

Influences of Language, Culture, and Power on Instructional Decision  
Making with High-Achieving African Students in Advanced Secondary  
English Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed to examine the influences of language, culture, and power on teacher instructional decision-making with high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms. The research questions were crafted to address how language, culture, and power influenced: (1) teachers' instructional planning when working with high-achieving African American students in the secondary English classrooms as they use literary and informational texts to support literacy development; (2) teachers' understanding of how language, culture, and power impact instructional decision-making when planning for literacy development with high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms, and (3) teachers' understanding of how language, culture, and power influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms. The framework for this study was grounded in several intersectional theories related to; (a) schools as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998); (b) language as identity shaper and inseparable from culture (Delpit, 2002; Gee, 2005; Labov, 1972; Lee, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Smitherman, 1977; & Thornborrow, 1999); (c) culture as emergent due to human interaction (Carrithers, 1992); (d) power is a force in all relationships and interactions, which creates imbalances and determine the degree to which the language variations and cultures interact freely and equitably (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1921/1970; Giroux, 1992; Nyberg, 1981; Shrigley, 1986); (e) race is a social

construct and racism is normal infiltrating every aspect of US society including the education of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995); (f) secondary students acquire, develop, and engage with literacy differently from their elementary counterparts and require teachers to deepen their knowledge about the ways adolescents engage with texts (Alexander, 2003; Chall, 1983; Goldman & Snow, 2015; Idrisano & Chall, 1995; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Moje, 1996/2002; Piercy & Piercy, 2010; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Participant interviews, lesson plans, and field notes generated data to address the research questions. Findings demonstrated language, culture, and power are intersectional and influence every aspect of the instructional decision-making process. This study provides insight into teacher's thinking about their planning and how the inquiry constructs influence that planning.

# Influences of Language, Culture, and Power on Instructional Decision Making with High-Achieving African Students in Advanced Secondary English Classrooms

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This study was designed to gain insight into the influences of language, culture, and power on teacher instructional decision-making with high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms. Three research questions were crafted to address how language, culture, and power influenced: (1) teachers' instructional planning when working with high-achieving African American students in the secondary English classrooms as they use literary and informational texts to support literacy development; (2) teachers' understanding of how language, culture, and power impact instructional decision-making when planning for literacy development with high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms, and (3) teachers' understanding of how language, culture, and power influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms. Several interconnected theories formed the basis of this inquiry and were related to (a) schools as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998); (b) language as identity shaper and inseparable from culture (Delpit, 2002; Gee, 2005; Labov, 1972; Lee, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Smitherman, 1977; & Thornborrow, 1999); (c) culture develops as humans interact (Carrithers, 1992); (d) power is present in all relationships and interactions; it creates imbalances and determines how varieties of language variations and cultures freely and equitably interact (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1921/1970; Giroux, 1992; Nyberg, 1981; Shrigley, 1986); (e) race is a social construct and racism is normal

infiltrating every aspect of US society including the education of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995); (f) secondary students acquire, develop, and engage with literacy differently from their elementary counterparts and require teachers to increase their knowledge about how adolescents engage with texts (Alexander, 2003; Chall, 1983; Goldman & Snow, 2015; Idrisano & Chall, 1995; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Moje, 1996/2002; Piercy & Piercy, 2010; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Participant interviews, lesson plans, and field notes generated data to address the research questions. Findings showed language, culture, and power are intersectional and influence every aspect of the instructional decision-making process. This study provides insight into teacher's thinking about their planning and how the inquiry constructs influence that planning.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to every student I had the privilege and honor to serve along their educational journey – especially my HA-AAs who others allowed you to slip, slide, and hide! You trusted me to push you to become the learners and thinkers I knew you were, even when you did not! Thank you!

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*Thank you!* Team Lucas – “We Are Family!” *Thank you!* This journey began with a road trip to campus and ended with an advanced degree. *Thank you!* To my mother, Shirley A. Reed – this journey would not have been possible without your willingness to travel and help raise your grandson during the process. *Thank you!* To Aerin and Robert, II – y’all know you served as the inspiration for this study and make smile every day. *Thank you!* To Bob Marshall – there are no words to express my deep gratitude for your encouragement and support through this process. You are my love, my life...*Thank you!*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### Contextualizing the Project

The purpose of this study was to examine how language, culture, and power influence teacher instructional planning and learning tool choice with high-achieving African American (HA-AA) students in a secondary English classroom to engage this group of learners in literacy learning and achievement. By examining teacher practices with high-achieving African American students, my aim was to extend the conversation about how teachers are working with HA-AA students to address the needs of this under-researched group of learners. As I examined teacher planning practices with their HA-AA students, I used several lenses which include language, culture, and power as factors influencing teachers' instructional decision making with this group. These factors were examined against the backdrop of on-going education reform, which has impacted how teachers approach their instructional decision making and interactions with their students.

#### **The Story of the Problem**

The story of racially constructed representational imbalances in advanced courses is complex as it calls into question the very notion of school as a meritocracy where students are judged fairly according to their abilities. Thinking about my reasons for studying teacher practice with HA-AA students began with my own experiences as a student, the learning experiences I created for my students, the experiences of my own children, and the work I do with teachers. In high school, I was the only Black student in

my Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature classes and knew many more students like me who should have been in my class but were not. Nearly one-third of the top fifteen students in my high school graduating class were African American, of which I was not one, yet I was the only African American student to graduate that year haven taken three straight years of honors and AP English classes. What is important to note about my high school experience is I had to advocate for the opportunity to take a second year of AP English Literature. My junior-year teachers and counselor felt, despite performing well in the class, my pre-Scholastic Aptitude Test scores were an indication I might not be able to handle the work load of the senior level course. What my teachers and counselor did not tell me was the score they were using to determine their decision; the information was hidden to me. Luckily, I possessed the wherewithal to advocate strongly enough for myself to convince my teachers and counselor I possessed the skill and work ethic needed to be successful in the class and was allowed to continue taking the AP English Literature course for a second year. The dynamic of power was something I understood on a basic level; however, my understanding was not deep enough to fully grasp or appreciate the significance of my self-advocacy. Had I not spoken up for myself, the trajectory of my educational experience and subsequent opportunities would have been quite different than how they turned out.

The confluence of my own teaching practices, the work I do with teachers, and the experiences of my own children frame my interest in this topic. As a teacher, I worked with students across all academic course levels. Despite our one-size-fit-all state standards, the learning experiences I designed for my high-performing students were significantly different from those I designed for my on- and below-grade level students.

The academic needs of my high-performing students would have gone unmet had I only adhered to the confines of the mandated standards and pacing guides I was given. As with my own personal high school experiences, my honors classes lacked diversity and I taught fewer than twenty African American students in my honors classes over a seven-year period. In thinking about my students, meeting their cultural needs became as important as meeting their academic needs. I deliberately designed lessons to foster an environment where diversity of thought, experience, and expression had a place amidst our collective work as teacher and students.

My work with teachers presents a picture similar to and different from my own as both a student and classroom teacher. Many of the teachers with whom I worked used Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as their state standards and found themselves wondering what it meant to go beyond the Standards since they were considered more rigorous than the standards by which they had been previously guided. Rarely did our conversations or their inquiries include questions about or challenges to what were most certainly racially defined representational imbalances in their advanced classes. Additionally, inquiries about cultural relevance rarely, if ever, came up. When questions about cultural relevance did arise, the most common discussion was about how to incorporate rap music or what became known as high-interest texts as tools for engagement. I suppose the thinking was rap music and high-interest texts, which usually meant texts with less rigorous vocabulary, simple plot structures, and stereotypical Black characters, were the only ways to be culturally relevant with African American students. As with my personal experiences as a high school honors student, many of the teachers with whom I worked employed both subtle and overt forms to question the intellectual

capacity of their African American students in general and their high-performing African American students in particular. These teachers' questions ran the gamut from expressing concern for test scores, students' comfort levels in the classroom, work quality, and ability of students to keep up with the pace and requirements of their class. Considering the questions teachers asked led me to question perceptions and practices teachers use with their high-achieving African American students.

### **Rationale and Significance**

As I consider the significance of examining teacher practice with HA-AA students, I am reminded of a conversation with a former colleague about an honors science class she visited. As a content-area specialist like myself, this colleague was called in to provide teacher support with an honors biology class. Upon sharing her reflections of her day, my colleague remembered her frustrations of walking into the classroom and attempting to present what she believed was the appropriately leveled rigor befitting the class classification. Much to her chagrin, my colleague recounted the students in that class were not honors students, they were just White. While we laughed at the way she told the story and her willingness to be frank about the racial make-up of the class, we both believed the lack of diversity in that honors class was more by design than based on the true abilities of the students. What we both realized was our district, like others, suffered from racially derived representational imbalances in advanced and special education classes. As Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2000) highlighted in their research on gifted African American students, advanced courses remain segregated with students of color being underrepresented by nearly fifty percent (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). My colleague remarked about how the teacher she was supporting lacked the skill

to adequately structure and deliver her lessons to provide the academic challenge her advanced biology students needed. Sharing conversations I had been having with some my teachers, we began to realize our teachers may have been under-supported in their abilities to meet the needs of their advanced students. I began to think about whether the teachers in our district were having a dual challenge of having to meet the demands of more rigorous learning standards while simultaneously having to meet the needs of students for whom they were ill-prepared to adequately serve. We questioned whether in our quest to ensure our struggling learners were getting their academic needs met, if we had missed opportunities to support our teachers with our high performers.

The conversation with my former colleague piqued my interest in the racial disparities in high level courses apparent in our school district. Furthering my interest in teachers' practice with high-performing students was our district's adoption of state approved academic standards. Between 2009 and 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) took center stage in the educational field and gripped my school district by the throat. My job changed dramatically as my colleagues and I had to learn a new set of learning standards to develop required curriculum guides for our teachers. The CCSS were considered more rigorous, which would challenge our schools with our most struggling learners. Despite our district containing many schools with struggling learners, we had many schools with high performers and found ourselves challenged and often ill-equipped to answer questions about how to help our teachers meet the needs of their high performing students. Questions and frustrations arose as I reflected on my colleague's remarks about the honors science class she visited, the lack of racial diversity in that class, my work with our new literacy standards, and questions from teachers regarding

how the new standards would enable them to meet the needs of their advanced students. My team and I seemed unprepared to address the concerns our teachers were raising regarding their high-performing students. Since I worked primarily with middle school teachers, we did not have the Advanced Placement curriculum available to our high school teachers to serve as a guide. We had to provide support with the honors level courses according to our own understanding of what more rigor would mean in light of higher rigor associated with our new standards. We had been so focused on supporting our teachers' work with their struggling students, we gave cursory attention to how our teachers could meet the needs of our high performers. Furthermore, most of our conversations about our Black students focused on the test-score gap between them and their White counterparts. Our narrowly focused conversations regarding our students of color challenged me to consider the need for a broader perception of our student population. Realizing we were not focused on high-achieving students in general, increased my concern about the specific needs of our high-achieving African American (HA-AA) students.

As a literacy specialist, I worked extensively with teachers and school leadership teams on developing whole-school literacy plans. In this role, I was often asked to work with teachers and grade-level teams on their lesson planning, and found myself amazed at how readily many teachers admitted to not planning and/or stated they did not have to concern themselves with planning because their plans were developed for them by members of their school leadership teams. I believe very strongly in the need for teachers to be deliberate in their thinking about how to structure learning and believe formal plans are beneficial for teachers to be prepared for the complexities of instructional delivery.

Hearing teachers admit to deliberately not planning for learning disturbed me as it signaled a lack of understanding about the intricacies of learning and teaching. Hearing teachers tell me their plans were developed and handed down, was equally disturbing, because of the autonomy implications created by removing teachers from the instructional decision-making process. My roles as literacy coach and specialist presented opportunities for me to provide lesson plan feedback and engage teachers in discussions about their thinking regarding learning and teaching as outlined in their plans. Teachers whose plans were handed to them often found it challenging to sustain in-depth conversations with me about their thinking. Upon questioning teachers about activities and/or materials, I would often have teachers inform me they were given their plans and simply planned to deliver the lesson as it was given. Conversely, those teachers who were actively involved in developing their own plans, either individually or as part of a team, engaged in dialogue about their thinking, text choices, questions they were considering, and activities they were choosing. Additionally, those teachers who developed their lesson plans asked critical questions about their lessons to clarify their understanding of our new standards and sought assistance with instructional delivery ideas they were considering. These questions ran the gamut from asking about objective alignment to standards, to whether their materials aligned to objectives, to what type of questions would be helpful in moving their students more specifically towards the standards. Reflecting on the difference between how these groups of teachers approached their work, challenged me to think about the importance of planning as a foundational component in student learning and an inextricable link to how teachers considered their delivery of concepts.

By examining teacher planning as a foundational element of a teacher's practice with an emphasis on HA-AA students, I gained insight into the ways teachers approach their instruction for this underserved population of learners. When Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) broke ground with their work on culturally responsive teaching, my school district became vested in making sure our teachers used what we believed were the right strategies to foster cultural relevance in the classroom. What we did not do was engage in deep training and/or analysis of how our teachers should use planning as a mechanism to connect their desire to meet the needs of their Black students to their actual instructional practices in the classroom. We offered the requisite professional development and hoped for the best. Purposeful instructional delivery requires purposeful planning. With such an under-researched group of learners, it is important for me to get a sense of how teachers think about high-achievement, language, culture, and power, and how these constructs are accounted for in structuring learning for HA-AA students. My work is significant because the research on African American students remains narrowly constructed. Furthermore, my work expands the thinking and discussion about how to characterize African American students and gets inside the minds of teachers as they approach their instructional practices with this group.

### **Problem Statement**

The education of black people in the United States has been diverse, contested, and widely researched since Africans were brought to the Americas nearly four hundred years ago (DuBois, 1973; Hilliard, 1995; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Kendi, 2016; Woodson, 1990). Questions of intellectual capacity, whether Africans should be educated, how they should be educated, and to what degree they should be educated have

framed the discourse around the education of African Americans (DuBois, 1973; Goldstone, 2011; Washington, 1901; Woodson, 1990). For much of the twentieth century, the narrative about Black students was framed by three concepts; Black students needing to cope with and/or avoid the notion that smart was akin to “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985), identity formation in opposition and resistance (Ogbu, 1986) to society’s on-going practice of presenting Blacks using deficit perspectives (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002), and underachievement and poverty. Much of the current educational research on African American students perpetuates a narrative of teacher deficit thinking and stereotypical representations of African American students as struggling and oppositional (Bonner, 2000; Delpit, 1995/2002; Hilliard, 1995; Milner, 2007). Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003), and Perry (2003) asserted, “the contemporary public conversations about Black school achievement, like virtually all past conversations about African-American school performance, remain focused on underachievement,” (p. 6). This imbalanced research and representational focus on negative frames leads to a false equating of underachievement and poverty with African American learners. Examining and problematizing the limited master narrative is much needed.

Despite the imbalanced narrative of African American students, there is a growing body of research emerging to challenge the equating of Black students with underachievement, opposition, and poverty (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005; Wiggan, 2007; Wildhagen, 2011). As researchers work to examine and challenge the deficit frameworks surrounding how Black students are portrayed, they do so against the backdrop of ever-increasing accountability measures, which have changed the way all students are taught. While education seems to be in a constant state of flux and reform,

two measures have had significant impact on education in general and on African American students in particular. The passage of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) legislation and the 1983, *A Nation At Risk* (ANAR) report have held substantive influence on teaching and learning in this country. *Brown* desegregated schools opening the door for racial integration in all public institutions across the nation. The passage of that landmark legislation also brought Black students face to face with White teachers' perceptions about the intellectual capacity of Black students (DuBois, 1935). While *Brown* provided broader educational access for Black students, representational disproportionality in special education and advanced level courses became an unintended outcome (Bell, 1975; Ferri & Connor, 2005).

ANAR indicted the public education system by advancing a notion of the US being at risk of falling behind our global neighbors. The response was swift and pervasive requiring annual high-stakes testing, more prescriptive teaching to meet the demands of the high-stakes testing, and more focus on holding teachers accountable for student learning. Test score outcome differentials by race have long been the topic of research and the response to *A Nation At Risk* along with subsequent legislation such as No Child Left Behind have only intensified the scrutiny of students who do not necessarily meet the grade. The scrutiny has most often focused on traditionally marginalized students anchoring the narrative of Black students as academically inferior to their White counterparts.

Regarding teacher practice with HA-AA, the primary focus has been on the identification process, how to attract and retain HA-AA learners, and the affective domains of the classroom (Harris, 2006; Milner, 2002/2007; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard,

2003; Wiggan, 2007; William & Castellino, 2006; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Tyson). Cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) has become an additional area of increasing import as the US teaching force grows more homogenous as the student population becomes more diverse. While the discussion on the education of African Americans has been in the public sphere for centuries, it remains largely and intractably constructed negatively calling into question the intellectual capacity of African American students. The conversation has changed language and form, but as Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) have explained, African American students continue to face an educational environment which continuously calls into question their intellect exposing them to stereotype threats (Steele, 2003), which lead to underachievement in advanced courses or a failure to take advantage of honors and AP/IB level coursework offer. Gaining deeper knowledge about how teachers understand the influence of language, culture, and power on their instructional practices with marginalized adolescents, particularly high-achieving African American students, can offer teachers and educational support personnel opportunities to meet the learning, cultural, and affective needs of all students.

### **Research Questions**

In 1950, the Educational Policies Commission released a report on education for the gifted making the following statement, "...Follow-up studies of highly gifted young Negroes...reveal a shocking waste of talent – a waste that adds incalculable amount to the price of prejudice in this country," (p. 33). Since this commission's report and the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), schools have remained segregated, with advanced level courses becoming a vehicle to maintain levels of segregation within racially diverse

schools (Bonner, 2000; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2000; Milner, 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Research by Bonner (2000) showed roughly two percent of all literature on African American students addresses high achievement, with the majority focused on test-score gaps and Black students as struggling to learn and/or being oppositional to learning. The literature on HA-AA students has focused on teacher practices regarding student access to advanced classes, student retention in advanced classes, and social issues surrounding HA-AA students' ability to adapt to the environment of advanced classrooms. Studies by Milner (2002) and Hemmings (1996) suggested high-achieving African American students often feel the need to choose between seemingly conflicting cultural identities to be fully accepted as part of their advanced courses. Language is an inseparable marker of cultural identity Nieto (2010), and according to Ford et al. (2000), Milner (2002), Delpit (2002), and Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010), school culture is often at odds with the home culture of many African American students. This cultural mismatch influences teacher-student interactions and how teachers make instructional decisions regarding this group (Delpit & Kilgour, 2002).

This study was designed to gain insight into how the confluence of language, culture, and power influences teacher instructional decision making with HA-AA students in secondary English classrooms. The research questions below shaped my inquiry and exploration:

1. How do issues of language, culture, and power influence the instructional decisions made by teachers working with high-achieving African American students in the secondary English classroom as they use literacy and informational texts to support literacy development?

2. What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence planning for literacy when working with high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom?
3. What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom?

### **Subjectivity**

Pursuing and disseminating knowledge are core elements of research. Researcher neutrality and objectivity are expected positions meant to ensure levels of validity and reliability, particularly for quantitative research. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Patel (2016) explained and Freeman and Jones (1980) stated, "the independent observer is a myth because all observation includes the subjective response of the enquirer to the phenomenon," (p. 5). The position of the researcher is bound to and influenced by the context around which the study has been designed and will be conducted. While many research methodologies assume researchers are outsiders, researcher positionality is not absolute. Researchers assume levels of positionality ranging from complete outsider to complete insider. In this study, I lived in an insider/outsider gray space. As a former literacy specialist in a large school district in the southern part of the country, I had the opportunity to work with teachers coaching them on how to become reflective practitioners. My work involved providing feedback on lesson plans, classroom-level instructional teacher coaching, and partnering with building-level leaders to reshape their literacy departments. Additionally, I have spent time working with one of the

participants in this study as their district adopted new literacy standards and a new curriculum. In my role as a literacy coach, I coached teachers and worked with the leadership team at one of the sites used in this study, but had no prior relationship with the teacher from this site who participated in my study. These prior and overlapping relationships required an awareness of myself as a researcher, my knowledge of the site and the teacher with whom I had a prior professional relationship, as well as my literacy knowledge and coaching skills. I have carefully considered my subjectivities and remained mindful of how they shape understanding of this project.

Peshkin (1988) explained the presence of research subjectivity as, “one’s subjectivity is like a garment, it cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspects of our life,” (p. 17). There are several hooks upon which I hang my identity, which needed to be acknowledged and managed so as not to skew the interpretation of my results. I hang my research interest on teacher practice with high-performing African American students primarily based on my own experiences as an honors English teacher in a culturally diverse environment. In this environment, I worked to ensure my students felt culturally valued despite culturally homogenous district-provided texts. In addition to classroom experience, I have worked with teachers coaching them on their instructional practices as well as having the opportunity to work as a literacy specialist charged with the task of shaping a district’s approach to secondary literacy. As a researcher, with a coach’s eye observing teacher practice, it was particularly important for me to be keenly aware of my tendency to be in coach and literacy specialist mode. While gathering field notes, I recorded teaching notes and later reflected on their meaning to ascertain the degree to which my ideas were clouding my

ability to be an outsider during my analysis. During the lesson plan analysis phase, I maintained my outsider position by focusing solely on the content without engaging in analyzing the plans to offer feedback, which is my usual practice when reviewing teacher lesson plans. While I used reflective and reflexive practices to move between my emic and etic perspectives, I refer to Freeman and Jones (1980) who raised the notion all observations are subject to the responses of the inquirer. As a researcher with express knowledge and experience with the phenomena under exploration, I sought to account for the instances when my experiences and a priori knowledge encroached on my observations and interpretations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I outline a theoretical framework for thinking about teacher practice with HA-AA students. My thinking about teacher practice with high-performing African American learners has been shaped by many theories related to how language, culture, and power influence teacher practices. The framework for my study was grounded on several connected theories related to: (a) schools as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998); (b) language as an identity marker and inseparable from culture (Delpit, 2002; Gee, 1999; Labov, 1972; Lee, 2007; Nieto, 2010, Smitherman, 1977; Thornborrow, 1999); (c) culture as emergent due to human interaction and idea exchange which is inseparable from language (Carrithers, 1992); (d) power is an inherent force in all relationships and interactions creating imbalances in need of examination and becomes an instrument that determines the degree to which the varieties of language and fullness of cultures move freely and equitably through it (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1921/1970; Giroux, 1992; Nyberg, 1981; Shrigley, 1986); (e) race is a social construct, not rooted in

biology, racism is normal and infiltrates every aspect of US society including the way members of marginalized groups are educated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995); (f) secondary students acquire, develop, and engage with literacy differently from their elementary counterparts thus requiring teachers to deepen their knowledge about the unique ways in which adolescents engage with texts (Alexander, 2003; Chall, 1983; Goldman & Snow, 2015; Idrisano & Chall, 1995; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Moje, 1996/2002; Piercy & Piercy, 2010; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). These theories provided lenses to gain deeper knowledge about the influencing factors on teacher practices with HA-AA students.

### **Language and Identity**

Language and culture are inextricably linked. Each reifies the other and are critical components of a person's identity. Language places an individual among a group of people and per Nieto (2010), identity is shaped by how one experiences the world with language as a key factor in both identity formation and how one encounters and interacts with the world. Labov (1972) and Smitherman (1977) offered a way to conceptualize how the unique ways African American linguistic forms serve as identity markers. They associated certain features such as grammar, pronunciation, and lexicon as distinctive to Black speakers. While Labov and Smitherman were not absolute in ascribing the language use to all African Americans, their work revealed many Black speakers used a form of language, which differed from what has come to be known as Standard American English (SAE). The differences between SAE and what Labov deemed Black Vernacular English (BVE) and Smitherman described as African American Vernacular English

(AAVE) are distinct enough to give each group of speakers a way to characterize and identify themselves as members of their requisite group.

Although AAVE and SAE speakers often have separate identities according to their language use and other factors, Smitherman (1977) offered the following statement depicting the nature of how language both creates individual identity and makes space for collective overlapping identities, “it is true that a number of early Black American English forms have survived until the present day, but it also true that distance between contemporary Black and White American English is not as great as it once was,” (p. 10). The lack of distance between AAVE and SAE demonstrates the significance of human interaction. Smitherman’s statement implicitly demonstrates the transactional and fluid nature of language acquisition and transmission. Although the historical relationship between Blacks and Whites in the United States is rooted in the institution of slavery, the relationship influenced more than just how English was acquired by the enslaved and used by the enslaver. The exchanges also influenced the dynamics of how words were communicated and resulted in dialectical complexities that have traveled in and across time impacting the ways words and thus language operate and function. Language is therefore indissolubly embedded in networks of sociocultural relations (Ahearn, 2001; Fought, 2006; Gee, 1999; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Nieto, 2010). Smitherman’s example depicted one dynamic of the relational aspects of language identity as influenced by culture. I now move to discuss the inevitable connections between language and culture.

## Language and Culture

Language, culture, and power are inseparably intersecting forces, which course in and through the landscape of every relationship and encounter. There are no shortages for defining or thinking about culture. Anthropologist Carrithers' (1992) positions on the inevitability of culture framed my approach to understanding and characterizing the relationship between language and culture as factors in examining teacher instructional planning practice with HA-AA students. Despite the US and many other countries being governed by a dominant culture, Carrithers' theory provides a way to challenge ideas of the inherent superiority of any one people or their culture. According to Carrithers, humans have, "an innate propensity for mutual engagement and mutual responsiveness," (p. 55), which creates opportunities for cultural exchange and intermingling of ideas and customs. A central tenet of Carrithers' theory is sociality which he has characterized as, "humans are available to each other, their abilities are only developed and transformed by others and in respect of a social setting. The capacity of sociality may be in individuals, but they are completed only between them," (p. 57). Through their intersubjectivity, humans interact on intellectual, social, and/or emotional levels and exist only in and through their connections with one another. Culture is developed as people interact, exchange ideas, customs, and language, making it a socially mediated process (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). Teachers and students come together in the same way in the classroom with individual cultures mixing, exchanging ideas, customs, and language use. Through sociality, a joint culture develops based on new interactions, use of language, idea exchanges, shared customs, and the ways teachers set up and direct the environment. Carrithers' notion of sociality through intersubjectivity is particularly useful for framing

the classroom environment because the nature of the classroom is built on the dynamics of the teacher-student and student-student relationships.

Not only is language an individual identity marker, it is a primary tool used to communicate and exchange ideas. Language is also one of the primary ways people get identified as belonging to specific culture group. I applied Gee's (1989) notion of language and discourse as identity markers to explain language acquisition and learning. Gee explained discourse as a two-level communication system, which is exemplified by language "plus other stuff" (p. 26) such as behavior, ways of thinking, and values specific to a socially recognized group (e.g. sports team or a specific industry). He goes on to differentiate everyday language use as discourse meant to depict language used in more generalized forms (e.g. conversation and/stories). As a member of a cultural group, young learners acquire the necessary linguistic tools enabling them to be active members of their group. According to Gee (1989), learning is a process, which involves acquiring knowledge through formal and informal means that may not necessarily comprise one who is designated as a teacher. Language is both the umbrella over which learning occurs as well as the foundation upon which learning is built. Its acts as a situating device positioning people among the various groups they inhabit and through linguistic acts, people are often characterized and placed among and against others of a particular discourse (Gee, 1989).

Our individual language use provides a way for others to make decisions about our worth and value. The spoken word and the ways in which people use language provide a structure to reflect the many aspects of group and individual identity as well as shapes the perspectives others have (Deveraux, 2015; Fecho, 2004; Fought, 2006). In an

exchange with a fourth-grade teacher of students from the rural south, researcher Purcell-Gates (2002) exemplified the notion of language as identity marker as she reflected on a teacher's statement about a parent, "I knew she was ignorant the moment she opened her mouth!" (p. 123). Purcell-Gates explained the teacher, upon hearing the parent's dialect, identified her as a being poor and uneducated. In this way, the spoken language was symbolic of group membership. Because language is acquired first through informal means, it becomes the principal way individuals begin to construct meaning of the world around them and allows them to place themselves within the world (Delpit, 2002; Fought, 2006; Thornborrow, 1999). As learners take on the language of their group, it becomes a core element of who they are. Language use gives individuals the ability to move within and across groups, becoming the voice and image to the outside world or what Delpit (2002) characterized as the skin people speak. By enacting individual and community forms of language, individuals acquire the ability to gain access to full measure of benefits associated with membership into a group or community. The use of group and community sanctioned linguistic discourse positions and privileges the individual (Gee, 1999). According to Nieto (2010), identity is shaped by how one experiences the world with language as a key factor in both identity formation and how one encounters and interacts with the world. Because language is fluid and inherently communal, the individual does more than engage in speech acts to transport pieces of information (Reddy, 1979). The co-constructive nature embedded in language exchange offers individuals opportunities to use language as vehicles upon which they can continuously build new forms of linguistic exchange and use. As Ahearn (2001) stated, "linguistic anthropologists view language as a vehicle that people themselves are continually in the

process of building together,” (p. 111). In this instance, language acquisition and learning are a joint effort between users.

Culture must be understood beyond food, fun, and festivals as it is the very foundation upon which historical bridges of humanity have been built (Carrithers, 1992). The import and impact of culture cannot be separated from the ways in which language is constructed or employed. Because language is distributed within and across the cultures, the cultural rules and frames direct how language operates. Language and culture are socially mediated processes (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000) and as suggested by Stewart (2011) are inseparable from an attention to the “transactions between individuals and cultures,” (p. 284). This perspective sheds light on the inevitability of social interaction as a factor in how language moves between cultures as individuals interact. It is also important to understand in the movement between cultures, social structures dictate how cultures are viewed and valued. All social interactions contain relational imbalances created by and shrouded in power dynamics. In the next section, I discuss the relationship among language, culture, and the dynamic of power.

### **The Dynamic of Power**

In this section, I address how language and culture are impacted by power. Language and culture exist in socially constructed ways governed by the unseen but always felt dynamic of power. The construct of power adds a dimension to human interaction removing relational neutrality regarding the use of language as well as the development and exchange of culture (Freire, 1921; Egan-Robertson, 1998). Nyberg (1981), offered the following definition of power, “power is the ability or authority to dominate men, to coerce and control them, obtain their obedience, interfere with their

freedom, and compel their actions in particular ways,” (p. 19). Since power is based on structures of dominance and control, it can be likened to a silent dictator governing all components of the systems and relationships found within a society. In a stratified society, power becomes a determinant of the degree to which the varieties of language and fullness of cultures move freely and equitably through it. Due to how the domains of societal power operate, value is ascribed to the language and culture of the dominant group in the form of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu advanced his forms of capital stating,

Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible, (p. 15).

Inequity is inherent in Bourdieu’s forms of capital because what is deemed capital worthy is dependent upon what a dominant group values. The problem becomes those who do not possess the capital elements valued by the dominant culture are marginalized because they are devalued. Crystallizing the connection between language, culture, and power relative to forms of capital can be summed up as follows, “...language is the arena where the concepts of right (both in the sense of entitlement and in the sense of what is morally sensible) and duty are created and thus language creates power, as well as being a site where power is performed,” (Thomas et. al, 1999, p. 11). This statement highlights the inseparable link between how power gets transacted and transmitted through linguistic exchanges while implicitly foraging the notion culture is also part and parcel in the

process. In a hierarchical society, dominant cultural norms and structures get reproduced through language acquisition, literacy learning, and human interaction.

The confluence of power is a primary element in the relational dynamics between teachers and students. Teachers transmit their beliefs and make instructional decisions based on the frames of reference they bring to their teaching (Thornton, 1989). Along with transmitting their perspectives on literacy, teachers also transmit their conscious and unconscious beliefs about language and culture. Because literacy and language are viewed as containing cultural capital, which maintain systems of inequity, teachers' personal beliefs about language are particularly significant. These personal beliefs act as instructional and curricular gatekeepers (Devereaux, 2016; Thornton, 1989) determining what students learn, the materials they encounter, and the underlying messages teachers send. A recent discussion I had with a teacher regarding a lesson on poetry exemplifies the importance of the need for teachers to value the culture of all students as well as the need for them to recognize their narrowly constructed perspectives on who gets to represent a particular culture and how their perspectives impact their instructional decisions. The teacher aimed to engage her high-school English students in an analysis of American society as revealed through hip-hop and poetry. My questioning of her instructional goals and curricular choices revealed a narrow definition of poetry and hip-hop. As I probed her to explain what she meant by hip-hop, she explained her intentions were to engage her students with lyrics from rap music. Her stated intention was to have students use American poetry and rap music to explore social issues in America. This teacher also stated she wanted her students to be able to make connections between themes in American poetry and those in hip-hop (rap music). On the surface, her

intentions to expose her students to rap music appeared to be respectful of her population, which was more than fifty percent African American. Her stated goals and objectives for this lesson would fall under the umbrella of what Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Gay (2010) described as an attempt to be culturally relevant because of her inclusion of rap music in the lesson. It is important to note this teacher chose only canonized poetic texts by White poets and rap music written only by Black lyricists. The fact this teacher chose poetic texts authored only by dominant culture writers (White) and rap music penned only by non-dominant culture artists (African American) revealed a narrowly constructed epistemology and ideology regarding who gets to represent American literary writing and who represents hip-hop, in this instance, rap music. In so doing, the teacher essentialized American poetry and rap music into dominant culture frameworks that maintained singular representational modes. Her understanding and beliefs about American literature and rap music coupled with who she believed represents each determined her texts choices as well as what her students may internalize about how literature acts as a symbolic representation of American culture. What may have also been created in such an exercise is a gap between intent and impact. This teacher's stated intent was to engage students in an examination of America as seen through hip-hop (rap music) and poetry. The unwitting impact was an entrenchment of dominant culture ideals essentializing America according to a single group construct while simultaneously "othering" a group outside the super-ordinated dynamic. Such dichotomous messaging also exemplifies Bourdieu's (1986) notions of capital because value was assigned to those authors who were essentially American, in this case White, while not necessarily offering students an opportunity to interact with poets who were not thought to be

representative of America. This teacher's beliefs and the authority she had to choose her texts, gave her the power to determine what students read and who gets to represent America. Unfortunately, the message sent reinforced society's biases.

### **Factors Influencing Teacher Practice**

DuBois (1903) made a significant charge about the reality of race in the United States of America. In his landmark book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1903) stated, "...the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colorline," (p. 3). I contend the colorline remains a problem in the twenty-first century. Race in the US is complicated. Race is as complicated in the classroom as it is in society. As Delpit (2002), Gee (1989), Hilliard (1995) and Nieto (2010) have pointed out, language and culture are inextricably linked and power is an overlay, which directs the course and flow of interactions. In this section, I will discuss the confluence between race, language, and culture in the classroom giving attention to how these elements and the dynamic of power impact teachers' professional lives. A review of the literature on the among between race, language, ]culture, and power in the classroom will be presented more fully in the literature review section.

Education and teaching are anything but neutral (Apple, 1985; Freire, 1921/1970; Macedo, 2006; Nyberg, 1981). Teachers and students have an involuntary relationship with neither party having the power to choose the other. Additionally, the scope of knowledge required for learning is externally determined and as Apple (1985) stated, "Schools seem to do a number of things...They help maintain privilege in cultural ways by taking the form and content of the culture and knowledge of powerful groups and defining it as legitimate knowledge to be preserved and passed on," (p. 42). Apple's

point provides the basis for understanding the nature of schooling as an institution structured around the reproduction of cultural norms, which benefit groups in power, thereby fostering an environment that is anything but neutral.

While education has been shown to be unequal and inequitable (Apple, 1985/2014; Burbules, 1986; Nyberg, 1981) most teachers, when asked if they see color, will respond stating they are colorblind and do not recognize color. Research conducted by Fang (1996) demonstrated teachers who believed all students could learn, promoted literacy at higher rates than those who did not necessarily believe all students could learn. Fang's research further revealed educators do hold implicit theories about their subject matter, teaching responsibilities, and the students they teach. Unfortunately, as Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) have pointed out, African American students experience school amidst an environment of deficit thinking (Ford, et al., 2002) on the part of their teachers which challenges the notion many teachers assert of not recognizing color. Language is an identifier (Lee, 2007) placing people within their culture and race. How students speak and use language impacts how teachers view, relate to, and in some cases, educate them. Like the larger society, teachers make decisions about their students in conjunction with their own personal beliefs regarding the culture and/or race their students represent. As critical race theorists Bell (1992) and Delgado and Stefancic (2012) and historian Kendi (2016) advanced, racism against African Americans is historical and pervasive in American society, is evident in all institutions, and operates at within schools, as schools are institutions representing US societal structures. Historically, the intellectual capacity of Blacks has been questioned, believed to be inferior to Whites, and supported by what has now become debunked science meant to

use brain size as proof of educability (Gould, 1996; Kendi, 2016; Muhammad, 2010). Despite the science of Black intellectual inferiority being refuted, the ontology and epistemology of the inferiority belief lingers in society affecting the ways African American students are viewed and educated.

Teachers live out their professional lives as a mediated practice between themselves and those they teach. It is impossible for teachers to separate who they are and the beliefs they hold from their work as teachers. Teaching is a complex task and as Gay (2010) pointed out, “teaching is a contextual, situational, and personal process; a complex and never-ending journey,” (p. 22). This journey involves the daily interactions between teachers and those they are charged with the task of teaching. Language is the primary mode of interaction between teachers and students with both using language as identity shapers and tools for establishing the norms for interaction and ultimately, the culture of the classroom. A community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) is created through the intersubjectivity and sociality between teachers and students which plays out as they co-construct the culture in their classroom. Teachers enter relationships with their students possessing authority and power that leads to an unevenly weighted albeit co-constructed CoP (Pace & Hemmings, 2007; Shrigley, 1986; Wenger, 1998). The way teachers recognize and use their power can and often does impact students’ perspectives on learning. Delpit (2002), posited, “language exists not merely on the level of words, sentences, paragraphs, dialects, accents, and linguistic differences,” (p. 151), suggesting language co-exists with the domains of power directing its use. As the authority figure in the classroom, teachers structure and direct the linguistic exchange thereby exerting power over how language is used, shaping how their CoP is developed and lived.

Language is a component of the capital forms advanced by Bourdieu (1986) and those who employ language in a societally valued manner enjoy the privileges and benefits associated with “proper” use. Conversely, no benefit is derived for language use outside the societally acceptable domain. Teachers have inherent linguistic capital and their beliefs about language variety can validate students or negatively impact relationships with students depending upon how they portray their beliefs about how language should be used. Their beliefs can also create instructional imbalances whereby students whose language use fit the valued structure obtain opportunities and those whose language use does not align can face consequences, which in some cases limit full participation in the learning process. The question for teachers becomes whether they consciously attend to the factors of language, culture, and power as they as part of the instructional decisions made with their HA-AA students as they plan for literacy development in their secondary English classroom. My aim through this study is to shed light on this topic.

### **Language, Literacy, Culture, Power, and Adolescent Development**

Since the focus of my study involved teacher practices in the secondary English/language arts classrooms, a discussion on the literacy practices of adolescent learners is warranted. I discuss a framework on adolescent literacy development to think about the intersections between language, literacy, culture, and power as factors in adolescent development. Adolescence is a unique time in the lives of many young people and those who support them. While identity formation is part of every developmental stage, it is particularly evident during adolescence. According Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001, “adolescence has long been characterized as a time when individuals begin to explore and examine psychological characteristics of the self in order to discover who

they really are, and how they fit in the social world in which they live,” (p. 91). This critical stage in a young person’s life is, as described by Bandura (2005), a time of immense change as major biological, educational, familial, and social role transitions occur almost simultaneously. The literacy needs of adolescents are shaped by the identity and culture of the group as a whole, yet the identity and culture of the group are often at odds with the institution of school. It is important to note as adolescents begin to exercise personal agency, their actions can translate into exercising academic agency which can lead to friction as teachers may register such personal agentive power as a threat to their authority.

Adolescent literacy development is shaped by yet differs from how elementary learners acquire literacy skills. The literacy needs of adolescents are influenced by the power and need youth have to construct meaning across domains. In the context of the adolescent learner, domains refer to the subjects or disciplines students at the secondary level encounter through the course of their school day. The disciplinary difference between secondary and elementary learners is not meant to suggest a lack of engagement with subject matter learning for elementary students. It is to emphasize the critical difference between the two ways elementary and adolescent students acquire and develop literacy practices. At the secondary level, students encounter an increased volume of informational texts as the nature of the content they meet changes. Research by Piercy and Piercy (2011) and Moje (2008) revealed vocabulary and other discourse structures between math, science, history, and literary texts overlap but are different enough to require learners to employ varied analytical skills beyond a basic level. The nature of adolescent literacy also calls for a stronger focus on the discourse structures of the

various content areas secondary learners are likely to encounter (McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Piercy & Piercy, 2011; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2013; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). For instance, as secondary students interact with historical texts, they must begin to think like a historian and learn how to engage with texts in accordance with the discourse frames of how expert historians interact with and make meaning from texts (Piercy & Piercy, 2011). Middle and high school students interact with content in qualitatively and quantitatively different ways from their elementary school counterparts. This difference necessitates adolescent learners gain access to the structures, vocabulary, and other discourse frames of the disciplines they encounter. The need for adolescents to build knowledge through the content areas impacts teacher practice and instructional decision making with this group of learners.

The culture of school and adolescents do not always align. Adolescence is characterized by a young person's need to form identity and exercise an ability to make decisions apart from the adult world. Identity and agency formation can, at times, be counter-cultural to the learning environment and Phelps (2005) stated, "schools may not be very friendly to adolescents' identity or literacy development," (p. 4). The juxtaposition between adolescents, how they construct their identity, how they use their identity to develop literacy practices, and how teachers understand their roles as authority figures in the classroom can cause conflict. School culture reproduces existing social hierarchies and as adolescents live in the push and pull characteristic of their development, tensions arise which can negatively impact their schooling. Language, culture, and power are driving forces in how adolescents develop and engage with literacy. Teachers have their own beliefs about language, race, culture, and their

authority and power which influence their instructional decisions. Literacy learning is not a neutral prospect (Street, 1984); therefore, consideration of the influencing factors must be part of the instructional models governing teacher practice, particularly with adolescent learners. As teachers enact their personal beliefs onto the learning environment and co-construct a CoP, they wield tremendous power in how they develop students' literacy practices. The significance of this power dynamic cannot be understated, particularly relative to marginalized students. Through this study, I sought to examine how teachers make instructional decisions for high-achieving African American students. The choice to target high-achieving African Americans was born out of my need to expand the master narrative about Black students, which despite important social shifts in this country, tends toward a deficit framework essentializing Blackness to academic struggle and economic distress.

### **Summary**

African American students have long had their intellectual capabilities questioned (Peele, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) often relegating them to a near singular narrative of being oppositional and struggling to learn. Cultural and language mismatches between teachers and students have created an environment where deficit thinking (Ford et al., 2002) by teachers negatively impacts African American students' access to higher level courses as well as their ability to feel a sense of connection to the environment (Milner, 2007). As the student population in public schools continues to become more diverse while the teacher population becomes less so, it is important for the perspective of African American students to extend beyond the narrative of a struggling, oppositional learner living in poverty.

The education of African Americans has been a discussion since Africans were enslaved in this country (Cooper, 1930; DuBois, 1935/1973; Kendi, 2016; Peele, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Similarly, education has been in a constant state of reform impacting how teachers teach and learners learn. In next chapter, I present a review of literature addressing several critical issues in education: education reform, adolescent literacy, and achievement among high-achieving African American students. I begin the chapter with a review of literature on education reform and the impact of accountability and standardization. While much of the conversation about education reform centers on the impact of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), I contend any discussion about the education of African Americans in the twentieth century must begin with the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which opened the door for Black students to encounter teacher deficit thinking grounded in questions about the intellectual capacity of Blacks associated with what Gould (1983) deemed the mismeasure of man.

To situate my research on teachers' instructional decision making, which includes planning, with HA-AA students within the secondary English classroom, I include a review of literature on adolescent literacy, which differs from elementary literacy in ways worth understanding. By examining teachers' lesson plans, I have a window into how teachers think about literacy instruction for their adolescent learners as a whole and how the constructs of language, culture, and planning influence how they plan for learning as well as how they view those plans after implementing them. The chapter ends with a review of the literature on African American academic achievement, which for nearly forty years has come to be known as a fear of acting white (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985). While much of the literature on academic achievement on African American students has

focused on the Black students as oppositional to academic achievement, emerging literature reveals a challenge to this long-held belief. The issues addressed in my literature review served to provide a grounding for my research questions and methodology.

## Chapter 2

### A Review of Literature

In this chapter, I present a review of the literature related to several critical issues in education that shape teaching and learning. The literature I chose to discuss was designed to support my research questions outlined in Chapter 1, seeking to gain insight into how language, culture, and power impact teacher instructional decision making with their high-achieving African American students in secondary English classrooms. In this literature review, I provide grounding in adolescent literacy and what it means for a student to be considered high-achieving. I begin with a general review of the literature on education reform and the accountability and standardization movements to discuss how these forces have shaped teacher autonomy in the secondary English classroom. Next, I present a review of literature on adolescent literacy and high academic achievement. Finally, I address the literature on how language, culture, and power are manifested in and shape teachers' instructional decision making and delivery with emphasis given to how these forces particularly impact teachers' work with high-achieving African American students.

#### **Education Reform and the Impact on Accountability and Standardization**

Education reform has become ubiquitous in the discourse about how to address the complexities of teaching and learning. In this section, I lay out the first issues of this chapter with a blueprint for understanding how education reform and the accountability and high-stakes assessment movements in this country developed and shapes thinking about how teachers teach and students learn. Many discussions about education reform in the United States begin with the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) which has

led to increased teacher accountability measures along with instructional learning and teaching standardization. In addition to presenting ANAR as critical to education reform, I introduce the *Brown versus Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954), school integration legislation as integral to contextualizing the current landscape of high-achieving African American students.

**Considering Brown v. Board of Education.** While many conversations regarding education, reform begin with A Nation at Risk (ANAR), when thinking about the education of African American students, the discussion about education reform would be more complete by moving the conversation back about thirty years. The passage of *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* (1954) (Brown) ushered in dramatic shifts in the education of this nation's children. Until Brown, racial segregation was the rule of law under *Plessy v. Ferguson* which maintained legal separation of races as long as facilities for Blacks were considered equal to those of Whites (Ladson-Billings, 2004). The challenge to *Plessy v. Ferguson* and legal segregation came in the form of both domestic and international pressure placed upon the United States leading to what Bell (2004) coined interest convergence. Bell's contention was when the needs of Blacks fit the interests of White, social and economic change would emerge. The passage of *Brown v. Board of Ed* fit Bell's premise because it allowed the United States to appear as though it was taking a moral high ground regarding racial equality when in fact, the government was responding to domestic and international pressure regarding the treatment of African Americans in the wake of the ending of America's involvement in the fight for freedom internationally while maintaining racial separation (Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic,

2010). In passing the *Brown* legislation, Black and White students were to be educated side-by-side legally for the first time the nation's history.

*Brown's* passage was significant as an education reform measure because it served to challenge the notion of separate but equal. In legalizing and mandating racial integration in schools, societal mores and belief systems were upended regarding how races were to interact. There is literature available on the degree to which states and school districts complied with the government mandate; however, for purposes of this chapter, I focus on the literature connecting the *Brown* legislation, teacher deficit thinking about students of color, particularly African American students, and the representational imbalances of races in honor's level courses. While *Brown* opened educational opportunities for Blacks students, the passage of the bill also exposed Black students to White teacher's and society's entrenched notions of Black intellectual inferiority. As Gould (1996) explained, the use of craniometry throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries served to anchor beliefs about Black intellectual capabilities. Additionally, the use of IQ testing, according to Gould (1996) was another factor used to determine not only the intellectual capacity of Whites, but was as a tool used to support notions of Black inferiority. The use of such tools as craniology and IQ testing became support for maintaining racial separation and while the Supreme Court ended physical separation by race, it could not end the pervading thinking around Black intellectual, social, and cultural inferiority (DuBois, 1935). As a result of passing *Brown*, many African American students entered desegregated schools amidst a contentious environment. Ending school segregation was most certainly believed to be positive and necessary as it made the dismantling of other systems of segregation possible, and the separate school

environment for Black students was not equal as mandated by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. However, DuBois (1935) posited the attitude of White America toward Black America could prove detrimental to the psyche of Black students. This belief in the inherent inferiority of Black students has become what Ford (1998) coined as a deficit framework whereby teachers judge African American students not necessarily by their actual abilities, but against a general bias about African Americans.

In their work on the underrepresentation of students of color in gifted classes, Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) raised the issue of teacher deficit thinking as a primary obstacle in African American access to academically rigorous coursework. In analyzing data on racial representation and placement of Black students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, they concluded, “deficit perspectives exist whereby students of color who are culturally different from their white counterparts are viewed as culturally deprived or disadvantaged,” (p. 52). In viewing African American students from a deficit framework (Ford, 1998), teachers are less likely to recommend African American students for entry into honors level and/or AP courses. Ford, et al. (1998/2008), indirectly raised a connection between the passage of *Brown*, teacher deficit thinking about Black student intellectual abilities, and student access to honors level and AP courses. As Gould pointed out in his work and others have echoed, Black intellectual capacity has been questioned in the United States as a strategy to justify slavery and maintain legal segregation until *Brown*. The passage of *Brown* did not remove the thoughts about Black intellectual and social inferiority; it directly exposed African American students to the effects of the deficit thinking. According to Ford (2003), Ford and Grantham (2003), and Ford, et al. (2002), when teachers’ instructional lenses are clouded by deficit thinking,

they are unable to recognize student potential because they are “blinded” (Ford, 2010, p. 32) by low expectations associated with racial and ethnic biases. Such deficit thinking, according to Ford et al. (2003) has directly impacted the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced coursework. While many scholars have raised the point that teacher expectations and deficit thinking about students is critical to students having access to rigorous courses, Ford (2002) and DuBois (1935) more directly connected desegregation to Black student school success and access to advanced coursework by explaining the exposure to teachers’ bias against Black students was critical in students being accepted in desegregated schools and having access to higher level courses.

**Accountability and Standardization.** While education has seemingly been in a constant state of reform, there are movements in education that appear more definitive than others. Historical context provides a way to gain insight into the current climate of high-stakes assessments and mechanized learning (Freire, 1970). Current educational practices whereby teachers are forced to follow prescribed curriculum in strictly managed environments has its roots in two philosophical bents connected to slavery and scientific management (Aufhauser, 1973). As Aufhauser (1973) explained, two prevailing philosophies related to strict management of laborers were born out of George Fitzhugh’s use of overseers to maintain control of his slaves coupled with F.W. Taylor’s beliefs in, “a general tendency among workers to “take it easy” which renders them lazy and inefficient,” (Taylor as cited in Aufhauser p. 813) have shaped the prevailing environment in American schools. Taylor’s position on the relationship between management and laborers has been applied to the schooling process, shaping the ways

teachers approach the profession (Aldridge, 2007; Au, 2011; Cooper, 1930), leading to the current state of highly mechanized instructional practices.

Just as Fitzhugh, Taylor, and the passage of *Brown* changed the educational landscape, the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) became a flashpoint, which also changed the way America characterized our education system. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) charged that students attending America's public schools were failing to such a degree as to jeopardize the nation's rank against its global competitors (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; McDonnell, 2005). Ever since the release of the document, educational reform in the shape of increased accountability measures, standardization of instructional practices, and increased high-stakes testing have restructured teaching and learning. To combat the supposedly impeding positional loss, the structures and language of accountability emerged, which sought to ensure teachers were working to improve student achievement. Academic learning standards, once the drivers of instructional practice, were supplanted by standardized assessments, which became the primary vehicles used to prove teachers were, in fact, increasing achievement (Linn, 1999; Shapiro, 2003).

As Cooper (1930), Gould (1996), and Au (2011) explained, standardized testing has been part of our education system for more than a century; however, the pervasiveness of testing has created what Au (2011) has termed a "zero-sum curriculum," (p. 30) having the reductive effect of emphasizing tested subjects while simultaneously de-emphasizing non-tested subjects. While concerns about the encroachment of high-stakes assessments on teachers' ability to broadly educate students have increased, concerns regarding the dangers of curriculum narrowing have been around for decades. As presaged by Cooper (1930), "we have been so ridden with tests and measurements, so

lashed and spurred for percentages and retardations that the machinery has run away with the mass production and quite a way back bumped off the driver,” (p. 393). Her sentiments foreshadowed current thinking around how excessive focus on assessments have taken over the educational process replacing teachers as the driving force behind how students are educated. Cooper’s words echo the battle for the soul of our education system waged over a century ago as our nation chose the scientific management approach fostered by Thorndike, Snedden, Bobbitt, and others in lieu of Dewey’s child-centered, inquiry approach (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002; Labaree, 2010; Tomlinson, 1997). Cooper’s words have additional significance because her sentiments were directed toward the Black community of her day. Due to the underlying racist ideologies (Kendi, 2016) and US government policies around segregation, African Americans were left out of the national conversation shaping the Thorndike-Dewey battle (Labaree, 2010). Cooper’s comments about the negative impact of mechanized learning and excessive testing towards the education of Black students, brought this community into the mainstream conversation on education.

According to the framers of ANAR, increased assessment could be an effective strategy in determining student learning. Such a focus on assessment and accountability was meant to guarantee students were learning and demonstrating proficiency primarily in mathematics and reading (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Linn, 1999; Ravitch, 2013) as these subjects were the comparative barometers to determine America’s rank in the academic global sphere. Unfortunately, the unintended consequences were reductions in what students learned as teachers focused on tested items. *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983) provided a mechanism for the federal government to direct thinking around how to

conceptualize learning and achievement, which was to focus on quantifiable measures of determining what it means to demonstrate learning. The result of reducing learning and achievement to narrowly quantifiable units taught through prescribed curricula, is a sense of teacher deskilling and disempowerment (Au, 2011).

While ANAR was not a legislative document, it did have legislative reach as “evidence,” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 3) from the report was used to shape rhetoric and legislation concerning education reform measures in this country. As, Darling-Hammond, (2007), McDonnell (2005), and Ravitch (1993) pointed out, recommendations from ANAR such as a need for more rigorous academic standards and annual testing, served to frame state and federal arguments about how education should be reformed. As McDonnell (2005) explained, former President G.W. Bush pointed directly to ANAR as rationale for the federally-mandated assessment measures included in his No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. This legislation required all students in grades three through eight be tested annually in reading and mathematics. States were required to show progressive growth (Adequate Yearly Progress/AYP) or face sanctions in the form of federal withholding of state education dollars (Darling-Hammond, 2007; McDonnell, 2005). The accountability mandates increased the role assessment played in education, thereby redirecting teacher focus at the classroom level. Emphasis on assessments unwittingly reduces the complexity of learning down to measurable chunks akin to soundbites delivering incomplete messages. Shapiro (2003) furthered this point by explaining, “the increasing standardization has ushered in a time where students search for prefigured ‘right’ answers and regurgitate bits of information from what others believe is intellectually correct,” (p. 28).

Considering Shapiro's point, it is easy to understand how gaps in stated intentions under NCLB about a need to foster educational improvement and global competitiveness and the emphasis on testing became a hidden curricular item requiring teachers to meet its demand instead of their students' learning needs. Redirection of teacher practices to prepare students for tests was inevitable.

NCLB (2001) had the stated intentions of offering teachers a way to improve learning achievement for all students with particular emphasis on literacy and mathematical accountability for grades three through eight. However, the mandated annual testing created a gap between the stated intentions and the unintended consequences. For purposes of this section, I discuss the unique impact NCLB had on teaching practices for adolescent literacy.

*Adolescent Literacy.* Understanding the impact of NCLB and standardization on adolescent literacy necessitates unpacking literature related to adolescent literacy. Research on adolescents and their literacy reveal learners at this stage of development seek to craft unique identities separating them from the adults in their lives, have a need to be more self-directed, and benefit from collaborative learning opportunities (Phelps, 2005, Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001). Moje (2002) marked this developmental stage as one of *becoming* (p. 216) where students engage in agentic behaviors (Bandura, 2005) to exercise personal, social, and academic autonomy. As adolescents' developmental needs shift, so to, do their literacy needs and capacities. According to Chall (1983), reading development progresses in stages with adolescent literacy marked by readers extending beyond acquiring technical skills for learning how to read to applying technical knowledge to enable them to learn from their reading, eventually

moving towards being able to adopt multiple perspectives on the various topics and content they encounter. In the advanced stages of reading, adolescents read more complex texts across subjects, which tend to be more informational than narrative. Such texts tend to contain more complex vocabulary and organizational structures than those read in earlier stages of reading (Chall, 1983; Snow & Goldman, 2015).

Understanding and characterizing adolescent literacy has evolved and expanded over time. Adolescents read a wide variety of text across disciplines and need skills to access the texts they encounter. To address the literacy shifts adolescents experience associated with their wide and varied subject-specific reading, Alexander (2003) advanced a model of literacy occurring on a journey to expertise. Alexander (2003) stated, adolescents, “distinguish between two forms of subject-matter knowledge: domain and topic knowledge,” (p. 11). In moving between subject-matter and topic knowledge, adolescents acquire complex reading skills associated with subjects or domains such as history, science, and math. Developing subject-matter expertise is a critical component of adolescent literacy simply because adolescents encounter literacy in targeted ways according to the disciplines they face through the course of their day. Disciplinary literacy, or literacy associated with thinking according to the discourse of a particular subject (McConachie & Petrosky, 2011; Piercy & Piercy, 2010) fosters expertise as students acquire the complex reading skills of the subjects they face. Stages of reading (Chall, 1983) and models of domain literacy development (Alexander 2003), apply to all readers, in varying degrees from struggling to advanced learners.

*Standardization and Adolescent Literacy*. Conley and Hinchman (2004) posited NCLB offered a number of literacy recommendations which could benefit adolescent literacy development, three of which are presented below:

1. Continuous reading instruction with an emphasis on developing strategic knowledge for dealing with unknown words and comprehension.
2. Individually appropriate reading instruction anchored in assessment of individuals and programs.
3. Multiple opportunities to use a variety of texts within a context of comprehensive schoolwide reform. (p. 44-45)

Each of these recommendations put forth in NCLB was meant to support the literacy development of adolescents. Unfortunately, the ensuing focus on yearly testing emphasizing single-answer responses, worked against the natural ways in which adolescents learn and develop literate practices (Phelps, 2005; Petersen, 1988).

Those recommendations outlined in NCLB presented a limited perspective on how adolescents approach literacy. In progressing through the stages of reading along with moving towards expertise, continuous reading instruction is necessary. As (McConachie & Petrosky, 2011; Moje 2002/2008; Phelps, 2005; Piercy & Piercy, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Schoenbach, R., Greenleaf, C., & Murphy, 2012) explained, adolescent readers should incorporate disciplinary/content-specific forms of literacy to give them exposure to the unique structures and vocabulary associated with the subjects they encounter. On-going instruction is needed for adolescents to move effectively towards expertise in disciplinary literacy because they benefit from the examples set by teachers (Schoenbach et al., 2012) who represent expertise in the type of

literacy analysis required at the middle and high school levels. Opportunities to engage with a variety of texts is especially important in meeting adolescent literacy developmental needs as this group of learners thrives on having wide and varied experiences, which involvement with a range of texts necessitates (Petersen, 1988). Developing disciplinary or subject-targeted literacies is critical to deepening adolescent literacy practices. Doing so also allows adolescents to develop expertise as Alexander (2003) outlined in her work on adolescent literacy development previously discussed.

While Conley and Hinchman (2004) advanced the notion of NCLB's promise, they conceded limitations existed. As they explained, literacy in the NCLB focused on alphabetic knowledge, fluency, and comprehension, but did not account for the more advanced forms of literacy comprehension specific to the demands of adolescence. Research on adolescent literacy underscores the need for contextualized and socially constructed strategy use to meet the needs of this group (Bean, 2000; Schoenbach, et al., 2012). The focus on more elementary forms of literacy acquisition and development leaves behind a significant learner group. Such limitations also impact teacher practice because the reductionist nature embedded in the legislation along with the concomitant assessments act as restrictive agents to teacher instructional decision making. Conley and Hinchman (2004) stated, "through its emphasis on the details of literacy (e.g., alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency) and accountability, one might hypothesize that NCLB could usher in a new era of lecture-driven practices that conflict with the adoption and use of known content area literacy strategies," (p. 48). Their comments were prescient as teachers have indeed settled for practices that prepare students for tests as opposed to designing learning that accounts for their developmental literacy needs

(Conley & Hinchman, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Shapiro, 2003; Stewart, 2010).

Teacher ability to meet the academic developmental needs of adolescents can be negatively impacted by the degree to which a teacher is able to choose literacy tools and use instructional practices that may not be sanctioned by their school district or individual building.

**Standards and Teacher Autonomy.** Educational reform in the shape of increased focus on testing has redirected the relationship among teachers, their standards, and the assessment process. Teachers have traditionally relied on content standards to guide their instruction and assessment decisions. Darling-Hammond (2007) suggested due to the regulations of NCLB, states turned away from more thoughtful assessments connected to their standards, which allowed for “instructionally rich, improvement oriented-systems, towards more rote-oriented,” (p. 246) carrot and stick approaches. Her point hinted to a time where teachers may have connected their practice to standards and assessments in productive ways, which they are having to redirect given the current climate of over standardization and high-stakes testing. In addition to assessments shifts, Barrett (2008), expanded Darling-Hammond’s suggestions in a study of teachers’ perceptions on the changes in their work as a result of NCLB. His study found teachers experienced a narrowing of curriculum as they focused more attention on tested subjects than non-tested subjects. School-based leadership’s role in narrowing curriculum was not addressed in Barrett’s study; however, given the role principals have in directing teachers’ daily practices, it is a reasonable conclusion that principals have a role in curriculum narrowing and reduced teacher autonomy. While the language of the legislation does not expressly call for teachers to redirect their focus away from non-

tested subjects, the increased monitoring and surveillance expressed by the teachers in Barrett's study provide insight into the negative impact and unintended consequences of excessive standardization and high-stakes testing. I address the next issue of this chapter with a discussion on teacher autonomy and then move to discuss how the language of Common Core Standards (CCS), as a set of standards, can act as an accountability system similarly to the way high-stakes assessments afford and constrain teacher autonomy and practice. The use of the CCS is meant as an example of standards as a whole and should not be taken as universal because while a majority of states in the country have adopted them, some states do not use CCS as curriculum and assessment drivers.

According to Anderson (1987), Samuels (1970), and Webb (2002), teacher autonomy exists on a continuum between complete freedom and complete adherence to the system of rules and regulations. Teachers usually make decisions within the sphere of their classrooms while at the same time, being governed by the structural boundaries instituted by their states and local districts which include but may not be limited to scheduling, amount of planning time, number of students, as well as curricular and assessment timeframes (Pearson & Hall, 1993). Anderson (1987) more explicitly explained, "We know first that the autonomy enjoyed by teachers is restricted to their activities within their classrooms. We also know that teacher autonomy is a direct result of the manner in which schools and school systems are organized," (p. 359). Therefore, teachers experience degrees of autonomy impacting their work, which is governed by the regulations and controls embedded in their environment. While current practice is to understand teacher autonomy as existing on a continuum and literature to the contrary has not been found, opportunities exist to suggest another perspective. The complexity of

teaching warrants a way to capture the dimensionality of the intersections which effect the degrees to which any teacher may have and/or exercise their autonomy.

The language of the standards offers affordances and constraints. The writers of the CCSS outlined what the standards do, their purpose, and instructional role. As put forth in the Introduction (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), the Standards were designed with an emphasis on outcomes as opposed to strategies to achieve them. The language read as follows:

By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Thus, the Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify a most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards. (p. 4).

Based on this language, it appears the Standards afford teacher autonomy rather than constrain it. Additional language in the Introduction further hints towards a support of teacher autonomy as the writers cautioned readers to recognize the Standards, “for what they are not as well as for what they are,” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). In what could be considered a hint towards transparency, Standards writers offered six key components meant to address the design limitations and provide educators with a map for how to structure curricular design and instructional decisions. The writers advance both the role of the Standards in determining teacher practice and their limitations. While the language

seems to be firmly in favor of teacher autonomy, restrictions exist as well. Applebee (2013) described this paradox as “challenges and possibilities,” (p. 25) intended to point toward the elements contained within the document that give the impression of curtailing teacher autonomy.

The entirety of the document presents opportunities for autonomy while simultaneously curtailing them. Three areas within the Standards merit examination as they have become cornerstones of the teachers’ work associated with meeting the demands of the Standards. Close reading, text complexity, and increased reading of informational texts have come under increased scrutiny because they are viewed as mechanisms of constriction (Pearson, 2013). Close reading requires teachers guide students to read texts and cite evidence to support claims for what is explicit in and inferable from the text. Standards writers have advanced the notion of a gap between reading competence at the end of high school and the beginning of college as being great enough to warrant a gradual increase in the level of text complexity students encounter in grades 2 and 3 to close it (Pearson, 2013). While this claim has been widely contested, I will focus on the implications of text complexity on teacher practice. On its surface, the language of the Standards does not mandate any course of action regarding how teachers should meet them. What they do include are numerical parameters, called lexile ranges, to direct teacher text choices in an effort to assist in choosing grade-band appropriate texts (Applebee, 2013 & CCSSO, 2010). For example, the traditional lexile range for grades six through eight was 860-1010, which overlapped into grades 9-10. The CCS aligned range for this grade band is 955-1155, which is the old leveling for grades 9-10 (CCSSO, 2010, p. 8). Although lexile ranges are presented as guidelines, school

leadership seeking to meet the demands of the Standards, can direct teachers to choose texts at higher lexiles than some students are able to handle. These guidelines offer the promise of flexibility through language, which appears to give teachers permission to use the full range of grade-band lexiles to meet students' needs; however, if school-based leadership is overly directive, teacher autonomy will be challenged and teachers will be forced into practices which could work against their better judgment and the needs of their students. I contend the language is just broad enough to provide teachers' cover to be autonomous but puts them at jeopardy for misinterpretation, which can compromise their autonomy. Teachers' instructional decision making with HA-AA students is inextricably linked to the Standards they are mandated to teach as well as to the degree of autonomy they have to make advanced courses accessible to African American students. Literature on teacher autonomy as it relates to African American students having access to advanced courses will be addressed in an upcoming section of this review.

### **Language, Culture, and Power in the Public-School Classroom**

Language, culture, and power are inseparable intersecting forces coursing in and through the landscape of every relationship and encounter. Language and culture serve to situate people as individuals as well as group members. Power can be understood as an essence much like the wind, you cannot see it, but its presence is unquestionable. This section addresses the third issue of this chapter as I explain how language, culture, and power manifest in the public-school classroom. I also continue the discussion on teacher autonomy initiated in the previous section and include a review of the literature regarding teachers' work with high-achieving African American (HA-AA) students.

At a basic level, language, culture, and power manifest in the public-school classroom the very minute teachers and students arrive. Language, culture, and power manifests in classrooms amidst the interactions between the individuals. As students and teachers interact, they engage in a cultural exchange process governed by institutional rules of engagement. Giroux (1984) explained culture inhabits a person's ways of being, which include belief and value systems, speech, behavior, moving, dressing, and interaction different from others. These ways of being reify group membership and serve as individual and collective identity markers providing a sense of belonging (Hilliard, 1995). Language is a defining component of culture, acting as much as a marker of identity as skin pigmentation. Delpit (2002) provided the following support for my claim, "just as our skin provides us with a means to negotiate our interactions with the world – both in how we perceive our surroundings and in how those around us perceive us – our language plays an equally pivotal role in determining who we are: it is *The Skin That We Speak*," (p. xvii). Culture and language are inseparable, as one reifies the other. Power is conceptually complex and no universal definition will be offered. Instead, my understanding of power is framed by the work of several theorists. I have come to characterize power as an oppressive force, when employed will direct thinking and behavior as a means of maintaining positional rank across a variety of spectrums (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1921; Giroux, 1984; Nieto, 2010; Nyberg, 1981). Power is as ubiquitous as language and culture, governing every aspect of interpersonal relationships.

Because teaching and learning are social enterprises, language, culture, and power will guide the interactions of all involved. Schools and classrooms are cultural entities with ways of being all their own. As societal institutions, schools and classrooms most

often represent the ways of being associated with the dominant culture which may not be representative of all students. The dynamic of power is especially evident due to the hierarchical structure of the teacher-student relationship. Schools are more than academic instructional sites (Freire, 1921 & Giroux, 1984) they are avenues whereby students learn the culture of the society. It is at school where students learn if their ways of being fit the dominant culture. Often, students whose language and other cultural markers do not fit the dominant framework get left out of the learning process. Research by Delpit (2002) revealed the impact of teacher language correction on students' perceptions of school. Results from interviews with middle-school inner city students revealed that students resented teacher attempts at language correction and they characterized the teacher's behavior as rude especially when the students were involved in personal conversations and the teacher sought to "correct" (p. 51) them. The students in Delpit's study had their language challenged and devalued as exhibited by the teacher's need to force a specific linguistic style upon them. In this instance, the teacher attempted to wield power over her students as a corrective measure to what she characterized unsanctioned school linguistic behavior. This studied exemplified how teachers unwittingly advance dominant culture norms at the expense of non-dominant norms. A gap between the teacher's intention and the interpretation of the actions were critical to how the students registered her actions.

Michaels (2015) stated, "it's not just what you teach but how we teach it," (p. 73) that matters. In studies conducted at a variety of schools across the United States, Michaels sought to gain understanding of how teachers register and raise questions about race in their teaching. An observation in an honors level high school English class is

particularly salient to this study. During an observation of instruction on the *Great Gatsby*, the class had come to the end of the reading and the teacher attempted to give students an opportunity to personally connect to the characters. As part of the class discussion, the teacher asked, “Now who would you like to date or eat lunch with from *Great Gatsby*?” (p. 73). On the surface, the question appears neutral; however, given that all the main characters in *Gatsby* are white and the only African American characters hold servant positions, cultural dissonance existed for the Black students in the class. My point is not to suggest an African American would not choose to date or have lunch with a White person, it is to question the teacher’s ability to recognize the positional disparity between the Black and White characters relative to who his students are able to choose as viable mates should they be so inclined. While Michaels admitted to having concerns about the teacher’s intentions behind the question, he found the teacher unable to recognize the ways in which his question unwittingly privileged his White students. Through a discussion with the teacher about purpose, Michaels determined the teacher intended to give his students a way to more deeply connect with the characters in the book. Unfortunately, the seeming lack of implications for having no Black characters of financial means from which any of his student, much less the Black students, could choose exemplifies how culture dictated a teacher’s instructional choice in a way that did not fully take into account the totality of cultures in the room. The teacher’s inability to grasp the potential for negative imagining also represented cultural ignorance. Of course, the teacher held the best intention in wanting his students to find a way to personally connect to the characters; however, the lack of cultural sensitivity conveyed and reinforced a subtle message about positionality and companion suitability. Both studies

represented how a teacher's understanding of culture effects decisions about instruction and how they will interact with their students. For the teacher in the Delpit study, the issue was one of registering her students' use of Black Vernacular English as substandard, to be fixed. For the teacher in the Michaels' study, it was lack of cultural awareness, which is detrimental to students' ability to feel a sense of connectedness to the teacher and the learning.

### **High-Achieving African American Students and Teacher Practice**

**Characterizing High Achievement.** Like intelligence, academic high achievement can be characterized by many factors. In the United States, standardized tests are the primary tool used to ascribed labels of both intelligence and academic achievement. In this section, I provide a framework for understanding honors and advanced level English courses. For the purposes of this study, I make a distinction between giftedness and high achievement. Giftedness in children has traditionally been determined by performance on an intelligence test or what has come to be known as an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test (Gagné, 1985; Getzels & Jackson, 1958; Gould, 1996; McClellan, 1985). While IQ testing has become a primary tool in determining intelligence, such tests have been criticized for cultural bias (Ford, 2004) and their inability to capture non-technical qualities such as creativity, aesthetic sensitivity, motivation, and social adeptness (Ford, 2004; Gagné, 1985; Gould, 2010; McClellan, 1985). Traditionally, children with IQ scores ranging from 130 to 145 have been designated talented with students having IQ scores ranging from 145 to 160 designated as gifted and children with IQ scores above 170 designated as highly gifted (Gagné, 1985 & McClellan, 1985). Being designated gifted and/or talented means a child possesses high

levels of general intelligence as well as high abilities in specialized areas such as math, language, creative and/or artistic expression, and leadership (Gagné, 1985). The reliance on a single measure to determine giftedness is not without its challenge. Gould (2010) explained Binet, the originator of today's intelligence test, sought to measure intelligence not as a tool for labeling, but as a means of identifying children "whose lack of school success in the normal classroom suggested the need for some form of special education," (p. 179). Binet's test measured the difference between a child's mental and chronological age and became the tool that essentially put to bed the use of craniometry as the chief vehicle for measuring intelligence. While current use of IQ testing tends toward strict categorization, Binet himself cautioned against such use of any tool to definitively measure intelligence stating, "...the number is only an average of many performances, not an entity unto itself. We feel it necessary to insist on this fact, because later, for the sake of simplicity of statement, we will speak of a child of 8 years having the intelligence of a child of 7 or 9 years; these expressions, if accepted arbitrarily, may give place to illusions," (Binet, 1911 as cited by Gould, 2010, p. 181). Binet's prescience is noteworthy, as IQ testing has become a mechanism for labeling children.

High achievement, much like intelligence is not easily measured. Unlike IQ testing, no tests have been found to measure or determine the degree to which a learner will be or is high achieving. Many states rely on IQ tests, aptitude tests such as Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT), state-designed achievement tests, and teacher recommendations as determinants for placing children in gifted or honors level classrooms (Assouline, Colangelo, Heo, & Dockery, 2013). A 2012 study conducted by educational researchers McClain and Pfeiffer on state policies

regarding how students are chosen for placement in honors and other advanced level courses revealed similarities and differences in state requirements and decision making. Their 50-state survey results found every state offered some designation of giftedness or potential for high achievement with policies to identify middle and high school students. Their findings also highlighted variances in state policies regarding criteria for student placement in honors and/or advanced level courses. Specifically, 32 states (66%) have a state-wide policy, 12 states (24%) leave policy decisions to local school districts, and 6 states (12%) have neither state nor school-district policies for identification and placement. Their study further revealed criteria variances, such as IQ test-score cut off ranges, state-level test score cut score ranges, student portfolios, and teacher recommendations. According to their survey, only eighteen states (36%) in the country mandate either IQ or state-level achievement test score cut scores. Of the eighteen, fifteen (83%) require achievement score ranges, ten (56%) require cut scores on other measures such as creativity and leadership. Additionally, the survey results showed twenty-six states (+50%) mandate policies for identifying diverse populations while twenty-four (48%) have no such policies. The McClain Pfeiffer study is significant to my study because it showed the growing changes in how students are identified for placement within advanced courses.

**High-achievement and African American Students.** While McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) revealed nearly half of all states mandate policies to identify high achievement among diverse populations, representational disparities remain woefully imbalanced and seemingly intractable. Studies by Theokas and Saaris (2013) and Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, and Gitomer (2008) showed 71% of all US high schools

offer at least one AP program with 783 US schools offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program. Of the schools offering AP programming, nearly 12% of all HS schools participate with 5.5% of students with IB availability participating. Certainly 12% and 5.5% participation rates are low relative to the availability; however, when considering the participation by race and ethnicity, the numbers are even more startling.

High achieving is a phrase rarely used to characterize African American students (AA) students. The pervading belief is African American learners are primarily under-achieving and poor (Bonner, 2000; Ford, Harris, Tyson, Frazier Trotman, 2002; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Milner, 2007; Perry, Steele, Hilliard, 2003; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Results from Theokas and Saaris (2013), Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, and Gitomer (2008), Archbald, Glutting, and Qian (2009) and Ford (2004) revealed the seeming availability of rigorous courses in the form of honors, AP, and IB, stark racial and ethnic representational disproportionalities within these courses exist. Of the 12% participation rate of all students in AP programs, African Americans comprise nearly 6% which is less than half of their total population in high schools of nearly 14% (Ford, 2004). Such racial representational disproportionality relative to availability is worthy of examination. In this section, I begin a discussion on high-achieving African America (HA-AA) students with the goal of expanding the current narrative driving the discussion on this group of learners. Much of the literature around African American achievement has focused on underachievement. Perry (2003) asserted, “the contemporary public conversations about Black school achievement, like virtually all past conversations about African-American school performance, remain focused on underachievement,” (p. 6). This imbalanced

focus on underachievement has led to a false notion that underachievement is the primary characteristic of an African American learner. With fewer than two percent of all scholarly research geared toward high-achievement among minoritized students (Bonner, 2000 & Ford 2004), it is easy to understand why underachievement has come to define African American learners. Research on teacher practice with HA-AA focuses on the identification process and the affective domains of the classroom (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Frazier, & Trotman, 2002; Harris, 2006; Milner, 2002/2007; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Wiggan, 2007; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005) with autonomy virtually absent from this conversation. Teacher autonomy is an underlying thread associated with how students are identified as having potential for high achievement. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) highlighted the import of teachers having the latitude to recommend students for advanced courses. Their work found teachers were less likely to recommend students of color, particularly students they deemed overly inquisitive of teachers themselves or assignments. Such questioning was viewed as oppositional (Ogbu, 1985) and taken as an affront to the teacher's authority. A study by Ford et al. (2002) showed teachers harbored deficit frameworks about their African American students which, hindered their willingness to view AA students as having similar potential as their White students. Ford et al. (2002) demonstrated the power deficit thinking manifested in low academic expectations has over student access to rigorous coursework which can change the trajectory of a child's academic life and future.

While the bulk of the literature around African American achievement is framed around deficiency and opposition, emerging literature has begun to challenge the

foundation upon which many of these notions have been built. Literature from Archibald, Glutting, and Qian (2009), Ford and Harmon (2001), and Wiggan (2007) among others has also begun to provide insight into ways the institutionally reproduced academic inequalities can be disrupted providing more opportunities for HA-AA students and the teachers who work with them. Ford and Harmon (2001) suggested the use of nonverbal tests of intelligence which, tend to be “less culturally loaded than traditional tests,” (p. 4). The use of standardized tests to determine giftedness and achievement show no sign of abatement; therefore, the use of such tests should work to open access for traditionally underrepresented groups. Wiggan (2007) interviewed HA-AA students who reported the need for teachers who demonstrated care exemplified by a willingness to offer challenging assignments, assistance with work when needed, as well as a willingness to answer questions and recognize them as necessary. Additionally, the students in Wiggan’s study recognized economic disparities between their school and others in their area and raised the need for discussions about finance reform to stem the tide of poverty. For Wiggan’s students, the lack of equity demonstrated a lack of care as they realized the impact of poverty on academic achievement. Their desire to engage in dialogue about poverty and the need for equity demonstrates a high level of understanding of what it takes to provide students with a leveled playing field upon which to learn.

**Foundations of a construct.** For nearly thirty years, the work of anthropologists Fordham and Ogbu (1985) have framed the thinking around African American academic achievement. They argued that due to the racial dynamics in America which manifested themselves in the classroom along with messages Black students received at home, a fear of “acting white” (1985) resulted. Fordham and Ogbu studied a small group of

successful African American adolescent students in one predominantly Black high school in the South. Based on their interviews, Fordham and Ogbu ascertained that “acting white” in the school context was perceived as a set of cultural norms that included, but were not limited to, the use of Standard American English (SAE), listening to what was deemed White music, working hard and getting good grade in school, and frequenting local cultural sites. The response to the potential for being accused of “acting white” was to underperform, hence one of the explanations for African American academic underachievement. Underachieving was believed to be a coping mechanism for traversing the hostilities of school, especially for HA-AA students whose lived school experiences involved intra-racial and inter-racial opposition.

In addition to the fear of acting White, Fordham and Ogbu (1985) espoused HA-AA students enacted resistant oppositional behaviors as an additional layer of coping with a culturally violent environment. Since the pursuit of academics had been associated with characteristics of whiteness, adolescent African American students were thought to forge a separate identity through active resistance and oppositional behaviors such as becoming the “class clown” (Bonner, 2000, p. 652) and intentionally underachieving. Additional research by (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998 & Hemmings, 1996) supported the notion HA-AA students hide their academic abilities by employing such tactics as not turning in homework, not giving academics sufficient time to be successful, and showing disinterest at the classroom level. These behaviors served to reinforce notions of AA students as being primarily low-performing, anchoring a limited perspective of what it means to be Black in school. While the research presented was salient to forging a pathway for characterizing African American learners, more

recent research as revealed that those reigning theories of “acting white” and resistance-oppositional identity formation present an incomplete picture.

**Problematizing and Challenging Systems of Belief.** Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) made a critical observation regarding the pervasiveness of acceptance that Black academic underachievement was a factor of opposition and resistance to “acting white.” They cautioned, “the oppositional culture model has become so respected in the academic community that it threatens to divert attention from other explanations for the racial gap in school performance,” (p. 550). Their statement was prescient as the literature has revealed studies questioning, testing, and challenging the validity of Ogbu’s and Fordham’s claims and the degree to which African American achievement disproportionality can be solely attributed to anti-system resistance and opposition and the fear of peer reprisal associated with “acting white.” Research has begun to offer a broader view for understanding African American academic achievement. Results from one study will be discussed as it offers a pathway for reconstructing the widely-held notions of African American achievement disproportionality.

A study of HA-AA males in a study by Graham and Anderson (2008) found adopting a “Blackness” identity was a source of strength, which propelled the students forward in their academic pursuits. The students in this study revealed being oppositional would represent a stereotype of what people, especially their teachers, expected and believed about them. Their choice, instead, was to defy the stereotype and adopt a “Blackness” identity, which allowed them to be their authentic selves in the face of social critique and low expectations. Critical to the formation of these young men was the racial knowledge grounded in the history of their ancestors as oppressed people in the

United States. Resistance and opposition took the form of acting against stereotypes to fully embrace achievement as representative of Blackness. The representational imbalance of AA learners would serve to expand the narrative and defy society's widely-held advanced beliefs and messages about Black achievement.

**Teacher Practice and High-achieving African American Students.** The literature on teacher practice regarding HA-AA is limited in scope and depth, focusing primarily on teachers' role in affording students access to rigorous coursework. Generally, teachers have been found to be gatekeepers to high-level classes such as Advanced Placement (AP) and honors. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) reported, "the task of academic achievement for African Americans in the context of school in the United States is distinctive against the United States ideology that seeks to question the mental capacity of African Americans," (p. 6). Teachers are uniquely positioned to provide access to honors level and Advanced Placement (AP) courses as the task for identifying potentially gifted and talented students often begins with nominations from them. As Bonner (2000) explained, teachers often use subjective factors associated with White cultural norms and those students, particularly African American students, who do not fit the norms often get excluded regardless of their intellectual abilities. Students are expected to exhibit behaviors and use language associated with White middle-class culture and as Sparks (2015) pointed out, despite many teachers saying they believe all students can learn, they are less likely to recommend students who are deemed excessively inquisitive or whose home language differs from the socially accepted norms, or whose behavior appears to challenge teacher positions of authority. Such narrowly constructed ideas of being renders students vulnerable to teachers' uncovered biases.

Ford and Harmon (2001) stated, “if teachers do not understand that some cultures come from an oral tradition, they may neither recognize nor appreciate the strengths of students who prefer speaking more than writing and reading,” (p. 2). Such a bias towards what it looks like to be gifted precludes teachers from adopting a broad-based perspective, which will limit access to rigorous courses. In his work on social issues pertaining to HA-AA, Milner (2002) suggested teachers may not appreciate students who are overly inquisitive and often misconstrue such behavior as deviant. Student compliance tends to be more highly valued among teachers and they often define high achievement as a degree to which students follow rules. Although limited, this singular perspective of teachers as gatekeeper pervaded the research and offers opportunities for teachers to adopt broader constructs of what high-achievement should be and who could be a high-achiever. My research has the potential to expand the narrative about teacher practice with HA-AA students by examining instructional decision making related to the influences of language, culture, and power. By examining the ways in which teachers plan for and deliver instruction to their HA-AA students, I gained insight into what it looks like when teachers address the unique learning needs of HA-AA students.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this chapter has been to address the literature on three issues in education. As standardization continues to rule the landscape, teachers’ autonomy will remain under attack. While the literature rightly advances the impact of high-stakes testing and learning standards on the ways in which teaching and learning are constrained, I contend research on the role of school-based instructional leadership in the abatement of teacher autonomy could also be useful in widening the discussion on the

factors restricting teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment. While teachers are subject to state and local educational rules and regulations, the scope of their daily work is governed more by the decisions of their school-based leadership, which if highly directive stands to be as instructionally constraining and reductive as the standards are believed to be. Research in this area could serve to help leadership balance operational governance with an appreciation for teachers' needs for instructional professionalism.

While the discussion of African American achievement has begun to shift to a broader context, I contend more research in this area is also necessary. Teacher practices with HA-AA students continues to be narrowly constructed around affective domains of learning and challenging biased thinking, which act as gatekeeping forces against access to rigorous coursework. Such narrow construction presents a gap in understanding regarding how teachers engage in lesson design and delivery for this group of learners. It is necessary for teachers, coaches, teacher educators, and researchers to expand their thinking around academic achievement for African American students. The literature has presented promise as the shift towards a broader perspective has begun. I contend more work in this area remains and my research can engage in deeper dialogue around how to meet the needs of HA-AA students. Additionally, more work around how teachers think about their literacy instruction with their HA-AA students is needed to extend understanding about teacher practice to get beyond deficit frameworks pervading the current conversation.

## Chapter 3

### Method

The purpose of this study was to examine how language, culture, and power influence teacher instructional planning, learning tool choices, and instructional delivery practices with high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom in ways that engage this population in literacy learning and achievement. Classrooms function as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) influenced by the intersections of language and culture with the inevitability of power dynamics as shapers of the relationships between teachers and students. The theoretical frameworks shaping this study were situated on interrelated theories relating to the inseparable nature of language and culture (Delpit, 2002; Gee, 1999; Labov, 1972; Lee, 2007; Nieto, 2010, Smitherman, 1977; Thomas et al., 1999), the inevitability of power as a dynamic in every relationship (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1921/1990; Nyberg, 1981; Shrigley, 1986), the inherent presence of racism as a force shaping how students are educated in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and adolescent literacy (Alexander, 2003; Chall, 1983; Goldman & Snow, 2015; Idrisano & Chall, 1995; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Moje, 1996/2002; Piercy & Piercy, 2010; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). I used a variety of data sources to gain insight into how these forces influence teacher instructional decision making as seen through their formal plans for their HA-AA students.

To address my research questions, I used a variety of sources to generate data. By using multiple methodological approaches, I analyzed the data more effectively to gain a more complete and holistic perspective (Jick, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) on how

language, culture, and power impact teacher instructional decision making with their high-achieving African American students. As Fielding and Fielding (1986) stated, “we should combine theories and methods carefully and purposefully with the intention of adding breadth and depth to our analysis but not for the purpose of pursuing “objective truth,” (p. 33). Language, culture, and power are simultaneously fixed and fluid. Each is fixed in their inevitability while being fluid in their manifestation; therefore, arriving at an “objective truth” about how they influence teacher instructional decision making is impossible. Through the research, I described and explained how each construct influenced teachers’ instructional decision-making. I explored these constructs as related to HA-AA students to expand the narrow portrayal of this learner group and how teachers work with them.

There are several prevailing frameworks around which high-achieving African American students and their teachers are commonly constructed. According to Perry (2003), “the contemporary public conversations about Black school achievement, like virtually all past conversations about African-American school performance, remain focused on underachievement,” (p. 6). Fordham and Ogbu (1985) advanced the notion Black students in American public schools face a debilitating burden of having to fight an image of acting White, which negatively influences whether they will take advanced courses. Hemmings (1996), Milner (2002/2007), and Graham and Anderson (2008) contended African American students in advanced courses must choose between their home culture and the dominant culture to feel measures of classroom connectedness, which often leads to alienation from their home cultures. Ford (2002) determined teachers’ deficit thinking about Black students was the primary gatekeeper impacting

access to advanced courses. These prevailing frameworks serve to limit thinking about HA-AA students and teachers. As advanced through my theoretical framework and literature review, the continuing master narrative about Black students as under-achieving and oppositional, presents a need for a more expansive perspective about African American students. Examining lesson plans, interviewing teachers, observing classrooms to take field notes met teachers at the crossroads of their instructional practices and offered a vehicle to extend understanding about high-achieving African American students and how teachers educate them. In the next sections, I address the methods used to complete this study.

## **Methods**

In this section, I describe the tools and methods of analysis used to gain insight into how language, culture, and power shaped teacher practice with HA-AA in a secondary English classroom.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

There were five secondary English teachers in this study. One participant was a middle school teacher from a large urban-suburban school district in the southern part of the US. One of the high school participants taught in a suburban school in the northeast and the three remaining participants taught at the same high school in a rural school district in the southern part of the US. According to (Maxwell, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005; Seidman, 2013), purposeful selection allows a researcher the opportunity to gain substantive knowledge about the experience being explored. Suri (2011) described criterion sampling as using pre-determined qualities as a means for selecting study

participants. Since I focused on gaining insight about teacher practices with high-achieving African American students, it was necessary to establish specific criteria for selecting my participants. Participants for this study were chosen per the criteria listed below:

1. Currently teaching English at the secondary level (grade 6-12)
2. Teach honors English level or above (preAP or AP)
3. Twenty-five percent or more of students taught should be identified as African American
4. Willingness to share lesson plans and reflect on instructional decisions
5. Willingness to be interviewed and reflect on instructional decisions and practices
6. Willingness to allow classroom visits for the purpose of gathering field notes

**Participant Recruitment.** My former work as a district-level literacy coach and literacy consultant provided recruiting opportunities. To recruit participants for this study, I contacted the superintendent of the school district where three of the participants worked. Having worked in the district as a consultant prior to this study, I requested permission from the superintendent to recruit the high school teachers. After being granted permission, I emailed recruitment letters to four of the English teachers and three agreed to participate. Upon securing participation agreements, I emailed participant consent forms to each teacher. After receiving electronically signed consent forms, each participant was emailed a demographic form.

I also reached out to a middle school principal in the district where I worked as a literacy coach and specialist. The principal granted me permission to recruit teachers and provided three names of teachers who met the criteria of this study. I emailed

recruitment letters to each of the three teachers and one agreed to participate. I then emailed a participant consent form and once I received the electronically signed consent form, I emailed the participant a demographic form. The final participant was recruited as a result of reading an article she had written in *The Reading Teacher* magazine. The biography at the end of article stated she taught Advanced Placement English Literature in a class with African American students. I emailed her to introduce myself and explain the study. She expressed interest in the topic of this study and I forward a recruitment letter. As with the other participants, upon receiving agreement to participate, I followed up with an emailed copy of the consent form, and had her complete a demographic form.

**Participant Information.** The five participants in this study had different experience levels and with the exception of the three who taught at the same school, the three sites differed demographically. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. I have constructed participant profiles, which are based on the initial interview. The initial interview provided the opportunity for participants to share background information about their personal and professional schooling experiences. I refer to these profiles in Chapter 4 to contextualize participant responses and the findings of the study. Table 1 provides an outline of participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Table 1.  
Participant Demographics

Participant (pseudonym)	# of Years Teaching	Grades/Courses Taught	Self-identified race/ethnicity	Self-identified gender
Amy	6	8 <sup>th</sup> advanced & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female
Beth	1	11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female
Dawn	18	10 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	African American	Female
Erin	2	9 <sup>th</sup> <del>pre-AP</del> & on-grade level	African American	Female
Marie	1	11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female

### Participant Profiles

**Amy.** Amy is a six-year veteran with high- and middle-school experience. She has taught in two different states and at the time of the study, was in her fourth year in her current building. Throughout her teaching career, Amy was a substitute teacher and taught subjects other than English. She described herself as “always AB honor roll... You know I was a good kid,” (interview 1). Amy also described as herself as having grown up in a middle-class family with a professionally employed father and mother who worked inside the home until she was in middle school. She shared fond memories of school and described her teachers as involved. Amy teaches eighth grade honors- and on-grade level English.

Amy’s school is part of a learning community within a large southern school district. Her learning community was created by a partnership between the school district and a philanthropic organization to address the needs in one of the district’s high needs schools. Students in Amy’s honors English class gain entry via their math class. In her district, students who achieve in the ninetieth-percentile or above on their seventh-grade state tests gain entry into a math class that combines the eighth-grade and ninth-grade

curriculum. Students are expected to take their regular eighth-grade and ninth-grade assessments at the end of the year. Parents can request their child be placed in the advanced math course, which would automatically place their child in the honors English course; however, due to the testing component, students are rarely entered by parent request alone. They are asked to have teacher recommendation.

**Beth.** Beth is a first-year teacher and began with a description of her personal schooling experience. She spoke of going to a small rural mostly white high school. She recalled a pleasant personal schooling experience and shared that she was from a different part of the state from the school where she is currently teaching. As an English teacher who did not study English as an undergraduate student, Beth told of struggling with the content at times because she did not possess the same level of passion around the subject as she had noticed in other teachers who had taught English. Beth shared that in not having a high passion for the subject matter at times makes it a challenge to provide her students good enough reasons for why they are required to do some of what she must teach. Beth teaches eleventh and twelfth grade English and Advanced Placement English Literature. Beth, Erin, and Marie teach at the same high school. Their high school is the only high school in the district and the district is on the state's school improvement list. Students in Beth's, Erin's, and Marie's district gain entry in the pre-Advanced Placement courses via a tracking system that begins in third and fourth grades. Students are tested and those who test at or above eighty-five percent are given the option to be placed in advanced courses. The students can remain in the advanced classes until they graduate high school. Parents can also request their child be placed in the district's advanced courses. Teachers also have the ability to recommend a student for entry into an advanced

class. Students can be exited due to grades; however, it is rare for them to be allowed back in once they have been exited.

**Dawn.** Dawn was the participant with most teaching experience, at eighteen years. She recalled having generally pleasant memories of school, but admitted to not remembering anything of significance or especially negative. Dawn shared that she believed kids should come to school and get what they need and not let her or any other teacher have enough power over them to make them feel negatively about themselves. She believed, “You shouldn’t give anyone that much power,” (interview 1), and said she never gave her teachers more power over her than her parents had. For her, school was part of life’s necessity, but not all consuming. Dawn described herself as an avid reader and was proud to share that she had read nearly ninety-percent of the books her students read. Dawn teaches tenth and twelfth grade English and Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition. Dawn teaches at a high-achieving, well-funded suburban school in the southeastern part of the US. Her school district has an open-access policy for all Advanced Placement courses. Parents can request and teachers can recommend students be placed in their AP courses.

**Erin.** Erin is a second-year teacher who is teaching in the same school she went to as a child. As a student, Erin recalled having generally negative experiences in school, with her teachers mislabeling her as needing special services. She remembered being the student who finished every assignment last, was the last to answer teacher questions, and felt as though she thought differently from her classmates and her teachers did not understand how she approached learning. Erin credited her mother’s intervention, which kept her out of special education. At Erin’s school, ninth and tenth grade honors level

students take preAdvanced Placement English. She teaches ninth grade preAP English and works with students after-school to recover lost credits in English. Erin is a participant with whom I worked while a consultant in her district prior to this study.

**Marie.** Marie is a first-year teacher from the northwestern part of the US. She described her middle and high schools as being, “of money,” (interview 1) and very well resourced. Marie described herself as a child who grew up loving to read. She took Advanced Placement English Literature in high school and maintained a relationship with her high school English teacher. Her undergraduate studies were in the state where she now teaches, and Marie described the college as liberal arts, but not very diverse. Marie teaches eleventh-grade Advanced Placement English Literature, on-grade level tenth grade English, and twelfth-grade creative writing.

## **Procedure**

In the section below, I outline the procedures used to analyze my data.

## **Lesson Plan Content Analysis**

One of the data sources used in this study is qualitative content analysis described by Stemler (2001); Hsieh & Shannon (2005); and Hood (2006). Stemler (2001) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described qualitative content analysis as a research method involving systematic review of text, which allows for “subjective interpretation,” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), of the language contained in the data by assigning codes and categories to the data that emerge through the analysis. I analyzed lesson plans for trends and patterns in language use, evidence of non-dominant culture texts, and areas of congruence and departure from how participants described their lesson planning process.

Studies of teachers' written lesson plans have revealed the use of rubrics to determine the degree to which teachers follow their plans and their overall effectiveness. Lesson plan analysis studies by Clark and Yinger (1979/1980), Yinger (1980), Panasuk, Stone, and Todd (2002), Jacobs, Martin, and Otieno (2008) all involved the use of rubrics, which contained a criterion based on teachers' written plans addressing student background, interests, prior knowledge and culture, as well as word count analysis. Each of the studies was quantitative and did not contain content analysis of the actual words in the lesson plans to determine what the language revealed about how or whether teachers were paying attention to their students' background, prior knowledge, interests, and/or culture. I used content analysis of lessons plans to gain insight into how language and culture influenced teachers' instructional plans. I was looking to see how teachers used words in their plans and if there was evidence of non-dominant culture texts. The content analysis steps I used are presented below:

1. I read three sets of lesson plans per participant and made hand-written notes on each plan to record emerging patterns.
2. After reviewing individual teacher's lessons, I developed a coding dictionary to categorize developing themes for each teacher.
3. I developed separate multi-column lesson plan analysis charts for each teacher, which contained a column for participant pseudonyms, specific words lifted from the plans, instructional material descriptions, activity descriptions, codes for emerging themes, and memos to capture my analysis.

4. After analyzing individual participant lesson plan analysis charts, I developed a master lesson plan analysis chart to capture the emerging themes across the individual charts (See Appendix A).
5. I analyzed the master lesson plan chart and mapped the data to my interview coding dictionary to lead to my findings and address my research questions.

In analyzing themes across the lesson plans, I conducted thematic content analyses as described by Reissman (2008), where she explained the emphasis is on what is being said rather than how words are expressly used. Organizing the data in this manner provided a basis for describing how language is used as well as whether there is specific evidence teachers are intentional about the language they use with their HA-AA students. By including analysis of instructional materials and activities, I learned how instructional decision-making was influenced by the relationships among teachers' language use, the materials they selected, and the planned activities and teachers perspective on culture and their use of instructional power.

### **Participant Interviews**

To begin making connections about how language, culture, and power impact teacher instructional decisions, I conducted two to three interviews with each of the teachers in this study. Interviews provided teachers opportunities to discuss their perspectives on the role of language, culture, and power as factors in their instructional decision-making processes. Interviews also offered an opportunity to inquire into the lived experiences of participants. As Seidman (2013) explained, "at the root of in-depth interview is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience," (p. 9). As I examined participants' lesson plans,

interviews afforded me the chance to gain more direct knowledge teachers' thinking about language, culture, and power as they made decisions about instruction with their HA-AA students in real time. I used a three-interview series process as described by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 & Seidman, 2013). The first interview was used to gather background information about the teachers, their memories of their schooling experiences, their general knowledge about their district's policies for identifying high-achieving students, and how those policies are communicated to them. The second interview was designed to delve deeper into the teachers' use of language and culture in their planning, material selection and use, their instructional delivery, and interaction with their students. During the second interview, I also asked teachers their thoughts about the dynamic of power and how they view themselves in relation to the embedded power they have as the authority figure in their classroom. The third interview was conducted with three of the participants as follow-ups to the previous two interviews and provided teachers with the chance to, as Seidman, (2013) described, "reflect on the meaning of their experience," (p. 22). The final interview was conducted after the site visit and allowed me to focus on how they used language during the lesson I viewed. We also discussed their perceptions on the role culture played in the lesson I viewed. Two of the participants were not available for a third interview due to school schedules. Since all participants taught both advanced and on-grade level courses, interview questions focused on their work with their high-achieving African American students.

*Data Analysis.* Interviews provide a form of storytelling to allow participants a voice in the process of data generation and analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995; Reissman, 2008). As Reissman (2008) pointed out, narratives require interpretation when used as

data sources in social research. The steps I used to interpret the narratives derived during the interviews are outlined below:

1. In preparation for the interviews, I created individual charts for each participant. The interview data charts were set up to contain codes, code definitions, interview data, and memos for each participant. I used this as an organizational tool in preparation for the interviews.
2. I listened to the initial interview from each participant and used a note taking tool to record significant responses and the times when the responses occurred.
3. I then listened to and transcribed the first interviews. After transcribing and analyzing the first interviews, I developed a coding dictionary to begin categorizing the data.
4. After each subsequent round of transcription, data was coded and added to my coding dictionary. New themes were added to the coding dictionary and I completed the coding chart described in Step 1.
5. After analyzing the separate coding charts for each participant, I completed the master coding chart for each teacher containing the data from all three interviews as described in Step 1.
6. Data from the five-master participant interview coding charts was used to develop a single interview analysis chart containing the coded categories and themes from across all interviews (Appendix B).
7. I conducted a thematic analysis of the data contained within the interview analysis charts and mapped to the master lesson plan analysis chart to lead to my findings and address my research questions.

Hood (2006) and Rossman and Rallis (2003), explained the method of using codes and categories to develop themes from data provide mechanisms for making connections between concepts, which appear throughout the data. The system of data analysis I used was designed to organize and simplify my data (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). My process provided opportunities to create meaning around the data and use the data to point towards my guiding questions and theoretical underpinnings. Once the data from each source had been coded, I analyzed my coding dictionaries to determine points of similarities and departures to help me better understand how the participants made decisions about their planning and how those decisions were being influenced by language, culture, and power.

*Interview Questions.* As (Seidman, 2013) explained, the three-series interview approach is designed to give participants the ability to share background, delve deeply into the topic of inquiry, and have opportunities to follow-up and reflect. The questions used in my interviews are outlined below:

Initial Interview Questions:

- Describe your schooling personal experiences.
- How many years have you been teaching? What grades do you teach? What other academic levels do you teach?
- How does your school district determine which students will be in advanced class?
- How are the district determinations communicated to you?
- What are the expectations of teachers who teach advanced students?
- How are the expectations for advanced learners communicated?
- What characteristics do you think teachers of advanced students should possess?

- Please explain how you plan for student learning in your advanced classes.
- How do you define culture?
- How do you use language in your planning, instruction, interaction with your students?
- Please describe the power dynamic in your classroom.
- What expectations do you have for how students will use language in this classroom?
- How would you describe the role of culture in your planning, teaching, and interactions with this group of students?
- How did you make decisions about the texts you use for this group?
- In what ways do your planning and teaching differ between class levels?

Second Interview Questions:

- How does this particular student population inform your planning and teaching of texts?
- How does the concept of culture influence how you talk about texts with this group of learners?
- What influences your choice of words with this group?
- How does this group of learners influence the questions you ask?
- How did you determine the in-class activities/tasks for this group of learners?
- Additional questions were posed to participants to probe for clarity. Questions for probing differed by participant based on responses in the moment.

Third Interview Questions:

- Reflecting on the lesson, please share how things went.

- Reflecting on the lesson, please explain how you used your power. What effect would you say your use of power had on the lesson and these students?
- Reflecting on the lesson, please explain the ways in which culture was most prevalent.
- How would you say culture impacted your lesson and this group of learners?
- Tell me about a time in the lesson you felt your language accomplished the goals you set.
- What activities might you change? Why?

Stewart (2011), proffered the idea, “presenting data in the form of human experience, instead of raw numbers, can have powerful results – particularly in acrimonious debates over how schools should be run and evaluated,” (p. 293). Examining data sources from a qualitative lens, using tools specific to teachers, echoed Stewart’s point about the human experience having powerful results. Field notes, taken during site visits provided an additional layer of knowledge about the role of culture in this environment. Each of the methods employed offer a decolonized method (Patel, 2016 & Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) of analysis by analyzing teachers’ formal lesson plans and interviewing them, I had a front row seat into the ways culture, language, and the dynamics of power impacted how teachers lesson design for their HA-AA students.

### **Limitations**

All research studies offer possibility and limitations. The size, scope, and amount of study research time can also be described as limitations to this study. Using five teachers is a relatively small study whose results will not be generalizable to the public; however, the results and my interpretations provide applicable knowledge about how

language, culture, and power impact teacher instructional decision making with high-achieving African American students. My use of ethnographic research methods (Heath, 1983; Ellis, 2004), offered insight into the culture of the environment, which also provided a way to better understand the relationship between how language, culture, and power operated in this space in ways that impacted how the teachers in this study use language, culture, and power as influencing factors of how they plan instruction for a group of learners traditionally discussed in narrowly constructed ways. Seidman (2013) spoke of having to listen for and differentiate between an interviewee's "outer or public voice," (p. 81) to get at the heart of a response. As interviewees pay attention to their audience, they are more likely to use an outer voice, which can limit the authenticity of a response. Probing teachers during the interview process mitigated the limitations that may have arisen from my participants' inclination towards public voice responses. Additionally, in conducting interviews with a study of this size, I had an opportunity to develop conceptual inferences (Stewart, 2011) about the influences of language, culture, and power on instructional planning in ways not necessarily possible in a larger study.

Instructional decision-making includes a wide range of processes and activities. I focused on instructional planning because I consider instructional planning a foundational to all aspects of instructional decision making. Focusing on teacher lesson planning afforded me opportunities to deeply examine how teachers approached the constructs of language, culture, and power as they plan and think about instruction for the group of students not generally considered in this manner. While observations were not part of this study, the use of field notes along with the other data sources provided a mechanism to begin understanding teacher practices with HA-AA students, with future opportunities to

examine instructional delivery as a next step. This study has the potential to broaden the conversation about HA-AA students and how teachers educate them. My interests, desires, and previous experiences with teachers as a coach, specialist, and content developer can also be limitations to this study as those experiences and knowledge come with me into the research environment.

To ensure data trustworthiness, I developed a member-checking tool (see Appendix D) containing each of the study constructs with data from the interviews, lesson plans, and field notes along with my interpretations. Each participant was emailed a chart containing their data information and was asked to review the chart, provide changes or indicate the information was accurate. I acknowledge the potential for my subjectivities to be viewed as limitations; however, I leaned on Freeman, de Marrais, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre (1977) who explained, “there are no “pure”, “raw” data, uncontaminated by human thought and action and the significance of the data depends on how material fits into the architecture of corroborating data,” (p. 27). My use of multiple data sources provided the avenue to address the naturally existing limitations.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

In Chapter 1, I discussed the impetus of this study as an outgrowth of my personal story as the only African American student in my Advanced Placement English classroom. In that chapter, I also told the story of the problem regarding the dearth of research on high-achieving African American students. In Chapter 2, I presented a review of literature related to several critical issues in education that shape teaching and learning. The issues served to ground my study within the current body of research on race, culture, power, adolescent literacy, and teacher practice regarding high-achieving African American students. In Chapter 3, I outlined the research methods for this study and the modes of data analysis. In this chapter, I present the findings based on my data analysis. First, I discuss the findings of each construct separately providing connections to my theoretical framework. Then I discuss the relationships among the constructs to answer my research questions of how language, culture, and power influence a teacher's instructional decision making with their high-achieving African American students in secondary English classrooms, what the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence their instructional decision making with their high-achieving African American students in secondary English classrooms, and what the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom.

Language, culture, and power are inextricably linked constructs. As Nieto (2010) stated, "everyone has a culture because all people participate in the world through social

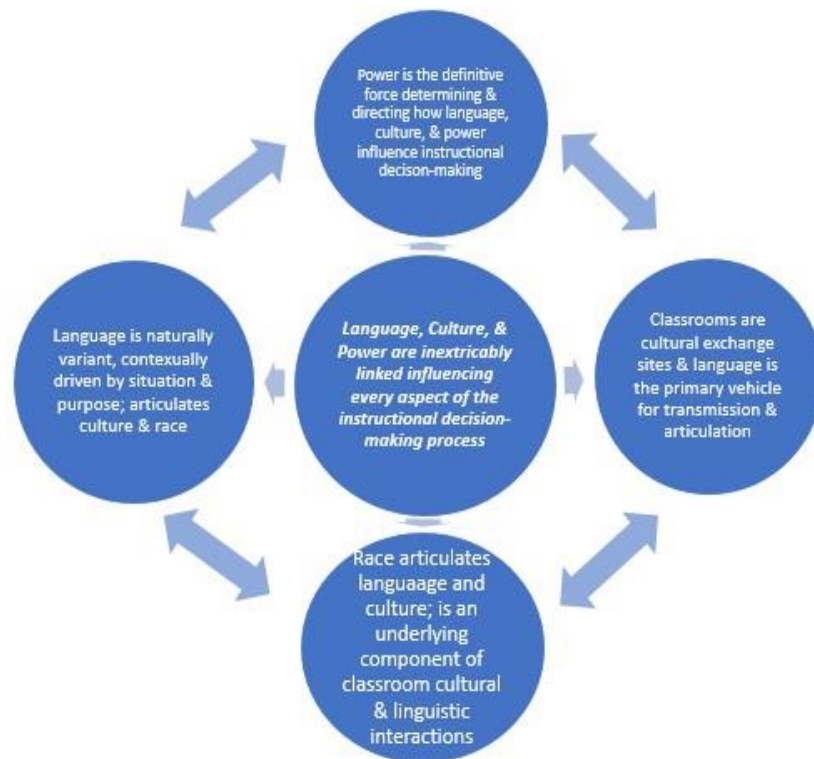
and political relationships informed by history as well as by race, ethnicity, language, social class, sexual orientation, gender, and other circumstances related to identity and experience,” (p. 9). Power weaves in and through the cultural components Nieto outlined because it is the “smog in the air,” (Tatum, 1997, p. 6) that directs and redirects the connections among the elements. Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice; the emergence of culture as the inevitable result of human interaction (Carrithers, 1992); language as an identity shaper, inseparable from culture (Gee, 1999, Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977); power as an ever-present force in every relationship which creates imbalanced interactions (Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1921; Nyberg, 1981) undergirded participants’ articulation of their understanding about the relationship among these constructs. Additionally, race as a social construct that is a normal factor in nearly every aspect of US society including how students of color are educated (Stefancic & Delgado, 2012) further shaped how participants approached their individual descriptions of language, culture, and power as well as how they explained the collective influence of these factors on their instructional decisions for HA-AA students. These interrelated theories served as a pathway for understanding the data and developing themes, which led to the findings I discuss in this chapter.

Based on my data analysis, I determined a core finding, which linked all other findings in this study. While it was evident language, culture, and power intersected in a multiplicity of ways, the core finding of this study is language, culture, and power are intersectional and influence every aspect of the instructional decision-making process and participants’ beliefs about language, culture, and power influence how these constructs influence their instructional decision-making processes. I discuss each related finding

and explain how it stems from and connects to this core finding. In Figure 1, I present a graphic representation illustrating the connections among the core finding and critical sub-findings of this study.

Figure 1. Construct Relationship Model

Figure 1. Construct Relationship Model



## Language in the Classroom

Throughout this study, it was nearly impossible to make clearly delineated separations among language, culture, and the smog of power in shaping how teachers make instructional decisions. However, as I engaged with my participants through interviews, reviews of their lesson plans, and observation field notes, I developed themes from codes I assigned to the data for how these five participants conceptualized language

in their classrooms with their high-achieving African American students. Findings on participants' understanding of language suggested they use language in a variety of ways, which was based on their beliefs about and expectations for how language should be used in the classroom. From this finding, the themes I determined began aligning to Smitherman's (1977) notion words fit into a symbolic and cultural system and must be understood as part of the cultural domain, and Gee's (2005) concept of words being reflexively related to "language-plus-situation" (p. 113). I supported these themes by open coding the data from all five participant interviews, lesson plans, field notes, and dialogic memos (Stewart, 2011). I developed thematic maps for deeper analysis across themes to arrive at my findings. In this next section, I present themes related to language for instruction and language for interaction. Each of these themes provides insight into how teachers characterized their own language and the expectations they had for how students will use language in their classrooms.

### **Teachers' Language Use in the Classroom**

In working to understand how teachers conceptualized language as a function of their instructional decision-making, it was important for me to first gain insight into how they characterized their own use of language. During the first interview, each participant was asked to consider how they used language in planning, instruction, and interaction with their students. When considering their own use of language, participants responded by characterizing their language use according to purpose and delivery, meaning whether their language was on paper in the form of lesson plans and/or tasks or through verbal speech while interacting with students and/or delivering instruction. How participants described their language use in their classrooms were findings from which I constructed

the theme of language use is variant and contextually driven. In this section, I present data exemplifying this theme and the findings that led to this theme.

Findings from participants' responses led to the central theme related to language, which demonstrated language as fluid, variant, and event situated. Themes also aligned to what Foster (1995) deemed as the "tripartite function of teacher language" (p. 129), which revolved around language for communicating academic functions and/or processes, developing and maintaining relationships, and expressing teacher's attitudes about speech in the classroom. Second-year teacher Erin, explained, "On paper, it's always what is --- I guess what is considered dominant language. Even in instruction, it's majority dominant language unless I am uhm --- I guess I am trying --- and I don't like to use the word trying to relate to them. I'm putting it on and taking it off," (interview 1). To provide details about what she meant by putting on and taking off language, Erin recalled the following incident:

We were discussing Oepidus the King, we read an excerpt and we were discussing and I noticed stuff was flying well---way above their heads as far as comprehension. I went through a series of asking these academic questions...what's the relationship...blah...blah...blah...and I was okay look--- This is what Jacosta's saying, "Look Bae...Boo don't even worry about ol' boy over there, I already took care of that...I ain't tryna' hear dat..."

To anchor her explanation, Erin went on to say, "I shifted my language to colloquial and it clicked for them and they were able to git it. I transitioned back so I guess what I call code switching --- uhm --- going back and forth in that," (interview 1). By naming her own process of using colloquial language as a means for fostering comprehension, Erin

exemplified Gee (2005) because the situation dictated a language variation, which she characterized as dominant culture language. Her students needed support and the use of local colloquialisms helped her students make sense of Oedipus the King. Erin's use of colloquial speech in the moment, served to communicate academic functions in a way that made comprehension possible as part of Foster's (1995) tripartite. In describing her linguistic dexterity, Erin demonstrated Smitherman's (1977) notion of words fitting into symbolic and cultural systems, which must be understood as part of the cultural domain and she embodied Devereaux's (2015) definition of code-switching, "adapting your language to fit the situation, audience, and purpose," (p. 4). Erin's code-switching is borne from her personal knowledge of her environment.

As outlined in the participant section in Chapter 3, Erin is a product of the school district where she teaches; therefore, she is uniquely equipped to take on and use the colloquial phrases of her students. Her ability to move dexterously between local colloquialisms exemplified the ways culture influences instructional decisions in the classroom. Erin chose content-specific language throughout her written lesson plans. In a lesson on the use of colons, she wrote, "Students will be able to: determine two distinct usages of colons," At the end of the lesson she designed a task and wrote it as follows, "Based on your analysis, develop a theory/theories about colon usage using the following sentence stems: *Semicolons can be used to... I know that semicolons...*," (lesson plan 1). These lesson plan examples depicted the way Erin used language on the page versus how she explained her language use in speech exchanges with her students. The situation on the page dictated she use "dominant culture" (Erin, interview 1), language, while the situation in the physical classroom made space for language variation in speech. Erin's

classroom language also served to develop her relationships with her students (Foster, 1995).

### **Language Fluidity and Variance**

All participants were fluid in their language use as they moved between formal, colloquial, and informal variations of English. Language fluidity and variance exemplifies Foster's (1995) notion of the tripartite function of teacher's use of language and characterized the basis for how participants used language as they interacted with their students. In this section, I present data supporting this sub finding associated with participants' descriptions of their language use in their classrooms

Being fluid with how they used words was evident across all participants. Language on the page in all cases was formal marked by discipline-specific terminology used throughout. Eleventh-grade AP English teacher Beth described her language as follows, "Whenever am I writing directions or lesson planning, I 'compose' instead of 'write' or use 'what could you infer instead of what do you think,' things like that," (interview 1). In this instance, written language is the situation where participants deliberately chose to use more formal means of communicating academic functions. As with Erin, Beth described using the students as a means for determining how best to use spoken language with them. She explained, "I guess I have to say reading the kids. If they ask for clarification and they say "write" then I'll just say yes...just "write". I guess I try to pick up on what language they're using and translate it into what they would best understand," (interview 1). While Beth did not explicitly use the term, code switching, the fact she expressly explained using her students' language and translating it into what they need for understanding academic concepts demonstrated the influence of situation

on her language decisions off the page. Beth was fluid with her language in this instance. Participants' use of student language became the conduit for students to demonstrate academic understanding and created the need for both Erin and Beth to move adeptly between formal and colloquial structures of language. Even Amy, whose school learning community provides lesson plans written by a multi-classroom leader coach, used formal discipline-specific language when she developed a three-day narrative writing lesson for her students. Amy's lesson focused on preparing students to write a narrative in the voice of a character from the class' common novel. She designed a three-day writing lesson and by the end of Day 1, students were expected to answer, "What is a thematic concept? What is a thematic statement?" (shared lesson 1). Amy's PowerPoint contained the following definitions she wanted her students to know:

Thematic Concept: Important topics that come up again and again in a text

Usually a word or short phrase- almost like a topic

Ex: Love, hope, courage, jealousy

Thematic Statement:

A complete sentence (or two) that express a theme

What the author is trying to say about a thematic concept

Big ideas about human behavior and value

Amy's PowerPoint, further solidified idea how situation dictates language variation (Gee, 2005; Smitherman, 1977; Devereaux, 2015). Despite having her lesson plans developed for her by her school community, when developing her own lessons, Amy used formal language on the page, in this case, the page was in PowerPoint form to communicate the

academic functions she advanced through her writing lessons. She held to formal language in her speech with students as well.

Knowledge of language variance and fluidity was also evident in data analyzed in Marie's lesson plans, my field notes of her class, and interview transcripts. In the classroom, her language varied from content-specific terminology introducing students to components of a poetry analysis organizer to using causal language to share her ideas about a Tupac Shakur poem entitled, *Liberty Needs Glasses*. In her lesson plan, Marie used formal content-specific vocabulary to organize the steps of her instructional process. For example, she wrote, "TLW: Students will begin to use TPCASTT to analyze poetry," (lesson plan, 2). TPCASTT is an acronym standing for Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, Title (again), Theme, which she chose as a tool to help her students analyze poetry. On paper, Marie held to using English content language because the situation dictated she do so. In the classroom, her language exhibited flexibility as she introduced the organizer holding specifically to the terminology explaining the meaning of each component using English/language arts (ELA) vocabulary. For instance, Marie explained, "Shift is a place within a poem where the poet changes direction by incorporating imagery, symbolism, or some other literary device," (field notes 1). Symbolism, imagery, and literary device are English/language arts content terms, which Marie used to help build her students' poetry analysis skills. Once she provided the definition of Shift and the students began to read and analyze the assigned poem, Marie's language became less terminology specific as she and her students exchanged ideas about *Liberty Needs Glasses*. Students were familiar with the "P" paraphrase component of the acronym and when Marie moved to this point of the analysis, her students remarked that

paraphrasing was something they were good at doing and her response was, “I’m not mad about it,” (field note 1). Instead of complimenting her students by agreeing with them or using a more formal speech structure, Marie employed a relaxed colloquial phrase to show her agreement. The situation, in this case jumping in to show support for her students’ paraphrasing abilities, gave her a measure of linguistic freedom not afforded on paper in her lesson plan. Language movement and dexterity became a clear theme as participants flexibly switched language modes based on situations.

Findings from Dawn’s artifacts also supported the theme of language being fluid, variant, and situationally determined. Even though she does not write formal lesson plans, Dawn developed and provided examples of student projects (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Dawn-Artifact 1

In-class

Paired Novels  
AP Literature

NOVEL SELECTIONS:

1. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. With these novels, you may want to think about a woman finding or not finding her voice.

2. *The Kite Runner*/*A Thousand Splendid Suns* both by Khaled Hosseini. With these novels, you want to think about the culture and gender roles.

3. *Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho/*Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. With these books, you want to think about the power of faith.

4. *Funny in Farsi* by Froze Durnas/*Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Maria. With these novels, you may want to think about the immigrant experience and the plot of the poor.

5. *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie/*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. With these novels, you may want to think about impact of colonization. (I strongly suggest reading *Things Fall Apart* first.)

6. *Black Like Me* by John Howard/*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. With these novels, you may want to think about importance that race plays in society.

7. *Losing My Cool* by Thomas Chatterton Williams/*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* by Jeff Hobbs. With these novels, you may want to think about if the protagonist is a juxtaposition of each other.

8. *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson/*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Nelle Harper Lee. With these books, you may want to think about justice, injustice, and the role that race plays in justice.

Each group will pick a set of books to analyze and present to the class. With these books, you will go beyond surface meanings, and will explore what message or messages that the authors are exploring through these works. Each group will decide which book it will read first, and the work for that book is due, in google classroom, on the date assigned.

The first book should be read and the work turned in by Monday, February 27<sup>th</sup>.  
The second book should be read and the work turned in March 20<sup>th</sup>.  
NOTE: The work can be turned in early but cannot be turned in late.

Directs vable to make these choices on their own - Artifact #1  
why the leading? This is AP? - focus on that power ind still more leading than expected

has leading by her students do not hv the latitude she purports. This was then showing to them thinking "

She provided her students with a detailed outline listing paired novel selections, content-specific tasks, and due dates. One pairing contained the following teacher's note: *Losing My Cool* by Thomas Chatterton Williams/*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* by Jeff Hobbs. "With these novels, you may want to think about if the protagonist is a juxtaposition of each other (shared artifact 1)." Students were asked to write three themes and determine three problems for each novel. In this project, Dawn communicated with clearly identifiable English/language arts terminology. In her classroom, she switched between casual forms of language and the use of content vocabulary. When discussing specific elements of a shared piece of student writing, Dawn asked, "What is going on

with her thesis statement? Why did she use repetition on this [highlighted a student's word choice] word? (field note 1).” Thesis statement, while not exclusive to ELA, it is widely used in this subject area. The same is true for Dawn’s focus on word repetition. As she moved through the writing lesson, Dawn mixed content-specific ELA terms with casual speech frames showing the flexibility of spoken speech. Across all participants, articulated speech was flexible, variant, and situated within events. The use of formal, discipline-specific language in her novel project demonstrated the influence of language on her instructional decision.

**Teachers’ interactive language.** The participants’ use of students’ language variations as bridges for content knowledge building authentically made space for students’ culture and enacted their instructional power to make their decision. When participants interacted with their students beyond strict academic spaces, the lines of linguistic demarcation blurred. Again, the theme of language-plus-situation defined how participants characterized the type of speech they used when interacting with their students. Their interactions also served to establish and maintain relationships with their students. Just as the theme of language variance and fluidity defined their instructional language use, findings supported this theme relative to how participants described their interactive speech with their students. Language interactions between participants and students also advanced themes related to developing and maintaining social relationships and conveyed participants’ attitudes about speech (Foster, 1995). Dawn explained her teacher-student interactional speech this way:

When we’re talking conversationally, you just use your language. That’s what I like about code switching. I’m not trying to make kids not be who they are. That’s

what we do. When it's time to talk about this [pointing to a released AP test], when they're talking about this [the test], let's talk about diction, talk about author's craft blah...blah...blah... but when we're just playing around, use what works for you...They know when to turn it on and off," (interview 1).

Code-switching (Smitherman, 1977) was a mainstay in the interactions between Dawn and her students. Additionally, her students possessed the ability to know when to use academic language and when it was okay to use another variation. They moved flexibly with fluidity between formal and informal variations of language, which Dawn expected as she herself did so freely. While gathering field notes, the use of colloquial speech in her conversations with students was evidenced as class began and Dawn accessed a video of bookstore incident. Unable to contain her laughter about the video because it represented a very plausible way she would behave in a bookstore, she remarked, "I was crying when I saw this. This is going to trip somebody up. Can y'all see me doing this?" (field notes 1). Dawn was not crying nor were her students physically tripping over objects in the classroom. In using these language variations, Dawn communicated how hard she laughed at thinking about herself in the bookstore customer's position and how funny her students would find thinking about her behaving in the manner of the customer. The colloquial language was a class starter, a means for setting a congenial tone for the class because as Dawn later explained, she knew the class was going to be "heavy" (interview 2). She had planned to have students share their most recent AP-inspired essays. The language served as the day's ice breaker, which Dawn felt was needed because her plan was to have individual students share their writings for a whole class peer-review process. Knowing the risk involved in students sharing their work in front of

the class, Dawn strategically showed the video and shared her personal thoughts about the video using her “everyday speech” (interview 2) in the form of colloquial language. In so doing, the combination proved useful to her students, solidified the relationship between Dawn and her students, created a pathway for the academic work planned for the class, and actualized Dawn’s attitude that language should be used in ways that fit the speaker, be it formal or casual, colloquial or standard. Furthermore, varying her own language was a nod to raising culture through language (Nieto, 2010).

Erin and Marie were conscious of their interactive speech, naming it as colloquial. Marie explained she uses colloquial language but does not change her vocabulary specifically for her students. She offered, “So I talk to them like I would usually talk to any other adult. And if they need me to go back and define, I will...I think that’s really important that they’re getting exposed to other types of vocabulary because there is a place for colloquial language...” (interview 1). As with Dawn, data generated from field note observations of Marie’s class supported how she characterized her language interactions with her students. To get her students’ attention at the beginning of class, Marie used the following phrase, “Hey...Okay...cop a squat,” (field notes 1). Her students moved to their seats and class began. Through this interaction, Marie’s actions supported her responses as communicated in our interview that she purposefully employs casual speech to more effectively communicate with her students and create a relaxed environment. Erin explained when interacting with her students, she usually uses colloquial speech as she feels more comfortable doing so. This comfort depicted both her attitude about speech and the way she uses language to maintain relationships with her students. Unlike any of the other participants, Erin held an insider’s perspective as a life-

long member of the community. Her language mirrored those of her students, and speaking colloquially demonstrated a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) between her and her students. The use of colloquial speech further connected language and culture.

Amy held similar yet different perspectives on her interactive language with her students. Her beliefs about language use with students compared to the other participants in this study in that she explained a clear differential in her language interactions based on the academic level of the class. As Amy shared, there are thirty-six students in her honors English class and at times they are talkative, which makes managing them a bit challenge. However, in characterizing her language interactions with them she relayed the following:

They're such amazing kids, they're such sweet kids, they're so well behaved they're talkative as anything which is pretty much the only complaint I ever have about them especially since there are so many of them...it gets a little flustered sometimes but they're such great kids. So when they come in we could be like you know bantering joking around and things like that. I feel like they see more of my real personality than the other classes... I'll share like anecdotes or I'll share stories like they know all about my dog and they've heard --- they've seen pictures of my mom...my brother we talked about stuff like that because I can tell them those stories and they get where I'm coming from or where I'm going with it, (interview 1).

In this example, Amy showed how she interacted with her honors-level class. While this exchange connected to culture and dimensions of power, which will be discussed in another section, it highlighted an aspect of how Amy used language as an interactive tool

with this class. Her stated use of anecdotes and story-telling depicted another way in which language served as a mechanism to connect beyond academics. Amy was specific in explaining this type of interaction was reserved for her honors class, which differed from the other participants who made no distinctions in how they used language for interaction with their students based on class level. Even when probed, other participants did not describe their interactive language as being associated with how the levels of their other classes. In each instance, linguistic interactions between teachers and students illustrated the recurring theme of language being fluid, variant, and situationally enacted, even for Amy whose interactions varied along a different line than the others.

**Expectations for students' use of language.** Thematic analysis of the data led to following finding: participants held flexible and fluid expectations for how students would use language in the classroom. Four of five participants expected their students would use formal, casual, and/or colloquial variations of English for verbal communication. Amy; however, held fixed expectations for how students should use language in the classroom and enforced strict use of dominant American English (DAE) (Paris & Alim, 2014). For written communication, all participants expected students to use formal, content-specific vocabulary. The varied expectations of most participants demonstrated implicit understanding language and situation determine what type of language should be used. As Zwiers and Crawford (2011) stated, "In the language arts class, language is both the product and the tool," (p. 138). In holding varied expectations, four of the participants exhibited an understanding of how language could be used as a tool for communication and a product for demonstrating knowledge. In the next section, I

address findings on how participants' perspective of an advanced ELA classroom influenced their expectations for how students should use language in the classroom.

**Role of class level on student language expectations.** Participant's perspective about what an advanced ELA classroom should be influenced their expectations about students' use of language in the classroom. All participants unequivocally believed being in an advanced ELA class should translate into students possessing and being able to use higher levels of vocabulary. As teachers of higher achieving students taking advanced coursework, the expectation was for students' language to reflect the academic level of the class. For example, Marie made the level of the class a condition for her expectations of how students should use language. The following statement from the initial interview provided an opportunity for me to learn about Marie's initial thinking:

They're AP especially like I want them to speak professionally. It can be colloquial but I don't want swearing...But I want them to be able to discuss what's going on in a book and so if you're able to discuss that with your language do that, but if you need to pull from your tool box we created to discuss that book or discuss that poem, you know I expect them also to be able to do that, (interview 1).

Here Marie situated her expectations within the frame of how students should use verbal language tools to demonstrate English content knowledge and skill mastery. Marie also framed her expectations within her thinking about how AP students should use language. As a former AP English student, Marie brought her prior experiences with the coursework to her teaching and expectations for how students should operate linguistically within the space. There was space for students to use their own language

and/or tools developed in the classroom as mechanisms for support; however, being in an advanced leveled-class held a higher level of expectation in her thinking. Marie allowed students to use language freely, which mirrored her own free use of language as she engaged with her students for instruction and interaction, but as she would explain, being a former AP English student sometimes influenced her expectations of how this group of AP English students should use their language.

Unlike Marie, Beth and Amy subtly associated the expectations for students' language to class level. Beth described her expectations as students in her AP using professional language. The same was true for Amy, who noted she expected students in her honors class to use professional language. In each interview, participants linked class level with how students should be expected to use words as an indicator of being in an advanced course. The implicit belief was students in an advanced class possessed higher vocabularies than their counterparts in the on-grade or lower courses; therefore, participants felt it was reasonable to expect their higher achieving students to use more advanced forms of language. During our first interview when we discussed her expectations for how students should use language Amy stated, "But you know it's the fact that like people are observing them, people are listening to them and this is school and so you should show you're educated," (interview 1). In this exchange, Amy advanced the notion word choice was a de facto representation of one's level of education and she wanted to ensure her students were demonstrating their academic abilities through speech.

Beth used the word professional as the descriptor for how she expected students in her AP literature class to use their language. I probed Beth to ask for an explanation for

what she meant by professional and she shared expecting students to use complete sentences in writing and speaking when they use language in her classroom. She stated, “I expect more than a simple answer. I think they know it bugs me more than anything whenever on an open response essay question I get a sentence...they know I expect them to keep it professional,” (interview 1). For each of these three participants, student speech characterized by types of words, length of responses, and complexity of responses were appropriate language markers of students being in an advanced level English course. It is important to note, neither of the three participants provided examples of professional words or professional speech to support their characterizations. Their responses reflected a conceptual understanding about the relationship between language and class level, which they were unable to explicitly articulate. Nonetheless, the role of class level played prominently in the minds of three participants regarding students’ use of language in the classroom. With these expectations, participants also advanced their beliefs about student language use in the classroom.

### **Acknowledging Students’ Language for Knowledge and Interaction**

The participants’ responses consistently demonstrated attention to freedom of linguistic movement within the advanced class. Their willingness to acknowledge students should be able to use speech as they saw fit indexed their understanding of the natural variance of language, which is shaped by situation and purpose. There was recognition students came to school with language, be it school-sanctioned or not, and in many cases participants’ expectations for how students would use their language supported the notion students should be able to use language freely to demonstrate their content knowledge and interact with their peers and teacher. Mutual respect for teacher

language structures also developed from the data. While these themes may appear contradictory to the role of class level on teachers' expectations for how students would use their language, the themes intersected as opposed to being mutually exclusive. Participants coursed in and out of their thinking about language and how it should manifest at school. While Marie was clear about her expectations for the use of professional language in our first interview, her thoughts and expectations seemed more expansive during our second interview, and was visible during my field notes observation.

Verbal language was the vehicle for student expression, with the only boundary being students not use profanity. During our second interview when we revisited language as a factor in culture, Marie added the distinction of how her students should use language relative to writing in her expectations:

So when we are like writing, um...they know I want academic language and they know I'm going to correct them on that 'cause we need to write in a way we could write for a job and college that will be acceptable...If they're doing...able to do that we're harnessing that... and I'm trying to water that to get it to blossom but you know when we're just chatting I'm just like let your freak vibe fly...(interview 2).

By "that," Marie meant using academic language in students' writing. Writing seemed to add a juxtapositional layer to Marie's expectations for how students should use language in the classroom. It appeared the professionalism mantel had been replaced with a more relaxed perspective on speech in the classroom. I probed Marie about the writing and what she meant about her students letting their freak vibes fly and she responded:

Like let your freak vibe fly...on colloquialism with the understanding that I --- cussing is not a thing you know although it's almost impossible to get that out of your classroom um...as I've found...it's almost impossible but you know we're just chatting, like talk to me as another human – you know and it's really fun because I will speak colloquial to them but colloquially how I speak --- Um --- I -- - that's a really interesting thing. They're going up against me from two very different cultures and plus you get my own personality where I was an only child who read a lot of books and I just had a really large vocabulary from that --- It's interesting – I learned lot and they have learned to catch on or at least make inferences to what I'm saying...sometimes (interview 2).

In this response, Marie dropped in the inseparable link between speech and culture. Without using the exact words, she raised the importance of valuing and making space for the language students bring to school. Letting their freak vibes fly was her clarion call for how students should use language for academic knowledge and peer-to-peer as well as student-to-teacher interactions even in this advanced English class. For Marie, the use of colloquialisms in their rightful place was not in opposition to the students being labeled as high achieving. Marie also dropped in an essential understanding about teachers' and students' colloquial language; they can be sources for mutual learning. Unlike Erin, Marie did not have the benefit of insider knowledge. Her knowledge of the school and surrounding community came as she interacted with her students; listening to and learning from them became her second school. By choosing to acknowledge her students' colloquial language and making her colloquialism visible to them, Marie centered language, both academic and colloquial as sources for mutual learning.

Marie provided another salient example of the importance of students using their language and teachers using their language as mutual learning sources. She brought up the point that her students often challenge her on the way she talks, wondering why “she does not use slang or even the N-word,” (interview 2). After recounting her response to being given permission to use the racial epithet, Marie went on to discuss the following exchange between herself and a student regarding the use of language. The student pointed out Marie used formal language. Marie’s response demonstrated her belief and understanding that language marks identity and provides a source of cultural learning.

Marie: And I’m like so... That’s good for you. Jus---Just like it’s good for me to hear like you speak and like how you speak, I’m learning---I’m learning different things about the culture just by listening to you guys speaks slang and about different places in the town and about your --- about how you guys speak and how you’ve learned to use language. And that’s how I learned to use language. And I’m not going to change the way I speak for you because this is part of what makes me---me. And that’s part of what makes you---you (interview 2)

Once again, unsolicited, Marie moved in the direction of language and culture being inexorably intertwined. She also anchored the need for mutual language respect as ways of learning. In this conversation with the student, Marie made it clear that colloquial variations are two-way streets upon which teachers and students cross paths towards understanding and appreciation. Her statement about language making her who she was and her student who he was, echoed a sentiment by Dawn regarding her expectations for how students would use language in her classroom. In a matter-of-fact tone, Dawn stated, “I’m not trying to change kids. I’m not trying to tell kids not to be who they are,”

(interview 1). Both participants made the use of language a point of mutual respect, a source for learning, and a tool for demonstrating knowledge.

Erin and Beth held similar positions regarding how students should use language for learning to demonstrate knowledge and for interaction; however, Amy's position proved to be an outlier. When asked in our initial interview to consider how she used language in the classroom, Amy was hard pressed to recount anything beyond explaining she would, "reword things for her lower students," (interview 1). Conversely, when the question was posed regarding her expectations for how her students would use language, Amy was clear, definitive, and emphatic:

Well – now when I think about language in terms of *them* it's literally speaking in proper grammar. So you know I expect them to be speaking formally you know that it's ---eh....I don't know how I want to say that 'cause it's not formal all the time... I don't---I don't want them, like the "we was..." and "they was..." and improper grammar like "mines" drives me nuts and I will correct them *every* single time that they say it and it drives them absolutely nuts. But I tell them all the time, are you gonna' say that on a job interview like how unprofessional do you look? It seems like it's not worth it because then the moment that they leave they either go right back talking that way or speaking the way that they were or they're hearing even other teachers speak like that. So I mean I'm fighting a losing battle and I know that but they know at this point when they come in how they should be speaking and that it shouldn't be how they speak or talk outside of school...And it works sometimes...(interview 2).

Amy was unable to hear and describe her own language because for her, it represented the correct way to speak. She measured and registered what she deemed were errors in her students' speech against her own use of language. Her inferiority principle regarding her students' language led her to believe it was necessary to fix their mistakes. This language ideology was also evident in her interactions with her students when I visited to gather field notes. A student was asked about borrowing a book and stated, "I been had it..." (field note 1). Upon hearing this, Amy corrected the student's speech and the student repeated the sentence using Amy's example. Unlike her participant counterparts who seemed to both understand and appreciate the flexible variant nature of language, Amy adopted a fixed mentality for how students should speak at school and left no room for variation on her theme. Additionally, Amy's need to correct her students was an instructional decision based on cultural power dynamics situated in the racial differences between her and her students. Being from the dominant culture whose language represented official school speech working with traditionally marginalized students whose speech has been devalued created power differentials impacting how Amy interacted with her students.

The implications for Amy's position are wide and deep. As a White female teacher from a self-proclaimed middle-class background, Amy embodied every stereotype about culturally ignorant and insensitive White female teachers. She embodied Ford et al.'s (2002) notion of the impact of teacher's deficit thinking about African American students committing acts of linguistic and cultural violence through her need to fix the perceived broken speech of her students. Through her "correctionist model" (Wheeler & Swords as cited by Devereaux, 2015, p. 2), Amy situated herself in

opposition to her students and left no space for understanding or possibilities for learning as other participants did. I opted not to probe Amy's response during this initial interview. I chose instead, to review the transcripts and craft a follow-up question related specifically to language as a component of identity, culture, and power to see if having the opportunity to think about her position on language in a new way would yield a different response. As a burgeoning researcher, I knew it would have been irresponsible to probe her in that moment as doing so could have caused a negative reaction from her that would have jeopardized data collection. I revisit the conversation with Amy about language in sections related to culture and power.

**Race, language, and culture.** The lens of race figured prominently in teachers' expectations for how students would use their language in the classroom. This was particularly evident in the data generated with Amy, Beth, and Marie. As outlined in the participant profile, Amy, Beth, and Marie are all White females whose backgrounds would be defined as middle-class. All three of these participants taught majority African American students. While none exhibited overtly racist or deficit frameworks regarding their students or discussed their students' socio-economic backgrounds, their inability to provide specific examples for what constituted professional language or words creates a point of critique. As Stubbs (2002) explained, "we hear language through a powerful filter of social values and stereotypes," (p. 66). In gathering field notes, I learned students in each of these participants' classrooms used what has been theoretically defined as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Fought, 2006; Smitherman, 1977; Labov, 1972). In discussing the meaning of professional language, neither of the three participants offered specific words or structures for their descriptions.

Amy spoke definitively about her expectations for language her students should not use. She was adamant they not use their out of school language forms as evidenced by phrases such as, “we was or they was,” (interview 1), which are characteristic of AAVE structures. In using specific phrases characteristic of AAVE structure to demonstrate unacceptable speech, Amy demonstrated a “linguistic inferiority principle,” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 6) about her students’ language variations. Specifically naming AAVE words or phrases her students should not use connected indexed Amy’s beliefs about language to how she allowed it to influence her instructional decision-making as evidenced by her stated process of correcting her students whenever she hears them speak in what she has determined is incorrect English. The other White participants were not as overt in naming acceptable student speech in the classroom. Stefancic and Delgado (2012), determined race and racism were socially constructed naturally occurring phenomena that infiltrate every aspect of human interaction, including the schooling of traditionally marginalized students. Ford et al. (2002) and Perry, Hilliard, and Steele (2003) posited African American students have grappled with the subtleties of White teachers’ deficit thinking regarding their academic abilities and language style for decades. The inability of these participants to provide exemplars of their expectations for how students would meet their demands for professional language, outside Amy’s demand for no AAVE in the classroom, manifested the subtle yet real influence of teachers’ language ideologies on expected student behaviors in the classroom. These expectations were also part of a hidden curriculum against which students were invisibly and inevitably measured.

## **Summary**

In this section, I presented findings demonstrating the natural variance of language and how such variance is a product of purpose and situation. I also addressed how participants in this study defined and characterized language use in their classrooms. While the constructs of language, culture, and power are interconnected, participants were asked to first consider each separately and then think about how the constructs work in tandem to influence how they structure learning for their high-achieving African American students. Based on the data, language is naturally variant and fluid. It operates as Gee (2005) pointed out within the context of situation, purpose, and audience. I determined themes showing language is fluid and variant. The data demonstrated students have colloquial forms of speech, which can find space within the classroom based on teacher's ideologies of what type of language should be allowed in schools. Most participants in this study recognized students' language varieties and made space for them alongside ELA academic language. Language variance connects to and stems from the core finding and theme of this study because it provides the essential vein through which culture lives within the classroom. Participants' ideologies around language and their use of power determine how language and thus culture will manifest in the classroom. In the next section, I present findings on participants' perceptions about culture and will then move to present findings related to power.

## **The Cultured Classroom**

Culture is messy, multi-faceted, and not easily defined. There are as many ways to conceptualize culture as there are people from whom to solicit ideas. As advanced in the previous section, culture and language are inseparable, with one illuminating the

other. Carrithers (1992) framed culture in the context of human interaction, explaining humans have culture because they have history. In this section, I present findings related to participants' general notions of culture, how culture shapes their classrooms, and the impact of culture in their instructional decision-making processes. Although findings on language were presented in the previous section, the intersection between culture and language presents opportunities for more data points to be shared regarding the intersection between these two constructs. Language, culture, and power are inextricably linked and how participants viewed these constructs determined how they influenced their instructional decision-making. In the sections below, I focus on the links between language and culture to demonstrate how these links influenced how participants made instructional decisions.

### **Participants' Definitions of Culture**

The data demonstrated the ways participants' concept of culture influenced how they made instructional decisions and structured their classrooms. Their interview responses provided insight into how their thinking shaped the culture of their classrooms and the instructional decisions they made. Their definitions varied, but were thematically similar. Based on the thematic similarities of participants' responses, I constructed the theme *classrooms are cultural exchange sites*, to index ways language functioned as primary tool for cultural transmission. Dawn defined culture as, "how people operate that are together. You know, what are the norms for people who are together," Beth defined culture as, "beliefs, attitudes, practices of a particular place or group of people," and while Amy declared defining culture was tough, and stated, "the environment...like the environment and how people contribute to an environment, I guess like demographics."

When asked to describe what she meant by demographics, she added, “It could be race. It could be religion. And it could be gender. It could be sexuality. Erin’s and Marie’s responses were more extensive and are provided below:

Erin: I see culture, especially when you’re talking about race, it’s not the same for one particular quote-unquote race or group of students. Because although I teach 95% African American students, the culture is different in each classroom. I define culture as an amalgamation of personalities --- it --- it to be quite honest now that I’m verbally processing this, I don’t --- I think culture --- so many people jump to you know ethnic background things like music, cultural norms and stuff although it has its place; however, I see culture more so in a sense of personality.

Marie: That’s a loaded question in itself. Uh...so culture a lot of times is like the socially...the larger social um...acceptance of music, art, language, knowledge, stories um...fashion all those things, but like it’s a socially accepted within a group but there could be like a subculture within that and then the bigger culture overall. So like you have like the US culture, the state culture, the city culture...within a school culture...within a room culture.

I leaned on Carrithers’ (1992) notion of sociality to construct meaning of how my participants understood culture and how their classrooms were shaped by their epistemology of culture. As put forth in my participants’ definitions in alignment with my theoretical framework, culture is this “thing” people make when they interact, share ideas, and communicate using language. In their layered definitions, Amy, Erin, and

Marie highlighted components of culture, which were essential to understanding the operational aspects of culture in their classrooms.

**Conceptual frameworks for understanding culture.** The conceptual frameworks of my participants' definitions of culture were noteworthy as much for what they deliberately included as for what they omitted. Their conceptual frameworks around culture were broadly constructed and only addressed race when explicitly asked to consider it as a component of culture. Dawn and Erin self-identified as African American and Amy, Beth, and Marie self-identified as Caucasian. I self-identify as African American and assumed Dawn and Erin would frame their concepts of culture with race as the dominant factor. Neither did so. In fact, their responses were as broadly constructed as their White counterparts. Erin made a point of stating she thought about culture more as a coming together of individual personalities as opposed to focusing on ethnicity. When I probed Dawn about the role of ethnicity, race, and gender in her conceptualizing of culture, she said these factors were very important and explained, "I think if schools do not address that kids are different and they come from different backgrounds that's a problem," (interview 1). Dawn's response about schools needing to recognize difference was a measure of responsibility displacement suggesting she understood children are different, but schools did not. Across all participants, race and ethnicity were given equal value in their definitions of culture. Given the majority of students in most of the classes were African American, I expected race to be privileged, to predominate their conceptual understandings. There was no obvious attempt at racial erasure; however, there was a need to see deeper into the concept of culture than through race and ethnicity alone. Erin's point about having to think about culture differently is well taken, particularly in

light of Carrithers (1992) as he based his theory of sociality on human interactions only privileging language as the primary conduit of cultural exchange.

**Control and accountability as culture.** Accountability and control defined the culture of Amy's classroom. Language establishes culture and vice versa. Amy's language established a culture best described as authoritative and rigid. Students were directed on how to handle classroom materials, they were notified about behavior points lost due to what was deemed as excessive talking, they were informed about losing points on their essays if the format she presented was not followed as outlined or turned it in late, and students were reminded they had to check in with her about returned classroom books even if the books had been returned to their required locations. When a group of students returned from a school trip and entered the class in what she felt was an inappropriate noise level, Amy stopped the class activity and addressed the group remarking, "I don't know why you came back interrupting *my* class; we weren't sitting her waiting for you. You have the same amount of time to get your work completed so you need to get started and stop talking," (field note 1). In preparing students for a student author sharing of their essays, Amy instructed the students to close their computers to a forty-five-degree angle and flip them so she could make sure they were not being rude. When a student flipped their computer by the screen, Amy remarked, "...Don't hold it by the screen. I just say that forty-five times a day," (field note 1). Her use of language established a culture grounded in rules with her at the center.

In addition to using language to establish to a culture of control, field notes showed how culture can be created via a focus on accountability. As a "data-focused school" (Amy, interview 1), the bulletin board in the back of the room graphically and

visually categorized students according results from their district-mandated assessment. The bulletin board was titled “Now Starring,” with each level given a different name: Level 3 (level for passing), Stars in the Making; Level 4, Top Stars; Level 5, Rockstars (highest passing level). Student names were written on paper stars and placed in the area associated with their passage level. The walls were also adorned with behavior posters signaling ways students were expected to attend to learning. One such poster contained the acronym BEST, which stood for back straight/body still, ears actively listening, silent voices, track the speaker. Posters such as this one were common throughout the classroom and were meant to help students focus during lessons with the goal of getting them to perform well on district- and state-mandated high-stakes assessments. The combination of Amy’s spoken language and the language used on the posters and other wall adornments created an environment whereby students’ language and thus their culture had no space. While Amy did not use the term correctionist to describe what she did when students used language she deemed incorrect, her fixing behavior coupled with her rule-based language left students out of the cultural exchange process. Students were expected to adapt to the accountability culture; there was no mutual exchange of culture between her and her students.

**Personality as a cultural descriptor.** Participant responses defined culture in broad terms, which included personality and group practices. As I analyzed data from the interview responses, I determined culture can be defined in relation to the combination of individual personalities and shaped in accordance to the group practices of those individuals. For example, Beth and Erin described their classroom cultures in relation to their students’ personality. Beth shared that she had, “independent leaders or challengers

or people who are not afraid to speak out or push back and I have some definite groups who like to hang back and they're not necessarily followers but they are not eager to challenge other people either or me either," (interview 1). When I probed for clarification, Beth distinguished between her two groups as follows, "Challengers like to talk --- uhm...challengers are more argumentative or emotional...whereas leaders --- leaders always have that textual evident that uhm...well-formed argument," (interview 1). Upon visiting Beth's classroom, I noticed her descriptions manifested in the interactions between her students. She operated more as a guide, providing direct instruction to introduction to wrap up the opening task, move students through the whole-class reading, and facilitate the discussion connected to the writing task. There was a group of students who matched Beth's description of both the challengers and independent leaders. Students were asked to read an essay and offer critiques about its structure and word choice. The independent leaders provided examples when offering critiques and explained their rationale for the ideas shared. Conversely, the challengers worked to influence their classmates to choose them for class reading and when their classmates did not choose them, they reacted by maintaining an undercurrent of chatter while the chosen student read. The culture could be deemed as having been co-constructed; however, it appeared the co-construction was more between student to student than a co-construction between Beth and her students.

Erin taught two preAP classes and as she detailed, the culture depended on the collection of personalities of the students in each class, how the students in each class worked together, and what each could handle in terms of responsibilities. As per her

description, students in the first of two classes required more of her physical presence and voice. According to Erin,

...in [the first] period I have to be more of a parent to them. With [that second] period, they're more like my peers because they're --- they just carry themselves that way. They self-correct their own behavior, they self-manage. And I treat them as my peers as equal partners in their learning. With [this first] period, I definitely have to --- I'm very cognizant that I have to be their teacher...(interview 1).

Based on the nature of the students in the first of her two classes, Erin recognized her presence was needed more than with the students in the second of her two classes. She described being present as having to use language to more explicitly direct and redirect behavior, which was not necessary in her other class.

During my visit to each of her classes, the personality differences were evident. Like Beth, students were engaged in an assignment requiring them to write on chart paper posted around the room in the first class, while the students completed the assignment, Erin had to step in to keep students on task. When a group of students congregated around a portion of section of the classroom, Erin walked up and reminded them the section was not meant to be a parking lot. Students acknowledged her statement with a laugh, and continued with their work. In the second of the two classes, students interacted with Erin only to ask for clarification, to share their ideas before placing them on the chart paper, and at the end of class when she moved to the whole class lesson wrap up. Using a nearly inaudible voice, a student signaled the beginning of class by engaging his classmates in the following way: "If you can hear my voice clap once...If you can

hear my voice clap twice...If you can hear my voice...clap three times. I think Ms. (teacher's name] needs our attention," (field note 1). Two important notes must be made. First, having prior experience with observing Erin's teaching, I have watched her use this strategy to get students' attention, although not with this class; therefore, it is likely this student learned how to get his classmates' attention by watching Erin do so. Second, this student's actions were unsolicited; he knew it was time for class to begin and recognized his classmates needed to be brought together to ensure class began on time. Additionally, when he felt the class was getting a bit too noisy during the gallery walk portion of the lesson, he used the strategy again and his classmates responded to him as they would had Erin had done it.

This student's actions spoke to Erin's description of the operational culture of this class and it illuminated Carrithers' (1992) sociality theory. As outlined in my site profile in Chapter 3, advanced level students in Beth's, Erin's, and Marie's school district are essentially tracked into advanced classes as early as third grade with little to no movement in or out of the associated classes. By the time they reach high school, the students have a rich history and a culture developed through years of educational and social interacting. As Erin explained when I asked about her students' behavior in second class, she offered they know each other inside and outside school and since they had been together so long, it was easy for them to have a culture where they have as much input as she did. In fact, Erin felt she could take very little credit for the culture of this class and stated,

With that class, I can't take credit for that full culture, I can't. Maybe with giving them permission to have that culture. I can't take credit for it because they have

been together since 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They've been together, they been coming up so they already had this sort of relationship with each other. I just gave the permission and I stood – got out of their way. I gave them permission to be who they were, (interview 3).

In showing the cultural difference between her two classes, she provided this explanation about the first class,

Okay...with [the first] period, I give them the framework where they can be themselves, in a productive way. Because if they're just themselves...themselves, they're not productive. They can talk, they're always talkin' 'bout – very engaging conversations, but it's never about the work. So I have to give them the framework. Here is your rubric. So, but you have to be very aware of your students and who they are (interview 3).

Each group of students knew each other because of their history and from that history came the class-specific cultures. Erin's position was not about changing their individual culturally-constructed selves, it was about learning who they were as individuals, how their individual personalities worked together in the classroom, and what was necessary to advance the academic work of the class within the co-mingling of the personalities. For her first class, more direction was needed; for the second class, virtually no direction was needed. The students in the second class assumed the logistical workings of the class and left the academic work to Erin. They co-constructed a cultured space where each assumed roles within the scope of their abilities and responsibilities. Students in the first class needed more from Erin to get the work of the class completed. Erin used her job-ascribed power and authority flexibly as required by each class. In using power flexibly,

Erin demonstrated how power enactment determined the way culture would be constructed in the classroom. In this case, the culture was co-constructed.

**Using environment to describe culture.** The data depicted how constructing an environmentally safe space was a cultural descriptor used to frame the culture four participants discussed wanting to establish in their classrooms. Intellectual safety was a primary characteristic Marie used to discuss the culture of her classroom. While she focused mainly on her role in constructing the culture, Marie used communal language to talk about the feelings she wanted students to have in the class. In our first discussion, Marie explained, “I try to keep my classroom to be a safe culture --- I like --- I try to more be laid back feeling like when you walk in you’re not like a stressful feeling um --- but with high expectations on my students. But it’s like a culture where you can laugh and we can have fun but at the end of the day, we know that there’s work to be done. This characterization could not have been a more honest portrayal of Marie’s classroom culture. On the day of my visit, she introduced students to a poetry analysis process using a TPCASTT organizer and the poetry of Tupac Shakur. Students exchanged ideas about the poem with each other, with her, and even with me, wondering my thoughts about whether Tupac was actually dead or alive living on a remote island. As Marie described the class, there was laughter, students bantered and engaged in “signifyin” (Smitherman, 1977), a common practice of language exchange among African Americans whereby speakers banter using ritual insults (Labov, 1972) and if misconstrued, could be interpreted as negative. As per Marie’s description, there was a casual feeling in the classroom with students appearing to feel safe to use language to communicate in a variety of ways.

Throughout the visit, students used language variations freely. As students discussed the poem *Liberty Needs Glasses*, they used colloquial and discipline-specific language variations interchangeably to share ideas. At times Marie simply stood still and allowed students to analyze the poem amongst themselves remaining on the periphery of the peer-to-peer discussions. Marie was not trying to be where she was not needed. When the students needed clarification, they welcomed her back to the discussion. The class progressed in this manner even while students worked to complete the assigned organizer in pairs. The atmosphere was indeed laid back; however, students were fully engaged and attended to the assigned task. There was virtually non-stop talking and laughing, most of which focused on the text and the assignment. The cultural environment was exactly as she described in her definition. There was complete alignment and congruency between her words about the classroom culture and the manifestation of the culture in the classroom. The language variations used throughout the classroom created the relaxed environment Marie desired to establish. Additionally, Marie's enactment of power made the space safe for a co-constructed culture, which was shaped by the language variations and cultural expression of her and her students.

Similarly, Dawn talked about setting the culture herself and layered in how she used tables instead of desks to create the communal environment she wanted in her classroom. Dawn's understanding of her students shaped her decision to move from desks to tables and she explained, "Most kids of color are communal learners and everybody can benefit from working together," (interview 1). In moving from desks to tables, Dawn raised race and ethnicity to the forefront and created an environment she felt met the cultural framework of her students. Although she taught the fewest number

of students of color, she was mindful of the need to design a physical space where all students had opportunities to become more culturally aware. Au (2012) argued, to gain a fuller understanding of the world necessitated prioritizing the perspectives of the marginalized. By using tables instead of individual desks, Dawn prioritized the perspectives of her traditionally marginalized students and opened spaces for naturally occurring cultural exchange.

The use of tables also supported her definition that culture was how people operate when they are together. Tables reified the communal environment she advanced through her language. During our initial conversation about culture, her language, and the physical set up, Dawn made the following statements:

You create language in your classroom that's common, like "let's roll" they know that's our common language and what that means. So you create culture in your classroom through the language that you use. How you interact with them how they interact with you...you create that culture and you let that...you let it go...you let it do what it do. I think most of the kids feel comfortable they get it we're able to --- they feel comfortable enough to take risks. You let 'em know we're family (interview 1).

Throughout this interview, our second interview, and my two site visits, communal language anchored the community culture. Dawn consistently spoke in the language of "we, us, let's, and our." Using tables further anchored the sense of community, which was evidenced in both of my visits. The first visit is where Dawn showed the previously mentioned bookstore video, which had students imagining her behaving "badly" about a store's inability to get a book she wanted. Students had been asked to upload practice

essays for a whole-class editing session. When no student volunteered, Dawn chose a student and asked her to let herself be vulnerable. The student agreed and when the editing session ended, the student requested extra credit for, “putting myself out there,” (student response, field note 1).

The use of communal language was evident in the artifacts Dawn shared. While she does not plan on paper, student tasks are formally type and distributed. In an artifact outlining a project involving students’ out of class reading, Dawn laid out the specifications, provided a rubric, and at the end she typed, “We will discuss possible presentation dates,” (artifact 2). She did not assign dates, rather she informed students they would discuss the best possible time for the projects to be turned in. In discussing this notation at the end of the document, Dawn shared she and her students did decide on an agreed upon time that fit within her upcoming lesson schedule and needs the students had based on other class assignments. Although Dawn and Marie used words suggesting they were the primary creators of their classroom environments, the interactions between them and their students as evidenced in my site visits, depicted spaces with measures of free language exchange between and among the students and them and classroom cultures, which supported their ideologies about culture in the classroom.

### **Cultural Dissonance and Incongruence**

Data generated from field notes mapped to data from interviews evidenced areas where participants’ stated ideologies about culture differed from the manifested culture in their classroom. Data generated from interviews also showed evidence where participants’ individual classroom cultures contrasted descriptions of building-level cultures. From these data, I determined cultural dissonance and/or incongruence existed

when ideologies about culture contrasted actual behaviors within classrooms and/or buildings. I also determined instructional needs and decisions create points of departure from participants' espoused cultural ideologies.

Classroom cultures exist within building and district cultures. Internal cultural alignment within classrooms and among classrooms, building, and districts is an important goal. Despite general cultural alignment within classrooms and across buildings, the data revealed two noteworthy instances of cultural dissonance and incongruence. In the sections below, I present findings from data generated from interviews, which evidenced dissonance and/or incongruence between participants' stated ideologies about culture and actual cultural dynamics observed through field notes and the language in assigned learning tasks.

**Cultural dissonance in the classroom.** Instructional decisions can create classroom-level cultural dissonance. Through data generated from field notes, learning tasks, and interviews, I recognized areas of departure from participants' stated ideologies about culture, language, and the use of power and the manifestation of these constructs in the classroom. I considered these differences dissonant because they created a critical departure from what the participant described their culture to be and the actuality of the culture as evidenced through field note observations. In Dawn's class, language operated to create and maintain a sense of community; however, her language also created dissonance, which seemed to go unnoticed. In a discussion about a poem, Dawn solicited students' ideas about whether, based on the poem, they would want to be naked or nude. Seeing many of the girls were silent on the matter, she admonished them by saying, "Good girls don't make the history books," (field note 1). With this statement, Dawn

referenced Jan Stradling's 2010, book wherein she chronicled the lives of twelve women who challenged the male-dominated status quo to make history. There was mild laughter and an uneasy silence which I interpreted as discomfort with the challenge. Despite the challenge, which was meant to encourage the female students to speak up, there was no change in the female response rate. In fact, more boys were willing to chime in on the concept of being naked or nude than the girls. Students' responses to the statement signaled a quiet acceptance as though it were something with which they had familiarity, while at the same time registered discomfort. This language exchange was the first instance of a disconnect between what Dawn said she valued and the embodied value. Setting a family atmosphere through a consistent use of communal language was Dawn's stated goal. She repeatedly used communal terms such as "we," "our," "let's," and phrases meant to signal community such as, "we're family"; however, the insinuation about what makes a good girl, caused a break in the familial chain.

Lack of participants' awareness regarding the gap between their stated cultural beliefs and instructional decisions evidenced in classroom language and learning tasks created the classroom-level cultural dissonance. Classroom-level cultural dissonance has the effect of creating negative space within the classroom. During another exchange in the same class, the following statement was made, "Ladies why do we always have to show the boys..." (field note 1). Referring to the female students as ladies and the male students as boys created a positional difference between the students. Dawn situated the boys and girls against one another and leveled them through her terminology. The girls nodded in agreement, the boys murmured, and another break in the familial chain seemed to have occurred. There was noticeable disagreement with the statement. Both those

instances revealed cultural dissonance because she was quite emphatic about using language to set a communal tone. Her extensive use of collective pronouns, (e.g. us, we, our) gave the impression of a belief in inter- and cross-cultural equality; however, those exchanges portrayed something different. The cultural dissonance occurred again during my second site visit. During this visit, students were working collaboratively to prepare for their upcoming book presentations. Students had uploaded their group essays to the class work sharing site and Dawn conferenced with each group to provide feedback on their progress. There were mixed- and single-gendered groups and for the mixed-gendered groups, Dawn called them up for their conferences using the names of only the female students. In giving the feedback, she relayed her ideas mainly to the female students. The exchanges were seemingly innocuous; however, against the backdrop of the male students' reactions to the ladies leading the boys comment, this incident signaled a gap between her goals for community and the full embodiment of those goals. Taken together, there appeared to be a departure from her ideologies about culture and the actual culture evidenced. The use of language and power produced dissonance between the ideals and the actuality.

The distance between teacher-student voice within the class was another example of cultural dissonance. Although students spoke collaboratively within their groups, Dawn's voice dominated the whole-class exchanges. Having read as many as ninety percent of all suggested student texts, Dawn was very knowledgeable about the books students were to present. Each time she asked students their thoughts and ideas about their books, Dawn shared her thinking before students actually had opportunities to fully engage and share their ideas. She spoke more about the books than her students, shared

more ideas, sooner, and more often. Her voice dominated the space. Although Dawn espoused the importance of community and equal engagement, these incidents demonstrated dissonance between her stated values and the actions in her class. Dawn was admittedly passionate about books, which showed in her eagerness to share ideas with her students; however, in doing so, she silenced many of them. Unfortunately, there was no recognition of the silenced voices, which has the potential to further the gaps between her ideals and the boots on the ground that generate the actual culture.

**Building-level cultural incongruence.** Cultural dissonance within the classroom can be detrimental, but easily addressed and course corrected. The data demonstrated ways inconsistency between classes can create inter-class incongruence. For example, Erin's classroom illuminated the idea of inter-class incongruence in a noteworthy way because as she led a discussion that opened a connection to how she organized learning for her HA-AA students. The first request of participants was to describe their personal schooling experiences. In addressing this request, Erin framed her response from the perspective of herself as a student, which was in the district where she now teaches and from the perspective of herself as a teacher. The second part of her response shed light on the incongruence she was experiencing. Erin explained feeling as though her classes caused friction in her school and used student interactions to support her thinking. She explained the encounters as follows:

Friction in the sense that um...for example, if I could use some students, one student, this was probably a week ago, when he entered my classroom he stopped, took a deep breath and like closed his eyes and then he proceeded to go to his seat. But...when he got to his seat, I asked him I was like what's wrong, why...is

something wrong? He was like no. I know I have to think in this class so I was trying to prepare myself when I walked in the door. And then another student last week...well several students said [says her name] why is---why are your essays the hard ones? The other essays that we have to do for our other classes, they're easy. But why is yours so hard? And I think the friction if I could make an assumption of its identity is that I don't believe my students are being challenged or asked to think at the level that I'm asking them to think in my classroom and that's not um...I don't say that to express disdain toward my colleagues or anything, but I'm just saying that if I had to identify what the friction was I think the level of expectation is not consistent throughout my school (interview 1).

Not only did I glimpse Erin's thinking about her teaching and what her students need to be successful, her response unveiled an important component in understanding culture. Just as classes are collections of students' individual cultures, school buildings function in much the same way. However, the dynamics of power constructed at the building leadership level created a layer that impacted the culture throughout a building. Erin's realization that her classes were demanding more of her students than her colleagues created cultural incongruence. The incongruence led to frustration she attributed to the difference between the culture of her class and the environment outside her classroom. As Erin explained, she and her colleagues held different perspectives on their students' abilities and she stated her positions as, "standing on the ground of intellectual integrity," (interview 1). To clarify her statement, I probed for an explanation to which Erin added:

What I mean by that is...not lowering expectations. What I've been getting these last two weeks, I have been feeling that friction, and they are begging that you

know almost asking me to lower that expectations. And----and---out of my gut, I was very straight forward, very direct in---it was a non-negotiable statement---as I---the expectation is that you are going to do this and that expectation is not going to be lowered. And I went on. And I didn't engage in any of the back and forth. I said it and I was done with it. At that moment I guess I switched into what I is called I guess critical parent mode and I didn't allow for---I'm very flexible and I let my students give me feedback and I adjust to them when I feel like the power struggle is not worth it. But that I definitely exercised my power as a teacher.

The expectation differential between Erin and her colleagues created the cultural incongruence, friction, and frustration she felt. Such incongruence is problematic because it affects student success and achievement in the short- and long-term. Further, Erin determined the expectation gap extended to her preAP students as her colleagues provided preAP and on-grade level students the same work with no differentiation. With a lack higher rigor assignments for preAP students, Erin shared she felt her colleagues may not believe in the students' ability to handle more advanced work.

When the culture of a class is misaligned to the building-level culture to such a degree that teachers must become strategic to survive and be productive within the culture, incongruence is the outcome. Data from three participants at a single site suggested cultural incongruence between the building and their classrooms. In sharing their ideas about culture, the dynamic of power came up with repeated reference to their building leadership. The dynamic shared about the leadership led me to discuss participants' ideas as a factor of culture. I discuss power in the next section, and revisit

this data at that time. In this section, I focus on the cultural dimensions shared by the participants. When asked to describe her perspective on power, Marie gave a lengthy response that moved into a discussion about the language used by her building leader.

She shared the following thoughts:

[The principal] gets on the intercom a lot and tells ladies how they should behave um...and tells them to sit down and stop talking like pretty girls are seen and not heard --- like it's telling them how they should and should not behave and it's telling the boys how they can act and how they should expect women to behave. If that's what they're hearing all the time, like this is how women should behave -- like for International Women's Day he got on the intercom and he was like saying like, "Happy International Women's Day. Blah...blah...blah...thanks for being here I know y'all are going to go shopping later..." And I was just like...And all the female teachers stuck their heads out of the classroom and we looked at each other like what the...and that's like part of the dynamic of the school a lot --- 'cause I feel like as a female I already have to work harder to gain respect and as a young female, I have to work even harder and now you're adding a layer of like --- you are actually um...like invalidating me as not just a teacher but as a human. As a strong woman, you are saying sit down and shut up, that my voice is not equivalent to a man's (interview 2).

Marie explained her leaders' comments as, "...part of the dynamic of the school a lot."

While this information was shared during our discussion on power, her statement about her leaders' comments as being part of the dynamic a lot led me to consider it as a cultural element.

Marie worked with her students to co-construct a relaxed laid-back inclusive culture. Hearing a constant barrage of gender-marginalizing speech at the leadership level was culturally disconcerting and incongruent to the culture Marie worked to co-construct with her students. In this incongruent cultural space, Marie felt the need to combat the incongruence through deliberate attention to her female students. Although her female students were out-performing her male students on paper, it was important for Marie to be strategic in combatting the cultural incongruence through text choices. One such choice was the use *Phenomenal Woman* by Maya Angelou in a poetry lesson. Marie said the choice was deliberate and recounted, “some of the girls were like saying out loud with Maya Angelou when I had the recording playing and most of them were like yea...yesss, she’s my lady like --- I love this poem,” (interview 3). The cultural incongruence experienced by Marie and the other female participants at that site as advanced through the language of their building leader provided a way to think critically about the connections between language, cultural, and power. Cultural incongruence created by the gender-marginalizing language of the site leader in Beth, Erin, and Marie’s building exemplified the intersectionality of language, culture, and power on two levels. First, the site leader’s use of language and power created an imbalanced building culture. Second, the participants used power to make instructional decisions allowing them to act against the gender marginalization culture.

### **Summary**

Culture is a many splendid thing. It is complicated, complex, multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted. There are as many ways to conceptualize culture as there are people from whom to solicit ideas. In this section, I discussed participants’ conceptual

frameworks and perspectives about culture, their ideas about culture in their individual classrooms, and raised the point that amidst having cultural ideologies of equality and inclusion, dissonance and incongruence exist. As participants detailed their epistemologies of culture, the connection to language as a cultural shaper evidenced. The connection between culture and language stemmed from and connected to core theme of this study as evidenced through participants' explanations of how these constructs are given space in the classroom. In the next section, I discuss the dynamic of power and begin, as I did with culture, with findings about participants' conceptual frameworks of power. I present findings on how participants viewed themselves within their conceptual frameworks and end with findings related to embodied power.

### **Power**

In this section, I present the findings related to participants' conceptual framework of power, their image of themselves within their conceptual framework, and possibilities of themselves as instructionally empowered educators. I demonstrate how power directs the influence of language and culture on instructional decision making. Power is the untouchable ever-present force at work in every relationship. Even when people shy away from it or try to deny its existence, power is guiding the dynamics of interactions. In teacher-student relationships, the dynamic of power is impacted by factors such age, knowledge differentials, and positionality. I asked participants to describe the power dynamics in their classrooms, which enabled me to glean information about their conceptual frameworks of power. Through analysis of the data, I gleaned the significance of power as the essential component on determining how language and culture influenced participants' instructional decision-making for their HA-AA students.

### **Conceptual Framework of Power**

Across the data, findings showed conceptually, participants struggled with the idea of power. Not only was it a challenge for them to describe or define power, it was difficult for them to see themselves as empowered professionals. I broached this topic in the first round of interviews to learn participants' thinking with the intention of probing and following up in subsequent interviews. The repetitious dissociative language in the responses of most participants suggested first a negative perspective on power and second a desire to be disconnected from the idea of having power. In near exact language, Beth, Dawn, Erin, and Marie used phrases such as, "I don't see myself as having power, (Dawn); I never thought of myself as being powerful or having power, (Erin); I don't feel like there's some power I have and they don't (Marie); I don't feel like a leader or boss," (Beth). Amy's initial response was the only one connecting her to having or even suggesting she wanted to be connected to power. When asked about her concept of power and the dynamic of power in her classroom, Amy responded, "Well they know that I'm the one in charge and that they will not overtake this classroom. This is a battle you're not going to win," (interview 1). Unlike the other four participants, Amy very clearly saw herself as having power in her classroom. Her response suggested a control framework of power and upon giving her silence to think further, Amy continued with:

It seems so totalitarian to say power and that it's my classroom and not theirs and that always makes me feel a little uncomfortable but I think it's about that sense of authority um...to have and not to let yourself be a push over when you set that culture and climate...they're not dumb. They're like rafters they know they can test the fence and they know where the weak spot is and where they can attack,

you know. So when I think...when I hear the word power it really is about letting them know the authority figure that would like to be friendly with you, but I'm not your friend. That...that...even that seems so harsh to even say (interview 1). Amy's expanded response demonstrated an unequivocal framework of power grounded in a control and behavior management. In direct contrast to her counterparts, Amy saw her power as a tool for management and behavior control, and with a matter-of-fact tone, the idea presented no dissonance.

The other participants actively worked against the notion of having power. They even attempted to mitigate the degree to which they had and used power for managerial or behavioral control purposes. Dawn stated, "I just don't believe in power, even with discipline," (interview 1). The difference in conceptual frameworks among these participants could be related to the difference between middle and high school environments. Having been a middle school teacher myself in three different school districts in two different states as well as having experience working alongside teachers in middle schools across the United States, I can attest to the perspective difference not being solely attributable to the difference between school middle and high schools. Each participant was asked to describe their personal concept of power and their responses reflected their thinking. As outlined in my participant outline, Amy had high school teaching experience; therefore, her conceptual framework encompassed the full body of her teaching experiences. Except for Amy, participants held negative concepts of power.

**Conceptual framework and empowered identities.** Analysis of data demonstrated participants' self-image as professionally empowered was inextricably linked to their conceptual frameworks and connected to how they made curricular

decisions. While Dawn had the most latitude in her curricular and instructional decision making, she shied away from an empowered self-image as much as the participants who made little curricular decisions. In describing the dynamics of power in her class and herself within the dynamic she explained, “I think power is equally distributive in my classroom. I don’t see myself as all powerful all-knowing at all. I try to build on what they know. Let everybody share and let’s grow with that,” (interview 1). Dawn associated power with knowledge, who possessed it and how much. Despite being the obvious knowledge leader in her classroom, Dawn’s image was not tied to being the center of information as she espoused a philosophy of knowledge sharing and co-construction.

Beth, too, saw herself as sharing power based on knowledge. She described herself as having power within the give and take dynamics of her classroom. Beth went a step further and connected her power sharing to her students’ personalities and their learning needs. Much like Dawn, there was knowledge sharing, but for Beth it came from what she expressed was having students who were sometimes more well-versed in English content than her and their willingness to challenge her knowledge. As we discussed the power dynamics of her classroom in our first interview, Beth explained, “These are smart kids and I don’t always necessarily feel that I know more than them because I didn’t really study English in college...I guess I’m more of a facilitator. So, it’s we’ve got this mutual respect kind of balance,” (interview 1). She went onto share when her students were self-starters and when they genuinely needed her for learning, they turned power over to her. Beth’s image was connected to her conceptual framework in that she saw herself as a facilitator of her students not their boss or leader. She associated her role based on respect for their knowledge level in relation to hers and flexibly shared

the intellectual space with her students. It was as though Beth believed her students, at times, possessed more English knowledge than her because she did not study English at the undergraduate or graduate level. Such perceived knowledge differentials warranted her respect and intellectual power sharing. Beth's perceptions of her knowledge relative to the strong students in her class led her to a use of instructional power based on knowledge equality. The give and take knowledge culture demonstrated how her ideals about power shaped the culture of her classroom.

Much like Dawn and Beth, Erin's conceptual of power centered around shared responsibility and cultural co-construction. The differences between Erin's classes necessitated varying levels of power enactment, further illustrating how the use of power directs the classroom culture. According to Erin, her preAP classes differed in significant ways, which required different forms of power enactment. In her first preAP class of the day, Erin saw herself as having to exercise power from a managerial perspective; however, in her second class of the day, she saw herself more as a peer. Erin's self-images differed because the cultures of her classes varied to such a degree as to necessitate completely divergent ways of being. Erin based her self-image on the nature and culture of each class. It was as though she had to be two completely different people because the lived experiences in each class required her to do so. In our initial discussion on power, she began her response with, "It depends on which class it is," (interview 1). When we revisited the discussion in interviews two and three, she prefaced responses with, "It depends on which class it is," (interviews 2 and 3). While she held to a general framework that power is not something she necessarily wanted to think of possessing, when she discussed it, Erin held two separate but equally valuable images in her head.

She did not value being a peer to the second class as more important than being more present in her first class. For her, there was value in each image because her classes necessitated the differences. Erin could have applied a one-size-fits-all approach regarding how to be powerful in her classes. Instead, Erin made an empowered instructional decision grounded in the unique culture of each class, which required different ways of being powerful.

Marie recognized the presence of power, made an association of power to managing behavior, but did not imagine herself as having any measure of power her students themselves did not possess. Similarly, to Erin, class personality dictated how Marie described her use of power. Findings detailed Marie's position of possessing as much power as her students. In describing her self-image, Marie stated, "I never saw myself as a mover and shaker with the power thing," (interview 1). Although she could not name the "thing" she associated with power, Marie seemed not to connect it to anything she saw in herself. Additionally, in describing herself in this way, Marie appeared not to want power to be something she alone possessed. Rather, she wanted it shared as part of their environment. Intellectual power sharing was to be part of the classroom culture. Marie's described conceptual framework and her self-image were evident during my site visit. As Marie and her students discussed *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* (Shakur, 2000), her students' voices were as present as her own. She did not attempt to demonstrate a higher level of understanding about the poem than her students, instead she deferred to them repeatedly soliciting their ideas. In our debriefing of the lesson, Marie admitted her students analyzed the poem in unexpected ways. She recognized the cultural differences shaping their analysis and privileged their cultural

knowledge as the basis of the expertise. Marie's work with the Tupac poem supported the major theme as indexed by the findings in this study. Marie could have chosen a power stance focused on getting her students to adhere strictly to the organizer planned for her instruction. Instead, because she valued her students' cultural knowledge relative to the poem and held to an ideology of intellectual power sharing, Marie allowed her students' knowledge more space than her own.

### **Summary**

Each participant's self-image was congruent with their epistemologies around power. Having participants share their conceptual frameworks of power and their self-images was an essential step in learning how they understood the influence of language, culture, and power in their instructional decision making with their high-achieving African American students. Findings suggested participants used their instructional power fluidly. Beth, Dawn, Erin, and Marie opted to align their use of power with an appreciation for students' knowledge and needs, while one participant maintained an ideology focused on behavior management and control. All data demonstrated how the use of power determined and shaped the culture of the classroom. In the next section I present findings of how participants embodied power as an element of instructional decision making and practice.

### **Language, Culture, and the Power to Plan**

There is no linearity in discussing power and how it influences language, culture, and the way teachers teach and students learn. Findings illuminated the idea language and culture are inextricably linked and teacher's epistemological framework around power

shapes how instructional decisions are influenced by language and culture. Participants shared a plethora of ideas regarding their concepts of language and culture, their degree of planning autonomy, how they made decisions about instruction, and the everywhere-ness of power woven through their lived experiences in the planning process. In this section, I outline the findings associated with how participants connected language and culture to embody their conceptual frameworks and self-images of power in their instructional decision-making practices.

### **Instructionally Embodied Power**

Teachers enjoy varying degrees of instructional autonomy (Anderson, 1987; Burbules, 1986; Samuels, 1970). How teachers use their instructional autonomy provides insight into their educational philosophies. In this study, findings depicted definitive links among instructional autonomy, ideologies about power, and the influence of the power ideologies on instructional decision-making. I begin this section with findings from Dawn's interview data to illustrate how beliefs and the ability to use instructional power shape instructional decision-making through the lens of language and culture. Dawn had the most instructional decision-making power because she enjoyed the least restrictive environment. The quote below summed up Dawn's philosophy on power and the ability to teach through the lens of language and culture:

As long as you have the power, kids can't learn. You have to empower children. I'm not the authority. I don't know everything; I'm just a guide. And if I see myself like that it allows them to be powerful. Right... So a lot of teachers want to teach the one novel---it gives them power, the one they've read a million times.

So now all of a sudden there's the power structure and what they're doing is completely ridiculous to me, (interview 2).

This quote from Dawn explained her planning process, her text choices, her task development, and for the most part the operational aspects of her classroom. Dawn had the most planning autonomy and developed her philosophy over eighteen years in the classroom. Unlike the other participants in this study, Dawn was not required to produce written lesson plans. When asked about her process, she spoke extensively about planning through the lens of reflection, thinking, and gauging her students. Planning was a cerebral task, and although Dawn acknowledged others' needs to write their out plans, her process was completely internal. In our second interview, I asked Dawn to explain how she plans despite not writing them. She stated, "'Cause I'm constantly thinking --- after every class, I'm thinking about it. What happened today in my mind. What went wrong today...in my brain, I'm already figuring it out. So it's everyday reflection," (interview 2). Thinking and reflecting were the cornerstones of her process.

Choosing texts was the most significant use of her instructional power. As Dawn put it, "I try to make sure we're reading diverse texts. That we are inclusive. I don't teach any dead white men. I try not to teach any white people at all. I know it sounds terrible, but I do," (interview 1). Having the autonomy to choose diverse texts embodied the influence of culture and power on Dawn's instructional decision making. She was deliberate in taking this stance and structured literacy development in her class around the perspective of the marginalized (Au, 2012). In discussing this perspective, Dawn explained:

I think those classics are readily accessible. Like the kids say, those are accessible. Let's give 'em something that's not accessible. Let's expand their world. Those texts---those---the classics are accessible. We need to get away from things – to me that are not reflecting the world in which we live. I would never tell a kid not to read a classic. Read it. But we have to expose them to other things as well, (interview 2).

Opening students to a wider view of the world was for Dawn a means to help them avoid the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). To move her students in this direction, Dawn focused her instruction on getting students to think critically about how texts connected to the world. Preparing students for AP exams mattered and written tasks were AP exam-inspired and multiculturally-authored novels and short stories were the vehicles for addressing prompts. Constant questioning to get students to refine their thinking and show her where to go next in her teaching was the framework around her planning process. Dawn explained gauging her students' responses to questions and analysis of their work as the basis for instructional planning.

The goal for Dawn was for her students to think critically, to consider how texts connected to them and the world. For her, the text was about more than what transpired between the front and back covers of a book. She wanted to get her students to think about what a book had to say about the world. Dawn understood it took deep analytical skill for students to do this type of work and spoke constantly of thinking about where she wanted to take her students, what goals she had for them as learners, and what it would take to help them develop the literacy skills associated with being in an advanced course. Creating the communal environment with tables signaled Dawn's knowledge of

how adolescents in general and students of color, in particular, learned best. Race and language were ever-present in Dawn's thinking and as she shared:

Being African American, race is always on my mind. It's a factor in every lesson. It's a factor every day all day. With the teaching I'm mindful to make sure that I um...know my place. It's not lower than anybody else and they're not lower than me in terms of the culture. I want every kid to bring their culture into this classroom, that's why I read diverse texts...I'm open to them. Bring what you bring to here. We're not---no one's an empty slate, I want you to bring that in here. So that's how I see culture. It's about---they can be in here and never learn about each other. We need to know about each other 'cause we're in here together. So race and place is in every lesson (interview 2).

This quote represented the full embodiment of Dawn's perspective on decision making with high-achieving African American students. Her class was more diverse than the participants. The diversity was precisely why she adopted her stance of using diverse texts, allowed wide language variations, and made her room a place where students "felt seen, felt here, felt more confident," (interview 2). Despite eschewing the word and concept of power, Dawn exercised power in agentive ways (Bandura, 2005; Freire, 1970). She engaged in what hooks (1994) deemed as transgressive teaching, which decentralized Euro-centrism and made space for a more diverse set of intellectual possibilities. Considering language and culture were central to her decision making and since she had wide latitude in her planning, Dawn moved freely within her educational philosophy. Dawn's curricular standpoint (Au, 2012) represented an epistemology about school knowledge, which led her to deliberately use power as a means of establishing an

environment whereby power was distributed. Power was distributed culturally and intellectually. Even though she eschewed using the word, Dawn's instructional decision-making was influenced by her full embodiment of power. Dawn chose to enact a power principle whereby she worked to honor the knowledge of her students and paid attention to culture and use of language in a way where marginalized voices were privileged.

*Ideological power incongruence within the instructional practice.* Instructional decisions and course type created ideological power incongruence within the instructional practice. While AP does not require set readings or assignments, there are suggestions for the type of writing tasks students should be able to produce. The knowledge of the AP curriculum prompted Dawn to make instructional decisions, which caused misalignment between her ideological frameworks about culture and the tasks she designed. Dawn was clear about the culture in her classroom. She spoke often about the community atmosphere, shared power, and insisted on using diverse texts in her classroom. As there was incongruence exhibited in the field notes regarding language use in Dawn's classroom, analysis of instructional tasks highlighted power incongruence between Dawn's ideologies about power and the tasks she designed for her students. While Dawn had the highest level of instructional decision-making freedom and espoused giving her students wide latitude with language use and content expression, her shared tasks showed heavy direction on student output, which represented a point of ideological departure. In one of the artifacts, students were instructed to choose among a list of paired novels around which to construct a class presentation. While students had latitude regarding which set of paired novels they could choose, each pairing came with Dawn's suggestions on how to focus their reading and analysis. For example, for the pairing of

Purple Hibiscus (Adichie) and Things Fall Apart (Achebe), Dawn provided, “With these novels, you may want to think about impact of colonization, (**I strongly suggest reading Things Fall Apart first.**)” (artifact 1) (See Figure 1). Suggestions such as this followed every pairing on the list. The use of bold font on her suggestion regarding which novel should be read first was a signal students should read Achebe’s novel first. While framed as suggestions, most students will read such words and register the bold texts as more than suggestion. At the end of the document, Dawn made it a point to inform students each group will decide their pairing and which book within the pair to read first. In giving her suggestions, Dawn covertly enacted her power over her students and represented ideological incongruence. With such espousals, I expected the task to include only project type, novel pairs, and due dates.

At the time of the assignment, Dawn had read each book on the list. She quite expectantly had a clear purpose for the novel pairings, which is well within the scope of authority as the teacher. However, she vehemently described power as a destructive force in student learning. With such a position on power, I was unprepared for the degree to which she covertly exercised instructional power in this task. Each book pairing contained her suggestions for how students should approach their analysis, which seemed to defy her oft-stated ideals that power should be shared in the classroom. In the pairing of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, students were told, “you want to think about the culture and gender roles,” (artifact 1). Dawn described her students as strong capable readers. This level of covert direction seemed incongruent with both her descriptions of her students and her stated ideas about the center of power in her class. With capable readers, I expected Dawn to give her students as much latitude in their

thinking as she did with how they could demonstrate their knowledge. Students were allowed to use any method and be as creative as they saw fit in how to present their project. There was a give-and-take regarding the instructional process, which was ideologically inside her stated beliefs about how power should move in classrooms; however, the overt directions within the project exhibited an ideological mismatch.

**Limited instructional power within boundaries.** The use of power was displayed across all aspects within the data. Participants experiences demonstrated that regardless of curricular limitations, they will exercise power in accordance with their beliefs about language and culture. Neither the educational process nor planning for it are neutral (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003). Dawn represented the full embodiment of instructional power adopting a standpoint whereby cultural equality and linguistic variation were highly valued and allowed free expression. Having unfettered instructional decision-making freedom is rare, particularly in the current US educational climate of high stakes testing and rigid accountability structures. Most teachers have instructional decision-making capabilities in varying measure (Anderson, 1987; Apple, 2013; Samuels, 1970; & Webb, 2002). Beth, Erin, and Marie represented a scope of decision making generally enjoyed by many teachers; they made instructional decisions within the confines of district-mandated curriculum. The spaces within the confines held interest and I wanted participants to explain how they understood the role of power in considering language and culture when planning, even within the confines of district and/or school mandates.

Beth and Marie taught eleventh- and twelfth-grade AP Literature, which afforded them a great deal of decision making latitude. As they explained, in teaching the higher

grades their only requirement was to ensure students wrote a ten-paper research paper on the topic of their choosing. This was a school-wide leadership expectation for all high schoolers. Beyond meeting this requirement, they were free to make as many instructional decisions as Dawn made. They were unfettered within the paper-writing mandate. I asked both participants if they thought about power beyond managing behavior and Beth's response was, "I feel empowered in that I get to create my own curriculum for my AP kids," (interview 2). She went on to explain, "I think the most limiting thing working with my AP kids is just those uh...expectations the administration looking for only this structure of the typing thing," (interview 2). Student's individual cultures were an undercurrent in Beth's decision making and she chose instead to focus on the dimension of rurality, raising the community over the dimensions of race, ethnicity, and/or gender. She also focused on what mattered to her personally as she chose in-class novels. In our discussion, Beth shared:

One of the things I personally value most is compassion and open-mindedness um...and working in a rural community a lot of my kids have not been outside of that community and seen people that are different from them---um...and so I try to expose them to things [that] may be are different or will get them thinking about people who are different from themselves (interview 2).

I probed further for an example, and Beth brought up the idea that she wanted her students to see the sameness in humanity even where difference was apparent. Discussing difference appeared to make her uncomfortable and I will admit to thinking it may have been racially inspired. At no time during our interviews or my visit did I detect obvious hidden biases; however, Beth's discomfort with some of the racially-derived cultural

displays within her class, as shared during our interviews, led me in this direction. It was important to Beth for her students to value others and she felt being from the rural community negatively impacted that ability. Therefore, she chose texts based on two important factors, first of which was availability.

Resource constraints were as influential as district curricular constraints. Her decision to use a certain text in her class became a question of, “does the library have enough books to cover all of my students,” (interview 2). Unlike Dawn who had access to a wide array of multiculturally-authored novels, text diversity was constrained by resources. Thematically then, Beth infused dimensions of culture based on her personal penchant for socially relevant texts such as *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck) to discuss issues of mental disability, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde) to challenge her students’ notion of morality, and *Twelve Angry Men* (Rose) to think about the US justice system. Each of these books were available in the school library, there were sufficient copies, students had not read them, and they had social significance; the major criteria upon which Beth based her decisions. In bringing these texts into her classroom, Beth had to consider her instructional purpose and process. With *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Beth recounted an unexpected struggle she had around religion. The religious bent in this community was ever-present and caused a stir. As she explained, her students have strong religious convictions and during the reading of that book, the religious aspects of their culture were front and center. Beth was a cultural outsider and ill-prepared for the religiosity of her students; however, her response was to find a way to honor this element of her students’ culture by allowing students to challenge ideas and ask questions about the text that lived beyond their religious convictions. In this example, Beth used her

instructional power to make space for her students' religious convictions, which was also an important unexpected finding with Marie. Though each taught majority Black students, race was not *the* defining element of culture; it was *a* part of the culture. As Erin and Dawn explained, Blackness was "there" every day, all day; therefore, these participants had to see culture in, through, and beyond the dimension of race. Here, in Beth's use of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, cultural dimensionality made itself known.

Working at the same site and teaching the same grade levels gave Beth and Marie the same levels of instructional autonomy. As with Beth, Marie developed her own AP curriculum, based text selection decisions on resource availability, and her students had to complete a research paper. Through the data, I learned Marie had a different perspective on the study constructs. Having studied gender inequality at the undergraduate level equipped Marie with a set of ideas and language to express her thinking the other participants did not possess. Additionally, data analysis of Marie's interviews illuminated an unexpected expansion in her thinking, which impacted her instructional decisions. The goal of this study was to get at participants' thinking about instructional decision making, not to get participants to change thinking or practice; however, Marie spoke explicitly about both. During our initial conversations about language and its role in the classroom, Marie spoke about not dumbing down words for her students. While she discussed being okay with students' use of language varieties, her first explanation of not dumbing down words suggested a value judgement on words students' words versus her own. As we continued our conversations, she spoke more expansively about colloquialism, exposing her students to words without making them feel as though their language variations were wrong. In our second interview, Marie

expanded her thinking about the value of students' colloquial language use in her class and as referenced in an earlier section, she was okay with students letting their "freak vibe fly," (interview 2). The use of students' language variations was acceptable, but as we continued to discuss language, Marie expanded her position, only mandating academic language when writing. In her explanation about the subtle change, she noted it was about having opportunities to learn from her students through their language. This was her first year at her school, and language became the vehicle to learn about the culture of the school and surrounding community. Valuing language as a learning tool illustrated how classrooms are cultural exchange sites.

Language opened a door for mutuality, which was not present to the same degree during interviews with Beth or visits to her class. Marie shared her students gave her permission to use a racially-charged epithet, which she refused to use. Through this invitation, Marie's students invited her into their space because she valued and respected their language and speech as equaled to her own. Language was not a source of exclusion and she recounted knowing when to intervene in her students' language exchanges because she possessed knowledge of its meaning. The following data point supported her knowing when to stop inappropriate slang, "So I'm like, "hey...NO! Not that one...not that...don't do that." Um... yeah...you can't say *that* one, 'cause I know that one," (interview 2). As a former middle school teacher, I recognized her position here because students often use language as a means of excluding adults. However, Marie's students giving her permission to use the N-word signified their relationship. Her ability to know when their coded language was inappropriate, and to see co-constructed knowledge

between their languages served to expand Marie's ideas about the importance of limiting mandates about language use.

Conversely, Beth shared her students specifically used language as an exclusionary device simply because they knew she did not know what their words meant. Like Marie, Beth did not mandate specific language varieties except when students were engaged in formal writing tasks. Unlike Marie, Beth did not view her students' language varieties as sources for knowledge building. She exhibited little curiosity about their language and shared, "They know that I'm not a part of it and they're cool with that. I don't think they're trying to bring me in. 'Cause half of the time I don't know what they're talking about," (interview 2). In these statements, Beth was talking about both her AP and on-grade level classes. Beth remained a cultural outsider, while Marie found ways to authentically enter her students' cultural spaces. Marie was able to enter her students' space because she displayed a genuine interest in their language and maintained the integrity of her own language. Students responded by inviting her into their cultural space, which did not occur with Beth. These data represent the connection between the use of instructional power and culture. Beth chose to remain on the fringe of her students' culture while Marie chose to find a way to become part of their culture. Cultural mutuality lived in Beth's and Marie's classes in direct measure to their use of power to make space for aspects of culture, which links to the core finding about the relationship between culture and power in the classroom.

Marie's perspective on her curriculum development and text choices as products of her having agency changed over the course of data collection. During our initial conversations about power, Marie held a moderate behavior management position

explaining that she did not have to assert her power, especially with her AP kids. As our interviews progressed and I probed her about her decisions, Marie began to envision herself as an educator with the power to make important decisions on behalf of her students. She adopted a standpoint similar to Dawn, but grounded in her Whiteness. By our third interview, she made the following statement:

As a white teacher, I feel like I definitely need to come in and take into account culture and language and all of those things because if I don't look at those and if I pretend they don't exist, then I am not, first of all giving the benefits to my students like they also have a point of view. But also, if I'm not taking into account that and just trying to force what I think to be good texts or good whatever and I'm not looking at culture and I'm not trying to be more rounded and I'm only teaching dead white authors because those are the classics I'm really just assuming my knowledge is greater than others and that's not right. I don't have that power and so I need to be looking at culture and I need to be looking at power dynamics because I need to stop perpetuating this system that I'm in that I didn't choose to be in but that I am definitely working in because I don't just want to be a cog in the wheel spitting out um...just absolutely culturally uninfluenced work that does not represent my students or their lives um...and yea (interview 3).

This statement came after Marie had made a series of instructional moves, which began with recognizing curricular dissatisfaction. She made the decision to switch from Shakespearean dramatic texts to comedies because she recognized a difference in her AP students relative to her own personal experiences as an AP student. Marie explained her students were getting lost in the long dramatics but seemed to connect better to the

comedies. She explained needing to adjust her thinking about what an AP class should or could be and after realizing she had the power to change the curriculum, Marie decided to include more comedies and other diverse authors. Marie went a step further and remarked she intended to spend her summer rethinking what her curriculum looked like so she could make the necessary changes reflecting her understanding about how language and culture should come together to foster deeply engaged learning. The findings here support the intersections between language, culture, and power. Marie recognized her instructional power and used it to create a culturally affirming environment for both her and her students.

Erin taught ninth grade at the same site as Beth and Marie. Ninth grade English is a tested course in the district and since the district is on the state school-focus list, there is increased pressure on teachers at this grade level to get students to “achieve” at passing levels on their state-level exams. Unlike Beth and Marie, Erin did not have curricular choice as she was mandated to follow the district-chosen curriculum, which included texts read in her class. She did explain she was getting more autonomy over her how the lessons were delivered. In our first interview, Erin described being extremely dissatisfied with the prescribed questions from the lessons because they felt too nuanced and in her words, “monotonous really and I began --- each lesson would give an average of fifteen questions that they want us to answer,” (interview 1). Erin’s curricular dissatisfaction and frustration became an impetus for her to assume instructional power within the boundaries of what she described was a tight curriculum. One of the most powerful data points from our initial interview regarding how she made the change occurred in the response to my question about how she chose texts. After explaining text choices were

made by her facilitator, Erin went on to explain her frustration and how she went about making instructional changes:

So, I began searching and trying to figure out what are those questions scaffolding to and then I started approaching with a sense of where's the profit and I mean profit like in how can I turn 15 into 2 and 3 questions. How can I make 2 and 3 questions as profitable as 15. So, I began to think back to what you were saying last year about questions and I went back to "what do you notice questions?" Out of...that question is so profitable. Very lucrative because what surfaces from that is almost everything you're gonna' need (interview 1).

Erin remarked she was working to refine her questioning processes. Owning the learning process for her students was Erin's embodied space of instructional power within the curricular boundaries. She made being a student of her students, her content, and her craft sources enabling her to assume a level of power not afforded through her curriculum.

Culturally, Erin had a multi-leveled insider knowledge no other participant possessed. She grew up and was schooled in her district and as an African American, had a shared racial space with her students that led her to say, "I'm Black, my kids Black, we Black all the time in my classroom," (interview 1). Being Black all the time in her classroom forced Erin to have a nuanced position about culture and see more than race as part of her students' cultural story. As she explained, culture was an amalgamation of personalities and it was among the personalities where Erin exercised another element of her decision-making power. In trying to understand Erin's instructional power, we discussed her planning during the second and third interviews and she shared the following ideas, "I figure out what...first of all what is it --- what it is I want them to

think about and kind of the best way to get them there. I guess it's all based on that moment of cognition that I want," (interview 2). During our third interview, Erin explained:

So how I'm designing I first think about what is that cognitive moment. What is that cognitive moment I want them to have and depending on that what am I most – what's the most profitable thinking. So where do I really want them to struggle with so in their thinking that cognitive moment and which others do I not care about. That I'm like okay I really want them to focus on this. For example, I didn't want them struggling mentally with deciding a choice and answer; I gave it to 'em. What I wanted them to struggle with in that cognitive moment was to justify it. Because had I not given them the answer, eventually I'll take the answer away. Once they're used to this thinking process, so the first go round, I didn't want them to struggle with deciding, 'cause...I want to take that away, I wanted to preserve that thinking power for what I really wanted them to struggle with. So I'm being more strategic with the mental struggles I want them to have (interview 3).

There was a three-pronged nexus of power shaping Erin's instructional process. She did not circumvent the curriculum or adopt a renegade approach. Instead Erin chose to work within the curriculum in ways to best suit her students. She began with a level of curricular frustration and dissatisfaction, she knew her students, and managed the intellectual space to maximize her student's learning. Erin deliberately considered the demands presented to her in the lesson, the cognitive demand the lessons held for her

students, and then considered how best to manage the cognitive demands. Students' learning personalities were the guide for how Erin addressed the curricular demands.

Erin used the texts prescribed in her district-mandated curriculum, taught the skills mandated in the curriculum, but assumed power to direct the instructional environment from a position of knowledge and a desire to more deeply engage her students. What mattered to Erin was whether her students were thinking and how they were thinking. To illustrate the importance of giving students the latitude to think, Erin shared the thinking process of a student:

I'll have a framework --- it's a thinking routine, generate, sort, connect, elaborate. This is MS doing whatever he wants to do. And he didn't do this. He decided to not do this and he was writing in his notebook that whole time and I was kinda' getting -- at first I was getting concerned. I was like MS are you working because every time I came in there he was writing in his notebook in his hand and he was going to other people and talking --- circulating with his peers. I was like MS are you gonna do this and he was like, "Okay...um...I'm thinking about it first." Everyday I'm thinking about it. Everyday I'm thinking about it...I'm about it. Everyday I'm thinking about it. And then I was like, I'm going to trust his brain. I'ma trust him. He goes home -- he asked me to take chart paper home; I gave him the whole thing. I gave him the markers. He comes back with all this [showing his work] (interview 3).

She gave her student time to think even though at first it appeared he was not following directions. According to Erin, the level of work the student produced, was well worth the time she gave him to process. She could have stopped the student and forced him to

complete the assignment according to her teacher-prescribed outline. Instead, she watched him and engaged in conversation to determine what he was doing. In our first interview, Erin said she held to the integrity of her students' intellect. This data point exemplified her principle and showed her moving within the boundaries. Her power rested in choosing to take the time to pay attention to this student's learning processes and the willingness to give him space to demonstrate knowledge even though he chose a different course of action.

Across the data, Erin summed up her process as creating a thirst for knowledge. She described her classroom as a place where her students were learning to value not knowing. Students' gaps in knowledge provided the fodder for teaching and they became the tools around which she achieved the mandates of the curriculum. Erin said, "I learned this year that giving students enough time to think is important. Kids, you can't do stuff. You can't do stuff. They have to engage in something. They have to think about something," (interview 3). Erin embodied as much instructional power as Dawn despite the seemingly constraining force of a prescribed curriculum. The curriculum was a framework for structuring her decision making and a vehicle for student learning. Using power shaped how the culture lived in the classroom and became part of the learning.

**Limited power within a highly-constrained boundary.** While high curricular constraint has the potential to hamper the power enactment regarding instructional decision-making, it does not always do so. Throughout the findings, it was apparent, participants used power regardless of the degree of curricular autonomy they enjoyed. For example, Amy enjoyed the least amount of instructional power. Like the other participants, she mainly described herself as having limited instructional power.

Her school was part of a learning community within a large southern school district whose curriculum was developed by an outside company; therefore, Amy had restricted ability to develop curriculum. While the learning community used the externally-crafted curriculum, modifications were developed by Amy's coach. She had little opportunity to develop lessons; however, during this study, Amy advocated for and obtained approval to teach a three-day writing lesson. Having high school teaching experience, Amy knew her students were being insufficiently prepared for the amount of writing they would face in high school. Advocating for the addition of a writing lesson was her way preparing students to meet the demands of high school. In discussing this lesson, Amy mentioned it was a way to show a sense of power, which in this instance was exhibited overtly. She recognized her previous experience afforded her knowledge of what her students would face later and in developing the lesson she engaged in an agentive action. Although highly constrained, Amy did exercise instructional power through her writing lesson. Unlike the other participants, neither language nor culture seemed to play a role in the decision to advocate for this writing lesson. It was based on Amy's knowledge of high school and was crafted according to her beliefs about what students needed to be successful writers in high school.

### **Summary**

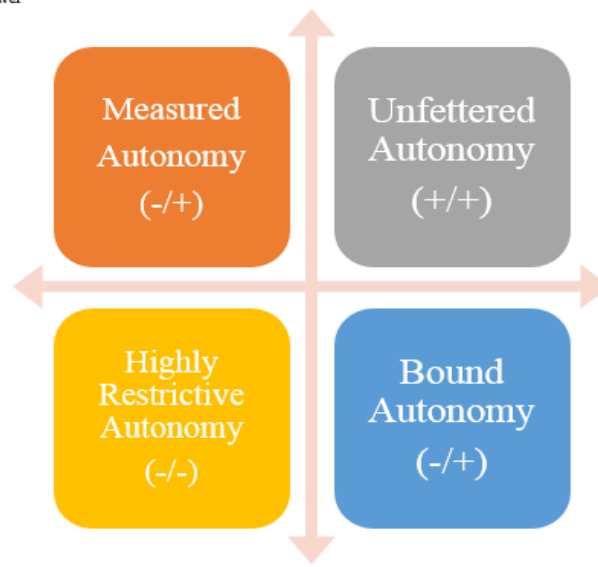
In this section, I highlighted the various ways participants used instructional power. Initially, many participants held limited perspectives about power, relegating their ideas to a power as behavior control mechanism. As participants shared their instructional planning processes, it became clear they used power strategically to influence their instructional decisions. From taking a stance about what texts to use or not to use, to

modifying prescribed lessons, to advocating in a highly-constrained environment, participants exhibited a variety of instructional decision-making process, which were centered in their ideologies about power and culture in the classroom with their HA-AA students. Findings illuminated how participants used power to foster more culturally affirming learning spaces acknowledging race, but where race was not the sum total of how students were understood. Findings also demonstrated how instructional decisions can be incongruent to ideologies and give students' academic power in one instance while curtailing it in others. The use of power was the thread through which language and culture influenced instructional decision-making.

Each participant enjoyed varying levels of instructional autonomy, which was used differently. Based on the findings, I developed an Instructional Autonomy and Power quadrant graphic (see Figure 2) as a conceptual framework to visualize the varying levels of instructional autonomy in relationship with enacted instructional power. I constructed the dimension of power in quadrants to depict the complexity between degree of autonomy and its enactment. The four quadrants depict Unfettered Autonomy (high instructional and curricular autonomy with overall positive uses of power); Measured Autonomy (few instructional and curricular constraints with high positive uses of power within the constraints); Bound Autonomy (strict instructional and curricular constraints with positive uses of power within the constrained environment) Highly Restrictive Autonomy (strict instructional and curricular constraints with negative uses of power within the highly constrained environment)

Figure 2. Instructional Autonomy & Power

Figure 2. Instructional Autonomy &amp; Power



In the next section, I present findings associated with how race became an element within the classroom as advanced through language and culture.

### **Language, Culture, Racial Understanding, and Power in the Classroom**

Race was an underlying element throughout the findings from the data.

Participants described their understanding of culture in general terms, choosing to address race only when specifically asked. Findings on race showed only when explicitly raised, did participants make room for it in their articulation of it as a component of culture.

When asked about the role of race in their understanding of culture, participants considered race a critical part of their student's culture, but they did not consider it as *the* defining aspect of their students' culture. Findings also suggested students' use of language was inseparable from their racial orientation and as such was a defining element of students' culture. In the sections below, I present findings related to language, culture, race, and how power influenced participants' decisions about making race visible in their classroom and part of their instructional decision-making.

### **Language, culture, and race in the classroom**

The data consistently supported the argument that language equals culture and is inseparable from race. The lens of race figured prominently albeit in indirect ways in participants' expectations for how students would use their language in the classroom is a particular form of English steeped in the Euro-centric history of the nation. African American language has been researched, examined, and challenged (Hilliard, 2002; Stubbs, 2002; Smitherman, 1977 & Labov, 1972). As speakers of BAE/AAVE, students brought race directly into the classroom. Findings depicted stark differences in perspectives relating to students' language and how it should be used in the classroom. Furthermore, the data showed the role of power in how participants made space for race through students' language use.

**Race, language, and culture.** The lens of race figured prominently in teachers' in discussions about language and culture in the classroom. This was particularly evident in the data generated with Amy, Beth, and Marie. As outlined in the participant profile, Amy, Beth, and Marie are all White females whose backgrounds would be defined as middle-class. All three of these participants taught majority African American students. While none exhibited overtly racist or deficit frameworks regarding their students or discussed their students' socio-economic backgrounds, covert terms to describe the type of language they expected students to use in the classroom. These three participants explicitly stated they wanted their students to use professional language, yet they were unable to provide specific examples for what constituted professional language. As Stubbs (2002) explained, "we hear language through a powerful filter of social values and stereotypes," (p. 66). In gathering field notes, I learned students in each of these

participants' classrooms used what has been theoretically defined as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Fought, 2006; Smitherman, 1977; Labov, 1972). In discussing the meaning of professional language, neither of the three participants offered specific words or structures for their descriptions.

Amy, spoke definitively about her expectations for language her students should not use. She was adamant they not use their out of school language forms as evidenced by phrases such as, "we was or they was," (interview 1), which are characteristic of AAVE structures. In using specific phrases characteristic of AAVE structure to demonstrate unacceptable speech, Amy demonstrated a "linguistic inferiority principle," (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 6) about her students' language variations. Specifically naming AAVE words or phrases her students should not use connected indexed Amy's beliefs about language to how she allowed it to influence her instructional decision-making as evidenced by her stated process of correcting her students whenever she hears them speak in what she has determined is incorrect English. The other White participants were not as overt in naming acceptable student speech in the classroom. Stefancic and Delgado (2012), determined race and racism were socially constructed naturally occurring phenomena that infiltrate every aspect of human interaction, including the schooling of traditionally marginalized students. Ford et al. (2002) and Perry, Hilliard, and Steele (2003) posited African American students have grappled with the subtleties of White teachers' deficit thinking regarding their academic abilities and language style for decades. The inability of these participants to provide exemplars of their expectations for how students would meet their demands for professional language, outside Amy's demand for no AAVE in the classroom, manifested the subtle yet real

influence of teachers' language ideologies on expected student behaviors in the classroom. These expectations were also part of a hidden curriculum against which students were invisibly and inevitably measured.

*Racializing language in the classroom.* Data demonstrated the ways participants responded to their characterization of and links they made between language and identity. However, these links were not always obvious to the participants themselves. During our first interview, Amy struggled to characterize her language use beyond the need to occasionally, "reword things for clarification," (interview 1). Conversely, in very precise language, Amy shared her expectations for students' use of language, which appeared in the section of students' language in the classroom. Amy recognized students possessed language forms; however, the only form of language allowed was Standard American English (SAE) or Dominant American English (DAE). I chose to probe Amy's thinking about hers and her students' language during our second interview. During that interview, I brought Amy back to her original response about her own language and asked her if she were able to talk about her language in way she was unable to do so in the first interview. Again, she struggled to define her language:

Well I don't really know what I would ever say about the way that I speak or the language that I use. I mean we're all teachers. We're all trying not to say what we're actually thinking half the time you know um...but you know I try to keep it real with them and keep moving. So, I don't know how I would define the language that I use in my classroom, (interview 2).

I asked a third time and tried to get her to describe the type of language, to which she replied, "I would define that as professional. Proper grammar," (interview 2). This

description of her own language mirrored the description Amy professed requiring of her students; she expected them to use proper grammar or what she deemed as professional language. The mirroring represented a projection of herself onto her students. During the interview, Amy provided identical examples of students' speech acts to demonstrate what she meant by unprofessional language. In the first interview Amy framed the language around her students as, "...this is school and so you should show you're educated. I don't --- I don't want them, like the 'we was...' and 'they was...' and improper grammar like 'mines,'" (lines 33 (lines 72-74). Amy situated herself in opposition to her students by providing the types of speech acts she would not use even though she hears her students use them and corrects them for it. In using the same examples with different referents, Amy established herself as the model for how students should use and organize their words.

Amy's students used linguistically described rules of Black American English (BAE) or Black Vernacular English (BVE) (Stubbs, 2002; Smitherman, 1977 & Labov, 1972). As these and other linguists have determined, BAE/BVE is a rule-based set of grammatical structures governing the speech of many African Americans. In the examples we discussed during Interview 2, Amy's students employed common rules of the form *be*, which represent West-African structural derivatives for sentence construction (Smitherman, 1977). Amy's statement about enforcing professionalism through "correct grammar," demonstrated a static perspective on language and as Devereaux (2015), Smitherman (1977), and Labov (1972) have pointed out, words fit into culture in symbolic and systematic ways, which cannot be decoded or separated from the context in which they operate. Amy appeared only able to connect her students'

language use to how she perceived language should be used in school. To better understand the possible perceptions about whether she thought about her students' language use outside of school, I asked her if she thought her students registered a difference between their home and school language. My rationale for doing was to gain insight as to whether Amy connected her correctionist framework to her students' self-image. Her response was, "No. Not yet. They haven't been held to that accountability yet," (interview 2). In her mind, students should be forced to use school-sanctioned English variations, and seemed to believe if they were held accountable to doing so, they would. I did not probe to gain insight into the types of accountability measures Amy thought would be useful. Amy's SAE only policy in her classroom had the effect of marginalizing her students' language, culture, and their race. Her actions also demonstrated how the use of power determines the enactment of culture and in the case of her African American students, the race of her students. As a White teacher enforcing SAE and correcting BAE/AAVE, Amy's actions furthered dominant culture ideologies grounded in deficit frameworks (Ford, et al., 2002; Foster 1985; Hilliard, 1985) about African American learners.

While I did not probe Amy to determine how she thought students should be held accountable for their language, I probed to see if she associated language with identity as advanced in my theoretical framework and as the works of Nieto (2010), Delpit (1995/2002), Fought (2006), Gee (2005), Smitherman (1977), and Labov (1972) have supported. To my direct question of do you think language is part of identity, Amy responded:

I mean it could be. I mean it's where they're from, if they have a passion to represent where they're from. I mean you hear so many horror stories with these kids with their home life or if they're [mentioned a district program] or living in a hotel room, you think they would want to disassociate with that...but I mean there could be a sense of pride or family, (interview 2).

Through this response, it is clear Amy connected language to identity. She also appeared to believe students' circumstances should be a conduit for them to use a form of language, which for her meant standard Euro-centric rules for grammar, as a reason to move away from their environments to create a new identity. Furthermore, she went on to explain it would be nearly impossible for her to understand her students' thoughts about her speech corrections. Being able to understand her students' perspectives on the association of language and their identity in relationship to her need to correct them, would require background knowledge about all of her students. Amy made it clear she did not possess knowledge of her students' thinking and due to the number of students she taught, she would be unable to obtain such information. Amy's position on language use stood in stark contrast to the other participants who held more flexible positions on how students should use their language in the classroom. Her position on students' language and identity was particularly interesting in contrast to Erin's who framed the connection between language and identity against the backdrop of history Blacks in the US. Amy was the only participant to speak about holding students accountable for not using standard Euro-centric forms of English. She was also the only participant who used value-laden suggestions about her students' language variations. Holding students to strict rules of grammar was a source of power Amy overtly enacted over her students.

Her message was clear and unequivocal; students' home or social language variations were not welcomed in her class. In not welcoming their language, Amy made the decision not to welcome their culture, which was inseparably part of their identities as African American. Given the power to choose a stance on language in her classroom, Amy's absolutist perspective about English was the deciding factor in how she made instructional decisions about language and culture in her classroom.

Although Amy adopted a definitive stance on racialized language in her classroom, other participants were more flexible. For example, unfamiliarity with cultural language proved disconcerting for Beth. Analysis of Beth's response to students' use of racially-structured language pointed to the significance of power as critical to instructional decision-making and establishing the classroom as cultural exchange site. During our second interview, Beth shared a learning task, which brought her students' BAE expressions out of their personal interactions and into the academic environment. Beth disclosed her students rap all the time, and while she had become accustomed to it, it was her students' jōn-ning, which caused consternation. "Jōn-ning," is akin to what Smitherman (1977) defined as signifyin' or playing the dozens and Labov (1972) defined as ritual insult. Signifyin' can be understood generally as the creative use of highly styled figurative language to engage in word play often involving insults. The practice is widely associated with BAE. Students were given creative license to demonstrate content knowledge of an in-class text and one group wove rap skills with jōn-ning to present their understanding of characters.

Watching her students insult one another as part of jōn-ning was disconcerting for Beth. She lacked knowledge and experience with it and interpreted her students' behavior

as mean spirited and inappropriate for school. In describing her thinking about jōn-ning, Beth made the following statement,

Um...okay...I've been told by other teachers that it's like a cultural thing, but I had not experienced it before. But jōn-ning --- okay it's ...people tell me and I've heard it's just I don't understand how you can just sit and go back and forth and...I mean I could understand...but not in class please.

She also made a point of saying the practice was not fun to her; which signaled a cultural mismatch. As the instructional leader in the room, Beth could have chosen to end the practice; however, her responses to her students playing the dozens demonstrated a willingness to learn and make space. First, she expressed admiration for her AP students who jōn, because they know how far to go and with whom to signify. Second, she relayed allowing the practice up to the point where it may interfere with classroom goals and objectives. Racialized language as characterized by jōn-ning was misunderstood due to cultural inexperience. However, the findings as shown in the response demonstrated the lack of cultural knowledge did not result in cultural dismissal or language devaluing. Beth did not correct students' language or signal signifying was wrong. In fact, she expressed concern her students might interpret her stopping of the practice as her trying take them out of their identity. Such was not the concern with Amy who showed only the need to get students to adopt the official language of school.

Analysis of the data proved Beth and Amy represented contrasting positions on racialized language in the classroom. Both had power as the instructional leaders and both chose to use their power to affirm in one instance and devalue in another. The forms of *be* used by Amy's students were as much a part of BAE as jōn-ning was for Beth's

students. Each participant held different perspectives on the racialized language and their use of power coupled with their beliefs determined whether or if their students' racialized language had space in the classroom.

**Enacting a cultural ideology.** Language and culture are ever-present and as discussed in the previous section, participants maintained different ideologies about language and culture in their classrooms. In analyzing data across participants, I noticed stark differences between Amy and the other participants regarding the role of school and students' cultural development. Data demonstrated how Amy used her power to advance a perspective of school or at least teachers as models for what students should aspire to want or be later in life. None of the other participants spoke of school in the same way. With the exception of the genderized space of Beth, Erin, and Marie's site, participants viewed school culture as equally valuable to their students' individual culture. Regarding Amy, data showed overt and covert power enactment regarding her positions about school culture and her students' culture. Her overt advancement of power was seen in the consequence and accountability standpoint enacted through the rules in her class. Covert power was evidenced through her stated beliefs about the varying cultures of her students relative to the school culture. Amy held the position a book could be judged by its cover. In an extended response about culture, language and school, Amy made the following statement:

You can tell just by looking that they have parents who are involved. They probably have both parents at home. They have parents who are also working good paying jobs, you know middle class jobs and they have that higher economy of language. They have parents who are reading to them. Their parents are

probably reading the paper to them. You know IEP's [students with] you know who are reading at a beginning reading level --- like how are you even in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade right now. Um...you know then you find out that they're living with a grandmother...there's also 6 other kids in the house. I mean it's night and day in [references her classes]. And I think that plays a huge part in the language, (interview 2).

The intimation in this statement is students in her advanced class lived in different cultural spaces than her other students. She infused the dynamic of economics, which no other participant had done, and in so doing advanced a deterministic perspective about her students, which harkened to Ford, et al.'s (2002) notions of deficit thinking.

Although Amy had previous experiences in Title I schools while teaching in a different state, the level of poverty in her current differed greatly from her previous site, and she admitted to struggling culturally in her first years in the district where she currently teaches. She shared an incident where students needed materials to complete a project she had assigned and admitted to not fully understanding why her students were unable to get the funds needed to purchase the required materials. For Amy, given her personal schooling experiences and upbringing, it was unfathomable students could not simply get money from their parents to get school supplies. In sharing this story, Amy made the following admission, "My mindset has to change a little and like I said after 4 years of living here I'm just starting to get the swing of that, (interview 2). While there was an admittance of insensitivity and a need for change, the tone of Amy's response demonstrated recognition without the attending action. Findings suggested Amy was entrenched in the belief school required a set language and behaviors, with set rules, and

students were expected to follow those rules. Unlike the other participants, cultural exchange was about students adopting school culture, not she and her students exchanging their individual cultured selves to advance a new co-constructed culture akin to Carrithers' (1992) notion of sociality.

Additionally, data illuminated Amy's position where the culture of school and teachers were models students should emulate. This position was not part of other participants' ideologies of power, culture, language, and schooling. She connected the idea of power to the power of economics and students striving to achieve what they have seen at school as advanced through their teachers. I asked Amy how she understood the connection between language and culture in relation to student achievement. Having the advanced learners provided a unique perspective on this question because at the time of this study, her class was on track to being one hundred percent proficient and college/career ready by the end of the school year. It was against the backdrop of the impending state assessment around which Amy framed her response:

When we're thinking about culture and language when it comes to them it's like building on what they've already seen knowing that they want something better but that they still wanna be---they want what they see as accomplishing and they might want something better than that. I just feel like home just has...and whatever happens outside of school. I don't even think I can define it as home. I think whatever happens outside of this school plays such---it's such a hidden figure in what we're trying to accomplish here. It's definitely making me think about other aspects of language and culture and the roles all of these things have -- or play within one student (interview 2).

The “them” in this response referred to Amy’s advanced English students. She was the only participant who raised an explicit connection between the language and culture of students’ lived experiences outside school in relationship to school objectives.

In targeting her response to her advanced students, Amy seemed to be suggesting a concomitant connection between school and her advanced students, which did not exist for her on-grade level students. Amy raised the school as a factor in cultural exchange and then added the role of teacher as a model in the following words, “I think when you’re thinking about those 3 things as a teacher it’s just – you’re modeling what they should want later on in life. I mean you’re showing them the dynamic that you set forth--- here’s what you can achieve,” (interview 2). Those three things were language, culture, and power. The role of the teacher, according to Amy, was to provide a pathway for students to see possibilities for their lives. For her, like the other participants, language and culture were connected; however, the students’ language and culture were not equal to hers or the school’s and needed to remain on the periphery. As the teacher, her power rested in being able to show students what type of language they should use to advance a particular brand of cultural expression on their way to a successful life. The only link to ELA content was the impending state assessment. Language and culture were not factors in her planning as they were for other participants. With so little involvement in the curriculum, Amy did not have the same level of understanding about the possible connections between language and culture for shaping learning as the other participants; therefore, those constructs were not factors in her decision-making processes for her HA-AA students. Her power was in enforcing official school culture onto students.

Amy's explanation about the teacher's role in the connections between language and culture opened an opportunity to revisit our earlier conversation about her planning. Even though Amy rarely had a hand in planning student learning, she acknowledged as a teacher, power was evident and explained her thinking thusly:

It's that circle of life right. Language – act professional; set the tone, reap the positive benefit and I think my job as the facilitator at exhibiting this power of domain that they see how that is effective right. My language up here if I have any remotely typed wrong I'm going to fix it. This represents me and you know when I'm saying professionalism you know it's just like I wanna' be relaxed with you I wanna show this can be fun. I wanna' show you that we can get through it but it's still a job and this is still a reflection of who you are so be proud of it.

(interview 2).

Amy's connection to her role and instructional planning regarding language was image directed. Academics mattered as she demonstrated pride in her advanced class being on track to be one-hundred percent proficient; however, she framed success along the lines of students taking on school as the pathway towards their success. For the other participants, language and culture became modes for academic learning and advancement. For Amy, language and culture were about her being an example through her own use of language in lessons she taught. As outlined in the data and my analysis, I determined Amy's goal was to ensure students behaved in accordance with official culture of school because she believed doing so would ensure her students' academic and life success.

## **Racialized Teaching**

In learning about the role of race in students' language expression, findings from the data highlighted the role of race in interactions between participants and their students. Data also illuminated how African American students raised race within the classroom in ways which differed from how they raised race through language. In this section, I present findings related to how students raised, how participants raised race, and the significance of power in how race lived in the classroom.

**African Americans participants raising race with African American students.** For the African American participants and their students, race was a common “thing,” affording a level of unspoken understanding. For example, there was no separation among race, language, and culture for Dawn and Erin. Each described the inextricability of race in their classrooms. As African American teachers of African American students, they were statistical anomalies considering the racial disproportionality of African American students in advanced courses (Theokas & Saaris, 2013), the low numbers of African American teachers in the classroom, and near absence of African American teachers teaching HA-AA students in advanced classrooms. First, in being Black teachers, second on teaching Black students, and third teachers of high-achieving Black students. The intersectionalities of Dawn's and Erin's experiences as educators in this space is interesting enough to warrant its own body of research. Suffice it to say, they recognized the uniqueness of what they do and were intentional in their actions. Dawn and Erin made their positions on race in the classroom plain. They and most of their students were Black all day every day in their classrooms and there was a cultural understanding between them which required no explanation. The racial

understanding between Dawn, Erin, and their students operated in much the same ways when teachers and their students share dominant culture identities. As such, there was a naturally occurring cultural and linguistic dynamic in their rooms. Erin's was more closely connected to her students' racially and culturally because of her insider position as a community member. She employed the language of her community with ease because she speaks it as part of the fiber of who she is. She remarked specifically:

I think it's some of it's natural because we're --- I'm from the place where I'm teaching so it's --- we're family. It's like family who I'm talking to and like we have --- their certain language that is particular to [this place] that I have access to and I definitely leverage that and take advantage of it in my classroom, (interview 2).

Cultural dominance was not a factor nor was there a need to develop racial understanding because of the shared racial space.

In addition to having the benefit of culturally- and racially-based language knowledge, Erin chose texts, when she could, to bring race front and center in her classroom. *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison is not on the novel list for her students; however, Erin shared her plans to once again teach a unit based on the topic of being invisible or not seen after completing state testing. The unit was something Erin taught as a first-year teacher and she wanted to try it again because she had made changes. She also shared she was working on a unit focused on the topic of beauty to address the needs of her female students. As a Black woman, Erin explained the importance of wanting her girls to recognize themselves as beautiful and she wanted to help them find ways to challenge the idea of beauty in the media. These choices were based on her need to

advance a standpoint from the position of the marginalized (Au, 2012). While her curriculum included a text by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Erin felt the need to extend the curriculum and raise race more directly through additional texts focused on what Erin explained were modern issues her students spoke of in her classroom.

Similarly, for Dawn, whose classroom was more racially and ethnically diverse, her deliberate textual choices brought the dynamic of race in society to the forefront of her class through literature. Her AP students read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson as well as *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. They read *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* by Jeff Hobbs and *Losing My Cool* by Thomas Chatterton Williams along with *Black Like Me* by John Howard coupled with *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. While these texts are not on the College Board Advanced Placement (2014) suggested author or novel list, Dawn felt she was well within the scope of meeting AP lit reading demands. In sharing her position on texts and student reactions, she said her African American students felt seen and present in the class and were more confident with their work without having to be the model for and answer to all things Black. There is no way for a teacher to divorce him or herself from who they are when they walk into the classroom. Being Black all day is who they are and the same holds true for their students. Both made power-driven decisions to let the academic space reflect the totality of who they and their students were. Culture encompassed race simply because teacher and students were African American. In being of the same race, culture took on a more nuanced role in the classroom.

#### **White participants raising race through interactions with Black students.**

Making race visible between White teachers and their Black students has been the subject

of a wide body of research. In this study, the White participants and their Black students raised race differently from how the Black students and the Black participants raised it. As White teachers, Amy, Beth, and Marie acknowledged the messiness of their positions as White teachers of predominantly Black students. Amy acknowledged the messiness of her position on language use relative to her students' race; however, she linked her position to what she believed were real-world situations her students would face. She felt it was her duty to give her students skills to traverse the world beyond school, which included the use of certain language variations her students did not naturally possess or use. Because Amy remained adamant about how students should speak in her classroom, I asked whether her students correlated intellect with being part of a specific racial group:

I have thought about that and you know especially when I'm saying things like speak with proper grammar because of that sense of self---that sense of identity and their home culture and taking them out of that and especially as a white teacher. I fear that it's just I'm basically saying speak like me but they're looking at a white teacher. And I do wonder about that, but when you're in the work force...when you're sitting in a job interview...when you're applying for your college applications. Is there a white or black there that we're going to be seen.

That's a huge---huge question...and I don't know...

Amy's response was complex. She appeared to acknowledge possible implications related to being a White teacher forcing Black students to use "proper grammar." There also seemed to be a realization of her demands as problematic given the optics of her being White and her students being primarily African American. Although there was

seeming acknowledgement, Amy reverted to her position of school as a model to justify her language demands.

As per her ideology about the role of school in preparing students for their future, it was reasonable for Amy to want her students prepared for the world beyond school. Having them adopt the language of power (Delpit, 2002; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1921; Giroux, 1984; Nieto, 2010) was her way of ensuring her students were prepared. However, her notion that colleges and businesses do not notice race defied the tenets of critical race theory as advanced by Stefancic and Delgado (2012) put forth in my theoretical framework. Her ideas correct speech is all colleges and businesses notice were simplistic and demonstrated dominant culture ideology from which her African American students will not benefit. In thinking about language and culture from the standpoint of correction, appropriateness, and societal acceptability, Amy advanced a dominant cultural framework not present in data from other participants.

As with Dawn and Erin, literature was an avenue for making race visible in Amy's class. *To Kill A Mockingbird* was a required reading for her eighth graders and Amy said she made it clear to her students that she would not use the racial epithet in the book. She also made it clear she was not okay with her students using the word either. While her advanced students did not raise an objection, Amy said her on-grade level students pushed back giving her permission to use the word because it was in the book. She shared the following scenario:

If anything, I think I would have heard something about that while we reading TKM [To Kill A Mockingbird]. I was very explicit I wouldn't---even though the N-word is in the book I'm not okay with saying that, I'm not okay with them

saying that because of the meaning behind the word---not that block because that block is just like --- oh, okay and they'll agree with whatever I say – okay we're not going to say it---okay. But my [other] block was like but you can say it--- we're okay if you say it, but I was like---but I'm not okay if you say it---why would I want to say it? And we got into a little bit of a dialogue about it, but other than that---no and I was really surprised especially given how opinionated these kids are here that no one continued that conversation further. Um...I felt like I got more backlash---well not backlash in a bad way about that word there was more of a dialogue about it. You know in terms of our differences if they didn't say it then, I certainly didn't think I'd hear it in other places throughout the year.

They've never really brought it up. I've never really felt like there was so much of a racial divide. Like I really don't see it.

Here Amy showed a difference between her classes. The advanced class complied and accepted her position and her other class chose to exercise a bit of power to engage in dialogue about the N-word. In analyzing the data, I intuited that race was most likely part of the conversation surrounding the meaning behind the N-word from Amy's side. I also surmised students held a different position on the use of the word; however, our discussion about race ended with Amy's responses about using the N-word relative to the book. With the limited degree of curricular decision making, Amy only went so far with making racial and cultural connections with her students as texts would allow. Culture was based on her personal understandings and beliefs about school being the place for students to be cultured. Students were to learn and adopt the culture of the school and

their race was non-factor. As Amy specifically stated, she did not see it; and the “it” was race.

Was she color-blind? Based on analysis of Amy’s interview transcripts and field notes, I would suggest Amy recognized her students were African American. She knew they spoke using BAE/AAVE variations of English and did not allow it. She recognized definitive cultural differences between herself and her students; however, she reported not seeing a racial divide. The divide between her and her students was culturally constructed based on economics and her upbringing relative to her perceptions about her students’ upbringing. Race appeared tangential. Yet in not allowing her students’ language variations, she engaged in race-shelving behaviors tantamount to devaluing her students’ race.

The closest participant to Amy’s perceptions on race and culture in the classroom was Beth. Her discomfort seemed also based on culture more so than race; however, Beth did not advance a notion of school as the cultural model for students to follow. That may be due to the genderized nature of her environment and thinking about her female students subscribing to the patriarchal ideals pushed by her building leader. Being in an environment where gender inequality was part of the leadership made her school cultural model something she probably did not want her students to follow. The issue for Beth was cultural misunderstanding. Although she hailed from the same state as her students, regionality created cultural differences, which showed up in the classroom. Beth also had a notion for how language should be exchanged, which was why “jōn-ning”/signifyin’ (Smitherman, 1977) was such a difficult concept for her to grasp. The power to make race visible existed in her willingness to allow “jōn-ning” up to a point because as

Smitherman (1977) pointed out the practice of signifyin' or what Labov (1972) termed ritualized insults, is shrouded in Blackness; therefore, when students engaged in that practice, the class became a racialized space. It was not something Beth understood necessarily, nor was it something she could specifically plan for or teach; it was merely present in the Blackness of her students. Beth did not raise race specifically; her students did it for her. She merely gave space for its existence without negative labeling.

Marie co-constructed a racialized teaching space. She was unapologetically White and allowed her students to be unapologetically Black. Marie and her students brought race to the fore of her class by acknowledging their differences and what it meant to be live in the town where she taught. She recalled the following conversation with students, “the other day I said that I liked to hang out in cemeteries and [a student] said, “That’s a white person thing (interview 2). While she laughed about the student’s response, Marie remarked it was one of the ways her students brought up their racial differences. Marie then shared an instance where she racialized the space by sharing the realities of her being in the sun, “I don’t know if you know this but I’m very white um...like especially if we’re talking about being outside. I’ll be like well, I can’t be outside because I’m actually a lobster...” (interview 2). The statement was something she and her students found humorous. It was also something around which racial mutuality was built. Racializing the space in this way occurred regularly and as Marie pointed out, race was something her students noticed and were not ashamed to broach. In fact, she saw it as their source of acknowledging more global issues of inequalities and using the classroom as a space to air their thinking.

Instructionally, race entered the teaching via lessons on Dr. King's Letter From A Birmingham Jail. What was most surprising to Marie during this teaching segment was her students' inability to connect time frames. She said her students seemed unwilling to bring the injustices described in Dr. King's letter forward into their lives. She even recalled having to remind a student of his recent run in with a local police officer to get him to connect the injustices across time. For Marie's students, it was easier to deal with the injustices at the school between themselves and their teachers than it was for them to see them as a wholesale issue of society. In centralizing race instructionally and socially within her class, Marie, in Interview 2, said she admired the bluntness of her students and their willingness to bring their ideas front and center in the class. The intersectionality between race and culture took instructional center stage with the introduction of poetry from the works of Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Tupac Shakur. Marie's students challenged the authenticity of her author choice and wanted to know if she chose the texts because they were Black. In response to the challenge, Marie recalled explaining she felt it was necessary to widen their reading and incorporate the voices of authors and texts they are least likely to encounter. Much like Dawn, she adopted a stance her students needed access to the inaccessible. Racializing her space meant opening doors, windows, and looking in the mirror to make herself vulnerable to her students. Marie co-created a racialized, cultured space with herself as openly part of it. Instead of letting her students' Blackness remain on the fringe of culture, Marie allowed her students to raise race as she raised race.

## **Summary**

In this section, I addressed the complexity of language, culture, racial understanding and power in the classroom. Findings from across the data highlighted the significant role of power in participants advancing their beliefs about language, culture, and race in the classroom. From the findings, it was clear, language and culture are inevitable intertwined elements in every classroom. Participants' thinking around language, culture, and their understanding of race manifested in their instructional decision-making in direct measure to how they used power to enact their ideologies.

Findings further suggested African American participants used literature to raise critical issues regarding race with their students. White participants raised race implicitly and explicitly. For Amy, a White participant, race was implicitly devalued because her students used language variations, which were characteristically African American and were not allowed in the classroom. With Beth, another White participant, raised race implicitly in allowing her students to use characteristic BAE/AAVE language as part of their peer interactions and in their academic demonstrations. Marie, the third White participant raised race explicitly through deliberate text choices and by placing herself in the middle of racial conversations. In raising race explicitly, the data showed how a White participant made racial discussion a low-threat prospect.

## **Conclusion**

Findings presented in this chapter provide supporting evidence for language, culture, and power being intersecting constructs, which influence all aspects of the instructional-decision making process. Additionally, findings also provide evidence supporting the notion that teachers' epistemological frameworks around language,

culture, and power influence how these constructs influence the instructional decision-making process for their HA-AA students in an advanced English classroom. All participants understood the natural variance of spoken language. It was their perspective on the variance and how they used their power, which determined how language influenced their instructional decision-making. Furthermore, all participants understood language changes according to situation and context. For Beth, Dawn, Erin, and Marie who valued language variations, they made space for free expression of students' spoken language. These four participants allowed themselves opportunities to learn from students' language variations and their students learned about language from them. For Amy who held a static perspective on how language should be used in school, students' language variations were not welcomed in the classroom. Instead, when student used their out-of-school language, they were corrected. This participant's viewpoint was English has specific rules and students should be held accountable for applying their rules "correctly."

**Culture for planning, instructional delivery, literacy development, and achievement.**

Separating culture from language proved challenging and these constructs clearly influenced the participants' instructional decision-making. Gaining insight into participants' conceptual thinking about the relationship between culture and language provided support for a key finding relative to issues related to culture influencing instructional decision-making. Participants defined culture broadly focusing on group norms, behaviors, language, and customs. Race was a component of culture; however, all participants made it a factor of culture rather than the core factor of culture. The data

demonstrated classrooms are cultural exchange sites. As members of the classroom interacted, they co-mingled their individual cultures and created new communities of practice (1998). Again, power was the mechanism for how culture shaped CoP and instructional decision-making. Amy's conceptual framework focused on school as the model students should follow and used power to enact a correctionist model (Devereaux, 2015) regarding language use, which connected to the culture of compliance and accountability forged in her class.

Beth, Dawn, Erin, and Marie held broad perspectives about culture and sought to affirm students' culture. Affirming students' culture took the shape of allowing students' colloquial and casual language variations. Even though Beth and Marie did not fully understand or at times had limited experience with their students' culture, they affirmed students' culture. As Dawn explained, she had no desire to change children's culture. By making space for students' language, these participants also made space for students' culture and race. Their ideologies about culture impacted their instructional decisions and their power afforded them the ability to live within their instructional beliefs regarding texts and tasks. Acting on cultural ideologies occurred in accordance with participants' instructional autonomy. Instructional autonomy ranged from completely unfettered to highly constrained. For Dawn who had no constraints, cultural ideology involved exposing her students to a wide range of multi-culturally authored texts. For Beth, Erin, and Marie, cultural enactment manifested as they structured lessons around their available resources, which allowed them to focus on broad social issues. Participants used instructional power to shape their instructional decisions regarding how their classrooms would be shaped as a cultured and racialized space.

Culture was a factor in shaping lessons and making instructional decisions evidenced in how participants structured learning. Across the data generated in the interviews, I noticed intentionality around learning about students beyond their race as a means of developing engaging learning opportunities. For example, Erin adopted a principle of understanding the learning culture of her students to create lessons designed to maximize their individual learning culture. In second and third interviews, Erin explained her goal was to let her students teach her how to teach them through her learning tasks. I learned through the data, four of the participants used texts to connect to students and expose them to a wide range of cultures as well as engage them in analysis of social issues. For Dawn, using diverse texts in the classroom was the primary tool for expanding students' perspectives on culture. For Erin, a constraining curriculum created an opportunity to use students' learning culture as a mechanism to craft lessons suited to better meet her students' needs. In sites where participants had curricular flexibility, culture was evidenced in text choices, task development, and student interactions. All participants demonstrated an understanding of the relationship between language and culture. They all acted upon their beliefs and understanding about the connections between language and culture as evidenced in the way they allowed students to articulate their culture and race through language. Participants' conceptual framework about power was the defining element determining in the instructional choices they made.

**Considering power.** While all participants spoke freely about their epistemologies around language and culture, power proved a difficult concept for them to discuss. Data about participants' conceptual frameworks on power demonstrated the significance of this construct as the critical component shaping the influence of language

and culture on instructional decision-making. In considering power, every participant held negative frames associating power most closely with behavior control and management. Despite participants primarily shying away from owning power, it was clear through the data power was the vein through which the influence of language and culture moved. As Nyberg (1981) and Burbules (1986) posited, power is ever-present in all relationships, which was evident in participants' instructional decision-making.

Four of five participants recognized the varying nature of power and advanced a shared power sharing principle in their classrooms. For example, in each of the three interviews, Erin explained her use of power was dependent upon the personalities of her classes. Amy was the one participant who held a static notion of power choosing to center her ideas around accountability and control. Across all the data and all participants, power was the smog in the air (Tatum, 1997) linking the influence of language and culture to participants' epistemological frameworks around language and culture.

Answers to the research questions are as intersectional as the constructs themselves. Data demonstrated language is inextricably linked to culture, race, and identity, making it a central element of the learning environment. Data indexed the ways in which each participant advanced their ideologies of language and culture by using their instructional power for their high-achieving African American students in advanced English classrooms. In chapter 5, I discuss the key implications of understanding the importance of how language, culture, and power influence teachers' work with HA-AA students in an advanced English classroom.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This study offers a pathway towards inquiry around a broader narrative concerning African American learners, which has remained entrenched in a pathology around opposition to high achievement, academic struggle, and economic poverty (Milner 2002/2007; Ogbu & Fordham, 1985; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). In this chapter, I discuss my findings to highlight the implications of the ways: a) language, culture, and power are intersectional and influence every aspect of instructional decision-making; b) epistemologies around power determine how language and culture influence instructional decision-making; c) classrooms are racial and cultural exchange sites; and d) instructional decision-making related to HA-AA students in an advanced ELA classroom is framed in accordance to course type, curricular autonomy, and participants' belief systems and use of instructional power.

The ordering of these findings is not meant to suggest a linear process. Rather I determined the findings relationally from the data to address the research questions. There are no easy answers to the research questions of this study; however, the data sources provided meaningful insight into the participants' thinking about language, culture, and power as factors in their instructional decision-making for their high-achieving African American students. Data from this project demonstrate the roles teachers' beliefs about language and culture play in their instructional planning. Moreover, the data highlight the importance of developing an awareness of the implications of how teachers use their power when working with high-achieving African

American students in the secondary English classroom. In the following sections, I present the findings from this study and discuss their implications for teaching and teacher education.

### **The Intersectionality of Language, Culture, and Power**

In this section, I discuss the implications of the intersectionality of language, culture, and power. The core finding of this study is language, culture, and power are intersectional and influence every aspect of instructional decision-making. Each research question was framed around various aspects of teacher understanding regarding how language, culture, and power could be influencing factors on instructional planning and decision making. These questions were crafted to help me develop insight into how participants connected these constructs as influencers on their instructional planning and decision making with high achieving African American students to transcend the current deficit paradigm used to characterize Black students in the classroom. Analysis of participants' responses regarding their ideologies on language, culture, and power, indexed the unmistakable intersectionality of these constructs. This intersectionality was evidenced in participants' individual conceptual frameworks about each construct and how each participant viewed the constructs as elements in their classrooms. Each component manifested separately and collectively as participants conveyed their instructional decision-making processes through the lenses of language, culture, and power. Getting a sense of how participants understood culture hinged on their thinking around language. In the next section, I discuss and present the implications of participants' perspectives on language, how they and their students should use language

in the classroom, and the significance of language as an influencing factor in instructional decision-making with HA-AA students.

**Teachers' and students' use of language in the classroom.** Findings from the data indicated participants held both fixed and fluid notions of how they and their students should use language in the classroom. Linguists Gee (2005), Labov (1972), Smitherman (1977), among others have posited language is situationally driven within context. Contextually, participants believed the level of the classroom was reason enough to expect students to possess higher vocabularies and to expect them to employ ELA academic language in both speech and in writing. Across the data, although speech could vary for the most part, in situations where students were required to demonstrate ELA knowledge in writing, participants were fixed in their expectations for students to use what was deemed as professional language. Professional language was most associated with formal register (Gee, 2005 & Labov, 1972) or the use of ELA domain-specific language. As participants shared their concepts of language for written expression, it became clear many of them connected academic language to Standard American English (SAE) or official school language (Apple, 2005). The notion of students using official school language in writing demonstrated an understanding that written language differs from spoken language. Just as participants held students to a fixed idea for written language, their own written language remained fixed in their lesson plans and tasks provided to students. Across the data, participants' lesson plans and student-provided tasks were written in SAE with ELA domain-specific language. In using formal language for written plans and tasks, participants' actions indexed the notion that situation and context determine how type of language.

Data analysis further illuminated how language shaped verbal communication between participants and students without explicit planning. The lack of specific planning for how language was to be used verbally in the classroom should not be taken as evidence for language not being instructionally influential. On the contrary, language influenced in-time instructional decision making because participants had to use language flexibly to aid content knowledge building. Participants also used language flexibly in regular student interactions. The implication of unplanned language style and form use speaks to the fluidity and natural variance of language (Devereaux, 2015 & Gee, 2005). Language variation was based on in-the-moment events, which required mental acuity, instructional flexibility, knowledge of students, and knowledge of content to employ the variation necessary to aid in meaning making and relationship building. The ability to be linguistically fluid is significant on two important levels. First, language and culture co-reify, which means they are conjoined. Verbal language variation in the classroom evidenced the idea of the intersectionality of language and culture. Such variety also supports linguists' ideas that while SAE is the dominant form of language in the US, there is no absolute form of language SAE (Devereaux, 2015; Gee, 2005; Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977; Stubbs, 2002; Wolfram & Shilling-Estes, 2006); all language varies.

Second, linguistic flexibility suggests a belief system about language. As highlighted in the findings of Chapter 4, (see page 98) Amy held a fixed perspective on written and verbal language use in the classroom. As students were mandated to use SAE, they learned in-school language must adhere to societally-sanctioned ways of speaking. When students ventured beyond the shores of SAE, they were subjected to a correctionist framework (Devereaux, 2015) whereby their perceived mistakes were corrected. As

other participants held flexible expectations for theirs and their students' language use in the classroom, they demonstrated an understanding of the inexorable links among language, identity, and culture. They also demonstrated an ability to recognize students should not be divorced from themselves through acts of linguistic colonization. Such a realization is significant to the student population in this study. The history of language acquisition and use for African Americans in the US is wrought with the baggage of the nation's history. This history requires keen understanding of the implications in forcing students to use SAE, which has been traditionally associated with White speech forms.

As participants matched their general ideology about language and how it should be used in the classroom, data indexed how enacted power influences the way beliefs about language are lived in the classroom with important implications. First and foremost, for those participants who understood there is no definitively correct way to speak English (Stubbs, 2002; Hilliard, 2002; Fought, 2006; Devereaux, 2015), they demonstrated the significance of students using language to both identify with and co-construct culture. Furthermore, these participants demonstrated an implicit understanding of adolescent development. As advanced throughout this study, language and culture co-constitute and co-reify. When adolescents use language in a variety of ways, they do so as mechanisms for self-expression, identity development, and as markers for group membership (Gee, 2005; Moje, 2002; Phelps, 2005; Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001). As African Americans, the students' use of colloquialisms and other forms of casual speech reified their race and culture. Therefore, as participants allowed their students to "let their [linguistic] freak vibe fly" (Marie, interview 2), they validated their students' racialized language and culture. Additionally, as participants

used language formally and informally, they modeled the natural variance of language and provided their students with a window into how to use language judiciously according to context and situations. In this way, participants exemplified the overarching theme of language varying according to purpose, situation, and context.

Conversely, for Amy who understood language varied, but chose to enforce a fixed model for language use in the classroom, students learned to dissociate their out-of-school language use from their in-school language use. As Amy provided specific examples of unacceptable forms of language, she reinforced deficit ideologies about AAVE, which have become widely associated with White teachers of African American students (Delpit, 2002; Ford et al., 2002; Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Contrary to the students in classes where participants held fluid ideologies about language, students in Amy's class learned language needed to be compartmentalized. The separation of a school identity and a personal identity as advanced through the curtailing of language depicted an insensitivity to students' race and culture. As Nieto (2010) stated, "language is incredibly powerful and diverse; it identifies and humanizes, and gives cultures, ideas, and thoughts the capacity to speak," (p. 76). The constrained use of language in this classroom embodied the power of language; however, it advanced a singular perspective rather than a diversity of language and culture. In both instances, ideologies about language influenced instructional decision-making through participants' use of power. Teachers and those who care about teaching and learning need to understand the importance of how language and culture influence instructional decision making.

Students arrive at school with a multiplicity of cultures and languages. Therefore, it is imperative pre-service and in-service teachers view language and cultural difference as difference instead of deficit. At the teacher education level, moving new English teachers toward affirming attitudes about students' language and cultural differences requires an analysis of curriculum to determine what prospective teachers are learning about American English. Such learning should include a historical review of American English as a variation of British English crafted to forge an American identity (Devereaux, 2015). Seeing American English as its own variation has the benefit of disrupting misconceptions about how and why SAE came to be. Building knowledge about the origins of SAE would equip pre-service English teachers with a conceptual understanding about SAE as a cultural tool and identity marker, further anchoring the need for English teachers to understand students' variations of language and English as an implicative of their culture. Shaping English education curriculum around a conceptual framework for understanding the construction of American English would develop a sensibility toward the natural variations, which occur in all forms of English. Such a sensibility could serve to deepen pre-service teachers' understanding about the intersectionality of language and culture.

**Language for cultural learning and respect.** Throughout this study, participants reported they and their students used language for academic and interpersonal interactions. Instructional decisions regarding language were described as responsive and flexible with many participants moving dexterously among formal, informal, and colloquial registers. Participants shared their students also moved dexterously between a variety of linguistic registers for communicative purposes. For

example, Beth stated all her students know the difference between writing for school and talking at school, explicitly sharing, “there’s the way they talk...there’s the way write for AP practice,” (Beth, interview 2). Findings across most field notes evidenced the language dexterity of participants and their students, which illuminated an environment of cultural learning and respect occurred when participants and students used language flexibly without judgment. Additionally, participants’ responses to students’ use of language, as captured in field notes, showed curiosity about unfamiliar language and/or vocabulary opened avenues for cultural dialogue. Even when participants explained having limited knowledge and familiarity with their students’ colloquial forms of language, simply allowing students space to use language as they saw fit provided opportunities for cultural learning. For instance, the use of *signifyin’* (Labov, 1972 & Smitherman, 1977) was unfamiliar to Beth; however, she reported allowing students space to engage in this racial-cultural practice and even included remnants of it in a classroom project. While Beth had no former experience with and on some level, disagreed with the practice, appreciating it as a component of students’ racial-cultural makeup provided the opportunity for students to be their authentic selves within the school. There was no need for students to choose between their race and culture or school.

As participants discussed their students use of language to learn about their students’, many also shared using their personal language to foster mutual cultural knowledge building. In our second interview, Marie spoke openly about responding to her students’ challenge about her language use, which differed greatly from theirs. Marie explained informing her students that her personal use of language, albeit different from

theirs, was part of cultural identity, which she would not change because doing so would mean she changed her identity and culture. When participants described the use of unfamiliar language as an element of their identity, students gained insight into the cultural makeup of the participants. As both groups used vocabulary and language forms inherent to their racial-cultural and cultural identities, mutual respect for language as identity and group identifier resulted. For African American students, appreciation for their use for language is essential to them finding equal space within the classroom (Gay, 2010). Mutuality based on language respect evidenced participants' understanding of the relationship between language and culture. Participants' decision to engage in dialogue about how they used language in relation to how their students used language demonstrated an understanding of how language and culture intertwine. It also indexed the core finding of this study by depicting the intersectionality between language and culture while using instructional power to advance their ideologies around these two constructs. Furthermore, participants' decisions and responses manifested the influence of language and culture on instructional decisions. While lesson plans and school tasks exemplified official school culture and speech, in-time responses and decisions about personal and student language illuminated a deeper knowledge around the need for linguistic and cultural flexibility. When teachers develop an appreciation for the variant ways students will use language, they demonstrate a willingness to show appreciation for student's culture and identity. Along with demonstrating appreciation for students' culture, teachers exhibit implicit understanding for adolescent identity development. Adolescents experiment with language as part of their growth and development (Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001); therefore, language variation is part of racial/ethnic

culture and adolescent culture. It is incumbent upon teachers to more deeply understand the way adolescents use language as part of the racial and cultural make up as well as part of their students being adolescent.

Cultural learning and mutuality through respect for language fluidity and flexibility are significant because they address critical aspects of the lived experiences of many African American students in the classroom. Findings from this study depict what can happen when language and culture are equally valued on both sides of the teaching and learning aisle. As participants made the instructional decisions to afford their students the space to use their language and vocabulary freely without judgment and addressed their students' inquiries about how they used language and vocabulary, mutual respect for both uses of language and cultural understanding resulted. Participants' and students' limited exposure to or experience with one another's language did not result in a devaluing of the language. Instead, participants and students found a way to learn from, about, and value each other's language. The traditional power dynamics associated with teacher-student relationships, the use of SAE and AAVE, and Black cultural identity and White cultural identity dissipated. The space usually filled with social-cultural, racial, and positional power disparities was opened to make space for a de-powered, de-centralized cultural dynamic. Participants' and their students' language and culture existed relationally. These findings are by no means absolute. However, they demonstrate possibilities when an instructional decision is made to authentically learn about the culture of others devoid of the need for positional and cultural dominance.

These findings also depicted mutual cultural affirmation. In this instance, participants and students affirmed one another's language and culture. For example,

Marie communicated to her students that her use of language made her who she was as much as her students' use of language made them who they were. Such communication illustrated the role of language as identity. Marie's example and that of others illuminated an epistemology about language, which could only find space within the instructional decision-making process afforded by participants' exercise of power and agency. By exercising power and agency in this way, the perspective of the marginalized (Au, 2012) gained equal footing with the power-endowed.

### **Summary**

In this section, I discussed the implications related to the intersectionality of language, culture, and power. These three constructs are inextricably intertwined and provide mechanisms to understand the influencing factors shaping how the participants made instructional decisions for the HA-AA students in their advanced ELA classes. As the data indexed, participants held varying perspectives about how their instructional decision-making was influenced by language and culture. Participants generally believed students' language was a cultural marker deserving of an equal space alongside academic language in their classroom. They also used students' language varieties as guideposts to adjust their own use of language to meet students' needs. Knowledge and understanding of culture from a variety of perspectives demonstrated the ways it influenced instructional decision-making. When participants made space for students' language variations, they were simultaneously making space for their cultures.

Findings highlighted the effects of participants and students exercising power and agency to create an environment based on racial-cultural and cultural affirmation based on mutual respect for language variance. As participants opened the instructional space

for students' inquiries about language and they chose to allow language unfamiliarity to be an opportunity for cultural learning, cultural mutuality resulted. While not being the last word on cultural mutuality, the findings on language use in the classroom depicted possibilities for how teachers and students can co-construct an environment whereby language variation fosters respect and learning as opposed to domination and cultural erasure or shelving. In the next section, I discuss the implications of classrooms being cultural exchange units.

### **Classrooms are Racial-cultural and Cultural Exchange Sites**

Culture exists because humans exist (Carrithers, 1992 & Hilliard, 1995). The point of human contact and interaction is the point at which culture originates. With participants sharing their experiences of learning from their students and allowing their students to learn from them, findings demonstrated classrooms functioned as cultural exchange sites. Additional connections among data points associated with the idea of construct intersectionality further anchored this finding. Race added a dimension of cultural complexity requiring some participants to consider the relationship between their expectations of their students and themselves as racialized beings. For other participants, the complexity of race became a point of additional learning through a willingness to openly acknowledge racial characteristics as naturally occurring elements of culture. The degree of authentic cultural exchange occurred within the domains of participants' power perspectives and their beliefs about culture in the classroom. In this section, I provide insight into a) the establishment of cultural exchange, b) racialized cultural exchange and c) impact of racial-cultural exchange on instructional decision-making. In discussing the data supporting classrooms being racial-cultural exchange sites, I demonstrate what the

use of language, culture, and power reveals about participants' understanding about these constructs as influencers on their instructional decision-making regarding their HA-AA students.

**Establishment of Cultural Exchange in the Classroom.** Culture enters the classroom at the point of interaction between individuals. Findings evidenced classroom cultures were born of the on-going and repeated interactions between positionally-situated individuals (Carrithers, 1992; Geertz, 1973/1983; Hilliard, 1995; Wenger, 1998). There were inherent power differentials between the participants and their students, which characterizes the nature of teacher-student relational dynamics. Field notes from Amy's class exemplified the power differential through repeated use of punitive language to control students' behavior and an express acknowledgement of power enabling her to decide what classes her eighth graders will be placed in as ninth graders. Within the naturally-occurring power dynamics between participants and their students, there was clear evidence of Carrithers' notion of sociality and what Geertz (1973) described as symbolic action, which define group membership existed for many participants. The establishment of classroom culture occurred as participants engaged with and responded to their students. As participants and their students interacted, individual language variations and behaviors combined to create the conditions for cultural exchange. Classroom cultural exchange mapped to sociality as the relationships between participants and their students illustrated the process by which extant cultural elements combine to develop new cultural ways of being. Although the relationships were grounded in traditional and unavoidable positional power frames (Bourdieu, 1986; Burbules, 1986; Freire, 1970/1921; Giroux, 1985; Nyberg, 1981) data showed evidence

of reciprocity within and beyond positional power, which cultivated mutuality for many participants and their students.

Across the data, epistemology and ideology were critical factors configuring the establishment and dynamics of the cultural exchanges within the classrooms. For Beth, Erin, Dawn, and Marie, cultural exchange was established based upon the recognition and appreciation of students' individual culture. As Dawn stated participant stated, "I'm not trying to change kids' culture," (Dawn, interview 1). Dawn's statement referenced her beliefs students should use their language in the classroom. The idea behind this statement resonated throughout the data for many participants as other participants positively linked students' language to their culture. Participants understood they and their students had pre-existing cultures and honored their students' culture evidence by their positions on language in the classroom. Students' language, thus their culture, was a platform upon which to build the overall classroom culture and became the vehicle for how many participants established cultural exchange and mutuality.

Amy's class presented the only occasion where students were expected to shelf their culture and adopt official school cultural norms. In Amy's class, classroom culture was normed against what has commonly been characterized as White middle-class behaviors. Students' culture, grounded in their style of language, found no place in Amy's classroom. While the establishment of culture in Amy's class differed greatly from the other participants, cultural exchange occurred. Students had to give up their cultural dynamic within the classroom in exchange for school culture. Contrary to Carrithers' notions of sociality, there was a one-dimensional flow of culture within this space. Like the other participants, Amy understood the reality that students arrive at

school as cultured beings; however, her ideology about the value of school culture in relation to her beliefs about her students' language as it pertained to their culture, created a static viewpoint of classroom culture. Unlike the other participants, Amy advanced a singularity of culture borne of a belief in the rightness and wrongness of language, which translated into a perspective about school and classroom culture. As Amy shared in our first interview, "this is school and so you should show you're educated," (interview 1). Her beliefs about language and what the use of out-of-school connotes about being educated illustrated a limited understanding of and lack of appreciation for students' language. Amy's statement also signaled a disregard for her students' culture. The influence of power bound the cultural exchange within the tight parameters of the institutionalized realm of school. While the data associated with Amy was an outlier in this study, her perspectives on students whose language and culture lay outside the official school culture are very much in line with on-going deficit frameworks (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Ford et al., 2002; Milner, 2007), about students whose language and culture deviate from official school culture (Apple, 1985; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2016; Nieto, 2010). Unfortunately, students of color, primarily African American students continue to face expectations they will forsake themselves for acceptance into the school domain. In the next section, I discuss data pertaining to how race, as component of culture, became visible and part of the cultural exchange in the classroom.

**Racialized Cultural Exchange.** Race in the classroom was an essential topic of discussion with important implications for future study. Although race is socially constructed (Bell, 1992; Freire & Macedo, 1921; Giroux, 1984; Stefancic & Delgado,

2012), its impact on classroom practice is complex. Understanding and making space for Black cultural articulation (Geertz, 1973; Hilliard, 1995) in the classroom necessitated Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) exploration of cultural relevancy and spawned a decade's worth of research from Ford (2001-2010) and others on teacher deficit thinking regarding African American children in the classroom. With two African American and three White participants, data regarding race in the classroom was revelatory. Findings showed both African American and White participants were reticent to discuss race unless explicitly asked to do so. When asked to consider race, both sets of participants recognized race as *a* component of culture; however, race was not viewed *the* essential element of their students' culture. With upwards to fifty percent of their classroom population comprised of African American students, I expected all participants to privilege race as the critical aspect of their students' culture. Instead, participants characterized their students' culture holistically, focusing on culture as group norms, ways of being, "how people behave when they're together," (Dawn, interview 1), and other elements such as music, clothing, and art. Race, when addressed, was acknowledged as important to their students' culture; however, it was not privileged as I had expected. According to the data, both set of participants viewed race as a factor in how their students' used language. For both sets of participants, race was part of the fiber of their classrooms simply because their students were African American. While the African American and White participants held similar ways of viewing race as a component of culture, differences existed in how the African American and White participants handled race in their classroom. Raising race is a delicate prospect; however,

it is essential for teachers to develop comfort with raising race authentically, devoid of stereotypes.

***Raising race in the classroom.*** Existing research discussing the challenges of raising race in the classroom has primarily focused on racial blind spots, missteps, insensitivity, low expectations, deficit frameworks, and blatant racist ideology (Au, 2012; Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Michaels, 2015; Nieto, 2010; & Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). This study shifts to focus on thinking about what happens when race is seen as a natural component of instruction instead through the lens of it being an issue to deal with. In discussing the connections among race, culture, and language, participants shared they and their students initiate conversations about race. Dawn and Erin, as African American participants, explained race as the “thing” they and their students always are, therefore, they chose to raise race explicitly through the literature choices they were able to make. Dawn chose more texts written by African American authors and those with a decidedly social justice lens due to her unfettered curricular autonomy. Erin chose African American authored texts at the end of the year when testing was complete and she had more curricular flexibility. Both Dawn and Erin shared their text choices were made to address social issues they believed their African American students would benefit from reading about, such as when Dawn used *Just Mercy* (Bryan Stevenson) to raise students’ knowledge about the inequalities in the criminal justice system.

Data from Beth and Marie demonstrated how they and their students raised race in their classroom. As explained by both Beth and Marie, their African American students raised race when comparing behaviors between them and other African

American teachers. In describing the way their students raised race through comparisons, Beth and Marie also discussed a shift in the racial dynamics. White participants explained their African American students compared their discipline tactics to their African American teachers. They pointed out, their Black students made statements such as, “my Black teacher allows me to...” or “the Black teachers wouldn’t do that...” (Beth, interview 2; Marie, interview 2). In each instance, these participants detailed feeling their African American students were raising race to set them apart from their African American colleagues. In doing so, they explained believing their African American students raised race as an exercise of power to align themselves racially with their Black teachers. White participants reported a sense of racial alienation when African American students raised race in this manner. In feeling racially alienated, participants resorted to silence, opting not to challenge their students’ assertions or reverse course on the contested behaviors. This example from Beth and Marie demonstrate the need for teachers, especially White teachers to develop an ability to determine what African Americans students may be attempting to do in the comparisons between themselves and their African American colleagues. While Beth and Marie reported not changing their behaviors, if such behaviors are reflecting hidden inequities or biases analysis and change are necessary. Addressing the racial imbalances between White teachers and their students of color, particularly their African American students, requires a willingness to acknowledge hidden biases and an on-going attention to the difference between intention and impact.

*African American participants raising race in the classroom.* As seen in the data, the African American participants did not have to raise race. For them, race simply

was. There was nothing to learn, nothing to consider, nothing to navigate. Race was as much an ever-present force as power, relieving them of the historical pressure associated with the baggage of the Black-White racial dynamic. As one participant stated, “race is always on my mind. It’s a factor in every lesson. It’s a factor every day all day,” (Dawn, interview 2). In not having to navigate the complexity of race interpersonally, the African American participants reported focusing on the learning culture of their students and bringing the issues of race to the fore in their classroom via their instructional decisions. Focusing on the learning culture of their students took the shape of what Erin (interview 1) described as being a student of her students. As the African American participants explained, being a student of their students created the opportunity for participants to deeply understand how their students learned, which allowed them to make instructional decisions aligned to the individual and collective culture of their classrooms. Classroom culture was shaped by race; however, it was not defined solely by race. As with language, there was no separation between race and culture. Race was the culture for the participants and their students.

Racial homogeneity allowed students to avoid the double consciousness (DuBois, 1906) often present in racially heterogeneous classrooms. There was no choice between a racially cultured self and an academic self; students’ academic lived experiences fit who they were as racial individuals. As one African American participant explained, there was a level of inherent cultural knowledge, which she brought to bear when making instructional decisions. Instructional decision-making through the lens of race as an element of culture advanced Ladson-Billings’ (1994) original notions of cultural relevance. As Ladson-Billings (1994) explained, the principal aim of culturally relevant

teaching was to assist the development of a “black personality” (p. 17), whereby African American students have opportunities to excel academically within their Blackness. Being a student of their students allowed the African American participants to tap into their students’ learning sensibilities within and beyond their racially determined lives. Instead of having to focus on merging race, culture, and academics, the African American participants had the freedom to focus on academics using their personal racial-cultural knowledge as a tool to advance academic excellence.

*White participants raising race in the classroom.* White teachers raising race carries a heightened level of risk than African American students raising race. The juxtaposition of race and position intensifies the complexity within the relational dynamics. Across the data, findings showed the White participants did recognize themselves and their students as racialized beings. Except for Amy, who chose what I call *race shelving* – the recognition of race but the use of power to mitigate its presence – there were no obvious instances of attempts at racial erasure. In fact, the participants were mindful of their own limited understandings of their students’ language as racial-cultural manifestations. As they shared, participants were reticent to curtail students’ racial-linguistic articulations so as not give the impression of requiring their African American students to be anything other than who they were. Even where there was stated discomfort, as with jōn-ning outlined in Chapter 4, the White participants chose understanding over judgment, and sought to learn about the practice from their colleagues. The decision to learn about that which they lacked knowledge harkened to the nature of sociality (Carrithers, 1998) and demonstrated how classrooms were cultural exchange sites. Decisions by the White participants further demonstrated lack of racial

knowledge does not have to equal racial marginalization. Neither the White participants nor their African American students could be anything other than their racial selves; therefore, in fully recognizing themselves as racialized, the White participants leaned into race, not as power tool leveraged within the space, which their students did at times. Rather, they leaned into race as a natural component of theirs and their students' cultured selves. Their raising of race underscored how they defined the cultures of their classrooms relying more on holistic as opposed to racialized elements.

As data told the story of White participants leaning naturally into race through recognition, analysis of interview data showcased a significant effect of Marie raising race through open dialogue and personal story telling. Findings suggested when race is raised personally and authentically by a White participant, as with Marie, there is racial mutuality and a mitigation of the racial power imbalance. Race in the US is most likely to remain a thorny issue steeped in the tensions of the nation's racial history. The data in this study demonstrated race can be raised authentically in a low-threat manner and in doing so, a White teacher and his/her Black students can interact beyond the constraints of racial power imbalances. When Marie explicitly discussed herself as a racialized being, she opened the door for Whiteness to be viewed through a cultural lens in much the same way as Blackness is viewed culturally. By stating, "I don't know if you know this but I'm very white..." (Marie, interview 2) and then concretizing her Whiteness with an example sharing a personal struggle of living in White skin, this participant humanized the racial space between herself and her students. This action also reduced the racial power differential between the participant and her students. While Marie did not bring the full weight of Whiteness in her depiction of living in White skin, raising race in

the way she did had the effect of defanging the racial monster and normalizing race as part of the cultural elements of the class. Marie's actions were significant because they stood in stark contrast to much of the research on White teachers and their African American students, which has remained largely focused on problematic interactions, which often prove detrimental to African American students, especially in advanced classes. Marie's willingness to be unapologetically White while affirming the culture of her African American students proffers White teachers an example of how authenticity can be an avenue for positive racialized interaction.

### **Summary**

In this section, I discussed the ways culture was established and exchanged in the classroom. I highlighted language as the primary vehicle for cultural expression and articulation. Across much of the data, participants viewed students' language variations as natural components of the classroom. Most participants understood language was an inseparable element of students' culture and required students to only use dominant cultural registers for academic writing. In allowing students linguistic flexibility, participants supported one of the key findings of this study; language is variant and its use controlled in accordance to participants' beliefs about language and culture and their place in the classroom.

Race is an essential element of culture. Findings in this section demonstrated that White and African American participants and their students raised race making it visible in the classroom. White participants raising race demonstrated the complexity of White teachers attempting to make race visible. The findings showed White participants raised race overtly and allowed students to articulate their racial identity via language. Findings

also indexed an expectation of racial shelving, which was a data outlier regarding the linguistic raising of race. When White participants overtly made race visible, they did so through interpersonal interactions, with the effect of reducing the racial power imbalances inherent in Black-White teacher-student relationships.

Additionally, I highlighted the ways African American students raised race with the White participants. When African American students raised race, they did so to challenge overt racist behaviors and to characterize actions of the White participants. Students raising race exemplified power enactment and agency (Bandura, 2005). Finally, I discussed findings depicting the way African American participants raised race. Findings demonstrated that racial homogeneity mitigated the need for African American participants to raise race. Racial homogeneity also made way for African American participants to focus on academics, which allowed their African American students to be simultaneously high achieving and Black. In the next section, I discuss findings and implications associated with language, culture, and power as influencing factors on instructional decision-making.

### **Influence of Language, Culture, and Power on Instructional Decision-Making with HA-AA Students**

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the separate findings related to language and culture demonstrating the inextricable link between them. I also addressed the domain of power within each construct. While analysis of the data presented notable findings related to power, these findings are best understood contextually as part of the overall discussion on the influence of language, culture, and power on instructional decision-making. I examined participants' ideas about language, culture, and power to

gain insight into how these constructs influenced their instructional decision-making. Thematic analysis of lesson plans, interviews, and field notes led to significant findings regarding the influence of language, culture, and power on instructional decision-making with HA-AA students. In the following sections, I provide insight into participants' perspective on a) power and b) power to influence instructional decision-making.

**Participants' perspectives on power.** Participants' epistemology on power determined the scope of influence language and culture had on instructional decision-making. As I analyzed the data, it became clear participants held narrow perspectives on power and viewed it as tool classroom management and behavior control. Despite these narrowly-constructed viewpoints on power, I determined through the findings that participants each enjoyed varying levels of curricular autonomy, which when coupled with their ideologies about language and culture, influenced every aspect of instructional decision-making. Every facet of instructional decision-making hinged on the confluence of participants' ideologies on language and culture forged within the affordances or constraints of their curricular autonomy. Participants' perspective of themselves within their ideas about power directly linked to how they created and/or co-creation their environments. Their power perspectives also shaped how culture, language, and the layer of race moved within their classrooms and impacted their instructional decisions.

**Power and instructional decision-making.** As Burbules (1986) and Nyberg (1981) advanced, educators have job-embedded power and varying levels of curricular autonomy. There were diverse spheres of autonomy ranging from high constraint to no constraint, which impacted the way participants negotiated and used their power. Amy maintained a power-as-behavior control model in the face of high curricular constraint.

With this model, she enacted a rule-based culture that constrained students' linguistic cultural articulation. Based on her beliefs about language at school and the AAVE style of speech her students used, Amy worked to institute a mono-cultural environment within her class. She exercised power within the curricular constrictions and made instructional decisions based on her personal ideologies about language and culture, which the data showed was tantamount to racial shelving. Amy understood the inseparability of language, culture, and race; however, given her beliefs and a severely limited way to shape curriculum, she chose a path of power through control of behavior. While the other participants used power to move differently within their spheres of curricular autonomy, Amy's path exemplified the core finding of this study. She fully indexed the notion that instructional decisions are influenced by language, culture, and power. Additionally, her ontological and epistemological bents on these constructs served as her primary access points upon which she drew power to move within her curricular restrictions. I highlight this participant because across all data points, she represented as an outlier warranting separate attention.

As suggested in the data, all participants shied away from naming themselves as powerful. However, the remaining participants used power quite differently as they evidenced the influence of culture and language on their instructional decisions with their HA-AA students. This group of participants had curricular latitude, which endowed them with the ability to choose between adhering to their conceptual framework of power for control or challenge themselves to think critically about the instructional decisions they made within their domains of control. The story told through the data was, even though this group of participants seemed to shy away from seeing themselves as having power,

they recognized areas where their instructional decisions were factors of their ability to use power within their range of curricular autonomy afforded to them at the district and/or building level. There was alignment between these participants' ideologies about language and culture. As the data evidenced, instructional decisions related to their HA-AA students in their advanced courses were factors of their willingness to exercise power within the domains of their autonomy. Dawn had wide latitude and the available resources to act upon her beliefs that students should read texts authored primarily by people of color. In her AP English classroom, exposing students to multi-culturally authored texts was an adopted ideological standpoint (Au, 2012). Advancing the ideology demonstrated her core beliefs that students need deliberate exposure through literature to get beyond the danger of single stories (Adichie, 2009) found within the confines of canonized texts often a part of the AP literature curriculum. The engine of Dawn's ideology moved through the classroom in direct accordance to the unfettered instructional autonomy she enjoyed and the power to put action into place.

The power to choose texts was an avenue many participants exercised as an instructional decision-making tool. When participants had limited text choice and curricular autonomy, power still directed instructional decisions. In the wake of limited material resources and a bound curriculum, Erin exercised power to shape learning. She focused on the learning culture of her high-achieving students and as she described, "got out of their way," to allow them the latitude to reorganize the scripted lessons to suit their needs. At the core of her beliefs was the need to foster an environment where her students' race was not the "thing" that defined them, but tool for intellectual articulation. Being African American sensitized her to how her students were educated against the

backdrop of deficit frameworks and critical race theories (Stefancic & Delgado, 2012) in the classroom. Therefore, she keenly attended to the intellect of her students powerfully enacting a notion of “integrity of the intellect,” (Erin, interview 1). Language, racialized culture, and learning culture were not explicit elements of the mandated curriculum; however, deliberate power enactment made language, racialized culture, and learning culture essential components of her instructional decision-making processes. I discuss the findings from these participants as exemplars to highlight the role of power as the conduit for the influence of language and culture on instructional decision-making. The ideologies each participant held regarding language, racialized culture, and culture had the potential to influence instructional decisions. However, since education is not neutral (Apple, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1921; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; hooks, 1994; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), the power each participant deliberately enacted in the advancement of their ideologies within their levels of curricular autonomy determined the influence of language and culture on their instructional decisions.

### **Summary**

In this section, I discussed the role of power as the critical component of the constructs of this study. Data demonstrated that all participants held viewpoints about language, culture, and power. Data also demonstrate all held primarily narrow perspectives about power and shied away from naming themselves as powerful. Despite their reluctance to view themselves as powerful, each participant acted upon their perspectives of language and culture allowing these constructs to influence their instructional decision-making within the realm of their curricular autonomy. Acting within their curricular autonomy was the act of being powerful, without which language

and culture would not influence instructional decisions. In the next section, I present the implications of this study.

### **Implications**

This study was about getting inside the instructional planning minds of five educators as they meta-cognitively examined their perspectives on language, culture, and power as influencing factors on their instructional decision-making with their high-achieving African American students. The aim was to gain insight into the planning and instructional decision-making process as I consider planning a foundational aspect of the overall instructional process. This study was not about examining lesson plans and teacher practice to check for evidence of prescribed and static notions of diversity, inclusion, or multiculturalism. It was about how teachers themselves think about language, culture, and power as influencing domains on the way they plan for a group of students traditionally absent from the landscape of educational research.

Focusing on high-achieving African American students in the classroom was about getting beyond the pathology of learning while Black (LWB) or what I call the one-third space of opposition, poverty, and underachievement. It was about looking inside advanced ELA classrooms, not to add more to an already vast conversation about representational disparity, but to look at the classroom once students are there and learn about teachers' thinking to see beyond pathology and into possibilities. Data from this study offer important implications for teachers and teacher educators, which I present in the next section.

## **Implications for Teacher Educators**

Examining teacher practice in any form carries implications for those who educate them. Data from this study offers teacher educators insight into an important facet of teacher education. With over half of public school teachers being White and female with the student population growing in racial, ethnic, and other forms of diversity, it is essential for pre-service teachers to engage in meta-cognitive work to uncover areas of their ideologies about language and culture that could prove detrimental to traditionally marginalized students. Research by Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2014) found attention to diversity and equity to be a growing trend in teacher preparation. Examination of research on teacher preparation programs conducted by Cochran-Smith, Villegas, Abrams, Chavez-Moreno, Mills, and Stern (2014) found benefit in White mono-lingual pre-service teachers having opportunities to unpack dominant ideologies about language to learn about language variations. Findings from their study showed a critical need for pre-service teachers, especially White mono-lingual pre-service teachers to develop, “critical awareness of the privilege they derive from their membership in racially, ethnically, and linguistically dominant groups,” (p.115). Findings related to Amy and Beth support their findings and illuminate an important implication for pre-service White teachers who may harbor similar beliefs.

Preparing a competent teacher workforce is the goal of teacher preparation programs. As the US and the world continue to diversify, a critical aspect of developing teacher competence must be the ability to view language and culture as naturally diverse, variant, and ever-changing. Findings from this study offer possibilities for teacher preparation at the coursework level and entry level, which connect to research on teacher

preparation. As Cochran-Smith et al. (2014) showed in their results, a single course is insufficient to get at the heart of hidden biases within a pre-service teacher. Cultural relevance (Gay, 2010 & Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and cultural sustainability (Paris & Alim, 2014) are mainstays across many methods courses as they seek to provide teachers with a way of viewing culture as an asset as opposed to a deficit. The findings of this study suggest pre-service method courses would do well to expand the canon of voices who speak to teachers. If pre-service teachers are to first grapple with their own hidden biases and second develop an appreciation for diversity, then coursework must take a two-fold approach to accomplish this important goal. First methods courses must provide multiple opportunities for candidates and those seeking advanced degrees to come to terms with their biases and underlying racist notions about the students they will have the privilege to serve. As advanced in the Cochran-Smith study, a single course will be insufficient. Single disjointed lessons will be insufficient as well. Self-examination is complex and requires on-going attention in a multiplicity of ways involving a variety of tasks and texts to aid the process. I contend pre-service English teachers would benefit from courses that allow study of multicultural curriculum theorists. Such a study would fill gaps in knowledge, which advances a singular story about curriculum theory. It is important for pre-service teachers to gain broad knowledge around curriculum to disrupt entrenched ideas about US curriculum history, which offers a single perspective about the shaping of US curriculum history. Providing pre-service teachers with knowledge about the contributions of voices other than White voices, can

Second, examining pre-service curricular materials to aid pre-service teachers in building competence and appreciation for language and culture are

necessary. Howard (2016) pointed, teachers cannot teach what they do not know.

Learning about language variation necessitates a variety of voices. Devereaux (2015) offers insight into how teachers can help students develop understanding of the natural variance in language. Her work applies readily to the pre-service level as well. While Amy's beliefs registered as an outlier, she represented a cadre of White teachers who have garnered a body of research involving cultural relevance and sustainability (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Considering her position and those like her, having opportunities to examine dominant culture forms of English side-by-side with other variations such as AAVE would provide the basis for pre-service teachers to develop the analytical skills to see both sets of variations for what they are. Both SAE and AAVE are rule-based language forms; however, SAE enjoys the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) not afforded to AAVE. Having opportunities to engage in analysis of both forms would provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to challenge their deterministic perspective of there being a singular right or wrong way to use speech. Such tasks require varied texts and an attention to the historical aspects of language to offer pre-service teachers context for often unquestioned ideologies. Using multiculturally-authored texts, which include language dialects to study language in conjunction with studying other elements common to literacy development would offer pre-service teachers opportunities to view language through an expanded lens.

While data from Amy was an outlier across all data points in this study, data from Beth and Marie demonstrated how race can live within a class beyond the

power differentials of the US Black-White racial paradigm. Analysis of this data showed that Whiteness can be named specifically through a cultural lens, thus lowering the threat between White teachers and their students of color. Furthermore, lack of cultural knowledge does not have to mean cultural dismissal and devaluing as evidenced through data generated from Beth's interviews and field notes. Data generated from Beth and Marie also evidenced how lack of cultural knowledge can and should be grounds for learning instead of grounds for judgment and entrenchment of deficit frameworks. What raises from the data in this study is how language, culture, and race can influence instructional decision-making with HA-AA students in such a way that honors those constructs instead of marginalizes them.

### **Implications for Teachers**

Implications of the data in this study for in-service teachers mirror those addressed regarding teacher preparation. Participants evidenced ranges of ideologies regarding language and culture. They also demonstrated a truth about power in the classroom; it will impact instructional decision-making regardless of curricular autonomy. In demonstrating an array of possibilities regarding how language and culture can influence instructional decisions in advanced ELA classrooms, one element stands out among those evidenced in the data. As school districts work to diversify their AP classes through open access policies, the use of diverse texts as instructional tools becomes more necessary. According to the College Board (2014), students should be exposed to a wide range of literature from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. In moving to a suggested reading list as opposed to a required list of authors, the College

Board offers AP teachers opportunities to use multiculturally-authored texts alongside texts authored by dominant culture writers. Dawn's decision to advance an ideological standpoint and focus on raising the perspective of the marginalized (Au, 2012) offers AP teachers a glimpse into how an AP literature class can authentically incorporate diverse books to ensure students of color are seen and heard in ways that legitimize instead of essentialize (Oh, 2017) them.

Dawn focused on AP skills and used multiculturally-authored contemporary texts as the learning tool. To provide students with non-canonical multiculturally-authored texts requires a willingness to believe such texts have a place in an advanced class. It also requires a willingness to actively seek out such texts to place them in students' hands. As Dawn explained, skills can be taught through a variety of texts and as the data from her interviews showed, students of color felt seen and present. It is not enough to open access to AP classes; the coursework and materials must be open to a variety of voices and perspectives as well. Relying on knowledge of and familiarity with a small group of texts read year after year does give teachers instructional power; however, doing so often leads to an over-reliance on staid instructional practices. Focusing on teaching skills instead of teaching texts opens opportunities to consider new texts that would push teachers past the familiar, engage students, and make space for more diverse texts in the classroom. Dawn's approach to her AP instruction exemplifies the need for AP literature teachers to adopt a critical eye in availing themselves of the textual flexibility afforded by the College Board's suggested author list. Her approach stemmed from a deep understanding of and belief in the need to present a multitude of voices that move students to considering a variety of perspectives. Although she enjoyed wide instructional latitude

many teachers may not, Dawn demonstrates the need for AP literature teachers to recognize the intersectionality of language, culture, and power and how these constructs will influence their instructional decision-making.

The way four of the participants addressed race in their classrooms offers another implication for in-service teachers. Race was viewed primarily as a component of students' identity rather than an issue to be dealt with. As Williams and Bryan (2007) among others have pointed out, African American students in advanced secondary courses who hold positive self-images around race associate achievement as part of their identity. The participants in this study worked with many students who seemed to view their Blackness as part of their intellect, not separate from it. Participants often viewed their students as racially-cultured people, affirming their students' culture through the incorporation of their students' cultured selves into lessons. For instance, in our third interview Erin reflected on her first year as a teacher with a class whose behavior she was unable to effectively manage. Like Beth's students who jōned in class, Erin's students engaged in what they called roasting, which is akin to jōn-ning. After many attempts to stop the behavior, Erin learned she needed to give her students a few moments at the beginning of class to roast one another. Both Erin and Beth learned the practice was part of the cultural fiber of their students and made the decision to exercise power to affirm their students racial-cultured lives. Even when there was limited prior knowledge and exposure to elements of African American linguistic practice, the decision to let limited knowledge be a source of learning instead of a requirement for racial shelving, serves as an example for how teachers should respond to unfamiliar cultures. In this study when participants did not have prior knowledge or did not understand the cultural articulation

of their African American students, the response was inquiry and learning, not judgment. Teachers taking an authentic inquiry stance to cultural unfamiliarity as opposed to a judgmental one offers African American students the ability to be their authentic selves without having to make a choice between being fully African American or a colored form of Whiteness.

As Marie raised race through an authentic lens of Whiteness, doing so offers possibilities and challenge to current ideas about race and culture in the classroom. Much of the current research around race and culture in the classroom centers on making multiple cultures visible, which tends toward traditionally marginalized cultures. Raising the perspective of the marginalized (Au, 2012) is essential to breaking down systems of dominance, inequality, and inequity that have plagued schooling in the US since the beginning of public schooling in America (Au, 2016). When Marie explicitly named her Whiteness, she pushed open the door for cultural relevance, learning, and respect mutually inclusive. Part of the issue with race in the classroom is Whiteness is rarely viewed as having demonstrative cultural referents (Howard, 2016 & Michael, 2015). Culture is something reserved for members of marginalized groups to set them apart from the societally-ascribed norm of Whiteness (Au, 2012/2016; Delpit 2002; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1985; Greene & Abt-Perkins; Hilliard, 1995; Lee, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Stefancic & Delgado, 2012). Associating a specific cultural behavior to Whiteness required students to openly consider Whiteness not as a normed reference, but as something with as much cultural specificity as Blackness. There was no cultural dominance in the naming. There was a need to build understanding around the possibility that both socially-ascribed races have cultural specificity deserving of equal understanding. The

challenge and implication is for White teachers to name the cultural referents that make up what it means to be White without making Whiteness an aspiration to which their African American students should strive. Raising race in this way also implies the possibility for racial understanding beyond relevance meaning only students of color possessing culture and simply bringing pop culture items into the classroom.

There are no easy answers for how White teachers could begin to raise race in their classrooms as doing so inauthentically can cause more harm than good. What passes as cultural relevance at times appears as overly simplistic and trite, reinforcing culturally stereotypical notions of who gets to represent American literature and who does not. However, for pre-service teachers, there must be learning opportunities in teacher education programs addressing racism in the classroom explicitly from the perspective of the marginalized (Au, 2012). I would go as far as to suggest teacher education programs should offer dismantling or un-doing racism courses as part of their programming. Raising the voice and perspective of the marginalized through such programming can offer pre-service teachers critical learning about race and racism at the systemic level while at the same time fostering self-reflection to address hidden biases that show in classrooms in myriad ways. English teachers are charged with the task of developing the literacy skills of their students. Literacy development cannot be separated from the language and culture of the learner; therefore, English teachers must possess a broad perspective on literacy and the literate practices of the students they teach. Within a broad perspective lies a deep appreciation for the naturally variant ways adolescents use language as part of adolescent culture as well as part of racialized culture. Not only must pre-service English teachers develop their appreciation and respect for the ways language

vary, they must equip their students with an appreciation for language to help them move between their out-of-school language and the ways SAE/DAE is used as the language of power.

US public schools will continue to educate a culturally diverse population. As long as the teaching population remains disproportionately mono-cultural, the need for knowledge-building and understanding about English dialect variations will persist. Preparing pre-service teachers for the reality of the ELA classrooms they will enter requires a shift in curriculum and instructional practices. ELA teacher education programs must develop curricula with an attention to shaping pre-service teachers' knowledge of culture and language in ways that go beyond culture equals merely bringing popular music into the classroom as a mechanism for being relevant. The complexity and intersectionality of culture and language necessitate curricula with textual representational balance coupled with instructional practices designed to foster the type of analytical skills, which use texts as vehicles for understanding how authors use language in texts to advance cultural knowledge-building and understanding. Such practices would broaden pre-service teachers' ability to view texts broadly as they develop the essential skills to appreciate the intersectionality between language and culture. Pre-service ELA teachers must also learn how authors use language as a tool to advance ideologies of power through in texts. Language, culture, and power are intersectional, therefore, ELA teacher preparation programs must include curricula and instructional practices that afford and equip pre-service ELA teachers with the knowledge and skills allowing them to use texts as vehicles to illustrate the intersectionality of language, culture, and power.

## Summary

In this section, I discussed the implications of this study. The implications for teacher educators focused on providing pre-service teacher coursework that fosters self-reflection on hidden biases toward diversity, inclusion, and equity. As put forth by Cochran-Smith, et al. (2014), pre-service teachers need a variety of courses and experiences to aid them in acknowledging and challenging possible hidden biases around race/ethnicity, language, and culture. I also presented implications suggesting an examination of curricular materials to broaden what pre-service teachers learn about language and culture. By learning specifically about historical underpinnings about language, pre-service teachers would have opportunities to examine the relationships between societally-accepted forms of English and other language variations to disruptive deterministic precepts about language correctness.

Along with addressing implications for teacher educators, I discussed implications for in-service teachers. Based on the findings in the data, I asserted in-service teachers have opportunities to learn about language variations to develop understanding around language variations. I also discussed the need for teachers in AP literature classes to seek out and incorporate multiculturally-authored texts to broaden as a mechanism for expanding the canon beyond the traditionally White-authored texts. Finally, based on the findings I asserted a way for White teachers to address culture by specifically naming their Whiteness in ways that equalize culture rather than continue forms of culture that essentialize Blackness and normalize Whiteness. In the next section, I discuss the significance of this study and areas for future research.

## Study Significance

In 1966, Burt Bachrach penned a song asking an important question. The song was titled, “Alfie,” and was framed around the question, “What’s it All About?” In considering the significance of this study, I ask the question and pose a response. At the outset, this study was about three questions seeking to understand the influences of language, culture, and power on teacher decision-making with high-achieving students in advanced English classrooms. The significance of the questions was in opening a vein of study around a population traditionally studied along narrowly-constructed lines of inquiry. Asking about teacher’s understanding of language, culture, and power, relative to their instructional decisions, was significant because teachers were asked to contemplate their planning and decision-making for the sole purpose of gaining insight into their thinking about their high-achieving Black students. Teacher planning tends to focus on how strictly teachers adhere to systems of accountability. My study asked participants to meta-cognitively think about their approaches to teaching a group of traditionally marginalized students through the lens of constructs that tend to be agents for marginalization.

While there were questions about language, culture, power, and race, there were none about economics or family structures. The purpose was to situate participants solely within their sphere of control as educators. By focusing participants on their loci of control, they had to be cognizant of how they approached their practice within the confines of the study constructs. There was no space to consider possibilities outside themselves as mechanisms to describe their understanding of and approach to making instructional decisions. This approach was significant because it forced participants to

contemplate only what they could control regarding their students. Even in places where participants had district-mandated structures, they remained focused on their instructional decision-making. This study centered teacher practice, not student circumstance. It also centered student intellect and achievement instead of struggle.

This raises implications for how African American students are characterized in the classroom. As Amy noted, it was easier for her ideas about instructional decision making on the struggling learners. Such a position signifies the import of this study. For nearly three decades, research on African American students has focused on a near singular story espousing academic avoidance to resist acting White. The default button on characterizing and understanding African American students has rested on the pathological (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Even discussions about high-achieving African American students in advanced courses focus on deficit frameworks (Ford, et al., 2002; Milner, 2007), deliberate underachievement, access gatekeeping, and Black students' ability to sustain their identities within advanced courses. Rarely has the research focused on how teachers approach planning for HA-AA students in their advanced courses.

Research on language and culture has focused primarily on showing White teachers how to be culturally relevant. Cultural relevance is important having raised essential questions and challenged teacher practices with students of color. Cultural sustainability (Paris & Alim, 2014) has also fostered dialogue and reframed the conversation on “access and equity around the question of how to get working-class students of color to speak and write more like middle-class White ones,” (p. 87). While research on high-achievement for African American students has focused on teacher

frameworks, there has been little inquiry on the planning and instructional decision-making relative to language, culture, and power associated with HA-AA students in advanced courses. Through this study, I join and extend inquiry around high-achievement relative to African American students' culture, language, and how teachers' use of instructional power determines domains of influence.

The significance of this study is the possibilities raised in addressing culture and language as they naturally occur and visioning them beyond an issue-based framework. Additionally, this study offers a window into how power shapes instructional decision-making within a variety of curricular realms. Most significant to this study is the shift presented in how research about teachers of HA-AA students can occur. Getting inside teachers' thinking offers a decolonized (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012 & Patel, 2016) methodology for bringing teacher thinking to the fore. This study also presents a shift in thinking about HA-AA students beyond one-third spaces to consider high-achievement to be as natural to LWB as opposition, underachievement, and poverty have become. Finally, this study presents a possibility to consider how culture and race impact the learning epistemologies of high-achieving African American students.

### **Areas for Future Research**

There are three areas of future research to add layers of dimensionality to this line of inquiry. One of the limitations of this study was the need for student voice. Moving forward, understanding the perspective of the HA-AA student would further expand the understanding of language, culture, and power as influencers on teacher instructional decision-making. Including student voice would provide the added dimension of seeing the effects of instructional decision-making. Observations in this study were used to

gather field notes, using observations in comparison to lesson plans to track areas of planning departure would also extend understanding about how, when, and the circumstances around which teachers make instructional-decisions. The next level of inquiry regarding teacher instructional decision-making with HA-AA students in advanced courses is examination of student work. Student work analysis of this population would tell an important story about curriculum, teacher intentions, student thinking and content understanding as well as provide insight into how teachers view the work of their HA-AA students in their advanced ELA classrooms. A plethora of research exists on how teachers use power as gatekeepers limiting access to advanced coursework. Analysis of student work could address an additional area of gatekeeping to gain insight into what continues to be framed as achievement gaps in advanced courses.

### **Conclusion**

I engaged in this study to examine the influence of language, culture, and power as influencing factors on teacher instructional decision-making with high-achieving African American students. The choice for this line of inquiry was born from personal and professional experiences. As an African American female, I attended a diverse high school and was the only Black student in my AP English classes. As a former classroom teacher of honors-level English classes, fewer than ten percent of my total student population was African American. These two experiences have shaped my interest in getting inside teachers' head as they think about their instruction with high-achieving African American students. In analyzing participants' lesson plans, interview transcripts, and gathering field notes, I learned the inextricable links among language, culture, and power as well as how participants' ideologies influence instructional decision making.

Data from this study suggested the answers to questions about the influences of language, culture, and power on teachers' instructional decision-making with their HA-AA students in an advanced secondary English classroom are deeply complex. Belief rested at the vortex in addressing the research questions of this study. The degree to which either or any of the study constructs do or do not influence instructional decision-making with HA-AA students boiled down to a teacher's belief in the intellectual ability, capacity, and right of their HA-AA students to be part of and present in an advanced course, the willingness to recognize race, without judgment, as an inevitable factor in the linguistic and cultural domains of their students' lives, and the power to act upon those beliefs in whatever school environment they find themselves.

The responses to my research questions were both complex and simple. Believing in students is what teachers do. Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century, in education, we continue to discuss African American students in the one-third space of text-score gaps, academic struggle, and poverty. We continue, in education, to discuss teachers having to be taught the value of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and cultural sustainability (Paris & Alim, 2014), and we continue, in education, to discuss the value of and need for diverse texts in the classroom. It was the beliefs shared by each participant that gave way to the power enactment, which either incorporated the language and culture of their students or did not.

If, in education, we believed, there would be no need to teach teachers to value culture; they would value it. There would be no need to push for multiculturally-authored texts in curriculum; those texts would be there in full measure with the dominant-culturally authored texts. The conversations about African American students would

include the one-third and the two-third spaces. Findings from the data in this study reveal that language, culture, and power are going to exist simply because they do exist. The issue is not one of the influences of language, culture, and power on teacher's instructional decision-making regarding their high-achieving African American students. The issue, as the data has shown, is one of a teacher's beliefs about language and culture and how they use their power toward the advancement of learning and achievement for their high-achieving African American students in advanced secondary English classrooms. If educators want to make appreciable change in the way all students, especially the traditionally marginalized, experience school, then those who care about teaching and learning must help them recognize the intersectionality and influence of language, culture, and power on their instructional decision-making processes.

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## APPENDIX A: LESSON PLAN ANALYSIS CHART

Appendix A: Lesson Plan Analysis Chart (Example)

Theme/Construct	Code	Datum - Raw Data	Memo - Interpretation
Language	Language type	<p>All contain EQ's - essential questions "How do characters develop over the course of a text?"</p> <p><b>Formal structure of language</b></p> <p><b>Follow a template</b> outlining what learners will do, opening tasks, questions to be addressed, engagement activities</p> <p>3 of 5 = Assessment Data Informs Instruction - statement at the top of the template</p> <p>3 of 5 = Asked to label portions of their plans according to Look Fors (GLF and/or Foundational, J&amp;E, MD, Passage, Type/Reading; content, vocab, usage)</p> <p>Erin - Do Now: Write down everything you think you</p>	<p>Note: EQs are connected to state standards -</p> <p>Use of formal language supports ideas shared during interviews - each participant stated that on the page, their language is formal and academic</p> <p>The statement at the top of the template has no indication of teachers paying attention to it in the body of the plans - no "data" included in the plans</p> <p>Language is used to trigger teacher actions</p> <p>Marie - while not slang, the tone is casual; which reflects her own characterization for how she uses language on and off the page</p>

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW CODING DICTIONARY

## Appendix B: Interview Coding Dictionary

<b>Theme/Construct</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
Language	Interactive – Interpersonal	Flexibility of use
		Use of colloquialisms
		Correctness – Fixed
	Written – Planning	Formal
	Perspectives	Class dependent
		Purpose
		Knowledge & Understanding
Fixed vs. Fluid		
Power	Perspectives	Control/Manage behavior
		Decision-making
		Flexible Use – Class dependent
	Instruction	Degrees of autonomy
Culture	Classroom	Class dependent
		Environmentally ascribed
		Building vs. classroom
		Power creation
		Cultural beliefs
		Insider vs. Outsider
		Language connections
	Racial Dimension	Hidden vs. Open
		Levels of knowledge
		Perspectives
		Insider vs. Outsider

				Memos
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APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Appendix C: Observation Protocol

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Observation Date/Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Construct	Observation Notes
Language	
Culture	
Power	

Language				
Construct	Code/Category	Theme	Data	
Culture				
Power				

Observation Coding Protocol

**Purpose:** The purpose of this document is to give you an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the data I collected during our interviews. I have divided the chart into 3 columns: 1<sup>st</sup> Column – title of area around which you answered questions; 2<sup>nd</sup> Column – your words as transcribed from our interviews; 3<sup>rd</sup> Column - Accuracy Check.

**Directions:** Please read title of the 1<sup>st</sup> Column and your words in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Column to determine if I have captured your ideas. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Column simply type an “A” if it’s accurately captured. If you would like to add additional information or want me to change the ideas, please type your ideas into the 3<sup>rd</sup> column.

Category	Transcription Data – Your Words & Ideas	Accuracy Check – “A”
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Language</b></p>	<p>"I might re-word things and break it down a little bit further for my lower level block."</p>	A
	<p>"Well - now when I think about language in terms of them it's literally speaking in proper grammar. So you know I expect them to be speaking formally...But you know it's the fact that like people are observing them, people are listening to them and this is school and so you should show you're educated. I don't ---I don't want them, like the "we was" and "they was" and improper grammar like "mines." I will correct them every single time."</p>	A
	<p>"I would define that as professional Proper grammar. I'm not going to be saying words like "mines" since the word is "mine." I'm not going to be saying "we was" or "they was" 'cause that's improper grammar. It's we were."</p>	A
	<p>"...I don't really know what I would ever say about the way I speak or the language that I use."</p>	A
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Culture</b></p>	<p>"Culture is the environment...um...culture is...I don't know. --- that's a tough question --- culture is like the environment and how people contribute to an environment. I guess like demographics things like that."</p>	A
	<p>"It could be race. It could be religion. And it could be gender. It could be sexuality</p>	A
	<p>No nonsense nurturing; MVP directions; Consistency is our culture</p>	A
	<p>"We want a universal culture throughout the school that we're going to speak in the same economy of language and that we're going to follow the same consequences.</p>	A
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Power (Includes areas of instruction and decision making)</b></p>	<p>When we're thinking about culture and language when it comes to them it's like building on what they've already seen knowing that they want something better but they still wanna be ----whey want what they see as accomplishing and they might want something better than that.</p>	A
	<p>"I mean my power would be in how I'm grading things you know --- you turn this is one day, it's 10 points off I'm telling you right not --- no if's, and's or but's that's exerting a sense of power."</p> <p>"I've been you know advocating a lot for increasing</p>	A

	<p>writing because how are you preparing 8th graders for high school if you're not teaching them the basics of writing?"</p> <p>"What I did last quarter, I uh...did a little more than I did this quarter to be honest with you. I try to get them a day ahead..."</p> <p>"We figure out how to make them work for our students..."</p>	<p>A</p> <p>A</p> <p>A</p>
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## APPENDIX E: FINDINGS CHART

Appendix E: Findings Chart (Example)

<i>Findings</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Datum – Raw Data</i>
<p>Participants primarily reported using their language in different ways depending on whether they were writing their plans or speaking to students</p> <p>Participants had limited expectations for how students would use their language – academic language when speaking about content-specific matters, colloquially when not; except for 1 participant who had a very specific expectation that students would speak in dominant language forms</p>	<p>Language is naturally variant – words + situation = language form needed to properly and effectively communicate</p> <p>Fluidity of language</p>	<p>Erin – on paper, it's always in the dominant culture, speech it's always colloquial</p> <p>Dawn – academic if discussing discipline specific matters; all other times, use what works</p> <p>Beth – professional (mostly) when discussing academic matters; otherwise, students' language is okay – will adjust her own language to meet their "needs" for understanding content and directions</p> <p>Marie – professional when discussing academic matters; other times – freak vibe – but no cussing; language is a learning opportunity (two-way street)</p> <p>Amy – proper grammar at all times; even when being casual; you are not allowed to use the language you would use outside the classroom in the classroom (not situational)</p>
<p>Language was important in the lessons because the language – did not necessarily shape how they thought about teaching, but more about the interactions between participants and students – language was the articulation of culture (Geertz)</p>	<p>Language, culture, and power are intersectional; nearly inseparable constructs influencing teacher instructional decisions</p>	<p>Amy – perhaps language marks identity if...; culture of school – you need to sound educated</p>

Significance: How does this study open windows, doors, and mirrors in education?

1. Discussion about HA-AA in a way goes beyond Black pathology of opposition, struggle, economic poverty (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012)
2. Opens dialogue to see beyond the one-third space of Black deficiency – my own words (no citation)
3. Focuses on teacher decision making as a way of getting behind teachers' thinking about their practice with an under-researched population – teachers are telling their story about their practice; opportunities to see into teachers' thinking, which matters because it is in the thinking that learning about practice and frameworks are found; seeing planning beyond box-checking for accountability (Beth & Marie's plans were place-holders for teachers' actions, plans did not depth of thought)
4. Understanding language and culture as shapers of the ontological and epistemological framework for students as learners, which must be appreciated – the O & E are grounded in the culture of the students, which shapes how they approach the learning process
5. Demonstrates the ability of teachers to deal with the knottiness and consanguinity of language, culture, and power.
6. Opportunities: teacher ed preparation – what are programs doing to get to the teacher belief before teachers enter programs and certainly before they enter classrooms to avoid the Amy mentalities, also what are pre-service teachers in English Ed programs teaching about multi-culturally authored texts, material reviews, curricula reviews are necessary; coaches, facilitators – text selections, getting teachers to see beyond the 1/3 spaces of Black children, seeing past pathologies, elevating the concept of culture beyond culture = race = black = Beyoncé in the classroom as a means of being relevant.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1.

*Participant Demographics*

Participant (pseudonym)	# of Years Teaching	Grades/Courses Taught	Self-identified race/ethnicity	Self-identified gender
Amy	6	8 <sup>th</sup> advanced & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female
Beth	1	11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female
Dawn	18	10 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	African American	Female
Erin	2	9 <sup>th</sup> <del>pre</del> AP & on-grade level	African American	Female
Marie	1	11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> AP & on-grade level	White/Caucasian	Female

TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Table 2.

*Participant interview schedule*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interview #1</b>	<b>Interview #2</b>	<b>Interview #3</b>
Amy	3/9/17	3/22/17	N/A
Beth	3/6/17	3/15/17	3/28/17
Dawn	3/10/17	3/20/17	N/A
Erin	3/4/17	3/17/17	3/28/17
Marie	3/3/17	3/18/17	4/2/17

## FIGURE 1: CONSTRUCT RELATIONSHIP MODEL

Figure 1. Construct Relationship Model



## FIGURE 2. INSTRUCTIONAL AUTONOMY &amp; POWER

Figure 2. Instructional Autonomy &amp; Power

