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African-American students' perceptions of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts: Do urban African-American students see the Massachusetts comprehensive assessment examination as a vehicle for strengthening a separate and unequal class system?

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH-STAKES
TESTING IN MASSACHUSETTS:
DO URBAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS SEE THE
MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT EXAMINATION AS A
VEHICLE FOR STRENGTHENING A SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL CLASS
SYSTEM?

A dissertation presented

by

Reginald E. Harge

to

The Department of Law, Policy and Society

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

While the overarching goal of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially those of underperforming racial groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions. Given this gap, the secondary school experiences of African-Americans and other students of color in the United States continues to be substantially separate and unequal (Bell, 2004; Darling-Hammon, 2004).

High-stakes tests are used to make decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in a grade and which will receive a high school diploma (Heubert, 2000). Massachusetts has developed its own high-stakes test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam—MCAS) and starting with the class of 2003, students in grade 10 had to meet or exceed the Needs Improvement threshold score of 220 in both English Language Arts and Mathematics in order to graduate from high school. In the future more subjects will be added.

This dissertation draws upon a qualitative methodology as informed by the theoretical perspective of critical race theory to analyze the disparities in Black-White educational outcomes and explores the proposition that high-stakes testing is being employed as a vehicle for strengthening a separate and unequal class system for African-American children and may in fact be having negative effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, etc.) on these students. This proposition was examined through three research questions: 1) How do African-American students perceive the MCAS examination?; 2) How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive within the Massachusetts public school system?; and 3) What impact (if any)

has the MCAS had on African-American students' educational experiences?

The investigator chose a focus group and in-depth interview methodology as the appropriate data gathering strategies. Thirty students participated in three sets of focus groups: (a) students age 18 or older who were unable to pass the MCAS; (b) students between the ages of 15 and 17 who were successful in passing the MCAS; and (c) students between the ages of 13 and 19 who were preparing to take the MCAS exam. Fifteen interviews were conducted with key policy makers.

Six themes emerged from the focus groups and the policy makers' interviews as being common to most students' perceptions, albeit the students and policy makers had differing perceptions. The students' themes involved future aspiration; suburban schools are better than urban ones; concern for future livelihood; psychological impact of testing; equity of tests; and participants' recommendations for the future. The policy makers' themes can be categorized as: no positive or negative consequences (of testing); effect of socio-economic status; testing as a graduation requirement; psychological impact of testing; ambivalence toward testing; and apprehension about testing.

At the time when the law was implemented, it was perceived that all students had access to the same resources, which this study showed not to be the case. The implications of the study are that the law that was implemented to help students be successful is actually having an adverse impact; and access to quality education is not the same for all students. Implications for law, policy, and society were discussed.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother whom I wish to thank very, very much for preparing me for life while she was living, and after her passing, for having introduced me to Christ.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE 1

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION..... 2

DEDICATION..... 5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 6

TABLE OF CONTENTS 8

CHAPTER ONE 12

The Problem 12

 I. Introduction 12

 II. Statement of the Problem 16

 III. Background of the Problem 23

 IV. Testing and African-Americans..... 26

 V. High-Stakes Testing..... 27

 VI. Standardized Testing and Its Psychological Impact on Students of Color 29

 VII. Theoretical Framework for Research..... 30

 VIII. Significance and Rationale..... 34

 IX. Goal and Objectives..... 35

 X. Major Research Questions 35

 XI. Definitions Of Key Concepts and Terms..... 36

XII. Summary of Chapter One.....	37
CHAPTER TWO	39
Review of the Literature.....	39
I. High Stakes Testing.....	40
II. Slavery and Education.....	44
III. Education Laws and Policies	51
IV. The Advent of Education Reform in Massachusetts	57
Table 1: English Language Arts	62
Table 2: Mathematics.....	62
V. Reliability and Validity of Testing.....	66
VI. Scoring Errors in High-Stakes Testing	73
VII. Social Impact of Testing.....	76
VIII. Theoretical Perspectives	81
IX. Conclusion.....	90
X. Summary of the Review of the Literature.....	91
CHAPTER THREE	93
Methodology	93
I. Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods.....	93
II. Ethical Issues.....	95
III. Research Design.....	97
IV. Procedure	105

CHAPTER FOUR.....	111
Results	111
I. Student Focus Groups.....	112
II. Policy Makers.....	122
Questions for Focus Groups.....	133
CHAPTER V	134
Discussion of the Results	134
I. Introduction	134
II. Critical Race Theory	135
III. Counter-Storytelling	137
IV. Policy Makers’ Perceptions Versus African-American Students’ Perceptions.....	139
V. Conclusion	147
VI. Limitations of the Study	148
VII. Significance to Law, Policy, and Society.....	148
VIII. Implications for Future Research.....	149
IX. Summary and Overview of the Study.....	149
APPENDIX A	151
APPENDIX B	153
APPENDIX C	156

REFERENCES..... 161

CHAPTER ONE

The Problem

I. Introduction

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . It is the very foundation of good citizenship. . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms. We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.

Chief Justice Earl Warren, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This report was written in response to the widely held belief that the United States was at risk economically and that schools were responsible for this economic trouble. The report summarized its findings in brutal terms:

If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. (p.5)

The report not only used test scores as an indicator of success, but also promoted test performance as the primary goal of schooling. *A Nation At Risk* gave birth to an unprecedented belief in the validity of test scores as measures of quality.

According to those critical of education at the time, “American education needed

to be brought under the control of experts” (Meier, 2000, p. 10). Experts were seen as those who understood the new demands of the economy, as opposed to parents and even educators themselves. The commission offered the following recommendations:

1. [A]t a minimum, all students seeking a diploma [should] be required to have the foundations in the Five New Basics [including English, math, science, social studies, and computer science].
2. Schools, colleges, and universities [should] adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct.
3. Significantly more time [should] be devoted to learning.
4. Improve the preparation of teachers . . . to make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession.
5. Citizens [should] hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms, and provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about reforms. (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, p.5)

In the 1990s, all 50 U.S. states embarked on education initiatives related to high standards and challenging content. A central focus of these efforts was to establish a common set of academic standards for all students that included assessments that measured student performance and accountability clearly focused on student outcomes. Although assessment has always been a critical component of the educational system, the growing emphasis on standards and accountability has dramatically changed the role of testing.

In January 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), ushering in a new era of educational accountability. This legislation purports to lead to higher achievement for all children and requires states to adopt a specific approach to testing and accountability. NCLB sends the message that the federal government will assume a more forceful role in elementary and secondary education, one that makes unprecedented demands on states and local school districts to raise academic achievement and to take direct action to improve poorly performing schools. The law also requires states to raise the qualifications for new teachers and verify the qualifications of current teachers.

The following are some of the major goals of the NCLB Act:

1. By school year 2005-2006, states must administer annual statewide tests in mathematics and reading/language arts to children in grades three through eight, and at least once during grades ten to twelve, and must provide individual student test scores.
2. By school year 2007-2008, students must be tested in science at certain grade spans.
3. Starting in school year 2002-2003, states must annually assess the English proficiency of students who are learning the English language.
4. Every other year, states must administer the mathematics and reading exams of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to a sample of their students in grades four through eight, with the federal government paying the costs. This requirement is meant to serve as an independent check on the states' own tests.

The NCLB law contains specific requirements about the features and uses of state tests.

They include the following mandates for schools:

1. Alignment with the state's academic standards and results that are comparable from year to year.

2. Results that can be used to determine whether students are meeting the state standards and help teachers diagnose and address students' specific academic needs.
3. Test scores provided promptly to local school districts by no later than the beginning of the school year after the test is given.

The new law requires every school, school district, and state to “disaggregate,” or break out, the average test results for certain groups of students, including major racial and ethnic groups, major income groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. This requirement is meant to highlight the relative achievement levels of these groups of students and to hold schools accountable for closing the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students on the one hand, and Caucasian and Asian students on the other (NCLB, 2001). With the passage of this act, every state-mandated testing program has become high stakes for schools and districts.

While the overarching broad goal of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially those of underperforming racial groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions, the secondary school experiences of African-Americans and other students of color in the United States continue to be substantially separate and unequal (Bell, 2004; Darling-Hammon, 2004; Orfield & Gordon, 2001). Currently, about two-thirds of all students in urban schools are Black or Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Funding systems and tax policies leave most urban districts with fewer resources than their suburban neighbors (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Denbo, 2002). In such districts, one finds the highest percentages of under-qualified, poorly paid teachers (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000); the highest percentages of

under-performing children; limited access to technology; few educational specialists (e.g., math and reading specialists) and resources (e.g., accelerated curricula for all students); limited extracurricular opportunities; and dilapidated physical environments (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Center on Educational Policy, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Denbo, 2002). And according to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), these schools are more likely to be identified as “failing schools” despite the obvious lack of financial, human, and educational resources, whereas suburban schools would more likely be identified as “high-performance schools” because of better financial, human, and educational resources.

When the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) ruling was handed down, the Supreme Court established three major premises or expectations about integrated schools. First, an integrated academic setting would improve the self-esteem and racial esteem of African-American children. Second, with a healthier sense of personal and racial identity, along with better facilities and better teachers, African-American children would perform as well as white children academically. Third, integrated schools would lead to improved racial relations within schools and the larger society (Atkinson, 1993). Fifty years later, it appears that the expectations of *Brown* have unfortunately been reduced to a single policy: high-stakes testing (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) ensures that high-stakes testing will become a mainstay of public educational organization and practice in the decade to come (Boger, 2003).

II. Statement of the Problem

Throughout the country, high-stakes testing, which Heubert (2000) defines as

tests that are used in making decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in a grade and which will receive a high school diploma, is emerging as one of the most significant movements in American public education. Although standardized testing has always been an essential part of the educational process, the tendency to use test data as the most significant indicators of learning and achievement and as critical determinants of obtaining a high school diploma has increased [e.g., New York State Regents Examination, Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP), and the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+), to name a few] (Center on Education Policy, 2005).

In response to the high-stakes test movement, Massachusetts has developed its own high-stakes test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System—MCAS) in which scores for each test are scaled with a maximum of 280 points and with results reported for students according to four performance levels: Advanced (students display a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter) 260-280; Proficient (students display a solid understanding of challenging subject matter) 240-259; Needs improvement (students display a partial understanding of subject matter) 220-239; and Warning (students display a minimal understanding of subject matter) 200-219. Starting with the class of 2003, students in grade 10 had to meet or exceed the Needs Improvement threshold score of 220 in both English Language Arts and Mathematics in order to graduate from high school (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003).

The class of 2003 had five opportunities to pass the MCAS test (starting in the spring of 2001). Nonetheless, approximately 5,728 or 9% out of 60,862 students did not receive a passing score on the MCAS and, as a result, did not receive a high school

diploma in 2003, although they met the local graduation requirements. Of the 77,733 students who started out with the class of 2003 in the ninth grade, approximately 16,871 or 22% of the students missed the opportunity of receiving a high school diploma (Massachusetts Parents, 2003). The students in the “official” class of 2003 who were unsuccessful in satisfying the requirements of the “competency determination” were awarded a “certificate of attainment” which is a state-endorsed credential intended to promote access to educational, job training, and employment opportunities for students who have completed their high school program of studies (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004). The majority of these students are students of color, low-income students, limited English-proficiency students, students with disabilities, and vocational-technical students (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

Given that there is a disparity in the passing rate between students of color and graduation rate (Table 5), in particular African-Americans and Hispanics, relative to their White and Asian counterparts on high-stakes exams in Massachusetts (Table 1) as well as in other states (Table 2), the investigator is concerned that the disparity in the passing rate on high-stakes testing may be adversely affecting African-American students’ educational attainment and potentially having negative effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, etc.) on these students. Students who are home-schooled or who attend private schools (which are predominately White) may be conditionally subjected to high-stakes testing with the exception of students in North Carolina (Table 4). And, while high-stakes testing may be affecting other students of color in a similar manner, this thesis will focus exclusively on African-American students.

Table 1: Percentage of 10th Graders by Race/Ethnicity Who Passed Both English and Mathematics Exams of the MCAS on the First Attempt in the Years 2001–2005.

Race/Ethnicity	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
African-American	37%	40%	52%	60%	58%
Asian	68%	74%	80%	82%	84%
Hispanic	29%	33%	44%	52%	53%
White	77%	78%	84%	86%	87%
All	68%	69%	75%	80%	81%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, *Spring 2006 MCAS Tests: Summary of State Results, September 2006*.

Tables 2 and 3: Gaps in Initial Pass Rates on Exit Exams Between White and Minority Students for All States with Exit Exams, 2005

READING/ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

State	White Pass Rate	African-American Pass Rate	White—African-American Gap--%	Latino Pass Rate	White-Latino Gap %	Asian Pass Rate	White-Asian Gap--%	Native American Pass rate	White—Native American Gap--%
Alaska	82%	59%	23	62%	20	59%	23	65%	17
Arizona	85%	64%	21	56%	29	84%	1	48%	37
California	89	64	25	65	24	86	3	73	16
Florida	65%	28%	37	41%	24	63%	2	61%	4
Georgia	97%	92%	5	86%	11	95%	2	95%	2
Idaho	88	71	17	65	23	86	2	71	17
Indiana	74	40	34	46	28	74	0	52	22
Louisiana	93	76	17	77	16	88	5	89	4
Massachusetts	94	76	18	69	25	89	5	86	8
Minnesota	90%	56%	34	64%	26	76%	14	67%	23
Mississippi	91%	74%	17	77%	14	88%	3	77%	14
New Jersey	91%	76%	15	66%	25	88%	3	81%	10

North Carolina	94	80	14	78	16	91	3	84	10
Ohio	93	78	15	80	13	93	0	84	9
South Carolina	93	77	16	76	17	91	2	87	6
Tennessee	94%	83%	11	85%	9	93%	1	83%	11
Texas	93	82	11	80	13	92	1	88	5

MATHEMATICS

State	White Pass Rate	African-American Pass Rate	White—African-American Gap--%	Latino Pass Rate	White- - Latino Gap--%	Asian Pass Rate	White-Asian Gap--%	Native American Pass rate	White—Native American Gap %
Alaska	81%	57%	24	57%	24	74%	7	68%	13
Arizona	80%	54%	26	52%	28	84%	-4	44%	36
California	87	55	32	62	25	92	-5	69	18
Florida	87%	58%	29	71%	16	90%	-3	85%	2
Georgia	97%	86%	11	88%	9	98%	-1	93%	4
Idaho	81	56	25	53	28	81	0	56	25
Indiana	70	31	39	47	23	84	-14	53	17
Louisiana	88	61	27	71	17	88	0	81	7
Massachusetts	90	64	26	61	29	91	-1	73	17
Minnesota	81%	35%	46	46%	35	64%	17	47%	34
Mississippi	96%	87%	9	94%	2	96%	0	87%	9
New Jersey	85%	47%	38	57%	28	89%	-4	66%	19
North Carolina	91	72		78		93		80	
Ohio	84	53	31	64	20	90	-6	63	21
South Carolina	87	61	26	69	18	90	-3	78	9
Tennessee	83%	54%	29	73%	10	83%	0	67%	16
Texas	83	54	29	61	22	89	-6	75	8

NOTE: No initial Pass Rate Data Available for AL, NV, NM, NY, and VA

Source: *Center on Education Policy, exit exam survey of state departments of education, June 2006, Item 32.*

Table 4: States with Exit Exam Policies for Home-Schooled and Private Schools Students

State	Is exit exam required for home-schooled students?	Is exit exam required for private school students?
Alabama	No	No
Alaska	No	No
Arizona	No	No
California	Only for students earning a public high school diploma	No
Florida	No	No
Georgia	No	No
Idaho	In some circumstances	Only for private schools seeking state-accreditation
Indiana	Only for home-schooled students enrolled in public school	Only for students in accredited private schools or those also enrolled in public school
Louisiana	No	Yes for students in approved private schools that have same graduation requirements as public schools and grant a standard Louisiana diploma
Massachusetts	No	No
Minnesota	No	No
Mississippi	No	No
Nevada	Only for students who want to be eligible for the Nevada Millennium Scholarship Program	Only for students who want to be eligible for the Nevada Millennium Scholarship Program
New Jersey	No	No
New Mexico	No	No
New York	No	Yes for students in accredited private schools

North Carolina	Yes	Yes
Ohio	Only for students seeking a diploma with the state seal	Only for students in chartered private schools or private school students who seek a state diploma with the state seal
South Carolina	Yes	Only students placed in private schools by school districts or other public agency
Tennessee	Yes	Yes for accredited private schools with the same diploma requirements as public schools
Texas	No	No
Virginia	No	No

Source: *Center on Education Policy*, exit exam survey of state departments of education, June 2006, item 15, p.81.

Table 5: Graduation Rates for All Students and by Student Subgroups
Number of 1st time entering 9th graders in 2002-03—transfers out/deaths + transfers in

	Graduates 4-Year Rate	Still in School	Dropped Out
All Students	79.9%	6.4%	11.7%
African American	64.4%	13.5%	18.0%
Asian	83.9%	6.7%	8.0%
Hispanic	56.9%	12.0%	26.5%
White	85.1%	4.6%	8.9%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Cohort 2006 Graduation Rates—State Results*.

Table 6: Graduation Results for All Students by Student Subgroups
 Number of 1st time entering 9th graders in 2003-04—transfers out/deaths + transfers in

	Graduates 4-Year Rate	Still in School	Dropped Out
All Students	80.9%	6.6%	9.4%
African American	65.2%	14.3%	15.8%
Asian	83.7%	7.0%	6.8%
Hispanic	58.5%	13.6%	22.8%
White	86.4%	4.5%	6.6%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Cohort 2007 4-Year Graduation Rates—State Results*

III. Background of the Problem

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) evolved out of the Education Reform Act of 1993, which was driven by *McDuffy & Others v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education & Others [McDuffy]* (Bolon, 2001), a 1993 lawsuit that was originally filed in 1978 (Eye On Education, 2003). The lawsuit filed in the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts alleged that the state of Massachusetts was allowing poor communities to offer lower-quality education in comparison to affluent ones. In other words, students in poor communities were receiving a "second class" education, while students in wealthy communities were receiving a "first class" education (*McDuffy*, 1993). The Supreme Judicial Court Of Massachusetts ruled that educational funding disparities denied students residing in poor communities the education to which they were constitutionally entitled (*McDuffy*, 1993). Therefore, the legislature passed the Education Reform Act of 1993, calling for the creation of curriculum frameworks or guidelines that delineated what should be taught in all schools at various grade levels.

The Education Reform Act of 1993 called for a comprehensive assessment system that would measure whether teachers were focused on the curriculum and whether students could demonstrate competency in the frameworks of English/language arts, math, science, history, art, health, and foreign language. The MCAS covers the first four subjects. A passing grade in two specific subjects (English language and math) on the 10th grade MCAS is required for high school graduation; in the future more subjects will be added and the passing score will be increased (Massachusetts Education Reform Act, 1993).

Due to the vagueness of the law, some public officials' interpretations led to a single pencil-and-paper test instead of a variety of assessment instruments that should be utilized to measure student performance (e.g., work samples, projects, and portfolios). The Education Reform Act of 1993 mandated that the MCAS should be designed to: a) test students educated with public funds across the Commonwealth, including students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency; b) be administered annually in at least grades 4, 8, and 10; c) measure performance based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework learning standards; d) report and document performance of students, schools, and districts; and e) serve as “one” basis of accountability for students, schools, and districts. However, the test is principally used to assess student and school performances instead of assessing progress in the implementation of the curriculum frameworks (Wheelock, 2003).

There are several factors that may account for the inability or ability of African-American students, other students of color, and low income students to pass the MCAS. Some researchers place the responsibility on the individual student, some on the family

structure, and some on the school or community group. At the individual level, there are several possible explanations: some students do not perform well on standardized tests due to anxiety, stress, fatigue, or test phobia (Connor, 2003), and/or they don't possess the intellectual capacity to pass a standardized test. At the school-level, theories include the following: teachers do not teach well (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Center on Educational Policy, 2001); they have low expectations of students, especially students from low income communities and students of color (Ferguson, 2003; Gill & Reynolds, 1999); they aren't certified in the subject matter which they are teaching (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; No Child Left Behind, 2001); experienced teachers are assigned to the high performance schools and the inexperienced teachers are assigned to the low performance schools (Kohn, 2002); some schools have more financial resources and are able to offer more enriched and extensive learning opportunities (Brantlinger, 2003; Center on Education Policy, 2001); schools coach students in test taking (Ornstein, 1993); years of service of staff (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Kohn, 2002); cultural bias of the test (Mabie, 2000); and, one-third of the high-stakes test graders do not have a college degree, and one-half do not have any teaching experience. Finally, on the family or community level, theories include: students' family income (Gustafson, 2002); the number of parents living in the home (Battle, 1997); per-capita income (Hawkins, 1993); parents' expectations (Seyfried & Joong, 2002); and not having positive role models at home or in the community (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001).

The Department of Education provides two options that allow students to meet competency determination standards after several unsuccessful retests. The first is an appeals process, which to date has been utilized by only 1,162 out of 2,348 students who

were denied diplomas (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004). The second is for students to enter a Pathways program (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004). This program guides students toward careers that may provide no upward mobility on the socio-economic ladder and places them in a pool with older adults who have been in a non-career advancement situation longer than they have. Although they may not have received a high school diploma, these more senior adults may have gained substantial work experience and knowledge; consequently, they may be more qualified for positions and more competitive than their younger counterparts. Therefore, it is quite likely that the youngsters may remain disenfranchised economically and socially longer than might have otherwise been expected.

There is considerable debate as to how the MCAS exam should be used to measure student performance; further, there are several factors that lead to students' inability to successfully pass the MCAS exam; and there are limited options that allow students to meet Competency Determination standards after several unsuccessful retests. Given the foregoing, the MCAS exam and the way in which it is administered is likely to have a negative effect on African-American students and potentially, other students of color.

IV. Testing and African-Americans

Since the 1920s, testing has played an important role in both the assessment of students' growth and influencing curricular change(s) in schools. It now plays an even larger role in educational reform. Elected officials have become major advocates for the expanded role of testing and the use of standardized test data in the articulation of educational policy at the elementary and secondary levels (Gifford, 1990).

African-American skepticism about the purposes and the politics of testing began in the 1950s when it became apparent that many firms and educational institutions, acting in contradiction to civil rights legislation and judicial decisions, were using standardized tests to deny educational and employment opportunities to people of color, African-Americans in particular (Gifford, 1990). Anecdotal observations and empirical studies have argued that standardized tests have a cultural bias (Miller, 1975; Valencia & Suzuki, 2000); national norms are based on Anglo, middle-class samples that are inappropriate for use with students of color (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999); the language of standardized tests ordinarily follows Anglo European language patterns (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999); and standardized tests tend to reflect a deductive mode of thinking which is not consistent with an Afro-centric world view and thinking style, which can be described as intuitive (Gifford, 1986). Finally, according to Agbenyega and Jiggetts (1999), standardized testing tends to be the main reason why students of color are more likely to be segregated into special education.

V. High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is playing a major role in determining the content, context, and quality of current and future educational policies (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001).

As it currently stands, 22 states (Table 4) have implemented an examination that students must pass before they graduate from high school (Center on Education Policy, 2006). High-stakes tests and high school graduation examinations tend to be found in states that have a higher percentage of African-Americans and Hispanics relative to the White population (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). It is predicted that by 2008, 81 percent of all American states will be implementing high school graduation examinations (Amrein

& Berliner, 2002). Interestingly, none of the 10 states with the lowest populations of African-Americans have implemented high-stakes tests, whereas all of the 10 states with the highest populations of African-Americans have done so (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). In the traditions of critical race theorist proponents (e.g., Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) one could speculate that perhaps high-stakes tests are being implemented to hinder some African-American students from graduating, thus further reinforcing a separate and unequal educational policy.

Individuals and groups have voiced their opposition to the whole idea of high-stakes testing (Fuhrman, Goertz, & Duffy, 2004; Harman, 2000; Ohanian, 1999). Critics of high-stakes testing charge that it has led to increased dropout rates; that more students are being forced to take the General Educational Development examination; that there is less chance for educational advancement and career opportunities; and that there has been a redirection of the focus of teaching and learning, such that teachers focus more time and attention on specific test content, rather than on curriculum standards. Administrators tend to reallocate resources to tested students at the expense of other learners, and students tend to devalue grades and school assessments (Albrecht & Joles, 2003; Amrein & Berliner, 2002, 2003; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; & Clarke, 2001; Phelps, 2003; Shepard, 2002; Stecher, 2002).

In contrast, advocates for high-stakes testing (e.g., Achieve, 2001; President George W. Bush, 2001; Rodney Paige, former Secretary of Education, 2001; The Education Trust, 2003) contend that students work harder and learn more when they have to take high-stakes tests. Teachers need high-stakes tests to know what is important to teach, while students benefit from high-stakes tests because of knowing what is important

to learn. Students will be motivated to do their best and score well on high-stakes tests. High-stakes testing, it is argued, aids teachers in instructional decision making and assists them in individualizing programs to support student learning needs. It further provides information about how well educational systems are doing; holds schools as public institutions and educators accountable for student performance; and helps policy makers judge the effectiveness of educational policies. If students score well on tests, they will have feelings of success, and, if they do poorly on such tests, they will make increased efforts to learn (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Rubin, 2003; Stecher, 2002; WestEd, 2000).

VI. Standardized Testing and Its Psychological Impact on Students of Color

It is the investigator's concern that high-stakes testing as part of the standardized testing movement has been detrimental to people of color, in particular African-Americans (Green & Griffore, 1980; Miller, 1975). It is well documented that the majority of students of color do not do well on standardized assessments (with the exception of some Asian students) (Boon & Adesso, 1974; Green & Griffore, 1980; Miller, 1975); yet laws are being implemented in secondary educational systems throughout the country that require students to pass certain standardized tests to graduate from a "public" high school or to be promoted to the next grade level (NCLB, 2001).

Research suggests that high-stakes testing is related to an increase in the number of students (especially African-American) who drop out, leave high school without a diploma, or who are retained (Haney, 2000; Horn 2004). Standardized testing in general tends to cause these students to be placed in special education classes and/or be tracked in lower curriculum levels (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Lee & Bryk, 1988; Orfield & Gordon,

2001).

The use of high-stakes standardized tests was intended to assist in the improvement of public education, and in some cases it has. However, it is the investigator's view that it has created long-term, intractable problems for people of color (in particular African-Americans).

Although intended to motivate students to reach higher performance levels, the high-stakes nature of standardized tests can have quite the opposite effect (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). To date, no research exists on the psychological effects of high stakes testing on African-American students in Massachusetts. However, research based on teacher opinion and anecdotal evidence indicate that high-stakes testing has caused some students to experience stress, anxiety, fatigue, anger, boredom, low self-esteem, low morale, worry, pessimism, and to become increasingly withdrawn (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Ediger, 2000; Jones & Egley, 2004; Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, & Davis, 1999; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Stecher, 1996; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000).

Little research has been done that attempts to connect high-stakes testing and its effects (i.e., positive, negative, neutral) upon African-American children. Furthermore, African-American children's voices have not been incorporated in any policy making regarding high-stakes testing.

VII. Theoretical Framework for Research

Researchers have used many theories to conceptualize the disparities between Black and White educational outcomes, e.g., family and cultural influences; and the effects of social stratification. While these theories provide some insight into explaining

Black-White educational disparities, the study proposed here will analyze disparities in Black-White educational outcomes through critical race theory.

A. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory provides four propositions that may help explain persistent racial inequality in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). First, the concept of race is a product of social thought and relations. It is, in other words, a social construction. As such, it is not something objective, inherent, or fixed. Race, as a social construction, corresponds to no biological or genetic reality; rather, race (and its components) is something that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. Second, racism is ordinary and is an ingrained feature of our social landscape; it is not perceived by people in the dominant culture. Third, racism is sustained by myths, presuppositions, and popular beliefs that make up common culture which renders Blacks and others as being inferior from the beginning. Fourth, White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks and other racial groups only when these promote White self-interest (Bell, 1980).

Critical race theory, as it relates to education, challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial groups. Solorzano & Yosso (2001) identify five themes of critical race theory of education that form its basic perspectives, pedagogy, and research methods.

First, critical race theory of education recognizes the central role racism plays in the structuring of schools and schooling practices and that racism intersects with other forms of subordination, including sexism and elitism. Critical race theory acknowledges

that notions of objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy, as well as curricular practices, such as tracking, teacher expectations, and intelligence testing, have historically been used to subordinate students of color. In addition, critical race theorists identify four components of racism: a) it has a cumulative impact on both the individual and the group; b) it takes on instrumental and individual forms; c) it has macro (e.g., racial profiling; African-American students being placed in remedial courses [versus college prep courses], without any apparent rationale) and micro (e.g., high school guidance counselors telling African-American students that they are not college material) components; and d) it has conscious and unconscious elements (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Second, critical race theory is cognizant of the fact that the experiential knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical race educators can use methods such as chronicles, family history, storytelling, scenario building, narratives, biographies, and parables to draw on the strength of the lived experiences students bring into and outside the classroom (Delgado, 1989).

Third, critical race theory challenges the essentialism and the uni-disciplinary focus of most traditional analyses and insists on an analysis of race and racism by placing them in both an historical (separate but unequal) and contemporary (high-stakes tests) context using interdisciplinary methods (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Fourth, critical race theory examines the system of education as part of a critique of societal inequality (i.e., social inequality is reinforced through the education system

and its practices). Critical race educators challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, through research, pedagogy, and praxis (i.e., ascertaining how a theory or lesson becomes part of lived experience). Critical race theorists argue that traditional claims of objectivity and meritocracy camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Finally, a critical race framework is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Critical race theorists envision the ultimate elimination of sexism and racism and the empowerment of the underrepresented.

Overall, critical race theory in education realizes first, that the educational system is designed to maintain a White hierarchy in place. Second, current instructional strategies assume that African-American students are deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Third, intelligence testing has been a movement to legitimize African-American students' deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism (Ladson-Billing, 1999). Fourth, inequality in school funding is a function of institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Finally, despite the recorded history of the fight for school desegregation, critical race theory argues that, rather than serving as a solution to social inequality, school desegregation has been promoted only in ways that are advantageous to Whites (e.g., African-American students being bused into predominantly White schools; the creation of well-funded magnet schools to lure White students back into urban schools) (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

One of the major critiques of critical race theory is that it ignores the possibility

that the racial inequality that it asserts has been detrimental to African-Americans, as a collective, may not actually be experienced equally or in the same manner by all African-Americans. There are some African-Americans who feel that they have never been subjected to racial inequality. In other words, critical race theory does assume that all African-Americans feel that the law has discriminated against them, which in reality has not been the case. Some African-Americans will argue that some of the laws or policies have been advantageous, allowing them to become more successful than they may otherwise have been. They argue that these laws or policies have opened doors that would have remained closed in the absence of such legislation (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; Civil Rights Act, 1964).

VIII. Significance and Rationale

This research has several significant implications for children, education, families, and generations to come. First, the investigator's review of the literature found that high-stakes tests have a negative impact on people of color (in particular African-Americans), the curricula are Anglo-centric (instead of multicultural and inclusive), and race is a major indicator of the quality of education that one receives. Therefore, the investigator's research was informed by the perception that high-stakes testing (in particular MCAS) may be returning to a de facto "separate and unequal" education for African-American children; this was ruled unlawful when the Supreme Court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. Further, this could potentially have negative effects (e.g., feelings of stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, etc.) on these students. We need to know how they feel about what policy and law makers are doing to them so that steps can be taken to amend laws and policies that may be detrimental to their generation and

future generations. Critical race theory would say that this has to be part of praxis, i.e., theory informing practice, practice informing theory.

IX. Goal and Objectives

A. Goal

The goal of this study is to ascertain if high-stakes testing (in particular the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) is being employed as a vehicle for strengthening a separate and unequal class system, and whether high stakes testing may be having negative effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, self-esteem, etc.) on African-American students.

B. Objectives

There are two objectives of this study. First, to give African-Americans students a chance to voice opinions on issues that are germane to their existence. Second, to add to the body of literature that is sparse at this time regarding African-American students and their perception of high-stakes testing.

X. Major Research Questions

When the court decided *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it was Kenneth Clark's classic "doll study" that was reflected in Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion that separating black and white children "solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." In this sense, the current study explores whether high-stakes testing is just another form of "separate and unequal" education for African-American children and may in fact potentially have negative effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, self-esteem, etc.) on these students. This proposition is examined through a qualitative

research design focused on three broad questions:

1. How do African-American students perceive the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination?
2. How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive through the Massachusetts public school system?
3. What impact (if any) has the MCAS had on African American students' educational experiences?

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to look at the effects of the MCAS on African-American students to ascertain if the law that was implemented to help students be successful may actually be having an adverse impact.

XI. Definitions Of Key Concepts and Terms

The operational definitions of key concepts and terms are defined as follows:

1. African-American/Black: Citizens or residents of the United States who have origins in any black racial groups of Africa (United States Census, 2000).
2. High-Stakes Testing: Tests that are used in making decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in a grade and which will receive a high school diploma (Heubert, 2000).
3. Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS): Is a series of standardized test designed to meet the requirements of the Education Reform Law of 1993. This law specifies that the testing program must:
 - test all public school students in Massachusetts, including students with disabilities and with limited English proficiency;
 - measure performance based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework learning standards;
 - report on the performance of individual students, schools, and districts.

In addition, beginning with the class of 2003, students must pass the grade 10 tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics as one condition of eligibility for

a high school diploma (in addition to fulfilling local requirements). And, beginning with the class of 2010, students must pass one of the four science exams (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, or technology/engineering).

The MCAS program is used to hold schools and districts accountable, on a yearly basis, for the progress they have made toward the objective of the No Child Left Behind Law, namely, that all students be proficient in Reading and Mathematics by 2014 (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003).

XII. Summary of Chapter One

The purpose of this chapter was to serve as a background to the study on the inception of high-stakes testing and how Massachusetts developed its own high-stakes test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System-MCAS). In addition, the investigator highlights the disparity in the passing rate between students of color, in particular African-American and Hispanic, relative to their White and Asian counterparts on the high-stakes exam. There is a discussion of the passing rate on high-stakes testing and how it may be adversely affecting African-American students' educational attainment and potentially causing negative effects such as stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, on these students. While high-stakes testing may be affecting other students of color in a similar manner, this dissertation focuses on African-American students.

A major objective of this study is to give African-Americans students a chance to voice opinions on issues that are germane to their existence. High-stakes testing is defined as tests that are used in making decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in a grade, and which will receive a high school diploma (Heubert, 2000). These tests were implemented with good intentions throughout the country and in

Massachusetts in particular; yet the law that was implemented to help students be successful may actually be having an adverse impact.

The following chapters cover, in greater detail, a review of the literature, the research design, the results of the data collected, discussion of the results, and finally, a summary discussing the implications of this study. Chapter Two is an extensive review of the literature. It identifies and summarizes the theories and studies that helped to shape this dissertation, namely, the positive and negative effects of high-stakes testing, the impact of slavery on the education of African-Americans, educational laws and policies, pros and cons of the MCAS, reliability and validity of testing used in assessment, scoring error in the MCAS, social impact of testing, theoretical perspectives of family and cultural influences, social stratification, and Critical Race Theory. Chapter Three details the methodology that was used to design and collect the data for this project. Chapter Four provides the research analysis, and Chapter Five discusses the results and their implications for theory, research and practice.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of the literature as it pertains to African-American urban students' perception of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts. The chapter is organized to review the literature on the negative and positive effects of high-stakes testing; the impact of slavery on education of African-Americans, as well as a historical perspective of slavery; educational laws and policies at the federal level and court cases that influenced African-American education; purpose, history, and pros/cons of the MCAS; reliability and validity of testing used in Assessment; scoring errors in high-stakes testing; social impact of testing; and finally, theoretical perspectives with Critical Race Theory as the lens with which this study views the disparities in Black-White educational outcomes.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the review of the literature.

I. High Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is a method associated with the school accountability movement and the standards movement that brought together people who wish to maintain high standards for school curricula and high expectations for the performance of all students (Gunzenhauser, 2003). The heightened emphasis on high-stakes testing has resulted in both negative and positive effects for students.

A. Negative Effects of High-Stakes Testing

There is considerable evidence that suggests that there are massive flaws in the growing use of such high-stakes standardized tests that impact both students and teachers. Stecher (2002) speculates that high-stakes standardized tests have multiple negative consequences. For instance, standardized tests cause some students to devalue grades and school assessments altogether, make other students more competitive, and still other students become frustrated and feel defeated. Koretz, McCaffrey, and Hamilton (2001) focused on the impact of standardized tests on teachers. They speculate that high-stakes standardized tests tempt teachers to cheat when preparing or administering tests to students. In essence, these authors suggest that teachers may engage in inappropriate test preparation and focus more on specific test content than on curriculum, which devalues teachers' sense of professional worth, among other things.

Simply put, standardized testing does not appear to improve educational value. In fact, The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (2001) asserts that high-stakes standardized tests have a deleterious effect on poor and minority students, in particular. These negative consequences manifest themselves in several ways. For instance, these tests are not good indicators of student achievement and refocus attention away from

more valuable or important learning opportunities. Standardized tests may place students under dire stress that is ultimately harmful to their health. Furthermore, standardized tests do not necessarily comprehensively measure teaching and learning in every school context, nor can such tests possibly detect qualitative variables, such as school or teacher effectiveness. Moreover, standardized tests tend to discourage students in the most vulnerable educational contexts, increasing dropout rates among at-risk-students. In the final analysis, public schools lose and private schools gain, at least those private schools that are not held to standardized testing procedures.

The Coalition For Educational Justice (n.d.) insists that high-stakes standardized testing is class-biased and racist. Specifically, teachers at schools in low-income communities of color tend to focus their pedagogy on “Back to Basic” lessons and testing drills, thus erecting boundaries around students’ ability to infuse themes or concepts beyond the discrete lesson or drill into other more complex and intellectualized learning - experiences. Conversely, teachers in schools located in more affluent areas may be able to focus on more rigorous, project-based learning activities that allow students to integrate concepts and utilize information in a more complex and intellectual fashion, as part of an on-going knowledge-building process.

Also, when given only in English, tests measure national origin more than mastery of school material. When tests are language-biased, otherwise competent students are inadvertently punished for not speaking English fluently. Finally, standardized tests do not measure several aspects of teaching and learning that are central, such as creativity and problem-solving abilities, among others.

Vinson, Gibson, and Ross (2001) maintain that high-stakes standardized tests fail

to acknowledge and account for individual and cultural differences in knowledge, values, experiences, learning styles, economic resources, and access to dominant academic artifacts that ultimately contribute to both the appearance of achievement and the status of cultural hegemony upon which standards-based reforms depend. This outright denial of diversity and the failure to account for these differences become increasingly consequential the further away from mainstream, White and middle class the individual is.

Ross (1999) declares that high-stakes standardized testing does not account for student motivations. Rather than contributing to students' motivation to achieve, standardized tests tend to promote anxiety and a preoccupation with test scores that often undermines students' interest in learning and desire to be challenged. Furthermore, standardized tests drive curricula and instructions in such a way that ultimately children are negatively impacted; their learning experience suffers as a result. For instance, teachers' pedagogy often becomes overly focused on test preparation and administration, which decreases the focus on time for quality teaching and learning that motivates students and enhances their commitment to scholarship or engagement in learning as a process. Unfortunately, many children equate their performance on standardized tests with a measure of their potential or worth. In the final analysis, this interpretation regards standardized test results as the final arbiter of students' value. In many ways, to be more effective, these tests would demand more standardization of curriculum and a virtual homogenization of students: this would necessitate tighter external control of teaching and learning and would call for persons who are many degrees removed from the direct experience to project their values onto learning processes and outcomes.

Standardized tests promote a singular view of truth, knowledge, and learning and completely disregard any value of diversity and multiplicity of truth, knowledge and learning.

B. Positive effects of high-stakes standardized testing.

Other scholars argue that high-stakes standardized testing has positive effects on students, teachers, and administrators. For instance, Stecher (2002) asserts that among students, high-stakes standardized testing provides clearer insight into their strengths and weaknesses because of the way in which both knowledge and skills are quantified. He asserts that this approach to measuring student outcomes sends clearer signals to students about what to study, helping them associate and align personal effort with rewards that are specifically manifested, in this case, as higher outcome measures. Finally, viewed from this perspective, standardized tests are believed to motivate students to work harder in school by increasing the level of accountability and explicitly and unequivocally quantifying the extent to which they have mastered particular skills and/or acquired discrete facts or knowledge.

Stecher (2002) further maintains that high-stakes standardized testing helps teachers identify areas of weaknesses and strengths in their curriculum, the quality of which is measured, albeit indirectly, through the standardized test scores of their students. In turn, this depiction suggests that teachers are thereby led to align both their pedagogical approaches as well as the content of class teaching and learning with externally defined educational learning goals measured by standardized tests. Such measures of students' learning enable teachers to better diagnose individual student needs, thus motivating teachers to work smarter and harder. Stecher (2002) asserts that

standardized tests ultimately benefit teachers because these professionals are encouraged to hone their teaching skills and enhance their craft through on-going professional development. Standardized tests also help teachers identify content not mastered by students and redirect instruction accordingly.

Stecher (2002) continues that high-stakes standardized testing helps administrators assess the quality of the programs at specific schools and across districts and directs them in making better and more informed decisions about resource allocation, such as identifying appropriate professional development opportunities and/or figuring out which professional developments would be most beneficial for teachers working with specific student populations. Moreover, standardized testing provides a basis on which administrators are able to critically examine school policies related to curriculum and instruction, leading them to recognize and then implement appropriate changes in school policies, and in doing so, improve teaching and learning on a far-reaching basis. Furthermore, Stecher asserts that high-stakes standardized testing improves policymakers' ability to monitor school system performance and helps policymakers assess the efficacy of educational policies, and fosters better allocation of state educational resources.

II. Slavery and Education

Clearly, educational scholars have a split view of the purpose and usefulness of standardized testing. In many ways, either argument sounds credible. However, rather than relying solely upon educational scholars to inform our understanding of the worth of standardized testing, it is far more prudent to refer to educational laws and policy, on an historical level, to shed light on this very important and compelling issue. As with any

reform or movement, many important events have precipitated this debate on standardized testing, particularly along the lines of educational laws and policies. Therefore, it is imperative to place an informed discussion of standardized testing in the context of these historical occurrences and policy decisions.

A. Impact of Slavery

Slavery was first and foremost an economic system designed to maximize the productivity of the slaveholders' investment in human labor. Thus, slavery itself was the severest barrier preventing African-Americans from acquiring an education. As a result, the institution of chattel slavery was dependent upon keeping the enslaved in a state of ignorance, for knowledge was the one factor that could have dismantled it (Fleming, 1976). Therefore, over a period of years, a well developed legal system to justify the institution of slavery became commonplace throughout the United States of America, which hindered most African-Americans from developing their intellectual potential and in the investigator's opinion, has had an indirect impact on African-Americans up to this day.

In 1740, South Carolina adopted the first compulsory ignorance law in America: And whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with grave inconveniences; Be it enacted, That all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall be hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money. (Klingberg, 1941, p. 69)

In 1832, Mississippi outlawed a gathering of six or more Negroes for educational purposes (Weinberg, 1977). An 1830 law in Louisiana prescribed imprisonment of from

one to twelve months for anyone guilty of teaching a slave to read or write (Woodson, 1968, p. 161). In 1831, Georgia passed a law providing that any Negro who should teach another to read or write should be punished by fine and whipping. If a White person should so offend, he should be punished with a fine not exceeding \$500 and with imprisonment in the common jail at the discretion of the committing magistrate (Woodson, 1968, p. 161). In 1819, Virginia prescribed corporal punishment, not exceeding twenty lashes, for any slaves assembling to read and write (Fleming, 1976). North Carolina and Alabama in 1832 similarly adopted laws that prohibited teaching slaves to read and write (Weinberg, 1977).

While laws were being instituted that prohibited slaves from receiving an education, there were free Negroes in the North and South who gained their education through one or more of the following: (a) public schools; (b) secret and other private schools; (c) Sabbath schools; (d) apprenticeship; and (e) special treaty requirements. Although avenues existed, they were met with great resistance. For instance, several southern states set up free “common” school systems before the Civil War, but all excluded Black children (Weinberg, 1977). In the North, many private schools were organized; however, they were often located in basements and spare rooms, lacking materials and books, and operating for as little as two months a year (Weinberg, 1977). In addition, Black schools were the targets of physical destruction and were often fired by the torch of White mobs. Moreover, many northern Whites viewed African-Americans not as real citizens, but as property to be supported by their owners (Morgan, 1995).

By the end of the Civil War, the American system of slavery in the South and race prejudice and discrimination in the North had successfully denied 4.5 million Blacks the

opportunity for learning (Fleming, 1976; Jones-Wilson, Asbury, Okazawa-Rey, Anderson, Jacobs, & Fultz, 1996).

B. Historical Perspective (Slavery)

To understand the state of the African-American family, it is mandatory to discuss the impact that slavery has had. However, there is considerable debate surrounding this topic. Some scholars view slavery as having had a negative impact upon the African-American family structure, whereas others view slavery as having had a positive impact upon the African-American family structure.

Billingsley (1992) states that the slave system had a crippling effect on the establishment, maintenance, and growth of normal patterns of family life among African-Americans. Franklin and Moss (2004) contends that slavery impacted African-American families through: (a) the practice of separating families, particularly not allowing most males to establish normal family ties, thus not being able to bond with their children; (b) forcing many of the males and females to serve as producers of future laborers by forcing the males to mate with numerous females and then selling the offspring. (The act of using some males as breeders is a classic example of the concept of “blaming the victim,” in that, despite being forced to live in this manner, they were branded as immoral for their actions.); (c) degrading the institution of marriage by not allowing couples to participate in the religious ceremony associated with marriage, but instead having them jump over a broom handle or some other meaningless act; (d) not allowing slaves to be educated; and (e) treating slaves as livestock to be bought and sold, with their last name changed to that of their current owner. Ingoldsby and Smith (1995) state that slavery impacted not only the household size and composition but also the physical health of mothers and children.

Some scholars contend that slavery had a positive impact on the African-American family. For instance, Staples and Johnson (1993) contend that slaveholders had a commitment to maintaining slave families intact. Furthermore, family life under slavery was one of the most important survival mechanisms for African people held in bondage (Blassingame, 1972, as cited in Staples & Johnson, 1993).

Gutman (1976) argues that the model of family development adopted by most slaves was nuclear in form and resembled that of their owners, including the customs of soliciting permission for courtship and eventual marriage. In their state of involuntary servitude, the slaves began to form a new sense of family. Whereas in African society, the family was based on the system of kinship within the tribes, under slavery it was in the community of slaves that individuals found their identity. Tribal affiliation was reorganized to encompass those individuals bound together by the commonality of their Blackness and their enslavement. In this context, many of the traditional functions of the family were carried out and the former philosophical principle of survival of the tribe held fast.

How have African-American families endured the slavery holocaust and racism, oppression, discrimination, and other issues still present at the dawn of the 21st century? Researchers have identified numerous strengths that African-American families have utilized throughout history. Among the strengths are kinship networks and extended family systems, strong male/female bonds, role adaptability and flexibility, strong religious and spirituality orientation, persistence, self-determination, language and expressive patterns, personal expressions through music and the arts, strong education and work ethic, and forgiveness (Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Hill,

1972; Hines and Boyd-Franklin, 1982; McFadden, 1993; Parkham, White, & Ajamu, 1999). As a result of these strengths, African-American families have developed “resiliency,” which is defined as the family’s ability to use its inherent strengths to challenge and triumph over adversity and, in doing so, emerge stronger and more confident (Johnson, 1995). In addition, Johnson (1995) identifies ten attributes of resiliency that contribute to the ability of these families to challenge and triumph over adversity.

First, the family is perceived as a "sacred ark," a vessel for containing and exercising precious myths, rituals, stories, and cultural traditions. Second, the extended family is essential to survival in providing unconditional warmth, and support in the form of emotions and economic resources. Third, the family serves as a source of spiritual nurturance, honoring the family’s connection to the metaphysical world and giving meaning to moral values and life transitions. Fourth, there exists a covenant between family members and elders who serve as role models, guardians of wisdom, and instructors in the “Way.” Fifth, the family guarantees each member’s safety and provides refuge. Sixth, through providing roles and rules and designating responsibilities to members, the family functions as a vehicle for socialization and communication, particularly emotional communication. Seventh, use of native language and dialect protects the socio-cultural heritage of the family system. Eighth, the family context protects its members from the external forces of oppression and racism while encouraging members to transcend a victim perspective. Ninth, the family system mitigates recent and long-term trauma associated with the process of migration and acculturation. Finally, the family nurtures the resilience of its members.

Family structure varies from culture to culture according to status, economics, and socialization (Williams, Auslander, Houston, Krebill, & Haire-Joshu, 2000). Billingsley (1968) contends that the African-American family structure consists of three general forms: nuclear, extended, and augmented. The nuclear family includes parent(s) and children, with no other members present. The extended family consists of parent(s), children, and relatives. The augmented family consists of parent(s), children, and non-relatives, sometimes called “fictive” kin. Within the framework of these three general forms, Billingsley (1968), developed twelve topologies of family structures:

1. Nuclear--Incipient--includes husband and wife in the home, no children, no relatives or others.
2. Nuclear--Simple--husband and wife in the home, children present, no relatives or others.
3. Nuclear--Attenuated--single parent, children present, no relatives or others.
4. Extended--Incipient--husband and wife, no children present, other relatives in the home.
5. Extended--Simple--husband and wife, children present, other relatives also present.
6. Extended--Attenuated--single parent, children present, other relatives also present.
7. Augmented--Incipient--husband and wife present, no children, non-relatives in the home.
8. Augmented--Incipient-Extended--husband and wife present, relatives and non-relatives in the home.
9. Augmented--Nuclear--husband and wife present, children present, non-relatives also living in the home.
10. Augmented--Nuclear-Extended--husband and wife present, children present relatives and non-relatives living in the home.

11. Augmented--Attenuated--single parent, children present, non-relatives living in the home.
12. Augmented--Attenuated-Extended--single parent, children present, relatives and non-relatives living in the home.

The African-American family structure, like the family structure of other ethnic families, has changed over the years. However, it is within the last several decades that significant changes have occurred that have had an enormous effect on the structure of the African-American family. First is the increase in the number of births to unmarried women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Second is the increase in female-headed families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998; Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). Third is the declining rate of marriage among African-Americans (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Fourth is the increase in marital disruption, defined as separation or divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Finally comes the high incidence of poverty among African-American children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1997).

III. Education Laws and Policies

As you can see, control over education for African-Americans was exercised by Whites, and in most situations, African-Americans were impeded vigorously at every turn by Whites to hinder them from obtaining an education and keep them in their place. Nevertheless, through sheer determination, blood, sweat, and tears, African-Americans have persevered.

Although on the surface significant gains have been made with regards to African-Americans' educational attainment, it seems that at the end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st century, laws and policies are being implemented to undermine

that progress.

A. Federal Legislation

1. Elementary and secondary education act of 1965

On April 11, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The ESEA was the most far-reaching legislation in education in the history of the United States. ESEA provided more than one billion dollars in federal funds for education.

The ESEA consisted of five major sections, or titles, and provided financial assistance for agencies, libraries, districts, and various other constituencies. ESEA contained the following components:

- Title I—Local Educational Agencies to Educate Students from Low-Income Families
- Title II—School Library Resources and Instructional Material
- Title III—Supplementary Education Centers and Services
- Title IV—Educational Research and Training
- Title V—Strengthening of State Departments of Education

Of the above, Title I was most beneficial for public schools, particularly those in low-income areas, funneling financial resources to schools with the highest concentration of poverty and allocating monetary resources to students who were not performing well academically and/or who were at risk of educational failure. The key provision of Title I included an expansion of Head Start, creation of Bilingual Education programs, establishment of Guidance and Counseling programs, and a significant increase in the number of Reading Instruction programs.

2. GOALS 2000: Educate America Act of 1994

On March 31, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act. The language of the GOALS 2000 legislation recognized that education is a state and local responsibility. However, GOALS 2000 also reiterated the fact that education must be viewed as a national priority and, as such, state and local departments of education must collaborate with federal agencies to help create and sustain productive and efficacious systems of education.

GOALS 2000 encouraged state-level departments of education to develop challenging educational standards for students. To that end, GOALS 2000 provided grants for schools, communities, and states to support the development of their own approaches to facilitating student achievement. Furthermore, GOALS 2000 sought to promote flexibility and local control by providing authority for the secretary of education to waive certain federal regulations for some states and communities attempting to implement various school improvement initiatives.

3. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. By all accounts, it is the most sweeping educational-reform legislation since President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced his landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. In purely technical terms, the No Child Left Behind Act legislation is actually a reauthorization and revision of the 1965 legislation.

The No Child Left Behind Act increased the role of the federal government in guaranteeing the quality of public education for all children in the United States—with an emphasis on increased funding for school districts in low-income areas, higher achievement for poor and minority students, and new measures to hold schools

accountable for their students' progress. In the process, No Child Left Behind has dramatically expanded the role of standardized testing in American public education, requiring that students in grades three through eight be tested every year in reading and mathematics.

B. Court Cases That Influenced African-American Education

1. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

The landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 gave legal credence to the separate but equal doctrine and, for African-Americans, this case signified racial identification. While the *Plessy* case does not deal directly with education, the opinion has far reaching implications for the education of African-Americans and other minorities. This case resulted in two key outcomes. First, it provided clarity on the legal definition of who is identified as African-American as well as who is not; it also supported the notion of the separate but equal doctrine. In large part, social status and treatment in the United States are based on one's racial identity. One outcome of the opinion that is frequently overlooked, except by many Blacks, is the fact that in the *Plessy* case, the court determined that any person with Black blood, no matter how microscopic an amount, is Black. Once identified Black, one can expect the subsequent circumstances and treatment.

2. *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950).

This was the first case concerning equal educational opportunities for African-Americans in higher education. McLaurin, who had a master's degree from Langston University, applied to the University of Oklahoma's doctoral program in education. He was denied admission because he was Black. In Oklahoma, it was a misdemeanor for

Blacks and Whites to attend desegregated higher education settings, including classrooms, the library, and the cafeteria.

Although McLaurin was eventually admitted to the doctoral program at the University of Oklahoma, his admission was contingent upon several conditions. These stipulations included: (a) he was to sit at an assigned desk in a room next to the classroom; (b) he was to use an assigned desk on the library mezzanine and he was not to use any desks anywhere else in the library; and (c) he was to eat at an assigned table in the cafeteria and not use the cafeteria when other students were there.

In *McLaurin*, the Supreme Court concluded: “The result is that appellant [McLaurin] is handicapped in his pursuit of effective graduate instruction. Such restrictions impair and inhibit his ability to study, engage in discussions and exchange views with other students, and, in general, to learn his profession.”

3. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Brown v. Board of Education, 1954 is the landmark case that has set the precedent for desegregation cases of today. Initially, this case was argued in 1952, and then reargued in 1953. The *Brown* case is a consolidation by the U.S. Supreme Court of cases from Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware. The lawyers for the plaintiffs wanted the Black students to be able to attend public schools in their respective districts on a nonracial basis. Each state had laws that sanctioned schools to be segregated by race. The plaintiffs based their cases on being denied equal protection under the laws.

4. Kenneth Clark's study

The *Brown v. Board of Education* case argument against segregation in schools relied heavily on the consideration of “intangible” factors, and on social science research as proof of the psychological damage that black individuals experienced under segregation (Jackson, 2001). The major piece of social science evidence brought before the court was Kenneth Clark's study that used white and black dolls to ascertain the sense of inferiority felt by African-American children as a result of separate educational facilities. Clark's testimony highlighted one particular study involving sixteen African-American children between the ages of six and nine. The children were shown black and white dolls that were similar with the exception of skin color. The children were asked a series of questions: which doll they liked best, which doll was nice, which doll looked bad, which doll look like a white child, which doll looked like a colored child, which doll looked like a Negro child, and which doll looked like you.

Ten of sixteen children preferred the white doll, choosing it as the one they liked best. Ten of sixteen children also chose the white doll as the nice doll, and eleven chose the black doll as the bad doll. Clark concluded that the African-American students, “like other human beings who are subjected to an obviously inferior status in the society in which they live, have been definitely harmed in the development of their personalities” (Jackson, 2001, p. 139).

The Clark study based on this empirical research was far from perfect. The existing research could not provide an answer to whether psychological damage experienced by African-American students resulted from discrimination experienced in their daily interaction in society. In other words, could the psychological damage

experienced by African-American students be a product of the families in which they were reared? Nevertheless, the Clark study paved the way for the courts to recognize that separate and unequal educational facilities created psychological damage to African-American students.

The above cases all involved Blacks and Whites being segregated and how equity, equality, and quality of education of African-Americans were initially impeded by laws and policies. These critical historical cases also highlighted how laws and policies can be potentially damaging psychologically when one group is stigmatized as undesirable in society.

IV. The Advent of Education Reform in Massachusetts

A. Purpose of the MCAS

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the Commonwealth's statewide assessment program developed in response to the Educational Reform Law of 1993. The primary purposes of MCAS are: (a) to measure the performance of individual students, schools, and districts based on the standards outlined in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks; (b) to raise student achievement; (c) to improve classroom instruction; and (d) to determine whether students meet the passing standard in English language arts and mathematics to earn a competency determination, one condition for receiving a high school diploma (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

The 1993 Educational Reform Law requires MCAS to include the participation of all students educated with Massachusetts public funds, including: (a) students enrolled in public schools; (b) students enrolled in charter schools; (c) students enrolled in

educational collaboratives; (d) students enrolled in private schools receiving special education that is publicly funded by the Commonwealth, including Chapter 766-approved private schools within and outside Massachusetts; (e) students receiving educational services in institutional settings; (f) students in the custody of the Department of Social Services; (g) students in the custody of the Department of Youth Services; (h) students with disabilities; and (i) students with limited English proficiency (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004)

B. History of MCAS

Regardless of whether the impetus for educational reform stems from the pen of a scribbling academic, an opportunistic politician, or a faceless bureaucrat, reform movements proceed in a step-wise fashion, involving many actors who play a wide variety of roles. Moreover, educational reform can evolve to such a degree that it is difficult to discern the original intent from the ultimate impact (Monk & Haller, 1990).

Education reform in Massachusetts was initially driven by *Webby v. Dukakis*, a school finance lawsuit, originally filed in Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1978. The lawsuit charged that students in property-poor towns were being denied the opportunity to receive an adequate education as guaranteed by the Massachusetts Constitution. That same year, the Massachusetts Legislature enacted the “School Funds and State Aid to Public Schools” in an effort to balance school funding across districts and to thereby attempt to ameliorate the financial disparity confronting schools in property-poor communities. As a result, the plaintiffs in *Webby v. Dukakis* temporarily suspended their action. However, in 1983, convinced that state remedies had not sufficiently improved schools in poor districts, the plaintiffs of *Webby v. Dukakis* again

moved forward with their suit and both parties started gathering evidence.

Two years later, in 1985, *Webby v. Dukakis* began to move through the court system as the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ordered preliminary hearings to begin. That same month, the Massachusetts Legislature passed “An Act Improving the Public Schools of the Commonwealth.” The plaintiffs in *Webby v. Dukakis* again withdrew their suit.

In 1989, attorneys working on behalf of students who attended public schools in Worcester, Carver, Revere, and Rockland filed *Levy v. Dukakis*. The lawsuit challenged the constitutionality of the state’s school-financing system. In 1990, the plaintiffs in *Webby v. Dukakis* became dissatisfied with the movement towards equity spending in school financing; therefore, a “restated complaint” in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court was filed. The case was effectively combined with *Levy v. Dukakis*, and heard in court as *McDuffy v. Robertson*. The official plaintiff in this case, Jami McDuffy, was a student in the Brockton Public Schools.

In December 1992, Justice Ruth Abrams of the Supreme Judicial Court ordered that *McDuffy v. Robertson* be heard by the full Supreme Judicial Court in February 1993. In the interim the Massachusetts Legislature was already working on broad-based education reform.

In June 1993, in *McDuffy v. Robertson*, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the Massachusetts school funding system was unconstitutional, and ordered the Legislature to craft a remedy. In its ruling, the Supreme Judicial Court outlined seven broad learning goals that a person would need to attain in order to be considered an educated person.

Governor William Weld signed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993

in June 1993. The act affected every aspect of K-12 public education, from teacher training and certification to curriculum frameworks and student assessment. Billions of dollars were designated for state education funding; by the year 2000, each student would be funded at a minimum of \$5,500 per year.

With the passage of the Education Reform Act in June of 1993, Massachusetts launched one of the most comprehensive and far-reaching educational reform efforts in the state's history. Prior to the passage of this law, the state had played a limited role in the development of curriculum and assessment of local schools and districts. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was an outgrowth of the Education Reform Act of 1993, which was driven by *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*, a 1993 lawsuit originally filed in 1978. The lawsuit alleged that the state of Massachusetts was allowing school districts in poor communities to offer lower quality education compared to the quality of education offered in affluent school districts. In other words, the students in poor communities were receiving a “second class” education, while the students in affluent communities were receiving a “first-class” education. The Massachusetts Supreme Court concurred with *McDuffy* and ruled that educational funding disparities harmed the quality of education for some students, denying them the quality of education to which they were constitutionally entitled. Therefore, in 1993, the legislature passed the Education Reform Act, calling for the creation of curriculum frameworks or educational guidelines for what should be taught in all schools across the state and defined specific learning objectives for different grade levels.

The Education Reform Act of 1993 called for an accountability standard that

would measure the extent to which teachers' pedagogy fit within state-determined curricular frameworks. In that light, this legislation measured teacher and school accountability by the extent to which students could demonstrate competency in the frameworks (also known as core areas) of language, math, science, history, art, health, and foreign language. The first four subjects are covered by the MCAS. According to this educational policy, a passing grade in the first two subjects (English language and math) on the 10th grade MCAS is required for high school graduation. In subsequent years, the plan was to incorporate more content areas into the recommendation requirements, in addition to increasing the minimum passing score that students in Massachusetts would be required to earn to graduate from high school.

The MCAS scores are divided into four levels: advanced, proficient, needs improvement, and failed. The exam consists of multiple choice questions (used in all content area tests, which require students to select the correct answer from a list of four options); short answer questions (used only on the mathematics tests, requiring students to generate a brief response, for example, a short statement or computation leading to a numeric solution); open response questions (used in all content area tests) that require students to provide a one- or two-paragraph written response or to respond with a chart, table, diagram, or graph, as appropriate; and writing prompts (used only on the English Language Arts test) that provide a stimulus for students to create a written composition; some prompts are related to reading a brief passage. Initially, fourth, eighth, and tenth graders were to be tested, but now grades three through eight and grade ten are tested each year (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

Starting with the class of 2003, students in tenth grade must meet or exceed the

Needs Improvement threshold score of 220 in both English Language Arts and Mathematics in order to graduate. Although Tables 1 and 2 indicate that African-American and Latino students have improved their percentage passing rate, both groups are still significantly behind their White and Asian student counterparts on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination. Later I will discuss how the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination has been detrimental to African-American students.

Table 1: English Language Arts

Race/ Ethnicity	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Black	35%	36%	34%	62%	61%	66%
White	67%	69%	69%	85%	87%	88%
Asian	61%	66%	64%	78%	86%	89%
Hispanic	32%	36%	33%	55%	60%	63%

MCAS Performance—Grade 10: Percent of Students Passing by Race/Ethnicity
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004

Table 2: Mathematics

Race/ Ethnicity	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Black	15%	17%	20%	50%	41%	57%
White	52%	53%	62%	83%	79%	84%
Asian	57%	63%	75%	92%	87%	94%
Hispanic	13%	14%	23%	48%	44%	59%

MCAS Performance—Grade 10: Percent of Students Passing by Race/Ethnicity
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004

According to the Massachusetts Department of Education’s report in 2004, the class of 2003 has had five opportunities to pass the MCAS test, starting in the spring of

2001. Approximately 10.69 percent of 60,862 students did not receive a high school diploma in 2003, although they met the local requirements for a diploma. In addition, when one takes into account that 77,733 students started out in the class of 2003 in the ninth grade, approximately 16,871 students missed the opportunity of receiving a high school diploma. This fact is quite compelling and illuminates educational failure on both the state and local level. However, in the final analysis, students, African-American students in particular, end up bearing the brunt of this educational failure by not receiving a high school diploma, which has far-reaching implications in terms of their professional and educational options thereafter.

There are several factors that could account for students' inability to pass the MCAS thus far. Some place the responsibility on the individual student, some on the family structure, some on the school or community group. In terms of the responsibility being at the individual, student-level, there are numerous explanatory constructs that emerge, for instance: (a) students do not perform well on standardized tests due to anxiety, stress, fatigue, or test phobia (Connor, 2003); (b) students don't do well because of their attitude towards the test (Steele, 1997); and (c) students don't possess the intellectual capacity to pass standardized tests. On the school level, explanations might include: (a) teachers are unable to teach well (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Center on Education Policy, 2001); (b) teachers have low expectations of the students, especially students in low-income communities, or students of color, and therefore, do not adequately prepare students for the test (Ferguson, 2003; Gill & Reynolds, 1999); (c) teachers aren't certified in the subject matter that they are teaching and are, therefore, unable to offer students appropriate, enriching, and informative educational exposures in

the content area (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachhum, 2005; No Child Left Behind, 2001); (d) experienced teachers are assigned to the high performance schools and the inexperienced teachers, who are relatively unable to offer enriching educational opportunities to students, are assigned to the low performance schools (Kohn, 2002); (e) some schools have more financial resources and are, therefore, able to offer students more enriched and extensive learning opportunities, both materially and pedagogically (Brantlinger, 2003; Center on Education Policy, 2001); (f) pupil/staff ratio; (g) class size; (h) district per-pupil spending; (i) years of service of staff (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachhum, 2005; Kohn, 2002); (j) schools coach students in test taking (Ornstein, 1993); and (k) cultural biases of the test (Mabie, 2000). Finally, on the family structure or community level, factors might include: (a) students' family income (Gustafson, 2002); (b) number of parents living in the home (Battle, 1997); (c) parents' expectations (Seyfried & Joong, 2002); (d) per-capita income (Hawkins, 1993); and (e) not having positive role models at home or in the community (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001).

Considering all of the extraneous variables that factor into the quality of education that African-American students, other students of color, and low-income students receive, it is highly unlikely they would be successful in passing the MCAS.

C. MCAS Pros and Cons

Depending upon the magnitude of a policy, enormous controversy can be generated. And given the controversy surrounding "high stakes" testing in our present time, it's no surprise that the MCAS has contributed to that controversy.

The supporters of MCAS (Gov. Mitt Romney, Mass Insight Education, former House Speaker Thomas Finneran, as well as supporters in education, the business community,

and others) argue that MCAS has driven schools to work harder for students of color and students with special needs. These populations are getting a lot more attention; MCAS provides students with diplomas that mean something, diplomas that guarantee that kids do have the essential skills to meet the demanding criteria of today's workplace; MCAS stops the practice of meaningless promotions from grade to grade and ensures that everyone learns the required material in each grade; all children deserve access to a high quality education; MCAS tests skills that matter; and MCAS is improving student learning in English and math.

The critics of MCAS, including the NAACP, the Latino Parents Association, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the ACLU of Massachusetts, and the Student Coalition Against MCAS (SCAM) argue that: MCAS is unfair to certain groups; that MCAS is designed to create a permanent underclass; that it discriminates against minorities, is not an accurate measure of students' achievement and will result in an increased dropout rate; and that MCAS undermines the pursuit of excellence in the classroom. Every hour children spend being drilled on test-taking skills is an hour they are not spending making sense of ideas. Parents feel that these tests should not be used as a requirement for high school graduation. The content does not reflect what we as a society honor, what we think it means to be well educated, and what matters to us about schooling and human life. The accuracy of the test is problematic; it does not meet the standards of reliability and validity. And some argue that MCAS is counterproductive. It is well known that inner-city schools have a lot of problems and the MCAS is not needed to reveal that; and the MCAS "one-size-fits-all test" does not measure the true abilities of children with learning disabilities and other learning issues.

V. Reliability and Validity of Testing

Reliability and Validity are two essential components of implementing and interpreting standardized test outcomes. According to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999, p.25), “reliability refers to the consistency of such measurement when the testing procedure is repeated on a population of individuals or groups.” In other words, what is the likelihood that a student’s score, proficiency level, or pass/fail status would change if that student took the same test on another occasion or took a different version of the test that was substantively equivalent to the first test?

According to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999, p. 9), “validity refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by proposed uses of test.” The test itself is not validated, and test scores per se are not validated. It is the interpretation determined by the proposed use that is validated (Messick, 1989).

Standardized tests must be both reliable and valid for all students. By definition, standardized tests should neither substantially and systematically underestimate nor overestimate the achievement, competencies or abilities of any particular group (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). In addition, when decisions are made using standardized tests that affect students’ educational opportunities and benefits, it is imperative that these decisions be made on accurate and fair assessment data. Indeed, when test scores are used in making educational decisions for individual students, it is crucial that these assessments accurately measure students’ abilities, knowledge, skills, and needs, and do so in a non-discriminatory fashion, thus treating all students fairly,

regardless of race, national origin, sex, or disability (Office for Civil Rights, 2000).

A. Reliability

Now that a basic definition of reliability has been established, four different specific types of reliability will be discussed: (a) test/retest reliability; (b) alternate-forms of reliability; (c) split-half reliability; and (d) inter-rater reliability. Each type provides a measure of consistency, but the various types of reliability are used in different situations.

Test/Retest reliability refers to “the extent to which scores on the same measured variable correlate with each other on two different measurements given at two different times” (Stangor, 1998, p. 82). If the test is reliable, the two scores for each individual will be similar, and thus the resulting correlation coefficient will be high (close to +1.00).

Although the test/retest procedure is a direct way to measure reliability, it does have some limits. First, on many tests there will be practice effects. Some people will become better at test-taking by the time of the second test, therefore reducing the correlation. Second, the time interval between the first and second test may be too short, therefore, people may be able to recall how they answered previously, both correctly and incorrectly. This may result in testing their memories and not the reliability of the testing instrument (Jackson, 2003).

Alternate-Forms reliability refers to “the extent to which two different versions of the same test are administered to the same group of students in as short a time period as possible, and their scores correlated” (Kubiszyn & Borich, 1996, p. 311). Just like test/retest reliability, alternate-form reliability establishes the stability of the test over time and also the equivalency of the items from one test to another. Also, like test/retest reliability, it has some problems. First, one must ensure that alternate-form reliability

tests are truly parallel (i.e., have the same number of items, same difficulty level, time limits, examples, instructions, and format). Second, if the tests are truly equivalent, people may be able to practice for the tests (Jackson, 2003).

Split-Half reliability refers to “the degree of consistency of scores from separate items on a test or questionnaire consisting of multiple items” (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003, p. 94). The major problem with split-half reliability is determining how to split the items so that the two halves are in fact equivalent (Jackson, 2003).

Inter-Rater reliability refers to “the consistency from rater to rate, rather than from time to time or even from test to test” (Salkind, 2006, p. 111). For example, let’s say that you are observing play behavior in children. Rather than simply making observations on your own, it is advisable to have several independent observers collect data. Once the data are collected, inter-rater reliability needs to be established by examining the percentage of agreement among the raters.

Although the above properties are essential for a test to be reliable, Le & Klein (2002) have identified four broad classes of factors that affect/lower scorer reliability: (a) item sampling; (b) transitory variables; (c) rater agreement; and (d) test length and format. Item sampling refers to placing a set of questions on one version of a set and putting a different set of questions on a different version of a test. Although both sets of test questions are designed to be comparable, a given student may do better on one set than on another set while the reverse may be true for another student. In short, a student’s score may fluctuate with the format of the particular version of the test taken.

Transitory factors refer to situations that may be short-lived (or transient) and that may have an impact on a student’s performance on a given test. Transitory factors

typically refer to psychological and emotional factors that affect an individual test taker. They are also often associated with environmental factors and a variety of other idiosyncratic variables that may impact test performance. A student's physical well-being is an example. A student's test performance may, in part, be a function of whether the individual is healthy or ill. On an emotional level, another transitory factor includes the extent to which the student suffers from test anxiety; that is, if the student is relaxed or anxious during the test and the effect that this may have on the individual's performance. Another significant transitory factor is whether the student is rested or tired on the day the test is given. Yet another important transitory factor is the time of day the test is given. Transitory factors that are environmental include the room lighting as well as whether the testing environment is comfortable or not, or how crowded the auditorium or room is on the day of the test, along with a broad array of other environmental conditions. Other important factors include the degree of adherence to instructions and time limits by the individual who administers the test, the quality of the test booklets and other materials, and the encouragement that teachers give to students to do well on the tests.

Rater agreement takes into account the extent to which there is inter-rater agreement. This is particularly significant in light of scoring essay examinations. Factors to consider include: (a) raters may have different average scores (i.e., some raters are more lenient than others); (b) score spreads (i.e., how much raters use the full range of possible scores); and (c) relative standing (i.e., the extent to which raters agree on which answers are better than others). In addition, corresponding differences can arise when a rater evaluates the same answers on different occasions.

Test length is a factor since shorter tests are typically less reliable than their longer counterparts—in fact, the shorter the test, the less reliable it is. However, this is not to suggest that the opposite is true; that is, that longer tests are always more reliable. In fact, a test can be too long, which in turn may cause certain unwanted consequences, such as fatigue. Consequently, student scores may not necessarily accurately measure what students understand and do not understand. Instead, when fatigue sets in because of a lengthy test, the lower scores may signify the onset of fatigue, which makes it difficult for students to demonstrate their knowledge or competencies on the given test.

As a result of all the extraneous variables that affect the reliability of a test as outlined and elaborated on above, test reliability should be viewed with high skepticism. In other words, tests may not be measuring what students do and do not know. Rather, test scores may be detecting the psychological, emotional, and environmental factors discussed. Therefore, one could easily question the reliability of the results of any given test.

B. Validity

While the above definition of validity appears to be simple and straightforward, there are several different types of validity, each of which is used to establish the trustworthiness of results from a test or an assessment tool: (a) face; (b) content; (c) construct; (d) concurrent; (e) criterion; and (f) predictive. Each of these types of validity takes a somewhat different approach in assessing the extent to which a measure measures what it purports to.

Face validity is the least important aspect of validity, because validity still needs to be directly checked through other methods (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003; Lyman, 1978).

Therefore, if an instrument has face validity it means: “Does it appear to measure what it’s supposed to measure?” For example, we expect a math test to look like a math test. Face validity is based on subjective judgment and is difficult to quantify (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003). In addition, face validity is not always necessary or even desirable in a test (Stangor, 1998).

When discussing content validity, Jackson (2003) describes it as “the extent to which a measuring instrument covers a representative sample of the domain of behaviors to be measured” (p. 44). For example, a history exam in which the questions use complex sentence structures may unintentionally measure students’ reading comprehension skills rather than their historical knowledge. The degree of content validity is not expressed as a number, but, is a subjective assessment based on a comparison between the items on a test and the content areas that the test purports to measure (Gellman, 1995).

Construct validity is considered by many to be the most important type of validity (Jackson, 2003; Lyman, 1978; Salkind, 2006). Salkind (2006) defines it as “the extent to which the results of a test are related to an underlying psychological construct. It links the practical components of a test score to some underlying theory or model of behavior” (p. 116). For example, performance on a newly developed intelligence test might be correlated with performance on an existing intelligence test for which construct validity has been previously established.

Criterion validity is defined as “the extent to which a measuring instrument accurately predicts behavior or ability in a given area”(Jackson, 2003, p. 44). For instance, imagine a hands-on-driving test has been shown to be an accurate test of driving

skills. By comparing the scores on the written driving test with the scores from the hands-on driving test, the written test can be validated by using a criterion related strategy in which the hands-on driving test is compared to the written test.

Concurrent validity is described as “the extent to which scores obtained from a new measure are directly related to scores obtained from a more established measure of the same variable”(Gravetter & Forzano, 2003, p. 88). For example, a driver’s test (the actual road test, not paper and pencil test) has concurrent validity. You take the test to evaluate how well you can drive now.

Predictive validity is defined as “the extent to which scores obtained from a measure accurately predict behavior according to a theory” (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003, p. 88). An educational psychologist who predicts school performance from SAT or GRE scores might be an example.

Obviously, it is necessary that a measurement be valid. Worthen, White, Fan, and Sudweeks (1999) identify seven extraneous factors that can prevent the test items or assessment tasks from functioning as intended, thereby lowering the validity of the interpretations from the assessment results.

1. Test-taking skills. Mastery of certain skills (appropriate allocation of time, deductive reasoning and guessing strategies, and so on) allows respondents to more fully demonstrate mastery of test objects, or true ability levels.
2. Testwiseness. The ability to use “clues” in the test to obtain a higher score than deserved is referred to as testwiseness.
3. Response sets. Test takers exhibit certain styles or preferences in the way they respond to tests.
4. Anxiety and motivation. Performance may be impaired by excessive anxiety or inadequate motivation.
5. Administrative factors. The way in which a test is administered (the extent to

which cheating is tolerated, the clarity of instructions, and so on) can affect scores.

6. Coaching and practice. Coaching (for example, special practice drills) may affect test scores.
7. Test bias. The degree to which a test is biased (constructed in a way that some people have an unfair advantage over others) may cause some people to do worse or better than they deserve to based on their knowledge of the subject matter (p. 153)

Considering that there are several factors and outside entities that contribute to the validity of tests, the likelihood that tests are actually valid for all students at all times is highly questionable.

VI. Scoring Errors in High-Stakes Testing

A. Overview

Unbelievably, scoring errors are pervasive in high-stakes testing. That is particularly disturbing given the importance attached to the results of high-stakes testing in making educational decisions for individual students. Scoring errors should be minimal given how high the stakes are for students. Hendrie and Hurst (2002) report that Harcourt Educational Measurement, the contractor that produces testing assessments for secondary educational systems throughout the country, mistakenly failed 736 students on the high school graduation test when these students had, in fact, passed it. Similarly, Franck and Hacker (2000) report a less egregious but still significant, scoring error on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). Questioning some scores, administrators from the Missouri Unified School District asked McGraw Hill, the contractor, to rescore 200 essays that the administrators believed received unreasonably low scores. Upon doing so, McGraw Hill admitted that 33 of these formerly failed essays should receive higher scores.

These scoring errors have also gone in the opposite direction. For example, Houtz (1999) reports that scores were inflated on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), for over 400,000 student essays. Apparently, upon re-scoring the essay, it was discovered that a scorer gave too many perfect scores for grammar and spelling. Furthermore, Pearce (1999) reports that on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), Arizona state educators found an incorrectly keyed item in the tenth-grade mathematics test. Bower (1998) reports that on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), a calculation error resulted in incorrect scores for grades four, eight, and ten. De Vise (1998) reports that on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) an errant computer scanner that counted all responses marked B as incorrect, was blamed for an error that affected about 19,500 of 650,000 test-takers. Harp (1997) reports that on the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS), a programming error yielded low vocational studies and arts and humanities test scores. Ross (1997) reports on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP), due to a scoring discrepancy, students with high percentile rankings were classified as requiring remediation, while those with much lower percentile rankings were said to have met state standards. Frahm (1999) reports that on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), the Department of Education determined that student scores on the essay portion of the test were too low, requiring that 75,000 sixth and eighth grade essays be rescored. The DOE then determined that the second set of scores was too high.

Undoubtedly, regardless of whether the scoring error overestimates or underestimates students' abilities, knowledge, or competencies, it is highly probable that these scoring errors on high-stakes tests have had dire consequences psychologically, and

may have caused stress, anxiety, and depression, mostly impacting students, and their parents, teachers, and school administrators.

B. MCAS

Regrettably, the MCAS has not been able to avoid scoring errors. Gallagher (2001) reports that a science professor detected errors on four items on the 2001 tenth-grade MCAS exam. Additionally, Kurtz & Vaishnav (2002) report that a student was able to identify a second solution for a mathematics multiple choice problem on an MCAS retest. Vaishnav (2000) reports that a teacher identified two correct answers on a multiple choice item from the eighth-grade history test; however, only one was keyed as correct. In fact, 666 eighth-graders passed after being told they had failed, and 883 other students moved up one performance category. In all, 14,000 students out of 75,000 had been given scores one point too low.

As if the scoring errors on individual items or for individual students were not enough to make one seriously concerned about the results of standardized testing, there have been instances in which students' tests were actually lost. For instance, Myers (2000) reports that Massachusetts school officials notified Harcourt Brace after ascertaining that some test scores were missing in their school results. In response, Harcourt Brace was able to locate some of the tests, but was unable to find all of the missing tests. In another incident, Myers (2000) reports substantive information that was recorded on the test itself incorrectly. For example, on the fourth-grade English/Language Arts exam, President James Madison was incorrectly identified as President John Madison. Furthermore, Coleman (2000) reports that several Massachusetts educators detected a printing error on one-sixth of the eighth-grade

science tests that led students to finish before the test concluded.

Given the number of errors that have occurred with high-stakes testing in Massachusetts, negative psychological implications for students can be deduced in some situations.

VII. Social Impact of Testing

The use of high-stakes tests in schools has been questioned since the tests were first implemented in most states several years ago. Some have questioned the use of student test scores to measure educational quality (Popham, 1990), while others have questioned the more direct effects on students and teachers (Kohn, 2002). Yet, politicians and many in the public arena seem more determined than ever to hold educators accountable through the use of high-stakes tests.

While high-stakes testing was intended to motivate teachers and students to achieve optimal performance levels, studies conducted soon after the implementation of high-stakes programs indicate that high-stakes testing can have quite the opposite effect on teachers. Hoffman, Assaf, and Parris's (2001) survey of Texas educators found that 85 percent of teachers were thinking of leaving the profession because of the restraints the tests place on decision making. Similarly, Jones and Egley's (2004) survey of 708 Floridian educators found that some teachers felt that their motivation to remain teachers had decreased and thus were more likely to leave the profession. Again, Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, and Davis's (1999) survey of 470 North Carolina elementary teachers indicated that 80 percent of teachers were thinking of leaving the profession because of the implementation of high-stakes testing.

Studies also suggest that high-stakes testing assessments increase stress and

anxiety among teachers. Jones and Egley's (2004) study of teachers in Florida found that some teachers felt that they were feeling stress from the pressure of high-stakes testing. Jones et al. (1999) state that 76 percent of the teachers reported that teaching was more stressful as a result of high-stakes testing.

As the pressure to improve test scores intensifies throughout the country, it appears that the higher the stakes on a given test, the greater the level of teacher focus on test preparation and the greater the chance of teachers' teaching to the test to the detriment of other aspects of teaching/learning, as discussed in the following section.

A. Curriculum

Mathison & Freeman's (2003) one-year ethnographic field study of two school districts in upstate New York found that fourth grade teachers reported that most of their time was spent on high-stakes testing. Similarly, Moon, Callahan, and Tomlinson's (2003) questionnaire of educators from all 50 states and the District of Columbia found that teachers reported spending substantial time preparing students for high-stakes testing prior to and after the test. Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris's (2001) survey of Texas educators found that 60 percent of teachers reported that high-stakes testing leaves little time for real instruction. In open-ended interviews conducted with educators in three states, Brown (1992) found that teachers reported altering the scope and sequence of the curriculum and eliminating concepts that were not covered on state tests.

While many believe that rigorous testing policies, such as high-stakes testing, encourage teachers and students to get serious about teaching and learning, it appears that the test encourages teachers to teach to the test and consequently, narrow the curriculum and instructions. Furthermore, teachers are cognizant of the consequences that high-

stakes testing is having on some students.

B. Teachers' Perception of the Effects of Standardized Testing on Students

Jones & Egley's (2004) survey of 708 Floridian educators found that a quarter of the teachers reported that high-stakes testing had caused students to feel too much pressure and stress. Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao, and Li (2003) interviewed 360 educators in three states, on-site, and found that the interviewees reported that high-stakes testing created more stress for students. Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, and Davis's (1999) survey of 470 educators in North Carolina found that 61 percent of the educators reported that their students were more anxious as a result of high-stakes test. A survey conducted by Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, and Stecher (1996) found that one-third of educators in Kentucky reported that student morale had declined in response to Kentucky's high-stakes test.

There is no question that many students undergo serious stress when asked to take part in high-stakes testing, and as a result of the stress, students may be subjected to decreased social functioning, lower feelings of self-worth, and lowered achievement.

C. Students' Perception of Standardized Testing

Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney's (2000) examination of 303 (73.3%) 4th graders, 58 (14.1%) 8th graders, and 50 (12.2%) 10th graders' drawings of themselves taking the Massachusetts high-stakes test found that a small minority of drawings portrayed students as anxious, angry, bored, pessimistic, or withdrawn from testing.

Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000) surveyed 46 second through eleventh grade classes in Michigan, California, Arizona, and Florida. Their investigation found that students hold generally positive views about achievement tests but that increasing age and

familiarity with tests is accompanied by more negative attitudes. Many older students distrusted the accuracy and validity of the tests, were dissatisfied with the feedback and information provided, and worried about the social comparisons that might result from the test scores. Older students also reported that they gave less effort and had fewer effective strategies for taking achievement tests than younger students.

Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000) surveyed 120 students in fourth grade, 41 students in seventh grade, and 79 students in tenth grade in Michigan and discovered that tenth graders harbored many negative attitudes about the state-mandated standardized test. The tenth graders thought that it was acceptable to cheat, to fill in answers blindly, and to try half-heartedly to do well. Moreover, they did not feel anxious about the test nor did they bother checking their answers. However, younger students held more positive views of the state-mandated standardized test. Two-thirds of the fourth graders agreed that they or their teachers thought it was important to do well.

Paris, Roth, and Turner's (2000) survey of 61 fifth-grade and 65 eighth-grade students in Michigan revealed evidence of students' negative perceptions of high-stakes achievement tests. Some fifth graders and many eighth graders regarded the test as unimportant. Older students placed less value on the standardized test; they thought the test was not an accurate measure of their ability; and they expressed fewer reasons to try harder. Although eighth graders placed less value on the standardized achievement test, they expressed more anxiety over their performance than the fifth graders.

Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth's (1991) survey of students in grades two to eleven revealed that by adolescence many students had become suspicious and cynical about tests. A large number of students, especially low achievers, were anxious about

tests, cheated, tried half-heartedly, or used poor test-taking strategies.

Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth (1991) conducted another survey of 250 Michigan students in grades 4, 7, and 10 about a state-mandated criterion-referenced achievement test. They found that older students, and 10th graders in particular, cared less about how well they did on the test, thought that parents and teachers did not care about their test scores, felt less prepared to take the tests, received less explanation and encouragement from teachers, did not read the entire passage, thought it was okay to let their friends see their answers, were less likely to go back and check their answers, and were more likely to fill in the answer sheet without thinking.

Roth and Paris (1991) studied 61 fifth-grade and 65 eighth-grade students in public schools in Michigan. Their survey revealed that the fifth-grade students had a more positive perception of standardized tests; whereas the eighth-grade students were suspicious of such tests.

Paris, Turner, and Lawton's (1990) survey of 1,000 students in Michigan, California, Arizona, and Florida found that younger students believed that the test was useful for measuring how much students learned, identifying which students have specific learning problems, and showing a student's intelligence. On the other hand, high school students believed that test scores did not show how intelligent you are, and that test scores do not necessarily reflect the qualities of a good student.

In a survey of the Stanford Achievement Test, Karmos and Karmos (1984) found that 360 sixth through ninth graders held moderately positive attitudes about the test in general, but many students reported negative attitudes about the purpose of the test and a lack of motivation to try harder. For example, 47% of the students thought that taking

achievement tests was a waste of time; 36% thought achievement tests were dumb; and 36% of the students thought more about just getting the achievement test over with than doing well on it. Almost a quarter of the students reported that there was no good reason to try to do well on achievement tests and 21% said they did not try very hard. The students' attitudes were related significantly to their performance on the tests, $r = .37$. Students with high scores reported more positive attitudes and greater effort than the students with low achievement test scores.

The results of these studies clearly indicate that as students get older, their attitudes towards standardized testing become increasingly negative. Therefore, their negative perception appears to have direct consequences for their test-taking behavior.

VIII. Theoretical Perspectives

Researchers have formulated several theories to explain the disparities between Black and White educational outcomes. These theories include: (a) family and cultural influences; (b) the effects of social stratification; and (c) critical race theory.

Admittedly, these theories may provide limited insight on Black-White educational disparities. Therefore, each will be discussed briefly. However, most of this discussion will be focused on exploring these differences through critical race theory and analyzing these differences through that lens.

A. Family and Cultural Influences

Mickelson's (2002) explanations for racial disparities in school performance focus on family background and fall into two broad categories. The first concerns characteristics of families, such as the number of children, the marital status of parents, the number of adults in the household, wealth, income, and the adults' educational

attainment. The second category concerns social class dynamics. These dynamics are deeply connected with the ways in which families interact with schools, how parents socialize their children for schooling, and how parents participate in their children's education.

1. Social capital.

Social capital provides another explanation for racial disparities in educational outcomes. It accrues from membership in social networks that provide valuable information and resources to students. Like cultural capital, social capital is related to SES. To the extent that Blacks have lower SES than do Whites, they are likely to have less social capital, resulting in fewer educational advantages (Hallinan, 2001).

2. Financial and human capital.

Families' financial capital influences how well children eat, their health, and what kinds of books, if any, are present in their homes. In addition to the necessities of life, money purchases access to the best developmental preschools, tutors, computers, psychologists who test for giftedness, and homes with quiet bedrooms for doing homework. Moreover, in the case of a two-parent family in which one parent earns enough money to support the family, the other parent is free to volunteer in the child's school (Mickelson, 2002).

Parents' human capital influences student outcomes as well. For example, the more education parents have, the better they are able to help with their children's homework. When schools are neutral with regard to (or passively accept) students' differences in parental resources, parents' resources (or lack thereof) interact with school organizational structures to contribute to discrimination in education (Mickelson, 2002).

While social, financial, and human capital are all important factors that influence how successful students are in their educational experiences, it is the investigator's contention that these concepts are not prerequisites for African-American students because historically, African-Americans have been able to obtain superior academic achievement in spite of limited social, financial, and human capital.

B. Cultural Effects

1. Cultural deprivation.

Cultural deprivation theory suggests that the failures of Blacks are due not so much to genetic inferiority but to Blacks' own negative and self-defeating attitudes. According to this theory, deep structural problems in the Black community having to do with values and attitudes, disadvantage Black students and inhibit their educational accomplishments. This perspective claims that Black families fail to provide their children with the kinds of skills and educational attitudes and aspirations that support and encourage success in school (Hunter, 1986).

2. Cultural difference theory.

Cultural difference theory is a related explanation of the low achievement of Blacks. This view attributes the poor educational skills of Black students to their growing up in a culture that differs from mainstream White culture. Some cultural difference theorists (e.g., Ogbu, 1978) claim that Black students reject schooling because they believe it symbolizes White middle-class values or because they think that public schools have rejected them by failing to recognize their skills and potential. Thus, cultural difference theory suggests that Black culture fails to prepare Black students effectively to succeed in school. It also faults Whites for failing to take into account the

differences in Black culture when educating Black students (Sowell, 1981).

Recent analyses have raised questions about some of the assumptions of cultural deprivation and cultural difference. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, show that Black students do not perceive fewer educational and occupational opportunities than do White students and that Blacks have more pro-school values and greater esteem for high-achieving peers than do Whites. They argue that the reason for Black students' poor performance in school is that Blacks lack the material conditions that lead to good study habits and successful school performance. This finding shifts the responsibility for Blacks' low achievement from inadequacies of Black culture to the economic and social forces that limit Blacks' educational success.

3. Cultural capital theory

Cultural capital theory is defined as general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1977). Cultural capital is a means of social reproduction, transmitting the effects of social origins to school performance and conveying intergenerational class advantage. Students from privileged families are socialized to a lifestyle that confers privilege and opportunity. Since SES is related to race and Blacks are likely to have lower SES than Whites, Blacks are apt to have less cultural capital as well. Hence, many Blacks lack the resources accompanying cultural capital that promote educational and occupational careers (Bourdieu, 1977).

Lareau and Horvat (1999) argue that the value of cultural capital depends heavily on the particular social setting, on parents' and students' skill at activating their cultural

capital resources, and on the reciprocal, negotiated process by which social actors in schools respond to its activation and accord it legitimacy. Lareau and Horvat (1999) also argue that these factors create moments of inclusion or moments of exclusion for families. And they argue that the historical legacy of racial discrimination, in conjunction with school structures and operations, makes it more difficult for Black parents, independent of their social class, to activate their cultural capital on behalf of their children.

4. Oppositional cultural framework.

Oppositional cultural framework argues that many Black students, as members of an involuntary minority group, often reject educational achievement as an avenue for success. They perceive labor market discrimination as a relatively permanent barrier that cannot be scaled through education, and they develop alternative frameworks for achieving success. Cultural and language differences from Whites become markers of a collective identity as an oppressed people. This perspective is expressed in many Black students' pointed disdain for the alleged link between education and opportunity (Ogbu, 1978). Based on their collective history of discrimination, and the perception that schools are White dominant-controlled institutions, activities associated with school success (i.e., doing homework, carrying books, and speaking proper English) come to be viewed as compromises of Black social identity and group solidarity. In this way, the behaviors that lead to academic achievement come to be associated with “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Noguera (2005) argues that oppositional cultural framework does not acknowledge the dynamic that occurs between Black students and the culture that is

operative within schools. Black students may engage in behaviors that contribute to their underachievement and marginality, but they are also more likely to be channeled into marginal roles and to be discouraged from challenging themselves by adults who are supposed to help them. In addition, some Black students find ways to overcome the pressures exerted on them and manage to avoid choosing between their racial and gender identity and academic success. Even if few in number, there are some Black students who manage to maintain their identities and achieve academically without being ostracized by their peers.

C. Social Stratification

1. Social reproduction theory

Social reproduction theory views the transmission of class structure as a response to the demands of a capitalist society. According to this theory, the school perpetuates a capitalist system by preparing students to assume their place in a hierarchy of dominance and subservience. Schools channel different learning opportunities to students depending on their ascribed and achieved characteristics. In the process, schools adopt the authority and control relations that are found in the workplace (Heath, 1983).

2. Resistance theory

Resistance theory focuses on the reaction of students to the efforts of schools to reproduce the social order. It examines the motivations, behaviors, and cultures of those who consciously or unconsciously reject part or all of the economic and social system. Emphasizing students' nonconformity and resistance, the theory argues that, in some cases at least, students' negative responses to the educational system are rooted in justifiable moral and political anger (Giroux, 1981).

Ethnographic studies grounded in social reproduction and resistance theories shed light on how race operates in channeling opportunities to students. MacLeod (1987) studied the occupational aspirations of two groups of teenagers, one Black and the other White, in a poor working-class neighborhood. He found marked differences in the level of optimism the boys felt about their prospects for social mobility. Black boys were far more sanguine about their future than were their White peers. These attitudes were played out in school. The Black students were cooperative and respectful; satisfied with course assignments, even when their programs would not further their career goals; they turned to extracurricular activities and athletics to have an opportunity to excel. The White students were unmotivated, undisciplined, engaged in deviant behavior, or changed courses often, and were likely to drop out of school.

MacLeod (1987) argues that the difference between the Black and White boys in his study stems from their attitudes toward the achievement ideology. The Black boys believed that schooling could help them reach their career goals, while the White boys perceived their chances of success to be so slim that it was not worth their while to achieve in school.

D. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory includes four propositions that may help explain persistent racial inequality in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). First, the concept of race is a product of social thought and relations. It is, in other words, a social construction. As such, it is not something objective, inherent, or fixed. Race, as a social construction, corresponds to no biological or genetic reality; rather, race (and its subdivisions) is something that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. Second, racism

is ordinary and is an ingrained feature of our social landscape; it is not perceived by people in the dominant culture. Third, racism is sustained by myths, presuppositions, and popular beliefs that make up common culture which renders Blacks and others as being inferior from the beginning. Fourth, White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks and other racial groups only when these promote White self-interest (Bell, 1980).

Critical race theory, as it relates to education, challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial groups. Solorzano & Yosso (2001) identify five themes of critical race theory of education that form its basic perspectives, pedagogy, and research methods.

First, critical race theory of education recognizes the central role racism plays in the structuring of schools and schooling practices and that racism intersects with other forms of subordination, including sexism and categorizing by class. Critical race theory acknowledges that notions of objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy, as well as curricular practices, such as tracking, teacher expectations, and intelligence testing, have historically been used to subordinate students of color. In addition, critical race theorists identify four components of racism: (a) it has a cumulative impact on both the individual and the group; (b) it takes on instrumental and individual forms; (c) it has macro (e.g., racial profiling) and micro components (e.g., African-American students being placed in remedial courses, versus college prep courses, without any apparent rationale); and d) it has conscious and unconscious elements (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Second, critical race theory is cognizant of the fact that the experiential

knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical race educators can use methods such as chronicles, family history, storytelling, scenario building, narratives, biographies, and parables to draw on the strength of the lived experiences students bring into and outside the classroom (Delgado, 1989).

Third, critical race theory challenges the essentialism and the uni-disciplinary focus of most traditional analyses and insists on an analysis of race and racism by placing them in both an historical (separate and unequal) and contemporary (high-stakes tests) context using interdisciplinary methods (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Fourth, critical race theory examines the system of education as part of a critique of societal inequality (i.e., social inequality is reinforced through the education system and its practices). Critical race educators challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, through research, pedagogy, and praxis (i.e., ascertaining how a theory or lesson becomes part of lived experience). Critical race theorists argue that traditional claims of objectivity and meritocracy camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Finally, a critical race framework is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Critical race theorists envision the ultimate elimination of sexism and racism and the empowerment of the underrepresented.

Overall, critical race theory in education realizes that first, the educational system

is designed to maintain a White hierarchy in place. Second, current instructional strategies assume that African-American students are deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Third, intelligence testing has been a movement to legitimize African-American students' deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism (Ladson-Billing, 1999). Fourth, inequality in school funding is a function of institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Finally, despite the recorded history of the fight for school desegregation, critical race theory argues that, rather than serving as a solution to social inequality, school desegregation has been promoted only in ways that are advantageous to Whites (e.g., African-American students being bused into predominantly White schools; the creation of well-funded magnet schools to lure White students back into urban schools) (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

One of the major critiques of critical race theory is that it ignores the possibility that the racial inequality that it asserts has been detrimental to people of color, as a collective, may not actually be experienced equally or in the same manner by all people of color. There are some people of color who feel that they have never been subjected to racial inequality. In other words, critical race theory does assume that all people of color feel that the law has discriminated against them, which in reality has not been the case. Some people of color will argue that some of the laws or policies have been advantageous, allowing them to become more successful than they may have been otherwise. They argue that these laws or policies have opened doors that would have remained closed in the absence of such legislation (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; Civil Rights Act, 1964).

IX. Conclusion

High-stakes testing is dominating the landscape of education reform in secondary education, and all educators are being held accountable for student outcomes. Yet given the historical inequitable experiences of African-American students, other students of color, and low-income students in school settings, high-stakes testing implies that the playing field has been leveled since America's beginnings, especially with regard to the education of African-Americans. In other words, high-stakes testing in Massachusetts, in particular, implies that students of color (in particular African-American) have access to the same resources as White students that will allow them to be successful in passing the MCAS tests. In addition, it appears that Massachusetts policy makers failed to take into consideration the psychologically harmful effects that certain laws and policies have when they are implemented.

While research indicates that students' perception of high-stakes test has been measured, little attention has focused on how African-American students perceive that high-stakes testing has impacted them. So, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, to show that high-stakes testing is just another form of "separate and unequal education" that may cause significant psychological harm to the African-American student psyche. Second, to heighten policy-maker awareness that law and policy not only affect society but also impact people individually in how they feel and think about themselves.

X. Summary of the Review of the Literature

In this chapter, the reader was provided with a comprehensive review of the literature, as it pertains to Urban African-American students' perceptions of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts. First, high-stakes testing was introduced, highlighting the negative and positive effects. Second, the investigator provided insight into the impact of

slavery on the education of African-Americans. Third, the investigator focused on educational laws and policies at the federal level that have shaped the educational climate and African-Americans' experiences in the educational realm. Fourth, attention is shifted to the history of the MCAS; as well as the pros and cons of the MCAS. Fifth, the reliability and validity of testing used in assessment was discussed. Sixth, the investigator highlighted the scoring errors in high-stakes testing. Seventh, the social impact of testing was reviewed. And finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives of the Critical Race theory as central to this analysis.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Chapter Three provides details of the methods used in this dissertation to compare urban African-American students' perceptions of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts (MCAS) to that of policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and the Massachusetts state education agency). Focus groups were conducted to capture the perceptions of urban African-American students and in-depth interviews were conducted to ascertain the perceptions of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts (MCAS) of policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and the Massachusetts state education agency). The perceptions of the urban African-American students and that of the policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and Massachusetts state education agency) in relation to high-stakes testing in Massachusetts (MCAS) will then be compared to one another.

This chapter describes the rationale for using qualitative research, ethical issues, research design, focus groups, interviews, characteristics of the sample population of the African-American students and key policy makers who were recruited for the study, procedure, how the focus groups questions were developed, validity of the research and how the data were collected and analyzed.

I. Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods

Basically, there are three major research paradigms: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Creswell, 1994; Clark & Creswell, 2008). The research paradigm this study employs is qualitative. Qualitative research refers to “methods and techniques of observing, analyzing and interpreting attributes, patterns and characteristics and meaning

of specific, contextual or gestalt features of phenomena under study” (Leininger, 1985, p.56). There are several reasons why qualitative research is the method of choice in this study.

First, qualitative research complements the theoretical framework of the researcher, in this case, critical race theory. A theme of critical race theory is the use of voice (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billing & Tate IV, 1995). Therefore, the voices of African-American students as well as policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, the Massachusetts state education agency) were heard in focus groups and in-depth interviews respectively. The African-American students were regarded as experts on their lives, and the policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and Massachusetts state education agency) were regarded as experts in policy development.

Second, qualitative research focuses on gaining insight and understanding about an individual’s perception of events or circumstances rather than how the investigator interprets the events or circumstances (Nieswiadomy, 2002). Here it is the perceptions of the African-American students and policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and the Massachusetts state education agency) that the study captures, not those of the investigator. Of course, as Creswell (1994) points out, the analysis of the data is screened through the personal lens of the researcher, and it is virtually impossible for the researcher to omit personal interpretation while analyzing qualitative data.

Third, qualitative research is based on the assumption that multiple realities exist (Nieswiadomy, 2008), which again aligns with the theoretical framework of the research. A theme of critical theory is naming one’s own reality because stories provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting (Ladson-Billings, 1999;

Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). The intent of this research is to provide a platform for African-American students to articulate their reality of how the MCAS is impacting their lives, as opposed to the reality of policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and the Massachusetts state education agency).

The final reason for using qualitative methods in this research is that it can be “used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.19). As was pointed out in the Chapter Two review of the literature, little is known about African-American students’ perception of high-stakes testing, in particular of the MCAS. Therefore, this research will, one hopes, add to this small body of literature.

Overall, it was apparent to the investigator that qualitative research would be the best method to utilize to ascertain urban African-American students’ perception of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts as compared to that of policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and the Massachusetts state agency).

II. Ethical Issues

“Ethical issues are an integral part of the research experience as much as they are part of the experience of everyday life” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p.28). Regardless of whether one is conducting qualitative or quantitative research, legal rights and ethical aspects must be considered (Berg, 2004; Flick, 2006; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Therefore, a variety of ethical matters related to the research required attention prior to interaction with the participants.

First, permission was obtained from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to starting the focus groups and in-depth interviews.

According to Dell, Schmidt, & Meara, (2006), this task is absolutely necessary for conducting research with all human participants. Second, before the investigator started the interviews with each interviewee or focus group participant, he conversed briefly with each of them. This set the interviewee and focus group participants at ease and established a warm and comfortable rapport (Berg, 2004). Third, the investigator prepared each interviewee, and focus group participant, by explaining the overall purpose of the study and allowing time for them to ask questions about the research. Fourth, confidentiality was established by the consent form (see Appendix A) given to each interviewee prior to the interview, the interviewee was given as much time as needed to read it, and then was asked to sign the form. The focus group participants' consent form was given to the executive directors of the sites in which the focus groups were held so that, they could distribute the form to the participants to take home and get a parental signature, if required. Prior to the start of the focus groups at the respective sites, the consent forms were collected with parent signatures and the participants were asked if they had questions. Fifth, anonymity was established in several ways. Prior to the start of each interview, only the place and time of the interview was identified on the tape. Prior to the start of the focus groups, only the place and time of the interview was identified on the tape and participants were instructed not to call any participant by his or her name. When the tape was reviewed, if a participant's name was identified, it was deleted from the tape. The details of the various sites and each interviewee will be changed to further protect their identities. Finally, the data (i.e., tapes and transcripts) will be stored in a safe so that only the investigator can access the data (Flick, 2006).

III. Research Design

This study employed focus groups with urban African-American students and in-depth interviews with policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and Massachusetts state education agency) as the principal means of data collection. Moreover, the nominal group technique was used with the focus group participants, in which each participant initially wrote down his or her own perceptions about the MCAS rather than enunciating them. Use of this technique produced a greater number of unique responses from the group and ruled out the effects of compliance or identification, because no one knew what anyone else in the group expressed. In addition, each person participated, and no one deferred to someone else's idea (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walter, 1993).

As an analytical framework, grounded theory was adapted. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in inverse relationship to each other, which they do in a deductive study. One does not begin with a theory and then test it. Rather, one begins with an area of social interaction and observation of what is relevant to that area, and allows it to evolve.

A. Focus Groups

The focus group approach is the preferred strategy when the investigator wants to know what participants think about a specific area and why participants think as they do (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 2002). The focus group offers several additional

advantages.

First, focus groups can offer participants a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from similar socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds (Morgan, 1998).

Second:

[I]t is a socially oriented research procedure. People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them. Focus groups place people in natural, real-life situations as opposed to controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies. Also, the one-on-one interviews are not able to capture the dynamic nature of this group interaction. (Krueger, 1994, p34)

Third, the focus group format gives the moderator an opportunity to discover unanticipated issues, which is not possible with typical mail-out surveys that have a more structured questioning sequence (Krueger, 1994). Fourth, focus groups provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants' opinions or perceptions than may be obtainable through telephone interviews or mail surveys (Edmunds, 1999). Fifth, focus groups can be used for hard-to-reach groups such as children and people of color (Connaway, 1996). Sixth, they allow the researcher to observe a large number of interactions on a topic in a limited period of time (Morgan, 1997). Finally, focus groups permit assessment of nonverbal responses, reveal group interaction patterns, and reflect group behavior and consensus (Connaway, 1996).

Although focus group research has many advantages, as with all research methods, there are limitations. Among the limitations are the following:

First, the researcher has less control in the focus group than in individual

interviews. The focus group allows the participants to influence and interact with each other, and, as a result, group members are able to influence the course of the discussion and may move away from the central topic (Krueger, 1994,). Second, given the number of focus group participants, results are not necessarily representative of the general population from which participants are recruited and should not be considered as such (Edmunds, 1999). Third, participants' responses are not independent; they are generally offered in the context of a group's conversation. As a result, participants may respond differently regarding a specific issue than they would if the issue were posed during an individual interview (Connaway, 1996; Edmunds, 1999; Morgan, 1997). Fourth, the focus group may occur in a setting that does not lend itself to conversation, whereas an individual interview can be conducted in a setting that is comfortable and convenient for the interviewee (Krueger, 1994). Fifth, given that the focus groups are driven by the researcher's interest, the fact that the researcher creates and directs the groups makes them distinctly less naturalistic than participant observation; there is always some residual uncertainty about the accuracy of what the participants say (Morgan, 1997). Finally, focus groups operate under the assumption that the participants can verbalize their thoughts and behavior (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

B. Interviews

Johnson (2002) suggests that a researcher should employ in-depth interviews when his goal is to seek deeper information and knowledge than might be attainable through other means, such as surveys, informal interviewing, or focus groups.

Furthermore, Mason (2002) contends that qualitative interviewing is the appropriate methodology when participants' understanding, knowledge, interpretations, experiences,

views, and interactions are essential components of the social reality which the research questions are designed to explore.

Interviews are the preferred strategy when the investigator wants detailed information about participants' feelings, perceptions, thoughts and behaviors or wants to explore new issues in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Salkind, 2006). In addition, interviews offer other advantages as they: (a) ensure a high rate of participation (Goddard & Villanova, 2006; Jackson, 2003); (b) encourage free expression (Goddard & Villanova, 2006); (c) discover personal information, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that a paper-and-pencil survey might not uncover (Goddard & Villanova, 2006; McBurney, 1998); (d) allow the respondent to reveal otherwise concealed attitudes (Goddard & Villanova, 2006); (e) facilitate the participation of individuals who are visually handicapped or who cannot read or write (Orlich, 1978); (f) reveal problems and their potential solutions through discussion (Goddard & Villanova, 2006); (g) allow for observations and recording of nonverbal communication (Goddard & Villanova, 2006; Jackson, 2003; Salkind, 2006); (h) provide more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys, and allow people to feel more comfortable in having a conversation with the researcher (Boyce & Neale, 2006); (i) interviewees usually allocate more time to answering the questions than they do in telephone surveys (Jackson, 2003); (j) interviewees can ask for clarification of a question (Jackson, 2003; McBurney, 1998; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2006); and (k) for the most part, the interviewer sets the general tone and agenda at his or her own convenience (Salkind, 2006).

Although interviews have many advantages, as with all research methods, there

are disadvantages: (a) interviewees may be unwilling to share or uncomfortable sharing all that the interviewer hopes to explore (Marshall & Rossman, 2006); (b) interviewees do not answer the question that you ask, they may provide monosyllabic replies, they may be non-stop talkers, provide contradictory statements, or the interviewees' knowledge does not measure up to what the interviewer anticipated/visualized (Glesne, 2006); (c) interviews can be time consuming (e.g., transcribing and analyzing the results) and expensive and still not generalizable because small samples are chosen and random sampling methods are not used (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Jackson, 2003; McBurney 1998; Salkind, 2006; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2006); (d) interviewees may feel uncomfortable answering truthfully in someone else's presence, especially if that person is writing down their responses; the interviewer may show bias; the lack of anonymity may affect the responses; and interviewees may feel the need to give socially desirable responses (Jackson, 2003; McBurney, 1998; Salkind, 2006; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2006); (e) the interviewer's safety may be compromised by the location of the interview (McBurney, 1998; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2006).

C. Sample Population

The study employed a purposive sampling procedure to recruit participants. The advantage of employing this method was that it provided the investigator the opportunity to select people with the characteristics that are important to his research (Creswell, 2003). This study focused on African-American students who attend or who have attended urban and suburban public secondary schools in Massachusetts and who will take or have taken the 10th grade MCAS exam, because it determines whether students

graduate from high school, unlike the MCAS tests taken in the 4th and 8th grades; and policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and Massachusetts state education agency). The policy makers were selected based on the various roles that each group held in the Massachusetts education systems and in particular the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Each group provided a unique view of the MCAS.

The students were all of high school age and from an urban setting. They shared the common cultural attributes of being African-Americans and living, working, and attending school in Massachusetts. This is consistent with the definition suggested by Long, Convey, and Chwalek (1985), namely, that a sample population consists of a group of individuals who share one or more attributes that may shed light on the problem being studied.

The initial intent of this study was that these focus groups would consist of three different sets of groups with eight to 10 members in each group, with the sessions ranging from 60 to 120 minutes. While, the focus groups did consist of three different sets of groups, a total of eight sets were conducted, with two to eight members in each group, with sessions ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

The first group consisted of students age 18 or older who, to date, have been unable to pass the MCAS examination. The participants in this group all attended an urban program that provided tutorial assistance for the classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005 to attain a Competency Determination which will subsequently lead to high school graduation. This program is located in a large urban city in Massachusetts.

The second group consisted of students between the ages of 15 and 17 who were successful in passing the MCAS examination. The participants in this group were all

members of an urban program that aids youth in developing educational, career, and leadership potential. This program is located in a large urban city in Massachusetts. In addition, this program offers unique opportunities for younger people to explore their interests, develop skills, and broaden their access to information and resources so they may realize their life goals.

The third group consisted of students who were preparing to take the MCAS examination in the Spring of 2006. The participants in this group attended an urban after-school youth development program for underserved youths, between the ages of 13 and 19. This program is located in a large urban city in Massachusetts.

All participants were in programs that addressed the issue that high-stakes testing may cause undue and significant psychological harm to African-American children. However, there may be other African-American students whose voices will not be heard on this issue for a variety of reasons. Thus, one of the purposes of these focus groups was to enable the voices of these possibly silenced individuals to speak out and for their concerns to be taken into account. The primary intent was to provide an understanding of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of African-American students towards high-stakes testing.

D. Policy Makers

The intention was to conduct six to 12 interviews with policy makers (i.e., politicians, superintendents, principals, and a board that governs a Massachusetts state education agency) all from different regions in Massachusetts. Each interview session would be no longer than 60 minutes in length and interviews would take place in various locations throughout Massachusetts. Participants would be recruited in a convenience

sampling method that included word of mouth and referrals.

The political candidates were members of a committee that considers all issues that pertain to secondary education in Massachusetts. As it currently stands, there are 17 members on this committee, and all members were asked or selected to participate, with the hope that at least three members would participate.

The pool of superintendents consisted of superintendents of urban and suburban school systems in Massachusetts. As it currently stands, there are approximately 392 superintendents. However, only urban and suburban superintendents were asked or selected to participate, because they were representative of the population this study wanted to capture. Therefore, 30 superintendents were asked or selected to participate, in the hope that at least three superintendents would participate.

The pool of high school principals consisted of those from urban and suburban schools systems in Massachusetts. As it currently stands, there are approximately 377 high school principals. In all, 33 principals were asked or selected to participate, again with the hope that at least three of them would participate.

The pool of board candidates that oversees all matters of primary and secondary education in Massachusetts currently consists of 11 members. Therefore, all members were asked or selected to participate, in the hope that at least three would participate.

As stated earlier, these policy makers were chosen because of the functions and roles that each held in relation to Massachusetts education systems, and in particular the MCAS. Moreover, each group would provide a unique perspective towards the MCAS.

AGE	# Students	GENDER	# Students	SCHOOL	#Students
13–17	19	Male	16	Urban	23
18 and older	11	Female	14	Suburban	7

Table 1. Demographics of 30 African-American Students in Focus Groups

GENDER	# Policy Makers
Male	10
Female	5

Table 2. Demographics of 15 Policy Makers in Interviews

IV. Procedure

The participants for this study were from community organizations in a large urban city in Massachusetts. The Executive Directors of the respective organizations were contacted two weeks prior to the investigator's arrival so that he could deliver the consent forms (see Appendix A) and a room could be reserved for the focus group. All consent forms were collected prior to starting the focus group. Furthermore, approval from the Human Subject Review Committee at Northeastern University was secured before any focus group was conducted. The study was explained orally, followed by the appropriate written protocol (see Appendix B.).

The participants for the interviews were from various regions throughout Massachusetts. The politicians received letters that were personally delivered by the investigator and a follow-up call was made to ensure that the members received the letters.

The superintendents were initially called at their respective public school systems

so that their emails could be obtained. Once their respective emails were obtained, individual emails were sent with a consent form and introduction letter to ascertain if they would participate in the study.

The principals were also initially called at their respective public high schools so that their emails could be obtained. Once their respective emails were obtained, individual emails were sent with a consent form and introduction letter to ascertain if they would participate in the study.

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education committee members were each mailed a letter and the Chair of the of the committee was emailed a consent form and introduction letter to present to the committee.

This study used an open-ended question method that provided the following advantages: (a) it elicits information directly from participants; (b) it allows opportunity for probing and finding out why people feel or respond the way they do; (c) it allows for an opportunity to clarify information as it is given; (d) it allows the respondents to determine the direction of the response; and (e) it reveals what is on the interviewee's mind, as opposed to what the interviewer suspects the interviewee is thinking (Creswell, 2003; Krueger, 1998; Yin, 1994).

A. Developing Focus Group Questions

Questions designed to stimulate debate among focus group participants must be carefully formulated (Kruger, 1998). Chioncel, Van Der Veen, Wildemeersch, and Jarvis (2003) contend that lack of precision and consistency can threaten the internal validity of focus groups. Initially, a broad list of possible questions was formulated, then refined in further discussion and incorporated into an interview guide. This consisted of 11 main

questions, moving from those initially aimed at obtaining students' initial perception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System to more focused questions designed to ascertain how students feel about themselves after taking the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam. The questions were piloted with two high school students and three Massachusetts educators in order to ensure that they were clearly formulated, could be readily understood, and would encourage reflection.

B. Ensuring Validity of the Research

Validity of any study should ensure that the explanations of the phenomena being studied match the realities of the world. Validity in qualitative research includes internal causal inferences and external generalization, as well as issues of objectivity and reliability. In qualitative research, validity is dependent on data collection and analysis techniques (McMillian & Schumacher, 2001). Strategies used to increase and enhance validity during the study are presented Table 1.

Data Collection

Strategy	Description
Participant language: verbatim accounts	Obtained literal statements of participants, such as verbatim accounts of conversations, transcripts, as well as quotations from documents
Mechanically recorded data	Used tape recordings
Member checking	Probed to obtain more complete and subtle meanings during interviews

Table 3. Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the current study. (Adapted from McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, pp. 407-409)

Data Analysis

Strategy	Description
Avoiding subjective interpretation	The researcher acted as objectively as possible while analyzing the research data
Avoiding poor coding of qualitative data	The research data were carefully coded by the researcher and verified by two external coders
Avoiding making unsupported inferences	Generalizations were not made beyond the capability of the data to support such statements (particularly in the table of categories). The two external coders assisted in this process.
Avoiding selective use of data	Data were not used selectively to falsely verify findings. The two external coders assisted in this process.
Avoiding the unfair aggregation of data	Data were only aggregated a value if it could be supported by the research data. The two external coders assisted in this process.
Avoiding researcher bias	The researcher guarded against his own expectations, misperceptions, and need to find data that would support his preconceived notions about the research. The two external coders assisted in this process.

Table 4. Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the current study (Adapted from Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, pp. 116-121)

C. Data Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were tape recorded and those tapes were

transcribed verbatim by an experienced independent consultant. The typed transcriptions served as the main data.

Data analysis began after the first focus group and interview and continued throughout the data collection process. The analysis of data was facilitated through the use of grounded theory techniques as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The researcher first listened to the each tape and compared it to what was transcribed to ensure that everything was captured correctly. Then the researcher immersed himself in the data. He initially read the transcripts several times just to familiarize himself with the data and to see if any initial themes emerged. Then he reviewed each transcript line-by-line, underlining words, phrases or sentences that might suggest themes. Lincoln & Guba (1985) calls this process unitizing the data, which eventually contributes to the formation of categories. He then selected underlined words or phrases that occurred repeatedly in the transcripts and wrote them on individual sheets of paper and tallied the number of times each word or phrase occurred. This process concluded when all participants' responses had been unitized.

The next step of the analysis consisted of grouping units of the same content together in "provisional categories" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.347). The researcher then compared each piece of unitized data to every other piece of unitized data to ascertain if there were similarities and dissimilarities with the unitized data. And the unitized data that were similar were placed in the same categories and those that were different were placed in other categories. The process that was used in this stage of the analysis was the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). As the categories began to contain more and more unitized data, a propositional statement was

created that characterized the categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, each category was reviewed to ensure that there was no overlap in each category. In other words, each category had to be distinct. The goal was to have categories that were “internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.347).

The next stage of the analysis consisted of consulting with two independent data analysts (i.e., a retired high school teacher and a Human Resources Consultant) to negotiate categories and themes. This process guards against the potential bias that could emerge if the researcher had analyzed the data in isolation.

In summary, this chapter provides an overview of how and why the research was conducted and the manner in which the data were analyzed. Chapter Four will provide the results of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

There was a vast range as to how focus group respondents interacted, responded, and participated during the sessions. The group that had passed the MCAS examination was animated and nearly all were eager to share their opinions; they did not seem to be intimidated. Their responses were elaborate, rich in substance, and when one member answered a question, another had something to add or to make a statement about. In addition, there was constant conversation.

The group that is preparing to take the MCAS examination reacted similarly to the group that had passed the MCAS examination. They fully participated in the group sessions, were very energetic, and did not need prodding to generate a discussion. They displayed a sense of eagerness toward wanting to express how they felt about the MCAS examination.

However, the group that had failed the MCAS examination reacted somewhat differently than the group that had passed the MCAS examination and the group that is preparing for the MCAS examination. Initially, they were somewhat apprehensive about their responses, and their responses were not very fluent at times. Sometimes they needed prodding to generate a constant dialogue. Furthermore, there were students in the focus groups whose only participation consisted of agreeing with whatever the other respondents said. And, due to some group members' silence, some questions had to be repeated several times.

The interaction with the policy makers was very similar to that of the focus group that had passed the MCAS and the one that was preparing for the MCAS examination.

While the vast majority of the policy makers were hard-pressed for time, they were eager to share their opinions and in some interviews, I got a sense that the interview served as a release mechanism to express some disdain about the MCAS. Moreover, their responses were elaborate and rich in substance; they displayed a sincere sense of eagerness toward wanting to express how they felt about the MCAS examination.

Guided by the eleven focus group and in-depth interview questions, the across-groups analysis of data of the three groups and the across-groups analysis of in-depth interviews yielded six common themes (see Table 1 & Table 2) that captured African-American students' and policy makers' perceptions of the MCAS examination.

I. Student Focus Groups

Table 1: Research Findings by Themes and Categories

<u>Major Theme</u>	<u>Categories</u>
I. Future Aspiration	Cannot Graduate Cannot Get a Better Job Cannot Go to College
II. Suburban Schools Better Than Urban Schools	Better Teachers Better Resources More Structured Environment Students More Disciplined Better Maintained Schools
III. Future Livelihood	Get A Better Job Better Quality of Life Go to College
IV. Psychological Impact	Depressed Stupid Worried Stressed Pissed Scared Relaxed Smart
V. Equity Of Test	Schools Do Not Have Same Resources Unequal Curriculum

Theme I: Future Aspiration

Question: What effect will the MCAS have on your future?

The participants agreed that the MCAS examination would have an effect on their future. One student said:

It affects your whole life. You may not be able to go to college, graduate high school. You won't be able to get a good job if you don't go to college. You won't get a high school diploma if you don't pass the MCAS, so I think it has a great effect on the rest of your life.

Another remarked:

Like, if I do pass the MCAS, I will be able to go job searching and get a better job, because the MCAS prepares you to be able to get a diploma and if you have a diploma, you can get a better job.

Still another commented:

I have been through interviews and they ask me for that high school diploma and I tell them the truth. I said I don't have it yet because of MCAS and they say they can't hire me without it and you know basically I've been trying my best to get it and plus I wanna try to get my GED too but it never worked. To me, I didn't graduate high school cause I didn't pass MCAS.

A further student said:

If you were getting ready to graduate and you don't not pass the MCAS, it could prevent you from not graduating and not being able to go to college.

One student concluded:

You have no life. Basically, staying home. Because, without the MCAS, what can you do without passing.

Theme II: Suburban Schools Better Than Urban Schools

Question: How is it that the suburban schools do better on the MCAS than the urban schools?

The participants noted that there was a difference between the suburban schools and the urban schools. One student remarked:

Because of the education that they get. Like, if you have more money and you get the newer books and you'll have everything that is basically on that test. But, if you have schools that don't have that kind of money, you get the older books and you won't know as much.

Still another student said:

Like, you go into urban schools and they are overcrowded, you go into classrooms and there won't be enough books and teachers aren't even equivalent, they are older. They need more funding to try and fix it and help the scores along but they don't do anything cause the teachers themselves weren't even at that level they need to be at. And you go to suburban schools, and there's less overcrowding, more books, more advanced things, teachers go to the best schools and are qualified for the job and all that and also, like the culture around it. But, suburban schools, you go home and your parents are most likely are going to be there to encourage you, do your homework, da da da, whereas, in urban areas, most likely your parents are working and you come home, you have no one to tell you [to] do your homework. Like, you don't come right home after school if they are already out working, however, many jobs they have 'til whatever time and stuff like that. And, also urban schools there's no one saying, oh you can do it. There's not much role models or encouragement. It's more like your statistics say 50% of you aren't going to make it, da da da. In suburban schools they are like reach for the stars, stuff like that.

Another shared a similar view:

Cause the students pay attention more and I think they have better teachers than we have over here.

While another said:

. . . some people need silence to study so it's very noisy in the city, more cars and stuff and buses every 5 minutes, stuff like that.

An additional student said:

The learning, teachers in suburban schools help their students get ready, prepare them more than and better than the teachers at the urban schools. Like students come in and they push them harder so they can remember everything they learned all through the year so they can help them with the MCAS, and the teachers at the urban schools don't really worry about that, they help you but they don't push you as hard as they need to.

Likewise, one student commented:

Teachers work harder. Like teachers here they show you MCAS, but they don't push real hard for students to come in. Come in for extra credit. Out in the suburbs, I know in my cousin school, they push hard, they send notes home to your parents and tell them that your kid should come in to prep for MCAS cause he's failing or he is in danger of not passing.

Yet another said:

They have a better learning system out there. Well the teachers teach better out there and here, the teachers don't teach that well.

And one continued:

I go to a non urban school. I go to a suburban school and I know that they have like, we took like MCAS preps and we were prepared like to take the classes and they also like offer them if you have a learning plan; they offer them for you as well as the staff, teachers. The is really good. I know a lot of teachers would rather work at a suburban school than an urban school. They get better teachers.

Finally, one student said:

You know how we always have graffiti and all this type of stuff in our schools and the kids don't go straight to their classes like they are supposed to. They skip and do all this type of stuff. But, if you go to one of the suburban schools, when then the bell rings, everybody is in the class, listening, do what they gotta do to get where they gotta go and stuff. It's not that they are smarter, it's just that they are more focused than us.

Theme III: Future Livelihood

Question: Why do you think you need to successfully pass the MCAS exam?

Participants agreed that they needed to pass the MCAS for a better future. One student said:

To get somewhere in life. If you want to go to college, then do what you gotta do.

Another said:

To get a good paying job.

Still, another said:

Basically, move on and go to college.

However, a couple of students had a different view. One commented:

So they can figure out who is having trouble, who is doing bad etc., . . . trying to develop a theory and stuff like that and hopefully they use this for creating mentor programs or educational programs that will help certain grades and working within their cultures to help them out.

While, the other one added:

I think the schools want you to pass, because they want to look good and they want to be above other schools. They are not thinking about how the kids are going to feel if there is so much pressure on them to do good.

Theme IV: Psychological Impact

Question: How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?

The participants concurred that the MCAS examination would have some type of effect on them. One student said:

The students worry how they did, if they passed or not.

Another said:

They feel horrible cause they don't know if they passed or if they did not pass. Did they do enough work so they are so miserable not knowing.

Still, another student declared:

I think they feel happy that they did it and it's over with. Then when they find out they didn't pass, they get mad at their self that they have to take it again.

While another opined:

They probably would feel tense and scared of how they did. Whether they did good or not.

A further student remarked:

Well, some feel stupid and others smart. I have a few friends who passed it on the first try. The first try they did it and they passed. Whereas for me, I had to take it, this is probably my 3rd or 4th time, I am not sure. So, it makes me feel a little stupid.

Similarly:

If you pass it, you feel relaxed, but if you don't you're depressed. You gotta take it again.

And one student said:

I felt nervous cause I didn't know what was happening.

And again:

Stressed, did I pass or didn't pass. If you don't pass you have to take it all over again.

One succinctly commented:

Scared and worried.

Finally, one student said:

I think you take the test and just go home and fall asleep . . . and somebody open it, you see that you don't pass, you'll be very pissed. I mean, you going to say all this for nothing and you go to your parents and you're like what am I supposed to do now. Cause you gotta find another way to like do your best so you can move on to what you like.

Theme V: Equity of Test

Question: Do you think the MCAS is fair?

The majority of the participants concluded that the MCAS is not fair for various reasons. One student said:

Well, I think if the school doesn't have the resources with MCAS, if they make it like if you have the proper resources, you have the right curriculum, it's just about the students and graduation. And lots of times it's not fair. Teachers aren't equipped, not enough books, not enough microscopes and whatever for science, calculators for math or whatever and you study so it's not the same. More stuff to help them, different methods for teaching cause a lot of people are more hands on, one school lacks more than the other, then it affects how they do on it.

Another remarked:

If chemistry is on the MCAS in the 10th grade, and my school we take it in the 11th grade, I'm not going to know it, but someone who took it in the 10th or 9th grade, they are going to know it, so they are basically saying we should know this and if we don't, we are not going to pass it.

A further student commented:

Like, it's kind of like the whole separate but not equal thing. Like suburban and urban, like they are separated and are not equal. Like which races, which areas did worse and the minorities are not holding it up, and if you level the playing field and you start with good schools and good environment like good neighborhoods and people to help them out, like who is available then you get more people from different backgrounds. Like, level it off before you do any judgment.

Yet another said:

I don't think they should base getting your high school diploma on that test in just 4 days you took the test. I think they should base getting your high school diploma on the 4 years you been there and all the work you did in 4 years.

One student expressed a similar view:

Students should graduate on how they did in 4 years, not in 4 days, because if I failed the test in 4 days, but passed all my classes and got straight As, I still don't get my high school diploma. I don't see it as fair.

And another remarked:

I don't think it's fair, because when I was in high school, I wasn't taught like I should have been taught for the MCAS. So, it's more like the MCAS is coming, so don't make a mistake. That's basically it, that's all they told me. The teacher was horrible and when the time came I didn't know. I don't think it's fair.

Some participants had a different view about the MCAS examination. One student said:

In a way, it's fair but in other ways, it's not fair, because in other states they don't have to take a test like that. It's fair, because you just see where different students are at and what different schools are doing to help change it I guess.

Another echoed a similar thought:

There are certain things you need to know to graduate high school.

While another said:

The MCAS is like a great way for a person to be able to achieve more out of life. Well, if they pass the MCAS they will be able to get a better paying job.

Finally, one student commented:

I think it's fair because it's helping us succeed in life and it's showing us what we need help on and what we are good at.

Theme VI: Participants' Recommendations for the Future

Question: What would you like people to know about the MCAS that I have not asked?

The participants provided several opinions about the MCAS examination. One student said:

They should cut it from graduation requirement and just do it the old fashioned way. Like you have to pass.

Another student offered the following advice:

Just try your hardest. If you can't make a question or have a hard time on a question, you can actually skip it and come back to it.

Similar advice:

Basically, to whom it may concern, tell your kids or encourage your kids to do well and pass MCAS or they don't graduate high school.

One student provided the following encouragement:

If you do good, it's a way to get scholarship if you can't afford it. If you can't afford college you think you can't go

to college cause you can't afford it and getting a good score on MCAS, you might get a scholarship or something and it might just change your future a little bit.

Another commented:

I think that they should really pay attention just to prove them wrong. Like, we do want to learn, we have good teachers and that the suburban schools are not better. If they are better they are only better because of the kids and it's not like they do something that we can't do. We have the ability to do it to but we just have to focus, really focus and pass the MCAS.

Similarly:

I would tell them they would have to focus and pay attention, no fooling around cause the MCAS is no joke. Like seriously, pay attention. It's really not funny. Like some people I know they would be like, the MCAS is nothing. I'm going to pass it, it's nothing. Then right after, the same person that says that right after the test is over, I talked to them and they say, I think I failed, but I thought the MCAS was nothing. Well, I didn't see it; it was hard so you definitely got to pay attention.

While one student offered the following advice:

I'd tell the students that if they don't think the teachers are helping them enough, then they should sign up for MCAS prep classes after school to prepare themselves more for what they would be dealing with on MCAS.

Another declared:

I would want people to know that suburban upper class people got it, and that basically, the curriculum is not the same at every school.

Finally, one student said:

Teachers work hard to help students and it's not good enough most of the time. There are a lot of teachers who strain themselves out stressing about the MCAS and it still comes out and it's not good enough. So, I think we need better helpers for the MCAS. The majority of like the inner city schools don't pass the MCAS, but the suburban schools pass the MCAS. I think we should take teachers from the suburban schools and bring them to the inner city and take some teachers from the inner city and bring them to the suburban schools and see what the outcome would be.

II. Policy Makers

Table 2: Research Findings by Themes and Categories

<u>Major Theme</u>	<u>Categories</u>
I. No Positive or Negative Consequences	Students Do Well on Test School Has Resources
II. Socio-Economic Status	Parental Involvement Wealthier Communities Proper Nutrition Continuity and Consistency of Education
III. Graduation Requirement	Baseline for Students Basic Skills
IV. Psychological Impact	Demoralized Discouraged Feelings of Hopelessness Stress Low Self Esteem Easy
V. Ambivalence	Assessment Measurement
VI. Apprehension	Use as Assessment Measurement

Theme I: No Positive or Negative Consequences

Question: What effect will the MCAS have on your future?

The participants agreed, for the most part, that the MCAS examination would not have a positive or negative effect on their future. One policy maker said:

I'm not sure. I never took it myself in school.

Another policy maker remarked succinctly:

None whatsoever.

Still another policy maker commented:

I'm not sure it will have much on me...because most of our children have college educated parents; most of our children have their own bedrooms; most of our children have had dinner and a good night's sleep; and they have had breakfast; and they have been sent off to school with parents who have told them to sit up straight, pay attention and do what their teacher tells them to do.

And further:

I'm not sure that it will have an effect on my personal future. Our students do well in general and they've always done well.

And again:

My personal future, very little. In the respect that I am fortunate to be at a school who has performed well on the test.

Yet another policy maker remarked:

I don't know. I guess I've never thought about that before. The truth is that I'm the . . . in a district that tends to [be] pretty high performing on the MCAS. Our kids largely arrive at school ready to learn; they get a good breakfast and they have parents who are engaged in their education and they get to have all kinds of educational experiences outside of school. And we are well funded, have resources. I mean we have all kinds of things that are putting us at an advantage in terms of how our kids do. So it's an interesting question that I've never really thought of the MCAS scores as being tied to my career or my reputation. That's interesting. So, honestly, I don't see that it's connected much at all.

Finally, one policy maker agreed:

As I said, because our school does well, I don't feel it's going to have any influence on me.

Theme II: Socio-Economic Status

Question: How is it that the suburban schools do better on the MCAS than the urban schools?

The policy makers noted that there was a difference between the suburban schools and the urban schools. One policy maker remarked:

Take a group of kids who in their earliest years had an opportunity to go to college; they have been read to everyday; they have gone to zoos, to museums, all kinds of learning opportunities. They have had all their shots and early kind of health care; gone to the dentist; all the things that make for a healthy appropriately developed child versus some kids who come to school and have rarely seen a book in their life. They haven't had any educational kinds of things. They have different experiences.

And again:

I think that many of the suburban settings, wealthier communities, parents that live there presumably have better paying jobs, they are better educated, they are more involved with the kids. So, you know that the MCAS wasn't designed for the suburban communities. They were doing well anyway. Their kids were going on and getting good jobs and it's kind of self-perpetuated. It was as much or more for the urban areas where frankly districts had given up on kids. They weren't getting any resources for those kids and what you are seeing now is a consequence of that neglect by the school systems.

Another policy maker shared a similar view:

There is a disproportionate number of students in urban schools, poor urban schools, who arrive at school in kindergarten with a lot more challenges than their suburban counterparts. When you are dealing with a large urban system where you have large numbers of students arriving

who have not had the benefit of preschool, being read to, a whole host of things, they start off with a lot more challenges than their suburban counterparts.

While another policy maker remarked:

Actually, when you scratch and you really dig down, the factor that is most highly correlated with performance when you look at the subgroups factors is income.

One policy maker said:

There are people who are willing to pay more for their house than it's actually worth and this is they are willing to invest in a good school system.

Likewise, one policy maker commented:

Most of the youngsters who start with us as 5 year olds are still with us when they are into high school. So, they have continuity and consistency of education. They come to us with some genetic predisposition or whatever you want to call it to do well. So, I think that a lot of the suburban districts that I am familiar with share both of those characteristics with us and that is, stability of enrollment and a parent population that is highly educated and wants that same thing for their children and have higher intellect levels.

Similarly:

In the suburbs here we tend to have a very stable population. The vast majority of kids at . . . started their schooling in kindergarten in . . . and here they've been the whole time. And I think urban schools probably see, you know, to a much greater degree a transient population. So that's hard in terms of giving a coherent sustained curriculum.

Another policy maker said:

Students who come from suburban backgrounds tend to have everything from more food in their bellies when they come to school in the morning and better attendance rates. In addition to that all being fed and clothed and having a home to live in, having your parents read to you from 6

months, one year on, is a huge indicator of success in a school. So, probably a lot of indicators are outside of school environment. High poverty correlates with poor performance in school. If a kid is cold and has a parent who may be in jail, can't focus during the day when they are otherwise distracted. Suburban kids do horseback riding; they know what a bridle is.

One policy maker remarked:

Where kids in suburban areas I think by and large, the suburban student population is by no means homogenous, but in greater proportions in their parents they see what academic success has meant in terms of economic success, in terms of fulfillment at work and therefore there's almost an unspoken motivator for kids to do that work.

Finally, one policy maker stated:

I felt this all the time and for me it's all I can answer, but for me as a parent of children who are exposed to the system in a year, the major difference I see and the only significant difference I see is that, those children have parental support at home. They don't have the same challenges that urban children have, home life, street life and so on, and as a result, they don't have academic gaps.

Theme III: Graduation Requirement

Question: Why do you think students need to successfully pass the MCAS exam?

Policy makers agreed that students needed to pass the MCAS because it is a graduation requirement. One policy maker said:

I think we need to pass it because we decided it in the state. Why? The majority of people in Massachusetts feel that it is a standard.

Another commented:

Well, because right now that's the only way they get a graduation diploma.

Still another said:

Well, the obvious one, the graduation requirement. But I think it has produced a level of expectation. It has raised the bar in terms of what is expected of every student and that is positive at the end of the day.

A further policy maker remarked:

Well, the law says that, if you want to get your diploma, you have to pass, which is pretty fundamental. The whole purpose behind setting up passing standards and having what we call the competency information standard for MCAS was to establish--was to bring meaning to the diploma. So why do I think kids need to successfully pass the MCAS? It's not just to get a diploma that they need, it's to get the skills behind that diploma.

Yet another

I mean, I think the state in its wisdom has decreed this and I think okay if this is a baseline indeed then it gives us a focus and it gives us a baseline.

Finally, another policy maker stated:

So we have some sense of accountability or standards to say look, if you get a high school diploma, then you are able to do x, y, and z at this level and then beyond that we say you get to the 12th grade and you do this and this as well.

However, a couple of policy makers had a different view:

It's a common, at this point accepted benchmark for college readiness; for post-secondary readiness.

While another agreed:

Well to satisfy this arbitrary benchmark number one. Number two, to me the MCAS is in some way a basic skills test.

Similarly, another one said:

Well, they need to have some fundamental skills.

Theme IV: Psychological Impact

Question: How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?

The policy makers concurred that the MCAS examination would have some type of effect on the students based on the outcome of the results. One policy maker said:

Well, if they don't feel they did well, they feel very badly cause they know they won't graduate. And if they are borderline they probably just live in fear until they find out how they did. And if it was easy for them they probably just don't even think about it. So, I think it's different for all of them, but I think for the month or so preceding it they are feeling tremendous stress. I think they are probably just relieved it's over with.

Another commented:

You have a very high achieving student who feels it was a waste of time, are kind of annoyed about it, but otherwise no real impact. You have a student who is struggling, student who takes it and does well, I think it makes them feel like they are capable of accomplishing something which is not a bad thing. And then there are students at the other end of the spectrum who no matter how many times they take it, they can't pass it. And I think that's very demoralizing to those students because it's basically said to them, we are writing you off.

Still another remarked:

I think we have a lot of kids here who breeze through it... and the vast majority of them feel good about it. The flip side of that of course is that there are kids who are really anxious about whether or not they are going to pass and there's so much emphasis on the high stakes nature of it that there are kids who are literally crying when they are taking the retest. I gotta imagine that they don't feel too good about that process.

And further:

If you are in a high performing district and the students do

well, then I think they feel pretty good about themselves. If you are not in a high performing district, I think it could be one more slap in the face.

An additional policy maker stated:

This I think is a very frustrating thing for me. We try to tell the kids don't feel bad if you fail the MCAS because it is not a perfect test. It doesn't mean you're not going to be successful. What I see happening is I think kids take it personally and they think there's something wrong with them. I think it can really have a harmful effect with just their self-esteem or their confidence; and I think that's a real problem, especially kids who fails it two or three times. They feel hopeless and I worry the long term effects are going to be on those students.

Similarly:

They get very discouraged you know and talk about why am I coming to school when I can't do this; and I can't do that; and I'm not happy with that.

Theme V: Ambivalence

Question: Do you think the MCAS is fair?

The majority of the policy makers were ambivalent towards the MCAS for various reasons. One policy maker said:

I don't think it's as fair as we would like. Again, I think we have learned a lot. I don't know if you could ever have one instrument to be fair, so I don't think it's blatantly unfair, but I don't think it's fair.

Another policy maker opined:

Well, I think it's been carefully fair. Yeah, they have worked very hard to develop a test that is specific to the curriculum that they designed so, if [a] teacher has covered the materials that they put into the curriculum as approved, then it's a fair measurement of how much that student has learned from that teacher on that subject. I don't know about fairness necessarily. It doesn't measure how much that student knows or how well they might do in other

settings or on other types of test.

One policy maker commented:

I don't think there's any such thing as a perfect test but I think it's one of the best tests in the country. It's one of the best better tests out there if not the best. Could it be better, I'm sure it can be.

And another remarked:

I think there are some cultural biases in there. I think certain children are at a disadvantage even before they take it. I think again the states attempt to be fair in administering the test.

Another declared:

I don't think holding it as a high school test and an impediment to graduation is fair. I do think that it measures an important ability in language arts and mathematics and not to have it in some sense would be unfair, because it would be taking away another important motivator and tool when showing equity in terms of achievement particularly in schools where kids are struggling in greater numbers. But what's unfair about it is it's unfunded mandate. The amount of money that's available to support schools to achieve the MCAS, just like No Child Left Behind, and so what's happened in our society, I believe, is a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of education.

Still another remarked:

I would say because the MCAS tests to a series of standards that have been promulgated for a long time. It's fair to kids who have been exposed to instruction that teaches those standards. For a kid who parachutes in, with all due respect, a kid who parachutes in from Texas in 10th grade and is English speaking and needs to pass that exam, I don't think that's fair because that kid has not been exposed to those concepts all the way along.

Finally, one policy maker stated:

As before, if there are no standards people do whatever

they want, but how we hold schools, teachers, students accountable has to be something different. I don't know what that is exactly, but there are multiple ways of addressing students and showing what they know.

Some participants had a different view about the MCAS examination. One policy maker said:

I think the biggest failure is one size fits all. It's a very individual experience. Too much dependence on it.

Another had a different thought:

It's a fair assessment of the curriculum frameworks. I certainly think that with English and Math at this point it is [fair].

Theme VI: Apprehension

Question: What would you like people to know about the MCAS that I have not asked?

The policy makers were apprehensive about the MCAS examination. One policy maker explained:

Well, I would like people to know really is that the education law written in 1993 doesn't call for just one test like the MCAS does. Which is sort of the way it's portrayed, it's the law. They really--and we talked a lot about it before we passed that legislation--that it needed to be a fair assessment, that it needed to have more than one product probably to look at how students were really performing. So, I think what I would like for people to know is it's not governed by the law.

Another opined:

I think that as we expand beyond English and math and go on to history and social studies and science we [have] got to rethink the principal frameworks in those areas and we gotta make sure districts have the resources they need to help students pass the test, particularly when you look at science. The facilities, the infrastructure we have in

science right now in lower districts is an issue. We have labs that are inadequate for experiments kids are called upon to do and I think we as a culture haven't supported learning in the sciences, mathematics like some other countries.

Another policy maker offered a similar thought:

One thing that people should understand about the test is that it is not the best test. It was originally designed from my understanding for people who were here when the law was initially passed to really be an assessment tool for how the districts and the schools are doing and not have impact on individual students and that certainly has not been the case. And I think the science requirement is a mistake and I am very concerned about what is going to happen to this year's graduating class who have to pass the science.

And further:

There is no panacea, nothing to just fix the problem. We need to support what's good with MCAS and put our resources there.

Similarly:

MCAS has its faults . . . let's figure out how better we can fix it, how we can get all students to meet the standards and hold them accountable while we support them.

And a kindred thought:

We need to be looking at it more critically, to be looking not just to say it's a wonderful thing, but it has many positives strengths, but also can we fix some of those things that are wrong.

Finally, one policy maker commented:

It's not as big impediment to good schooling as some would argue and it's not as much as a help to good schooling as some people would like it to be. I think we've learned to live with it now, it's been around long enough. I won't cry over it if it disappears.

The participants in the focus groups and the policy makers had different

perceptions and opinions regarding the MCAS examination as they addressed the same questions. Chapter 5 will elaborate upon the findings.

Below is the list of the eleven questions that the focus group participants and the policy makers were asked. From the responses to these eleven questions, six major themes were developed (see above for the themes and their categories).

Questions for Focus Groups

1. When you hear of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, what comes to mind?
2. What do you think are some factors that might prevent some students from successfully passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
3. What effect will the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System have on your future?
4. How is it that the suburban schools do better on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment exam than the urban schools?
5. What are the advantages or positive aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
6. What are the disadvantages or negative aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
7. Why do you think you need to successfully pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
8. If you could change one thing about the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, what would it be?
9. How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?
10. Do you think the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System is fair?
11. What would you like people to know about the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam that I have not asked?

CHAPTER V

Discussion of the Results

Chapter Five will start with a re-introduction of the purpose of the study. Second, it will focus on the theoretical lens which will be used to interpret the results of the research. Third, the last part of Chapter Five will contain four sections dealing with limitations of the study; significance to Law, Policy, and Society; implications for future research; and summary and overview.

I. Introduction

The study was intended to explore whether high-stakes testing is just another form of “separate and unequal” education for African-American children and may in fact potentially have negative effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, etc.) on these students. This proposition was examined through a qualitative research design focused on three broad questions:

1. How do African-American students perceive the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination?
2. How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive through the Massachusetts public school system?
3. What impact (if any) has the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System had on African-American students’ educational experiences?

More specifically, the purpose of this study was to look at the effects of the MCAS on African-American students to ascertain if the law that was implemented to help students be successful may actually be having an adverse impact.

The results of the study in an across-group analysis of the focus groups and in-depth interviews revealed that of the 11 questions, six questions generated common

themes from both sets of participants. Four of the themes will be the basis of the discussion because they address the three major research questions (above) directly. Although the student focus groups revealed two other themes (equity of test and participants' recommendation for the future) and the policy makers also revealed two other themes (ambivalence and apprehension), they are outliers of the research, yet important to it. Critical Race Theory (CRT), provides a useful theoretical lens for an examination of the current discussion of vast perception differences in large part between those of the African-American students and the policy makers.

II. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory, as it relates to education, challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial groups. Solorzano & Yosso (2001) identify five themes of critical race theory of education that form its basic perspectives, pedagogy, and research methods.

First, critical race theory of education recognizes the central role racism plays in the structuring of schools and schooling practices and that racism intersects with other forms of subordination, including sexism and elitism. Critical race theory acknowledges that notions of objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy, as well as curricular practices, such as tracking, teacher expectations, and intelligence testing, have historically been used to subordinate students of color. In addition, critical race theorists identify four components of racism: (a) it has a cumulative impact on both the individual and the group; (b) it takes on instrumental and individual forms; (c) it has macro (e.g., racial profiling; African-American students being placed in remedial courses [versus college

prep courses], without any apparent rationale) and micro components (e.g., high school guidance counselors telling African-American students that they are not college material); and (d) it has conscious and unconscious elements (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Second, critical race theory is cognizant of the fact that the experiential knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical race educators can use methods such as chronicles, family history, storytelling, scenario building, narratives, biographies, and parables to draw on the strength of the lived experiences students bring into and outside the classroom (Delgado, 1989).

Third, critical race theory challenges the essentialism and the uni-disciplinary focus of most traditional analyses and insists on an analysis of race and racism by placing them in both an historical (separate but unequal) and contemporary (high-stakes testing) context using interdisciplinary methods (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Fourth, critical race theory examines the system of education as part of a critique of societal inequality (i.e., social inequality is reinforced through the education system and its practices). Critical race educators challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, through research, pedagogy, and praxis (i.e., ascertaining how a theory or lesson becomes part of lived experience). Critical race theorists argue that traditional claims of objectivity and meritocracy camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Finally, a critical race framework is committed to social justice and offers a

liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Critical race theorists envision the ultimate elimination of sexism and racism and the empowerment of the underrepresented.

Overall, critical race theory in education realizes that first, the educational system is designed to maintain a White hierarchy in place (Ladson-Billing, 1999). Second, current instructional strategies assume that African-American students are deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Third, intelligence testing has been a movement to legitimize African-American students' deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism (Ladson-Billing, 1999). Fourth, inequality in school funding is a function of institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Finally, despite the recorded history of the fight for school desegregation, critical race theory argues that, rather than serving as a solution to social inequality, school desegregation has been promoted only in ways that are advantageous to Whites (e.g., African-American students being bused into predominantly White schools; the creation of well-funded magnet schools to lure White students back into urban schools) (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

III. Counter-Storytelling

One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling emerged “as both a method of telling the story of those experiences that have not been told (i.e., those on the margins of society), and as a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse--the majoritarian story” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156.). Given that high-stakes testing is playing a pivotal role in the lives of African-American students as regards whether they graduate from

high school in Massachusetts, paradigms must be created that allow their voices to shed light on the day-to-day realities in schools and challenge mainstream accounts of their experiences (Howard, 2008).

Counter-storytelling can serve multiple functions. First, it can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. Second, it can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center. Third, it can build community among those who are at the margins of society. Fourth, it can open new windows onto the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the reality they live and showing that they are not alone in their position. Finally, it can provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p.156.).

By listening to the counter-stories of people of color, perhaps the dominant culture can gain access to a view of the world that they have not been privileged to see because of being part of the status quo (Love, 2004). This was very evident with some of the policy makers who never gave a second thought that their schools/systems/students do not do well on the MCAS. According to Ladson-Billing (1998), story-telling or "naming one's own reality," provides for the "psychic preservation of marginalized groups" who internalize white condemnation of themselves. Story-telling has been a "kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression" (p. 14).

Finally, narrative and story-telling provide culturally sensitive research approaches for African-American students. Such approaches are viewed as interpretive paradigms that offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-

constructions of multiple realities and experiences, and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African-Americans (Tillman (2002), cited in Howard, 2008, p. 967).

The intent of providing the story and counter-story format in the discussion section is to underscore that the African-American students' counter-stories should be listened to so that, what they say also matters within the education system, as opposed to the voices of the policy makers; and perhaps be a voice within educational research as it pertains to the impact of high-stakes testing on African-American students in general and in Massachusetts particularly. Critical race theory is about learning to listen to other people's counter-stories and giving them a sense of importance within the education system and within educational research (Bernal, 2002).

IV. Policy Makers' Perceptions Versus African-American Students' Perceptions

In the discussion below, each Research Question is associated with two themes drawn from the Focus Groups and the Interviews. The discussion will show that Policy Makers and Students had near-opposing views.

A. Research Question Number 1:

How do African-American students perceive the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination?

1. Theme I: No Positive or Negative Consequences

a. Question: What effect will the MCAS have on your future?

b. Story

Policy makers in large part did not perceive the MCAS examination as having a positive or negative impact, because, in large measure, of the available resources that their schools/systems have, as well as the fact that, historically, their students do well on

the test. For one policy maker in particular, the MCAS examination affecting his/her future was not even an after thought:

I don't know. I guess I've never thought about that before. The truth is that I'm the . . . in a district that tends to [be] pretty high performing on the MCAS. Our kids largely arrive at school ready to learn; they get a good breakfast and they have parents who are engaged in their education and they get to have all kinds of educational experiences outside of school. And we are well funded, have resources. I mean we have all kinds of things that are putting us at an advantage in terms of how our kids do. So it's an interesting question that I've never really thought of the MCAS scores as being tied to my career or my reputation. That's interesting. So, honestly, I don't see that it's connected much at all.

The literature is well documented with the facts that suburban schools have better resources than urban schools. However, CRT asserts that, given that the majoritarian group establishes what is normal, it is unfathomable to imagine something different.

1. Theme I: Future Aspiration

a. Question: What effect will the MCAS have on your future?

b. Counter-Story

African-American students elucidated a different view. They were very perceptive of the potentially negative future economic and social consequences that the MCAS examination could have on their futures. One student said:

It affects your whole life. You may not be able to go to college, graduate high school. You won't be able to get a good job if you don't go to college. You won't get a high school diploma if you don't pass the MCAS, so I think it has a great effect on the rest of your life.

Another commented:

I have been through interviews and they ask me for that high school diploma and I tell them the truth. I said I don't

have it yet because of MCAS and they say they can't hire me without it and you know basically I've been trying my best to get it and plus I wanna try to get my GED too but it never worked. To me, I didn't graduate high school cause I didn't pass MCAS.

The literature abounds with studies that talk about what a person's quality of life would be like without some kind of formal education. The researcher is an ardent advocate for people obtaining as much formal education as possible. However, CRT asserts, that majoritarian group implementation of the MCAS was a way of implicitly organizing majoritarian privilege.

B. Research Question Number 2:

How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive through the Massachusetts public school system?

1. Theme II: Socio-Economic Status

- a. Question: How is it that the suburban schools do better on the MCAS than the urban schools?
- b. Story

The policy makers noted that there was a difference between the suburban schools and the urban schools. They based their findings on the fact that in the suburbs parents are more engaged with the children's education; they ensure that their children have proper nutrition before leaving for school in the morning and going to bed at night; they live in wealthier communities; and they provides a more stable family life. As one policy maker stated:

Most of the youngsters who start with us as 5-year-olds are still with us when they are into high school. So, they have continuity and consistency of education. They come to us with some genetic predisposition or whatever you want to call it to do well. So, I think that a lot of the suburban districts that I am familiar with share both of those

characteristics with us and that is, stability of enrollment and a parent population that is highly educated and wants that same thing for their children and have higher intellect levels.

Looking through the lens of CRT, the majoritarian group (hiding behind the meritocracy mythology) when they developed the MCAS implied that every student had equal access to educational opportunities, therefore, every student should be able to meet the same standards of performance. However, this assumption ignored the “academic apartheid or apartheid of knowledge”, (Yosso, 2002, p.97). As the policy maker highlighted, they have resources not available to urban students.

2. Theme II: Suburban Schools Better Than Urban Schools

a. Question: How is it that the suburban schools do better on the MCAS than the urban schools?

b. Counter-Story

African-American students’ perception did not quite align with that of policy makers. They too noted that there is a difference between the suburban schools and the urban schools, but they contended that better teachers, better resources, and well maintained schools are some of the factors that contribute to a better outcome on the MCAS examination. One student commented:

Because of the education that they get. Like, if you have more money and you get the newer books and you’ll have everything that is basically on that test. But, if you have schools that don’t have that kind of money, you get the older books and you won’t know as much.

While another student opined:

The learning, teachers in suburban schools help their students get ready, prepare them more than and better than the teachers at the urban schools. Like students come in and they push them harder so they can remember

everything they learned all through the year so they can help them with the MCAS, and the teachers at the urban schools don't really worry about that, they help you but they don't push you as hard as they need to.

Through the lens of CRT, the disenfranchised assert their voice to announce their reality, but yet the majoritarian group defines reality for them.

C. Research Question Number 3:

What impact (if any) has the MCAS had on African American students educational experiences?

1. Theme III: Graduation Requirement

- a. Question: Why do you think students need to successfully pass the MCAS exam?
- b. Story

Policy makers agreed that students needed to pass the MCAS because it is a graduation requirement that is mandated by the state; and it serves as a baseline for students to ensure that they have basic skills. One policy maker said:

I think we need to pass it because we decided it in the state. Why? The majority of people in Massachusetts feel that it is a standard.

Another policy maker said:

Well, the law says that, if you want to get your diploma, you have to pass, which is pretty fundamental. The whole purpose behind setting up passing standards and having what we call the competency information standard for MCAS was to establish--was to bring meaning to the diploma. So why do I think kids need to successfully pass the MCAS? It's not just to get a diploma that they need, it's to get the skills behind that diploma.

While the MCAS may be a graduation requirement and designed to ensure that students graduate with a basic skills set (the researcher is for students graduating from high school

with a certain level of skills), CRT asserts that the actions taken to implement MCAS as law are a form of the majoritarian group ensuring their dominant position. In reality, the law is not a law, but the majoritarian group is enforcing it as a law, in part, because the MCAS is aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

2. Theme III: Future Livelihood

- a. Question: Why do you think students need to successfully pass the MCAS exam?
- b. Counter-Story

African-American Students agreed that they needed to pass the MCAS for a better future. The students felt that the MCAS would lead to a better quality of life, perhaps a better job in the future, and maybe college some day. One student said:

To get somewhere in life. If you want to go to college, then do what you gotta do.

While another student remarked similarly:

Basically, move on and go to college.

Research shows that students who complete high school and go on to college have a better quality of life. However, according to CRT, the law is just a subtle maneuver to keep the disenfranchised oppressed; while it allows the majoritarian group to control their destiny, it does not allow those who are marginalized in society to control their destiny. And although the law is disguised in such a way that it appears to be for the betterment of all, it is not required of private secondary schools, which most of the majoritarian group children attend if they are not attending a suburban school.

D. Research Question Number 3:

What impact (if any) has the MCAS had on African American students educational experiences?

1. Theme IV: Psychological Impact

- a. Question: How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?
- b. Story

The policy makers concurred that the MCAS examination would have some type of effect on the students based on the outcome of the results. The psychological impact varied from discouraged, feelings of hopelessness, stress, low-self-esteem, easy, to flat-out demoralized. One policy maker said:

Well, if they don't feel they did well, they feel very badly cause they know they won't graduate. And if they are borderline they probably just live in fear until they find out how they did. And if it was easy for them they probably just don't even think about it. So, I think it's different for all of them, but I think for the month or so preceding it they are feeling tremendous stress. I think they are probably just relieved it's over with.

Another policy maker said:

I think we have a lot of kids here who breeze through it... and the vast majority of them feel good about it. The flip side of that of course is that there are kids who are really anxious about whether or not they are going to pass and there's so much emphasis on the high stakes nature of it that there are kids who are literally crying when they are taking the retest. I gotta imagine that they don't feel too good about that process.

The perception of the policy makers is congruent with that of the research when students take part in high-stakes testing. Studies have found that students who take part in high-stakes tests express emotions such as anxiety, anger boredom, and worry about the social comparisons that might result from test scores (Paris, Roth, & Turner, 2000; Wheelock, Bell, & Haney, 2000). CRT asserts that, the majoritarian group will

acknowledge similarities as the disenfranchised, but they will maintain the status quo until their children are dramatically effected.

2. Theme IV: Psychological Impact

- a. Question: How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?
- b. Counter-Story

African-American students concurred that the MCAS examination would have some type of effect on them. A myriad of psychological responses were provided, such as stupid, worried, stressed, scared, smart, and depressed. One student voiced:

Well, some feel stupid and others smart. I have a few friends who passed it on the first try. The first try they did it and they passed. Whereas for me, I had to take it, this is probably my 3rd or 4th time, I am not sure. So, it makes me feel a little stupid.

While one student remarked:

If you pass it, you feel relaxed, but if you don't you're depressed. You gotta take it again.

Still another student commented:

Scared and worried.

The array of psychological emotions that the students expressed are similar to those found in other studies (Paris, Roth, & Turner, 2000; Wheeler, Bebell, and Haney, 2000) and those of policy makers in this research. However, according to CRT, this study provided the opportunity for African-American students to have a platform to have their voices heard or to name their own reality, and perhaps this will short-circuit the power that the majoritarian group has exercised over the years with defining their reality (Love, 2004).

V. Conclusion

This study was intended to answer three research questions: (a) How do African-American students perceive the MCAS examination; (b) How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive through the Massachusetts public school; and (c) What impact (if any) has the MCAS had on African-American student's educational experiences? The results of this study show that African American students perceived that without successfully passing the MCAS, their potential for upper mobility in all aspects of life would be hampered. They realize that "higher education is the gateway to success" and in order to be successful in life, the first hurdle that they must pass is the MCAS. Second, African-American students perceived that inequity exists as it relates to resources. The suburban schools have better resources that include better teachers, better-maintained buildings, and a more structured educational environment, just to name a few. Finally, the MCAS has had an impact on their educational experiences.

From a positive standpoint, for some of them, passing the MCAS provided a sense of accomplishment and continued hope towards future academic achievements and economic prosperity. From a negative standpoint, for the ones who grappled with passing the MCAS, their future academic achievements, dreams, and sense of accomplishment were deferred with no immediate hope in sight in some cases. From a neutral standpoint, which is partly based on the researcher's co-creation of this story, the students making preparations for the MCAS, they fall in the same category as the ones who passed. Their hope of future academic achievement is still alive because their reality has not been challenged and as long as someone's reality has not been challenged, life is

quite often viewed through rose colored glasses. Lastly, the results of this research confirmed that policy makers are not in tune with those people whom their policy decisions affect the most.

VI. Limitations of the Study

This study will provide in-depth insight into some African-American students' perceptions regarding the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System and standardized testing. It was designed within the framework of Critical Race Theory and so was intended not be generalized to any other group and should not be generalized to the larger African-American population. Also, the study should not be generalized to other groups (e.g., Latinos/as, Asians, Native Americans). The study will not provide direct correlations to individuals with disabilities and to those students with limited English language skills. It will provide ideas for future inquiry for these groups.

A further limitation of this study is that there was no follow-up to investigate what happened to the students who were unable to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System at the genesis of this research. At the time the focus groups were held with these students, some of the participants appeared to be very dejected as a result of their inability to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System examination. It is hoped that in the future, longitudinal studies will emerge in this area.

VII. Significance to Law, Policy, and Society

Although the MCAS maybe be a tool for measuring how well schools are teaching information that is based on high standards in comparison to other states, and for determining how well students are demonstrating the levels of performance required by the state standards, the results of this study indicated that the law that was implemented to

help students be successful was having an adverse impact in some circumstances.

VIII. Implications for Future Research

Future research is suggested in several areas, one of which was discussed in the preceding Limitations of Study section, i.e., the hope that longitudinal studies will emerge in this area. More research needs to be done with regards to obtaining African-American students' and other students' of color perceptions of the high-stakes testing nation wide, because they are the ones most impacted by the implementation of high-stakes testing. Therefore, there maybe a lot of silent voices that are waiting to cry out with regards to how high-stakes testing is affecting their lives. And, if the cry is loud enough, perhaps change will come.

More research needs to be done in the area of what types of psychological counseling services may be available for students that reside in a state in which high-stakes testing is mandatory. There is a plethora of research that indicates that taking non-high-stakes tests can create a variety of psychology issues.

More research needs to be done with regard to how a law, which is not a law, has become a law.

IX. Summary and Overview of the Study

High-stakes testing is a growing phenomenon in the educational landscape. This study, reflecting a concern about African-American students, investigated the potential psychological effect that high-stakes testing may have on African-American students.

The sample consisted of 30 African-American students who reside in various large urban cities in Massachusetts, and 15 policy makers, all from various regions in Massachusetts. A purposive sampling procedure was utilized to recruit the focus groups

members; a convenience sampling method that included word of mouth and referrals was employed to recruit policy makers.

Three different types of focus groups were conducted. One focus group consisted of African-American students who were unable to pass the MCAS at the genesis of the research. The second focus groups consisted of students who were successful with passing the MCAS. The third group consisted of students making preparation to take the MCAS.

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with policy makers from various regions in Massachusetts.

Six themes were identified with four of the themes addressing the three major research questions:

- 1) How do African-American students perceive the MCAS examination?
- 2) How do African-American students perceive the quality of education they receive through the Massachusetts public school system?
- 3) What impact (if any) has the MCAS had on African-American students' educational experiences?

The results showed that the students perceive the MCAS as being directly correlated to their future aspirations; that by living in an urban community, they are not receiving the same quality of education as their suburban community counterparts; that the MCAS is having a positive/negative impact on their educational experiences; and finally, the students' and policy makers' perceptions of the MCAS differed substantially, with the only exception being the psychological impact.

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Law, Public Policy, and Society
202 Holmes Hall
Northeastern University
Boston, MA

Investigator: Reginald Harge

Title of Project:

African Americans Students' Perception of High-Stakes Testing In
Massachusetts: Does The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System
Raise Students Above The Separate And Unequal Class System?

I have been asked to take part in a research project concerning African American students' perception of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts. The researcher will explain the project to me in detail. I should feel free to ask questions. If I have more questions later, Reginald Harge, the person mainly responsible for this study, will discuss them with me. He can be reached at (617) 926-3292.

I will be asked to participate in an interview concerning African American students' perception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how law and public policy not only affects society, but also impacts people personally in how they feel and think about themselves. If I'm under 18 years of age, a parent or guardian will need to sign this permission form in order to participate in this study.

If I decide to take part in this study, I will participate in an one-on-one interview that will take about 60 minutes in length. The meeting will be audio-taped for the

purpose of reviewing the information. The interviewer will protect confidentiality at all times and my part in this study is anonymous. That means no one, with the exception of the interviewer, will know that the answers I give are from me. The recorded information and transcripts will be reviewed by the dissertation advisors and two colleagues as part of the research process. Confidentiality will be maintained during this time.

There are no expected risks to participation in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help in formulating educational policy.

My participation is voluntary and may be terminated by me at any time. I may discuss and ask questions about my participation in this project at any point during the process. If I wish to quit, I simply inform Reginald Harge of my decision.

If I am not satisfied with the way this study is performed, I may discuss these complaints with Nan Regina, Director, Division of Research Integrity, at (617) 373-4588, or William Sanchez, Principal Investigator, at (617) 373-2404, anonymously, if I choose.

I have read the consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature on this form means that I understand the information and I agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

Thank you

Signature

Date

Sincerely,

Reginald Harge, M.A.

APPENDIX B

Parental Consent Form

Law, Public Policy, and Society
205 Holmes Hall
Northeastern University
Boston, MA

Investigator: Reginald Harge

Title of Project:

African Americans Students' Perception of High-Stakes Testing In
Massachusetts: Does the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System
Raise Students Above The Separate and Unequal Class System?

My child has been asked to take part in a research project concerning African American students' perception of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts. The researcher will explain the project to my child in detail. My child should feel free to ask questions. If my child has more questions later, Reginald Harge, the person mainly responsible for this study, will discuss them with my child. He may be reached at (617) 926-3292.

My child will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion concerning African American students' perception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how law and public policy not only affect society, but also impact people personally in how they feel and think about themselves. If my child is less than 18 years of age, a parent or guardian will need to sign this permission form in order for my child to participate in this study.

If my child decides to take part in this study, he/she will participate in one discussion group meeting that will take about 60 to 120 minutes. The meeting will be audio-taped for the purpose of reviewing the information. The group leaders will protect

confidentiality at all times and my child's part in this study is anonymous. That means no one, not even the researchers, will know that the answers given are from my child. The recorded information and transcripts will be reviewed by the dissertation advisors and two colleagues as part of the research process; confidentiality will be maintained during this time. Due to the group format, participants will be asked to respect the confidentiality of other group members.

I understand that there are no expected risks to participation in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help in formulating educational policy.

My child's participation is voluntary and may be terminated by him/her at any time. My child may discuss and ask questions about his/her participation in this project at any point during the process. If my child wishes to end participation, he/she may simply inform Reginald Harge of his/her decision.

If I or my child is not satisfied with the way this study is performed, we may discuss these complaints with Nan Regina, Director, Division of Research Integrity, anonymously, if we choose.

I have read the consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature on this form means that I understand the information about my child's participation in this study. I will receive a copy of this form.

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian Signature

Date

Print Name Parent or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Child

Date

Print Name of Child

Date

I have explained the study, provided opportunity for questions, and determined that this individual is competent to understand the study.

Reginald Harge, M.A.

Date

APPENDIX C

Protocol And Questions

Dissertation Title:

African American Students' Perception of High-Stakes Testing in Massachusetts:
Does the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Raise Students
Above the Separate and Unequal System?

A. Introduction

Hello, I'm Reginald Harge and I'm a Ph.D. candidate at Northeastern University in the Law, Public Policy, and Society program. The purpose of the focus group is to ascertain your perception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam. This focus group should last between 60 to 120 minutes. Focus groups are different from classes. Once I get started, I am going to ask you questions and you are going to share your thoughts and opinions. You will do most of the talking. I will be doing a lot of listening. Remember, I want to learn from you. I'm not here to teach you anything today, although I hope we will all learn something from each other.

Everything we say in this focus group will be kept strictly confidential. I also ask that people in the group respect each other by keeping the discussion confidential as well. The information you provide will be combined with that of other focus groups, and only summary reports will be written. With that understanding, would you still like to participate in this study?

Also, I'd like to tape record our discussion for research purposes. Is that OK with you?

B. Ground Rules

All information shared in the group is to stay in the group. This means no one should tell other students' stories to friends, family, or relatives. By having this agreement honored in the group, you can know what you share will be kept private too. In this way, we can help maintain each other's safety. If you recognize someone in the group whom you know from another part of your neighborhood and you are not comfortable for any reason speaking in front of him/her, please tell the facilitator.

If you find yourself feeling upset and needing to take a break from participating, feel free to leave the room and talk with the executive director of the program. The executive director will be happy to speak with you and provide you with any immediate support you might need. When you are ready to rejoin the group, you may reenter the room.

Because the discussion today is so important, I will be taping all of the valuable information each of you has to share. This means it will be necessary for only one of you to speak at a time so that each word will be clearly audible on tape. I want to make sure that everyone has a chance to talk. Some of you may disagree with others in the group, and that's fine. I want to hear from all of you.

C. How Today's Focus Group Will Work

I will be asking you several questions about your perception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive System Assessment exam over the next hour or two. I want to assure you that there are no right or wrong answers, but rather, different points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view, even if it is different from what others have said. In fact, it's really important to hear all the different points of view in the room. If you want

to follow up on something someone said, or if you want to agree or disagree, or give an example, feel free to do that. Don't feel as though you have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I want everyone to have a chance to share ideas. I may need to interrupt or call on people to make sure this happens. Please do not feel offended if I do this.

Before we get started, I want to remind you that I will be tape recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say things in these sessions, and I can't write fast enough to write them all down.

Also, you do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. I would also like to ask that if you talk about your focus group experience with family or friends that you not attach anyone's name here with the stories they share. Can I get everyone to agree to that by nodding their heads?

D. Consent Forms

At this point, I would like to collect everyone's signed consent forms and ask if anyone has any question about these forms before I collect them.

After I have collected the consent forms, I will tell the group that the tape recorder will be starting.

E. Timing

We expect to be here until _____. I appreciate your taking this time with me so I want to make sure we end on time. I will be watching the clock and may need to break off the discussion at times to be sure we have time to discuss all questions.

F. Icebreaker

Let's begin by going around the room and asking each of you to tell us where you would go if you could travel to any country/continent in the world. And why. I'll start . . .

G. Focus Group Questions

1. When you hear of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, what comes to mind?
2. What do you think are some factors that might prevent some students from successfully passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
3. What effect will the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System have on your future?
4. How is it that the suburban schools do better on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment exam than the urban schools?
5. What are the advantages or positive aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
6. What are the disadvantages or negative aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
7. Why do you think you [the students] need to successfully pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
Why do you [the policy makers] think that the students need to successfully pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam?
8. If you could change one thing about the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, what would it be?
9. How do you think students feel about themselves after taking the 10th grade MCAS?
10. Do you think the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System is fair?
11. What would you like people to know about the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam that I have not asked?

H. Summarize the Main Points of The Discussion. Thank Everyone for Attending

I. Focus Group Site Preparation

1. Arrange chairs in circular formation for at least 8 to 10 participants, one facilitator and one note taker.
2. Test tape recording equipment and place in center of the circle.
3. Greet focus group participants as they enter the room.
4. Ask participants to turn off cell phones.
5. Inform participants where bathrooms are and encourage their use before focus group gets started.

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