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### The Double Consciousness of African American Students Who Desegregated Atlanta Public Schools

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# **The Double Consciousness of African American Students Who Desegregated Atlanta Public Schools**

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## **Abstract**

Six years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Atlanta reluctantly complied with the order to desegregate its school system rather than risk having schools closed due to noncompliance. Out of 132 students, nine black high school seniors desegregated four of Atlanta's all-white high schools. The purpose of this study is to explore and document the missing voices of Atlanta's 1961 school desegregation movement and provide an analysis of the students' experiences. W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory serves as a lens for understanding and explaining the experiences of the Atlanta students who were first to desegregate schools in "the city too busy to hate."

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## **Atlanta 9**

On August 30, 1961 Atlanta police detectives arrived 15 minutes after school began to accompany nine African American students to their new schools. These students left everything familiar, such as teachers, friends, and activities, to integrate White schools where they were unwanted.

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Detectives remained with the students all day and escorted them home 15 minutes before the official school dismissal. The nine students came to be known as the “Atlanta 9” (hereafter referred to as Atlanta 9). The first day went smoothly. The news media declared, “Everything is normal. No one is eating with them. No one is speaking to them. I repeat—everything is normal” (Dartt, 2012, p.152; Radio Communication in Atlanta City Hall, 1961). On the surface, all was well, but beneath the surface there was anxiety, isolation, and pressure on the nine students.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate schools were inherently unequal (Kluger, 1975; Martin, Jr., 1998; Rubin, 2016). All public schools were ordered to end racial segregation. After six years, Atlanta reluctantly complied with the order to desegregate its school system rather than risk having its schools closed due to noncompliance (Bohan & Randolph, 2009). At the start of Atlanta’s desegregation process, Black students had to apply to be considered to attend White schools (Kruse, 2007). The Black applicants participated in a rigorous process that included intelligence tests, applications, and interviews with the school board. Out of 132 students, ten were chosen to integrate four of Atlanta’s all White high schools (Corson, n.d.). One of the students opted not to transfer, thus nine Black students remained to integrate the 102,000 student body (Bayor, 1996; Research Atlanta, 1992). These Black students were from working and middle class homes, they were intelligent, and they were well-spoken (Dartt, 2012; Gong, 1992; McGrath, 1992). But regardless of the capital they possessed, they lacked the resources and opportunities of their White counterparts. Thus, their transfer was not so much an indictment of their Black zoned schools as it was the chance for greater opportunities inside and outside of their schools.

Everything about the desegregation of the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) was carefully planned and executed to ensure a peaceful transition and to guarantee the city of Atlanta would not earn the violent reputation given to other southern cities when they desegregated (Bohan & Bradshaw, 2014). Months leading up to the first day, the nine Black students received training on how to handle hostile incidents that might arise at their new schools. The emotional turmoil and pressure to succeed was stressful and affected their young lives, which was not unusual for Black students who participated in school desegregation. In many ways, the Atlanta 9 stories mirrored the narratives of others across the South who were the first to integrate their schools. These common experiences included: feeling a sense of loss when transferring, sensing a role of tokenism, and maintaining resilience in the face of adversity (Leonardo, 2012). In addition to these familiar themes found in many school desegregation narratives, several additional themes emerged from this research which

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made the Atlanta 9 experiences unique in comparison to others (Beals, 1994; Fisher, 2002; Heidelberg, 2006; Jacoway, 2008; Poff, 2016; Poff, 2014). Through the lens of double consciousness, as researchers we found educational, cultural, and social class privilege that were unique to Atlanta. Double consciousness, put forth by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), is the idea that Black identity is divided into two. Thus, Blacks not only viewed themselves from their own perspective, but also from the perspective of how the outside White world viewed Blacks. Thus, these nine students were keenly aware of how double consciousness impacted their young lives.

In 1961, Atlanta was an empowering place for African Americans who were surrounded by prestigious Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's), multiple Black churches, several Black media outlets, and numerous Black businesses (Bohan & Bradshaw, 2014; Hobson, 2017). No other city boasted this type of progress amongst Blacks in one central location. Much of this success can be ascribed to the Black middle class, which is rarely examined in the desegregation literature. In Mary Patillo's book, *Black Picket Fences* (1999), she focuses on the residential experiences of the Black middle class, which she argues is too often overlooked in mainstream research. She noted, "The Black middle class and their residential enclaves are nearly invisible to the non-Black public because of the intense (and mostly negative) attention given to poor urban ghettos." We concur with Patillo's argument because of the findings during this research. Voluminous research on school desegregation highlights the losses experienced by Blacks during the process, the failures of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to maintain integrated schools, and the heroism of Whites who joined the struggle (Baker, 2006; Daniel & Walker, 2014; Hyres, 2017; Jacoway, 2008; Kluger, 1975). But limited research suggests how pivotal the Black middle class was in fighting for equality, while still supporting and building up the Black community. The findings of this research reveal how crucial those elite and privileged Blacks were to the success of the movement.

Although the participants embodied a degree of privilege, they represented much more than token integration and accommodationism, which frequently is ascribed to them. Once the cameras packed up and left Atlanta Public Schools (APS) to cover other news, the Atlanta 9 stayed and endured. As the city congratulated itself and took credit for the peace largely resulting from actions by the Atlanta 9, the students quietly went to school daily and "worked their butts off," as the students wanted to show that, "Blacks deserved the same access and resources as Whites" (Welch, October 25, 2016). They were not expecting entitlements or stardom, only a good education.

Despite Atlanta's history of progressivism and inclusiveness,

remarkably little attention has been given to the experiences of the Atlanta 9 and the process these students endured in integrating the schools. The nine students were just as responsible for social, economic, and political change as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Freedom Riders, the desegregation legal cases, the sit-ins, the boycotts, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The aforementioned individuals and events in the Civil Rights Movement are well-known and have garnered considerable historical attention. As researchers, we believe it is also important to mark the contributions of the actual students who were impacted by desegregation mandates. This research gives voice to these students.

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore and document the missing voices of Atlanta's 1961 school desegregation movement and provide a fresh analysis of their experiences. By examining the students' perspectives, we contribute to the historical record and provide a more nuanced analysis of school integration. As researchers, we utilize historical methods to collect the data and an inductive process to analyze it. The data consists of oral histories, archival primary source materials, and secondary literature relating to Atlanta's school desegregation. We also added W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory as a lens for understanding and explaining the experiences of the Atlanta 9 during the later stages of the study. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What motivated the students to apply and how did they handle the pressure placed on them by both the Black and White communities?
2. What did the students gain and lose by attending desegregated schools?

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## **Significance and Purpose**

This research is important for several reasons. First, the desegregation of Atlanta Public Schools is an important part of local and national history, and it should earn a place alongside other civil rights histories. The desegregation of APS, which occurred seven months after the desegregation of the University of Georgia, was a sign of progress, yet it also demonstrated how much more needed to be accomplished (Bohan & Bradshaw, 2014). Second, the oral histories detail what happened when Black students arrived to desegregate White schools, as well as highlight the role that young people and schools played in the evolution

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of society. Third, implications of this research may shed light on recent educational issues with respect to race. School resegregation is a current trend in many large school districts today (Anderson, 2004; Bell, 2004; Felton, 2017). Segregated schools often have fewer resources and are usually linked to educational inequality; segregation impacts students' socialization skills and their ability to interact and coexist with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. In addition, students of color are more frequently targeted as needing behavioral interventions by predominantly White, female, middle class teachers (Reno, Friend, Caruthers, & Smith, 2017). Reading and analyzing these narratives of past events might help solve current racial challenges facing schools and avoid future ones.

School desegregation and the struggle for equal access is well documented for cities like Little Rock, Memphis, Roanoke, and Prince George's County (Baker, 2006; Brown, 2007; Jacoway, 2008; Kluger, 1975; Poff, 2016), but the collective experiences of the Atlanta 9 are not well-known. The Atlanta 9 students' stories merit exploration and attention, especially given Atlanta's prominence as the home of the modern Civil Rights Movement (Hatfield, 2008; Hobson, 2017). A few researchers have acknowledged the Atlanta 9 as part of larger studies on the city of Atlanta. For example, the desegregation of APS was a component of a dissertation featuring research that examined Atlanta's race and class structure (Gong, 1992). The Atlanta 9 story is featured in a study comparing the city of Atlanta to another major city with similar demographics (McGrath, 1992). Also, the nine students are highlighted in research about civic groups that come together to stop the flight of Whites (Henry, 2012), and they are referenced in magazine articles commemorating *Brown v. Board of Education* and other civil rights milestones. But, the stories of the nine Atlanta students, themselves, have never been written about in-depth.

In order to appreciate the struggle, the triumph and the story of the Atlanta 9 students, one must understand the city of Atlanta and what made it such a unique town. Atlanta was a paradox; a place of both racists and progressives. The town prided itself on being "a city too busy to hate" inside a state where the governor detested any notions of racially mixing Black and White children (Bayor, 1996). There were Blacks who wanted to remain segregated in their nurturing environments and Whites who advocated for the integration of schools, which added to the irony during this tumultuous period. The Atlanta 9 students grew up in the shadows of Atlanta's paradox and, within this context, figured out how to use education to bring social change to Atlanta's school system (Bohan & Bradshaw, 2014).

The experiences of the Atlanta 9 were a part of something much

greater that was happening throughout the country. Yet, the students' actions happened within specific local and national contexts, including *Brown v. Board of Education* that the Supreme Court decided six years prior. The local NAACP and local politicians engaged in negotiation and legal maneuverings and leaders involved in desegregation discussions had to consider APS and its history. APS had been segregated since its founding 80 years prior (Bohan & Bradshaw, 2014; Kruse, 2007). In addition, violent protests occurred, businesses were boycotted, and tensions were mounting between Blacks who supported integration and Blacks who did not.

The city of Atlanta was becoming more progressive in the 1960s with an expanding Black middle class that maintained a strong presence within the Black church, Black media, Black colleges and universities, Black Greek organizations, and Black businesses (Hobson, 2017). But, Atlanta's progress was not enough to keep the White governor, mayor, and city leaders from clinging to their traditional views (Bayor, 1996; Hobson, 2017; Kruse, 2007). While powerful leaders disagreed with integrating Blacks and Whites at school together, the opposition was not enough to stop the nine Black students from transferring to White schools. Although the Atlanta 9 did not garner the fanfare of other civil rights activists, they were just as pivotal in the movement for equal rights as more familiar agitators who regularly receive praise for desegregating lunch counters and bus systems.

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## Methodology

The major source of data for the research was the oral histories of five students who desegregated Atlanta in 1961. The definition of "oral history" can be the mundane act of reminiscing about the past to the complex act of executing, recording, and transcribing an interview for scholarly purposes and making it public for others to access (Oral History Association, 2016; Shopes, 2002). Only five of the original nine participated in these interviews. Two were deceased and the other two could not be located. The five who participated are: Thomas Franklin Welch, Madelyn Patricia Nix, Martha Holmes-Jackson, Rosalyn Walton-Lees, Mary McMullen Francis. The four who could not participate include: Willie Jean Black (deceased), Donita Gaines (deceased, returned to Black school), Arthur Simmons, and Lawrence Jefferson. Oral history interviews were recorded to obtain first-hand narratives that traced the students' journeys from the admissions applications through their first year integrating the schools. The five narrators gave voice to Atlanta's school desegregation experience and corroborated primary sources gathered from the archives, as suggested by Green and Troup (2016).

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Other sources of historical research included secondary literature and archival materials such as school and student records, board minutes, news articles, legal briefs, memos, and other documents. Patricia Leavy (2011) clarified oral history research intent by explaining that, “Oral historians seek to document firsthand accounts while they are still available. In other words, those who have borne witness share their stories for the historical record” (p.17). Thus, oral history methodology is critical for ascertaining the perspectives of the remaining students and preserving their narratives while they are still alive.

The participants were interviewed at either the library, their homes, or restaurant meeting rooms and took place over a period of 11 months during 2015-2016. The five interviews were structured in the sense that the same 10 questions were asked of each of the participants. The questions provided a guide, but the conversations still tended to venture off in other directions. After meeting with the former students, the interviews were transcribed. After the transcription, the interviews were coded and then metacoded to merge duplicate data into manageable parts. During the analysis, common themes across the interviews were identified, and then prioritized to determine which themes provided the most rational explanations for describing the data (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002; Luttrell, 2010). Visits to several archives provided additional data to corroborate the participants’ recollections and to help plug holes in participants’ memories.

Once an oral history is recorded, it is subject to the same rigorous analysis as written history. Elizabeth Danto (2008) echoed this point when she noted researchers need to probe oral history transcripts in order to enrich the interpretation and credibility of the data. Because memory can be faulty, she argued that oral history must be subject to the same criticism as documents and other sources, to determine accuracy. Furthermore, Leavy (2011) added, “Although historical researchers often find themselves analyzing data as soon as they collect it, there is a systemic process that must take place for credibility” (p. 48). Moreover, Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested that data analysis helps bring “order, structure, and meaning to the mass amounts of collected data” (p. 112).

As researchers, we proceeded with a more formal analysis which included immersion in the data. Leavy insisted researchers engage in the process of “immersion” first in order to “get to know the data” (2011, p. 58). Immersion for this study meant re-reading the interviews, jotting additional ideas into the margins of the transcripts, and noting patterns that were emerging across the participants. During the immersion process, 70 pages of transcripts were reduced to 26 pages of coded data. Holstein and Gubrium (2002) suggested the process of coding to better organize the data and highlight the emerging themes. The codes were



pulled directly from the data and allowed the researchers to place participants' responses into categories. The codes were statements related to participants' thoughts, feelings, relationships, and actions during the school desegregation process.

A coding matrix was used to organize the codes into categories. The resulting categories became the themes presented in this research. As Creswell (2009) explained, coding involves, "taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the participant" (p. 186). Several familiar themes emerged from the interviews which were similar to the experiences of other students who desegregated their schools. These themes were identified as "existing" since they were related to data already in the literature. New themes emerged that set the experiences of the Atlanta students apart from other school integration experiences. These were identified as "emergent" since they were unique to the Atlanta 9. Ultimately, we sought to determine meaning in the students' experiences. "Sensitive analysis of personal testimony can lead to a deeper and richer understanding of how the past is remembered, reworked and restructured by people in the present" (Abrams, 2016, p. 8). These deeper meanings are presented in the findings.

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### **Double Consciousness**

One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being asunder. (W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903, p. 2)

When speaking, the five students revealed how they navigated their new school environments, and it became evident that Du Bois's idea of double consciousness was reflected in those experiences. This idea of "splitting oneself into two" is a concept rarely mentioned in previous literature on school desegregation. W. E. B. Du Bois's dual consciousness discovery came about during a critical moment in his childhood when one of his White playmates refused to trade cards with him. Du Bois described suddenly realizing he was different and that he was not a part of the White world. Du Bois's first known mention of double consciousness appeared in his book of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he described the "strife" of the American Negro (1903, p. 2). He used double consciousness to explain the struggle that Blacks experienced in trying to reconcile their identities as Blacks with their identities as Americans.

W. E. B. Du Bois's theory revolves around the belief that marginalized outsiders blended themselves into the dominant world by adopting

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dual identities for survival. The theory has become more prominent in contemporary education research on African American students (Lewis, 2014; Wynter-Hoyte & Boutte, 2018). Du Bois explained, “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face,” (1903, p. 3). Furthermore, he suggested that it was inevitable for Black Americans to embody two identities as they simultaneously participated in American culture and Black culture. Whether they were conscious of it or not, Blacks were forced to live dual lives as both Americans and Blacks. It was not the desire of Blacks to compromise either aspect of their identity, because they identified with and were entitled to both; but he asserted, “In his merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). Likewise, the challenge for the Atlanta 9 was figuring out how to be a part of both worlds, Black and White, even when one of those worlds refused to acknowledge their humanity.

#### **“The Veil”**

When explaining his double consciousness theory, Du Bois used the “veil” metaphor to symbolize the divide between Blacks and Whites (1903, p.1). He argued that Black people lived behind this veil in an entirely different world apart from their White counterparts. While Whites did not seek to understand Black humanity and life behind the veil (Tayebeh & Sophella, 2015; Daugherty, 2010; England & Warner, 2013), Blacks were tasked with the burden of understanding and mastering how to be members of the White world.

The Atlanta 9 students were a part of two very different worlds. The White world consisted of resources and opportunities the Black students sought when they applied to transfer. This White school world was considered superior and exclusive, as evidenced by the process that was required to gain access. The process included applications, tests, and interviews. The Black world had its own wealth, but not the kind that was valued or appreciated by mainstream White society. Black wealth and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) consisted of strong family ties, nurturing community networks, and qualified teachers who understood the individual needs of Black children (Siddle-Walker, 1996). The White world of schooling had more material resources, such as superior science laboratories, up-to-date textbooks, and greater access to institutions of higher education.

Research suggests the “veil” analogy has multiple meanings with both negative and positive implications. Howard Winant’s explanation hints that the veil is a paradoxical symbol of oppression and empowerment

for Blacks, as he noted that Du Bois did not only seek to lift the veil, but was also searching for a means to transform the veil (2004). In this transformation, the veil is a curse that separated the races and a blessing that shields and preserves the culture and identity of the Black race. While relegated to life behind the veil, Blacks learned to make the most of their circumstances by working together, building their own institutions, and preparing to infiltrate a world determined to keep them marginalized, which came with a price. At times Blacks found themselves caught in the middle feeling isolated from both the Black world and the White world.

The participants in this study, the Atlanta 9 students, alluded to the “strife” that comes with dividing oneself into two. The students recalled the good and the bad that came with leaving their all Black high schools to integrate the White schools during their senior year. They remembered feeling like “tokens” who were chosen and tolerated because of a court mandate. As proud as the Atlanta 9 were about being Black, they were aware of how the White world viewed them: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). The two worlds the Atlanta 9 experienced were evident throughout their narratives when they explained the application process, when they described walking through newly integrated hallways, and when they discussed their daily experiences returning back home to their Black communities.

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### **The “Gift” of Double Consciousness**

Throughout the integration process, the students steadfastly held on to the culture, values, and identities of their Black families and communities which helped them adapt and excel at the integrated White schools. Their double consciousness became a gift. With extraordinary eloquence Du Bois noted that, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world” (1903, p. 2). The students expressed having no desire to completely assimilate into the White culture they had entered in 1961. They merely wanted the basic privileges of an excellent education which they believed they had a greater chance of acquiring at the White schools,

I thought the textbooks were more current at Brown [High School]. In my view, newer does not necessarily mean better, but in this case, it meant better...A big reason for me wanting to go to Brown High was so I could take an ROTC class which they didn't offer at Washington High. I became an ROTC squad leader and taught drill techniques that I'd learned from my elder African American role models...I did

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notice that the classrooms were, for example, better equipped. I took a physics class and they had all kinds of equipment that I'd never seen when we were talking about space flights and rocket ships. (Welch, October 25, 2016)

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### The Atlanta 9 Students' Backgrounds

In 1961, President John Kennedy called attention to the integration of Atlanta schools when he congratulated the city for the orderly manner in which desegregation process transpired. Kennedy stated,

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Governor Vandiver of Georgia, Mayor Hartsfield of Atlanta, Chief of Police Jenkins, Superintendent of Schools Letson and all of the parents, students and citizens of Atlanta, Ga., for the responsible, law-abiding manner in which four high schools were desegregated today...Their efforts have borne fruit in the orderly manner in which desegregation was carried out--with dignity and without incident. Too often in the past, such steps in other cities have been marred by violence and disrespect for the law. (President John. F. Kennedy, 1961)

President Kennedy failed to mention, however, the impact of desegregation on the actual teenage children. Each of the five students had a unique story but common themes emerged for all of the students interviewed. Interviews with Madelyn Nix, Mary McMullen Francis, and Thomas Welch occurred face to face in one-on-one settings. Martha Holmes-Jackson and Rosalyn Walton-Lees were initially interviewed together as they have remained close friends over the years. Rosalyn provided access to Martha, whom she brought along to the interview after providing notification. Pre-interview meetings occurred by phone and face-to face to build rapport with the five former students.

The focus of the interviews was the students' experiences from the beginning of the application process in May 1961 through the end of the students' first year integrating their White schools in May 1962. Batty (2009) recommended that biographical research begin with a blank slate that is devoid of theories and concepts prior to engaging in the research. Although the research goals were shared with the participants, as researchers we were cautious and careful not to reveal personal beliefs or theoretical frameworks that might influence the former students' responses.

Madelyn Nix grew up on the campus of Morehouse College, which is a Black all-male college in Atlanta. Her father was the dean of students for the college and her mother was a homemaker. Madelyn had one younger sibling who did not apply to transfer. She was a 12th grader at her former Black school but she entered her new White school as an 11th grader. School officials claimed she did not have enough credits to enter

the White school as a senior. As a result, Madelyn was forced to spend an extra year in high school because of the transfer. After graduating from Spelman College, she earned a law degree at Emory University and an MBA at Fordham University. Madelyn became a corporate attorney. She believes her strong test taking skills and her calm temperament are the reasons she was chosen as one of the few Black student to integrate APS (Nix, Dec. 6, 2015).

Mary McMullen Francis grew up in a working class home with three younger siblings whom she helped to raise. Her mother was a homemaker and her father worked in a warehouse. Mary credits her family with shielding her from the cruelty of others during her integration experience. During the process, her family received verbal threats and harassing phone calls. Additionally, her father was laid off from his job when his boss learned of the daughter's decision to integrate one of Atlanta's schools. Mary, who attended Spelman College, is a retired educator who drew on her own personal school experiences when she became a teacher. She always remembered the challenges she faced, which gave her the much-needed compassion with her own classroom students (Francis, June 24, 2016).

Rosalyn Walton-Lees was raised by her single mother and older brother after her father died. She is the middle of five children. Rosalyn's reason for applying to an all-White school was to remain beside her friends, all of whom had decided to apply together. Fortunately, or unfortunately for Rosalyn, she was the only one in her group to gain acceptance. She maintained friendships with the students at her former Black school where she opted to participate in their senior activities. Rosalyn did not engage in activities at her White school because she did not feel welcome. While Rosalyn had few positive memories about her experience, she still harbored no regrets about her decision to transfer, "I pushed it out of mind a long time ago...it was just a bad time. I did it and I'm glad but it wasn't a happy time" (Walton-Lees, July 19, 2016). Rosalyn retired as a supervisor with the Internal Revenue Service. She attended Morris Brown College in Atlanta, another historically Black institution of higher education.

Martha Holmes-Jackson grew up the youngest of five children. Her dad was a self-employed carpenter and her mother was a domestic worker. She was elected Vice President of the Student Government Association and was an active member of the band at her Black school but had to relinquish those honors when she transferred to her White school. The adjustment was difficult for Martha who remembered being shoved and insulted in the hallways. She believes the support of White organizations like the League of Women Voters and the Quakers made a huge difference during her transition. These groups served as liaisons

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with the White community and held training sessions to prepare Martha and the others for their new White schools. Martha also credited her good testing skills as a major reason for being chosen to transfer. She attended Spelman College and like Mary McMullen Francis is also a retired educator in Atlanta (Holmes-Jackson, July 19, 2016).

Thomas Welch's motivation for applying to integrate the schools was the ROTC program at the White school, which his Black school did not offer. Thomas was raised in what he describes as a working-class home with middle-class values. He was the oldest of seven children. Although his father ran several gas stations and allowed him to help out, Thomas's father insisted that he attend college rather than settle into running the gas stations. Thomas recalled many hurtful moments during his experience, as well as encouraging moments with teachers and students that kept him hopeful that he had, in fact, made the right decision to integrate. Thomas, an active alumnus at Morehouse College, also a historically Black college in Atlanta, is an entrepreneur and real estate developer (Welch, Oct. 25, 2016).

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### Findings and Themes

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#### Student Expectations During the Admissions Process

During the admissions process the participants impressed the White selection committee with their ease in adapting to White expectations and requirements. Interestingly, the one interview question that all five participants instantly remembered was a hypothetical question apparently designed to weed out any person who might provoke confrontation or who could not handle the White resistance that was bound to happen.

I remember sitting out there in a room, and they called me in, and I walk in and there were maybe two or three older, big, White men sitting at a table...they asked me, how would I react if someone hit me or were somehow violent towards me and I probably said um you know I'm not going there for that. I'm not going there to start fights or to be in fights period. I obviously said the right thing. (Francis, June 24, 2016)

Walton-Lees echoed the same sentiment as Mary Francis,

I knew to smile and be nice because that's what my mama told me. We didn't want to be angry Black people because that's what they expected you to be. Sometimes you didn't want to smile and be nice but you had to smile and be nice all the time. (Walton-Lees, July 19, 2016)

Thomas Welch elaborated upon the idea that Blacks were expected not to react or show emotion when insulted,

I got called for an interview and I remember saying ‘this must be it’ because they asked me ‘what are you gonna do when a White boy calls you nigger...and I think my answer was, ‘I wouldn’t like it but I’m not gonna react because that wouldn’t be helpful.’ (Welch, October 25, 2016)

One of the participants remembers the interviewers taking notes on her gestures and body language whenever she shifted or moved her hands or legs during the interview (Nix, December 6, 2015). The board appeared most interested in Black students who knew how to respond in certain situations and evidently the Atlanta 9 passed the interviews. But lurking beneath their answers to the questions posed by the selection committee were their true feelings. On the outside the Atlanta 9 students appeared docile and nonthreatening. They were not the type, or so it seemed, that who cause the tensions that militant Black students might cause. As Madelyn Nix noted, “I think they wanted candidates whom they saw as smart, low key, slow to anger, and focused” (December 5, 2015). Convincing the committee that they were disciplined and capable of surviving whatever might happen during the process was not difficult because of the strength and perseverance the students already had. But just because the students understood their role as peacekeepers who had to help preserve Atlanta’s image as the “city too busy to hate,” the burden was still heavy (Bayer, 1996; Hobson, 2017). Rosalyn Walton-Lees observed, “If there had been a big outburst we would have been the ones suspended [not the Whites]” (July 19, 2016). Hence, the same demeanor the students exhibited to earn acceptance into the White schools was the same behavior they would exhibit daily to ensure peace during the desegregation process. Thomas Welch recounted,

One day we had finished our drill, we were getting ready to put the rifles up, and this little White boy turns around, and he spits on me and says, ‘I spit on a nigger’...I thought about breaking his nose with the rifle but I didn’t. I knew that would be the worst thing to do. (October 25, 2016)

Somehow Thomas figured out how to rise above the “common contempt” that was understandable in a moment like that. Mr. Welch did, in his restraint, what many others could not have done. Thomas had already decided the goal for the peaceful integration of schools could not succeed if he followed his initial instinct. Du Bois has a similar passage that speaks to these kinds of moments in his discussion of the double consciousness of Blacks, “I had no desire to, therefore, tear down that veil... I lived above it in a region of blue sky...the sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination time” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2).

On August 30, 1961, Atlanta gave the appearance of acceptance, but quietly the trailblazing students who integrated the schools struggled. Atlanta was forced to fix its racial problems in order to maintain its economic

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growth (Bayor, 1996; Kruse, 2007). The only way to avoid negative publicity was by ensuring Atlanta's school desegregation process proceeded smoothly. The city had a lot riding on the Atlanta 9, and the nine students realized during their integration training sessions how important it was for the process to be successful. The students felt they would be blamed if it did not. Madelyn Nix remarked, "Once the decision was made and our names provided to the press, life as I knew it changed. I was not permitted to go alone to many places that I was able to previously go" (December 6, 2015). For the media, business owners, and political leaders, the silent rejection and suffering did not seem to matter as long as there was no blood shed or bad press for the city (Francis, June 24, 2016). The students knew that the world was watching, including the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, who as noted earlier, had commended the students and the city at the end of the first school day.

The codes which emerged as themes for the study can be understood and described using Du Bois's double consciousness framework (1903) which helps explain the impact of desegregation on the participants. For this study, we highlighted the common themes of the students' sense of loss, acts of resistance, rejection and resilience, and the influence of cultural capital. We also note throughout students' feelings of tokenism. Novel themes were the role that class and educational privilege played in this process.

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### Sense of Loss

Another way Du Bois' theory is evident in the interviews is the students' strong ties to their home schools and communities. By desegregating the schools, the students lost peer relationships, caring and nurturing teachers, and the opportunity to participate in high school activities. Rosalyn Walton-Lees remarked, "I missed out on my prom. I missed out on my friends. I missed out on social things that I would have done being at my old school," (July 19, 2016). At the White schools, they were constantly reminded of their identities as "token" Black students, as evidenced by the isolation and exclusion they experienced daily. None of the nine students participated in extracurricular activities at their new White schools because their arrival and dismissal times were different from the rest of the student body which made participating in activities after school difficult. As a result, they would often return to their Black schools for such activities,

Our former classmates continued to invite us to participate in their activities, go to their football games, and after-school social activities. While we felt isolated at Brown, we knew our real friends and former teachers were still available to us. (Nix, December 6, 2015)



Both Madelyn and Mary, who transferred to two different White schools, had similar experiences with senior picnics. Since the park refused admission to Black students, both principals notified the students that if they insisted on attending their senior picnic, the entire senior class would have to forego the picnic because the park did not grant exceptions to the segregation statutes:

The principal calls me to the office and tells me the people at Calloway Gardens said it had come to their attention that there were two Black students in the class and so they were notifying the principal that they do not allow negroes and that you can either take your money back and then your classmates could still go or you can insist upon going and nobody would go. It's up to you. (Francis, June 24, 2016)

Clearly, the Atlanta 9 were not invited to participate in activities outside of traditional high school classes. When asked why she did not participate in extracurricular activities, Rosalyn Walton-Lees indicated, "It wouldn't have been feasible because they would only have harassed you. That was something you did when you were in your previous school. It wouldn't have been something you enjoyed" (July 19, 2016). Another student noted,

I was in the band, but I didn't even think about being in the band at Murphy. That means you would have had to get on the bus with them, that would have been a whole 'nother big to do that I didn't want. (Holmes-Jackson, July 19, 2016)

The Black students may have legally "desegregated" the schools, but there was still segregation within the "integrated" schools, which resulted in a loss of peer interaction. The losses the participants experienced during their junior and senior year marred what should have been the most memorable years of their K-12 years. But they still had no regrets.

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### **Resistance, Rejection, Resilience**

The students' ability to cope and bounce back from the resistance and rejection they experienced during this process was a result of the strength they gained behind the "veiled" walls of their Black communities. Take Mary Francis, for instance, when she learned that she was the only one of her friends to advance to the next step, the loneliness sank in, but the support of her family enabled her to continue. She recalled going to school, receiving the cold shoulder, being insulted by other students, and having to follow her mother's advice and not cry in front of others at school, "All day long it's sitting there, just sitting there. And then when she [mom] got off that bus from work, when I heard her feet, it was like the damn broke." Her mother's strength came in handy as

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Mary walked the halls of Grady. She says she would never have survived the lonely stay at Grady without it. Mary admitted to being nervous, but her fears did not stand a chance given the cultural capital such as strength, courage, and intellect that she received from her family and community (Yosso, 2005).

The resistance happened at the hand of Whites mostly, but there were encounters with some Blacks who also made the participants feel rejected. Although Mary Francis felt protected by Blacks, she was initially not sure what to make of their response to her decision to transfer to Grady. Mary reflected,

I just remember how it was quiet and nobody said anything. How was your first day? It was as though they didn't care to know. There may have been some who were disappointed in themselves that they didn't even try to go because they thought it was going to be horrible. (Francis, June 24, 2016)

She further rationalized that perhaps the people in her community felt guilty that she had accepted the challenge and they did not. Or maybe they were imagining the worst and could not bear to know what she was experiencing. By the end of the year, she knew Blacks wanted her to do well. The reactions of some Blacks in Mary's community symbolized the tensions and diverse perspectives within the Black community. Du Bois debated Booker T. Washington over the best means for Blacks to work on achieving civil rights and racial equality. Both individuals had the support of Blacks in the community with Washington supporting a more "conciliatory" approach and Du Bois espousing a more integrationist framework (Batty, 2015). Their ideas were evident during this desegregation period as Blacks sought access to quality schools. Du Bois, himself, seemed conflicted later in life over the merits of segregation once he left the NAACP, "To endure bad schools and wrong education because schools are 'mixed' is a costly if not fatal mistake" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 330). Yet, the Atlanta 9 forged ahead and fundamentally changed the APS district.

The students demonstrated resilience in the face of profound hostility and rejection. Martha Holmes-Jackson vividly recalled, "When you're changing classes, they would bump into you, deliberately push you. I had a note on my locker, it was go back to Africa jungle bunny," (July 19, 2016). Indeed, it is remarkable that the students could endure such intimidation. They would remain calm and composed in the face of horrible antagonism. There were a few public protests where Whites demonstrated opposition to integration, but for the most part the protests were nonviolent. The Atlanta 9 believed that they had to remain tranquil as the world was watching their behavior with intense scrutiny. Mary McMullen Francis said, "It's like a soldier goes on the field and he knows he can be shot, but you do what you have to do. And, that's how I felt"

(June 24, 2016).

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### **The Influence of Cultural Capital: Class and Educational Advantage**

Another way the double conscious theory manifests itself is through the cultural capital such as intellect, education, and life skills that the students brought with them to the desegregation experience (Yosso, 2005). Upwardly mobile Blacks are more susceptible to situations where their selves become divided (Fanon, 1967; Gaines, 1996). Hence, each of the students interviewed were from working and middle-class homes and in some instances while they were not necessarily rich, they had more resources and educational support than many other Blacks at that time.

Clearly, these students came from educationally supportive environments. Madelyn Nix's father was a dean at Morehouse College. Thomas's father owned three gas stations and his mother was a homemaker. Mary's mother spent time as a homemaker and her father had a job at a warehouse. All five continued their education at prestigious historically Black institutions in Atlanta. Three graduated from Spelman College, one attended Morehouse College and later graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a fifth graduated from Morris Brown College. One Spelman graduate furthered her education by obtaining advanced degrees at Emory University and Fordham University. Undeniably, the five students possessed cultural capital including advantages of class and educational support that enabled them to successfully navigate rigorous educational and psychological demands.

Thomas Welch and Mary Nix had similar sentiments in their responses, "I knew that we were as smart, as talented as anyone," Mary declared (Francis, June 24, 2016). Thomas conceded, "My parents never had a middle-class income. What they did have were middle class values. Solid middle-class values. And what do I mean by that? Values for education. Values for honesty. Values for integrity," (Welch, October 25, 2016).

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### **Implications and Discussion**

In the same way that segregation is harmful, desegregation done poorly can be equally as harmful. Looking back at the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision some academics argue that if desegregation had taken place more thoughtfully, it would have benefitted more students and communities (Bell, 2004; Balkin, 2002; Hynes, 2017). Nearly six decades after the Atlanta 9 desegregated Atlanta Public Schools, many schools are still segregated, and many of the district's predominantly Black schools disproportionately lack in academic achievement as measured

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by test scores. Many schools in the district, which is approximately 75% Black and 15% White, are essentially resegregated. In addition, the school district serves a largely poor population, as 75% of the APS student body receives free and reduced lunch (Georgia Department of Education, 2018). These statistics suggest that the dream of integration was never truly achieved. As U.S. society has become increasingly diverse in recent decades, and research has demonstrated that diversity benefits classroom environment and student development, puzzlingly opposition to policies that promote diversity remain (Hurtado, 2001; Reno, Friend, Caruthers & Smith, 2017). Thus, opportunities are lost to learn from students who are different from each other, both in terms of race and socio-economic background.

Considering the level of resegregation that has occurred in American public schools, the consequences of limiting equity and access have resurfaced in the face of *de facto* rather than *de jure* segregation (Kozol, 2005, 1991; Lee & Lubienski, 2017). Certainly, our research reveals that the desegregation of APS should have been done in a manner more considerate of the emotional needs of the students. Thus, the experiences of the Atlanta 9 are insightful and demonstrate the importance of attending to the social, mental, and emotional needs of the students rather than obsessing over symbolic court victories. The school experiences of the Atlanta 9 reveal the success and failure of American schools, neighborhoods, and the entire society. These past lessons can help inform educational policy and pedagogy today.

This research is significant for today's ongoing debate over education research and practice. Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) court case, the debate has raged over access, content, and funding (Kruse, 2007; NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, 2005; Orfield & Frankenburg, 2013). During the 1960's many people, both Black and White, believed that the only way to ensure quality education was for Blacks to attend schools with Whites. Black parents who disagreed with this notion were in the minority during the 1960's, and many second-guessed their instincts (Siddle-Walker, 1996). These parents and other community stakeholders knew the value of African American students attending African American schools with African American teachers. They went along with NAACP litigators and thought that the benefits outweighed the risks because placing their students alongside White students meant the same access, the same content, and the same funding as White students. Access refers to the opportunity for students, regardless of their race to have the same resources, extracurricular programs, teacher training, instructional materials, and technology. Quality content refers to rigorous content-rich curriculum and a loyalty to 'child-centered' teaching (Rhames, 2015). Although Black children in desegregated schools may

have had higher academic outcomes, it is important not to ignore the psychological impact that schools and teachers have on the hearts and minds of Black students, “A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). The benefits of majority Black schools need to be considered as well as the common place deficit perceptions such as the achievement gap.

Conducting historical research on the student experiences during the desegregation of Atlanta Public Schools sheds light on the benefits and challenges that resulted from *Brown v. Board of Education*. The student voices provide a sense of the burdens placed on these young individuals as well as the successes they achieved. Clearly, the Atlanta 9 experienced a double consciousness as Black students in White schools. But, the Atlanta 9 were unique in many ways. They possessed educational, cultural, and social capital that perhaps helped them overcome a sense of loss. Interestingly, all five interviewees chose to attend historically Black colleges and universities after their desegregation experiences in Atlanta Public Schools. They returned to the comfort of a familiar Black community rather than continuing to be tokens on all White college campuses. However, the experience may have prepared some for graduate school in predominantly White institutions. These students may have been tokens in a White educational world, but they were also trailblazers who paved the way for all students who followed.

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***Photographs***

*Atlanta-Journal Constitution* photograph archives of Atlanta Public School desegregation housed at Georgia State University Library, Special Collections.

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