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Empirical evidence suggests that parent involvement is promotive of positive educational outcomes for students. However, scholarship exploring parent involvement for African American parents with students attending Title I schools is limited. To address this limitation in the literature, this study uses Participatory Action Research as a methodological approach to explore this topic. The purpose of this study is to give voice to African American parents with students attending a Title I middle school and to engage them in parent to parent and parent to educator/community leader collaboration to increase parent advocacy and to establish effective home-school-community partnerships. During this study, seven parents of varying social classes, educational levels and family structures representing seven schools and two school districts participated in individual and focus group interviews. They also participated in Parent Professional Learning Community meetings which allowed them to become co-constructors of knowledge about Title I schools and parent involvement. At the end of the Parent Professional Learning Community meetings, parents presented their findings to a group of educators, parents, and community/business leaders. As a result of participating in this study, parents were inspired to seek ways to form collaborative relationships with other parents to increase social networks and to establish support systems. They were also motivated to seek additional ways to advocate for their children. Program evaluation data in the form of surveys also indicated that because of the presentation, educators and community/business leaders wanted to continue the critical discourse on African American parent

involvement and they also desired to find more ways to establish authentic home-school-community partnerships to meet the needs of parents in Title I schools.

AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN TITLE I SCHOOLS:  
ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE HOME-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY  
PARTNERSHIPS

by

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Approved by

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To my loving mother who departed this life on October 8, 2016 at the age of 94. She was a phenomenal godly woman and mother of 10 children who made many sacrifices to ensure that I received my first college degree. She also provided moral and spiritual support for her family until the day she departed. She understood her role as a parent and she walked in it daily.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Most of my career as an educator has been in schools serving a large population of African American students from low-income homes. While working with this population of students, parent accountability has always been a topic of concern among my colleagues. These concerns are widespread today in Title I schools and are predicated upon educators not being able to contact parents when they encounter challenges with the students and from a lack of parent participation in parent involvement activities sponsored by the school. Parent involvement is related to positive education outcomes for students (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Pemberton & Miller, 2015).

In reflecting upon my childhood as an African American girl growing up in public housing owned by the government, my parents did not attend school sponsored parent involvement activities, yet my siblings and I experienced positive education outcomes. School sponsored activities were held during evening hours and the public transient system was the only means of transportation for my family. My father worked more than eight hours daily to provide for ten children while my mother worked diligently at home to train us and take care of the needs of her children. As residents of public housing, my parents were very vigilant in trying to shelter us from the negative peer pressure that existed within the neighborhood. They valued education even though they did not

graduate from high school. They communicated the importance of education to us as we were required to attend school every day and do homework after school before going outside to play. As the youngest of ten children, I remember my mother going back to school to get her General Education Diploma (GED) when I was in junior high school.

My professional and personal experiences with parent involvement have birthed within me a desire to look more closely at the meaning of parent involvement from the eyes of parents who are similar to the parents that I work with daily in Title I schools. Not all parents with students attending Title I schools are living in poverty. A school can establish a school wide Title I program if a minimum of 40% of the students are from low-income homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, it is very likely that some Title I schools are comprised of students from families of varying social classes. I am an African American middle class educator and parent with a daughter who attended a predominantly African American Title I school. I was present at most of the parent involvement activities sponsored by the school but overall parent attendance for African American parents was scarce. Interestingly, research shows that parent involvement strategies sponsored by the school are based upon school cultures that are formed from middle class European American cultural norms (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Kroeger, 2005).

In order to better understand why African American parent involvement in Title I schools appears to be lacking, I believe educators need additional information about parent involvement as viewed from the eyes of African American parents who have children attending Title I schools. According to Auerbach (2007), the strategies that may

not be visible to educators are often the very strategies that African American parents use to teach their children resilience, pride, and the importance of family. Educators must gain additional information to better understand the varied roles African American parents play in the education of their children. Educators can also utilize the varying family structures and social classes that exist within the population of African American parents in the school to build collective parent power and to increase social networks. Gaining an understanding of the needs and strengths of African American parents in Title I schools, knowing the various community/neighborhood challenges and supports that may exist, and knowing how African American parents assist their children can better equip educators in empowering parents to become agents of change in the education of children. It can also assist educators in establishing effective home-school-community partnerships.

The purpose of this study is to give voice to African American parents with students attending a Title I middle school and to engage them in parent to parent and parent to educator/community leader collaboration to increase parent advocacy and to establish effective home-school-community partnerships. In order for educators to establish effective partnerships with African American parents, the voice of African American parents must be heard and their voice can serve as a conduit to assist other parents and educators in better meeting the needs of all families in Title I schools.

Minority students and students from low-income homes continue to lag behind their peers in terms of achievement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Pemberton & Miller, 2015; Vang, 2006). One of the common reasons for persistent underachievement of African

American students is the disproportionate number who live in poverty (Anyon, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 2005). To assist in raising the achievement for low-performing students in schools with high poverty rates, Title I, Part A of the federal legislation the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was authorized in 1965 and reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to provide financial assistance and instructional support to these schools (Center on Education Policy, 2006). In 2015, NCLB was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In ESSA parent involvement is referred to as family engagement and continues to be a major component of Title I, Part A of this legislation (National Education Association, 2015). ESSA continues to require schools to utilize at least one percent of Title I funds for parent and family engagement activities with a requirement that parents and family members of children receiving Title I services be involved in the decisions regarding how these funds reserved are allotted for parent involvement activities. Parent involvement activities include professional development, home-based programs, disseminating information, collaborating with community-based organizations, and other activities that the local educational agency deems appropriate to carry out its parent and family engagement policy (National Education Association, 2015).

Parent involvement has been linked to a range of positive outcomes for students including academic achievement, engagement in school work, and lower dropout rates (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Jeynes, 2011; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Pemberton & Miller, 2015). However, there is a common perception that there is a lack of parent involvement for ethnic minorities and for low-income parents (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein, 2001;

Fine, 1993; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Noguera, 2004). Due to disparities in achievement and parent involvement, African American students from working class and low-income homes and their families are included in the category of marginalized populations who are in need of more support and assistance due to various systemic inequities (Cooper & Christie, 2005). Researchers have suggested that “the missing link in educational equity, in terms of achievement, is parental involvement” (Colombo, 2006).

As an administrator with many years of experience working in Title I schools, I have witnessed what appears to be a lack of parental involvement for low-income and working class African American parents when measuring parent involvement by their participation in school sponsored activities and events. However, through telephone conversations, parents have expressed some of the challenges and successes they’ve encountered with their involvement in the education of their children and it is evident that they truly care for their children. Based on my interactions with these parents, my parents’ experiences (who were low-income African American parents), and my experiences as a middle-class parent, the problem may lie in how schools define parent involvement and in educators’ lack of understanding of how African American parents are involved in the education of their children. This includes their (i.e., educators) lack of knowledge regarding the challenges these parents face, the support system the schools can provide, and the strengths parents have in assisting them in the educational process of their children. The current discourse on parent involvement suggest that educators need to redefine what it means for parents to be involved and include a broader framework that makes involvement more inclusive for families of color (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006;

Griffin, 2011). My initial research question, based upon educators' perception of African American parents' lack of parental involvement in Title I schools is, "How do African American parents describe parent involvement and what challenges do they face in satisfying traditional conceptions of parent involvement in Title I middle schools"?

Parent involvement in education is not a new research topic. Existing studies show there are many factors that impact parent involvement. Some of these factors include race and social status (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Heymann & Earle, 2000), school culture (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Miretzky, 2004) and the deficit thinking that some educators have regarding African American low income and working class parents' inability to be an asset in the education of their children (Cooper, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Noguera, 2004). Studies have been done to show ways in which African American parents are involved in the education of their children (Auerbach, 2007; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Cooper, 2007).

Limited studies have been done with African American parents with children attending Title I middle schools where parent involvement is mandated. Middle school is a time when the developmental needs of children change and parents may be faced with the challenge of utilizing strategies that are no more effective as their children mature or due to changes in the school structure from elementary to middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Many studies on parent involvement and African American parents are case studies and do not include an action plan to empower parents, to increase their self-efficacy and advocacy, and to form meaningful home-school-community partnerships.

This study will add to the existing research on African American parents and their involvement in the education of their children. African American parents with students attending Title I schools must be empowered to assist in improving the academic performance of not only their children, but the overall performance of schools meeting the needs of all children. Schools can be better equipped to meet the needs of African American parents when they hear their voice on varied aspects of parent involvement and give parents a platform for parent to parent collaboration. Using a theoretical framework which seeks to dismantle power structures and empower marginalized groups to become agents of change, this study gives voice to African American parents with children attending Title I middle schools to better understand their perceptions about their role in the education of their children and to hear their voices on strategies they feel educators can employ to form effective home-school partnerships.

Using a participatory action research methodology (Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009), this study will provide a platform for parents to collaborate during parent focus group meetings to assess their own strengths and areas where support is needed from schools. Parents will also engage in dialogue with educators and community leaders as they share their reflections and ideas for parent involvement initiatives that are mutually beneficial for them, the community, and for schools. This will begin the process of forming effective home-school-community partnerships by bridging the gap between the misconceptions and realities of parent involvement for African American parents and to empower them to become agents of change. Additional research questions that are addressed in this study are:

- What are African American parents' perceptions about their role in the education of their children?
- What are their beliefs and values about home, school, and community partnerships and ways to establish these partnerships?
- How can Participatory Action Research empower African American parents and assist them in taking action to get what they need to become more inclusive in parent involvement initiatives and other decision making processes within the school?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature view is based upon a theoretical framework using Hoover-Demsey and Sandler's (1997) model for examining why parents become involved in the education of their children and using a critical epistemological stance for understanding parent involvement (Cooper et al., 2010; Scanlan, 2012). It is inclusive of studies that call for a dismantling of the traditional views of parent involvement and the need to view parent involvement in a critical manner when examining why African American parents from Title I schools are seemingly not involved in the education of their children. Topics included in the literature review are: (a) parent involvement: types and roles; (b) home-school-community partnerships: it takes a village to raise a child; (c) parent involvement: race and social class; (d) parent involvement from a historical perspective: relationships and mutual trust and respect; and (e) parent involvement: policies and practices. After reviewing the literature for each topic, the theoretical framework for the study, methods used, results of the study, discussion of findings, and implications and conclusion will be presented.

#### **Parent Involvement: Types and Roles**

Research shows that students benefit when parents are involved in their education. Benefits include increasing social capital or networks to leverage resources (Lee & Bowen, 2006); increasing academic achievement (Auerbach, 2009; Hill & Craft, 2003;

Pemberton & Miller, 2015); lowering dropout rates (Jeynes, 2007; Yan & Lin, 2005); aspiring to attend college (Auerbach, 2007; Cabrera & Steven, 2000), and decreasing the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006). However, in school systems serving low-income and minority families, participation in school sponsored parent involvement initiatives are at a minimal (Bower & Griffin, 2011; G. R. Lopez, 2001; Noguera, 2001; Pemberton & Miller, 2015; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Due to a lack of involvement, educators question low-income and ethnic minority parents' interest in promoting learning and whether they are concerned about their children's achievement at school (Field-Smith, 2005; Noguera, 2001; Yan, 2000). Studies reveal that parent involvement strategies that are being implemented in schools are not successful in increasing parent involvement for students of color and students of low socioeconomic status (Bower & Griffin, 2011). When discussing parent involvement strategies, it is important to recognize the multiplicity of meaning for the term parent involvement.

The Epstein Model for parent involvement (2001) is a widely-accepted parent involvement framework which is inclusive of defining parent involvement in terms of home-based and school-based activities. This framework outlines six types of family involvement behaviors: positive home conditions, communication, involvement at school, home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships (Epstein et al., 2009). Epstein's parent involvement model extends beyond the traditional school sponsored parent involvement activities that are oftentimes used to judge ethnic minorities and low income parents as not being involved. Bower and Griffin (2011) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of the Epstein

Model in a high poverty, high minority elementary school. The results of the study reveal that while the model is inclusive of home-based and school based parent involvement activities, the strategies do not speak to ways of bridging the cultural gap that exists between the families and the school. Bridging cultural gaps are important in order to establish authentic relationships with the parents which can assist in motivating parents to be involved. Bower and Griffin (2011) also assert that the model does not capture how parents are or want to be involved.

Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) posit three types of parent involvement: (a) school involvement which includes activities that take place at school and school related activities that take place at home; (b) cognitive-intelligence which refers to exposure to intellectually stimulating activities that parents engage in with their children such as reading together; and (c) personal involvement which involves parents being knowledgeable about what is going on with the child at school and what the child is working on at school (Overstreet, Devine, Bevan, & Efreom, 2005). According to Larocque et al. (2011), different types of parent involvement are chosen by different types of parents and sociopolitical factors such as socioeconomic status, parents' own past experiences with schools and schooling can impact the ways in which families are involved. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel's (2001) study showed that low-income and ethnic minority parents believe that the school is responsible for the academic education of their children while they are responsible for their children's moral education. Therefore, these parents may not see their involvement in academic-based parent involvement initiatives as a priority.

Despite the myriad of studies showing that low-income and ethnic minorities are not involved in the education of their children, there are studies that show their involvement is contingent upon what role parents believe they play in the education of their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Many factors must be considered when investigating these roles. Factors such as cultural background (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001), parents' self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), socioeconomic factors (Lareau, 2003), and the context of the school (Greene, 2013). Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) assert that examining parent involvement and the roles low-income and ethnic minorities play in their children's education is best understood within an ecological perspective. These parents may not appear to be involved in the education of their children when parent involvement is defined in a traditional manner, which is considered the norm. Greene (2013) conducted a study on parent involvement which included Caucasian, Latino, and African American parents. His study showed the range of meaning that parents attached to supporting their children. He examined parents' behaviors at home as well as at school. Park and Holloway's (2013) study revealed that educators must consider how cultural differences can impact how parents demonstrate parent involvement and seek to bridge cultural gaps between homes and schools. Park and Holloway (2013) assert that educators must recognize that parents are involved in the education of their children in ways that align with their personal and cultural beliefs and resources in addition to the characteristics of the school context. Many of these parent involvement studies were at the elementary level.

Parent involvement is also instrumental in improving student engagement and academic performance for middle school students (Mo & Singh, 2008). However, research reveals that parent involvement begins to decline as children grow older. The developmental needs of children change and parenting practices that were effective when their children were young are no longer helpful (Hill & Tyson, 2009). There are varying reasons for this decline. Some parents may seem to think that adolescents desire and need more independence as they get older (DuPlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007) or the children may have little desire for their parents to be engaged in school activities or supervise their academic work (Eccles & Harold, 1993). In many cases, the curriculum becomes more difficult and parents' experiences change in their own capabilities to assist their children (Hill & Tyson, 2009). According to Epstein (2001), parents of middle school students receive less guidance and information about how to be involved in more complex schools.

#### **Home-School-Community Partnerships: “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child”**

Home, school, and community partnerships are important. Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence shows that there are mutual interests and influences of families and schools on the lives of children (2001). The external structure of this model consists of overlapping and non-overlapping spheres which represents the family, school, and the community. The degree of overlap is controlled by three forces: time, experiences in families, and experiences in schools. This model explains mutual interests and influences of families and schools that can be impacted by policies and programs of organizations and by the attitudes and actions of people within the organizations (Epstein,

2001). Therefore, educators can be proactive in forming authentic home, school, and community partnerships as they gain a better understanding of these overlapping spheres of influence. Milner (2015) suggests that schools must gain an understanding of the neighborhoods where their children live and seek to find ways to improve their communities which will aid in social development and student learning.

Educators and policy makers must be intentional about finding effective ways of establishing authentic home-school-community partnerships with African American parents. According to Lewis and Foreman (2002), when schools establish partnerships with parents of color, many times they are void of power, their voices are silenced and they are marginalized. A major goal of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was the establishing of authentic partnerships between schools and families; especially parents from backgrounds that a culturally and linguistically diverse (P. B. Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). Another reauthorization that occurred in 2015 under The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) also includes parent and family engagement as a major goal (National Education Association, 2015). Auerbach (2007) posits that partnership models do not recognize the myriad ways in which parents' roles in education and the home-school relationships in which they are embedded reflect social inequalities that impact students. Oftentimes schools do not value the resources of low income or ethnic minorities families which places limitations on their involvement options or they are viewed as subjects who need educators to teach them how to work with their children, rather than true partners from whom they can learn (Auerbach, 2001; Cooper et al., 2010;

Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Establishing authentic partnerships between schools and African American parents with students attending Title I schools will require educators to have dialogue with parents to learn more about them and what they value; to become more centered on parents, making decisions along with them based upon what they need and value. Authentic home-school-community partnerships cannot be one-sided, advancing the agenda of schools and educators. They must be inclusive of the needs and preferences of families within the school.

Schools as institutions for promoting a just and caring environment for all families must understand the importance of fostering a sense of community where parent involvement is not an isolated term, but it conveys home-school-community partnerships (Miretzksy, 2004). Partnership is not a power-laden term and educators must see African American parents from all social classes as partners in education. Studies on school family relations that involve minorities or low income families have found that educators typically do not welcome, expect, or cultivate power sharing practices with the families of marginalized groups (Abrams & Gibbs, 2007). According to Lewis and Forman (2002), educators tend to “develop strategies for limiting and structuring parent participation” (p. 68). Sometimes educators even make the assumption that these families can’t contribute to their children’s education (Fine, 1993; Noguera, 2001). The deficit model for low-income and African American parents positions parents in a place of powerlessness; not considering their “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 2005), and not taking a critical epistemological stance when examining parent involvement (Cooper, 2009; Riehl, 2000).

Family and community engagement has been cited as a strategy for increasing students' educational outcomes and improving schools. However, educators have experienced challenges in engaging with schools that serve large populations of low-income and ethnic minority students (McAlister, 2013). Oftentimes low-income African American parents do not know how to navigate the bureaucratic territory within a school system to work together in establishing partnerships with schools and community organizations which makes it difficult to work together collaboratively (Koonce & Harper, 2005). However, school leaders must implement processes to assist parents in creating these partnerships. Kakli's (2011) portrait of an African American mother and education activist highlights the need for educators and community leaders to work with parents and nurture their involvement in schools. This will not occur if educators do not take a critical epistemological stance concerning low-income and working class African American parents and dissolve the deficit thinking mentality about this marginalized group.

Shifting from using the term parent involvement to family engagement can be foundational to establishing authentic home-school partnerships (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). According to Yull et al. (2014), family engagement is a culturally responsive view for authentic partnerships. Greene (2013) posits that authentic partnerships will require educators to get to know who their parents are in order to gain a better perspective about their needs and what they value. Greene (2013) asserts, "the lives of children and families are nested within the broad socio-cultural landscape of neighborhoods, communities, institutions, and policies that are local, national, and

global” (p. 2). Therefore, educators must listen to parents’ voices to understand the complexity of their lives. When educators operate in this manner, Greene (2013) concluded that educators can become more effective in balancing their own goals with the beliefs, values, and priorities of the parents they serve and can authentically engage parents. One implication from his study was that parents’ social networks will increase as they work together with other agencies such as churches, nonprofits, and other civic groups to create power to leverage change in schools so they can better meet the needs of families. Morris’s (2004) study of two successful African American schools where parents showed agency revealed how the principals at these schools bridged their schools with the surrounding communities and with outside businesses and agencies. Many educators today are disconnected from the communities where low-income and working class African American families live (Epstein, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

There are studies that show African American parents as equal partners in decision making (Barton et al., 2004). An authentic partnership model is inclusive of parents as equal partners in participation in decision making processes (Barton et al., 2004). The results of Barton et al.’s (2004) study on low-income African American parent engagement in urban education uncovers how “parents activate nontraditional resources and leverage relationships with teachers, other parents, and community members in order to author a place of their own in schools” (p. 11). This speaks to the epistemology of inclusivity. Listening to parents’ stories can foster productive home-school-community partnerships and can give educators a sense of who parents are, their values, and their priorities (Greene, 2013). Barton et al. (2004) also framed parent

participation through an “ecologies of engagement” framework which views parents and their involvement in relation to their environment (p. 4). Parent involvement for African American parents can be benefitted or hindered based upon experiences, actions, and support inside and outside of the community. Educators normally do not consider the neighborhoods and communities that parents must navigate to gain advantage for their children (Barton et al., 2004). Therefore, it is important to extend our discourse on parent involvement for low-income and working class African American parents to include neighborhood and community support. Implications from Diamond and Gomez’s (2004) study are for educators to make all parents feel welcome at the school and include them in engaging community education and outreach programs to help them.

The results of a study conducted by Koonce and Harper (2005) on ways to engage African American parents in school using a community-based consultation model concluded that community-based organizations can be an asset to schools and parents as a “mechanism to bring educators and families together to improve interactions between ethnic minority families and the public school” (p. 57). Therefore, in order to include marginalized parents in meaningful school-related processes, we must seek ways to increase home, school and community partnerships.

Miretzky (2004) in her study of low-income and working class African American and Hispanic parents noted that establishing school communities must be inclusive of all social classes and races. Miretzky (2004) posits that community is a “cohesion among those who are stakeholders in a school, built on acceptance of differences, a commitment to the common good, and a recognition that the school and its environment are

interdependent and mutually supportive” (p. 819). Within this community, Riehl (2000) calls for cooperative inquiry where parents, teachers, and members of community organizations or other stakeholders engage in discourse about schools and actions that need to be taken to address inequities and other issues within the community and within schools. The development of home-school-community partnerships is not a new initiative, but one that has been recommended as a method or strategy to promote equitable and quality educational opportunities (Ford, 2002). Establishing home-school-community partnerships is an inclusive endeavor for educators to achieve as they consider the needs that exist with parents and within the community. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), “the assumption that families would accommodate the school’s value system rather than the school accommodating the unique communities or populations that it served was and continues to be the dominant ideology” (p. 315). Authentic partnership should have privileges for all partners involved.

Rafaelle and Knoff (1999) posit that home-school collaboration must include the efforts of parents, school personnel and the efforts of institutions within the community (i.e., businesses, social service agencies, religious institutions, civic organizations). Schools do not function as an isolated entity, but they are impacted by the neighborhoods and communities in which they exist and within a network of organizations and institutions (Riehl, 2000). Educational leaders who are interested in social justice can initiate school improvement efforts to combat inequities within the society that are prominent within their school communities (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Tough, in his book *How Children Succeed* (2012), asserts that the ability for children to

be successful is not innate and children can be molded by their environment and the society can influence the development of children. Parents and teachers are not the only individuals for providing interventions that can help children be successful. Social workers, counselors, clergy members, and neighbors can also play an important role.

The results of Koonce and Harper's (2005) study on the development of a model for engaging African American families with schools to advocate for their children concluded that increasing parent involvement cannot be achieved by schools alone, "but requires a combination of resources within the community, as well as organizational change to deliver effective educational programs that produce positive student outcomes" (p. 71). Schools need the communities in which they exist and the communities need schools. Riehl (2000) asserts that "schools are embedded within broader community-based organizational fields and they are central, not only to improving the life experiences of individuals, but also to efforts to improve the social fabric of neighborhoods and communities" (p. 66). If this is to occur, educators must broaden their vision of the purpose of parent involvement to extend beyond student achievement in school. Cooper et al. (2010) suggests that parents and educators engage in a "communal and participatory process" in a process called "communities of practice" (p. 766). A community of practice "is an intentional site of learning and social action where participants coalesce to co-construct new knowledge and develop an extensive repertoire of activities, common stories and ways of speaking and acting" (p. 766). They posit that when parents and educators engage in communities of practice, they learn new and better ways to relate to one another and to the broader world.

### **Parent Involvement: Race and Social Class**

African American students underperform academically in comparison to their peers in other racial subgroups (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; NCES, 2003). One common reason for the disparities in achievement between African American students and their peers in other racial subgroups is the disproportionate number that lives in poverty (Anyon, 2005; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 2005). Data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that African American students from middle class backgrounds outperform African American students from low-income homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Furthermore, African American students who attend middle class schools underperform academically in comparison to their White and Asian peers (Carter, 2005; Conchas, 2006). One factor that is thought to be responsible for higher academic achievement among students from middle class homes is parental involvement (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Scholarship shows that parent involvement may have an impact on increasing African American students' achievement and decreasing the achievement gap (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Bernard, 2004). Research suggests that typically low-income and ethnic minority parents are less involved in their children's academic experiences than White parents (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Lee & Bowen, 2006). The perception that African American parents are less involved generates beliefs that these parents are not interested in the education of their children (Cooper, 2007). However, some African American parents believe it is their role to invest time in teaching their children strategies for dealing with challenges they may face which oftentimes are linked to race (Chapman, 2008). This role doesn't require them to visit

schools. Researchers have examined the interplay between race, social class and parent involvement (Diamond, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Milner (2015) asserts that race, class and poverty are linked.

There are many studies showing that parent involvement experiences vary based on social class and race (Cooper, 2007; Heymann & Earle, 2000; Lewis & Forman, 2002). These variations exist when using the traditional parent involvement model as a measuring stick to gauge participation for low-income and ethnic minority parents (Auerbach, 2007; Cooper, 2007). Traditional parent involvement strategies such as Curriculum Night, volunteering in classrooms, and holding midday parent association meetings typically privilege upper income and middle class white parents (Cooper, 2009; Lewis & Forman, 2002). Traditional parent involvement models are referred to as “oppression that is built into our policies, procedures and institutions” (Young, 1991, p. 41). African American parents’ perceptions of racial discrimination have bred mistrust of educators and they do not desire to participate in activities held at the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Park & Holloway, 2013). These parents have also experienced negative interactions with school personnel because they are viewed as being uneducated and they are critical of the school’s agenda and are not motivated to support the school (Williams & Baber, 2007). According to Martinez-Cosio (2010), educators need new practices that are inclusive of culturally relevant strategies such as relationship building and parental efficacy which are strategies that have been productive in working with ethnic minorities and low income populations.

Racial differences surrounding parent involvement are connected to socioeconomic differences (Park & Holloway, 2013). White families are more likely to have access to better schools and access to more resources and more social networks to help them navigate within schools (Lareau, 2003). Middle class African American parents are generally pleased with the type of education their children are getting while low-income and working class African American parents are dissatisfied perceiving that schools are resistant to their involvement (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Greene (2013) posits that educators' vision of what African American low income parents do for their children outside of the institution of school is limited due to traditional views of parental involvement. Therefore, their actions are invisible when looking through the lens of educators. Auerbach (2007) asserts that some of the strategies that African American low-income parents utilize to support their children are "the very strategies that teach their children to protect themselves against the corrosive effects of institutional racism (p. 252). Auerbach (2007) also posits that the traditional parent involvement model which fails to acknowledge the ways in which low income African American parents are involved with their children outside of school is a "reflection of broader social inequities that affect students" (p. 251).

Studies have suggested that the higher the educational level and income of the parents, the greater the amount of parent involvement because class dynamics create an unequal distribution of cultural, human, and social capital (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Greene, 2013). Diamond and Gomez's (2004) study of African American working and middle class parents showed that social class can affect parents' access to social capital

(networks and relations of trust) and other resources (i.e., knowledge, skills or expertise, income, and cultural capital) needed to navigate the bureaucratic systems within schools. Greene's (2013) study of low-income African American parents revealed that they may not have the wealth of resources as middle class white and African American parents. However, educators must provide opportunity for these parents to voice what they do value and educators must also acknowledge and build upon their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 2005). According to Yull et al. (2014), educational disparities for African American students and their families are prevalent independent of their socioeconomic status and parent involvement is one strategy that can improve achievement.

Studies show that schools tend to devalue the resources of lower socioeconomic (SES) families (Auerbach, 2001; Lareau, 2003). Parents with a lower SES usually provide indirect and behind the scenes support for their children whereas parents with a higher SES are more open and proactive in their involvement (Gandara, 1995; Lareau, 2003). There is also a power gradient when looking at social class and parent involvement. Middle and upper class parents have more influence within schools and are more involved in the decisions about their children's schooling whereas poor working class parents have less power and more "ambivalent relations with school staff" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 253). According to Lareau and Horvat (1999), race effects are aligned with class, showing parent of color having less influence and more contradictory relationships with school staff.

The results of Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin's (1996) study showed that even though middle class white parents are noted as being very involved in the education

of their children, their ideology supports class privilege and status advantage in schooling, which exacerbates the inequities experienced within schools. Some school districts have school choice programs and have created magnet schools in order to include middle class parents in schools with a high percentage of students from low-income homes. Cuchiara and Horvat's study (2009) with middle class parents in racially and economically diverse schools revealed that middle class parents bring many resources into high poverty urban schools but the benefit of their presence depends on whether the middle class parents have a desire to work together to benefit everyone within the school as opposed to an individual orientation. Even though these studies show how social class impacts parent involvement, Lewis and Forman's (2002) study of two schools revealed that there is an important factor within schools that can counteract the negative effects that social class has on parent involvement. The two schools in Lewis and Forman's (2002) study both had a great deal of parent involvement, but the social class was different. The school consisting of a large population of low-income African American and Hispanic students had a school culture built upon a philosophy that focused on establishing home-school partnerships, whereas the other school wanted to achieve the school's agenda and just keep the parents happy, but at a distant. This is evidence that what educators do within schools can counterbalance any negative effects that class and race may have on parent involvement.

## **Parental Involvement from a Historical Perspective:**

### **Relationships and Mutual Trust and Respect**

Educators learning how to relate to African American families is foundational in establishing relationships that will increase parent involvement and build effective home-school-community partnerships. As stated previously, research on race, social class, and parent involvement implicates that race and social class impacts parents' level of involvement in their children's schooling (Auerbach, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Ironically, from a historical perspective, before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954*, race and social class did not impede parent involvement, but parents, educators, and community members were able to establish meaningful relationships in the midst of legalized racism and segregation (Morris, 2004). Administrators were successful in connecting the school to the community. Morris's (2004) study of two predominantly African American schools with children from low-income homes revealed that income and race didn't have a negative impact on family-school partnerships. Practices and structures existed within the schools that supported agency for African American families. While effective relationships existed within the predominately Black schools in Morris's (2004) study, Diamond and Gomez's (2004) study show that race and class shape parents' beliefs about their role in the education of their children and their beliefs impact their behaviors. The results of their study with middle and working class parents revealed middle class parents are able to better customize their children's educational experiences than working class parents due to the various resources they possessed (economic, human, social, and cultural capital). The educators, parents, and community

members in Black schools before *Brown v. Board of Education* had social and culture capital. Teachers understood the culture of the families they served. Today, schools are very diverse and the teaching force is remains predominantly white (Brown, 2005).

The educators, parents, and members of the community in the two schools in Morris's (2004) study had social capital through their interpersonal relationships with one another and cultural capital through their cultural connections. Black educators went beyond teaching content and taught the whole child. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), through the process of schooling, these educators (before desegregation) played a major role in forming the social, cultural, and political experiences of black children. A "symbiotic relationship" existed between the Black community and Black schools as "black people collectively created functional institutions that worked for the betterment of their children, families, and communities within an oppressive social structure" (Morris, 2004, p. 72). A key component of establishing a "symbiotic relationship" is communication that is centered on mutual trust and respect.

Morris (2004) posits that the key to the authentic relationships that existed before *Brown v. Board of Education* is the mutual trust and respect that existed between families and educators. Miretzky (2004) conducted a study on communication requirements of democratic schools and parent-teacher relationships. The results of her study suggest that mutual respect and social trust are mandatory in the creation and sustaining of democratic communities within schools. Parents are not given a real voice due to the deficit thinking of educators and true relationships cannot be established. Educators must find ways to establish meaningful relationships with low-income and working class African American

parents and not allow race and social class to serve as a hindrance to establishing home-school-community connections. Educators must be intentional about building trust with parents. Greene (2013) posits that relationships of mutual trust and productive home-school partnerships can be created by listening to parents' stories. The belief that low-income and working class African American parents have something to offer to the educational process breeds respect. Effective home-school partnerships cannot exist beyond meaningful dialogue between teachers and parents that exists outside of the context where parents are viewed as the client and the teacher is in the seat of authority (Thorne, 1993).

Historically, trust between educators and parents was not an issue because black families trusted the Black educators to do what was best for their children because the families and educators interacted within the community (i.e., neighbors or church members). Parents did not see a need to visit the school, because they trusted the teachers to do what was best for their children (Morris, 2004). Educators must work directly with African American parents to form meaningful relationships and in order to nurture their involvement in schools (Kakli, 2011). The educators at the all Black schools in Morris's (2004) study made a conscientious effort to build trust with families. They didn't wait for parents to initiate contact with the school. They reached out to the families and welcomed them into the schools. They created a climate of trust and were intentional about creating opportunities for families to actively participate in school events. Morris (2004) refers to this as "agency" (p. 89).

Scholarship in social capital theory suggests that when relationships are built among people a foundation for participation within schools and within the community exist (Noguera, 2001). When relationships are built and collaboration takes place between schools and low-income and African American families, these families have access to more social capital. The relationships that existed with African American families and educators before segregation exposed these families to social capital that they would not have had without having relationships built upon mutual trust. The amount of social capital that existed within groups varied (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). A study conducted by Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) revealed that parents in middle class communities have greater social capital and they feel confident in interacting with educators and they have relationships with one another regarding issues surrounding education. Contrariwise, they found that working class parents are not as connected with other parents at the same school and they lack the education or status in feeling confident in relating to educators as equals. One implication from their study is to form bonds with parents by collaboration and relationship building. Through bonding they can find the support they need to increase their social capital and to interact more powerfully with school leaders (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001)

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the process of desegregation began, mistrust between educators and parents were prominent because of racial and social class issues (Morris, 2004). African American families could not trust teachers to do what was best for their children and these feelings were exacerbated by the deficit views that

educators had about African American parents (Cooper, 2007). They deemed different as deficit (Tran, 2014). Lareau and Horvat (1999) argued that because of the history of racial discrimination, Black parents approach schools with criticisms and challenges educators rather than support them. This makes it difficult for meaningful trustful relationships to be form as they did in Black schools before desegregation. The relationships established were conduits for the establishing of effective home, school and community partnerships. African American parents and students that existed within these schools before *Brown v Board* were no different from the parents and children that exist within our schools today.

Before segregation, the teachers used their cultural capital to shape the children's critical understanding of their history (Morris, 2004). The parents and the students connected with the content and the curriculum. Black educators, schools, and communities worked together collectively to establish institutions that met the needs of all stakeholders (DuBois, 1935). Parents and educators had social capital and cultural capital as they relied on their interpersonal relationships with one other and they valued the African American culture (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The two schools Morris (2004) used in his study were examples of how educators used their cultural capital (their knowledge of African American history and culture) to help students understand their history from a critical perspective.

Many educators today are socially and culturally disconnected from the students they teach and they do not have knowledge of the communities in which African American families live (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993). These social and cultural barriers

prevent the establishing of authentic home-school partnerships (Tran, 2014). They do not understand the experiences of low-income and working class African American families' experiences beyond school. In a portraiture study of an African American education activist, Kakli, (2011) captures the heartfelt concerns about the American education system not being intentional about nurturing Black children and in making cultural connections with their lives. Educators can no longer ignore the role that culture plays in working with diverse families and they must move away from cultural acculturation where they deal with all families in the same manner regardless of their culture, to "cultural pluralism" recognizing all cultures (Riehl, 2000). Gay (2000) calls for the utilization of culturally responsive strategies to assist educators in changing their negative perspectives of low-income and working class ethnic minorities which can create the foundation for building trust and establishing true partnerships. Cooper (2007) argues that educators must use culturally relevant strategies in order to make vital connections with students and their families.

Prins and Torso (2008) suggests that educators look at parent involvement from a socio-cultural view where they "consider the historically and culturally situated nature of family structure and the principles that define what it means to be involved" (p. 565). Lewis and Forman's (2002) study of two schools that are known to have a great deal of parent involvement was an excellent example of how social class and school culture interact in a manner that is advantageous in laying a foundation for building meaningful relationships between parents and educators. The purpose of building meaningful relationships between low-income African American parents and educators to establish

home-school-community partnerships goes beyond increasing the number of parents who attend school-related functions, but it is about empowerment. Mutual trust and the establishing of relationships between families and schools which honor parents as partners are pre-requisites for parent empowerment.

### **Parent Involvement: Policies and Practices**

Parents are empowered in schools when they are able to help implement systemic change with schools (Fine, 1993). Some educators fear parent power. Lubienski, Scott, and Welner (2015) conducted a policy analysis to examine the efficacy of parent trigger policies that give parents the power to induce major structural changes within local schools through collective power. Even though the parent trigger policy is an example of parent agency and collective parent power, it may not be conducive to building the type of collaborative democratic communities that need to exist in schools (Rogers, 2006). Title I of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the latest reauthorization of this legislation, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are parent-educator friendly, but must be viewed critically as a mean to empower African American parents with children attending Title I schools.

Title I legislation recognizes parents as partners where schools are required to share information with parents such as academic assessments, parent involvement policy, and School-Family Compacts, which shows how teachers, students, and the parents will work together to help increase academic achievement (Epstein, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). According to Stevenson and Laster (2008), less than one third of the states were in compliance with fulfilling Title I mandates for sharing this information.

According to Rogers (2006) in his article related to the power of poor parents in federal legislation NCLB, he suggests that “informed and engaged parents can play a central role in holding the school system accountable for providing a quality education to all students” (p. 612). Cooper (2007) asserted policy makers would benefit from learning about low-income and working class African American practices (*motherwork*) in order to capitalize on their strengths and be aware of their challenges in order to develop school-family partnerships. Miretzky (2004) suggests that policies should not only reflect the outcome of achievement test scores, but they should reflect who we want our children to grow up and become and the type of society we want them to live in. Milner (2015) posits that focusing on outputs such as standardized test results without considering programs, practices, systems and policies that are responsible for the output will not be effective.

The NCLB legislation which was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires schools to include parents in the decision making process for Title I budgets and programs, which is parent empowerment (Epstein, 2005). However, low-income African American parent engagement in the decision-making process of schools have been limited. Title I of the NCLB legislation affords parents the power of choosing their child’s school when their school fails to make adequate progress (Rogers, 2006). Manytimes they are disempowered when they lack the information needed to seek the best school choice options (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Cooper, 2007). According to Diamond and Gomez (2004), school choice policies exacerbate inequities for low-income

and working class parents because they don't have all the needed information to navigate the complexities that are associated with school choice.

Cooper et al. (2010) posit that school leaders must not judge low-income or ethnic minority parents as not caring when they do not understand school policies and practices. Instead school leaders must critically examine existing school policies and collaborate with African American parents to create new school policies to ensure that systemic inequities are not perpetuated by silencing their voice and overlooking their contribution to the education of their children. The implementation of a policy should be purpose driven to meet the needs of all students. From a social justice standpoint, schools must set up policies and practices to empower parents to become agents of change. Modifications are needed to the No Child Left Behind legislation that reflect the research that has done on parent involvement (Epstein, 2005). Hiring policies for Title I schools should be made to ensure the hiring of quality teachers because many low performing Title I schools have poor teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Research shows that teacher quality has a high yield effect (six to ten times greater) than issues such as poverty, crime, and family issues (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Based upon my literature review, it is pertinent to create opportunities for African American parents of varying social classes to share their stories as they engage in dialogue with educators because the lack of parent involvement is not solely due to the actions of parents just as the achievement gap is not solely due to the actions of students and their families. There are many aggregating factors that may impede African American parents' involvement (lack of social and cultural capital) and the decreasing of

the achievement gap can be counterbalanced by the actions of educators and community organizations. Beyond the actions of educators and community organizations, we must focus on systemic inequities. Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts,

The presumption that undergirds much of the conversations about the achievement gap is that equal educational opportunity now exists, therefore, continued low levels of achievement on the part of students of color must be intrinsic to them, their families, or their communities. Yet when the evidence is examined, it is clear that educational outcomes for these students are at least as much a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, both inside and outside of school as they are a function of race, class, or culture.

Policies that are mandated without understanding the needs of marginalized families will create practices that are counterproductive to the academic success of marginalized students. Based upon the literature review, African American parents are involved in the education of their children, but their involvement may be in ways that are not aligned with the expectations of educators. Therefore, policies that are inclusive of considering the needs and strengths of all families must be considered. There are also varying factors that impact the establishing of authentic home-school-community partnerships. From a historical perspective before desegregation, home-school-community partnerships were prevalent due to cultural connections, which reveals race as a one factor that impacts parent involvement. Therefore, it is vital to take a critical look at how parent involvement is defined and critically examine why African American parents are involved in the education of their children.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model for why parents become involve in the education of their children. Looking at this model will shine a light on why the subjects of this study, African American parents with students attending Title I schools, become involved in the education of their children and what external and internal factors impact their involvement. This study will also take a critical epistemological stance in understanding varying ways of defining parent involvement and how perceived knowledge about how to define this term can be limiting or empowering (Cooper et al., 2010; Scanlan, 2012).

### **Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) Model**

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model of why parents become involved in their children's education is based upon three constructs: (a) the parents' construction of his or her role in the child's life; (b) the parents' sense of efficacy or their belief that they can make a difference in the life of their child; and (c) general invitations and opportunities for parent involvement presented by the child and the child's school. Each construct is impacted by other variables.

Parents' role construction is parents' beliefs about their educational role in their child's life and the behaviors that follow those beliefs. It is shaped by expectations of various social groups and by parents' personal beliefs. More specifically, parents' role construction is influenced by their beliefs about the development of their child, how their child should be reared and what they believe they should do at home to help their child succeed in school. It is also impacted by a family's expectation for a mother's behavior;

a community's expectation for the behavior of school children's parents; and the workplace. Because parents' role construction is shaped by various social groups and by parents' experiences over time with individuals and groups associated with schooling, it is socially constructed and can change over time (Chrispoele & Rivero, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Parents' self-efficacy is parents' belief in their ability to act in ways that will yield desired results (Bandura, 1986, 1997). This construct is based upon self-efficacy theory which proposes that parents make their decisions about involvement partially by thinking about the results that will be produced due to their actions (Bandura, 1997). If parents' efficacy is high, they have a tendency to make positive decisions about being actively engaged in their child's education and are more likely to face and overcome challenges encountered. Parents weak in efficacy for involvement are more likely to be associated with lower parental expectations about their efforts to help their child in school and they have a lower resistance to overcoming challenges encountered (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Variables linked to parents' self-efficacy are parents' confidence that they can help their child with school work; parents' views of their competence as their children progress; and parents' belief that they can influence the school through school governance. Parents' self-efficacy is grounded in parents' personal experiences in four major domains: (a) parents personal success in achieving their goals in a given area; (b) observations of others achieving similar goals; (c) verbal persuasion or encouragement from important others that they can be successful; and (d) physiological arousal which constitutes the physical and affective feelings brought about as they see the importance of

a goal and their personal ability to achieve the goal. Because parents' self-efficacy is grounded in these domains, it is also socially constructed (Bandura, 1997).

Invitations for involvement are also motivators for parent involvement. Variables for parents feeling invited are a child's communicating to the parent the importance of parental participation, a school's climate that is inviting, and teachers' behaviors that are welcoming and facilitating. Comer's research focusing on improving education for marginalized families suggested that the parents' involvement and empowerment increases when school staff expressed positive attitudes towards marginalized families (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Additional empirical studies have been conducted using the three constructs which have provided ancillary information on understanding parents' motivation to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

### **Critical Epistemological Stance**

Viewing parent involvement from a critical epistemological stance goes beyond accepting one view of what constitutes parent involvement. Research on culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of recognizing different ways of knowing and different sources of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Discourse on parent involvement reveals disagreement on how to define it (Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Lopez & Stoelting, 2010). Parent involvement can take on various forms and parent involvement for low-income and ethnic minority parents is contingent upon many factors that normally do not appear on the surface (Epstein et al., 2009; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Therefore, it is imperative to gain knowledge about parent involvement as viewed from the lens of African American parents.

Empirical studies and scholarship show that parent involvement is laden with power implications (Lightfoot, 2004). Auerbach (2001, 2007) posits that parent involvement in education has been socially constructed to privilege White middle class norms. Cooper (2007), using Black feminist theory reveals how parent involvement when “defined broadly is a socially constructed activity that is influenced by one’s gender, race and class” (p. 492). Low-income and ethnic minority parents oftentimes exhibit parent involvement through nurturance based activities and through conversations with their children that will help them succeed in a society that devalues the contributions of low-income and working class African Americans (Cooper, 2007). These activities are not aligned with the traditional parent involvement activities provided by schools (Griffin, 2011). Defining parent involvement based on traditional views held by schools aligns with middle class cultural capital and implicitly views low income and ethnic minorities as deficient when they don’t participate (Lareau, 2003; Lightfoot, 2004).

Empirical studies indicate that how parents construct their role in the education of their children is impacted by educators’ beliefs and practices which are based upon their knowledge of what constitutes parent involvement (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Auerbach, 2001; Epstein, 2001). It is crucial for educators to recognize and understand that parent involvement in schools is a term that has been socially constructed to privilege White middle class norms (Auerbach, 2001) and taking a critical epistemological stance is the way to view parent involvement from another perspective; that of the marginalized group. Ladson-Billings (2000) defines epistemology as a “system of knowing which has internal logic and external validity” (p. 257). African

American parents in Title I schools may construct their meaning of parent involvement, but because of a lack of external validity, their role construction of parent involvement is not accepted within schools. Cooper (2007) concluded in her study of low-income African American mothers and their school choice for their children, that educational leaders need to rethink and reform schools to increase the voice of marginalized populations.

Cooper et al.'s (2010) study of critical epistemology amid communities of practice highlights the importance of educational leaders examining dominant epistemologies that govern their structures and practices within schools and suggests that leaders develop a critical epistemological stance when working with diverse families. According to Ladson-Billings (2000), "one's epistemological frame of system of knowing has immediate implication for how one perceives culture, diversity, and difference and how one assesses the strengths and values of diverse families" (p. 768). Riehl (2000) in her critical review of literature on the practice of education administration posits that school leaders have great power in defining situations and meanings. According to Riehl, "administrators can employ a variety of rhetorical and dialogic strategies in communicating new understandings" (p. 60). Riehl (2000) asserts that based upon epistemological understandings of practice, persons come "to know" through their own actions. Educators must understand the actions of low income and working class African American parents and how they construct their parent involvement role before they can judge whether they are involved in the education of their children. Educators

cannot exclude the type of involvement exhibited by low-income African American families and only include parent involvement that privileges white middle class parents.

Scanlan (2012) refers to this notion of inclusion and exclusion as “epistemology of inclusivity” (p. 1067). He examined how epistemology impacts behaviors in his study on the role of an epistemology of inclusivity on the pursuit of social justice. He suggests that a critical stance is required when considering marginalized populations in education to avoid inequities based on who is included and who is excluded because “epistemological features of schools impact the practices that are in place in the school” (p. 1083). Schools are very diverse and educators’ must be cognizant of how African American parents construct their parent involvement roles. Educational leaders of Title I schools must ensure that the population of parents and students in which they are receiving funds to provide service are not the group that is being excluded because of how parent involvement is being defined. Auerbach (2007) posits that educators must broaden their perspective of parent involvement from a narrow traditional definition to include a wide range of practices for diverse parents that occur inside and outside of school. Capper (2001) calls for epistemological pluralism where how one knows and comes to know take on multiple perspectives. Taking a critical epistemological stance not only positions educators to focus on issues of inclusion and exclusions, but attention must also be given to the ways in which low-African American parents are included.

Title I is a federal policy that mandates educators working in Title I schools to establish mutual beneficial partnerships with parents and it has established a framework through which schools, families and the communities can strategically work together to

improve teaching and learning (Koonce & Harper, 2005). According to Snell, Miguel, and East (2009), one of the challenges of implementing the parent involvement component is a lack of agreement on the meaning of the term parent involvement. Despite funding that is received yearly to establish effective home-school partnerships, some Title I schools are faced with challenges in the area of parent involvement. Scholarship shows that modifications are needed in the Title I program to reflect research suggesting implications for more effective parent involvement programs (Epstein, 2005). Studies also show a lack of parent involvement for low-income and ethnic minority parents (Epstein, 1997; Noguera, 2004; Park & Holloway, 2013). Title I schools have a significant number of low-income and ethnic minorities. According to Cooper (2009) it is necessary to take a critical look at the structures and practices within schools before we judge parents as not being involved. According to Pemberton and Miller (2015), many parent involvement studies are based on correlations between types and levels of parental involvement and achievement outcomes, and ignores any variables that might create challenges for the least-involved parents to become more engaged (Crozier, 2001). Legislators have shifted their discourse from parent involvement to family engagement (Mapp, 2012). This shift will only be successful when educators take a critical epistemological stance on what it means for African American families to be engaged in the education of their children.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Participatory Action Research**

The research methodology for this study was participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a process that “involves researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better” (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007, p. 1). According to Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), PAR practitioners focus “on empowering disenfranchised and marginalized groups to take action to transform their lives” (p. 1671). Sohng (1996) asserted that participants are empowered as they make connections with other individuals faced with similar experiences and as their experiences are contextualized within the broader community.

PAR is a methodology that is rooted in a social justice agenda to construct power for the “poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes . . . to enable these groups and classes to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage . . . to achieve goals of social transformation” (Kindon, 2005, pp. 207–208). PAR is an appropriate type of research for taking a critical look at parent involvement in Title I schools. The traditionally- based models of parent involvement are an example of “oppression that is built into our policies, procedures and institutions” (Young, 1991, p. 41). Social justice seeks to dismantle these power structures and empower marginalized groups to become agents of change. Bell (1997) describes social justice as having the “goal of full and

equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3). Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) argued that social justice in schools should “promote inclusion and equity and develop reciprocal community relationships” (p. 57), which was an important goal of this study. African American parents’ voice must be included in the discourse about what it means for parents to be involved in the education of their children.

This study gave voice to seven African American parents with students attending a Title I middle school. In addition to giving voice to this marginalized population of parents, this study assisted them in reflecting upon their parent involvement challenges, needs, and strengths as they engaged in critical discourse with one another and with the principal researcher. It also engaged them in collaborating with educators and community/business leaders to provide strategies to assist them in establishing effective home-school-community partnerships. PAR places a priority on collaboration between researcher and members of communities to study and transform circumstances that are “relevant to and determined by, those members” (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). The seven African American parents in this study took an active role in the research project as they engaged in dialogue with the principal researcher and with other parents in the study during five focus group meetings (four of the five meetings were Parent Professional Learning Community meetings [PPLC]). The PPLC meetings gave voice to the parents and provided parents with additional information about navigating within Title I schools. The parents in this study empowered educators and community/business leaders by sharing their voice on parent involvement and by giving them strategies for

developing effective home-school-community partnerships during a community based presentation. Two values or features of PAR are privileging local voices and cultures throughout the different stages of research and the incorporating of “power-sharing and reciprocity into knowledge production processes that can transform conventional and oppressive relationships between research/researched” (Grimwood, 2015, p. 219).

My vision for this study was to hear the voice of each participant on various aspects of parent involvement during individual interviews. Because parents had different family structures, socioeconomic status, and educational levels, I wanted to give parents the opportunity to collaborate about their views to see similarities and differences in their perceptions during a focus group interview. Parent Professional Learning meetings (PPLC) were designed for parents to have critical discourse with one another and with principal researcher on parent involvement in Title I schools. I wanted parents to co-construct knowledge about this topic, share their parent involvement experiences and to receive valuable information about Title I schools. After spending four sessions discussing African American parent involvement in Title I schools, it was important for parents to share the results of this study (their perceptions) with educators and community/business leaders to remove misconceptions about their involvement in the education of their children. It was also my vision that the parents who participated in the study would see the significance of their voice and their collective strength in making a difference in education (of their children and other children as well). It was my desire that business/community leaders and educators would begin to seek ways to establish

authentic home-school-community partnerships to meet the needs of marginalized families while recognizing the strengths parents bring into the partnership.

### **Participants**

Seven African American parents with students attending a Title I middle school were selected to participate in this study. The inclusion criterion for participation was being an African American parent with a child who attends a Title I middle school. Participants were chosen by purposeful sampling. According to Maxwell (2013), purposeful sampling is a strategy chosen when “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97). Participants were recruited from two local churches. The project was discussed with the pastors of the churches and permission was given to distribute flyers at the churches. Flyers included the title of the study, the duration of the study, the number of sessions parents must attend along with a brief description of the topics to be covered in each session, and the telephone number and email address of the principal researcher for interested participants to contact. Only four parents from the two churches responded and agreed to participate in the study. Three parents were recruited by snowball sampling and were recommended by other people as good candidates for the study. Snowball sampling “involves gaining access to informants through contact information from other informants” (Lichtman, 2012, p. 192).

Parents in the study represented varying social classes, educational levels, and family structures. All participants were females because fathers did not respond to the

flyer. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 67 years old. See Table 1 for demographics of parents who participated in the study.

Table 1

Demographics of Parent Participants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Education	Income
Phyllis	36	Single	1	Some college	0-15,000
Janice	34	Single	5	High school graduate	0-15,000
Monica	42	Divorced	3	Some college	26,000-35,000
Annette	61	Single	2	Bachelor's degree	26,000-35,000
Nora	43	Single	1	Master's degree	36,000-45,000
Amy	37	Married	3	Some college	66,000-75,000
Millie	33	Married	2	Master's degree	66,000-75,000
Shellie	—	Married	4	Master's degree	—

*Note.* Parent information was self-reported via a demographic survey completed after the parent presentation (See Appendix I). All information from Shellie, the parent who dropped out of the study is not reported because she was not present when parents completed the survey. The information listed for Shellie was given during her individual interview.

My original plan was to recruit low-income and working class African American parents that would be representative of the population of families that Title I programs target (students who qualify for free or reduced lunch). Recruiting participants was a difficult process due to the time commitment. Parents were asked to participate in one individual interview, four group meetings, and one community presentation. My sample only included the parents who responded to the flyer or by snowball sampling. The final sample represented low-income, working class, and middle class African American

parents and included three parents who had Masters Degrees, two who were educators and one who was once employed as an educator. Having participants of varying social economic status, family structures, and educational levels proved to be serendipitous during the study and provided for richer parent to parent collaboration and support.

In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants. One parent dropped out of the study because she could not attend several of the group sessions due to her work schedule. One parent had health challenges linked to an inherited disease and was very shy. She did not give much input during the focus group interview. After having a personal conversation with the parent about how her illness impacted her parent involvement experiences, she stated that her mother worked closely with her. I asked her to discuss the study with her mother to see if she would be willing to participate. Her mother (grandmother of the child attending the Title I school) was very excited about the study and agreed to participate. The final group of participants consisted of six parents and one grandparent.

Parent participants presented their findings to a group of 18 people representing educators, parents, students, and community/business leaders. Educators and community/business leaders were recruited by passing out flyers at the local YMCA/YWCA, city recreational facilities, community youth centers and at the churches where parent participants were recruited. The students and parents were invited by other participants. See Table 2 for demographics of audience for the parent presentation. The flyer included the title of the study, the purpose of the event, date, time, and location of the event and the contact information for the principal researcher. An IRB information

sheet (Appendix A) was given to the educators and community/business leaders who agreed to attend the presentation. The sheet included detailed information about the study such as why they were being asked to participate and information about confidentiality.

Table 2

## Demographic Information for Participants Attending the Parent Presentation

Occupation	Years in Current Occupation	Race	Gender
Parent/School volunteer	5-10	Black	Female
Parent	15-20	Black	Female
Educator-High School Teacher	10-15	White	Male
Educator- Middle School Teacher	15-20	Black	Female
Educator -Middle School Teacher	15-20	Black	Female
Educator-Elem. School Teacher	10-15	Black	Female
Educator -School Treasurer	15-20	Black	Female
Educator-School Counselor	15-20	Black	Female
Educator-Assistant Principal	1-5	Black	Female
Educator-Assistant Professor	1-5	Black	Female
Community Leader/Educator	more than 20	Black	Male
Community Leader/Boys and Girls Club	1-5	Black	Male
Community Leader/Pastor	more than 20	Black	Female
Community Leader/Associate Pastor	more than 20	Black	Male
Community Leader/Parks and Recreation	1-5	Black	Male
Business Leader-Banking analyst	1-5	Black	Male
Business Leader-former Lorillard	15-20	Asian	Male
Student	Sophomore in college	Male	Male

*Note.* Information on this chart was obtained from a survey that was completed after the Parent Presentation. Most participants also had an extensive conversation with principal researcher about the study and their role in the study before agreeing to participate.

### Setting

Seven different Title I schools from two large metropolitan school districts in the southeastern area of the United States were represented in this study (District West and District East).

**District West** (pseudonym) serves more than 70,000 students across 127 schools. The student population consists of .45% American Indian, 5.9% Asian, 40.9% African American, 14.3% Hispanic, 34.4% White, 3.9% Multi-racial, and 0.16% Pacific Islander. Twelve of the 23 middle schools in District East are Title I middle schools. Four Title I schools from District West are included in the study. Two of the four schools are classified as a low performing school.

**District East** (pseudonym) serves more than 50,000 students across 81 schools. Less than one percent of the student population is American Indian or Native Hawaiians/Pacific, 2.5% Asian, 28.5 % African American, 24.5% Hispanic, 40.2% White, and 4% multiracial. Ten of the 14 middle schools in District West are Title I middle schools. Two of the three schools within District East are classified as low performing. Low performing schools are the schools within the district/state that made a school performance grade of D or F and a growth performance score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth” as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15 (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/schooltransformation/low-performing/>). See Table 3 for demographic information on each school.

Table 3

## Demographics and EOG Percentage Data Chart of Schools Represented in the Study

School	FRL	African American	White	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian	Multi-racial
<b>District West</b>							
West No. 1	72	49.0	19.3	20.3	5.3	0.3	5.8
West No. 2*	98	54.0	21.5	11.2	3.3	0.3	2.6
(LP) West No. 3	98	52.0	5.0	30.7	6.6	2.7	3.1
(LP) West No. 4*	99	40.0	23.5	20.1	12.1	0.1	3.5
<b>District East</b>							
East No. 1	58	54.0	27.1	14.9	1.8	0.1	4.7
(LP) East No. 2*	66	30.7	31.0	28.5	5.0	0.1	4.4
(LP) East No. 3*	98	85.0	2.0	16.2	0.46	0.0	1.8

*Note.* \* Magnet schools. FRL = Free and Reduced Lunch. LP = Low Performing School. Low performing schools are the schools within the district/state that made a school performance grade of D or F and a growth performance score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth” as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15 (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/schooltransformation/low-performing/>). Demographic data is based on Feb. 2016 report. Retrieved from [https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/reports/410367\\_2016\\_Middle.html](https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/reports/410367_2016_Middle.html)

Title I schools were chosen for this study because they receive federal funds to provide extra instructional services to raise the achievement for low-performing students in schools with relatively high poverty rates. Parent involvement is also a major component of Title I programs (Center on Education Policy, 2006).

All individual interviews were conducted at a location requested by the participants. The locations included the home of the participants, my home, the church, and their place of employment. The focus group interview and the Parent Professional Learning Community meetings (PPLC) took place at various locations which were agreed upon by the participants. Because parents lived in three different cities, it was necessary to divide the focus group and PPLC meetings into two different sessions to

make meeting places more convenient by decreasing parents' travel time. Parents volunteered to have some of the meetings in their home. Other meeting places included my home, a community center, and the public library. The final meeting for the parent presentation was held in a conference room owned by a local university.

### **Data Collection**

After gaining approval from IRB, pastors of the two local churches where recruitment occurred were contacted to discuss the purpose of the study and to get letters granting their permission for me to recruit at their church. These letters were submitted to IRB. Data sources for this study included:

- Individual interviews (ranging from 30-45 minutes)
- Focus group interviews (60-70 minutes; two groups with three parents in each group)
- Reflective notes taken during and after Parent Professional Learning Communities meetings (PPLCs)
- Parent Professional Learning Community Meetings (PPLC)—four meetings, each meeting divided into two 60- to 90-minute sessions with four parents in one group and three parents in the other group; one parent did not attend all sessions.
- Critique of parent involvement information located on the schools and school districts websites (see Appendix B for questions used to critique websites)
- Demographic data for parents (See Table 1).
- Community Presentation (See Appendix C for Outline of the Presentation)

- Educator and community/ business leader survey given after the parent presentation (see Appendix D; 18 surveys were distributed. All 18 were completed and returned).
- Electronic parent survey emailed to the parent participants to get feedback six weeks after start of school year about how their actions changed as a result of participating in the study (see Appendix E).

See Table 4 for a timeline for data collection.

Table 4

Data Collection Timeline

Month	
April	Individual Interview
May	Individual Interviews
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Interview</li> <li>• Focus Group Interviews</li> </ul>
July	PPLC meetings
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PPLC meeting</li> <li>• Community Presentation</li> <li>• Educators/Community/Business Leaders Survey</li> <li>• Beginning of New School Year</li> </ul>
September	Electronic Survey sent to Parent Participants
October	Seven Surveys Emailed and Seven Returned

*Note.* Individual interviews began within a week after the first participant was recruited. Recruitment was a slow process with the last interview occurring almost two months after the first one.

A written consent form was given to each participant to read and sign before conducting interviews (see Appendix F). Because of my interests in participants'

perceptions and understandings of parent involvement, each parent participated in a semi-structured individual interview that lasted 30-45 minutes. According to Lichtman (2012), this type of interview consists of a general set of questions that is used for all participants and the interviewer can alter the questions or probe for additional information. Individual interview and focus group protocols and questions are located in Appendix G. After all individual interviews were conducted, they were transcribed by the principal researcher before conducting the focus group interview. This was purposeful because the transcription of interviews led to additional areas of investigation during the focus group interviews. A total of eight individual interviews were conducted. One parent dropped out of the study after participating in one PPLC meeting.

The focus group interview was divided into two 60- to 80-minute sessions. Responses from all individual interviews were compiled (responses were anonymous) and given to the parents for review during the focus group interview. Parents discussed their own responses and made additional comments and/or clarifications about their responses and about other responses listed (member checking). Three parents participated in each session.

Parents also participated in four 60- to 90-minute Parent Professional Learning Community meetings (PPLC). The purpose of the PPLCs was for parent to parent and parent to researcher dialogue and support; for analysis of information on the school/district websites; for data analysis to determine parents' strengths, needs, and challenges with respect to parent involvement; and to plan a presentation that would help educators and community/business leaders gain a better understanding of African

American parent involvement in Title I school. This information could be used to help establish effective home-school-community partnerships. A general protocol for PPLCs can be found in Appendix H. Each PPLC meeting had a specific agenda which was partially based upon parents' comments and interests during previous sessions. The agenda of the first PPLC was two-fold: The first part was to discuss and further identify codes that were established from individual interviews and focus group interview. The second part was to give parents an opportunity to review and critique information for parents on their school and district websites. This was purposeful because technology is a communication and information tool that schools use and it was vital to critique the information and assess whether parents were familiar with the information on the websites. Each Title I school has a link to their school's report card. Because of parents' interests, we determined that the next PPLC meeting would focus on looking at specific components of their school's report card. During the second PPLC meeting, each parent was given a hard copy of their school's report card. The parents discussed their school's grade, they compared their reading and math EOG data with the state and district's average, and they discussed teacher quality. Because parents felt so strongly about advocating for their children amid negative academic outcomes for some of their schools, before this session ended we discussed what parent advocacy meant to them. The purpose of the third PPLC meeting was to review what we discussed during our previous meetings to determine their strengths, weaknesses and challenges and to prepare for their community presentation. After meeting for 90 minutes, the parents did not feel they were ready to do a presentation. They all agreed to meet again to prepare for their community

presentation. A fourth PPLC was not part of the original plan for this study. One distinguishing feature of PAR is that it is iterative with responsive processes of planning-acting- and reflecting for change (Grimwood, 2015).

As an action step for parents in this study, they collaborated with principal researcher to prepare a presentation to a group of educators and community/business leaders. The purpose of the presentation was to give voice to this representative group of parents and to help educators and community/business leaders understand their perceptions, experiences, strengths, challenges, and needs which could serve as an important step for true parent engagement. The presentation was held at 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning in the conference room owned by a local university. Before the parents presented their findings to the group of educators and community/business leaders, the principal researcher discussed the purpose of the study with the group. The presentation included some of the topics that emerged from the study, interesting quotes that supported the topics, and a list of parents' strengths, challenges, and needs, and how educators and community/business leaders can form effective partnerships with the parents. The parents had mixed emotions about standing in front of an audience to present their findings. There were feelings of excitement, yet feelings of uncertainty about how the audience would feel about what they would share. The presentation was scheduled to last for 90 minutes. Parents were asked to arrive 30 minutes before the presentation. As the members of the audience arrived, they partook of the refreshments provided. The parents were nervous and chose not to eat until the end of the presentation. Each parent was responsible for sharing a specific section of the findings to the audience.

(See Appendix C for an outline of the presentation). The parents' presentation lasted for 45 minutes. After the parents presented, members of the audience introduced themselves, made comments about the presentation, and asked questions. After 90 minutes, members of the audience and the parents continued to collaborate about parent involvement concerns in Title I schools. Many of the comments were about standardized testing and meeting the needs of African American families. Due to high interest from everyone involved, they continued to engage in critical discourse for an additional 30 minutes. The presentation lasted for two hours.

The parents in this study invested their time and energy and it was important to show my appreciation by being flexible during the sessions as I answered their specific questions and provided them with information about their schools (based upon information on the school/district website). The group meetings were entitled Parent Professional Learning Community meetings because parents and researchers dialogued about parent involvement and topics related to their school. We were all learners and co-constructors of knowledge about parent involvement. Additional means of reciprocity (Glesne, 2006), included each parent receiving a snack bag and a gift card to a local restaurant ranging from \$5.00 - \$7.00 at the beginning of each PPLC meeting and a \$100.00 gift card to all parents who completed the study.

All individual/focus group interviews, Parent Professional Learning Community meetings, and the parent presentation were audio taped using a Digital Voice Recorder. All data collected was stored in a password protected computer file. At the end of the PPLCs parents completed a demographic survey (see Appendix I). The purpose of the

demographic survey was to obtain general information about each parent such as yearly income and age. At the end of the parent presentation, all educators, and community/business leaders completed a short survey (see Appendix D) telling what impact the presentation had on their understanding of parent involvement and how they can establish effective home-school-community partnerships. Reflective memos were written after all interviews and PPLC meetings to reflect upon my opinions, reactions, impressions and feelings during the data collection and analysis. According to Saldaña (2013), memos are comparable to a researcher's journal entry used to communicate with ourselves about our data.

### **Data Analysis**

PAR does not prescribe specific strategies of data analysis but strategies are determined by the context of the study (Grimwood, 2015). All individual and focus group interviews, Parent Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs), and reflective memos were transcribed. Throughout the data collection process, I looked for emerging themes, topics and patterns in parent responses. According to Lichtman (2012), “a systematic approach to analysis and interpretation brings order and understanding to the qualitative research project” (p. 246). Coding began after transcribing all individual interviews and the focus group interviews (two sessions). The analysis of the transcribed data began with a line by line open coding process as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Coding is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, silent, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013). Each interview was coded using the Comment feature of

Microsoft Word during multiple cycles of coding. Twenty-seven codes were identified after the first focus group session. See Appendix J for a list of codes.

The codes were presented to the parents during the first PPLC session for further discussion and grouping. The parents did not add additional codes but they made comments about existing codes and had questions about how certain codes emerged. For clarification, parents were given the specific quotes that aligned with the codes. Some of the codes were grouped together as parents made comments about them. During the second PPLC meeting, parents also participated in the data analysis process as they critiqued information for parents that was listed on their school/district's website. See Appendix B for critique questions. Based upon questions that emerged during the first PPLC meeting, the topic of End of Grade (EOG) data was added to the agenda for the second PPLC meeting. Parents looked at their school's report card which included information such as EOG data, school grade, and teacher quality. Parents expressed their feeling about their school's report card and what could be done to change the status of their school. This topic was not an original topic for PPLCs. During the third PPLC meeting, parents elaborated on their strengths, challenges and needs by using the established codes/categories and topics discussed in previous group sessions. Parents also started preparing for their presentation to educators and community/business leaders as we discussed some of the emerging categories/topics and what they wanted to share during the presentation. They were very engaged in their dialogue and all agreed to come back for an additional PPLC meeting. During the fourth PPLC meeting, the principal researcher used parents' input from previous sessions to develop topics in order to

simplify the plethora of data collected during all sessions and to organize information for the presentation. Seven categories/topics emerged and each parent was responsible for presenting one of the categories/topics (see Appendix C). Parents practiced for their presentation and celebrated what they had accomplished together as a team.

All PPLC meetings and the parent presentation were transcribed and coded by principal researcher. After several cycles of coding, categories/topics were developed to capture the nuances of the participants' responses and their beliefs and values about parental involvement. Coded individual and focus group interviews were also revisited and compared with codes and categories of PPLC meetings. Codes and categories were repetitively studied to capture not only salient themes, but silent themes that may have developed due to what was not said, which may speak to issues of inequalities. The codes created from all interviews, PPLC meetings, and the parent presentations were used to create categories and topics. Parent responses were categorized and written in topical format. Within each topic, themes were extracted. Lichtman's (2012) six steps to data analysis were followed: (a) initial coding, (b) revisiting initial codes, (c) developing an initial list of categories, (d) modifying initial list based on additional rereading, (e) revisiting categories and subcategories, and (f) moving from categories to concepts/themes. See Table 5 at the end of Chapter IV for a list of topics and themes.

### **Subjectivity and Positionality**

My childhood experience of observing how my mother was involved in the education of her children in the absence of her participation in school sponsored activities and my current position of being an African American woman who is enrolled in a

university with a focus on social justice may subject my findings to personal biases. There were moments during our PPLC meetings when I paused before speaking when I felt that my personal views and experiences could inadvertently influence some of my parents' views. Other areas of concern include my relationship with three of the parents in the study. I attend the same church with three parents in the study and I work with one of them. I believe that my relationship with these parents assisted in creating authentic and open dialogue during the PPLC meetings. However, my relationship with these parents could have been a limiting factor in how they responded during our discussions. There were multiple systemic concerns that were voiced by parent participants that created serious moments of critical reflection for me because I am an administrator in the system. These moments also re-created the unequal power relationship between me and the parent participants and parents had to be reminded of the importance of their voice in the education of their children. To minimize bias and increase validity, I was reflexive of my positionality during the data analysis process. Litchman (2012) defines reflexivity as "bending back on oneself" (p. 164). Reflective memos were written to highlight my impressions, feelings, and opinions to assist in reducing bias. This term refers to writing that a researcher does in relationship to the research that is not inclusive of field notes, transcribing, and coding (Groenewald, 2008). Maxwell (2013) posits that memos are one of the most important techniques used by a researcher to develop ideas.

### **Trustworthiness**

Parents were given the opportunity to view a compilation of the transcribed data from all individual interviews during the focus group interview. The anonymous

responses did not prevent parents from recognizing their unique responses and they made additional comments regarding their responses and/or compared their responses with the responses of the other parents (member checking). This was purposeful and parents saw similarities and differences in their perceptions about parent involvement and similarities and differences about their individual schools. During the first Parent Professional Learning Community (PPLC) meeting, parents were given a list of codes that were derived from transcribing all individual interviews and the focus group interview. Direct quotes from the interviews were placed under the codes to help parents understand how the codes were created. During this session, parents did not create additional codes but they needed clarification about some of the existing codes. Discussing the direct quotes provided the clarification they needed. This entire process was a form of member checking. Member checking is a process to support validity and trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013). This study also consisted of thick rich data with eight 30- to 45-minute individual interviews (one parent dropped out of the study); two 60- to 70-minute focus group interviews (three participants in each focus group); analysis of information from a total of eight 60-90 minute PPLC meetings (three/four participants in each session); the parent presentation (two hours); and reflective notes. This allowed for triangulation of data. Triangulation is the use of different methods as a check on one another which reduces the risk that conclusions are reflective of only the biases of a specific method (Creswell, 2011).

### **Benefits and Risks**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is designed to empower marginalized groups and to foster dialogue and create shared learning experiences. It is a process for enacting change (Grimwood, 2015). Educators, community leaders, and parents may benefit from this study. Educators may use information from this study to implement programs that are conducive to meeting the needs of African American parents with students attending Title I schools and to develop professional development to assist teachers in better understanding marginalized families. Parents may benefit because they were given the opportunity to collaborate with other parents who shared some of their experiences and they became a support system for one another. Parents also gained insight about how to access information about their school and ways to navigate through the school system to obtain needed resources. They can also benefit as their voices were heard and the process started where they saw significance in letting their voices be heard. From a social justice lens, information from this study can be used to establish new policies and to make adjustments to old policies that will build parent efficacy, promote advocacy, and assist parents and educators in being agents of change through mutual decision making processes.

The risks in this study were minimal. However, some parents may have felt reluctant to share some of their experiences with educators. An important component of PAR is to taking action and promoting change which did increase some of the parents' anxiety level or area of comfort because of their limited experiences in speaking in public. Information about maintaining confidentiality of all information was shared and

pseudonyms were given to each participant. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent form. The form is located in Appendix F.

### **Limitations**

One limitation is the small sample size of seven parents which was not representative of all African American parents with students who attend Title I schools. All parents in the study had their own transportation and were able to travel to different locations to participate. Transportation has been noted as a barrier for parents participating in school sponsored events. Therefore, these results were not generalized to all African American parents with students attending Title I middle schools; especially those who live in poverty and have no means of transportation. The youngest parent in the study was 30 years old. Oftentimes the perceptions of younger parents may vary from parents who are older and different results may have been obtained if younger parents were included in the study. Parent involvement perceptions from fathers may have varied from the perceptions of mothers, but their voice was excluded from the study by default because they did not respond to the invitation to participate. Other limitations include the setting where only seven schools were represented from two school districts as well as the length of the study. Conducting the study for a longer period of time would have given parents more collaboration time and they would have received more information to help them understand policies and practices within schools. Parents participated in five 60- to 80-minute meetings. However, each session was divided into two groups (for most meetings, three parents participated in each group). Even though information discussed during one session was shared with the members in the other

session, having all parents participate in each meeting would have provided time for richer critical discourse on parent involvement.

Another limitation was during the parent presentation. The participants in the audience consisted of mainly African American educators and community/business leaders. The dialogue may have been different if more racial diversity existed in the audience. The male-female ratio was almost equal.

### **Significance of the Study**

The limitations of this study do not alter the transferability and the significance of the study. Information from this study can be used to develop a model for establishing effective home-school-community partnerships with African American parents with students attending Title I schools. This study has significance because it unfolds how educators' epistemological views about parent involvement and home-school-community partnerships can impact their practice and position them to continue to marginalize African American parents with students attending Title I schools. The study speaks to the need for teachers, school and district level administrators to reflect on their own perceptions about diversity within the student population; more specifically for this study, the varying classes of African American families within their school. All African American families represented in Title I schools are not families living in poverty and schools can use the varying social classes, family structures, and educational levels represented to form parent support groups that will assist educators in better understanding the needs of African American parents and ways to establish authentic home-school-community partnerships. Using a Participatory Action Research model for

parent-to-parent collaboration created a space for parents to gain support from one another as they shared their fears, challenges, and weaknesses. Parents were empowered as this methodology created a platform for parents to share their perceptions with educators, parents, and community/business leaders. Parents were given a position of significance.

The Title I program was designed to provide additional academic support and services for the population of families represented in this study in order to close the achievement gap. In the absence of socioeconomic differences, race differences are significant when attention is focused on the achievement of African American students in general. The parent involvement component of the Title I program supports empirical studies showing that parent involvement is directly related to positive academic student outcomes. However, when hearing the voices of the parents in this study along with scholarship and other empirical studies on parent involvement, it gives a clear picture of the complexities involved in utilizing parent involvement as a strategy to increase academic achievement for all African American students. It extends far beyond school-planned activities and counting signatures to validate parent participation. This study has significance because if educators can broaden their view of what it means for African American parents to be involved and parents are given the opportunity to engage in critical discourse with one another and with educators/community business leaders, authentic home-school-community partnerships can occur which can also have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

The results of this study reveal variations and commonalities in the perceptions of seven African American mothers and one grandmother on African American parent involvement in Title I schools. Participants were of varying social classes, educational levels, and family structures. They participated in one individual interview, one focus group interview, four Parent Professional Community Learning meetings (PPLC), and a special community presentation where they shared the results of their study with educators, parents, and business/community leaders. There was an agenda for each PPLC. However, the agenda was flexible as parents had questions or topics they wanted to discuss. The data was organized into five topical areas and themes were chosen within each topic. The topics include (a) parent involvement: roles and perceptions, (b) prerequisites for partnership, (c) the race factor, (d) systemic inequities, and (e) parent participation versus parent empowerment. See Table 5 at the end of this chapter for a listing of all topics along with corresponding themes.

#### **Parent Involvement: Roles and Perceptions**

Critical discourse on parent involvement during this study disclosed how African American parents viewed their role in the education of their children. Understanding how parents constructed their role gave insight into why parents became involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Five themes emerged from this topic.

## **Theme: Parents Emphasized the Vital Role They Play in the Education of Their Children**

Parents in the study believe they play a vital role in the education of their children. They expressed accountability for being involved and a strong sense of care for the educational welfare of their children. They had varying reasons why parents should be involved. Each parent linked their involvement to positive outcomes for their child. During the first Parent Professional Learning Community (PPLC) meeting, parents were asked to respond to a claim from existing research stating that “typically African American parents are less engaged in their child’s academic experience than their White counterparts” (Abul-Adi & Farmer, 2006; Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). All parents passionately disagreed with the statement and followed a line of inquiry about its validity. They wanted to know which parents were involved in the study because they were not included and where was this study conducted? Janice, a single mother with a high school diploma and five children, believes that she plays a major role in the education of her children and that her interactions with the teacher impacts how her children will respond to the teacher. She also believes that she sets the standard for her children. When she was asked what role parents play in the education of their children, she responded:

I think parents play if not the most critical role, really, because everything does start at home. I think that parents play the most critical part because if I’m at the school rolling my neck, snapping my fingers, yelling at this teacher, is my child likely to pay attention and respect this teacher? No he is not . . . We bridge the gap with the teacher as well because yes, this is a Title I school. Yes, my child is a minority. No, I don’t have a lot of money, but I take this very seriously and I expect you to do the same.

Janice also shared an experience when she wanted her son to play sports for the school and the team was so unorganized. Nonetheless, she kept her focus and continued to be involved.

So I wanted him [her son] to play. It was so unorganized to the point where the coaches . . . It was so bad I wanted to pull him off because I was like, I can't let your first experience be like this. The coaches were—I think they just grabbed somebody out of the street saying, “Can you be the football team coach?” So I'm involved because education is—well, no one can take from you what you know. I participate because it's just who I am, it's what I do, and I want my children to know that I'm involved so they need to be involved.

Her reflecting upon this experience helped her to communicate to me her determination to be involved no matter what the circumstances are.

When Nora, who is a single mother with a Masters' degree and one child, was asked what role parents should play in the education of their children, she replied,

They should play a big role. I feel like you should want to know what your child is exposed to on a daily basis. Their interactions with the teacher in the classroom and just see how they behave around peers which will sometimes answer the question why are you acting like this. So I feel like if you would just take the time out to get to know their peers to see what's going on, it really helps.

Amy, who is an educator and married with three children, had a perspective that was more inclusive of parents playing an active role at school. Amy believes

Parents play a major role in the education of their children. From the start of being involved, not just with their grades, but also the whole building of the school; becoming a community with the principal. We need to know who are the heads down to the teachers because building those relationships will help you know who to go to whenever there is a problem.

Millie, who is also an educator with a Master's degree and two children, saw the importance of parents and teachers teaming up. She asserted, "Parents play a very important role. It has to be a team type thing. It can't just be that's a school issue or that's a home issue. We have to all do this together."

The intense dialogue led to defining the term parent involvement. The term was defined as parents reflected on the role they play in the education of their children.

**Theme: All Parents Believe They are Advocates for Their Children**

Advocate was a key term that emerged during the coding of the data. All parents agreed that they were advocates for their children and gave their description of what it meant for them to advocate for their children. Their responses included: being a motivator, a supporter, being a voice, being open-minded, being there for your child, being consistent, being a learner, giving guidance, holding others accountable, being an advisor, a contributor, their cheerleader, the root, getting their supplies, and just doing their part. Shellie, who is married with four children and has a Master's degree in School Administration but no longer works in the field of education, used the term advocate to discuss her role in the education of her children:

Well, I've always thought that as parents, you should be the advocate. The one who is supposed to speak on their behalf. The teachers are not the ones to make those decisions. They are there with the students all day long, but I am that child's advocate. So if there is any decision that needs to be made on my child's behalf, I should be the one doing it. I should be informed.

Shellie could not attend the final three sessions of the study due to major conflicts in her work schedule.

Janice's definition of being an advocate was enlightening to the parents. According to Janice, "being an advocate is empowering, but that can go either way. When they [teachers] don't seem to care we must step in and when they see this person cares about this black child, and that I can help them." Even though Janice never attended college, she has confidence that she can be a help to teachers which is empowering to her as well as to her child's teachers. Parents' attitude on being an advocate expressed their commitment to speak up for their children, to look out for them, and to do what they feel is best for them. While discussing parents being an advocate, Amy declared,

I have to stay involved. I have to advocate for my student and in order for me to do that I have to know what's going on in my child's life so therefore my only thing is don't go by just what your child is saying is happening. Get up in there and find out what's really going on because even though we love our children, sometimes they have misconceptions about what is really going on and things are not really that way.

Amy sees herself as a liaison between the home and the school and that parent involvement cannot solely be based upon attending school-sponsored activities.

**Theme: Parents Emphasized Importance of Home-based Parent Involvement Activities**

Parents' definition of parent involvement was inclusive of the six types of family behaviors in Epstein's parent involvement model (Epstein, 2002). However, they placed emphasis on their behaviors at home that help to prepare their children for school. Examples of home-based activities the parents said constitute parent involvement are:

- taking an interest in what their children are doing;
- communicating with their child about their day;
- asking whether they are going through any issues;
- keeping regular tabs on them;
- being a guiding factor for them;
- checking Powerschool (a computer program where parents can see their child's grades);
- educating their child on how to advocate for himself;
- checking homework; and
- keeping an open line of communication with the teachers.

Millie sees parent involvement from a holistic point of view. According to Millie, parent involvement is

Being a part of the educational process. You might not always be able to be there physically. But knowing that you are keeping regular tabs. You're checking Powerschool for the parent. Educating students on how to advocate for themselves. Looking into their own grades and things like that. Sending emails regularly. Having constant communication with the teachers when need be. Being an active member; whether it be physically or behind the scenes; phone calls, emails, knowing you're doing things at home as well.

Monica, a single parent with three children and currently in school, talked about a parents' role in terms of preparing them for "war." She values what she does for her children at home and she believes that what she does for her children at home will set them up for success at school. The quote below gives insight into her belief regarding the role parents play in the education of children:

I feel like a parent should play every role. Matter of fact they should piggy back off of what the teachers are doing. They, because the thing to me I find that if you set standards at home, you know what I'm saying, it flows over at school . . . So when you send them out that door, you send them, to me it's like a soldier going to war. You're sending them out there to fight because this is their future and if you don't send them prepared, then just like every war you're going to lose it in the end.

Monica believes that one way in which she sets her children up to win is by "taking an interest in what they are doing. Letting them know, I'm there for you. It's just us and we're a team. If we don't work together, we're not going to make it."

According to the parents, communicating with their children at home sets the stage for their success at school. Nora believes that communication is a key to parent involvement: "I feel like communicating with your child about their day, how their day has been, are they going through any issues. So I feel like communication is big in parent involvement." When discussing home related parent involvement activities, the parents focused extensively on the importance of being able to help their children with their homework assignments and having those conversations with their children that will set them up for success at school.

### **Theme: Parents Placed Value in School-sponsored Parent Involvement Initiatives**

All parents saw some value in attending school sponsored events. However, they expressed challenges in participating in school-sponsored events. Two major challenges were conflicts with their work schedules and not giving them enough time to make plans to attend the activities. Examples of school-sponsored parent involvement activities are: walk the schedule night, school dances, student led conferences, Donuts for Dads, Muffins for Moms, PTA, Book Fair, movie night for family, Title I Night, Open House,

Literacy Night, Science Fair, report card pickup, curriculum night, concerts, athletic events, awards ceremonies, fieldtrips, and concerts.

Parents had mixed feelings about the parent involvement activities held at their school. Three out of seven participants said they were satisfied with the parent involvement activities sponsored by the school. Amy, whose child attends a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) magnet school made reference to how her school has a variety of parent involvement activities that are “very engaging and helpful.” However, there was no pattern in linking engaging and satisfying parent involvement activities to schools that are magnet schools. Out of the four schools that are magnet, only two of them had engaging parent involvement activities according to the parents. Four schools represented are categorized as *low performing* by state standards. Parents representing three out of the four *low performing* schools want more variety in school sponsored activities. Monica’s daughter attends a College Preparatory Magnet school but she could only think of a few activities the school sponsored. When asked to talk about the parent involvement activities held at her school, she stated

Honestly and truly, the only parent involvement that I know about specifically is the PTA. Well that’s the only thing I know about other than, say, for instance if my child has a function and they want the parents to come out and see, like a chorus or a play or you know what I’m saying? Now something to come in and talk, the parent teacher conferences, they have that. I feel there should be more or a least different avenues of a parent being involved, because not every parent can do parent teacher conferences because my job gets off at 5 o’clock.

Monica, along with other parents wanted more activities that would provide them with assistance in helping their children with their school work.

One of the *low performing* schools was recently changed to a magnet school. The parent stated that the parent involvement activities at the school are “basic, the same, nothing, no creativity; no out of the box thinking on how to build parent involvement.” Millie, an educator, gave parents insight into a benefit of attending school-based parent involvement initiatives. She stated that when parents are involved in the education of their children, teachers treat them differently. Some of the parents were surprised and asked Millie to give an example. Millie’s response was:

I see it on the other end also. The parents who are involved whether it’s physically coming to the school or having regular communication and the teachers know that . . . part of their response or how they respond in talking to each other about the kid and what happened is the instant response: oh you should contact this parent or that parent doesn’t do this that or the other. Or if it’s a bad situation and the teacher went wrong, you can tell by some of the coaching from the other teachers: well, that parent is really involved and you should not have done that or the other.

Millie thinks that the school-sponsored activities at her child’s school are “very helpful.” She also wishes that “there were more of them to do different things.”

Phyllis, a single mother with some college and one child, was very shy and spoke very little during the study. She saw value in parents attending school-sponsored events even though she had physical limitations that prevented her from attending some of the events. During her individual interview, she stated that “parents should stay in contact with teachers, principals and check homework.” After Phyllis’s individual interview, she informed me that she had a genetic illness and her mother assisted her with parent involvement initiatives at home and at school. I asked her whether her mother would be interested in joining the study group and her mother gladly agreed. Mrs. Annette,

Phyllis's mother, who is single with two children and has a college degree, agreed to do an individual interview as well. During the interview when she was asked to describe parent involvement, she immediately discussed school sponsored activities:

It [parent involvement] would be a situation where your child or grandchild was participating in any type of school activity and you are there too. You are there to support the child and the staff; getting involved in what's going on. Not just looking but actually doing. Letting the teachers feel comfortable enough so they know I can call Ms. Annette and see whether she will be interested in this or that. Knowing that we work but there are sometimes we might be able to help. So put your face out there so they can see that we are sincere about what they are doing and so that they are more relax to contact us.

Ms. Annette joined the group for the first PPLC meeting.

**Theme: Parents Linked Their Participation to Various Factors**

During the discourse on school-sponsored activities, parents said their participation was contingent upon various factors. Millie is looking for more activities that will interest her. She wants schools to tailor their parent involvement activities:

I feel that sometimes the programs are always tailored to parents who just don't have a clue and they should take it up to the intermediate level instead of always having it at the beginning level . . . I guess to have something for parents like me who work in the school system because I understand the logistics of a lot of things and all that. Maybe have tiered groups.

Millie is so busy working as an educator and she does not want to waste time attending events that will not be beneficial to her.

According to Shellie, the only thing that prevents her and her husband from participating is their work schedule: "Our work schedule is the only thing that would prevent us where we are at work or have to work. Now if we are notified in a timely

manner, we can definitely take off. But other than that, we are available, we are there.”

The parents were very vocal about the importance of being contacted in a timely manner so they could arrange their schedule or get permission to participate.

Janice wants to feel that the teachers really care about her children. When she was asked what would make her participation in school sponsored activities better, she replied,

To make parent involvement better I would say definitely . . . the school climate really has to improve. I need to know that you care about what you are doing and you're not just there because that is what you got a degree in and this is what you do to collect and pay bills. So as far as parent involvement, knowing that you really do have my child's best interest at heart and don't be thinking my child is just another student in your classroom.

Janice does not believe that some of her child's teachers really care about the children.

When Amy, who is pleased with the activities sponsored by her school was asked what determines whether she participated in school sponsored activities, she stated,

I would have to say the attitude of the staff members. That's a major factor for me. I would say if I don't feel welcome, I don't want to participate. You have got to make me feel like this is a home away from home and that you see me as a human being and not under-grade me because you think you'll more educated than me and how you treat my student, my child. If my child feels like okay mom, I really like this school and this is what I'm learning then I'm going to get very involved.

Amy's view of some educators' perceptions about African American parents supports the deficit-based ideology that is unveiled in some empirical studies on African American parent involvement (Auerbach, 2007; Cooper, 2009).

All parents expressed that they want to feel invited and not feel that the school is just meeting a state or district requirement. After discussing how Title I schools must allocate one percent of their budget on parent involvement initiatives (Park & Holloway, 2013), Monica made a connection with this requirement and how she feels about school-sponsored parent involvement activities. She adamantly stated that her attendance is based upon:

The way they go about it. Is this something that they're just throwing together or can I see that you honestly took your time that you really want some feedback from me. They set aside so much money for parents so you're going to throw this to me like you're trying to do me a favor . . . if what you're doing, if it's really, if you want my participation, then you're going to give people enough time.

The parents in this study believe it is their responsibility to be involved in the education of their children. Their involvement is inclusive of the things they do at home to help their children be successful at school as well as their interactions with the staff at their child's school. All parents in the study believe that their children cannot be successful without their ongoing assistance. However, they also expressed the importance of having assistance and support from the school and the community in order for their belief to become a reality.

### **Authentic Partnerships**

All parents in the study believe that home, school, and community partnerships are important. However, the term partnership carried a different connotation with the parents in this study when compared to the one-sided socially constructed meaning of home-school partnership viewed from the lens of educators (Laroque, Kleiman, &

Darling, 2011). During the focus group interview, we collaborated to get a better understanding of the meaning of home-school-community partnerships and how to establish them. The themes under this topic are: (a) establishing effective home-school partnerships through communication, relationships and support and (b) establishing community partnerships to bridge the gap between home and school.

**Theme: Effective Home-School Partnerships are Established through Communication, Relationships, and Support**

Throughout the study parents referenced three interrelated factors that are essential to establishing authentic home-school partnerships. The factors are communication, relationships, and support. Parents stated that the school communicated with them regularly via weekly telephone messages and through information sent home in Wednesday folders. However, they did not view this type of communication as substantial in developing true home-school partnerships. Based upon the parents' stories and comments about home-school partnerships, they believe that communication must extend beyond school personnel giving them information to also be inclusive of providing parental support as it relates to the educational welfare of their children. Things that schools can do to provide the parents with support include: giving them information on how they can assist their children to become better; providing them with the needed resources to help their children with their assignments at home; keeping them informed in a timely manner about the concerns they have about their child and about the child's progress; providing them with information on opportunities for their children; and

being a source of encouragement and motivation for them. When educators provide parents with the support they need authentic relationships can be established.

In addition, parents cited a number of characteristics of strong positive home-school partnerships. These included: (a) they should be initiated by the teacher, (b) they must occur in a timely manner, (c) the common goal must be the success of the child, (d) parent and teacher must work together as a team, and (e) teachers must value the input of the parent.

**Initiated by the teacher.** Parents believe that teachers should reach out to them. According to Shellie, “they should reach out to us and I think every parent should have that open line of communication with the teacher. Especially if that’s the person on the front line educating your child.”

Amy believes that home-school partnerships are about relationships that should be initiated by the teachers because some parents’ past experiences with schools are negative and they may be hesitant to try to initiate relationships with teachers. She stated,

Home-school partnerships are more of a teacher-parent relationship. I think it should be initiated by the teacher because a lot of times the parents are not comfortable with the school setting because they left their school setting in a negative way or they see the teachers as an authoritative figure and not understanding that they have authority because that is your child.

She also believes that educators should push the parents “to be involved to do whatever they can because if that child sees that my mother cares about this and my mother partners with this teacher then I have to get it together.” As Amy was talking I was thinking about how I’ve tried to get parents involved at school on numerous occasions,

but to no avail. After continual discourse about parent involvement during this study, I realized that the participation or involvement was not based upon the intensity of the push, but upon the activity I was pushing. I was trying to get parents involved in our school-sponsored initiatives and my energy should have been directed towards assessing how valuable the activity was to meeting the needs of the parents and not on coercing the parent to participate.

The parents were very grateful for schools taking the initiative to send important messages to their homes via email and/or telephone that helped them prepare their children for events at school. Monica shared an example of these messages:

Like when they send those messages out that they're going to have tests. Make sure they get plenty of rest and make sure they have a good breakfast. I mean those things are very important because I don't, I wouldn't know when she's having EOCs or EOGs unless, if it was not for that automated service that calls.

**Communication in a timely manner.** Parents shared their frustrations when teachers do not contact them in a timely manner. Janice passionately shared how she feels when teachers do not contact her in a timely manner regarding problems they are having with her children:

Don't call me after the sixth time my child has done something here. Now we've got a problem because you didn't call me the first time so I could nip it in the bud. He feels like he got away with it and will keep on doing it. So now you are frustrated because you didn't call me the first time and you're mad at me like I'm a no-good parent, well you should have called me. How do I know he's doing this if you don't call me?

Annette, the grandparent in the study, agreed with the importance of efficient timing in communicating concerns with the parent. She views partnership as a special type of connection that is fostered through timely communication:

I think everybody needs to be connected you know. There should be some type of communication going on whether it be via email, telephone, some type of note, something of that sort, and don't tell me when it is too late. I need to know it as soon as you sense something may be going on. It's okay to contact me and voice your concern. Give me that opportunity to address it okay and then we'll see as time goes on is it the same or has there been any changes. If not then we have to come up with another plan.

Nora shared how she is open to communicating with her child's teachers, but if the teachers do not communicate in a timely manner, she cannot do her part effectively.

I told them [teachers], I'm only a phone call away. You can call me at work, text me, send me an email. Just don't wait until the last minute to tell me you've been having an issue with my child for a month, then I can't help you. Because now he has it in his mind that this is how I'm going to get through my day in this classroom.

Shellie voiced how untimely communication can impact students' academic performance.

She shared her feelings with the group:

Now I understand that the classroom teachers have their work cut out for them and they can be overwhelmed with work and grades and grading paper and so on and so forth, but however, for my child to come home with a D or F on a report card and I haven't been notified of them not doing well, that's unacceptable! . . . Say for instance, my child usually gets A's in Math but he came home with a C on his progress report. My husband and I went up to the school to have a conversation and asked when his grades were slipping why weren't we notified and her response was I was getting to that. Luckily, it was just a progress report and they [her child] had some catching up he could do weekends.

Untimely communication can not only impact students' academic performance but it can also alter parents' willingness to form true partnerships with teachers. Monica shared with the group one experience that hindered her ability to communicate/partner with the teacher for the remainder of the school year:

Her seventh—no this is her seventh grade—her sixth grade year, I want to say it was her science teacher, I called and I left her a message to call me back because she wasn't at the conference, the parent-teacher conference. I still haven't heard from the woman. So you know what I'm saying, that really put a bitter taste in my mouth because after that, I didn't want to hear anything she had to say.

Monica's desire is for schools to really have an "open door policy." But she discussed how she has an issue when she visits the school or calls and says she needs to talk to someone and never hears back from the school, she says, "I don't care. They can send me 20 *go billion* papers home, you know what, I don't care. I'm done!"

There were several times during our collaborative meetings when my perceptions about parent involvement were directly opposed to their perceptions. One example is when the parents expressed their views on an open-door policy and how administrators should be available to meet with them when they visited the school without scheduling a meeting. This was a major point of reflection for me because there have been many times when I did not meet with parents if they visited during an *untimely manner* for me. My thoughts were, "you can't do that with doctors and lawyers so why do you think you can do that with administrators." I shared my thoughts with the parents and they helped me to see that some parents may only be able to visit when they have transportation or when there is an urgent concern about their child and it's a last-minute decision to visit

because their work schedule allowed it. We were able to compromise in deciding that someone in the school should address their concern and not turn them away even if a follow-up conversation must take place over the telephone when limited meeting time is available.

**Common goal is success of the child.** The parents believe that home-school partnerships should not be difficult because parents and teachers have a common goal which is the success of the child. In discussing home school partnerships, Amy elaborated on why partnership is important and the mentality teachers must have in order to establish a home-school partnership.

What I want is for my child to succeed. What I want you to want is for my child to succeed. We are building a relationship. So with that common interest if we work together, my child, your student, the child will know that there are boundaries he can't cross because of that relationship. Me as a parent telling that teacher that I've got your back and my child seeing that I've got the teacher's back and the teacher's got momma's back. He is going to perform well.

Shellie also believes that authentic home-school partnerships are about relationships that will result in the success of children:

When the child sees that he's not only being supported by the parent but by the teachers and that there's a great working relationship, then very little can fall between the tracks. Being able to have that connection; that partnership definitely helps the student become more successful. They're getting what they need at home as well as in the classroom.

Janice believes that home-school partnerships are all about the success of the child. She believes this because

It helps the child to understand and know that this is serious. And children, as much as they don't seem like they do, they like that discipline; they like structure and they need it. So it's important for the success, really of everybody because if the child is successful then as a parent you'll feel good in your job and as a teacher you'll feel good doing your job.

Having a common goal is crucial as teachers and parents work together as a team to provide support for one another.

**Working together to provide support.** The parents in the study are cognizant of how important home-school partnerships are. They believe that educators and parents should work together as a team. According to Millie,

We are all working together as a team. It's not us against them and you against us. It's not like that. It's constant open communication and the kids and the students realizing that we are doing this together. You're not going to play us against each other.

Teamwork is an important characteristic of home-school partnerships according to Janice.

Home and school should definitely be on one accord. I think it goes back to the part about how the parent reflects and feels about school, that's how the child is going to feel about the school. The school rules should be adhered to by the parent, and making sure the child adheres to the school rules and vice versa. I'm the type of parent that doesn't allow my child to do x, y, z here at school, you being the teacher, don't sit there and allow him . . . I think that's a partnership of home and school. You've got a classroom rule and my child has broken it, I need to know so I can reinforce it at home.

Nora not only values the importance in communication with the teacher in establishing a strong home-school partnership but she also expects and depends upon teacher support as

they work together as a team. When she was asked whether home-school partnerships are important, she replied,

Yes, they are very important. Because sometimes with these teenagers they may talk to these teachers about something they won't talk to the parent about. And that's where I feel like communication come in where if it's something the parent can't handle, they can come together and figure out how can I handle this. Some kids are kinda tricky.

Teamwork cannot exist with effective communication. Amy believes that the student must know that the teacher and the parent are communicating. She described how this works:

Me as a parent telling that teacher that I got your back and my child seeing that I've got the teacher's back. He's going to be or perform well. And the student sees that the teacher's got momma's back and the teacher is going to back mama. Then they are going to say which way can I go. Which way can I turn. No one is on my side and it is that we're both on your side to help you succeed.

The parents in this study have high expectations in the area of teachers communicating with them and providing the support they need. They believe that communication and support are core features of working together as a team. Monica, who sometimes struggle with having time to attend school sponsored events was very adamant about what she expects from her child's teachers.

Communicate. I truly want to know what goes on because education is the key. It's the key and I'm trying to make sure that my children get the best education I can. I know I don't have the money to give them Yale, Harvard, Ivy League, but honestly, if I could I would. That's what I want. If when I come to you and say I have an issue, I want you to address it.

Monica's requirement for establishing a partnership with her child's teachers is for the teacher to go beyond contacting her to talk about problems she's having with her child, but to share some solutions. She believes that effective communication should be saturated with support. Her desire is when the teacher calls her home about an issue, she would like for the teachers to offer possible solutions to correct the situation:

Because if you're just telling me my child is talking and being disrupted or giving me some advice like I can see your child is being disruptive but I feel like it's for this reason. It will be more of a help than if you just called me and said my child is being disruptive and make it an issue with you. Make it a thing where you are being helpful with me and yourself as well.

**Teachers value parent input.** The parents in the study desires for teachers to view them as a credible member of a team. Being a credible member constitutes teachers valuing their input. Nora expects teachers to work with her to assist her child in having a positive learning experience. She believes that authentic home-school partnerships exist when teachers take her advice on what she feels is best for her child. She wants teachers to listen and value her input as it pertains to her child in the classroom. According to Nora,

When I go to them [teachers] and have a plan set forth for my child and I tell them this is what I'm doing at home and this is how I'm handling it. Now if you see these issues, tell me how you're going to handle it so we are on the same page and can get through the situation.

Shellie values and respects teachers' perspectives as they pertain to the needs of her child, but she wants educators to value her input as well.

Home and school partnerships mean that again the schools are communicating the needs of the child from their perspective and I also communicate how this can be done effectively for my child. I'm always telling them my child needs to be somewhere where there is less distractions. He needs to be in the front of the class so he can't see behind him. And these are some of the things my husband and I communicate about our children so they can get the best education possible in the classroom.

Parents in this study not only want teachers to value their input, but they would like for teachers not to extend their input beyond their knowledge of their child. This is the type of communication that can inhibit the establishing of authentic home-school partnership. One specific behavior that was communicated by Amy during the study was teachers' readiness to diagnose children. She gave her example of how teachers diagnose children:

And another thing for a parent who is not in education, don't come at a parent with well your child is compulsive. So what you're saying is that my child has ADHD, without saying it. My child won't keep still, he won't listen, he can't focus. Let's stop with the diagnosis. Just tell me what is happening in the classroom. I'm at the board. I'm doing a math problem on the board and your child threw paper across the classroom. Let's deal with that!

As Amy shared her frustrations with this type of behavior, the other parents cheered her for sharing her perception.

Throughout the study, parents discussed the importance of teachers and parents having an open line of communication. Without the communication that is directly linked to their children, authentic partnerships cannot exist. The parents also voiced their belief regarding the importance of community partnerships.

## **Theme: The Importance of Community Partnerships in Bridging the Gap between Home and School**

Parents believe that they not only need support from educators, they also need community support. As Millie stated, “reality is, everything can’t be done at school and everything can’t be done at home.” During one of the Parent Professional Learning Community meetings (PPLC), the participants discussed how parents and educators could not effectively meet the needs of the students without assistance from the community to help bridge the gap between homes and schools. All parents agreed that community partnerships are vital. When discussing community partnerships, the parents reflected on the strong community partnerships that existed when they were growing up. They equated home, school and community partnerships with the old adage of “it takes a village to raise a child.” Parents cited a number of characteristics of strong, positive community partnerships. These included: (a) churches, businesses, and neighboring families providing needed resources for schools and families, (b) communities increasing social capital for marginalized families, (c) people within the community being a positive voice to counterbalance the negative voices, and (d) providing opportunities for children to make a difference in the community.

**Churches, businesses, and families provide resources.** Parents felt strongly about the important role that churches and local businesses play in providing needed resources for schools and families. Millie simplified what is needed from these organizations:

Giving us money, money, money, money. Not only money, but supplies, time, and energy because we can have all the money in the world, but if we don't have enough people to put that money into use, it's worthless. It's pointless.

The parents believe that it should be the responsibility of businesses and churches within the community to help meet the needs of schools and families. According to Amy,

We need a community where when federal government says there is no money, the community says we don't need money. We need business partners and parents who are willing to go that extra mile and say whatever these students need, I'm going to provide.

Janice elaborated on how disappointed she was when her school's football team could not afford proper uniforms. According to Janice, "a business could have provided the purchase for them and wrote them off. So this is community, helping out to bridge the gap." Beyond money, these organizations can provide mentoring and tutorial services for children within schools and within the community.

Some of the parents shared how the community assisted in raising them. Nora talked about how the teachers in her afterschool program in her community helped her to become a better person. She shared how her father kept her in activities sponsored by the church. She believes the community should provide a safe haven for students when they are not in school. She regrets that what she had when she was growing up, does not exist today.

Annette, the grandparent, shared how her church currently provides food for families during the summer months along with giving students school supplies. Members

of her church also form partnerships with other organizations to provide tutorial services for students.

**Community as a resource to increase social capital.** Monica lives in the community where her school is located. She sees the importance of schools and businesses sponsoring events within the community to educate children. She shared how she has sat on her porch and listened to representatives from various organizations come out to “tell you about breast cancer awareness, heart healthy, or how important it is if you are sexually active to, you know, use protection.” She also listened to a representative from the city talk about issues relating to water. Because of zoning policies and school choice/magnet programs, many students do not live in the community where their school is located and cannot sit on their porch and receive valuable information.

The parents discussed how the community can serve as a source of social capital as community representatives visit the schools to provide information about community resources that are available to meet the needs of families. The parents feel they are not privy to needed information and resources that will help them better prepare their children for college. Monica says that getting the resources she needs is a challenge:

For my kids, college is absolutely positively a must and letting parents know that colleges are going to look for these things from the sixth grade. This is what we need to look for. This is what we need to work on because if your child is not meeting the criteria here, it will continue to get worse.

School representatives should also give families information about community resources that are available within or near their community. The parents believe that knowledge is power and they are not privy to the knowledge they need to provide opportunities for

their children. Monica shared her struggle of not knowing what is best for her and her children because of her limited knowledge of what is available. According to Monica, “sometimes as parents, we don’t know what’s best for ourselves, so we have to put our children into things that they can identify with and say that you know, I like that and maybe I wouldn’t mind doing that when I get older.”

The parents expressed their gratitude for the knowledge they gained as a result of participating in the Parent Professional Learning Community meetings (PPLCs) and during their presentation to community leaders/educators. They believe that local businesses, universities, and churches should work together to ensure that families attending Title I schools receive information about the opportunities available for their families.

**Community as a positive voice to counterbalance negative voices.** People within the community can serve as a positive voice for children. Amy elaborated on the need to have positive partnerships within the community to assist in counterbalancing the negative influences that may exist within the community. Amy’s viewpoint is supported by the empirical study showing that children’s lives are nested with the “broad socio-cultural landscape of neighborhoods, communities, institutions” (Greene, 2013). Amy believes that the church must establish partnerships by offering services to parents and their children. She was in tears as she shared her frustrations with a lack of support from the church:

As the church, we’re supposed to bring the world to us, but the world has more to offer our children (very emotional). The world has tutoring! The world has this, the world has that. But you tell me to teach my children not to look to the world,

but all that they got is to look to the world and it's kinda like, it's frustrating! It's so frustrating! We are supposed to be the church that's winning the world and the world is winning my children because we don't have anything to offer.

As a single mother, Nora has many concerns for her only child who is a male. She believes that people within the community can serve as positive male mentors for her son; being examples of how they can be successful despite the existing challenges.

According to Nora,

Maybe some of those men who came from a low place and have received education and build their businesses [can help]. Just be a positive role model. I feel like that shows young males that if they can do it, I can do it. Like my child, some of the mentors at my church, he tends to understand it more. Like when I say Mark, you can't wear your pants all the way down because when you go to the work force they're going to say young man if you can't keep your pants up we can't hire you. Well if I say it, it doesn't make a difference. But if his mentor says it, which is a male then he will pull his pants up.

Shellie sees great value in city officials and city employees coming into the schools to be a positive voice for students and engage them in activities that promote good character. She believes that children need to see and hear police officers and firefighters giving a positive message instead of how students may view them in their neighborhoods. Shellie stated, "City service, the fireman, police officers, let them see their faces outside of a fight or some type of tragedy that has happened. Let them see their faces come into the classrooms. Talk with them. Educate them."

The positive voice is an encouraging voice according to Janice which gives students a sense of pride to do their best. Janice, who has five children and moved from Washington, DC to her current residence stated that even in the midst of living in a bad

area when she was growing up, her community gave her a “sense of pride” which is missing from the communities that exist today. During her individual interview, she shared how the school, the church, and the drug dealers were not far from one another and how she heard voices in her community say, “well girl, if you don’t take your butt to school; what do you think you’re doing right here?” According to Janice, African Americans within the community have gotten away from that. She believes that “we got so far from that and that’s what’s wrong with our people now. It’s actually having pride, you know; pride about yourself. The community should play that role as having that pride in talking to the children.”

Amy expanded the notion of community as a positive voice speaking in the lives of children, but as a voice to schools and districts. Amy envisions businesses and different cultures “coming together as one village and here we are bringing our perspectives, the way we see schools should be ran. Supporting the schools. Supporting education. Having a voice. This is what we will tolerate and this is what we won’t tolerate.”

**Providing opportunities for students to make a difference.** Partnership is a two-way process and as communities are making a difference in the lives of families, students must see the importance of making a difference in their community. Students should see the role their school plays within the community. Monica, who lives in the community where her school is located shared how her children see how their school allows the Little League team to use their field. Her school also has a garden club where children help beautify the community by taking care of a garden. The parents discussed

the importance of schools showing students the value in being involved in projects that can assist people in their community. One example mentioned was students collecting food for the homeless. Most parents were not aware of schools placing emphasis of showing students the importance of making a difference in their community.

Parents agreed that many changes have occurred with home-school-community partnership after segregation was deemed unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*). The parents believe that in terms of home-school-community partnerships from a historical perspective, African Americans were better off in some aspects then than they are now. There were authentic home-school-community partnerships during that time. Teachers and community leaders understood the culture of their students and a sense of pride and togetherness existed as teachers, students, and parents attended the same church. These factors were pivotal in establishing strong bonds between teachers, students, parents, and community members. Discussions on the ways in which home, school and community partnerships are more challenging after desegregation was deemed unconstitutional was one pathway for parents to engage in rich conversations about the race factor and its impact in their involvement in the education of their children.

### **The Race Factor**

During the individual and focus group interviews, parents were asked a few questions about race and parent involvement at their school. Parents were more explicit in discussing how race impacted parent involvement during their collaborative time than during individual interviews. However, all parents were adamant in stating their determination to be involved in the education of their children regardless of any negative

experiences encountered due to their race. Nora's comment sums up the general attitude of the parents regarding their involvement in the education of their children amid racial challenges. When asked whether her race impacted her parent involvement experiences, Nora's response was:

No, because my most important thing is my son. So I don't care if you are black, white Chinese, Puerto Rican or Mexican, I'm going to be involved in his life so we will just have to deal with each other. It doesn't play a role at all.

This topic is inclusive of four themes: (a) stereotypes and deficit thinking about African Americans can create parent involvement challenges, (b) factors along with race that can create parent involvement challenges, (c) collaboration within the African American race to increase cultural and social capital, and (d) negative stereotypes can affect African Americans' feelings about being in the presence of diverse cultures.

### **Theme: Stereotypes and Deficit Thinking about African Americans Create Parent Involvement Challenges**

The parents in the study all agreed that African American families are victims of negative stereotypes and deficit thinking that can create parent involvement challenges. Parents discussed the various stereotypic views they encounter as they interact with school personnel. A dominant stereotypic viewpoint that all parents in the study related to was the perception that African American women are angry. Nora passionately expressed her feelings to the group about this stereotype:

I think that sometimes they think that because we're African American that we are always angry. We're just angry at the world and all of us are not angry. I mean, um, you know, I'm trying to figure out how to say it. You know how a

person can keep pushing you and then you do become angry because you keep saying I'm angry. But I'm just being firm and letting them know I'm serious and that is what I need to take place. But sometimes they get intimidated or be afraid or fear.

Janice, a single mother with five children attends a school that is 90% African American and 93% free and reduced lunch. She believes that African American parents are bombarded with stereotypic views from not only white teachers, but also from black teachers. She stated that "when you are in the schools where you have your black educators, they want to look at you like you have an attitude problem." When Janice was asked whether she thought her parent involvement experience at school would be different if she was Caucasian, her response was:

Absolutely. Absolutely, and can I go on? I know we are talking about Title I schools, but let me share this experience and I blogged it on social media: You see how we're sitting here having a conversation? Well, I forgot the principal's name, but he treated me like I was dumb. He treated me like I didn't know. He prompted me with everything, and said, okay, so what we're saying is . . . , so okay then say, I felt as though, you're doing this to me because I'm a black woman and you can tell I don't have what you have, like I don't have the intellect to have a conversation with you. So I've experienced that first hand.

The parents elaborated extensively on how they feel some educators have a negative perception of them and their children. Monica shared a parent involvement experience that she encountered while her child who is currently in middle school was in elementary school (second grade) and how it has had a lasting impression on her.

I found out when she was in the second grade that she was having issues with reading comprehension and they wanted to retain her . . . that was at the end of the school year [when the teacher told me]. She had had honor roll all four quarters . . . I just immediately began to cry and sob and she [the teacher] said to me,

“Well, it’s not your fault [that she’s being retained],” and I’m saying to myself, “That’s not what I’m thinking. I’m thinking I want to slap this woman!” I felt it was more racially based than her being concerned about my child because you’re waiting till the end of the school year to tell me that she’s had issues with reading comprehension . . . so I was like, well, obviously this is not really based on her as far as just her education. You’re looking at that she’s a little black girl so we’re going to keep her back. They were like, “well children don’t really mind it,” and I’m saying to myself, “Yeah they do!” They do because the other children recognize them.

Even though this experience did not occur when her child was in middle school, five years later, Monica remembers the emotional hurt from the experience.

Shellie, who has an advanced degree, experiences negative feelings when she visits the school. She feels that the teachers expect her presence to be based upon her having a problem that needs to be solved:

When you come into the school it’s like another parent is here to complain. That’s what I get. Now that’s not what comes out of their mouth. But that’s the impression that I get. It’s like, what now? It’s not inviting. It’s not an environment where they welcome you. Now the parents who have been in the core groups like the PTA and fundraising, they welcome them because they know them so now it become a clique or group. But if you’re not on the PTA and you haven’t been at the fundraisers, it’s like are you an angry parent! You’re always complaining and so forth, but every parent can’t take that position because we work. We have jobs. Every parent can’t take that position, but I don’t think your level of importance should be any less than those who do.

Shellie participated in a parent involvement initiative sponsored by the district and she was very disappointed after attending. Her expectation was that the program would be stellar. According to Shellie, “I think sometimes when they think that the audience is African American individuals, they can give you less than their best and it be sufficient. That’s how I felt.”

The parents in the *low performing* schools with a high percentage of African American students had the perception that teachers had low expectations for their children. Comments such as “there is no structure in the classroom and you [teachers] are talking about if you do this, you will get a treat for good behavior” or, “You’re passed for being quiet and you don’t have to turn a lick of work in.” These comments support the deficient thinking that some educators have about African American children and their families (Cooper, 2007).

Parents dialogued about how deficient thinking impacts some parents. Millie sees herself as a strong African American woman and she believes that race does not play a role in her involvement, but it probably plays a role in the involvement of some African American parents. When asked to elaborate about her feelings, she responded, “They don’t feel comfortable. They may feel like people may be looking down on them. Just like that’s not the type of thing that they do. Like if it’s a particular type of activity.” During Millie’s individual interview, she had very little to say about parent involvement and race. However, during the discourse with her peers, she was very passionate and engaged as she shared her feelings on race: “I feel so much of our interactions are based on race; no matter what it is, a whole lot and it’s unfortunate. I don’t think that there is anything that’s done in today’s society that is not related to race. I don’t and I hate that!” On another note, Millie believes that there are parents who live up to many of those stereotypes that are out there and some don’t, “and we are constantly having to fight against that. Not only us, but our children.”

Amy was very candid about sharing what she feels are self-induced racial identity challenges due to deficit thinking of some African Americans about themselves. When Amy was asked does race have an influence on parent involvement, she stated:

Especially in the south [Amy lived up north for most of her life]. I feel that race is a big issue because sometimes we are so focused on the color and the color limits us to the potential and we see one color having more potential than another and if we can get past the tone of the skin to get into the intelligence of the person, we can see that color doesn't really matter. I think so many times we use the color and what our ancestors been through to limit us to what we can do now to make a difference. It's like I can't go and get a higher education because I have this color and this color has no money because of a lack of knowledge. We don't have a lack of knowledge! If we are given the opportunity and the right resources we will go out there and get it.

The parents agreed with Amy's perspective.

### **Theme: Factors in Tandem with Race that Create Parent Involvement Challenges**

Parents consistently spoke of other factors that may exacerbate the parent involvement challenges some African Americans encounter. Some of these factors include appearance, gender, and social class.

**Appearance.** Nora attends an ethnically diverse school and she believes that there are other factors, along with race that may create parent involvement challenges for parents. During her individual interview, she shared her belief that it is not only race that may influence African American parent involvement at the school level:

I think sometimes you are stereotyped by your race and by your appearance. So if I come to a function straight from work looking like this, they might look at me differently and think I'm not educated. And then I think there is a lot that goes into it. Your conversation . . . And I also feel like it's a maturity thing. There are some young African American parents who are like: you go to school and you come home and eat and it's like, I got to go. And then you have me who is

middle aged that has a 13-year-old and want to focus on my involvement with him because I know how important it is.

The parents engaged in critical conversations about appearance. They had conflicting views on whether it was appropriate to come to a school event in pajamas because a few parents had observed this while attending a school-sponsored event. Some parents believe that it sets a bad example for the child and educators will pass judgement on you before they get to know you because they can't see past what parents are wearing. Janice shared with the group her perspective on the topic:

It's not the cover of the book all the time. What if she didn't feel like getting dress, but she got her butt up and she came to back to school night and I'm going to give her that little credit. And if I was a teacher, I would say, I really appreciate you for coming in your PJs and all. Sometimes you get E for effort and that's what that is.

Overall, parents were in agreement that regardless of how parents dress when attending school functions, educators should not judge them as a bad parent.

**Gender.** All parents in the study were females and comments were made about the role mothers play in their children's education. Three of the eight participants were married and they affirmed that they were more involved in the educational process than their husbands. Their comments about why they are involved confirms their sense of care and *motherwork* (Cooper, 2007). Monica, who is divorced, made a comparison about her involvement now and when she was married: "Even when I was married, I was still the one who paid more attention to their education and now that I'm divorced, I'm still the one who is about their education."

As an African American single mother, Janice alluded to how differently she was treated when she attended meetings with her children's father than when she went alone.

. . . and being a single mother. Their father and I were together for a very long time before we separated and I noticed a difference when me and him went in or when he and I were in a meeting versus just myself. You know, and it was completely different. The respect was different, you know what I'm saying? And so then I noticed when I'm having these meetings by myself and they don't take it as serious.

Parents whose children are African American males discussed the challenges, fears, and frustrations they encounter in raising an African American male. Nora feels challenged in raising an African American male. She believes that her son will have to work harder because he is a black male: "I feel that he has three strikes. He's a male, being raised by a single mom and his dad has some strikes. So they look at him, the world looks at him and say he's no better than his dad is." Amy identified with Nora's feelings pertaining to education and African American males:

It always saddens my heart when the underachievers are always us and how we are attacked with our male children if you have a boy, a son. It hurts my heart because I have two. When you say African American boys can't read or can't do math, you're saying this because when they find out that they can do it, they create things that are beautiful. It's like a secret code that's being taught to our children to keep them down even when teaching them. It's kinda like stereotyping them and keeping our mind on a lower rate by saying that you're not performing well. You can't measure up. Even the Hispanic are measuring up higher than us.

While discussing parent involvement challenges as they pertain to gender, the women took time to make comments about the strength and resilience of African American women:

As women, we are still the backbone. Let me say as a black woman, we are still the back bone of this country. We were then and we still are. We are just able to bring home money now but then, we were working for free and we still have the same roles and responsibilities. We have to do extra work now.

**Social class.** Parents in the study saw a direct link between parent involvement and social class. One parent (Monica) believes that there is a link between race and socioeconomic status. When Monica was asked would her parent involvement experience be different if she was Caucasian, her response was that “it would be different because her resources would be different.” The parents expressed how parents in a higher social class had access to more resources which gave their children an advantage. They also believe that African American parents have access to fewer resources than whites. Having fewer resources creates more parent involvement challenges. According to Janice, a single mother with five children, socioeconomic status has a greater impact on parent involvement than race. She elaborated on “the pride and the shame” of not being able to provide:

The socioeconomic thing plays a part because you are in an environment where you don't have much, you know, to provide for your child, and I've been that parent where I focused on, you know, man, I'm embarrassed and I don't want to be embarrassed for my child. I don't want to go here and they see me looking like I don't have nothing. That would keep a lot of parents from coming anywhere. . . . I love my child just like that white parent in that big house love their child.

Janice linked a low socioeconomic status to several expressed variables that may impact parent involvement. Those variables include not having appropriate clothing to wear to parent involvement activities; not being able to carry on intelligent conversations with the teacher; and not being able to help your child with your homework. When Janice was

asked whether her parent involvement experiences would be different if she was in a higher social class, she stated that she would have two responses to that question: “I wouldn’t even allow my children to have gone to that school. But even if I did, my being in a higher rank would have probably allowed me to really get the network and resources to help me.”

All parents in the study, which consisted of parents with varying socioeconomic status, have experienced a lack of social capital; those networks and connections that will help them navigate the system to get what they need to help their children. The parents discussed how the resources are different in some of the Title I schools. Janice’s child was interested in enrolling in band, but he couldn’t because neither the school nor the students could afford instruments. Her child was in band in a previous school and instruments were provided by the school. Shellie shared a story with the group about a teacher who expressed her perception of students of a different race and class than her own. According to Shellie, “it’s hard for some teachers to identify with some children. For example, a Caucasian teacher told a black student, you’ve probably never been swimming or on an airplane. Her mother came up to the school livid. You ask! You don’t assume!”

Amy prides herself in sharing different perspectives about African American parent involvement in Title I schools. She shared a different perspective regarding parent involvement and social class. She believes that some of the issues around parent involvement are not all socially induced but some are as a result of parents not setting priorities. According to Amy, “sometimes I don’t think it’s an economic issue. You

know I think we sometimes have a weakness of setting priorities than with socioeconomic status. Sometimes we place money in front of going to this event with the child.” Amy was successful in getting the other parents to see through her lens as they chimed in by making comments such as:

Or they say my child needs to be tutored and say I can’t afford a private tutor, but I can afford those Jordans or Albercrombie. But your child has an iPhone 4, 5, 6 when it first comes out and you can’t afford a private tutor, but she has the latest weave in.

The varying parental perceptions and views on how race impacts parent involvement is exemplary in unveiling how the race factor can promote educational inequality (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

### **Theme: Collaboration among African Americans Can Increase Cultural and Social Capital**

Rich collaboration about race and parent involvement occurred during Parent Professional Learning Community meetings (PPLC) regarding parent involvement and the African American culture. Parents were able to connect with one another. They had an understanding of their culture and some of the challenges that existed due to internal and external factors. There were moments of reflection when parents could not with certainty declare that the behaviors they were elaborating on could be distinctly identified as cultural traits. Parents dialogued about problems that existed within the African American culture before they were able to discuss empowering cultural solutions that they could enforce.

Monica's child attends a Title school that is predominantly African American. She believes that "as African Americans, we just—that's just not something [parent involvement] that's pushed or promoted in our culture." Monica stated,

Parent used to be older. Babies are having babies and they don't understand. They don't understand the struggle or what it really truly is like to really go through something in order to maintain or accomplish something. Now because since we see how our parents struggled and we don't want our children to do that. But what we fail to realize is what makes us who we are is seeing the struggle. It's seeing how we need to appreciate everything in life, not just the beauty of it, the bling bling.

Millie chimed in, "and welfare was not glorified. There is no such thing as instant gratification where you just wake up one morning and boom you are a superstar like what happens on TV. Those shoes, those Jordans that you're wearing, somebody has to pay for that." When I asked the parents, what needs to happen to change this Amy's initial response was:

I don't know. That's a hard one because the generation is so different and the mindset is so different. It's always you're attacking me. There is always a defense up. It does take a village to raise a child and I still do believe that. It takes all of us and the other cultures get it and it is our culture that is lacking that. If I want to get up, I'm going to get up by myself. I'm going to do it all alone.

The parents eventually came to the conclusion that African Americans need to collaborate and work together to provide one another the resources they need. Monica shared the following information with the group:

We have to come out of our comfort zones. We have to say, this is how it has been, but how it has been is not working. We have to see the bigger picture. If I

help you today, then I'm helping five more generations to come. We have to keep looking at paying it forward.

The discourse continued with Amy stating, "We have to get out of 'the me' in order to become a community of us . . . It's going to take collaboration. It's going to take that one issue of us working together." Amy passionately shared how African Americans can help close the achievement gap:

My thing is if we want to close this gap, if we really want to close this gap, it will start with us as African Americans. We're going to have to rebuild the land. Whether it gets started with our children and this little community right here. It has to get started. We're too busy hating one another . . . If you think I got something good, ask me how I got it. And I'll be willing to share and that's the only way you're going to be able to get what I got without envy and jealousy. We've got to kill this demon some way and somehow. And it's got to be killed now because it's killing us now.

Monica shared how she was taught not to tell everybody her business when she was growing up. But today, she feels there are times when it's good to let others know what you are going through because they may have the answer:

There might be resources out there. There might be a community center where your child can go until 7:00 until you get off. You just don't know unless somebody says so. We look at white people and say they are telling everybody their business, but the thing is when Susie or Elizabeth says, I'm struggling, I'm having a hard time with Nellie. Somebody says hey, well I know so and so is having the same problem and she may be able to tell you what she did to fix that . . . This is about knowing because we won't say we need help but on a certain scale we believe that people can just look at us and tell. People just kind of expect you to be able to see I'm screaming and I need help, but it takes communication!

The parents strongly believe that it still takes a village to raise a child. They believe that they must work together and collaborate in order to increase their resources. They also believe that other cultures understand that principle, but many African Americans do not.

**Theme: Feelings of Inadequacy Often Exist When African American Parents are among Those of Other Cultures**

Negative stereotypic views can impact African American parents' perceptions and feelings about being in the presence of diverse cultures, which effects their involvement in school sponsored activities. Claude Steele (1993) refers to these feelings as *stereotypic threats*. When discussing attending functions with other ethnic groups, Monica discussed how she may feel out of place: "You know sometimes we are not familiar on how to rub elbows with those kinds of folk so rather than feel like you're stupid, you just don't go." Millie made reference to feeling uncomfortable in places where other ethnic groups are located. She considers this a challenge but could not define it as a racial or cultural issue: "So the lack of confidence I guess to mingle and converse in a variety of ways around a diverse group of people—socioeconomic or racial or whatever. That's a challenge."

In the midst of communicating their own feelings of inadequacies among diverse groups, they voiced their desire for their children to be exposed to diverse cultures because of the value it will have later in their life. Millie talked about how she pushes her daughter:

I push my daughter. I'm like girl, you better go on out there. Stop hanging out with that group of people that you are used to. Step out of your comfort zone and she's like mom! So I try to get her to see me doing it, and really on the inside, I'm like, I'm so nervous. I'm like, oh my God, don't let me say the wrong thing. Oh my, don't stare at them. You know, I have to keep my resting face.

The parents expounded on the challenge of exposing their children to diverse cultures to help their children become well rounded without losing or appreciating who they are in the process. They also discussed how African American parents' willingness to learn about other cultures is not reciprocated. According to Monica, "we will go out of our way to try to understand everybody else's culture, but they don't try to understand our culture."

Amy believes that schools and districts must consider how race impacts parent involvement during their hiring practices because the disproportionate number of black and white principals exacerbates feelings of inferiority with African American parents. Amy asserted,

When you look and see more principals of the Caucasian race than the African American, parents may feel intimidated and feel they can't come into the school because they don't have anything to offer. I can't come into that school because I look like this. They are talking about me because I came to the school with my hair looking raggedy. Or I came with my tight dress on. There is definitely profiling going on in the school. Not just with African American, but with Hispanics and Latinos.

The parents believe that a lack of understanding of the African American culture is problematic in teaching African American children as well as in relating to African American families. In spite of some of the cultural challenges or feelings of inadequacies, parents expressed their desire to do whatever is necessary to be involved in the education of their children.

### **Systemic Inequities: Curriculum Changes, Teacher Quality, and Testing**

The parents in the study were adamant about overcoming the stereotypic setbacks, deficit thinking, and the sociocultural challenges they experience due to their race. However, they felt powerless when trying to deal with systemic inequities that existed in their schools and districts. The parents believe that systemic inequities are detrimental to the educational success of African American children.

Title I was established to improve the academic achievement of at risk children and to decrease the achievement gap (Center on Educational Policy, 2006). However, because schools and school districts do not consider the varying needs within schools due to diversity, oftentimes the needs of marginalized groups such as African Americans go unfulfilled. Amy shared her belief of how the system does not do enough to help our students succeed. She believes that preferential treatment accounts for Hispanic children excelling beyond African American children:

When you have a foreigner who comes in your country, you give them better treatment. You give them the basic fundamentals that they need for reading and math in order to strive, but you sit here and say that African Americans only care about clothing and shoes and style and that's not the truth. They can't seem to care about anything else because you're not giving them what they need to strive and to be what they need to be. And you sit here and give everyone else what you need to be giving them and then sit back and watch us flop.

This topic includes three themes: (a) changes in the curriculum without preparing parents for change, (b) teacher quality as extending beyond teacher certification, and (c) overcoming the stigma placed on schools due to standardized tests.

### **Theme: Changes in the Curriculum without Preparing Parents for Change Can Create Inequity**

The parents were very passionate as they voiced their beliefs and perceptions about the way the school system does not show concern about the needs of the African American children and the lack of focus in ensuring their success. Discourse on how changes in the curriculum have negatively impacted their ability to be involved in the education of their children was a critical point of concern for all parents in the study. Two major changes that have occurred are the adoption of the Common Core curriculum and the extensive use of technology.

**Common Core curriculum.** The adoption of the Common Core curriculum is a major change that occurred a little more than six years ago. Common Core is a set of shared goals and expectations for the skills and knowledge students need in English language arts and mathematics ([ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/home/ccss-parent-overview.pdf](http://ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/home/ccss-parent-overview.pdf)). All parents in the study believe that the adoption of the Common Core curriculum has been a setback for parents. They voiced how challenging it is and how it prevents them from assisting their children with assignments at home, especially with the math. Amy explicitly stated that the Common Core curriculum is a major obstacle to her being involved in the education of her child at home:

Sometimes the problem with helping my child at home is Common Core. It's so different so I can't help my child! That's pretty much all they need help with is that mess. Because sixth grade, seventh grade math is not what I'm use to and even as an educator, I'm just like why do you have to go all around the world to come through the back door.

Other parents in the group believed that if Amy, being an educator, has problems with the Common Core curriculum, there was little help for them. Furthermore, Monica elaborated on her belief that schools are failing and how Common Core is one reason for failure. She acclaimed,

Schools are failing because I look at this Common Core math, and I'm like why? Why change that? Why make a child have to go 3-5 more steps to get the same answer. What was the purpose? Whose bright idea was that? But I'm sure whoever voted that in, they had the resources, the socioeconomic status that they could make those changes without going through people who were really going to have to use it. Yeah, you were fine with your child being able to do that because you already know how to do it. But being a parent who went through public school and the way I learned the curriculum that's not how they teach now.

The parents feel that school districts have not adequately prepared them for this major change. Preparing them is to equip them to be able to assist their children with the assignments that are based on the Common Core curriculum. Years have transpired and parents continue to seek ways to help their children.

**Extensive use of technology.** Another major change that has taken place in schools is the extensive use of technology. Technology is now an important tool educators are using in their classroom. However, the parents discussed how educators cannot make assumptions that all families have the necessary technology or the knowledge base to access needed information that schools make available to them and their children. At one time, parents were able to use the textbook as a reference in meeting the instructional needs of their children at home. Today, they have to depend on the child to bring home materials that they can use to assist their children or be savvy with accessing on-line resources. Annette, the oldest participant (grandmother),

suggested schools move from just having an Open House to parent orientation sessions and set up small groups to meet the varying parental needs. These sessions will inform parents on how technology and other instructional tools are used in the classroom and how they can be accessed at home. Parents were vocal on how educators could assist them in using technology as an instructional tool by giving step-by-step examples on their website on how to solve problems so parents can assist students at home and by conducting some virtual lessons for parents to observe.

Technology has also become a major communication tool. During one Parent Professional Learning Community meeting (PPLC), we browsed through their district and school websites and conducted a brief critique. The following observations were made: lots of good information was available that parents were not aware of; some of the information needed to be updated; some information was not parent-friendly (i.e., too much information to read/difficult to understand); some sites were difficult to navigate to get information (i.e., parent portal website for parents to access student grades). There was so much information available on district websites that could be useful to parents, but they did not know the information was available.

It is not enough to change the curriculum or change how instruction is facilitated in the classroom and not consider how parents will be able to facilitate the process at home. The parents in the study have feelings of exclusion as a result of change.

### **Theme: Teacher Certification Does Not Guarantee Quality Teaching for African American Children**

The lack of quality teachers is one among many challenges facing families with students in some Title I schools (Darling-Hammond, 2001). During one of the Parent Professional Learning Community meetings, we looked at data taken from the State Department of Public Instruction's website on Teacher Quality. For most schools, the majority of the teachers had more than 10 years of experience along with advanced degrees. There was no correlation between teacher quality data and percentage of students who were proficient based on EOG data. The percentage of teachers who were labeled as highly qualified by the state in each Title I school represented was similar to highly qualified teacher data for the state and district ([https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/#/?\\_k=mpdibp](https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/#/?_k=mpdibp)). However, the parents were quick to state that having the credentials and the years of experience does not mean the teacher is qualified to teach in a manner that is effective for all students or that the teachers truly care about their students. The parents also had differing views regarding the teacher quality at their schools.

Parents expressed varying views about teacher quality at their schools. Some of the parents were satisfied with the quality of teachers at their school and others were very disappointed. Nora's son attends a very diverse school and she has been very pleased with the teachers at her school this year. She shared with the parents a positive experience she had with a teacher at her school:

He had one African American female and she was really good with him because she already know what he's faced with right, going into the real world. So she would send me emails—I had to get onto your child today because he was lacking in work or because he was playing around and it took him too long to get settled. They had some log they had to put it in or he would have silent lunch. You know, she took it to the next level and she didn't care if he had an attitude, but she went a step above her you know, what she's there to do.

Nora's school is not a magnet school or *low performing* school.

Annette is also pleased with the teachers at her granddaughter's College Preparatory Middle School. Students must apply and be selected to attend this school. Amy, whose son attends a STEM magnet school (the school has only been a magnet school for one year) that is also *low performing* gave voice to a very positive experience she had with her son's science teacher. According to Amy,

The most positive thing is my child's science teacher. Last year his 7th grade science teacher, she had just left engineering to take on a teaching job because this is what she loves. This is where her passion is and one thing she said to me is you are not going to let people tell you who your child is because you have already ordained who he is. And I see this in you, but I need you to exercise that. So that one thing took me to the limit where I can't limit myself.

Amy also communicated how some of the teachers at her school understands what it like to be a parent and they are very supportive.

Contrary to the positive comments regarding teacher quality, Janice and Shellie had different experiences with the teachers at their schools. Their children attend two of the lowest performing schools in the district and they had very negative opinions about teacher quality at their schools. Teacher quality was a factor that determined how they

felt about being involved in their child's school. According to Janice, one barrier to parent involvement for her is having a qualified teacher. She posited,

I use to go to every function, but by the time of middle-end of the school year, I was like, no thank you. I can't take these people seriously. These events, they are not organized. This is not how this is supposed to be. I feel embarrassed even watching them having this event. My kids even come home and say, my teacher was doing this, and I say, in the class?

Shellie believes it is the resources [which includes teachers] that make a significant difference in her interactions at her children's school:

It goes back to resources; the resources that are made available to the African American students in schools. The resources are not the same; like when I went to the Parent Academy, the standard of the presentation to African American parents, the expectation is low. Yeah, I feel that our African American students are not getting the best. It is difficult to get the good teachers in there.

Shellie, who has a Master's Degree in School Administration believes that teachers are not effective in Title I schools because they fail to build relationships with students and their families and they don't consider the learning style of the students:

Some of the teachers there now are there for a paycheck and building a relationship with you is not that important to them. I'm coming to work. I'm teaching your children, and you need to discipline your kids at home making sure they have what they need. I got them in the classroom and the connection is being lost there . . . The students also need teachers to teach to different learning styles. They teach one way and if the children don't get it, they say they are not able to learn versus them trying to stretch themselves and teach them different learning styles.

Shellie's boys are twins and she noticed that students are strategically placed with certain teachers within the same school. This is what Shellie shared about the teachers who instructed her children:

So one of them is high performing so he gets the best teachers that they have in the building; where also they are the best, but it's mediocre at best. They are the best in the school. But the other one who has challenges academically, he gets the teachers who are the worst, or let me say the teachers who are not as strong and it's counterproductive to me because if you go into his classroom everybody is like all over the place.

Shellie also believes that proper communication precedes education: "If they don't understand how to communicate with our children, it will be very difficult for them to educate our children."

During one discussion about Title I schools and quality teachers the parents had an epiphany about what would happen if the children at the Title I *low performing* schools would attend non-Title I schools that were not failing to see if it would make a difference in the students' performance. Would the teachers be able to teach in a manner to help the students be successful? The parents believe that teachers must consider that students are different and seek to understand the different cultures that exist in the classroom. According to Amy,

You may have two parents in your classroom with the same exact situation but living it out differently because their cultural background is different; not every black child is the same. Not every white child is the same. We need teachers who can differentiate instead of you just sit down and listen to me.

Millie, an educator believes that schools are not equal in many way; teacher quality being one way:

It's [schools are] not equal. Give us the same that you give to the other types of schools. Say for instance when companies or corporations give to schools don't just give it to one particular school because it's in a white neighborhood. Spread that money out equally. Give it to everybody. Or allow all of them to use the money towards a particular thing. Give us the same and when they hire teachers, give us the opportunity, the Black schools to pick from those who have the education from the Harvards or the rich Ivy League.

The parents in this study believe that teachers need additional training in order to be more skillful in dealing with challenges they encounter in the classroom. The following comments were made about teacher preparation:

I think a lot of teachers need that psychology base to know how to handle some children; you need to have volunteered and worked in a variety of settings with a variety of children. It's just a different breed that's out there today.

During our discussion on teacher quality I shared an experience I had with one of my daughter's teachers while she was attending a Title I high school. The class was Honors Chemistry and the teacher had poor classroom management and the students were not learning Chemistry. As a science teacher, I worked with my child at home to help her understand some of the content. However, when the students took the End of Course (EOC) test, most of them did poorly for multiple reasons such as students talking during the test and the students did not know the information. I called four parents of students who were in the class and we scheduled a meeting with the principal about our students' experiences and how students at the school deserved to have quality teachers and the

chemistry teacher was not in that category. The following school year, the teacher was not employed at the school. The parents enjoyed the story, but I was not convinced that they felt that they could have an impact or a voice that was strong enough to replace teachers who were not effective.

**Theme: The Stigma of Low Test Scores is Not Always Justified**

During a Parent Professional Learning Community meeting (PPLC), parents were given their school's report card which consisted of the End of Grade (EOG) test results for their school, their district and the state. The report also gave their school grade. Four of the schools represented in the study were labeled by the state as *low performing* schools due to the number of students who were not proficient as indicated by their EOG test results. The parents believe that the state-constructed title further exacerbates feelings of inferiority for families associated with these Title I schools.

The parents had varying feelings about their school's data: feelings such as surprised, disappointed, nonchalant, and anger. The parents believe that learning in schools today is focused on teaching student information so they can pass a test. They believe that their children are not receiving the education they deserve. More importantly, their discourse on why their EOG reading and math scores were so low in several schools were inclusive of reasons beyond their children's academic prowess.

Millie is an educator and she shared with the group her beliefs about the EOG tests:

The assessments are culturally bias and if you don't have the background knowledge or the experiences to bring into those settings, you are already doomed on those tests. If you don't have the vocabulary and you can't get all that vocabulary sitting in the classroom. So they are culturally biased and we need to look at some alternative ways of measuring proficiency.

Parents gave additional reasons why a large percentage of students in their school are not proficient. Reasons included some students do not test well and learning is not taking place in the classroom due to disruptions and teachers' lack of ability to employ effective instructional strategies.

Millie shared insightful information with the parents as she continued to led the discussion on race, standardized tests and Title I schools.

So when you look at these schools that are typically your Title I schools, you have a lot of minority presence in those schools and the scores are low. So going back to looking at it from the race standpoint, we need to focus more on how to educate appropriately. The education is not the same. It's clear. Because if it was the same, there would be no discrepancies. There wouldn't be. So there is a different way that. I can't really say different way. There is a difference of what education looks like for us.

Millie also believes that the school system does not consider the needs of African American families: "Everything that's taught, it's not taught for us at all. I also strongly believe and feel that the system is not set up for us to be successful." The parents discussed how teachers don't understand the different cultures in their classroom and how this prevents them from connection with the students and families. They believe that teachers need professional development that is geared towards helping them teach in ways to motivate their children and ways to relate to African American families.

A major component of this study was for parents to share their findings with a group of educators, parents, and community/business leaders. We collaborated to put together a presentation that would give parents a platform to share their perceptions with others who could also become their voice and institute change in how schools and

districts view parent involvement and establish home-school-community partnerships. After the presentation, the audience was given the opportunity to make comments. A former high school teacher shared his perspective about systemic setbacks as they pertained to statistics on graduation rates and EOG/EOC assessments and how the system is failing our students. He stated,

One of the things that bothered me the most about being a teacher is the false promises being made by the district. What I mean by that is one of the initiatives the district holds is that they want to reduce the achievement gap or raise the graduation rate, well is that raising education or is it raising the numbers? But the focus is on the numbers and it's not on education at all.

The former teacher encouraged the parents to let their voice be heard to ensure that their children are getting a proper education in the midst of focusing on numbers. Many of the comments that the audience made evolved around standardized tests and encouraging parents to continue to let their voices be heard even after the study.

### **Parent Participation versus Parent Empowerment**

Increasing parent involvement is one of the six goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) which was reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act, and parent involvement is now referred to as parent and family engagement. The goal is not only to engage parents, but to empower them. A goal of this study is parent empowerment. When requesting permission to conduct this research in one school district, I was denied because a school representative in charge of research approval wrote, "your participatory action research design references empowering parents and assisting them to take action—which are purposes beyond the usual scope of research

that is approved within this district.” Ironically, the district has quarterly “parent empowerment” sessions where they solicit parents to participate in activities based upon the district’s chosen agenda. Participation is not empowerment. This topic is inclusive of three themes: (a) parent participation simply to meet a school/district parent involvement goal, (b) when parents speak and their voices are not heard, and (c) parents are empowered when their voices are heard.

**Theme: Parent Participation to Meet a School/District Parent Involvement Goal Does Not Equate to Parent Empowerment**

Title I schools have many mandates in order for them to meet federal guidelines in showing they are involving parents in school-based initiatives. Each year parents are given a Title I Teacher, Parent, Student Compact to sign. The Compact includes the responsibilities of each stakeholder. When parents were asked to talk about their involvement in creating the Compact, they could not respond. The parents in the study remembered their child bringing the document home, but stated they had no input in creating the document. Parents were also shown the Parent Involvement Policy by which all Title I schools must abide. The policy is also on the districts’ websites. The parents were not familiar with this document. However, they could not say with certainty whether the document came home at some point during the school year.

As reported earlier, the parents found value in participating in school-sponsored parent involvement activities. All schools had some type of activities during the school year where parents are invited to participate. There is also a sign-in sheet to confirm parents’ attendance. However, parents have no voice in deciding what activities will be

offered during the school year. One parent voiced that her school gave her a survey to complete about the school but it was at the end of the school year.

During the individual interviews, parents were asked what educators could do to improve parent involvement at their school. All parents said that educators need to talk with them about what their needs are. They feel strongly about the communicating process extending beyond answering questions on a survey; even though the parent survey is a move in the right direction. They believe that educators need to extend their boundaries and get more creative in sponsoring activities within the community based upon the needs of the parents and use community resources as bridge to get parents into the schools. According to the parents, educators must consider the differences in parents' work schedules and provide activities and other sessions at varying times to meet the needs of the parents.

The parents also discussed how schools use food as a drawing device to get parents to participate; however, their needs go beyond food. Beyond the food menu is the agenda menu: "Are they offering me something that I can use with my children to help them be successful?" Some of the parents may also need childcare and transportation to a school-sponsored event. Nora would like to see educators plan activities farther in advance so she can make plans to participate: "I would come up with some type of monthly newsletter explaining the event and giving the times for the event: to give you enough time to plan." Parents had a plethora of ways to improve parent involvement, but schools were not asking for their suggestions but their participation in what was planned for them.

The parents in the study believe that they are limited even in their participation due to a lack of knowledge. The parents dialogued about the importance of educators hearing their voice in matters dealing with the education of their children. Millie, who is very knowledgeable about the Exceptional Children's Program and students Individual Educational Plan (IEP) led the conversation about the importance of the parents' voice in the development of the child's IEP. The parents talked about the challenge of hearing the voice of the parent because as parents they do not understand what's being discussed because it's all education talk or they are not invited into the conversation.

The parents from one district engaged in critical conversations about how their district's zoning policies promote separation of races which is responsible for some schools being identified as *low performing*. They discussed how their lack of knowledge impeded their ability to participate in any discussion about an issue that impacted the education of their children. Below is parent dialogue about their concern:

Millie: Can we say you are redrawing the lines to separate?

Monica: But nobody says why are you redrawing district lines.

Amy: We don't say that because we don't know to say that. And who do we say it too. But they would say it if it is happening in their community.

Millie: They did say it. That's why they redrew the lines.

Monica: And we should have been there to say, no don't redraw them or if you're going to redraw them, widen them this way instead of narrowing them this way.

The parents discussed the value of being informed before you can let your voice be heard and oftentimes they are not privy to the needed knowledge to know what to say.

**Theme: Parents Speaking Does Not Mean Their Voices are Heard**

Parents shared their experiences when they shared their input with educators and it was considered. Nora, however, had previously encountered a situation where her voice was not heard. Her son was placed in an Art class in which he did not enroll. When Nora challenged the decision and made the request to change his schedule, the teacher stated, “We want him to be well rounded and try it.” She explained to the teacher that “sometimes that’s failure for the child because he really doesn’t want to take it. He wants to take Spanish.” Her voice was not heard and his first quarter grade was an F. She spoke to the teacher again about him taking the class. She responded, “You know we have to push our black young men. He gets with his friends and he just sit there and he won’t do anything.” Nora decided to go to the principal to see whether anything could be done to change her son’s schedule. The principal’s response was we don’t like to change schedules because a child doesn’t like the class. Nora’s voice was not heard but she will try to enroll her son in Spanish next year when he is in the eighth grade. She believes that Spanish will make her son more well-rounded than Art.

Annette shared an experience she had with her granddaughter’s teachers that communicated to her that her voice or opinion did not count. Anette requested a parent-teacher conference with one teacher whose class her grandchild was having some issues and she was told that she would have to meet with the team. Annette shared her feelings about how the teachers would handle the situation if she met with a team of teachers instead of the one she desired to meet with:

So the other teachers are going to say that they had a situation but they didn't contact me about it. So now I felt they were trying to team up on me or they needed support, you know. I'm just a concerned grandparent . . . And I really still didn't get the help I felt I should have or the actual direct response . . . As far as the other instructors, don't take advantage of an opportunity that I initiated to try to make me feel intimidated . . . And a lot of times, this is why I don't like it because I don't want to put thoughts in your mind about a child where if the concern is not [there]. It has a lot to do with the individual person or the subject.

In Annette's mind, her requested parent-teacher conference was designed for the teacher to hear her voice after hearing first-hand information from the teacher involved. Annette also knew that her voice could serve as a conduit to promote negative thoughts in the minds of the other teachers who were not involved in the situation.

Parents also expressed the presence of another barrier that blocked their voices from being heard. They were asked whether they could do something about the lack of quality teachers in their school. One parent replied "Absolutely, yeah. We can if the voice was loud enough. But we know how the district is where if the school's test scores are not high enough our voices aren't even heard."

### **Theme: Parents are Empowered When Their Voices are Heard**

During this study, as advocated by Johnson and Parry (2015), local voices of a marginalized group were privileged, power related issues were noted, and parents were motivated to become agents of change. This is the goal of participatory action research (PAR). The parents who participated in this study felt empowered through having the opportunity to give voice to their perceptions and beliefs about parent involvement in their child's school. This section will be inclusive of the ways in which their voices became a source of empowerment and liberation.

Nora shared one story where teachers heard her voice and took action. Her son was in an honors class in the sixth grade and they moved him into a regular class. Nora let her voice be heard by communicating to the teachers what she felt was good for her child:

I said that's not good because Mark needs to be challenged. If he's not challenged, that's when the behavior issues start because he's bored. So she said we're going to move him back because he has the potential to be a straight A student. And he does.

Monica shared with the group that she had a very pleasant experience with helping to develop her child's IEP in middle school as opposed to the horrid experience she had in elementary school.

Parents saw value in not only letting their voices be heard within the school or district, but they felt empowered as they listened and shared their parent involvement stories and experiences with one another. They enjoyed parent to parent discourse which gave them support and promoted a sense of pride in being an African American parent/grandparent with a child in a Title I school; a different feeling for some of them when they share the name of their school with others. Being able to speak the truth for the parents in the study was liberating.

The parents in this study heard their own voices and the voices of their peers and were able to express some of their own strengths and their needs. At the end of the study before preparing for their community presentation, we reflected upon the topics we discussed and parents were able to talk about some of their strengths and needs.

According to the parents two of their strengths in general were their desire for their

children to be successful and their assertiveness about trying to ensure that their children were getting the best education possible. However, they felt that their assertiveness was viewed as a weakness. Some of their general needs as African American parents were:

- for educators to get their input on what they need;
- to have more parent to parent collaboration;
- to be involved in community and school activities that have a direct effect on student learning;
- to be encouraged and motivated because there are times when they get tired;
- for educators not to judge them, but to understand them and make connections with them; and,
- for educators, community members, business leaders, pastors/church members and other parents to work together to move beyond closing the achievement gap to helping their children become young men and women who will have successful careers.

They shared their strengths and needs with the educators and the community/business leaders during their presentation.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Throughout the study, parents made distinctions between what they believe and what their realities are. They gave voice to their beliefs and realities throughout the study. They formed a bond and a level of trust to share their innermost thoughts with one another. They also saw value in sharing their personal belief and reality statements

during their community presentation to parents, educators, and community/business leaders. They wanted their audience to understand some of their struggles.

One common belief expressed was that their children are well behaved and that they have trained them to do their best in school, but reality is sometimes their children do not do what's right. Nora has dreams of her only son becoming a successful young man in the midst of the negative stereotypes that exist for African American males. She believes, "my son will be a successful young man after he completes high school and college. But reality is, it is so challenging for him to get the tools he need to make it happen." Janice, a single parent with five children has many struggles but she believes, "I can all by myself raise my African American boys and girl to be mentally and emotionally healthy and financially successful citizens. However, my reality is I cannot do it by myself. It really takes a village." Amy strives to be a role model for her children and she shares her life experiences with them. She wants them to understand the importance of education. She believes, "my children will use my struggles to raise above the failures life offers. But reality is my struggles may be pleasing in their eyes of no understanding." Millie, an educator who is married with two children is still searching for the American dream. She believes

that she has done everything right to accomplish the American dream: I've gotten the degrees. I'm married. I have a career, etc. But my reality is we're still living from paycheck to paycheck struggling still trying to find that dream; but I will. I will redefine and simplify my American dream.

As a participant in the study, I have often thought about my own belief and reality statement. I believe that parent participants were truly motivated to take action by letting

their voice be heard. I believe their self-efficacy increased and they felt empowered as they collaborated with all participants in the study (other parents, educators, and community/business leaders). My reality is that I have doubts that their motivation will be sustained without additional support and encouragement as they continue their journey of increasing their advocacy and partnering with educators to help their children be successful.

At the end of the parent presentation, parents, educators, and community participants who were part of the audience completed a survey regarding their feelings about the study. Comments included things they could do differently in their organization or as a parent to establish effective home-school-community partnerships. An educator stated on her survey that she needed to maintain positive dialogue with parents. Another educator voiced how educators need to stop judging parents too quickly if they appear not to be involved, but instead focus on how we need to assist them. An assistant professor at a local university stated that she could begin with having dialogue with other professors about implementing teacher educator programs that will help prepare teachers to be more effective in working with all children. A community leader suggested that the model used for this study be replicated through the state/nation.

The parents who participated in the study completed a survey six weeks after the beginning of the school year. See timeline in Table 4 located in Chapter III. Based upon the survey results, all parents enjoyed collaborating with other parents to share positive experiences and struggles. Comments included: the study empowered me with knowledge and tools to help my children succeed; It got me out of my comfort zone; I

was honored to participate. I was empowered to make a change and I'm ready for other rounds. Two parents became members of their PTA this school year. Other parents said they were more supportive of their child's teachers and they are communicating with more parents to help them see the importance of being involved. Several parents said they were trying to bond with other parents to share resources. Parents also made comments about spending more time at their child's school this year to try to bridge the gap between parents, teachers, and students.

Table 5

Data Presentation: Topics and Themes

<b>Roles and Perceptions</b>	<b>Authentic Partnerships</b>	<b>The Race Factor</b>	<b>Systemic Inequities: Curriculum Changes, Teacher Quality, and Testing</b>	<b>Parent Participation versus Parent Empowerment</b>
<b>Theme:</b> Parents emphasized the vital role they play in the education of their children	<b>Theme:</b> Effective home-school partnerships are established through communication, relationships and support	<b>Theme:</b> Stereotypes and deficit thinking about African Americans create parent involvement challenges	<b>Theme:</b> Changes in the curriculum without preparing parents for change can create inequity	<b>Theme:</b> Parent participation to meet a school/district parent involvement goal does not equate to parent empowerment
<b>Theme:</b> All parents believe they are advocates for their children	<b>Characteristics of strong partnerships:</b>	<b>Theme:</b> Factors in Tandem with Race that Create Parent Involvement Challenges	<b>Two major changes:</b>	<b>Theme:</b> Parents speaking does not mean their voices are heard
<b>Theme:</b> Parents emphasized the importance of home-based parent involvement activities	-Initiated by the teacher -Communication in a timely manner	-Appearance -Gender -Social Class	-Common Core Curriculum -Extensive use of technology	<b>Theme:</b> Parents are empowered when their voices are heard
<b>Theme:</b> Parents placed value in school sponsored parent involvement activities	-Common goal is the success of the child -Working together to provide support	<b>Theme:</b> Collaboration among AA can increase cultural and social capital	<b>Theme:</b> Teacher certification does not guarantee quality teaching for AA children	
<b>Theme:</b> Parents linked their participation to various factors	-Teacher value parent input	<b>Theme:</b> Feelings of inadequacy often exist when AA parents are among those of other cultures	<b>Theme:</b> The stigma of low test scores is not always justified	

Table 5

Cont.

Roles and Perceptions	Authentic Partnerships	The Race Factor	Systemic Inequities: Curriculum Changes, Teacher Quality, and Testing	Parent Participation versus Parent Empowerment
	<p><b>Theme:</b> The Importance of Community Partnerships in Bridging the Gap between Home and School</p>			
	<p><b>Characteristics of Strong positive community partnerships:</b></p>			
	<p>-Churches, businesses, and families provide resources -Community as a resource to increase social capital</p>			
	<p>-Community as a positive voice to counterbalance negative voices Providing opportunities for students to make a difference</p>			

*Note.* Data analysis consisted of establishing codes and grouping codes into categories/topics. Each topic was later organized into themes.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study provides insight into the varying ways in which African American parents are involved in the education of their children. As such, the study supports the dismantling of the traditional views of parent involvement as portrayed in recent scholarship (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lewis & Forman, 2002; G. R. Lopez & Stoelting, 2010). In this section, my four research questions will be discussed.

#### Research Question 1

*How do African American parents describe parent involvement and what challenges do they face in satisfying traditional conceptions of parent involvement in Title I middle schools?*

The parents in this study described parent involvement in terms of home-based and school-based activities. They are motivated to be involved in home-based activities more than school-based activities which is a vital type of parent involvement to them (Tran, 2014). Parents knowledge of what it means for them to be involved is a missing link in critically defining and increasing parent involvement in Title I schools.

African American parents are faced with many challenges in satisfying the traditional definition of parent involvement which requires them to participate in school-related functions. Their race and gender can be a challenge. All parents in the study were African American females and many of their challenges were induced by educators'

deficit view and stereotypic opinion of them based on their appearance and/or how they interact with educators when they attend school events or conferences. When African American mothers interact with educators in what appears to be an aggressive manner is oftentimes an expression of their care for their children (Cooper, 2007).

Some challenges are based upon school structures along with educators' practices that are aligned with the traditional views of what constitutes parent involvement and excludes how African American parents are involved in the education of their children. Due to educators' excluding them, they are judged as parents who do not care about their children or are not involved in their children's education (Cooper, 2009). All schools represented in this study are Title I schools that receive federal funds. A certain percentage of the funds received must be utilized for parent involvement. Title I schools are required to document all parent involvement activities to ensure they are meeting federal guidelines. Therefore, schools and districts design school-based parent involvement activities in which parents are expected to attend. Parents' attendance is one means of validating that schools are meeting these federal guidelines. This is problematic when viewing parent involvement from a critical epistemological stance.

The parents in this study made it clear that parent involvement is not contingent upon being in a certain location (i.e., school), but it was about the services they provided for their children and the conversations and activities they engage in with their children and on their behalf. These are actions that cannot be measured or documented by the school. Nonetheless, educators' perception is that low-income and ethnic minority parents are not as involved in the education of their children as their white counterparts

(Pemberton & Miller, 2015; Wong & Hughes, 2006; Cooper, 2009). It is unfair for educators to label parents who do not attend the parent involvement initiatives sponsored by the school as uninvolved or uncaring parents. Cooper (2007, 2009) asserts the need to abstain from this type of biased discourse on parent involvement when more value is placed on the documentation than whether the event was of interest and of service to the parents because this is how schools measure parent involvement. Year by year schools offer the same events and expect to get different parent participation results. If only a few parents attended an event, educators must be reflective in determining what can be done to better meet the needs of the parents they serve. Judge the activity, not the parents. The parents in the study believe that some of the activities are offered because they are meeting a quota rather than meeting their needs.

The parents' description of parent involvement was inclusive of five of the six types of behaviors listed in Epstein's framework for parent involvement (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). These behaviors include positive home conditions, communication, involvement at school, home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships. For most parents, decision making was directly related to concerns regarding their children in the classroom. The parents did not make reference to participating in school-wide or district-wide decision making.

The School Leadership Team is one of the decision-making platforms within a school where parents are invited to serve, yet many parents are challenged in serving in this capacity because of the meeting time which is usually immediately after school when most parents are working. Some parents have a lack of desire to participate in decision

making on a broader scale within the school and in the district due to past experiences where their input was not valued when they made suggestions to the teacher about their child's education and it was dismissed as not important. This is supported by research and scholarship which revealed educators' deficit view of low-income and ethnic minority parents when they do not value parents' input (Cooper, 2009; Larocque et al., 2011). When parents' opinion about the education of their children is not valued within a classroom, parents do not have confidence that their opinion will matter on a governing body representing the entire school. Parents' self-efficacy or confidence that they can make a difference is a construct that impacts whether parents become involved in the education of their children. Self-efficacy is grounded in parents' personal experiences which can be influenced by verbal persuasion or encouragement from important others that they can be successful (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Regardless of the socioeconomic status of the parents involved in this study, all parents faced challenges in attending school-based activities, yet they saw value in them. One major challenge in attending school sponsored events was their work schedules. All parents in the study were employed, with the exception of the parent who had the genetic illness. One parent in the study worked two jobs and another parent worked a full-time job and was a student. Attending school-sponsored activities was a challenge for parents as well as a conflict of interest when home-based activities had priority. After work, parents are dedicated to communicating with their children about their day, assisting with homework, and making sure everything is organized for the next day. If the school

sponsored activities were directly related to their children (concerts, athletic events or maybe something they had a voice in choosing), attending these events became a priority.

The parents in the study were not active members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and had no desire or saw a need to participate in PTA meetings. Traditionally PTA members are available during the day to volunteer in schools and to serve on different PTA committees. Many of the parent involvement challenges existed due to school structures, educators' perceptions about what constitutes parent involvement and their lack of getting input from parents regarding their needs and strengths (Gordon, 2004; Tran, 2014). Defining parent involvement for the parents in this study supports research calling for a need for educators to rethink their definition of parent involvement and include what parent involvement means for low-income and ethnic minorities (Abdul-Adilb & Farmer, 2006; Griffin, 2011).

### **Research Question 2**

*What are African American parents' perceptions about their role in the education of their children?*

All parents in the study believe that it is their responsibility to be involved in the education of their children. They believe that their involvement was important and it is linked to positive educational and behavioral outcomes for their children (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mo & Singh, 2008). This study supported Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model explaining why parents become involved. According to their model, three constructs explain why parents become

involved in the education of their children. These constructs are parent's role construction, self-efficacy, and invitations to be involved.

The parents in this study had beliefs about what they were supposed to do for their children (parents' role construction) which have been shaped by their experiences over time and by the expectations of what others think they should do for their children (Auerbach, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). All parents had negative experiences with schools and in society in general. Some of these negative experiences were due to racial stereotyping. Because of these experiences, their role as an advocate is to do whatever is required to make sure their children get the type of education they need to be successful. Their role is to be a support system for their children in whatever way possible. Due to their experiences as African American women, they see the multiple challenges their children will face and they are adamant in making sure they are adequately preparing their children to face a harsh society where racism still exist (Cooper, 2009; Dyrness, 2010). Their view of advocacy was not related to participating in nebulous types of school sponsored events.

Parents desired to do their part in helping their children be successful in school. They wanted teachers to seek their support and value their input on how to work with their children. Therefore, a component of their role as advocate was to make sure teachers were doing what was best for their children. Educators must realize that parents have knowledge about their children that can be beneficial to them (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). Parents' determination to be involved and their negative perceptions about schools based upon their past experiences may support the educators' ideologies

about how low-income and working class African American mothers communicate in an aggressive manner (Cooper, 2007, 2009). The parents' perception was that educators don't listen to them but they were determined to be their child's advocate. What appeared to be aggression was parents' expression of the care they have for their children (Cooper, 2007). African American parents have development strategies over time to resist the racism and microaggressions they have experienced as well as their children (P. B. Lopez et al., 2013). It is also their role to prepare their children for the negative responses they will experience in school. Teachers need professional development on how to better understand the roles that low-income and working class African American parents play in the education of their children (Abel, 2014; Tran, 2014).

The parents in the study were inwardly motivated to be involved in the education of their children, but on their own terms. Furthermore, based upon Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model of why parents become involved, parents' role construction changes over time. All parents in the study had at least one child in middle school. The parents discussed how their ability to help their children with their work was limited as the curriculum became more difficult when moving to middle school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Park & Holloway, 2013). Their important role of being able to assist their child at home with school work diminished and schools took away their power to support their own children academically. These feeling disconnected parents from schools and decreased their self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

It was evident that self-efficacy was a factor in determining the role parents played in the education of their children. Two educators and one former educator

participated in the study. When they discussed their role in the education of their children, it was evident that their self-efficacy to be involved was higher than the other parents in the study. They were able to communicate more about parents' role in communicating and interacting with school personnel. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), when parents' efficacy is high, they have a tendency to make positive decisions about being actively engaged in their child's education and are more likely to face and overcome challenges encountered. Millie, Amy, and Shellie were examples of parents with high self-efficacy.

Another factor that determined parents' involvement in school based activities was the school climate and how inviting teachers were. Some of the parents in this study didn't describe their school climate as invitational; especially the schools that were labeled as low-performing schools. State mandated labels are counterproductive in increasing teacher efficacy, which impacts the climate that is created for students and parents. Being invitational is a mantle that must be worn by all school staff throughout the day as they interact with parents at the school or via telephone and not just during parent involvement activities sponsored by the school. Many of the parents will never experience the planned events because they don't feel welcomed during random visits to the school (i.e., picking their children up from school, telephone conferences with teachers). This supports studies showing that marginalized parents' motivation for involvement is limited or constrained by the actions of educators (Cooper, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Parents play different roles in the education of their children. The parents in this study represented lower middle class, working class and low-income African American families with different family structures and educational backgrounds. Their interests, needs and strengths differed. Parent involvement is not one size fits all. There are multiple types because parents play different roles in the education of their children. Therefore, educators must take the time to assess their parents' interests, needs and strengths in order to tailor their school-based initiatives and to provide other needed services to parents outside of school.

### **Research Question 3**

*What are African American parents' beliefs and values about home, school, and community partnerships and ways to establish these partnerships?*

The parent involvement component of the Title I program focuses on schools partnering with parents (P. B. Lopez et al., 2013). All parents in the study believed that home-school-community partnerships are important. This is supported by research showing that home-school partnerships are key factors in promoting positive school outcomes (Auerbach, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Tran, 2014). The parents also stated they needed assistance from schools and the community in helping their children to be academically successful. Establishing authentic home-school-community partnerships can be complex when considering the sociocultural and political aspects brought on by schools and the communities in which families live (Yull et al., 2014). Epstein's (2001) spheres of overlapping influences between home, school, and the community can serve as a foundation to establish authentic home-school-community partnerships. These

influences are controlled by time, family experiences, and experiences in school.

According to this model, there are “mutual interests and influences of families and schools that can be more or less successfully promoted by the policies and programs of the organizations and the actions and attitudes of the individuals in those organizations” (Epstein, 2001, p. 35). The more educators gain an understanding of the families they serve and the communities in which the families live, they can be more intentional about what strategies to employ to establish meaningful partnerships designed to meet the needs of marginalized families. During the study parents often quoted that it still takes a village to raise a child. They recognized their need for support as they navigated through the school system to ensure their child was getting the best education and other educational opportunities possible.

Establishing authentic partnerships must also be viewed from a critical epistemological stance. What is the purpose of home-school-community partnerships? Schools want to establish partnerships with businesses in order to gain resources and services. They want to establish partnerships with parents in order to have their support in attending school sponsored events and to get the help they need when encountering problems with children. School goals are more aligned with White and middle class values (P. B. Lopez et al., 2013). What about partnership from the lens of African American parents with children in Title I middle schools? Partnership cannot be a one-sided endeavor (Larocque et al., 2011).

All parents in the study were female and African American of varying social classes. During the study the parents discussed how their race, gender, and class

oftentimes worked against them when navigating through the school system (Cooper, 2009). The negative stereotypic views about who they are and what they value created a dichotomy between the parents and educators preventing parents from desiring partnership. Before true partnerships can be established with African American parents in Title I schools, educators must understand that race and social class cannot be ignored. When African American parents are constantly hearing about the achievement gap where their children are on the lower end of the gap along with their children attending a low performing school, they want authentic support that will manifest different results for their children and not partnership as schools define partnership.

Oftentimes, Title I schools are considered schools of poverty and that parents at these schools have nothing to offer. All parents have something to offer (Moll, 2005; Noguera, 2001). Parents can provide teachers with valuable information about their child that can assist them in providing appropriate instructional and communicational strategies for the child (Larocque et al., 2011). This study included variations within the African American culture. The schools represented in this study have a free and reduced free lunch eligibility population ranging from 54% to 98%. This study included African American women with different family structures and different educational levels (two are currently educators and one was an educator). Regardless of their class or family structure, they all believed that African American children encounter educational disparities. The educational disparities that parents and their children experienced extend beyond poverty because empirical studies show that educational disparities exist independently of the socioeconomic status of African American families (Allen, 2010;

Howard & Reynolds, 2008). For the parents in this study, partnership carries the connotation of being on the same team and having a voice; not being a silent partner. During the parent presentation, members of the audience were very supportive of the parents and enlightened by the information they shared about African American parent involvement. They encouraged the parents to continue to let their voices be heard as they start the new school year. One business leader really wanted to get involved in doing something to start partnering with schools. We have had several conversations since the study and he provided a pizza lunch for the staff at one Title I school. The audience felt a need to give special support to teachers as well as families in Title I schools to encourage them as they continue their challenging journey of balancing the task of meeting the needs of all children while fulfilling district, state, and federal mandates. Several participants in the audience would like to be included in the next parent meeting that I conduct. The process of establishing authentic partnerships started with having critical conversations geared towards addressing the needs of parents and educators.

Educators communicate what they need from parents. However, I question whether educators really know what these marginalized parents need from them. As an educator with more than 20 years of experience, before participating in this study, I'd never engaged in critical discourse with educators in a school setting about establishing home-school partnerships based upon parents needs and strengths. We must hear the voice of our parents in order to establish authentic home-school-partnerships. We must view partnerships from the lens of the marginalized parents in this study. They believed that authentic partnerships were established through effective communication,

relationship building, and support. This is supported by Morris (2004) study revealing the success of two elementary schools due to relationship building and mutual trust between schools and families. The partnerships were not one-sided and void of parent power (Auerbach, 2001; Cooper et al., 2010; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

During the study the parents made reference to the relational trust and the home-school-community partnerships that existed before segregation was declared illegal through *Brown v Board of Education*. Members of the community, churches, schools, and families had a common goal to work together for the success of children and families. Today most parents in the study had negative perceptions about schools due to racial stereotyping which hindered their desire to establish relationships with teachers and administrators. Racial and cultural biases have prevented some low-income and working class African American parents from desiring to establish any type of partnership or relationship with educators (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Educators must be cognizant of these perceptions and not reproduce them due to a lack of understanding of marginalized families. These families lack social and cultural capital and establishing authentic home, school, and community partnerships can provide them with the social and cultural capital needed to help their children have equal access to needed educational resources and services (Warren et al., 2009).

The parents believed that they play a role in establishing authentic partnerships, but they believed that partnerships should be initiated by the teacher (Tran, 2014). Due to additional state and local mandates required of teachers and administrators at Title I

schools (more specifically low-performing schools), teachers have limited time to contact parents in meaningful ways to establish authentic home-school partnerships. Oftentimes when parents got a call from the school it was through a computer-based program to provide information about school-based activities or it was a call to get assistance in dealing with disciplinary or academic problems. The types of calls received were not conducive to forming authentic partnerships. The parents appreciated the automated messages that keep them informed, but they wanted more than one way communication. The parents in this study visualized parents and educators working together as a team. They wanted timely information as it pertained to their children, but they also wanted support where educators provided information about how to work together to solve the problem they may be having with their children. What parents wanted and what teachers were able to provide created a divide between home and school.

In order to bridge this gap between home, school, and the community, the mindset of educators must change and they must reframe their discourse on what is required to establish authentic partnerships with parents. School leaders must have critical conversations with teachers about the importance of how they communicate with parents and encourage them to be intentional about communicating with parents for positive as well as the not so positive reasons. It begins with changing ideologies about the purpose of schools and how to better meet the needs of the families they serve. This supports Ferlazzo and Hammond's (2009) belief that family engagement (instead of parent involvement) requires schools to be intentional about getting ideas from parents and

develop relationship building processes. Educators need a better understanding of who their parents are and build on the assets that parents bring (Greene, 2013).

The establishing of community involvement was valued by the parents but they were not aware of how to establish these partnerships. They were depending on schools to connect them with needed community resources and services. Zoning policies, magnet schools, choice programs in Title I schools creates challenges with community involvement when considering the lives of children are intermingled within the communities in which they live (Auerbach, 2007; Milner, 2015). Children do not attend schools in the neighborhoods where they live and educators are far removed from the challenges students and their families may experience within their communities. Some Title I schools undergo school reform and are changed into magnet schools to increase enrollment and diversity. However, there are times when middle class, upper class, or White students coming into these schools exacerbate inequities (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). The parents in the student believe that many of the challenges they face in Title I schools were brought on by zoning policies. In spite of being in the midst of other ethnic groups and social classes, the parents had felt excluded and uninvited. The parents translated exclusion as discrimination.

Authentic partnerships cannot be formed by considering all parents as one. Schools are becoming more and more diverse but the teaching force is still predominantly white (Larocque et al., 2011). This creates a cultural mismatch which cannot be ignored. The parents frequently mentioned how educators do not understand the culture of African American families. Therefore, educators must consider race and class during their

discourse on how to establish effective home, school, and community partnerships because a great divide exist between the social and cultural capital of the marginalized group in this study and the dominant group that is represented by educators. This is cultural exclusion. One factor noted by researchers that contributed to challenges in establishing collaborative home-school partnerships was when teachers come into the field with predominantly European middle class backgrounds which differ from the backgrounds of the families they serve (Tran, 2014). Educators need to receive training on how to be culturally responsive to the needs of diverse families in general; especially ethnic minorities who cultural values are different from the dominant group (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; P. B. Lopez et al., 2013). Authentic partnerships through the eyes of African American parents is all about communication, relationship, support, teamwork, mutual respect and acceptance of who they are and the contributions they make to the education of their children.

#### **Research Question 4**

*How can Participatory Action Research empower African American parents and assist them in taking action to get what they need to become more inclusive in parent involvement initiatives and other decision making processes within the school?*

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was chosen as the methodology for this study because I wanted to understand parent involvement through the lens of low-income and working class African American parents due to the perception that they are not involved in the education of their children. PAR is used to investigate problematic issues and bring about change (Johnson & Parry, 2015). One feature of PAR is “privileging

local voices, cultures, and wisdom throughout the different stages of research engenders autonomy and identity within the collective process” (Johnson & Parry, 2015, p. 219). This study was the beginning stage of establishing a platform for the voices of African American parents in Title I schools to be heard.

During the four Parent Professional Learning Community (PPLC) meetings, we analyzed data from the individual and focus group interviews and we co-constructed knowledge about the meaning of parent involvement. PAR recognizes “epistemological plurality” or more than one form of knowledge (Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009, p. 240). As one of the research participants in this study, it was necessary for me to be willing to see through their lens and accept their perceptions as knowledge. In order for PAR to accomplish the goal for which it is intended, educators involved must be open-minded and value the knowledge that parents bring to the study.

PAR begins with personal change which is expressed as educators relinquish their power and parents become empowered. Parents were empowered as they engaged in critical discourse with their peers about parent involvement. Through collaboration they made vital connections with other parents with similar challenges and they came to understand they were not alone. Parents in this study were not representative of all African American parents with children attending Title I schools. During this study, PAR gave them the opportunity to share negative experiences with people in their own culture. This is referred to as “counter-space,” where individuals have the opportunity to critique negative beliefs about their own group (Yosso, 2005; Dyrness, 2010). Their shared stories and experiences become a source of support for one another. Parent

researchers began to make meaning of their parent involvement experiences alongside an educator who was willing to take a critical look at the educational system and examined the educational issues of their concern with them. Through this process, parents were able to gain knowledge (social capital) about how schools work as well as understand how they were marginalized due to systemic inequities. As parents were given multiple opportunities to engage in critical discourse about schools and their parent involvement experiences they were able to give voice to their own parent involvement needs and strengths. Their voice was valued and they were encouraged which increased their self-efficacy about how they can make a difference in the education of their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Tanking one step at a time, parents were given a platform to discuss their parental involvement views with others educators and community/business leaders.

PAR extends beyond inward personal changes and marginalized parents being given the opportunity to speak. It is about taking action to bring about a change. Initially, this may be done on a smaller scale as parents take a more active role in visiting the school. Due to parents' work schedule, some will take action by making connections with other parents in various places to share resources and to form valuable social networks so they can meet the needs of their children. As parents continue to grow stronger, some will emerge as parent support group leaders, some will serve on School Leadership Teams, and some will become legislators who will implement policies that will positively impact marginalized families. Regardless of the action they take, all parents are letting their voices be heard and bringing about needed changes in multiple

facets and in different places (i.e., schools, churches, community, district meetings, legislative sessions).

During this study, the group dynamics created a powerful collective voice where leaders emerged during the meetings as they discussed certain topics or experiences they felt comfortable sharing with one another. Several parents in the study had Masters Degrees, which is not typical of many parents with children attending Title I schools. My original plan for this study was to hear the voice of mainly low-income and working class African American parents (both male and female). However, reality is that the same challenges low-income African American parents face in attending school-based activities could have been the same challenges that prevented them from participating in a study that would require their time and commitment away from their home. Based upon the participants in this study who were married (all females), they play a dominant role in participating in the education of their children as opposed to their husband. The lack of fathers participating in this study could have been based upon how fathers construct their parent involvement role, which is not being the dominant voice in issues concerning the education of their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The parents also felt comfortable sharing their stories with me. I knew three of the seven participants personally and being an African American female with a daughter who attended a Title I middle school, I could relate to some of their stories. PAR can be transformative when all participants are willing to be transparent and not judgmental. As a result of participating in this study, the parents gained confidence that they could make a difference. They gain social capital as they shared their stories, their resources

(information about programs, and other educational or recreational opportunities), their strengths, their challenges, and their fears. The process was liberating because they understood that they were not alone as they became a support system for one another.

Considering an appropriate setting for PAR can be problematic. My study was community based and most of my parents were recruited from local churches or through snowball sampling. I question whether PAR can occur within schools because schools, as institutions of learning are not ready to give up their power in order to empower a marginalized group of people, fearing it may cause a revolution. Implementing PAR through establishing partnerships with college/universities and schools can be a viable method of helping schools to dismiss their traditional views about parent involvement and their deficit views of ethnic minorities. PAR was empowering for the parents in this study and when done properly, it will cause a change in our concept of parent involvement as parents become valued participants in our schools and when educators relinquish their narrow description of parent involvement. During the community presentation, educators, other parents, and community/business leaders spoke of how enlightened they were and how they now viewed parent involvement differently. I have not followed up with whether their different view turned into action, which is what PAR is all about.

After the first six weeks of school, parents were more cognizant of their collective parent power and began to make connections with other parents. Some parents joined the PTA and others emailed me to tell me how they desired to be more active within their school. The parents were disappointed when the study ended because they enjoyed

collaborating with other parents and learning more information about the school their child attend. I am uncertain that the motivation and synergy parents gained during the study can be maintained without additional support from other school leaders who understand their perceptions. Additional time is needed with these parents to continue to encourage them to increase their self-efficacy in order sustain their motivation to connect with other parents and educators to let their voices be heard (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Using PAR as a methodology to give voice to low-income and working class African American parents to help them take action to create change is easier said than done. There were many factors beyond changing the mindset of the educators and getting parents to participate in the study. There are many layers that must be unfolded within our schools in order for the voices of marginalized parents to be heard and for change to occur. Hearing their voice is not enough. Educators must recognize parents as a valuable part of the education system and use their voice to make necessary changes within schools to help bridge the gap between homes, schools and the community. Community and business leaders must be invited to hear the voice of this marginalized groups to help them understand how children, their homes, schools, and communities in which they live are connected. When their voices are truly heard, perceptions and policies will change. Educators will begin to critically examine their own beliefs about marginalized families and reflect upon the role they play in excluding parents.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

### **For Parents**

The results of this study have implications for several groups. Parents have a powerful collective voice and they must understand the difference they make not only in the education of their children, but in the educational system. They must connect with other parents to collaborate about their challenges and their strengths and to find support from one another. They must make connections with parents at their local churches, school events, or within their community to increase their social networks. They must see themselves as change agents and begin to step out and become engaged in decision making processes within the school. Not all parents will be leaders who engage in decision making processes within the school but as they share their stories with other parents, leaders will emerge.

### **For Teachers**

Teachers must take the initiative to reach out to parents to get to know them better. During Open House, make a good first impression. Be inviting. Give them information regarding times they can call to talk about their child's progress. Two-way communication is the first stage of building an authentic partnership. Give parents the opportunity to share during the first few weeks of school what teachers can do to help their child be successful and how they would like to help the teacher be successful. When it becomes necessary to call a parent about an academic or behavioral issue, go beyond sharing the problem, but be ready to give support to the parent by being part of the solution. Providing support is the next step in forming authentic home-school

partnerships. As this process continues, relationships will form which is a major ingredient in forming authentic home-school partnerships.

### **For School-based Administrators**

School administrators must engage in critical conversations with their staff about parent involvement for the different ethnic groups within the school to determine how they can better serve them. They must find out from parents what they need. They also need to survey parents to find out skills and strengths they have that schools can utilize. Schools can have meetings within the community instead of having all meetings at the school. District and school leaders must take advantage of the parent involvement funds received through Title I and go beyond filling a quota by getting a parent signature for coming out to a school sponsored parent involvement event or sending a contract home (Title I Parent-Student-Teacher Compact) that parents did not have a voice in preparing. School administrators must ensure that they are meeting the needs of all parents. School leaders must be creative in how they utilize their Title I funds to meet the instructional needs of students and their families. Because Title I schools have many low-income and working class families and technology is an important educational tool, leaders must provide in house resources for families to use (i.e., parent resource center with computers/laptops). Establish a relevant resource center for parents. Home-school coordinators or media specialists can be a resource to train parents on how to access Powerschool (program to check students' grades) and other educational websites on the computers/laptops in the Resource Center. Schools and districts have valuable information on their websites but parents do not know how to access it; even those

parents who do have computers. Parents need to receive specific information about how to navigate through these sites. Establish parent support groups based upon the results of a parent needs assessment given at the beginning of the school year. School administrators must be proactive in working with school social workers in having dialogue about different agencies and community resources that are available for families and have this information accessible for parents.

### **For District Administrators**

District leaders must take parent involvement to another level by providing professional development for teachers and administrators based on scholarship and empirical studies to help them view parent involvement from a critical epistemological stance and on how to employ culturally relevant strategies in order to engage this marginalized population. Many Title I schools have parent coordinators or family involvement coordinators who also need to be receive professional development. District leaders can also provide schools with information on the different communities that feed into the school to determine what community resources may be available because many students attending Title I schools do not live in the communities where the school is located. Parent involvement coordinators can also get involved in obtaining this information and finding out what resources are needed or available within the varying communities.

### **For Community Members**

Pastors, business/community leaders, and other local agencies must understand that schools are not institutions that stand alone. Educators and families need them.

They can provide a safe haven and a listening ear for parent support groups to meet to talk about their concerns, challenges and ways they can make a difference in the educational system. They can also provide needed resources and services to families such as tutoring/mentoring for parents and students, needed healthcare services and resources. Many churches have educators who can oversee parent support groups and provide needed educational services for families because relational trust has already been established where parents will feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

### **For Colleges and Universities**

University and college professors must work with families and partner with schools to link theory with practice. Parent support groups can be established at local colleges and universities to give voice to parents and empower them to advocate for their children and to become change agents within their schools. Pre-service teacher training should be inclusive of critical discourse about low-income and working class ethnic minority parents and their perceptions about parent involvement. Courses on how to employ culturally responsive strategies with students and their families must also be incorporated in pre-service teacher training. This must occur before teachers are thrust into Title I schools whose dominant population consist low-income and working class ethnic minorities. Many Title I schools have high turnover rates. Therefore, ongoing professional development using culturally responsive strategies must occur.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study add to the rich scholarship and empirical studies calling for educators to take a critical look at their practices and structures that exacerbate current

systemic inequities. Educators and community/business leaders on all levels must see low-income and working class African American parents differently and gain an understanding of the multiplicity of meaning for the term parent involvement based upon their role construction as parents, not based upon the school's definition alone. Educators must view all parents as contributing partners in education, regardless of their ethnicity and class. Low-income and working class African American parents' relationship with schools is not linear (home and school), but complex and interwoven with racial, social, and political factors that impact how they navigate through schools, their communities, and life in general. Parent involvement from a critical epistemological stance using PAR can serve as a viable strategy to decrease the achievement gap as educators come to understand that there is not a lack in low-income and working class African American parents' involvement, but a lack in educators' understanding of what it means for African American parents to be involved and how the actions of educators constrain or limit their involvement.

### **Personal Statement**

As an African American female administrator who works in a Title I school, this study has been transformative for me. After spending this limited, yet powerful time collaborating with the participants, my perceptions about the parents in the Title I school where I am employed has changed. We recently had a PTA interest meeting and two out of over 850 parents attended. As I rapidly overcame my disappointment, I reflected upon the lives of the parents I worked with during this study and their lack of interest in an organization that has historically been supported by the dominant cultural group. I no

longer judge them as uninvolved or uncaring parents, but I now see a major disconnect between what we offer and what they need. As I walk through the office daily and see parents coming in for a conference or to check their child out from school, I warmly greet them and sometimes carry on a conversation with them about their concerns. I am always looking for ways to empower them with knowledge about the school and other resources and services that may be helpful to them and their children so they can be more involved in the way they desire. When they are disappointed with a teacher and want to have a conference, I see myself as their advocate. I see more than a parent's complaint, but a parent's care and concern for his or her child. I see beyond their criticism to see their courage to approach an educator on the behalf of their child in spite of their fears. I see an indomitable spirit.

The parent in the study who had a genetic illness and spoke very little (Phyllis) became ill as she began to experience a sickle-cell anemia crisis which normally puts her in the hospital for several days. This event occurred the day before the parents were going to present their study to the educators and business/community leaders during a community-based program. During our last practice for the presentation, I could tell she was ill and her mother shared with me what was wrong. I told Phyllis and her mother that we could do the presentation without them and that I understood. Phyllis told her mother that she wanted to be with the group to do her part, which was to introduce herself and to share a belief and reality statement with her mother. On the day of the presentation, Phyllis' mother pushed her into the room in a wheelchair. She sat proudly in her wheelchair as she listened and participated in the program. After the presentation,

Phyllis' mother took her to the hospital. Phyllis had formed a bond with the women in this study and she was excited about doing something she had never done before. She was one of seven stars whose voice would be heard. She was a proud African American woman with a child who attends a Title I middle school.

I must continue my journey of empowering parents. However, I feel limited in doing so while serving as an Assistant Principal in a Title I school. Their voices deserve to be heard and change is needed within our schools. As a result of conducting this study, it is my desire to start a community based parent organization where parent meetings will occur using a format similar to the one used in this study. I loved hearing the voices of African American parents. I loved hearing their stories. Some of their stories were the stories of my parents who were low-income and didn't have the time or the transportation to participate in school-based parent involvement activities. Some of their stories could have been my stories as a parent whose children attended Title I schools. Fortunately, as a highly educated African American parent, I had the social networks and the high self-efficacy to overcome systemic challenges. We must create the conditions within our schools and communities that are equitable for all families so that all families have access to the resources their children need to excel academically and socially. Understanding how low-income and working class African American parents are involved in the education of their children, understanding their challenges and strengths, in addition to understanding how the actions of educators can limit or empower their involvement are key components to giving parents in Title I schools an authentic *part* in establishing home-school-community partnerships.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB INFORMATION SHEET TEMPLATE

Project Title: **African American Parent Involvement in Title I Schools**

Principal Investigator: Carolyn Alexander Brown

**What is this all about?**

I am asking you to participate in this research study because you are an educator or community/business leader. The purpose of this study is to give voice to African American parents with students attending a Title I middle school and to engage them in parent to parent and parent to educator/business and community leader collaboration in order to establish more effective home-school-community partnerships. This research project will only take about 90 minutes of your time and will involve you attending a presentation by a group of parents where they will present their findings from a 4-month study on African American Parent Involvement in Title I Schools. After the presentation, you will have the opportunity to ask parents questions about their findings. You will also be asked to complete a short survey about whether and how the presentation impacted your perception of African American parent involvement. Your participation in this research project is voluntary.

**How will this negatively affect me?**

No, other than the time you spend on this project there are no known or foreseeable risks involved with this study.

**What do I get out of this research project?**

You and/or society will or might find out ways to provide more support for parents and their children and find ways to establish more effective home-school-community partnerships.

**Will I get paid for participating?**

There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

**What about my confidentiality?**

We will do everything possible to make sure that your information is kept confidential. We will refer to participants by identification numbers and not by participants' names. All information is confidential and will be kept in a locked file cabinet and all electronic files with participants' responses will be password protected. All data will be disposed after three years. "All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law." At no time will the name of participants be used when data are reported.

**What if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You do not have to be part of this project. This project is voluntary and it is up to you to decide to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate at any time in this project you may stop participating without penalty.

**What if I have questions?**

You can ask Carolyn Alexander Brown anything about the study. She can be reached by telephone at 336 848-0232 or by email at [cabrown5@uncg.edu](mailto:cabrown5@uncg.edu). If you have concerns about how you have been treated in this study call the Office of Research Integrity Director at 1-855-251-2351.

**APPENDIX B****EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS USED TO CRITIQUE PARENT/COMMUNITY  
SECTION OF SCHOOL/DISTRICT WEBSITES**

1. Do you understand the information on this website? If not, what can be done to help you understand it better?
2. Is the information helpful to you and your family? If not, why?
3. What do you like about this website and why?
4. What do you dislike about this website and why?
5. Is there additional information that needs to be included on this website?

Additional questions may be added based upon parents' perceptions of the website and their needs, strengths, and challenges.

## APPENDIX C

### PARENT PRESENTATION OUTLINE

#### African American Parent Involvement in Title I Middle Schools

Each parent presented one category after principal researcher talked about the purpose and the methodology.

- I. Purpose of the Study (Principal Researcher)
- II. Methodology (Principal Researcher)
- III. Parents “I am” statements – Each parent introduced herself
- IV. What is parent involvement? (Nora)
- V. Curriculum and other changes—That was then . . . This is now (Millie)
- VI. Establishing authentic partnerships
  - A. Home-School Partnerships (Annette)
  - B. Home-School Community Partnerships (Janice)
- VII. Data and Diversity (Monica)
- VIII. Belief and Reality Statements – Each parent shared their personal belief and reality statement (Phyllis, the parent with an illness, joined in with her mother to give their statement)
- IX. Strengths and Needs (Amy)
- X. Equity – (Principal Researcher)
- XI. Introductions/Comments/Dialogue with the audience of educators, parents, community/business leaders. Each participant introduced himself/herself and made comments about the presentation before dialogue occurred.

## APPENDIX D

### SURVEY FOR EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY/BUSINESS LEADERS

1. What is your occupation? Place a check on the appropriate line
  - a. Educator (Give your specific role in education)  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Business field (Give your specific role in business)  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Community leader (Give your specific role in the community)  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Place a check on the line representing the number of years you've serve in this position.
  - a. less than 1 year
  - b. 1-5 years
  - c. 5- 10 years
  - d. 10-15 years
  - e. 15-20 years
  - f. more than 20 years
  
3. Did your perception of African American parent involvement change after listening and participating in the presentation?  Yes  No
  
4. If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What can you do differently to establish more effective home-school-community partnerships?

***Thank you for your support and your continual commitment to making a difference in the lives of children.***

**APPENDIX E**  
**PARENT SURVEY**

(Conducted six week after school began via email)

1. What part of the study did you like most?
2. What part of the study did you like least?
3. Have your feelings/perceptions about your role in the education of your child changed? If so, in what way?
4. Have your feelings/perceptions about your child's teachers/school changed? If so, in what way?
5. What will you do differently as a result of participating in this study?

**APPENDIX F**  
**CONSENT FORM**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**  
**CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT**

Project Title: African American Parent Involvement in Title I Schools

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Carolyn A. Brown and Rick Reitzug

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

**What is the study about?**

This is a research project and your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to examine African American parents' perceptions, values, and their beliefs about parent involvement (their role and the role of educators and the community) and to hear their voice on ways to establish effective home-school-community partnerships.

**Why are you asking me?**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an African American parent with at least one child who attends a Title I middle school.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Parents will participate in a total of six meetings (one individual interview, one group interview, three meetings with other parents in the study, and one meeting with educators and community/business leaders). Details of sessions are listed below:

Parents will be asked to participate in a 30- to 60-minute individual interview **AND** participate in a 60- to 90-minute group interview (focus group). The interviews will include questions about parents' perceptions and beliefs about parent involvement and home-school-community partnerships. Questions about how race and class impact parent involvement will also be asked.

All participants will be asked to complete a 7-question demographic survey after focus group interview is conducted.

Parents will work with researcher to review and provide feedback on data collected from individual interviews and to partner with researcher to analyze data from focus group session.

Parents will participate in three Parent Empowering Parent sessions (meetings where parents reflect on their strengths, challenges and needs in the area of parent involvement; parent will analyze parent involvement website from their school; and parents will participate in conducting a presentation to a group of educators and community/business leaders from the community about their research findings.

Parents will complete a short survey about their experience while participating in the study.

### **Is there any audio/video recording?**

All interviews and focus group sessions will be audio-taped. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below. The focus group interview will be video recorded and will be used as parents and researcher during the analysis of the focus group interview.

### **What are the risks to me?**

In order to maintain parent confidentiality during the presentation of research findings to educators, all opinions will be expressed as a group. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Carolyn A. Brown, Principal Investigator by telephone at (336) 848-0232 or by email at [cabrown5@uncg.edu](mailto:cabrown5@uncg.edu) or Rick Reitzug, Faculty Advisor by telephone at (336) 334-3490 or by email at [ucreitzu@uncg.edu](mailto:ucreitzu@uncg.edu)

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

Benefits of this study may improve educators' and business/community leaders' effectiveness in building effective home-school-community partnerships and may help educators establish parent involvement activities that meet the needs of all parents.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

Parents will get the opportunity to reflect upon their strengths, challenges, and needs in the area of parent involvement. The information gathered may give educators additional strategies to increase parental involvement.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

Parents who participate in all 6 sessions of this study will receive a \$100.00 gift card at the end of the study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

To protect your privacy, all demographic surveys will be coded with identification numbers and not by participants' names. All data collection procedures are confidential and interview transcriptions will be coded with identification numbers and not by participants' names. All information is confidential and will be kept in a locked file cabinet and all electronic files with participants' responses will be password protected. All data will be disposed after three years. "All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law." No names of people, school or school district will be used when data are reported.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

"You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped."

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

"If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you."

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by

\_\_\_\_\_.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX G**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS**

**Interview Protocol**

**Name of Interviewee:**

**Date of Interview:**

**Place of Interview:**

**Purpose of the interview:**

This interview is being conducted as a part of a research project and your participation is voluntary. The purpose of my study is to examine African American parents' perceptions, values, and their beliefs about parent involvement (their role and the role of educators and the community) and to hear their voice on ways to establish effective home-school-community partnerships. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an African American parent with at least one child who attends a Title I middle school.

**Confidentiality:**

The information shared in this interview is confidential and interview transcriptions will use pseudonyms and not participants' names. All information will be coded electronically and participants' responses will be password protected.

**Format:**

It will take approximately an hour to complete the interview. All responses will be audio recorded using a Digital Voice Recorder. If you need clarification on any question as the interview is being conducted, please feel free to ask. If you have any questions after the interview, I can be reach via cell phone at (336) 848-0232 or by email at [cabrown5@uncg.edu](mailto:cabrown5@uncg.edu)

<p><b>Purpose of the study:</b></p> <p><i>To examine parents' perceptions, values, and their beliefs about parent involvement (their role and the role of the educators and the community) and their voice on ways to establish home-school-community partnerships.</i></p>	<p><b>Interview Questions</b></p> <p><b>Opening Questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about yourself.</li> <li>• Describe the school your child attends.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Questions</b></p>	<p><b>Interview Questions (continued)</b></p>
<p><b>What are low-income African American parents' perceptions about their role in the education of their children?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role should parents play in the education of their children?</li> <li>• What determines whether you will participate in parent involvement activities initiated by the school?</li> <li>• What does parent involvement look like to you?</li> </ul>
<p><b>What are low-income African American parents' beliefs and values about home-school partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What types of parent involvement activities are held at your child's school?</li> <li>• How do you feel about these activities that are held at school?</li> <li>• What is a home-school partnership?</li> <li>• Are home-school partnerships important? Why or Why not?</li> </ul>
<p><b>What strategies should educators employ to help low-income African American parents be more successful in working with their children at home and in school?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do educators do to try to get you involved in the education of your child?</li> <li>• Is there anything the school can do to make these activities better? If so, what?</li> <li>• If you were responsible for increasing parent involvement at your school, what would you do?</li> <li>• Is there anything that educators can do to help you feel better about your involvement in the education of your child?</li> </ul>
<p><b>What role do low-income African American parents feel the community play in helping or hindering the academic and social success of their children?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you think the community play a role in the education of children? Is so, what is their role?</li> <li>• What does a home-school-community partnership look like to you?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Questions regarding race and socioeconomic status (Social Justice Framework)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel that race and socioeconomic status (how much money you make) influence your involvement at school? Is so, in what way?</li> <li>• Do you feel that your parent involvement experience would be different if you were Caucasian or if your socioeconomic status was different?</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your parent involvement experience?</li> <li>• Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview with me. I appreciate it.</li> </ul>

### **Focus Group Guide/Questions**

Data from the individual interviews will be discussed with parents before focus group interview begins. Additional questions may be included as a result of the analysis of data from the individual interviews.

***Researcher: Today, we will focus on parent involvement issues in public middle/high schools.***

The three research questions will guide the discussion.

1. What are parents' perceptions about their role in the education of their children?
2. What are parents' beliefs and values about home, school, and community partnerships?
3. What are parents' perceptions about the school's attempt to engage or involve parents?

***Researcher: Now we will focus our discussion on race, socioeconomic status and parent involvement.***

1. Do you feel that race and socioeconomic status (how much money you make) influence your interactions with school personnel or your involvement in the school? If so, in what way?
2. Do you feel that your parent involvement experiences would be different if you were white or your socioeconomic status was different?

3. As an African American parent with your socioeconomic status, is there anything that educators can do to empower you or to help you feel better about your involvement in the education of your child/ren?

***Researcher will ask whether anyone else had anything to add to the conversation.***

***Additional concerns may be discussed based upon parents' perceptions.***

## **APPENDIX H**

### **PARENT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PPLC) PROTOCOL**

#### **PPLC – Session One – Data Analysis**

##### Part I – Focus Group Data Analysis

- A. “How To” Session –Overview of Analysis Interviews (individual and focus group)
- B. Discussion codes generated from the interviews

##### Part II - Website Critique (See Appendix B for specific questions asked)

- A. School District Website – Parent and Community Section
- B. School Website – Parent and Community Section

#### **PPLC – Session Two – School Data and Parent Advocacy**

##### Part I – School Report Card

- A. Comparison of EOG school and district data
- B. Teacher quality information

##### Part II - Parent Advocacy

#### **PPLC – Session Three – Summing it Up**

##### Part I – Parents Strengths, Needs, and Challenges

##### Part II – Preparing for Presentation

#### **PPLC – Session Four -Continuation- Preparing for Presentation**

**APPENDIX I**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

**Participant's ID # \_\_\_\_\_**

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female
3. Martial Status: \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed
4. What is your highest level of education?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Less than high school  
\_\_\_\_\_ Graduate from high school  
\_\_\_\_\_ Some College/ Associate Degree  
\_\_\_\_\_ Bachelor's Degree  
\_\_\_\_\_ Master's Degree  
\_\_\_\_\_ Advanced or Professional degree (e.g., Ed.S., M.D., MBA, Ph.D.)
5. Please circle your *yearly* household income range:  
\$0 - \$15,000  
\$15,000 - \$25,000  
\$26,000 - \$35,000  
\$36,000 - \$45,000  
\$45,000 - \$55,000  
\$56,000 - \$65,000  
\$66,000 - \$75,000  
\$76,000 or more
6. How many people live in your household? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Please note the age, grade and sex of your **school-age** child(ren) below. Include any step-children that live in your household at least 50% of the time.

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Sex</b>
<b>Child 1</b>			
<b>Child 2</b>			
<b>Child 3</b>			
<b>Child 4</b>			

Thank you for completing this survey.

## APPENDIX J

### LIST OF INITIAL CODES

Accountability	Race	Appreciation
Stereotypes	Benefits of Parent Involvement	Teamwork
Advocate/advocacy	Faces of Parent Involvement	Challenges
Timeliness	Voice	Common Core
Identity	Culture	Instruction
Change	Technology	Quality Teachers
Community	Gender	Communication
Partnerships	Needs	Testing
Socioeconomic status	Frustrations	Dissatisfied
Motivation	Participation	Care