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This study explores African American mothers' special education decision making process and how their decisions are influenced by the politics of containment—racist power structures embedded into American society which seek to monitor, classify, and control—and how they endeavor to resist these power structures. Specifically, I am interested in how some African American mothers are included or excluded from the decision making process and what implications this inclusion or exclusion may have on the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education. This study relies on phenomenological, qualitative research methodology based on a conceptual framework with roots in black feminist theory, critical race theory and Foucault's theory on power. Combined, these theories address how the politics of containment influences African American mothers' experiences making decisions for their children in special education. In order to thoroughly examine the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of this phenomenon, this includes historical, theoretical and empirical components. Taken together, the data presented here suggests that in spite of their advocacy efforts African American mothers receive limited power in the special education decision making process.

AN HISTORICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MOTHERS SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION MAKING
PROCESS: EXAMINING RACE, GENDER AND THE
POLITICS OF CONTAINMENT

by

April Y. Ruffin-Adams

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Committee Chair

To my Daddy, Benjamin S. Ruffin, whose memory and spirit encourages me to run after my dreams of freedom, justice, and equality. I love you and miss you more than words can express.

To my son Frederick Bertrand Adams III and my daughter Avary Elizabeth Adams, the two most present reminders and reasons for hope in my life. You make my heart happy.

Last but not least, to my husband whose love and support has helped me to accomplish my dreams.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by April Y. Ruffin-Adams, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education in the United States promises opportunity, possibility, and advantage to all citizens. These promises are based on this country's philosophical commitments to freedom, justice, and equality. In reality, citizenship implies a sense of humanity and the agency to freely pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Unfortunately, for many African Americans the promise of equality has been elusive because of the persistence and pervasiveness of racial oppression that still exists in the United States (Bell, 1996). These inequities also persist in schools, where instead of offering possibilities, education has been used as an instrument to further exclude many African American students from the promise of substantive citizenship. A clear example of the exclusion of African American students from obtaining substantive citizenship-true integration and acceptance into all levels of society- through education can be seen in the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education (Blanchett, 2006).

There is a need for schools in the United States that equalize the educational outcomes for all students. Despite social and economic advancements, a Black child still lacks a fair opportunity to live, learn, prosper, and contribute to in America (Collins, 1998), this reality illustrates the fact that race is still an issue in the United States. Also, there is a contradiction between the promise of equality and the actual social practices concerning African Americans. Unfortunately, the inappropriate use of special education

has become an accepted way of excluding African American children from general education settings. Although the purpose of special education programs is to provide needed services to students, many of these programs are perpetuating the exclusion and marginalization African American students from an equitable public education. It is my hope that through the information learned from the mothers in this study, educators can begin to create collaborative forms of partnership in special education.

The discriminatory practices associated with the placement of African American students in the special education system have been recognized in the literature for more than 40 years (Dunn, 1968). In fact, many educational researchers link the continuous placement of African American students in special education with the passing of civil rights legislation aimed at ending desegregation (Loder-Jackson et al., 2009; Trotman, 2001; Williams & Baber, 2007). Legal actions and the implementation of educational policy to intervene in the presence of racial bias in the special education system has been largely ineffective (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Indeed, special education has been described as a method of excluding African American students, particularly African American male students, from the general education classroom setting and curriculum (Blanchett, 2006; Hilliard; 1992; Patton, 1998). Many African American students experience inadequate instruction and unnecessary isolation from their non-identified peers in special education classrooms (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Still, because the benefits of special education have not been equitably distributed, African American students are left in a cycle that is detrimental to their long term academic and social success.

It will be the task of this dissertation to examine the phenomenon-African American mothers' special education decision making process. Specifically, I am interested in how the mothers are included or excluded from the decision making process and what implications this inclusion or exclusion may have on the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education. To that end, I have conducted a phenomenological, qualitative study based on a conceptual framework with roots in black feminist theory, critical race theory and Foucault's theory on power. Combined, these theories will allow me to address how the politics of containment influences African American mothers' experiences making decisions for their children in special education. In order to thoroughly examine the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of this phenomenon, this dissertation will include historical, theoretical and empirical components.

My Experience

To be clear about my goals and personal connection to this topic, I feel it is necessary to situate myself within my work. As a parental involvement school social worker, I was responsible for cultivating relationships with parents and school staff to help ensure student success. In my role, I was often struck by the different ideas of involvement, participation, and knowledge held by educators and parents. My perspective was unique. I understood and saw firsthand the teachers and educational leaders who worked to make the best decisions for students based on their educational knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, and too often, these decisions were not informed by a broader understanding of the child, which parents held, and they led to African American

students, especially boys, being misplaced in special education “to get some extra help.” However, research on African American boys in special education tells a different story. For African American males, a special education referral may be the first step to permanent social and educational disenfranchisement (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

During my visits to students’ homes, it was mothers who most often expressed concern and resignation about the possibility of their children being placed in special education. In many cases, the mothers viewed the impending placement as negative; yet, they felt compelled to follow the school’s recommendations for their children. Through my conversations with many of the mothers I visited, I learned how they were involved in their children’s education. Most of the involvement described by the participants was not visible to the school staff. The apparent invisibility of mothers at school meetings and events impacted their ability to create effective partnerships with their children’s teachers and school leaders—partnerships that could have opened up lines of communication and trust to prevent misinformed special education referrals or facilitate proper placement thereby minimizing the oppressive impact of the politics of containment.

While my experience working with exceptional children centered, in large part, on working with students who have behavioral disabilities, it is important to recognize the unique role mothers of children with developmental disabilities play in their children’s special education decision making. For the participants, ensuring their children’s best educational opportunities and outcomes often motivates their involvement. The concerns of these mothers contribute to the ways they choose to be involved in their children’s education. Understanding what motivates the active

involvement of the participants may assist educators and community leaders in developing policies and programs to encourage mothers of students with behavioral disabilities to become more involved in their children's educational decision making.

Focus

African American mothers' involvement in their children's education has been an issue of debate and discussion for many years. Instances could range from African American slave mothers secretly teaching their children to read or perhaps social justice minded women's organization coalesced to fight school segregation (Blanchett, 2006). African American mothers are and have always been central role players in their children's education (Collins, 1994). However, the issue remains if the participants play such a critical part in their children's lives why has it historically been difficult for educators and mothers to form collaborative relationships that influence meaningful change to an educational system riddled with injustices against African American students, especially those with disabilities? Educators interested in forming inclusive and collaborative relationships with African American mothers must be aware of the ways the participants have experienced schools in the past. The ways the participants choose to be involved in their children's education reflects a history of marginalization and exclusion based on a system of racism, sexism, and classism. According to Williams and Baber (2009), African American parents found it difficult to trust schools with the education of their children because many educators failed to understand how historical realities connect to current ones. This means parents feel that racial differences play a major role

in the provision of educational services to their children and makes it difficult to form effective partnerships with school leaders.

To address the difficult relationships between African American mothers and educators, many scholars advocate cultural competence (Claus-Ehlers, Weist, Gregory, Hull, 2010), culturally responsive teaching (Irvine, Armento, Causey, Jones, 2001; Gay, 2010), and culturally reciprocal relationship building (Williams & Baber, 2007) theories as ways for educators to create more effective collaborations with African American mothers. However, the experiences of many African American mothers indicate that these theories have not improved educational practice, especially as it relates to special education. Therefore it is time for scholars to look to more comprehensive theories to adequately address the issues impacting African American mothers' participation, involvement, and advocacy for their children in special education. For instance, Cooper (2005) examined how rational choice theories were unable to adequately describe the realities of African American mothers' decision making. According to Cooper (2005) positioned choice is a factor that is overlooked in many instances regarding mothers who are making educational decisions for their children:

The notion of positioned choice helps to contextualize the mothers' decision-making and assess the mothers' decisions on their own terms and according to their distinct standpoint. The positioned choice perspective does not negate African American mothers' rationality or logic. To the contrary, the data reveal that the women in this study are very rational, but in a more complex and sophisticated way than rational choice assumptions indicate. (p. 185)

This means African American mothers' educational decision making must be considered regarding the importance of socio-cultural, historical and racial contexts that inform their

decisions. Therefore, in order to represent and examine the lives of African American mothers a complex, sophisticated, and comprehensive theoretical framework is needed to address the complicated existence and experience of African American women who occupy multiple social political and historical spaces.

I have combined several complimentary theories to consider the standpoint of African American mothers' special education decision-making process. Standpoint is an achieved collective identity or consciousness which emerges when those who are marginalized and relatively invisible from the vantage point of the privileged become conscious of their social situation with respect to socio-political power and oppression, and begin to find a voice (Bowell, 2011; Harding, 2004). The combination of theories allows for a more robust and meaningful analysis of how and why African American mothers participate in their children's education. First, the work of Michel Foucault (1977) and his discussion of power is used to highlight the historical relationship between knowledge and power in modern society. Next, critical race theory (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1999) is added to provide a historical lens for the racial inequities embedded into the legal and education institutions in the United States. Finally, black feminist theory will complete the framework merging the theories to address the impact the politics of containment (Collins, 1998) has on the lives of African American mothers' special education decision making process. It is my contention that understanding the historical contexts of African American parent involvement can help to shed light on contemporary parent involvement, participation,

and advocacy efforts leading to more effective relationships between educators and parents.

The new theoretical framework I have formed by integrating and extending existing theories lends itself to a qualitative research methodology. A phenomenological research design allows participants to articulate and define their lived experiences. By giving mothers the opportunity to be heard we can give validity to their experiences and understand the motivations for their decisions and behavior (Cooper, 2005, 2007).

Interviews conducted for this study poignantly provide a glimpse into the reality of six mothers who are involved in the special education decision making process on a regular basis. Further, a historical snapshot of Winston-Salem, North Carolina is used to highlight and provide context for the racial and social tensions that have existed in the local community for many decades. Synthesizing an historical understanding of African American parents in Winston-Salem with empirical data gained from the experience of African American mothers analyzed through a new theoretical perspective will contribute to the educational literature by adding insight into the dilemmas facing African American mothers involved in the special education decision making process and provide information to improve school-family partnerships.

Purpose

Although there is an abundance of research on the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, little is known about how African American parents make decisions regarding their sons' special education placement. African American parents involved in the special education process have a unique and

often undervalued knowledge of their children's educational ability (Trotman, 2001), and they should be encouraged to participate in the referral process (Harry, 1992). Literature on the special education process has emphasized the low levels of involvement from African American families with children having high incidence disabilities (Harry, 1992; Rao, 2005). The perceived lack of participation often leads teachers and other educational professionals to believe that African American parents are apathetic regarding decisions pertaining to their children's education (Cooper, 2003; Harry, 1992; Rao, 2005; Trotman, 2001). Interestingly, these views conflict with commonly held beliefs in the African American community that educational attainment is essential for progress and they fail to recognize the multiple forms of parental involvement (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Cooper, 2007; Hurd & Edwards, 1995; Trotman, 2001).

Focus on African American Mothers

Most of the literature on parental involvement describes it in terms that do not depict gender; however according to Cooper (2005, 2007) parental involvement is gendered work, specifically referring to the work that many mothers do in their role as primary caregivers to their children. Conversely, most of the special education referral literature describes the involvement of parents, not mothers. Consequently, the voice of the African American mother has largely been excluded from the special education literature, with few exceptions. For instance, Rao (2000) examined the relationships between African American mothers and special education school personnel and found that school personnel have negative perceptions of African American mothers that reflect disrespect and a focus on children's deficits. She also found that professionals discount

the cultural differences that may impact parenting styles. Understanding the historical context and meaning associated with African American mothers' decisions to participate in their children's education can explain their involvement in schools. Because African American mothers must deal with being viewed as incapable of making rational decisions and adult behavior, allowing them to share their decision making strategies is vital to improving parent-school relations (Collins, 1998; Cooper, 2007; Ruffin-Adams & Wilson, 2012). Furthermore, because women of color make decisions for their children based on issues of survival, identity, and power, placing the focus on race, class, and gender is also critical to understanding mothers' standpoint (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2005).

Research Questions

Research questions for this study were developed based on the historical, empirical, and theoretical goals of a phenomenological, qualitative study. The questions are as follows:

1. How are African American mothers included or excluded from their children's special education decision making process? What are the mothers' experiences making decisions for children? How are these decisions impacted by race, class, gender?
2. How is the historical marginalization of African American families in education generally, and in special education specifically, reflected in the contemporary experiences of African American mothers in special education?

3. What are the possibilities for an equitable, socially just framed set of solutions that will make lasting changes and correct the inequitable treatment African American mothers and their children have experienced in this country's special educational system? How must this change be articulated?

These questions will help my examination of the phenomenon-African American mothers' special education decision process and how the politics of containment impacts this decision making process.

Relevance

This study situates the voice, experience, and perceived reality of African American mothers in the special education decision making process within the historical and contemporary contexts of the community in which they live. Because parents are meant to be included as fundamental participants in schools (Sheldon, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010), it is critical that educators understand the standpoint of the participants in order to build better school-family partnerships with African American families. As Lindsay (2000) states, "the stories we reveal as we tell each other of our experiences have meaning in terms of what we do with other people" (p. 165). Further, it is crucial that the voice and experience of African American mothers be used to develop a counterstory that reframes deficit-based images and perceptions of parent involvement and participation for educators and reshapes educators' expectations of involvement from African American parents. Although today's students attend schools in vastly different social and political environments than students forty years ago and many more educational opportunities exist, some of the same racial injustices persist in schools. Brush (2005)

explains, “we cannot assume that the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions of racism end where expanded opportunity structures and pronouncement of racial equality begin” (p. 194). Because issues of racial disparity still permeates the special education dialogue it is important to ask, “is this problem intractable or does society just not care?” (Lashley, 2011). Indeed, it is time to move beyond the knowledge of problems and push towards meaningful and lasting solutions, likewise “naming and identifying inequity is only the first step of the struggle. We need to push ourselves to not just name inequity but also to dissect the process within which it happens and interrupt that practice” (Smiley, 2009, p. 18). The participants in this study are six African American mothers attempting to maneuver through the myriad of decisions needed when you have children in special education, and where possible, interrupting the process of injustice to ensure the best educational opportunities for their children. In addition to having at least one child in special education, each of the participants must efficiently juggle several other roles, including wife, employee, and mother. The lived experiences of the participants are influenced by a history of injustice and a need to combat that injustice with advocacy.

The introduction of a new theoretical framework in special education that addresses the complicated historical and contemporary realities of African American women along with qualitative data findings from this study has implications for improved policy development and practice. Findings from this study will speak to the unique roles African American parents play in the educational system by providing an understanding of how these mothers view their own involvement. Additionally, and most importantly,

this study offers insight about creating the needed solutions to break the cycle of inequality that exists in our current educational system. The findings of the study might also serve as lessons learned and knowledge gained by other African American mothers that may be transferable to current and future generations of African American mothers making special education decisions for their children, who might use the knowledge gained to foster their resiliency and develop survival skills and knowledge when they face some of the same situations.

This study reminds us of the history of oppression in our society and in schools, informs our knowledge of African American mothers' standpoint, and in so doing, helps to broaden the knowledge base about parent involvement and African American families. It also explores how meanings of race, class, and power emerge and interrelate in schools. As a result, the findings of this study add to the body of research that concerns how race, class, and power interconnect in the special education decision making process.

Organization

The purpose of Chapter II, then, is to provide a history of special education highlighting the role of parent advocacy and involvement in of educational policy legislation, as well as an overview of the literature on African American parent involvement in education to shed light on parents' decision making process. Additionally, a conceptual framework is described which serves to explain the complicated nature of African American women's existence in the United States by linking theories that address the historical and contemporary nuances of race, class, gender, and power. Chapter III is outlines the methodology and research design for the study. Chapter IV describes the

findings from the interview data and includes a brief historical snapshot of the small southern city where this research takes place with particular emphasis on educational inequities. The final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter V, is an attempt to analyze themes and the common experiences of the mothers who participated in this study, given the historical context, using the conceptual framework. The chapter will conclude with new theorizing and recommendations for research, theory, and practice for a re-articulated vision of educational opportunities for African American students in special education, and all students, based on social justice advocacy and educational liberation ideals and an acknowledgement of the history and impact of racism on the attainment of the educational equity for all students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The use of special education as a method of segregation for African American students has been a decisive concern addressed in educational literature for more than forty years (Dunn, 1968; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Moore, 2002; West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006). Therefore, special education must be examined from its historical position within the regular education system in the United States to understand how the inequities in the system impact African American students (Artiles, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Hilliard, 1992). This historical link has palpable implications for the current treatment of African American students, especially African American male students in special education, who are overwhelmingly classified as mildly mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed (Artiles, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry, 2006; Hilliard, 1992; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Patton, 1998; Skiba et al., 2006). This chapter consists of two sections, first a review of the relevant literature combined with a historical perspective of special education; followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework for this study.

Part I. A Historical Portrait of Special Education

African American men and women have been excluded from the educational system from their forced arrival in the United States (Patton, 1998). The Supreme Court's pivotal *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) ruling promised the end of school

segregation on the basis of race and it mandated the equitable treatment of African American children in schools. The landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) ruling on school desegregation granted African American students equal access to schools, and has been declared one of the most important court rulings in American history (Bell, 2004; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The *Brown* decision was one step in a long battle for freedom, justice, and equality fought for by African Americans. Indeed, the legal advancements made by African American parents served as the impetus for the special education movement (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Spring, 2005). Their diligence in pursuing a legal end to school segregation inspired parents of children with disabilities to advocate for equal rights on behalf of their children. However, the *Brown* decision resulted in two unexpected outcomes. One unexpected outcome is the disproportionate number of referrals and placement of African American students in high incidence disability categories. Another unexpected outcome of the decision is the use of special education classrooms as a form of *de facto* segregation (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beacham, 2005; Hilliard, 1992; Patton, 1998).

Dependence on Medical Model

The special education system justifies the continued segregation of African American students by relying on a medical model as a technique to place and serve students (Artiles, 1994; Deno, 1970; Harry, 1994; Hilliard, 1992; Patton, 1998). By using a medical model, proponents of the special education believe human error and influence is eliminated from the evaluation and placement process. The medical model is based on

a narrative which enforces a functional/psychological/scientific standard in special education (Deno, 1970; Patton, 1998). This model is described by Patton (1998):

(1) Assumes disability is a pathological condition students have, (2) asserts a belief that differential diagnosis is objective and useful, (3) defines special education as a rationally conceived and coordinated system of services that benefits diagnosed students, and (4) believes that progress results from rational technological improvements in diagnostic and instructional strategies (p. 27)

Deno (1970) stressed the pathological nature of the model because it focused on a within child, deficit approach that deflects the emphasis away from external factors educators could impact. The use of the medical model has contributed to the overrepresentation of African American students, particularly African American male students, in three high incidence disability categories: mildly mentally retarded (MMR), specific learning disabled (SLD), and serious emotional disturbance (SED; Artiles et al. 1994, 2004; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry et al., 1992, 1994, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006). The subjective nature of these disability categories relies on professional judgment not biological criteria, as a result, the possibility for bias in the referral and assessment process increases (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Rogers, 2003). Therefore, a critique of the special education decision making process is needed to acknowledge the failure of the medical model and its attempts to objectively diagnose subjective disabilities given the ambiguity of the decision-making process in the special education system regarding whom to test, what tests to use, and how to interpret results (Donovan & Cross, 2002). According to Ladson-Billings (1999):

Throughout U.S. history the subordination of Blacks has been built on “scientific” theories (e.g. intelligence testing), each of which depends on racial stereotypes about Blacks that makes their condition appear appropriate. (p. 23)

Consequently, special educators must address whether stereotypes and unrecognized biased practices perpetuate myths about Blacks and Whites that support the hegemonic function of excluding African American students from attaining citizenship through education (Crenshaw, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Recognizing the biases present in the decision making process is critical because students who are not inappropriately referred to special education are not inappropriately placed in special education.

The impartiality of the medical model is corroborated by the use of standardized tests which are used to assess students’ needs. Advocates for current testing procedures assert some aspects of the special education process are subjective, however they maintain the use of standardized tests is unbiased. Kunjufu (2005) refutes this claim and explains that current assessment practices are not culturally appropriate for African American students, especially African American male students who are overrepresented in all learning disability categories. The test administrator’s decision making process in selecting the types of tests and interview procedures used to assess students allows more subjectivity in the assessment process (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Artiles & Trent, 1994). Current testing procedures assume there is a right or wrong answer and fail to address the cultural diversity of students; moreover, current procedures do not consider how cultural differences may impact test scores of minority students (Kunjufu, 2005; Mills, 2003; Porter, 1997).

Dawning of Disproportionality

The disproportionate representation of African American students in segregated classrooms for mildly mentally retarded (MMR) students was brought to national attention by Lloyd Dunn (1968). This seminal work acknowledged a link between low socioeconomic level and placement in the MMR disability category. Dunn underscored the normative model of students that most educators used to evaluate students behavioral and educational needs (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Further, he linked educational deficits and poverty to minority representation in special education based on White educators' historically deficit-based view of African Americans. The study acknowledged minority students were referred to and placed in the MMR disability category because of the "nebulous and subjective nature of the constructs used to develop the tests" (Artiles, 1998, p. 416). The tests used were able to justify mentally retarded classification of African American students. In addition, labeling students substantiated segregated placement based on disability diagnosis, and grouped students by label not instructional need (Pfeiffer, 1980). Influenced by Dunn's (1968) work, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) began collecting survey data on special education classes across the United States. Particular interest was given to the processes that led to the overrepresentation of African American students, especially African American males in the MMR category.

Implementing IDEA

By the 1970's, the *Brown* decision that mandated school desegregation along racial lines was fully implemented. As schools made the transition to full integration, a more sophisticated form of segregation emerged. African American students, particularly

African American male students, were being referred to special education classrooms in the mildly mentally retarded and learning disabled categories (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Blanchett, Mumford, Beachum, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). In 1971, two notable court cases brought special education and the referral of African American students to national attention. In *Larry P. v. Riles* (1971), the plaintiffs argued the use of IQ testing led to the inappropriate placement of African American students in segregated MMR classrooms. The California judge ruled on behalf of the plaintiffs, finding the referral and placement of African American students in MMR classrooms discriminatory (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Blanchett, Mumford, Beachum, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Spring, 2005). The decision also banned the use of IQ testing and urged educators to find culturally relevant assessments. That same year, the most significant ruling on behalf of children with disabilities occurred when the Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) objected to the conditions of the Pennhurst State School and Hospital and condemned the “separate but equal” settings provided to their children in state hospitals for the disabled (Osgood, 2007; Spring, 2005). In the *PARC v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) court case, attorneys for the parents focused on the right of all children to receive an education. The combined impact of the two cases has contributed to the educational legislation, practices, and policies that are still used to address the rights of students with special needs.

Educational research and litigation continued throughout the 1970’s highlighting the inequities in the special education system and prompting the federal government to

address the rights of students with disabilities by passing the Education for All Handicapped Children (EHCA) Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). The legislation assists states by providing federal guidelines and funding for students with disabilities to support access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The EHCA derives from the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which grants full citizenship to all people born in the United States, due process, equal protection under the law, and incorporation. Additionally, students must be provided with services that meet their individual needs in the least restrictive environment possible (Artiles, Trent, Palmer, 2004). Further, the law gives states and local education agencies (LEAs) the ability to decide how to effectively serve students with disabilities. EHCA also implemented due process procedures that require the participation of parents in the referral, assessment, and placement processes (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). These procedures were implemented to ensure the just and equitable treatment of students with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2006). EHCA, reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), has been amended four times since its initial ratification. The most recent amendment in 2004 aligns the legislation with No Child Left Behind and the Family Education Rights and Protection Act. In addition, the new amendments specifically address disproportionality and implement procedures to collect data, review and revise policies, practices and procedures that may impact disproportionality.

Understanding Special Education Legislation in the United States

Special education was formalized under federal law by Congress in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Act. Reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) act, the legislation is considered by many disability advocates as the most important document for special education (Allen-Meares, 2007) because it was the first legislation to allocate federal funding for the education of students with disabilities. The IDEA legislation was enacted to ensure that all students receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment possible, in addition to protecting the rights of parents and their children with disabilities. Special education is defined in the IDEA legislation as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parent, to meet the unique needs of the exceptional child and may include instruction provided in the classroom, in the home, in the hospital, and in residential facilities and other settings” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, p. 12). In North Carolina, children with disabilities include those with autism, hearing impairments, visual impairments, mental disabilities, speech-language impairment, traumatic brain injury, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments (North Carolina Board of Education [NCBE], 2008).

It is important to understand the two broad disability categories: low incidence and high incidence disabilities. The categories are determined based on their occurrence in the general population. Low incidence disabilities are typically described as the biological or developmental disabilities children have that impact their education. High incidence disabilities can be explained as the subjectively defined disabilities not usually

identified prior to students entering school. According to Reschly (2002) these disabilities, such as learning disabled, mildly mentally retarded, and behaviorally and emotionally disabled, can be explained by a social system model because they are not directly linked to biological or developmental factors.

Summary of IDEA

Identification and referral. The identification for low incidence disabilities usually occurs before the children leave the hospital setting after birth, thus before children with low incidence disabilities enter school they have usually been referred to receive special education services. The decision making process for high incidence disabilities begins when teachers become aware of students with academic achievement and behavioral problems (Hosp & Reschly, 1993). After a student is referred by his or her teacher to be evaluated for a specific disability requiring special education services, IDEA requires a group of qualified individuals, often called a child study team, to determine whether or not an evaluation should be conducted. If an evaluation is necessary, several tests are given to the student to determine if s/he qualify for special education services. The child study team usually involves teachers, school administrators, psychologists, speech language pathologists, special education teachers, a school social worker, and parents of referred students. School social workers involved in the special education decision making process are in a unique position to advocate for early intervention for behavioral and educational problems, inform parents of their rights, and counter deficit-based assumptions of African American families (Allen-Meares, 2007). Drawing on their relationships with students in multiple contexts, social workers can

consult with teachers as they make decisions to refer students for educational assessments that may potentially lead to special education placement. By asserting their role effectively, school social workers can contribute to the reduction of inappropriate special education referrals.

Evaluation of children. Tests used to evaluate the student should not be racially or culturally biased. All screenings, evaluations, and testing must be completed prior to students being placed in special education. Each selected test must examine the specific disability for which the student is being referred, and more than one test should be used to evaluate for the disability. A variety of information should be gathered from as many sources as possible to ensure the use of “relevant functional and developmental” information is collected about the child (NCBE, 2008). Parents have the opportunity to provide additional information. In addition, when evaluating limited English proficient students, steps must be taken to ensure the evaluation is measuring the extent to which the disability is impacting the students learning rather than measuring the students English language skills. Parents have the right to request an independent educational evaluation be conducted by a qualified examiner not affiliated with the school system. After evaluation process is completed, the child study team will meet with the parent or parents to discuss the data collected and possible options for the student and to provide a copy of the eligibility documents to the parent. If a recommendation for special education is determined an individualized educational plan meeting will be scheduled to customize the special education services needed for the student.

Individualized educational programs (IEP). Individualized educational programs are developed to formalize any decisions made on behalf a exceptional needs students. These legal documents contain several standard statements that must be developed, reviewed, and revised regularly. These standards include:

- (1) Must reflect the child's academic level and educational performance, additionally this statement should explain how the child's disability ;
- (2) A statement of long term and short goals for the school year;
- (3) A statement of any special education services, related services, and supplementary aids and services the student needs to advance towards annual goals;
- (4) An explanation of how the student will or will not participate with nondisabled students in regular classroom and extracurricular activities, as well as how the child will be assessed;
- (5) The date the services will begin and end;
- (6) Any needed transitions for accommodations taking place after the ages of 14 and 16;
- (7) A statement of how your child will be measured for progress towards the annual goals, what the specific progress is, and how the parent will be notified of the progress (NCBE, 2008).

One of the major goals of IDEA is to educate students in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Children with disabilities should, as stated in IDEA (2004), to the maximum extent possible, be educated with students who are not disabled unless the nature of his or her disability prohibits this possibility. Due process procedural safeguards were implemented in the IDEA (2004) regulations to ensure that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). If parents and educators fail to agree on the identification, placement, evaluation or provision of FAPE then a due process hearing may be held to resolve the conflict. The hearing is held in a court room

and presided over by an Administrative Law Judge in the Office of Administrative Hearings (NCBE, 2008).

Parent involvement. The school is responsible for ensuring that at least one parent or legal guardian of the referred child is present for any meetings related to their child's education. If parents are unable to attend the meeting, the meeting can still be held as long as the school has documented its attempts to contact the students' parents. Although the formal guidelines for meetings are in place in all public schools, actual practice may differ from the stated procedures. A quote from Harry and Klingner (2006) provides one illustration of how decisions take place within the decision making process from the perspective of a school psychologist concerning his/her role:

I test; I write my report; I write my recommendations and I give it to the placement specialist . . . We discuss it and we come to a decision. And we discuss it prior to the meeting just to make sure we are providing the best for the child. And once we have a unified front for the parents, we can bring them in just so they know what is going on. (p. 91)

This quote describes the multiple ways that bias can inform the special education decision-making process. Although it shows educational professionals working to provide "the best for the child," the decisions are made without input from the student's family. Ultimately, the meeting process is just a formality. Further, the agreed upon recommendations reflect the judgments of the professionals involved the referral culture at a particular school instead of a collaborative effort of parents, like African American mothers, and educational professionals working together on the students' behalf. This

example may highlight and expose some flaws in the special education decision making process.

Referrals to special education must meet specific qualifications to demonstrate that students meet the criteria for a disability category (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). The disability categories where African American boys are disproportionately represented are learning disabled (LD) which is described as a discrepancy between IQ and achievement; educable or mildly mentally retarded (EMR or MMR) describes a student whose scores fall below the standard age norms; and behaviorally/emotionally disturbed (B/ED) which occurs when academic achievement is impacted by behavioral and emotional difficulties in classroom settings (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Although teachers must ensure that students meet the qualifications for a category, referrals for special education assessment must be academic and not behavioral in nature. The distinction between behavioral and academic referrals was implemented through the IDEA reauthorization in an attempt to reduce the number of minority referrals to special education based on behavioral problems alone (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

African American Families and School Involvement

African American children and their families are often characterized by educational professionals in stereotypical or deficit-based ways. Children who come from families and communities with low incomes are especially at risk for special education identification and placement (Kearns et al., 2005; Moore, 2002; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001; Hamovitch, 1999; West-Olatunji et al., 2006). As a result, special education is viewed by

some educators as a dumping ground for minority students (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Contextual variables have implications for minority students' achievement and success in regular education and special education programs. Poverty is often cited in the literature as a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education (Allen-Meares, 2007; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Knotek, 2003; Mills, 2003). According to Knotek (2003), "African American students are more likely than White students to be at risk for bias in their student support teams simply by virtue of being in the 'wrong' socioeconomic status" (p. 12). Although poverty is often cited as a contributing factor in the need for special education, it does not explain overrepresentation in national data which contradicts the commonly accepted notion in the literature (Allen-Meares, 2007; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). The literature consistently demonstrates the decision making process, testing and assessment, and teacher bias contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Specifically, African American children from low income families and communities are at risk for inappropriate identification and placement in the high incidence disability categories of educable (EMR) or mildly mentally retarded (MMR), behavioral/emotional disorders (B/ED), and learning disabled (LD; Hamovitch, 1999; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Moore, 2002; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001).

Deficit-Based Views of African American Students and Families

Research has reinforced the deficit-based belief that poor, African American students are intellectually inferior. In a mixed methods study that examined how school psychologists perceive the disproportionate representation of African American boys in special education, Kearns et al. (2005) found that many school psychologists believe African American parents pass down inferior intellect resulting in a generational academic disadvantage. In an ethnographic study about African American boys' schooling experiences, Duncan (2002) noted African American boys are regarded as a "strange" population, because they "possess values and attitudes that require explication and clarification because they are fundamentally different from those of the rest of society" (pp. 132–133). These perceived differences make the marginalization and exclusion they experience in school settings seem natural and a part of their own doing (Duncan, 2002). For these reasons, disproportionality is of particular interest to school social workers because of the profession's commitments to culturally competent practice that seeks "to eliminate poverty, discrimination, and oppression" (CSWE, 2001).

The effects of teacher bias and affiliation with dominant knowledge views can lead to the marginalization of African American boys from an equitable education. In a case illustration where a brief solution focused, social work intervention was applied; Watkins and Kurtz (2001) found that:

Whereas teachers' problem saturated stories may change (after intervention), their deep-seated perceptions of "aggressive" African American boys may be difficult to alter substantially in a short period. Thus, ongoing vigilance is essential in helping teachers work toward ending stereotyping of African American young men. (p. 231)

Although, teachers' negative opinions about their African American male students changed after the intervention, their bias towards the students remained. The educators' lingering bias in this illustration depicts the permanence of racism in American society and the educational system (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). Educators must develop an understanding of culturally diverse learners to overcome bias by resisting the status quo, and forces that promote educational inequality (Cooper, 2003).

Moore (2002) explains that "establishment bias" (p. 635), which maintains that teachers are more sympathetic towards students who share their social class and cultural values, impacts teachers' perceptions of students regardless of the race of the teachers. African American teachers, according to Moore (2005) were critical of African American boys whom they believed behaved in a culturally unacceptable manner, displayed language difficulties, and were not aesthetically pleasing. These biases lead African American and White teachers to refer African American boys to special education because of subconscious beliefs about minority children that are based on stereotypical cultural characteristics that are identified as different in schools.

As educational professionals, it is crucial that we examine the notions of human difference and how we view this difference in our work. Artiles (1998) suggests three ways to way analyze difference. First, examine the meaning and place of race, ethnicity, and language background in our society; second, understand how we situate ourselves in research endeavors; and third, promote the necessity of a plurality of perspectives. Further, Cooper (2003) urges educators to view schools as sites of political resistance where change occurs through building of relationships with parents that challenge

discrimination and benefit students. Although research indicates there is racial bias in the special education decision making process, Kearns et al. (2005) acknowledge the personal conflict some school personnel experience when they witness racially biased practices among their colleagues because of an alliance between educational professionals.

Parent Involvement in Special Education

Parental involvement is essential for the successful academic outcomes of students (Hurd & Edwards, 1995; Hurd, Moore, & Rogers, 1995). Schools indicate a desire to have parents participate in their children's educational decisions, however many educators fail to involve parents and then blame parents for their lack of interest and desire to collaborate with schools (Cooper, 2009; Henry, 1996; Trotman, 2001). Further, some educators expect parents to participate in ways that align with the schools' prescribed agenda. There is an expectation that parents will be visible on the school site, accessible to teachers, and provide students with the necessary materials needed for academic success (Cooper, in press; Delgado-Gaitán, 1991; Lareau, 1996). Indeed, parents participate in their children's education in ways that reflect class differences (Lareau, 1996). Low income African American parents often feel isolated and marginalized in school settings (Cooper, 2005; Delgado-Gaitán, 1991; Harry, 1992; Hurd & Edwards, 1995; Lareau, 1996; Trotman, 2001). This treatment may contribute to their low visibility in schools. Although some parents may not be physically present in schools, their absence does not mean they are not actively involved in their children's education. In fact, in a study on parental involvement and African American families,

Hurd and Edwards (1995) found African American parents identified several ways that they engage in their children's schooling at home, including helping with homework, providing culturally relevant information to supplement the school curriculum, and making their children practice reading and math skills. These activities illustrate a conscious decision by the parents to be involved in their children's education.

Similarly, African American parents' participation in decisions regarding their children's special education placement is relatively low (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Harry, 1992; Rao, 2000). Low participation may be attributed to their views of the special education system. According to Boyd and Correa (2005), African American families' opinions of the special education system are shaped by several interrelated factors including: "(1) the socio-cultural experiences of African Americans in American society, (2) the development of biases toward educational professionals working within the system, and (3) their level of acculturation" (p. 3). Although African American parents initially attempt to participate in the special education process their efforts are often undermined by the structure of the special education system (Rao, 2000). According to Harry (1992) the structure of the special education system reflects two professional thought traditions:

(1) deficit view of African American parents on which compensatory education practices have been based, and (2) the medical model on which special education is based and the resulting deficit view of African American children that has promulgated by continued misassessment and miseducation. (pp. 123–124)

This belief structure deters parental advocacy and involvement from African American parents because they perceive educational professionals working within these structures

as disrespectful and discounting of cultural differences in parenting styles, focused on legal compliance and documents, and that they are viewed as at-risk (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Rao, 2000). Because African American parents feel disenfranchised, they often withdraw their participation from the entire process.

Part II. Conceptual Framework

The United States is not just the domicile of a historically specific form of racial oppression, but it sustains itself as a structure through that oppression. If race—and its strategic social and ideological deployment as racism—didn't exist, the United States severe inequalities and betrayal of its formal commitments to social equality and social justice would be readily apparent to anyone existing on this ground.

Wahneema Lubiano, *The House that Race Built* (1998)

The complex issues confronting African American mothers' special education decision making process are a result of a history of dehumanization, marginalization, and isolation in the United States that extends beyond the educational system (Hilliard, 1992; Patton, 1998). Legally sanctioned social policies have justified the exclusion of African American people from educational access, and therefore substantive citizenship rights (Collins, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Research on African American mothers should combine an awareness of institutionalized practices and personal experiences with racism that contribute to their low participation in the special education decision making process. In addition, because of the dual minority status of African American women, it is necessary to combine theoretical frameworks to gain deeper insight into their involvement in the special education decision making process. Taken together the theories presented here merge to provide a comprehensive perspective of African

American women in educational and community contexts. Further, the theories address how the politics of containment works to exclude the participants from the special education decision making process. The conceptual framework of this research study draws on Foucault's (1980) theory of power, critical race theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and black feminist theories (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984) to discuss how the politics of containment impacts African American mothers' special education decision making process. It is my assertion that the merger of these theories sheds light on the historical and contemporary issues confronting African American mothers and their children, thus an essential element in the historical, theoretical and empirical goals of this dissertation. Educators can use this framework to improve school-family partnerships to provide more equitable and just educational opportunities for African American students.

Power

The conceptual framework begins with French philosopher Michel Foucault's work on power. According to Ross (2007), "any project attempting to elucidate issues of power, knowledge, and resistance would be remiss if it failed to consider the contributions of Foucault to these understandings" (p. 1). Foucault studied the history of social control in the modern, Western world and found since the 18th century, social order has been maintained by subtle forms of disciplinary power, referring to the techniques used to train an individual and normalize them for usefulness to the society (Jardine, 2010; Jones, as cited in Ball, 1990). There are several institutions designed to enforce order using disciplinary power, namely schools, the military, asylums, and prisons.

Ultimately, according to Foucault, schools are social institutions which teach people to respond in predictable ways and education is a form of disciplinary power used to maintain social order (Cheshier, 1990; Foucault, 1980). Educational practices are associated with the emergence of modernity and these practices have a central role in the increasing professionalization and bureaucratization of western society. Additionally these practices have a direct impact on all sections of society through mass education. Foucault (1980?) viewed power as one mechanism used to objectify human beings and bringing order through their interactions with each other, he states:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (p. 98)

There are three instruments of disciplinary power which serve to control, monitor, and classify individuals: hierarchical observation (i.e. surveillance), normalizing judgment, and the examination (Jones, as cited in Ball, 1990). These instruments ensured disciplinary power was able to overrun sovereign power (laws which previously brought order to society). Hierarchical observation is highlighted in the division of labor seen in schools. Normalizing judgments are seen in the way normalizing institutions such as schools issue micropenalties for behavior, time, speech and sexuality (Foucault, 1980). Power is used to define and replicate what is "normal" and is used to enforce conformity (Jardine, 2010). Examination entails powerholders documenting and assessing whether

political subjects fits with or deviate from the norm or mainstream. Deviation from the norm is subject to punishment while rewards are given for the ability to stay within normal limits. Foucault found the examination to be the most important instrument of disciplinary power because it combines hierarchical observation with normalizing judgment. Disciplinary power and surveillance in special education are the mechanisms of control used to perpetuate the politics of containment for African American women and their children and norms defined by white, middle class, cultural standards. Thus, special education highlights the already entrenched notion of “otherness” African American families feel when they encounter many educational leaders and teachers.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged as an outgrowth of the critical legal studies (CLS) movement in the late 1970s. The CLS scholars sought to critique the prevailing doctrine of objectivity and neutrality within contemporary legal studies. CRT seeks to address the “historical centrality and complicity of the law in upholding white supremacy (and the concomitant hierarchy, of gender, class, and sexual orientation)” (West, 1995, pg. xi). Further, CRT addresses the silence of CLS scholars who claimed to deconstruct the liberal views of United States law without providing a critique of racism inherent in American life (West, 1995). CLS provided CRT with a foundation of ideas including legal indeterminacy (the idea that not every legal case has one proper outcome) and the critique of triumphalist history, (the view that conquerors always construct history so that they appear to have won fairly through superior thought and culture rather than through force of arms; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Additionally, CRT draws on the radical

feminist movement's notions of domination and power, as well as the construction of social roles. The combination of critical legal studies and radical feminist theory provides critical race theory with an interdisciplinary focus.

CRT moves beyond CLS with its critique of the racial biases inherent in the United States legal system. CRT scholars believe “that legal scholarship about race can never be written from a distance of detachment or with an attitude of objectivity” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii). Thus, CRT scholars have two common interests first, “to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America” (p. xiii). CRT scholars are particularly interested in “the relationship between the social structure and professed ideals such as the ‘rule of law’ and ‘equal protection’” (p. xiii). Second, CRT scholars endeavor to move beyond the critique of racial bias and discrimination to make substantive changes in the social order. As Crenshaw et al. explain, CRT scholars “share an ethical commitment to human liberation” (p. xiii).

Most critical race theorists believe in six unifying themes (Matsuda et al., 1993):

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law . . . critical race theorists . . . adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

Taken together, these themes “turn our attention back to the role of racialized structures of inequality to better understand not only the weaknesses and contradictions of abstract notions of equality, but their impact on students of color” (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Critical race theory in education. Critical race theory in education expands on the established themes of CRT in the law by applying these themes to analysis of education. The seminal work for CRT in education was developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV in 1995. Their pivotal article, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” introduced CRT to education and provided a critique of the multicultural paradigm. They explain that by using race as an analytical tool for understanding inequity, it becomes evident that social and educational inequities “are logical and predictable results of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47). The authors charge that viewing race as a factor in inequity is critical and that failing to do so denies the experiences of raced people and denies the problematic aspects of classification (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Essential to their analysis is an acknowledgement of CRT as more than a theoretical construct. According to Lynn and Parker (2006):

Unlike previous studies of race and education that were merely descriptive of racist acts, policies, curriculum or teachers and administrators, they (Ladson-Billings & Tate) helped to explain how a critical analysis of racism in education could lead to the development of new ways to think about the failure of schools to properly educate minority populations. (pp. 266–267)

Overall, CRT provides a needed perspective for understanding the socio-historical significance of race in the evaluation of educational practices.

CRT in education has three central propositions: “(1) race is a significant factor of the inequity in the United States, (2) American society is based on property rights rather than human rights, and (3) the intersection of race and property can be used as a tool to understand inequity” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). Central to the conceptualization of CRT in education is the construct of property, originally theorized by Harris (1995), which asserts property rights are essential to understanding the salience and conflation of race and capitalism in the United States. Property can be used as an example of how the intersection of race and class offer a more complete understanding of the inequities in schools and districts in which the majority of students are poor and of color (Sleeter & Delgado-Bernal, 2004). In its explanation of property rights versus human rights, CRT addresses the historical links between slave property and governmental policies that perpetuate inequity. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995):

The purpose of the government (during slavery) was to protect the main object of society-property. The slave status of most African Americans (as well as women and children) resulted in their being objectified as property. And, a government constructed to protect the rights of property owners lacked the incentive to secure human rights for the African American. (p. 52)

The privilege of property ownership is illustrated in schools where property taxes are used as the primary means of funding education. Because many minority students attend schools in low income districts, their schools do not receive the funding schools more

affluent neighborhoods receive because of the lack of available tax funding. As a result of inadequate funding, poor minority students are excluded from obtaining intellectual property (the materials and instructional methods used to ensure academic success) offered in affluent schools because of their inability to attend schools in equitably funded districts with highly qualified teachers, access to new facilities, and cutting edge technology. From a CRT perspective, the discrepancy in funding is a form of racism that excludes poor minorities on the basis ownership (accurately stated as lack of ownership) and perpetuates the exclusionary practices inherent in the United States educational system.

Since its introduction to the field of education, CRT has expanded to address qualitative research methodologies, pedagogy, and educational policy to become more interdisciplinary and comprehensive in its focus (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Though CRT does not seem to be gendered some authors caution viewing this theory as strictly about race. The theoretical framework can be used as a legal and intellectual tool for making sense of the intersectionality and interconnectness of race, class, and gender (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ryan & Dixson, 2006; Stovall, 2006), therefore scholars do not have to choose which area of inequity is most powerful. CRT incorporates scholarship from feminism, social and political philosophy, postmodernism, and cultural nationalism. By incorporating these philosophies, it becomes a transformative theory for analyzing inequity in many areas of education. Likewise, CRT is a relevant and meaningful tool to address the historical and

contemporary perspectives of African American mothers' special education decision making process.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theorizing has been a part of black women's liberation since slavery and gained notoriety during the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Since then black feminist thinkers have confronted the black women's struggles with the "multiple realities of gender, racial, and economic or caste oppression shaped by the American experience" (James & Sharpley-Whiting, 2000, p. 1). Because Black women occupy a unique space in American society, their experience, their relationship to the world and resistance to oppression is also unique, hooks (1984) explains:

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. (p. 144)

Likewise, black feminist theory is an epistemological framework that accepts Black women's distinct voice and viewpoint can be used to explain their lived experience. By placing the self-defined viewpoint of African American women at the center of analysis, black feminist scholars recognize:

The long-term and widely shared resistance among African American women can only have been sustained by an enduring and shared standpoint among black women about the meaning of oppression...like other subordinated groups, African American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of black women's oppression, but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself. (Collins, 1990, p. 183)

Therefore, Black feminist theory emerges as a catalyst for fundamental shifts in how we understand oppression and injustice in the United States (Villaverde, 2008). By demonstrating the subjugated and oppressed forms of knowledge Black women possess, black feminist theory creates a space “where dialogue and disagreement could occur” (Collins, 1990, p. xvii). hooks (1989) elaborates on this notion, stating, “certainly for Black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (p. 842). It is from this epistemological framework that the meaning and importance of African American mothers’ special education decision process emerges.

Politics of Containment

Building on black feminist principles and theorizing, Collins’s (1998) new politics of containment theory describes the intersection of racism and sexism from a socio-historical perspective in the lives of African American women and their children. The politics of containment questions how the “changing patterns of the global economy, the wholesale denial of deeply entrenched racial practices in the United States, and the emergence of a rhetoric of color blindness arguing that institutionalized racism has disappeared” undercuts claims from African American women that racial and sexual discrimination persist (pp. 30–31). The emergence of the rhetoric of colorblindness obscures the workings of institutional power and challenges the notions of Black disadvantage due to racial barriers. The imperceptible nature of the new politics of containment makes its exclusionary practices more detrimental to African American mothers navigating the special education decision making process.

Strategies of containment are embedded in American life and therefore are often difficult to identify and analyze. Delineation of these strategies provides greater insight into the ways African American women, such as the African American mothers who strive to advocate for their children in special education, experience the complicated and imperceptible racism, marginalization and disenfranchisement in the new colorblind society. There are two key strategies of control in the system of containment: racial segregation and surveillance (Collins, 1998).

Racial segregation leads to the “the division of racial groups into physical and symbolic spaces based on the belief that proximity to the group deemed inferior will harm the allegedly superior group” (Collins, 1998, p. 280). According to Collins, although social arrangements are different, social indicators of African American women’s disadvantage remain remarkably unchanged in contemporary American society. In spite of the advancements of the women’s rights and civil rights movements, African American women have remained excluded from good jobs, schools, and neighborhoods. Indeed, the practice of de facto racial segregation is one strategy of control illustrating the politics of containment in contemporary society where laws abolish such tactics. For instance, formal desegregation in schools gave African American women access to educational attainment, however possessing the right to be in a public space, such as schools, did not necessarily translate into the right of equal treatment in those public spaces (Collins, 1998). Further, special education and the subsequent isolation inherent in it, becomes an issue of access, limited access to useful information, knowledge, and curriculum for both African American mothers and their children.

The second strategy of control, borrowed from Foucault, refers to disciplinary power techniques used to monitor, classify, and control individuals to render them easily supervisable, efficient, and productive (Jardine, 2010; Foucault, 1980). In the new politics of containment, Collins (1998) describes surveillance as the process “whereby people’s words and actions are constantly watched and recorded” (p. 281). For example, low-income African American women often experience blatant forms of surveillance based on their involvement in social welfare agencies. According to Collins (1998), these agencies assume that African American women are unable function as adults, and the agencies impose a form of social control to infantilize the participants. Involvement with social welfare agencies makes it difficult for many poor African American women to exercise substantive citizenship rights because the participants are already deeply involved in social institutions designed to monitor their behavior, critique their parenting, and further suppress their knowledge. In education, surveillance can be seen in the widespread use of standardized testing (monitoring through examination); in the use of grading to classify students and rank students; and in the ways learning is broken down into simple segments in order to control what is learned and when it is learned. Disciplinary power performed through surveillance is described by Foucault (1980), he explains:

But in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (pp. 38–39)

Likewise, the special education decision making process can be described as yet another form of disciplinary power used to exploit the lives of African American women and their children.

Theoretical Connections to African American Mothers' Decision Making Process

I have identified four theoretical links to the politics of containment and African American mothers' special education decision making process: voice and revisionist history, property and citizenship, the politics of desegregation, and surveillance and interest convergence. These themes are central to my conceptual framework.

Voice and revisionist history. The use of voice, storytelling, and revisionist history to assist those with subjugated or suppressed knowledge in naming, describing, and defining their own reality is an important component of the theoretical framework. Voice takes on different functions in each theoretical perspective, yet the central purpose is to allow marginalized voices to address the oppression and to share insights about social inequalities (Collins, 1998; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Few, 2007; Foucault, 1980). Foucault believed that by listening to the truths of people who are marginalized would help bring freedom to thoughts and actions. In his discussion of subjugated knowledge, he explains:

They are a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated naïve languages, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (p. 82)

To do its work, it is the duty of researchers to demand specific descriptions of the actual, not the intended, effects of power from those who experience it. In order to get descriptions for his work Foucault interviewed prisoners (jails), the psychiatric patients (asylums), and delinquents (schools).

Critical race theory combines the use of voice with counterstory. Voice is used as evidential support of the impact of legally supported racism on the lives of people of color (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). As Rousseau and Dixson (2006) explain, voice is “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (p. 35). The valuable knowledge gained from the experiences of people of color is used to create counterstories. Matsuda gives meaning to the need of counterstories in social science research using black poverty as an example. She states:

The technique of imagining oneself black and poor in some hypothetical world is less effective than studying the actual experience of black poverty and listening to those who have done so. When notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, are examined not from an abstract position of groups who have suffered through history, moral relativism recedes and identifiable normative priorities emerge. (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 63)

Thus, critical race theorists combine voice and counterstory to place marginalized people of color at the center of scholarship to shift commonly held and often incorrect assumptions maintained in dominant discourse (Rousseau & Dixson, 2006).

Black feminist thought, from which the politics of containment derives, uses voice to describe the meaning of lives lived within a culture of domination and oppression, Collins (2000) writes:

Placing U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences shows how intersectional paradigms can be especially important for rethinking the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society. Claims that systems of race, social class, gender, and sexuality form mutually constructing features of social organization foster a basic rethinking of U.S. social institutions. (p. 228)

The use of voice places the decision making of African American mothers in context because it gives the mothers the opportunity to explain how their lives are impacted daily by an educational system that views them as undeserving and unworthy of participating in their children's educational decisions and prefers they remain invisible in schools.

Power in property and citizenship. Central to Collins's new politics of containment and CRT are the concepts of property and citizenship. For African American women, there is an intricate and historical linkage between property rights and citizenship. Female slaves were idealized as property and producers of property (Collins, 1998), once emancipated African American women became "property transformed to citizen" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 19). Unfortunately, emancipation did not translate into substantive (full) citizenship (Collins, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lynn, 2006). Despite having been granted formal citizenship rights, African Americans were not able to receive the intangible benefits that whiteness offers in American society. Harris's (1995) description of "whiteness a property" exemplifies an essential function of whiteness as the absolute right to exclude. Today through their involvement in special education, African American mothers and their children are excluded from the general education setting, which in effect often denies them many of the intrinsic privileges of citizenship in the United States.

The relationship between property and school funding exacerbates African American mothers' exclusion. Indeed, property ownership and school funding illustrates the intersection of CRT and the politics of containment. An example of this is how educational funding, which based on property tax, is used to exclude and marginalize poor, African American mothers. Because poor, African American mothers' often do not own property and therefore do not pay property taxes, policymakers justify dilapidated buildings and lack of educational resources available in schools for the participants and their children based on lack of funding, making inequities representative of class not race. Moreover, mothers involved in the special education seldom possess the benefits bestowed on property owners which provide them with an authoritative voice in their children's educational decisions (Rao, 2000). The decisions African American mothers make on behalf of their children will influence their children's ability to obtain substantive citizenship rights. Consequently, special education is viewed as a containment strategy that excludes African American women and children from gaining the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a capitalist society.

Politics of desegregation. Closely related to the property and citizenship constructs is the issue of desegregation. African American women and their children are relegated to the position of outsiders through sophisticated forms of racial segregation. Social advancements after the civil rights era produced a colorblind rhetoric and the denial of entrenched racial discriminatory practices. The overturning of *de jure* segregation, or legally mandated segregation, which granted African American women formal citizenship rights for the first time in the country's history, created a new system

of racial segregation that works within formal American citizenship laws and practices. Thus, current forms of institutionalized racism are demonstrated in the reality that many social institutions are still segregated; despite this contradiction many whites believe racism and discrimination no longer exist (Collins, 1998). CRT critiques desegregation from the legal, political, and historical perspective with particular emphasis on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). CRT in education scholars often revisit the prominent case and examine the subsequent forms of *de facto* segregation, socially occurring segregation, that have become institutionalized in public schools through the existence of educational policy. Special education has been linked to these new sophisticated forms of segregation (Artiles, 1998; Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Anderson, 2006; Hilliard, 1992; Patton, 1998). Racially biased assessments, reliance on a medical model, and racially coded academic discourse are used to substantiate the placement of African American students, especially African American males, in special education (Collins, 1998; Harry, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1999). The failure of African American students to succeed in general education classes reflects a failure to learn within the identified racially neutral curriculum and instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The commonly held belief that curriculum assessments are race neutral and objective justifies the classification of students who perform poorly on tests. Therefore, performance on assessments becomes a tool to substantiate the segregation of African American students from general education settings because scores are seen as inevitable and scientifically based (Collins, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Surveillance and interest convergence. As lower income African American mothers who are involved in the social welfare agencies also enroll their children in public schools they become ensconced in another institution where they will be subjected to surveillance. Black feminist notions of surveillance provide a context for the meaning of the special education decision making process in the lives of African American families: special education places these families under scrutiny in schools. Special education becomes a means of monitoring and evaluating African American mothers parenting skills and becomes a method of perpetuating deficit-based myths of Black mothers in schools (Collins, 1998). Moreover, special education serves a means to track African American children's academic progress and illustrates the purpose of surveillance in Western society and its effect as a disciplinary act of power (Foucault, 1980).

The purpose of special education is to improve the educational outcomes for students; however, this often is not the case for African American students in special education. These students are disproportionately represented in high incidence categories of learning disabled, mildly mentally retarded and emotionally and behaviorally disturbed. The achievement gaps between students in special education widen over time, making special education ineffective and detrimental to many African American students' long term educational outcomes (Hilliard, 1992; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Patton, 1998). Conversely, special education provides White students with access to opportunities and privileges not available in the general education classroom settings. Special education for these students provides advantages that support their ownership of

intellectual property. According to Bell (2004), interest convergence covenants “are decisions in which black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their [white’s] primary concern” (p. 49). Interest convergence explains the historical role of special education legislation that maintains the advantage of White students while serving to further disadvantage African American students. In addition, by combining the constructs of interest convergence and surveillance, we see how special education suspends African American women and their children in a place of travelling while stay in place (Collins, 1998).

It is the goal of this dissertation to highlight the mothers’ voices in order to help educators understand how and why African American mothers are involved in the special education decision making process on behalf of their children.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

It is important for educators to understand the special education decision making process from the perspective of African American mothers. Critical approaches to qualitative research emphasize the importance of the voices of silenced populations, so qualitative research methodology is ideal for understanding how African American mothers view their involvement in the special education decision making. One way to empower individuals to share their stories and minimize the power relationship that often exists between researcher and participants is employing qualitative research methodologies because it can be used as a first step in allowing the marginalized voices to be heard (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2001).

Qualitative research has its origins in cultural anthropology and sociology (Bogdan, 2007). According to Merriam (2001), the key philosophical assumption among qualitative researchers is that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). As a methodological approach, it is seen as interactive and humanistic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative researchers use their creativity, logic, and a theoretical lens to interpret data. Creswell (2007) identified nine common characteristics of qualitative research. The following is based on Creswell’s characteristics. Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting and enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual place, and it allows

involvement in the actual experiences of the participants. The qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically giving this type of research a broad, panoramic view instead of a microanalysis. It is important for qualitative researchers to systematically reflect on who he or she is and how their personal biography will influence the study. Because qualitative research is emergent it may change and can be refined as the researcher learns what to ask and whom to ask. Fundamentally speaking, this methodology is interpretative allowing researchers to filter the data through a personal lens based on a specific sociopolitical and historical moment. Qualitative researchers may depend on multiple sources of data including open-ended observations, interviews, and documents including text, sounds, and images. Although the researcher is the instrument, the participants' perspectives on social situations, events, interactions and roles is of interest, not the researchers' perspectives. Most often, qualitative researchers begin their work from a specific theoretical perspective and use their philosophical assumptions to construct a picture of the issues being examined. Inductive data analysis is a major component of this methodology. Inductive reasoning requires researchers to create categories and themes from data using logic, theory, and professional experience to analyze and interpret the meaning of the data.

Given the conceptual framework for my proposed study, qualitative research methodology is appropriate for my research. Combining aspects of critical race methodology, feminist research methodology, and Foucault's human science philosophical approach, all of which rely on qualitative research methodology, has helped me to assert the need for a revisionist historical perspective regarding African American

mothers' special education decision making process to provide a new perspective of African American mothers involvement in special education. Critical race, feminist, and Foucauldian methodologies all stress the importance of alternative realities and ways of knowing, emphasize marginalized voices through counterstories and revisionist historical perspectives, and make linkages to the importance of knowledge and power (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Foucault, 1980). A counterstory shifts the focus of interpretation from the dominant culture and allows a more complete story to form which highlights the experiences of oppressed groups (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A revisionist historical perspective examines and replaces commonly accepted interpretations held by the dominant culture making the perspectives more accurately reflect the minority or marginalized viewpoint (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Additionally, a revisionist historical perspective offers evidence to support new interpretations from the historical record. The first step in a creating a revised historical account comes from the acknowledgement of multiple ways of knowing and understanding of the social construction of reality. Both critical race theory and Black feminist epistemology stress the value of knowledge and wisdom reflected in African American culture. The standpoint of African American women and the knowledge they possess is particularly overlooked or questioned in some areas of research. My research combines both historical revisioning and a consideration of the contemporary perspectives of African American mothers' special education decision making process through the use of a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze the empirical and historical data collected in this study.

Overall, qualitative research is a useful tool for placing the often unheard and misunderstood stories of marginalized groups, such as African American mothers, at the center of analysis because it seeks to explain how individuals make meaning of their lives, recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed, and allows individuals to explain their own reality. Using a qualitative method of inquiry informed by critical race theory and black feminist thought allows a counterstory to emerge. By applying a qualitative analysis to the new counterstory the experiences of African American mothers in the special education decision making process will help educators to revise their long held opinions regarding African American parents' involvement in educational decision making. Thus, phenomenology with its focus on the essence of the lived experience lends itself to the qualitative methodological goals of this dissertation.

Types of Phenomenology

Creswell identifies two types of phenomenology: hermeneutical and transcendental psychological. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of the lived experiences. In the hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, researcher interpretations are used to describe the human experience and used to process the meaning of the lived experience. Transcendental (or psychological) phenomenology relies less on researcher interpretation, in fact, it requires researchers to suspend all judgments of the experience in order to experience everything freshly. This process is called bracketing. After data collection, transcendental phenomenologists then create descriptions of what the participants experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon contextually to finally convey the essence of the experience (Creswell,

2007). I have conducted a hermeneutical phenomenological study, striving to incorporate both the descriptive and interpretive aspects of phenomenological research which by focusing on the lived experience of African American mothers journeys navigating the special education decision making process will allow me to explore elements of the participants experiences through the use of my theoretical and personal knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological Research

To adequately represent the shared and common experiences of African American mothers involved in special education decision making for their children I have conducted a phenomenological research study, which is one of many qualitative research approaches. As van Manen (1990) states:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textural expression of its essence-in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful. (p. 36)

Based in the philosophical tradition, phenomenological research seeks to describe the universal essence of several individuals' experiences with the same phenomenon.

According to Merleau-Ponty (2002), phenomenology is the study of essences and all problems amount to finding definitions of essences. Essences are “descriptions which reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Phenomenological researchers collect data from knowledgeable persons who have experienced the phenomenon and strive to

develop an accurate composite description of the participants experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). By bracketing their experiences, researchers are able to offer the essence of an experience without essentializing (Creswell, 2007; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

Philosophical Assumptions

van Manen (1990) describes eight philosophical ideas that underpin the phenomenological perspective. First, phenomenology is the study of lived experience. Specifically, phenomenology focuses on the lifeworld of participants, as they “immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (p. 9). Second, phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness. According to van Manen, consciousness is the only access we have to the world and therefore to conscious means being aware of some aspect of the world. Third, as mentioned earlier, phenomenological research is the study of essences. Phenomenologists are concerned with how the essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described to show the lived quality and significance of the experience. Fourth, phenomenological research is the description of the “experiential meanings we live as we live them” (p. 11). Phenomenological research is a human science concerned with ways to describe with depth and richness the meanings everyday human existence. Fifth, phenomenological research is the human scientific study of phenomena. Sixth, phenomenological researchers tend to the attentive practice of thoughtfulness, meaning phenomenologists are interested in everyday, practical concerns with “a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means

to live a life” (p. 12). Seventh, phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human. Finally, phenomenological research is a poetizing activity. Specifically, according to van Manen (1990), poetizing is using language that “authentically speaks the world rather than speaking of it” (p. 13). It is inappropriate for a conclusion to be drawn from phenomenological research instead we seek to find meaning in experiences.

Research Questions

As previously indicated, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1) How are African American mothers included or excluded from their children’s special education decision making process? What are the mothers’ experiences making decisions for children? How are these decisions impacted or influenced by race/class/gender?

This question is related to the experience of the participants in the study. From a phenomenological perspective this is also the essential question, and highlights the overarching purpose of this study.

2) How is the historical marginalization of African American families in education generally, and in special education specifically, reflected in the contemporary experiences of African American mothers in special education?

The second question refers to the historical revisioning and counterstory components of this study. This question seeks to interpret the legacy of inequality and its impact on present day circumstances in the lives of the participants.

3) What are the possibilities for an equitable, socially just set of solutions that will make lasting changes and correct the inequitable treatment African American mothers

and their children have experienced in this country's special educational system? How must this change be articulated?

The final question relates to solutions for this entrenched and insidious phenomenon and sets the stage for the new theorizing which is the goal of this dissertation.

The research questions informed the formulation of the interview protocol. Interview questions included adaptations of the two broad phenomenological questions:

- 1) What has been your experience making special education decisions on behalf of your child?
- 2) What contexts have typically influenced or affected your experiences making special education decisions for your child?

These questions, according to Creswell (2007) focus the attention on both textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon and provide an understanding of the participants' common experiences. Other sample items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Items

Tell me about your about your child and his/her experience in school.
What are some ways you've been involved in your child's education?
How important is it for you to be involved in your child's educational decision making?
How much input have you had in this process? Were you asked to contribute? Who asked and when (at what point during the process)? Does the school seem interested in your opinions, how so? Have you disagreed with any decisions in this process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What decisions specifically? ○ What happened? ○ Have you found it easy to agree with the decisions being made?
What, if any, challenges do you face in advocating for your child?
How do you think parents should be involved in the special education decision making process?

Ultimately, the interview questions seek to elicit meaningful and rich responses from the participants regarding their experiences in the special education decision making process. Further, the questions take into account the multilayered contextual factors from which the women in this study must contend with to engage in such a process.

Method

Historical Analysis

Data collection for this study began with archival research and analysis. To supplement the interview data for this study, historical documents were reviewed to provide contextual information about the experiences of African Americans from the participants' community. Polkinghorne (1987) suggests gathering data from other sources in phenomenological research to have descriptions of the phenomenon outside of the research process. To that end, I collected and reviewed 23 articles from the local newspaper regarding African American education and involvement from 1947 to 2012 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Additionally, I spoke with local historians who provided me with personal accounts of historical events, as well as, books, peer reviewed articles, calendars, yearbooks, and pictures reflecting the unique culture of Winston-Salem.

Winston-Salem: 2012 At-a-Glance

The land in Forsyth County is excellent for agriculture crops such as tobacco, corn, wheat, oats, and other vegetables. Because of the agricultural possibilities, in the early 1900s industrial firms sought out the area and developed what would be by the late 1940s the world's largest tobacco manufacturing center, the world's largest manufacturer of knit wear, and the world's largest circular knit hosiery mill. Winston-Salem, North

Carolina, the county seat of Forsyth County, is located in the central Piedmont region of the state, known as the Triad, with Greensboro to the east and High Point to south. Winston-Salem is the fourth most populous city in North Carolina behind, Charlotte, Raleigh, and Greensboro. According the 2010 U.S. Census, Winston-Salem has approximately 229,617 inhabitants while Forsyth County has 350,670 overall. In 2010, 51.2% of the city's population was white and 34.7% of the residents were black. Forced in the 1980's and 1990's to diversify its business base, Winston-Salem now relies on nanotechnology research, finance and manufacturing. The city boasts a strong connection to the arts and higher education as it is the home of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Winston-Salem State University, Salem College, and Wake Forest University.

Participants

Participants were six African American mothers of children receiving special education services in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School (WS/FCS) district. Each mother had one special needs child. Of the six children, four were students diagnosed with developmental disabilities and two students were diagnosed with behavioral disabilities. Four of the mothers were married and two were single. Also, the participants' social class status ranged from middle- to poverty levels based on self-disclosure.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for qualitative case study research usually begins with purposeful or purposive sampling procedures (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2001), which is a widely used non-probability sampling technique. I used purposeful sampling methods to locate

participants who were knowledgeable and information rich sources data (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2001). I began participant recruitment using community networks and area resource groups who assist students and families with disabilities, however this yielded no participants. After, four months I sought IRB modification which enabled me to recruit on the WS/FCS campuses. Next, I received approval from the WS/FCS Research Compliance department to assist me with my recruiting efforts. I created thirty-four packets containing letters and flyers with pertinent study information and researcher contact number and email. These packets were sent to potential and qualified participants from the districts' Exceptional Children's office to schools in district with high African American special education populations. This attempt yielded one response. In an effort to increase the sample size, the study IRB application was resubmitted to include direct recruitment in four WS/FC schools (these schools were chosen for their exceptional children's populations). I made contact with the principals of each school and again sent out flyers and letters to 64 potential participants. Two responses were received. In attempt to enlist more participants, I reinitiated community wide recruiting using snowball sampling methods from which two more participants were enlisted. Ongoing recruitment attempts proceeded for over one year. In hermeneutic phenomenology the interview is used as a means for exploring and gathering of stories of lived experiences, as well as, a vehicle by which to develop a relationship with the participant about the meaning of the experience (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Consistent with my research methodology, data collection for this study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured

interviews. Of the seven initial participants, six women completed two 60 to 90 minute interviews over a six week period. This yielded approximately 18 hours' worth of data.

Data Analysis

In keeping with the methodology adopted in this research, data analysis methods were developed from hermeneutic phenomenological research methods and from guidelines in the literature about systematic, useful ways of interpreting research data. Data analysis is an ongoing process in qualitative research beginning in the data collection phase and must be a simultaneous process (Merriam, 2001; Wolcott, 1991). Wolcott (1991) asserts qualitative data analysis is both an art and a science, and that there are four major tasks in data analysis: to figure out what the data says (description), what it means (analysis), why it is important, and what can be learned from the data (interpretation). Although there are no definitive set of steps or procedures for interpreting raw data to tell a detailed story, generally speaking, in qualitative data analysis it is important for researchers to use her or his professional, analytical, and interpretive skills to determine what needs to be done to transform the data into a representative story that reflects the true meaning (essence) of the participants' experiences. Likewise, there are no prescribed methods to phenomenological research, therefore to analyze and interpret my data, I followed several steps outlined by Creswell (2007) based on Moustakas's (1994) description of phenomenological data analysis. I chose this method of data analysis because it focuses on the systematic and detailed description of the phenomenon—African American mothers' special education decision making process.

First, I read each transcribed interview multiple times. As I read, I made notes in the margins pertaining to any thoughts, observations, questions, and insights I had. I also identified any significant themes offered by the mothers. This process of deriving and developing concepts is called coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After the initial coding process, I reread each transcript to develop a list of significant statements about how each mother experienced the special education decision making process, such as “offer example.” I worked to create and compile a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements. Next, I grouped the significant statements into meaning statements of themes, such as “offer example.” This process helped me to devise a textual description of special education decision making, or a “what” description using verbatim examples of my data. Additionally, I completed a “how” description which reflects the setting and context of special education decision making from the mothers’ experiences. Finally, I wrote a composite description of how and what the participants experienced.

After the initial description of the phenomenon was complete, I developed a thematic analysis by identifying any theoretical connections related to my conceptual framework which explored how the politics of containment impacts African American mothers’ decision making process. Specifically, I drew upon concepts from Black feminist theory, critical race theory, and the theory of power/ knowledge to examine each interview. Collins (1991) asserts that because Black women’s knowledge is often subjugated and subjected to White male interpretations and validation, it is the duty of Black women researchers to accurately represent the alternative ways of knowing Black women have created to make sense of their world. Critical race theory, which examines

the role of property rights in understanding citizenship, assisted me in critiquing the experiences African American women and their children based on the struggles they have had to endure because of the institutionalized nature of race embedded every social structure in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Foucault's theory of power/knowledge is used to explain how any regime of disciplinary power and knowledge brings with it the power to frame the nature of alternatives to that regime, the participants in this study explored options of revisioning disciplinary practices which influence their decision making process (Foucault, 1980; Jardine, 2010; Ross, 2007). In addition to analyzing the theoretical connections among themes, I conducted a negative case analysis, meaning I identified isolated and counter examples as they became known to determine what can be learned from any discrepancies in the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness Strategies

To ensure the validity (or strength) of my analysis and interpretation, I employed several trustworthiness strategies. According to Merriam (1998) "being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields, such as education, in which practitioners intervene in people's lives" (p. 198). Two methods of ensuring trustworthiness in a study are triangulation and member checking. Triangulation provides a holistic view of the phenomenon (unit of analysis) by relying on the collection of multiple sources of data through interviews, observations, and document analysis to counteract threats to validity (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). Member checking involves making certain the participants agree with how their story has been told by taking the

analyzed and interpreted information back to the participants (Creswell, 2007). This process is especially important for my study on African American mothers, whose life experiences have often been pathologized in research literature (Collins, 1998). Additionally, the participants' involvement was solicited throughout each phase of the research study to further ensure adequate and accurate representations of the cases are reflected in the overall study. I will engage in long-term observation to gather data over a period of time in order to increase the validity of my findings. Reflecting on my biases as a researcher will be critical to my study because of my experiences as a mother, educator, and African American woman it is important to the strength and truthfulness of the participants that my analysis is based on their experiences not mine.

Role of the Researcher

As an African American women, mother of two small children, and a former school employee my similarity to the participants in this study does not go unnoticed. As a mother, I am confronted daily with decisions regarding my children's care, their education, and general well-being. Because of my reality it is easy for me to empathize with the mothers in this study. As such, the data collection process was experienced as a conversation among two women who were deeply concerned about children, education, and lifelong citizenship. Although our social class differed, I believe our mutual experiences of race and gender oppression gives each of us (the participants and I) a unique vantage point to derive insights about the politics of containment, as Collins (2000) states:

Placing U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences shows how intersectional paradigms can be especially important for rethinking the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society. Claims that systems of race, social class, gender, and sexuality form mutually constructing features of social organization foster a basic rethinking of U.S. social institutions. (p. 228)

In other words, by placing our conversation at the center of analysis we (the participants and I) are reshaping the currently held, oppressive, inflammatory, and misconceived notions of African American mothers and their involvement in their children's educational decision making.

Subjectivity

Peshkin's (1988) article reminds novice researchers that subjectivity always plays a major role in qualitative research. As an African American woman and a former school social worker, studying African American mothers involved in the special education will be a very personal experience for me. Acknowledging one's own subjectivity can assist researchers to make relevant contributions to their studies without being burdened for the truth one's own lived experiences. Dixson (2006) suggests that researchers and scholars from marginalized groups use their positionality to provide perspectives on the margins and the center by bringing to the forefront the way in which dominant perspectives have maintained powers structures by continuing to disadvantage people outside of the mainstream. Indeed, Tillman (2002) explains that "from a culturally sensitive perspective, shared knowledge and understandings of the phenomenon under study are implied" (p. 3), having a shared knowledge and experience place culture at the center of the inquiry. Therefore, awareness of our own subjectivity can help us to "consciously

attend to the orientations that will shape what we see and what we make of what we see” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 6). As an African American woman, with aspirations towards a career in educational research, I am aware of my role as a future “agent of knowledge” (Collins, 1998) and the responsibility associated with accurately, respectfully, and thoughtfully portraying the lives of other African American women. Scholarship, “the formal production, identification, and organization of what will be called ‘knowledge’” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii), in this sense takes on new meaning as my standpoint begins to influence and reconstruct how African American mothers are viewed. Scholarship then becomes is a way to reshape the perception of African American mothers.

Conclusion

The research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures described in this chapter have been constructed to elicit the meaning of African American mothers’ special education decision making process. Although this study is not purely theoretical, empirical, or conceptual in nature, each component helps to contextualize the lived experiences of the participants in an effort to contribute to the literature a more balanced glimpse at a marginally represented population.

CHAPTER IV

DATA FINDINGS

This study investigated the involvement in and decision making process of African American mothers who have children in special education using historical, empirical, and theoretical perspectives. The chapter begins with participant profiles then presents the findings in two distinct sections. First, in order to contextualize the participants' responses, a brief history of Winston-Salem, North Carolina is provided to historicize the unique racial and social climate of the area in which the participants reside. Thus, the first section will examine the early history of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the struggle for Civil Rights in the area, and how the legacy of racism has impacted schools with particular interest given to African American students in those schools. Of particular interest here is building a foundation for a counterstory shaped by the participants in this study. By focusing on the history of Winston-Salem and the legacy of educational inequities that exist in the city, African American mothers struggle is expanded beyond a local matter of concern to an example of a social justice crisis which has lasted since this country's conception. Next, the empirical findings of the study will be presented. The second section includes core themes, supporting categories, and units of meaning generated from participant interviews to poignantly describe the essence of the lived experiences of the six African American mothers involved in special education

decision making. Four core themes emerged from the data to complete this section: (a) how African American mothers understand and describe their involvement in special education decision making, (b) critique of curriculum and educational choices, (c) issues of discrimination, and (d) perceptions and concerns of others.

Participant Profiles

The following profiles establish familiarity with each individual who shared their standpoint, insights, and recommendations regarding her involvement in the special education decision making process. Included in the participant profiles are marital status, demographic information, child's age, name¹, and grade, and disability diagnosis. Additionally, the profiles include the mothers self-described level of involvement.

Thomasina is a 38-year-old married mother of four children. Her three older children are sons 22, 21, and 19 years old, respectively, and live outside of the home. Her youngest child, daughter Catherine, is entering the first grade and transitioning from the Academy of Unique Children to a typical education setting at Blue Elementary school. Catherine was born prematurely and is diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Thomasina and her husband are both actively involved in Catherine's educational decision making.

Thomasina is a stay-at-home mother who has been with her husband, a factory worker, for 12 years.

Patricia is a 40 something married mother of four children. Her youngest son, 15 year old Cree, was born with a rare genetic disorder linked to physical anomalies and developmental delays. Cree attends Torin Middle School, a school dedicated to students

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities.

with moderate to severe special needs. Torin Middle is a connected to Merriam Middle school making it a unique academic setting. Patricia is solely responsible for Cree's educational decision making because her husband of 16 years works and is unable to attend the meetings. Patricia works full-time in middle management at a major hotel chain.

Demetria is a 40-something mother of five children. Her youngest daughter, Whitley, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Whitley is entering the 12th grade and attends a school in a typical high school setting. Demetria and her husband of over twenty years are actively involved in all of Whitley's educational decisions. Jointly, they attend most IEP (individualized educational plan) meetings, have addressed school district administrators, and school leaders regarding Whitley's educational rights. Demetria works with senior services for the county.

Carlisle is a thirty something married mother of one child. Her son, Dwight is in the second grade in a typical education setting at Orange Elementary School. Dwight was born prematurely and has brain damage which has left him unable to speak or perform age-appropriate, basic daily functions. Carlisle works as a habilitation specialist aid for Whitley. She advocates for Dwight with the help of extended family and friends.

Rose is a 37-year-old mother of four. Rose's two youngest sons, Jario (age 10) and Elden (age 9) have both been referred to and placed in special education for behavioral and educational disabilities. Both boys have been retained and are now in the third and second grades, respectively. Jario and Elden attend Huntington Elementary School. Sharon is unemployed and does not drive. Because she has no transportation,

Rose is often unable to be physically present for meetings. She does, however attempt to do phone conferencing and she sends notes to Jarion and Elden's teachers. She is actively involved in providing her children homework assistance.

Michelle is a 42-year-old divorced mother of 7 children. Her son 15 year old son, Matthew, has been diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder and anti-social personality disorder. Matthew attends school irregularly at Phillips High School due to multiple incidences with the law. Matthew was referred to special education in middle school. Michelle is unemployed. Because of economic constraints and lack of transportation, Michelle is unable to be physically present for meetings but does attend many via telephone conferencing.

Section I—Brief History of Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The Salem settlement was established in 1753 by the Moravians who were escaping Eastern Europe to pursue religious freedom in America. The Moravians were skilled as artists and craftsmen specializing in pottery, ironworks, tannery, and furniture making. The town of Winston, located just north of Salem, was established in 1851 and named after Major Joseph Winston, a Revolutionary War hero. Winston was the site of three major industrial headquarters: R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, Hanes Hosiery Mills and Hanes Knit Company. These companies would dominate the political and economic life of Winston for the remainder of the twentieth century. The city of Winston-Salem was established in 1913 with the merger of the Winston settlement and the Moravian settlement of Salem.

The new city became a prototype for urbanization and migration throughout the twentieth century based on labor needed for the Hanes Companies and R. J. Reynolds. African American workers traveled from South Carolina and eastern North Carolina to find jobs at factories in town. From 1920 to 1930, the county, which had been one of the smallest in the state, boasted a 55% population growth spurt rising from 48,395 to 75,274 making Winston-Salem the largest city in the state. During the 1930's, 52% of employed Black workers worked for R. J. Reynolds totaling 5,000 workers. Unlike other areas in the South where African American women primarily worked as domestics, Reynolds employed nearly 60% of the African American women in the city while only 28% worked as domestics.

Many of the Black people who moved to Winston from other areas settled in neighborhoods in the northern and eastern parts of the city. These neighborhoods often shared borders which fostered relationships and awareness throughout the Black community. Residents in these areas also developed a collective political consciousness and asserted their views through protest activities which were taken seriously by the city leaders (Dunston, 1981). The city leaders, who were also corporate leaders, viewed Winston-Salem as their personal property and felt the social and political climate of the city reflected significantly on their businesses; therefore they were concerned with any negative publicity received from protest activities.

Nonetheless, Black people in Winston-Salem have a history of activism seeking political, social, and economic empowerment through protests, both violent and nonviolent (Dunston, 1981; Friedman, 2007; Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). African

American men and women have fought against both covert and overt controls of the city's corporate/political leadership. Specifically, Dunston (1981) writes:

The black community in Winston-Salem was conscious of itself as a group in competition for certain scarce values with other groups. With this in mind, they understood that nothing came from pure good will or a robust warm nature but from constant pressure. (p. iv-v)

Black activists learned to use their political pressure to influence decision making in Winston-Salem and addressed interracial committee membership selection, the deliberate disregard of laws, annexation, and gerrymandering (Dunston, 1981). Subsequently, African American citizens of Winston-Salem played key roles in the Civil Rights movement in North Carolina. Three connected yet separate events occurred highlighting the activism and political initiative of the Black community. These events were noticed both statewide and nationally, and include the unionizing campaigns of Local 22, the riot of 1967, and the organization of the local Black Panther Party.

The Struggle for Civil Rights

The Civil Rights Movement began “dramatically and decisively in the early 1940’s when the social structure of Black America took on an increasingly urban, proletarian character” (Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988, p. 786) as African Americans in the United States gained economic power through their employment in the manufacturing and industrial sectors. Although, by the 1940’s Whites working at R. J. Reynolds held highest paid jobs, Blacks were employed at Reynolds formed the majority (almost 80%) of the workforce primarily in preparation departments where they cleaned, stemmed and conditioned the tobacco (Dunston, 1981; Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). These workers

only made a few cents above minimum wage and received limited benefits compensation for their work in physically demanding, hot, and noisy conditions (Dunston, 1981; Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). Although they were considered cheap labor, the employment opportunities in Winston-Salem were better than in other areas in the South. However, the policies designed to relegate Blacks to the lowest, menial tasks in the factory would be the impetus for a labor-management conflict and contribute to a political confrontation between the Black and white citizens of Winston-Salem, as well. Union Organizing at R. J. Reynolds.

In spite of years of maintaining the status quo and remaining, the Black workers at R. J. Reynolds grew tired of employment inequalities and gruesome working conditions. These workers, who as Friedman (2007) describes, had remained “invisible to white people” (p. 57), started the fight for collective bargaining in 1943. At that time, Reynolds was the only major tobacco manufacturer in the country not under a union contract (Dunston, 1981; Friedman, 2007; Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). Although two previous attempts failed, the workers were ready to respond to, and advocate for themselves against the Reynolds regime. Notably, African American women held prominent positions within the labor union and were instrumental in the dialogue. Negotiations between the union activists and the tobacco company continued until the workers decided to strike on May 1, 1947. The strike included mostly Black workers with only 33 white workers joining the picket line. On June 8, 1947, the strike ended with the workers agreeing to make a readjustment on seniority, to increase pay by 10.5 cents per hour, and added to new paid holidays. These terms were offered by Reynolds on the first

day of the strike which has caused some to consider the strike a failure (Dunston, 1981; Friedman, 2007) especially in light of the ill-feelings between Reynolds and the members of Local 22. However, for many of the employees involved, the union activism of Local 22 had exposed them and Winston-Salem to early expressions of Black pride. As Dunston (1981) notes:

Unionism had increased the awareness of the Black economic plight and fostered active efforts by Blacks and by industry to improve conditions, increased the Black participation in the political process, and helped curtail overt harassment of Blacks by white people (p. 60)

As a result, in 1947, Winston-Salem elected its first African American alderman, Kenneth R. Williams and the city had hired 3 Black police officers to patrol the Black community. By the early 1950's African Americans in Winston-Salem and North Carolina had made limited but progressive attempts to penetrate the political process gaining some social, economic and political advantages. And although Local 22 was eventually discredited because false claims of Communist Party connections its leaders would remain instrumental in Winston-Salem throughout the Civil Rights era.

By 1960, Winston-Salem considered itself a progressive, All-American city having desegregated its public libraries, the public golf course, Reynolds Auditorium, and the coliseum (Dunston, 1981). Additionally, several African American citizens had been appointed to local boards and commissions (Dunston, 1981). In spite of this progress, the city became involved with the sit-in movement on, February 8, 1960, when Carl Matthews took a seat at the segregated S.H. Kress Company lunch counter. Matthews was joining in solidarity with the passive resistance movement which had begun in

Greensboro one week earlier when students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter. In a typed, written statement Matthews explained that he hoped to "assure the students of A&T and Bennett College that they are not alone [in a fight] to gain freedom . . . and to test the authority of the All-American city" (Patrick, February 9, 1960, p. 4). Sit-ins continued for several months and included a selective buying campaign to impose further economic strain on the merchants operating with segregated practices. On May 25, 1960, after several negotiations between the interracial and mayoral appointed Goodwill Committee and the managers and owners of local businesses, lunch counters were reopened on a desegregated basis. Dunston (1981) writes, "the day went by without any disturbance under the watchful eyes" of city leaders from Winston-Salem and Greensboro. And with this action Winston-Salem became the first city to "voluntarily" desegregate its lunch counters in 1960. After the sit-in movement, white leaders in North Carolina realized the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality was only beginning. Because they were also concerned about the city's image, Winston-Salem's leaders were often open to negotiation and compromise in hopes of avoiding negative publicity from disenfranchised groups.

As a result of this openness, the city experienced three years of relative calm until on Sunday October 15, 1967, James Eller was beaten and maced by two police officers who believed he was drunk. After his release from jail, Eller's wife took him to two predominantly white hospitals where he was x-rayed, and no fractures were found. Unsatisfied with the diagnoses, Eller's wife took him to a predominantly Black hospital

where it was discovered that he had suffered a lumbar puncture and skull fracture. Surgery to correct his injuries was unsuccessful, and on October 28, 1960, James Eller died. Officer W.H. Owens, who hit Eller in the head with a blackjack, was arrested. Owens was released when the Municipal Court dismissed his case, prompting protests from Black leaders who felt there was insufficient information for a dismissal. The local newspaper urged citizens to wait and watch until the investigation was complete. City leaders expected a demonstration but shortly after James Eller burial on November 2, a riot began that lasted four days. The riot caused several thousands of dollars in damages and stolen merchandise. One young rioter, Larry Little, used his experience to become active in community organizing with the Black Panther Party.

In 1969, Winston-Salem became the first southern city to start a Black Panther Party (BPP). The group set themselves apart with their community-mindedness and became a prototype for Black Panthers throughout the nation. Little, with the help of Nelson Malloy and Hazel Mack, started a free breakfast program for local children, provided free sickle cell anemia testing, and began a free community ambulance service for residents in underserved Black neighborhoods. The BPP disbanded in 1976 with the resignation of Larry Little, who had been the group's leader and driving force. The organization's political and social influence is still present in the community they served. Both Little and Nelson Malloy have been City Council members, the school system took over the breakfast program and Hazel Mack is a well-known attorney.

These three events collectively symbolize the legacy of surveillance, segregation, entrenched racism, and blatant disenfranchisement of African American people in

Winston-Salem. Indeed the events illustrate how the politics of containment has relegated African American citizens of Winston-Salem to a struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. This struggle is reflected not only in the community but circulates powerfully through schools, especially in special education.

School Desegregation, Integration, and Beyond

Before the *Brown versus the Board of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court ruling (1954), which declared separate but equal school inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional, Winston-Salem schools were committed to the “separate but equal” functioning of educational institutions. However Brown posed a significant challenge for public schools in the southern states, and North Carolina was no exception. The Winston-Salem’s local newspapers warned its readers that the South had been given time to establish adequate solutions since more hearings and had been set regarding the timing and procedures for ending segregation (Dunston, 1981).

In order to delay desegregation in North Carolina, Governor William Umstead organized the Governor’s Special Advisory Committee on Education (referred to as the Pearsall Committee, named after Thomas Pearsall, North Carolina Speaker of the House) to address the state’s response to Brown. The committee determined integration “throughout the state cannot be accomplished and should not be attempted.” After Governor Umstead’s death in 1955, Governor Luther Hodges ordered a new committee to conclude how the state would respond to the Brown II verdict urging states to integrate “with all deliberate speed.” The new committee created the Pearsall Plan, which was North Carolina’s freedom of choice desegregation policy and grant each school system

control over desegregation. Indeed, the Freedom of Choice plans were passive aggressive attempts to provide racially mixed schools in each district. The policy permitted parents the right to send their children to the schools of their choice but resulted in the continuation of the dual public school system (Britt & Britt, 1976; Dunston, 1981). When faced with immediate desegregation, school boards formed parent advisory committees, faculty groups and assembled students to further delay the process (Britt & Britt, 1976).

The South's refusal to cooperate with the desegregation policies rendered it an "essentially dead letter" until it was given political force by a growing protest movement and more legislation (Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which authorized the federal government to withhold funds from any, segregated schools and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare policy, which demanded compliance evidence of an acceptable degree of racial balance to receive funding forced Winston-Salem to address total integration seriously for the first time. Additionally, the 1971 *Swann versus the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System*, upholding bussing as a means of integration, were integral in forcing the South and North Carolina to amend its racist practices. Thus, after years of negotiations and litigation, local schools were reorganized to create one inclusive system centering on the massive bussing of students (Britt & Britt, 1976; Dunston, 1981). As one retired teacher who worked during integration reported:

As a result of desegregation, a wealth of teaching methods and knowledge has come to the front to help the low I.Q. child to achieve greater learning . . . individualized instruction has become a necessity, and the disadvantaged students are catching up while other students continue to progress at the normal rate. (Britt & Britt, 1976, pp. 101–102)

Unfortunately, this comment reflects the deficit based thinking shared by many teachers in the newly integrated school system.

Policymaker's racist intentions limited the success of integration for Civil Rights activists. Between 1972 and 1976 Winston-Salem schools were found to be in violation of the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) grant, designed to ease the burden of integration, based on tracking practices in the district. Because the procedures could not be fixed immediately the district rejected an ESAA grant valued at \$400,000. Reports emerged in the Winston-Salem Journal that ability grouping had returned many Black students to segregated environments (Fox, 1981). One teacher described the phenomenon as "heavily Black at the low end and heavily white at the high end" (p. 12). In an article four years later, Black parents were encouraged to get involved in their children's education to address ability grouping and other educational inequities at a conference of Black families by Attorney Julius Chambers, executive director of the National Association of Colored People Legal Defense Fund and former lead attorney in the Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg case. Chambers, and other speakers addressed the detrimental impact of integration on Black students' self-esteem, urged attendees to look at solving their own problems because, as Chambers stated, "we have in Washington one of the most vicious groups of leaders that we have seen at any time in the nation's history" (Young, 1985, p. B1), and encouraged parents to ask questions of educators.

During the 1990s the resegregation of schools became a full-fledged problem stemming from the determination by the Supreme Court that massive bussing was unconstitutional. By 1995, bussing was phased out of the district and replaced by "school

choice zones” which allow parents to choose from multiple schools (Fain, 2012). Coincidentally, this plan is similar to policies enacted under the freedom of choice plans in the 1950’s. Beginning in 1997, the school board assigned an equity committee to address the issue; however they disbanded in 2001 without offering any recommendations for improvements. And in 1999, the school board changed a policy promoting diversity through student assignment because of federal courts determining the plans were unconstitutional (Ziegenbalg, 1999).

In 2002, the Journal did a story entitled, “Inequity: Churches come to aid of schools” highlighting the discrepancies in funding of schools in the district to help schools raise money for computers, playground equipment, and books for after-school programs (Schatzman, 2002). By July 2012, the local newspaper reported that Winston-Salem is North Carolina’s most segregated population center. And while an article emphasized the resegregated schools, the paper ultimately determined that the school choice plans in the Winston-Salem school district are in the best interests of students. The editorial board wrote this statement:

Racial integration in our society has come a long way, but much remains to be done. In terms of public education, we’ve got to continue to work on ways to incentivize families to make educational choices for their children that lead to the growth of multicultural schools—however, long that may take. (p. 1)

It is in this city, in this racial climate, and these schools that the participants of this study reside. The legacy of racism in Winston-Salem exemplifies how children and their parents involved in the special education system become a part of a complex legal system that has evolved because of a history of problems associated with special education

service delivery and the ambiguity involved in conceptualizations of disability (Ong-Dean, 2009)

Section II—The Experiences of African American Mothers Involved in their Child’s Special Education Decision Making Process

Participants involved in this study were extremely forthcoming with regard to the challenges, struggles, and successes they have had making special education decisions for their children. Although the experiences of the mothers interviewed for this study vary greatly because of age, socioeconomic status, and the level of disability for each child, the general feeling among the mothers that it is important “to be the voice” of their children and to let educators know “they have rights” regarding the decisions being made on behalf of their children.

The analysis of data provided numerous insights of African American mothers’ decision making process. In accordance with phenomenological research methods, the following representations which seek to “bring to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives” in order to challenge normative assumptions (Lester, 1999), long quotes are provided to be faithful to the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. Three themes emerged in the analysis of the data in this section: (a) how the mothers feel about their involvement in special education and the decision making process, (b) the ways in which they participate in the special education decision making process, and (c) the importance of collaboration in the special education decision making process. Although the mothers in this study were asked to share stories and insights about their experiences making decisions for their children, most of the women also highlight instances related to their overall involvement in their children’s

education. The mothers' overall involvement is important to this study because it speaks to the relationship between parents and educators before and after IEP meetings.

Involvement in Special Education

Parent involvement in educational literature often refers to parents (namely mothers) participation and attendance at parent-teacher conferences, arts events, sports events, open houses, academic presentations, in addition to mothers' ability to volunteer at their children's school, communicate with the school, and provide an environment suitable for learning (Cooper, 2009; Epstein, 2001; Loder-Jackson, McKnight, Brooks, McGrew, Voltz, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, conflicting perceptions and definitions of parent involvement held by parents and schools can lead to feelings of disrespect, exclusion, and disadvantage leading to ineffective school-family partnerships. In this section, mothers characterized their involvement as the ways in which they are able to contribute to their children's education and the special education decision making process. In this study, involvement refers to the ways in which the participants perceive their ability to contribute to their children's education. The mothers who participated in this study have children with varying degrees of disability and school settings. During interviews with the participants it was evident that the circumstances surrounding the age, disability, and parents social support influenced the ability to be involved in their children's education. For parents whose children have severe disabilities, according to Thomasina, involvement is crucial:

I think it's very important for a parent to be involved, because a lot of these kids here, I can speak for, they can't speak for themselves. They have to have someone to speak for them. And if something's not going right, like Catherine—you know,

she couldn't come home and say, "Well, somebody's being mean to me." You know, she would just come to school and cry. So just the little warning signs. I think every parent should be aware of their child's warning signs around different people or how people, you know, act around their child.

This quote accurately describes the desire of the participants to be involved in their children's education, especially regarding decisions made on their behalf. The theme involvement is divided into three subsections: importance of involvement, barriers to involvement and ways to be involved in overall education and the special education decision making process.

Importance of involvement. Several of the mothers mentioned the need to build trust for educators who are given the responsibility of caring for their children, as Carlisle explains:

Mainly I just show my face, you know, when I drop him off in the morning I don't rush out. I walk in, you know, and I'm talking, and I'm like what have you guys got planned today? And I try to make general conversation just so I can see what kind of mood the teacher is in.

I mean, there's been times where I felt like she sounded grumpy or something was going on, and I took Dwight back home, just because I didn't feel confident. You know, I didn't feel like he would be safe. And I don't know there may be some underlying issues with me and with him, you know, cause he's so small and sick, always wanting to protect, but— Yes. If I get a bad vibe like I'll take him back home. You know, but I just try and hang out and see what's going on, you know, and I come in different ways. I don't always come in through the front door. I may walk through the school to get to his classroom. You know, I do call his teacher. I have her cell phone number.

Like if I notice Dwight came home, you know, when, you know, with three diapers in his bag, I'm like well, why didn't you use these? You know, was he changed? Did he have the same diaper on all day and changed when it was time to go home. Or, you know, I just try to ask questions. I ask questions, actually show concern.

Being present in the school provides this mother with a way to see for herself if her son will be in “a safe environment” during the school day. Patricia also notes the importance of being present in the school:

So that’s what I kind of see. And, you know, I watch—I interact and watch some of the parents that come in, and some of them are not, you know, at a financial status to where I feel like they would maybe be involved. And economics shouldn’t have anything to do with it, but I don’t know a way to put it without being stereotyping. For instance, I make surprise visits to school at any given week. I want to know what he’s doing, what the curriculum is compared to a typical child. If there’s something that concerns me, then I go to his teacher, making those concerns known at his IEP. That happens once a year.

For these two mothers being seen in the school helps them to stay abreast of their children’s education which is critical because of their sons are nonverbal. Also, being present allows them to participate in classroom activities when necessary. Thomasina explains how her availability helps ensure her peace of mind about Catherine’s ability to begin her day smoothly:

I’m always here. I never leave this building before 9:00. It was one point in time when we first started here, they literally asked me, “Can you please leave out the room so she can (concentrate)? We can’t get her to do anything while you’re here.” So I moved from the classroom to the teachers’ lounge. I wouldn’t ever leave the school . . . I try to stay for the little events that they have for the kids, you know, make sure everybody have help with wheelchairs or whatnot. I go on field trips. I never leave the school, not knowing Catherine had her breakfast, because sometimes she just want to play. So I sit in the cafeteria and make sure she eat breakfast. We start off there first. And just where I can sit in.

A major concern addressed in our conversations was the importance of parents to be seen in schools because many of the participants felt it was obvious which parents participate by the care of the children in the classroom. Additionally, these mothers understand and

showed sympathy for parents who are unable to be present in the school due to financial concerns. They considered themselves to be watchful eyes for all of the students in the classroom. Although for some parents as students mature their involvement decreases, Demetria explains a situation with her older son and how it influenced her involvement in Whitley's high school education:

My oldest son (inaudible), cause I felt like, you know, you're in high school now, (inaudible) I felt like he didn't need me. But then he talked to me and said, and I found out that he needed me as much in high school as he did in middle, and you know, I felt sad because (inaudible). But, of course, I mean, we were there for him, but it was not so much—hands on because he was doing well, and everything was going fine, we thought, but you didn't—even if they're doing well, you need to be there. But, as Carlisle said, like in Children's School and Special Children's School is where I got a lot of information from. And once he got into the regular school setting things kind of changed. I didn't really get to know any of the other parents. You know, I would see them, but just to try to form a relationship, like a school, let's talk, you know, the kids and what, how we feel and what's going on, we didn't have that type of communication once she got into the school system. And so, and that be something maybe can be looked into (inaudible), someone can form (inaudible) talk with, you know, parents with these kids because, you know, we all need to be on the same page, and some parents are afraid. From the time she gets on that bus until the time she gets off in some kind of way I'm there. She calls me every day. When she's coming home in the evening she calls me; she's at lunch she calls me; you know, sometimes in the morning she calls me, so I'm aware.

The awareness that Demetria, Patricia, and Carlisle have because of their involvement in children's day to day school education allows them to be more informed at IEP meetings and in the special education decision making process. Demetria sums up the sentiment of the group with this statement:

If you can be in a classroom be there. I mean, it does, it makes a world of difference for your child, and it will make a world of difference for the other

students as well. Because the teachers are not going to say some things or do some things with you in the classroom.

Ways to become involved. A few mothers described ways to become involved in their children's education consisting of coming to school activities, talking with teachers, and providing an educational environment at home. Interestingly, the mothers in this study do not describe the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) as a meaningful way to become involved in their children's education.

For Rose, the most valuable and impactful way to be involved in her sons' education is assisting with homework. She explains helping both of her sons led her to understand their need for special education placement:

Yeah. But now he can—I—I give him and he go do it and then come back. Because when they get out of school and get out of school first thing you do homework—take your clothes off and do homework and then you go play. The first thing is to do homework. It was difficult at first. It's been stressful. It's getting frustrating. It—it be frustrating sitting and if you know something and the child doesn't you're trying to show them—okay—I'm—I'm trying to show you like you don't understand why can't you get this. And then he try—it's just frustrating trying to tell him over and over again. Then sometimes they don't get it. Sometimes they get it and sometimes they don't. Then sometime you can show them and then five minutes later they wants to do it another way even though you keep telling them. It's just difficult sometimes and stressful. Stressful. For both of them. It's a—it's stressful for me and it's stressful for them because they see I get frustrated and then it makes them frustrated because they not—they—they know that I'm not approving of what they're doing. So it's frustrating them, too. And so it's just frustrating on—on both. It's stressful on both people.

She clarifies that helping her children with homework has prompted her to begin conversations with her sons' teachers:

No. No. I help them and talk—talk to the teachers or whatever if it's like—Jerry like he—um—they have like—they have a—an agenda book. And they have them now I guess they just writing they stuff in. And some of the stuff that he writes I sometimes can't understand the—the—um --spelling words that they have on the list and whatever and he writes the words sometimes and I don't know what they is or whatever and I will call [inaudible]—I will call attention to him. I don't understand certain things because he writes—his writing—could she please just write it down so I can know what it is so I can get it right and so he can know whether it's going to be right because he maybe understand or ain't going to understand what he's writing but I can't. And so that's—that's the only thing—that is it [inaudible] about the only thing.

Indeed, Rose's pleas to her son's teacher exhibit a deep care and concern for his academic well-being and a desire to “get it right.”

In order to create an environment that stimulates learning, Thomasina shares how at home she considers Catherine's ongoing education and purchases toys to assist in Catherine's progress:

I mean, all my toys are educational. I try to get all educational toys to try to help her learn, you know, different things. Uh-huh. That's the only way I know how to help her.

Unfortunately, one of the participants has had her attempts to become involved in her child's education ignored by teachers and administrators. Michelle sought out assistance from the school concerning her son's behavioral and educational issues however she feels nothing happened until her son, Matthew got into trouble with the legal system:

I mean, you know, I can talk over the phone but—and that's about the best thing I can right now, you know, when they call. I can't get out there so—yeah. So that's a challenge--I mean it was like I couldn't get nobody to help me—you know—see what I was going through. Um—I don't know—that really—I—well—I guess it have now since they moved forward with him going to a group home and stuff.

Yeah. Yeah. Um-hmm. Yeah. Definitely. And hopefully this will work. And you know it ain't helping—you know—work through things I hope. Yeah.

Michelle believes her inability to be physically present at Matthew's school inhibited her ability to get results from his teachers. Because of this she now feels strongly about the role of involvement in education and special education decision making:

Well, I—I know from—from living around here we need—as parents we need to get more involved. Now I'm going to say this because I may—I may have been one at the time just so involved with other things that may seem more important than our children's education. Now I'm going to be honest about myself. But we need to get up off our behinds around here especially when there's a lot of us not working. Not because we don't want to but we don't have—and if—and if we not working, you know, we can go see about our children, you know, and their education or when they getting into things. A lot of us don't do that around here. Maybe—I mean they could be—a lot don't have transportation. Now I do say that, also. But we need to—if nothing than—than getting on the phone and, you know, asking questions or, you know, voicing our opinions. I mean—I—that's what I'm feeling right now. I mean cause a lot of them don't. And I'm saying there's a lot of them don't even really care.

Michelle's regret over her lack of presence and her son's current circumstances illustrate the need for improved home-school partnerships with lower income families.

Parent Teacher Association

For many parents the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) is a useful and informative way to become involved in their children's education, however, the mothers in this study did not describe PTA as a way of becoming more involved in the special education decision making process or their children's education overall. In fact they were quite vocal about their tensions with the organization. Each of the participants cited PTA as a deterrent to their involvement in their children's education. PTA is described as way

to further socially isolate parents of students with disabilities. Overall, the parents felt PTA did not meet their needs or the needs of their children. As Patricia states, parents in the PTA have different concerns from her:

The parents of the PTA—I mean, I think that they do some things—again, I’m not involved, but I think they do some things and they’re trying to advocate. I’m not one of those parents, so whether it was my typical child or whether it was Cree, I’m very vocal. I’m the parent that’s going to come and talk to the principal and get involved that way. I’m not a advocate of PTA because I just feel like they just take money and they don’t really benefit the schools that they are collected from. So, no, I don’t participate in PTA. To me, it’s not ultimately helping my son, and that’s just my opinion. But I felt the same way about my typical children that were not handicapped. My thing is, I don’t care about playground equipment. I don’t care about wood chips. I don’t care about any of that. I care about being treated the same way that (every other student) at the school is treated. I care about handicapped-accessible doors. I care about classrooms that are not old and look like the paint is about to—I care about stuff that, to me, affects the way that the teachers are able to teach. Having the right equipment. Those things matter to me. Having information accessible to a parent that has never had a special-needs child—I mean, a lot of things that I learned is because I sought them out. It wasn’t because it was (not explained to me).

Not only does PTA not meet Patricia’s needs, it further segregates students and families who are also members of the school by offering programs and services that do not integrate all of the students in the school. Similarly, Demetria describes the anger she feels for the way children with disabilities are treated by PTA:

Well, my oldest—well, not my oldest son, my second son, yes, because even though he, he had, in the beginning he (had issues as well). So we had to deal, deal with what they said he was ADHD. And so there were many issues that he came into the school system dealing with him with the teachers on that issue. And so we were very involved. My oldest daughter unfortunately, we, even though we were involved, she didn’t demand as much of attention, even though we went to, you know, the PTAs because, you know, they always—well, now the way they do it, they have a program, and then they have a PTA meeting first to get the people to come—so, but, so at a lot of the PTA meetings I was there. I became more and

more disturbed with the school system and so I have slacked off from the PTAs and stuff because I felt like they weren't doing anything that I could relate to, let's put it that way. And so, and that might not have been the best thing, I don't know, for me to do, but, but they're more dealing with kids in the normal scene, and I have never heard of them dealing with the kids in the special education program.

Even though she was active in PTA with her older, typical children Demetria found PTA amplified the exclusion she and her daughter feel because Whitley is unable to participate in the social activities since they do not accommodate her. Demetria's feelings of isolation ultimately led to feelings of anger, she continues:

And, you know, it—and you know I used to—I used to participate in the—we would go to the PTA meetings and all that. And then, you know, I just finally—I—I got angry and I haven't been to a PTA meeting in probably a couple of years, maybe two or three years. And the way that they would get me out is when my other kids would be in plays or—or something like that. That's the way they do it now. They have the PTA meeting before then they have the program. So you're there. And so—but—you—you know and I sit there and I listen and it just—you know—in my—it—it just—it just vexes me because there's—there's nothing. Like I said, there's a—there's a separate school. You—you have your typical school and then you got your special education school within a school. They—they say nothing—nothing is geared toward these children. They're completely left out. And so I stopped. I don't support the PTA in any kind of way. I don't know if that's right or wrong for me to be, you know, that—you know—to not support it at all though even join but that's just how I—how I feel. I mean to talk about it—it—it—it does nothing for me. It doesn't do anything. It just, you know—because they tell her she can't participate in this, she can't participate in that because it's not connected with the program.

Here Demetria gives a description of the segregation that occurs between the typical students and the students in special education. The school within a school mentality ignores the needs of students with differences. In their joint interview, Carlisle explained how she also feels anger because of the exclusion of special education from the goals of PTA membership:

That's my reason for not participating anymore. I used to support them, and, you know, they weren't including the EC kids at all. I would make suggestions and it's like it was falling on deaf ears. So I just stopped. It's just so funny because—um—one of the teachers approached me about that. And she was like, why haven't you joined the PTA yet? And I'm like, well, because I don't want to. And she's like, well, you know, why don't you want to and I said because it's not doing anything for Dwight. The events that you hold Dwight cannot participate in. The food that you sell he can't eat. You know it's just nothing that is, you know, accommodating to his class. And I don't feel like I should pay a due fee, you know. I don't feel like I should participate or supply anything because it's not helping my child or his classmates. Nothing. You know, you guys host these dinners and these parties and, you know, people come and it's nothing for them. You know a lot of these kids have to eat pureed foods and you don't have anything pureed there for them. You know you don't have any—some of the kids may be on, you know, or have equipment, you know, whatever it is and you just don't have the accommodating space for the parents, you know. So I just don't feel like it's—it's something for us to participate in so we don't.

Because Patricia, Carlisle, and Demetria are often present at their children's schools, teachers notice and question their absence from PTA. But for them PTA amplifies the isolation they already feel because their children are in special education within a typical school setting.

Thomasina's perceived isolation and exclusion from PTA by its members was compounded by the dissonance she felt related to race. This dissonance led her to find other meaningful ways to be a part of Catherine's education which meant doing some of the same activities on her own:

Well, I tried to do PTA but when I—you know—when I first got into it, it was like I was the only black mother. Right. But you know I feel the cold shoulders. They're looking at you all strange and, you know, I just stopped going. Like if they have something going on at the school I will always ask the teacher—if she needed help for that day—or—um—like I know when they went to the baseball game before school got out and the majority of the kids in Catherine's class were in wheelchairs so you know I knew I was needed then because they can't—two—two teachers can't push five or six wheelchairs. So—um—I actually went and

drove my own car and just let Catherine sit with the class at the baseball game. And I did the same thing like when they went to—um—to the fair. And any little field trip that they go on, you know, I will go with her just to help out the teachers. But as far as PTA go, if—um—one of the head people of the PTA come and ask me, you know, can you come and help us with bingo night or, you know, then I'll tell them, you know, [sure and] pop my head in the door and see who's in there first. And—um—you know most of the time I would help them like—like wrap the gift baskets or put the stuff out on the tables or stuff like that. But as far as attending the meetings and doing the parent cookout and stuff, that's not for [me].

One parent expressed being unfamiliar with PTA. For Rose, PTA is not useful because she does not understand the purpose, she explains:

I ain't never really understood PTA when I was in school—the parents/teacher thing. I ain't never really understood that. I just knew they was always sending my grandma out letters and they send me out letters when they want me to come or whatever and everything. But, it—it's enough people. They got them voting on what they—maybe I should go and get some kind of input on my child's education. But I just—I'm—I'm basically—I don't like being around a bunch of people. And I don't like being around [inaudible] bunch of people and then all of them go to the PTA meeting. I have to go there and—and be around people and talk to them and—and—and raise my hand and then stand up and talk and get involved in activities. And that's not something I try to do.

Barriers to Involvement

The challenges mothers in this study faced while working on behalf of their children's education directly influenced their ability to be engaged in the special education decision making process. Three mothers describe financial concerns as a barrier to being physically present in the school and more involved in their children's education. For the participants presence was linked to working and lack of resources. Demetria shares her view, which is the essence of the groups' experiences:

And so it's like, it's hard thing how, how much you should be involved per se because there's so much is going on, especially if you have other kids (inaudible). And I don't think we as parents should feel guilty, I know I be on that guilt trip, but we shouldn't feel guilty when you're doing all that you can do, then, then you can't do any more. But just be there and know about the school lessons, inquire, because there's certain things for her that's required if she can go on the bus or not in her chair. You know, and now they've changed the rules on the buses, it's just things aren't there anymore. So you need to be up and knowing what's going on, how the school system is changing with the buses, and then who's getting their child on and off the bus. You need to know the bus driver. You know, if they change, you need to know that there's been a change, you know, as much as you can. You need to be in touch with the principal, you know, have a relationship where you can talk. You know, if you can't be there, phone, e-mail, you know, you need to have that relation—try to have a relationship with the teachers as best as possible if you can. But if you're not getting the positive feedback you think don't let that deter you. And you know, keep going back and forth until you get the response that you think you need. So, do everything, I mean, do, I mean, from the people with IEP . . . And that is one thing that I really regret that I wasn't able to do because of the job. I couldn't, but that is one thing that I'm going to try to do more of.

I can't do it every, probably every month or every, you know, I don't know how often I can do it, but if it's not but 30 minutes seeing if I can take off some time and just go, because I'm downtown, where I work, and she is clear on the other side of town. And so, and because now she doesn't have the support of her brother or her sister, and that was a big help to me, because some things they would tell me. And I don't have that, those extra eyes and ears.

The participants acknowledge the difficulties associated with having and maintaining visibility in the school but feel it is important for parents to do what they can do to develop strong relationships with educators for the sake of their children's educational success.

Participation

Participation in the special education decision making process emerged is a theme for mothers in this study. For them the special education decision making process occurs

in the IEP meetings. By sharing their opinions and advocating on behalf their children, the mothers are able to participate in the special education decision making process.

Thomasina describes how participating in the special education decision making process is crucial for parents of children with disabilities:

Well, I'm pretty much involved [if they want me to be or not]. But as far as her education, I'm always at every IEP meeting. Any decision that have to be made, you know, among them, you know, I'm always sticking my nose in, trying to see what's going on. If I would not have asked last week, I would have never known Catherine was graduating. So, you know, I come in and I ask questions about what's going on. We had that last IEP meeting. We never heard anything. Then she graduated, you know. Usually—I mean, like last year I went through this, and the teacher told me, “Well, I really can't tell you if she going to fail or graduate or not.” Well, these are things I have to know because I have to prepare myself.

Although she had been actively involved in the decision making process and was present at IEP meetings the decision to promote her daughter was made without the input of this mother leaving her unprepared regarding school choices, teachers, and Catherine's readiness to transfer schools. Patricia describes how participating in the special education decision making process is an on-going process that culminates with the IEP meeting:

No. Because I'm very vocal, you know, throughout the year even before we get to the IEP. Um—and so for me once we get there that's just a form to say, okay, stop, keep, you know, start something new—type thing in my brain. Because I'm—I'm—I'm kind of looking at the—the overall picture and I'm not just waiting till the IEP to make, you know, make it known that, oh, well, you're doing this but I think you should be doing this. So it's a continuing process with me. Absolutely.

Demetria reinforces this sentiment noting again the importance of visibility in the schools:

And another thing at the very beginning when they have the first goal, meet your child's teacher and you get to see items that, you know, they made (inaudible)—open house, very, that's very important, because, you know, that, that's the time, the first meet and greet usually, and where you and that teacher can see eye-to-eye, and you can kind of get a feel for what this person is like. Exactly, cause they do, they make you sign, sign beside your child's name, or they either have a, you know, a sheet for you to sign-in on. And I think that those kind of things can be looked at negatively if you don't go. And it's not that, you know, feel like, you know, more so looking at your per se, but you want them to know that you are there for the child. And I want to know, I want to see who my child is going to be with during the day. And so if you never go you don't know who's who, what is what, I mean, you know.

Likewise Carlisle is available to attend all IEP meetings no matter what circumstances may arise:

Yeah, I'm pretty involved, I try to be. I try to be, and know what's going on, and make all the IEP meetings. I think it's important to attend all those, because if you don't they will make the decision for your child. So, I attend all of them, if they're rescheduled I say I'm here, you know, whenever you guys can do it, and we've done them—a couple of teachers were sick and we had to do it over the phone, I said, that's fine. I'm here as well, and they called them at home and did it over the telephone. Yeah, I attend those.

Carlisle's statements indicate the critical nature of participation in IEP meetings and demonstrate her commitment to the process and making decisions for her son. Also depicted in Carlisle's response is a shared sentiment among the participants that if you do not come to the meetings decisions will be made for you. Indeed, schools must have parent's permission to evaluate, provide services to, and reevaluate students, in addition to documenting reasonable efforts to obtain parental consent (NCDPI, 2008), although meetings can take place without parents being present.

Subsequently for Michelle and Rose, it seems as though decisions are made on behalf of their children without their input. Although they are unable to attend many school meetings they do understand the importance of being available for meetings, as Michelle states:

ARA: How much input did you have in the whole process and have you had in his education up to this point?

M: I mean, I was—I was there. I mean, in the meetings that I needed to attend, I was there. Some I couldn't make maybe because _____ because, like I say, I don't drive. But for overall I was pretty much there for them.

ARA: Did they ever offer you telephone conferences?

M: Yeah. I done a few of those, yeah. When I couldn't make it personally, yeah, I did do a few telephone conferences with the teachers. Yeah. Uh-huh.

ARA: And did they ever ask you specifically to contribute to the meetings, asking, "What would you like to see happen next?"

M: They did at some point in time, yeah.

ARA: Did they seem interested in hearing your opinions?

M: Somewhat. I would say somewhat.

ARA: Well, tell me more about "somewhat" if you can.

M: I guess—like I say, that's just been ever since Matthew has started—you know, starting acting out, you know, grades started going down again. You know, ever since then I've been—I talk to people. And they're acting like they're concerned and they'll say, you know, they'll help me do things, but some will, some won't. That's just been the story so far.

For Michelle, attempts to participate were unsuccessful for her and, ultimately, Matthew.

Rose poignantly describes how her lack of participation may be in part due to transportation issues, she also finds it difficult to discuss her sons' disability:

ARA: Were you able to go to the IEP meeting?

R: Hmm-hmm. That's why they sent me the information.

ARA: Okay.

R: I had signed a—um—thing and saying that I wouldn't be able to attend.

ARA: Okay. So, when that happened what—what's the procedure after that? They have the meeting without you?

R: They have a meeting without me and then send me all the information that they talked—where they talked about and the comments and whatever they – everything that was said and done in that meeting they send it to me.

ARA: Okay. And then you have to sign and send it back.

R: No. They just send it to me through the mail. I don't have to sign anything. I signed the paper that saying I was not going to be at the conference or whatever and that they can go ahead and do it. I had signed that but I didn't sign no more papers to send back in. They just—after they got through with it they sent whatever happens at the meeting they send it to me.

ARA: Okay. All right. So, well how do you feel about that?

R: Um—they going ahead and doing it?

ARA: Um-hmm—about them having a meeting without you being there.

R: And so I was—I was fine with it because I knew I didn't—no—I didn't have a way to go so I knew I was fine with it and then some time it makes me—even though when [inaudible] sit and talk about your child and certain things they can't do if they're not up to a certain level and they can't do this and it makes me feel bad. And so I really sometimes for him to deal with it like that [inaudible] because I don't like to hear everything that everybody says because it's frustrating.

ARA: Because it's frustrating?

R: Yeah, for me, yeah. I feel—feel bad because I know he—he can't do anything about it and I can't do anything about it but it's just—it's frustrating just to see that you child go through that and have to—and going through that with them. But he doesn't know anything is wrong or anything and ain't nobody treating him different. But it's just that I know but I'm all right with it. I'm all right.

Although this statement is lengthy it provides a glimpse of the complicated anguish and frustration this mother experienced hearing about her child's disability and the impact it may have on his future. Furthermore, it explains why she would relinquish her power and allow her son's teachers to make educational decisions without her input.

Opinions

The theme of sharing opinions emerged as mothers described how sharing their opinions is a meaningful way to contribute to the special education decision making process through their participation in IEP meetings. By sharing their opinions, participants lend their expert knowledge of their children to educators and specialists. For Patricia and Thomasina, it is important to be vocal to ensure their children receive appropriate services and instruction. Patricia explicates the process:

ARA: And you attend the IEP meetings?

P: Absolutely. I help write the goals. Those things are important to me. I don't want him to be a statistic.

ARA: Right.

P: I advocate for him. Over at the Children's Center, because he's a nonverbal, you know, child, the speech therapist wanted to take speech therapy away from him because she said his attention span wasn't enough to validate her working with him. And I said, "He's a non-speaking child in the classroom with non-speaking children. Why would you take speech away from him? You know, his hearing is comprised, but with repetition and work, like anything else he's been able to accomplish, I feel like he could start speaking. But if you want to take the one thing away from him that he is not doing, I don't understand. That's like saying because he doesn't walk, then you're never going to put him in his walker again." So I had to kind of get with her, and they didn't take speech away from him.

ARA: Are you asked to contribute when you're in the IEP meetings or do you just contribute?

P: No. We go through the goals, and then I'm simply asking each one of his teachers that are making comments why they want these goals this way; if it's something mandatory the way that they have to lay it out, then they need to let me know, that type of thing. It's been pretty cool to the point where I've not had to say, "Well, I don't agree to that and I want you to change it" and go through those measures. I mean, other than, like I mentioned, the lady at the Children's Center that wanted to take speech therapy away, I've not had any other issues to where I feel like it's not working.

Further, Patricia describes the IEP meetings as "having a conversation":

Absolutely. Each—each—each therapist that he gets services from at the school is present and they're going to tell me where he's at—um—what goals he's reached based on the last IEP and then their recommendation for the future x amount of months until the next IEP. And I can say, well, no, I disagree or I can say, okay, or I can make a suggestion and say, well, have you tried this? You know, that type of thing.

However, in spite of describing the IEP meetings as conversations, Patricia's depiction does not accurately reflect a conversation. She describes a meeting where her opinion is solicited only to agree or disagree with the decisions put forth by the IEP team; rather than a participatory process where recommendations are suggested from all members.

For Thomasina, Catherine's education is of the utmost importance. Based on her desire to create a productive learning environment at home, Thomasina has an awareness of her daughter's ability therefore she is able to share her opinions and knowledge in IEP meetings when teachers ponder how to adequately instruct Catherine:

So—um—I know she have a short attention span. Yeah. She'll go for five, ten minutes and then she'll want to do something else but like I told them, you know, it's certain things that she do at home that she may not just want to show y'all that she can do here at school. And I know she can do it because I seen her do it. So, you know, after they say what they have to say and tell me what they put in their report and what she needs to work on, you know, then I just get them my little

suggestions and tell them what she can do and what I've seen her do and what I know she can do. So—um—we've—we've been pretty much involve in all the IEP since she started school.

Thomasina illustrates the well of knowledge parents possess about their children and how schools can use this knowledge to improve the services provided to students. Thomasina was at ease sharing her knowledge because she felt respected, evidence of a successful school-family partnership.

Being the center of attention is not easy for some mothers and they find it difficult to take part in IEP meetings for this reason. Carlisle explains that sharing her opinions in IEP meetings even when it makes her feel uncomfortable is necessary:

They'll ask for any contribution as to what do I think. And you know, it's like this is what I think, and then I turn around well, if this is what she did, or this is what I see happening. There's a lot of times I think, or afraid to speak up, you know, because to some people the way IEPs are done, you know, it's like a panel kind of thing and it can be intimidating to some people.

At first it was to me to have everybody sitting around staring at me when I talked, you know. That used to make me afraid. But, you know, I got to the point where I was like, you know, this is, this is Dwight, we're talking about my son, and I need to snap out of it and make better decisions for him.

And now I kind of volunteer information, I really don't wait, you know, when they're reading I'll say, (inaudible) Dwight is doing this, this is the proof, and I bring a proof from his private therapist where everything that he's done, I'm like he's doing it, so we need to change that, because he's already mastered that. We need to move on to something else.

And they don't like it because they have to scratch out and re-type it, they don't like all that, you know, but it's for my child. (Inaudible) to get it done if I have to. So it's hard, it really is, it's hard. It's hard to, you know, maintain your calmness because you have to be able to get your point across, you know, because sometimes they come in like they don't want to talk to you or want to rush you through a meeting, or you know, they're like, well, you know, he needs to be doing this and right now we don't have enough staff.

That's another (inaudible) in special ed there is not enough staff for these kids. And it's like, you know, we should have enough money, you know, I don't understand why we don't, you know.

Likewise, Demetria explains having opinions and making it known is essential because "they will make decisions for you" if you are not there and if you do not share your opinions:

Uh-huh. Well, in Whitley's IEP you have the coordinator of the program, and you have regular ed teacher, special ed teacher, you have a principal and a counselor, counselor (inaudible). And of course, myself and my husband. So—and her physical therapist, the PT is there. And so they do like normal go through each section and then you know each one reads off what they have, and you know, and see how they can, if we need to change anything. And for the most part I found out in the IEP meetings that they want the parents involvement but at the same time they don't want too much, you know. They want more of the control to tell your child what they are going to do. And, but during the IEP that is the time for the parents to see (inaudible) child and you decide what you want your child to do. And the, the therapist is okay, they say what their, you know, like the physical therapist she say what she would like to see, with Whitley in a chair, and you decide whether you agree, or you disagree with what she's saying. And we have had, you know, pro and con. I mean, we weren't arguing, but you know, you have a right to state your opinion. And so even just because they are the counselors, the therapist, don't make them—don't let them make you feel that you don't know some of what's best for your child. Because they can make you feel kind of like taking a back seat.

And, cause some of them are kind of forward and, you know, I don't know necessary if they mean to be, or if this is just the way it's been done, or whatever, but you as parents, make sure you read—you have your paper, don't look at it, and let them read it off to you. When they're reading, you're reading, because sometimes the way they read it, they interpret it one way, but you look at it, and you see something different.

Demetria's experience has taught her to remain proactive and vocal regarding Whitley's IEP meetings. She views her role as an advocate for Whitley's best interests. She continues:

And so it's, the therapist, I mean, we have, I would say we have a good relationship even though we don't necessarily agree on everything, but that's fine. You know, there's nothing wrong with that. Her counselor, I mean, the counselors now, I understand that they have a lot of students. And so unless there's something specific they don't know your child. They really don't, I mean, that's just honest.

They read what's on that paper and that's what they know. And but it's up to you to make sure they know your child. And your child needs to know the counselor, and sometimes the counselor don't even make themselves known to your children.

Have your child in the IEP meeting, because they will say things about your child in the IEP meeting that your child cannot (inaudible) because they're not there. And I make sure Whitley is there, cause I don't want them to, I say something, and they come back and say something else, and then, I mean, the last IEP meeting I thought my child was going to come out of the chair.

I mean, this is how, she's a happy child. But, but when I say, Whitley, say your peace, that's exactly what I mean. And that's exactly what she does. Don't (inaudible) if they say something negative that's not right according to what you said. She has a good memory, thank God. And so she, she's able to say, well, no, it wasn't like that. And so, in the—when you have those moments where you don't agree on everything, you have a principal, and the counselor, who will try to like be a go-between, to try to figure out how can we, you know, fix this. But they will tell you something on paper, but they will do something totally different, so you, it's—I mean, the IEP is a good thing, cause you need something in place, it's better than nothing. But you need people there that's going to actually back what's put on that paper.

Demetria feels it is her job as parent not only to share her opinions but to hold educators accountable for the treatment of her child by participating in the IEP meetings and the special education decision making process.

The lower income mothers in the study were more hesitant to share their opinions in IEP meetings. For Rose, it is simply a matter of communication and understanding. Because she has difficulty expressing herself, Rose often chooses to avoid situations where her opinion may be needed to ease her frustration:

It's sometimes difficult because . . . I don't know how to exactly say—I know what I'm saying but I don't know how—how to express it to them. And so they take it the wrong way or think of it in the wrong way and so that's the way it goes sometimes.

Indeed, communicating effectively greatly influences Rose's desire to participate. She wants to be understood in order to help her children and to contribute to the decision making process. Instead she gives up her power and removes herself from the process. Unfortunately, retreating perpetuates images of uninvolved African American mothers but substantiates the need to address underlying issues in the clash between teachers and parents.

Michelle echoes Rose's sentiments and finds participating in IEP meetings to be difficult because the educators do not seem open to hearing her opinions:

Well—well—but with him I got a lot of the—the negative. I mean, you know, the one-sided story. It's like, you know, I—I—I—I don't know why but it was just like that a lot and you know they just wanted me to hear their side and maybe it was more. I mean I know my son can be, you know, a challenge sometimes—at times about things, but I mean it's—it's not all—I didn't think it was all like what they was just—Yeah. A lot of times I didn't agree with this principal. Now I really would when he went to Hanes I was—I was, you know, if I couldn't get there I'd call, you know, and voice my opinion. But it didn't too much matter . . . because one—they had done made their decision so—I mean it was for any and every little thing. I felt like that don't even make sense. He got to get some education.

In Michelle's case, she perceived her knowledge was not valued by educators at Michael's school. When she voiced concerns to his teachers and principal they ignored her.

Trust

A major reason the women in this study choose to participate in their children's special education decision making process is the issue of trust. The theme of trust emerged as a motivating factor for mothers participating in the special education decision making process. Because the mothers take special education decisions making seriously trusting the matter to others is difficult however many of them acknowledge the need to trust teachers that possess knowledge that extends beyond their own knowledge. The mothers approach trust with uneasiness and find it difficult to navigate the emotion because they must rely on relative strangers to care for their children who have special needs-some of whom are unable to speak for themselves. For Patricia, trust is a major issue because her son is nonverbal she must form trusting relationships with his teachers and anticipating changes in the future is source of fear for her:

Then that's another that I'll have to get over because him transitioning from the (primary school) to (his current school) with the—and now—you know—I'm kind of like a two-year old when it comes to change. I get used to people. And—um—because I don't really trust everybody then I have to rely on people all over again. I've got to learn his surroundings. I have to do all this stuff for him—um—just to make sure that I am aware of everything that is going on. So times like that—again, you just have some parents—and again I have to say whether it's typical kids or special-needs kids, they just receive whatever is told to them and they don't feel like they have any other options.

Carlisle echoes these feelings, stating her trust level has intensified since her son entered public school.

Like Ms. Demetria said, you know, I think they're going to be more on point when there's a parent there with all the kids, because they don't know the nature of my relationship with parents outside. They don't know if I have their telephone

number, and I can say and look your kid is soaking wet over here, or your kid's sick, and (inaudible). So they don't know that. So usually when one of the parents is there they kind of do stand at attention. (inaudible). I think it's (inaudible) because, you know, a long time ago teachers were, you know, like you (inaudible), and you just have to really be aware of what's going on with your child in Special Ed or Regular Education, especially with, you know, Dwight's situation, you've just got to really watch. So, yeah. I try to pop up. I come in through different entrances. You don't know if I'm coming through the backdoor or if I'm coming through the front door because I just—I don't have that trust. The teacher is good but, you know, I think—I don't know. But when he transitioned into public school I was really afraid for him, for his safety, you know, was he going to get teased. So, it's kind of almost like doubled, you know, me being at the school, and I do pop-up visits now, I just pop-up, you know, and here's some diapers. Just anything so just so I can get to his classroom and see what's going on.

Demetria's trust issues concerning Whitley were eased by the presence of Whitley's older siblings at her high school but now that they have graduated Demetria's trust issues have resurfaced:

D: And so I—we had another like set of eyes and ears, you know. And so, you know, some things when we couldn't be there, you know, they—they would—they would step—I mean my—my daughter and my son have actually kind of gotten reprimanded because they had to step in and see about their sister. And that should not have ever had to be. They shouldn't have had to do that. But—um—but now that she is by herself, you know, we—we talk—we talked a lot before but now we—we even—we, you know, we've really, you know, I try to keep up on what's going on with her in the classroom and—and all because I—I—because I—I just—I just don't—I don't trust them. I don't—there's no one at that school that I trust, nobody.

ARA: No one.

D: Nobody from the—from the janitor all the way up to the principal. There's nobody in that school.

ARA: Not even the janitor.

D: No.

ARA: Sometimes you can find a little ally.

D: And I just, you know, they—the way they have presented themselves to us it just made—has made it so difficult to trust anybody, to believe what they say. So, yes, I mean my whole perception of school changed once she reached the school system.

Because her experiences with Whitley have been extremely difficult in high school, Demetria feels it is important to be there and knows she has the right to be there to help her child:

But you as a parent, you have a right to be in that classroom as long as they are not testing, they tried to tell me I couldn't come and visit the classroom, and—but you as parents you have rights. And you need to know what your rights are. And don't take for granted that the teachers are doing what is in the best interest of your child.

Demetria displays an understanding of her right to act in the best interest of her child and illustrated the connection between knowledge and power and how this combination appears in school-family partnerships.

Rose and Thomasina trust takes on another meaning. Thomasina explains that she attempts to listen to teachers and specialists at IEP meetings respecting their expertise and she is able to do this without losing sight her own expert knowledge:

I think with some parents they just need to, you know, take in consideration what goes on—the parents need to, and just listen, because we're not right all the time, you know. And especially dealing with a special-needs child, somebody can—you know, a teacher, principal, or even the referral coordinator, whoever, they may, you know, have not all the right answers, but they could lead you in the right path. So for me I was always listen. For Dad, he had this—I'm not going to say he didn't listen, but he had the type of attitude where, you know, "You can't tell me my baby can't do such-and-such-and-such," you know. And I was like, "Well, sometimes, honey, you just have to listen." So, you know, we're not the experts

here. We're still learning. So if we could sit down with somebody that's been doing way ever before we ever been and just listen—just because they say something that we might not agree to, we don't have to jump up and get all upset about the situation, you know. So that would be my first thing, is to listen to what the person say. If you have a input—you know, I say my piece, but I don't, you know, have this big attitude behind it, like, “Well, you can't tell me what my child can do” or “You can't tell me that my child have to do this” or “You can't tell me”—you know, for me that's not the way, because you're not going to get anything done like that.

Rose explains how she trusts teachers' knowledge and still values her opinions and believes she is the best decision maker for her sons:

They should be—they should be experts on how to—how children and how to teach children. But it's just different with a mother and this is my child. It's just different. It's my child. I think, you know, I'm always thinking, okay, I know what my child needs and I know this and I know even though I may not be right. But I'm thinking, okay, I know my child needs and I know how y'all should teach them or whatever. But, it's not always right though. They're doing what they supposed to be doing I guess—I mean supposed to do. But it's not the way I would do it.

Rose trusts her knowledge of what is best for her children although she finds it difficult to assert her agency with educators. Because she has difficulty asserting herself she often finds herself in an undesirable position of trusting teachers to make decision on behalf of her children.

Advocate

Many of the women interviewed here described their participation in the special education decision making process as a form of advocacy. They felt it was important to advocate for their children and other students as the opportunity presented itself. In this section the participants described the ways they advocate for their children in the special

education decision making process. A quote from Thomasina provides a general sentiment the group:

A lot of people say, “Well, you’re a great advocate for your child.” And I was like, “Well, I really didn’t know that.” I mean, I knew they had people—you know, some people go out and get a professional advocate to speak for theirself and their child. But if I’ve got something to say, then I’m going to say it. I mean, I ain’t got nobody—I don’t have to hire nobody to say what I feel. I’m going to say what I feel and keep rolling with the punches. But for me to be a advocate for my child, I think that play a big role for me and her, you know. I can’t let anybody run me over, more or less run over a child that can’t help themselves.

Because their children have special needs and many of the families have been dealing with these needs since the children were born or entered schools, advocacy is a way of life. Therefore, when asked about advocacy and the special education decision making process the responses ranged from advocating with medical professionals, interactions with teachers, and the need to be a politically savvy advocate.

Questions about advocacy elicited passionate responses from four of the six mothers. Coincidentally, they are also the mothers of children with developmental disabilities. Patricia described how she advocated on behalf of her son, Cree to have speech when his therapist suggested it be taken away during an IEP meeting:

I—I’ve been pretty successful so far. Um—there was just one, you know, incident—um—before he came to [his current school] that, you know, one of his therapists kind of went back and forth about—um—about the—the number of—um—days that he would receive speech therapy. And she questioned why he needed more days if he was not—um—speaking or the fact that his attention span was so limited. And basically—um—you know, [inaudible] are heard. That is your job to spend that time with him to get him more allocated, you know, to spending the time for speech. So are you telling me you’re—you’re bordered in some way? You know, I—I didn’t really get her angle. And I said why would you take services away from a child that’s not speaking? You know, duh.

She elaborates saying:

Yeah. I mean, just like, you know, any other parent with a typical child you're advocating for that child. You're speaking—you're their voice. You're the liaison between them and their teacher. If they have an issue and they can't resolve it with their teacher then, of course, that would come to you. Well, I have to be all of that for him because he can't speak for his self. So—um—I don't—I don't see a humongous difference. I would—I would do, you know, for my—my typical kids the same thing I would do for my son. I don't really separate it. I just—I have to be a little bit more involved only because he's non-verbal. Oh, yeah. Uh-huh, especially my oldest. He kind of went through some transition _____ in school, kind of mixed up with the wrong kids. And I had to go before the school board and a number of other people who could advocate for him about a situation to get him back in school, and they allowed him back in school. So whether it be my oldest or my youngest, I feel like I have to be more vocal with Cree because he can't speak for himself. Um—again for me—um—I can't departmentalize it, you know, because I have typical children and then I have my special needs kid. So—um—same as before—um—I echo the same response, you know. I'm going to advocate for my special needs kid like I would my typical, no more, no less. Um—other than the fact that he is non-verbal—um—I have to go by his mannerisms. I have to go by his overall demeanor. Um—he is the type of kid, though, if he does not like you you will know it. Um—can I pinpoint and say, oh, well, somebody has done something to him. No. Um—but I'm very observant and because I frequent the school I pay close attention to the different teachers that he interacts with and I pay close attention the aides and those type of people and kind of sum them up. But they also know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I will rip them in half if they do anything to him. I'm—I just kind of put that out there. Um—and so I just think that they know. I—I demand my respect and I demand that they respect him just like right off the bat. And so they know how I am. They just know. Not trying to intimidate, not trying to be a bully, but they just know.

She concludes her statement by describing how she must advocate for Cree in other areas as well, particularly in medical settings where she is called upon to be his “voice” and stand up for his best interests:

I feel like sometimes they just don't know and they just do stuff, and so it takes me saying, “No, you're not doing this” or “You need to do this,” not taking on the role of the doctor, but as a parent saying, “No, you're not going to poke, stick, and

x-ray and do all this other stuff, you know, trying to find out what's going on, you know." Sometimes I've had to just step in and say, "No, we're not doing this."

Thomasina details a similar situation with Catherine in a doctor's office:

I know a lot of times I have to be her voice, like when she goes to the doctor or I would take her to the emergency room. You know, you're standing over here saying, "Well, what hurts?" Well, of course, she can't say what's hurting her, you know. Usually I can tell you what may be the problem is and, you know, we could look into it and see if it's that. Like say, for instance, when she got sick with the flu, you know, I didn't know she had the flu. All I know is, you know, she couldn't keep nothing down. And they was like, "Well, do her tummy hurt?" Do"—I mean, she can't, you know, physically get up and say, "Mommy, my tummy hurts. I don't feel good," you know. We're not prepared—we've not gotten to that point yet.

She also explains how she and her husband advocate for Catherine in the schools. They, along with other parents, filed a complaint with the area school board to restructure Catherine's class because they were promised a small class size at the typical school where Catherine attends kindergarten. In reality they found their daughter in a kindergarten through fifth grade class in which sixteen children with varying degrees of disability were being taught by one teacher:

Um—we've made such a ruckus till the point where they broke up the classroom. Because I thought well maybe she's a little intimidated. She's the only one in the wheelchair. She can't, you know—everybody else can walk. She can't walk. Um—she have to crawl and, you know, these big kids sitting there, you know, when she fell on the floor she gets stepped on. So I think that was probably the problem. And we voiced our opinion—a lot of us [inaudible]—um—the school board—central school board got a hold of our complaint. And, they decided that—you know—they was on our side to break that class up to take the bigger kids out and leave the smaller kids in. And we finally got results on that. Last Friday they took and moved all the older kids, I guess, from third grade up and put them in a trailer and kindergarten, first and second grade are in the main building. So it went from being sixteen kids in a class to six.

Thomasina's story is an example of parents using their right to advocate.

Demetria has had to advocate for Whitley in several situations especially since Whitley has entered high school. She explains how knowing her rights helps her to advocate:

And I mean, your child has rights. She has (inaudible) just like everybody else. And so, you know, so be involved. There are all kinds of ways to be involved if you can't be in the classroom like knowing the rights. You know, read and talk to other people. You know, if you see things aren't going right, don't be afraid to question authority. You are, what is it they say, you are your child's best advocate. No one is going to do it like you can. Cause you know your child better than anybody else. So, if things aren't going the way you think they should go, you don't let it lag, nip it as much as, before it gets blown out of proportion or to a point where they—cause they will come and ask you well, why didn't you say something in the beginning if you knew about something. So they will question you and make you feel like you've done something wrong. Keep up on what's going on, you know, in the class.

She goes on to explain the importance of knowing your rights regarding the IEP process:

They're—when—okay—if—I think they—they—I mean you—you need to stay on—stay on top and know—um—you need to go and research what a—if you don't know what an IEP is and what it stands for and how it relates to your child and the fact that what's on that IEP is law. If they break it they can, you know, they—they can get into some serious trouble if it's written, you know, right. Know your rights as a parent and know whatever they put in that IEP that's what they're supposed to stand for. And when you can call—just because they call you for an IEP meeting that doesn't mean that you can't. You can call. I don't care if they had one today you can call tomorrow if you think of something and request and say that—and say that you want to make an amendment to that IEP. And so, you know, just—just because of what they say sometime they can be intimidating because they've been there in this big group and it's only you, your husband, maybe, and your child. And so—and you got to learn—which I had to learn this and you can—you don't—if you don't feel comfortable you can take someone with you and—um—I am so thankful that I had a friend. When Whitley's first IEP before she left special children's school she taught me a lot. She was a social worker. She sat in with me with my first IEP and helped me to, you know, go through the process to where I could handle it—me and my husband could handle

it ourselves. And so she agreed to come. She told me if I wanted her to come she would come. So you can have other people in that meeting with you that you think can help with your IEP process. Don't think that you have to do this alone if you're not comfortable if they make you uncomfortable. Whoever you want you [inaudible] on your behalf, on your child's behalf—and that's frowned upon, too. When you bring family or friends, especially if you have a family member that's a professional and they come in there in that professional role not as grandma. So, it—they—they don't like that. It's like, okay. Who do you have with you? Oh, this is such and such. She's an RN. And they're like, oh. Or, you know, she's a social worker. Oh. Okay. You know, so it's kind of like everybody's tone changes after they tense up more. But, we kind of like, okay.

ARA: It relaxes you a lot.

D: Yeah. Exactly.

Although she has felt comfortable to advocate for Whitley in the special education decision making process she also acknowledges there is a Demetria to pay for being a zealous advocate for your children:

It does because they take it out on the child. Now the teachers look at her differently. Some of them that was so nice and pleasant with her but now they're talking to each other. They take up for each other. It's like they have this bond. They've developed this line that you don't cross. And so, you know, so they just give her a hard—hard time. Some of the teachers actually she tells me, mom—um—Miss So and So looked at me and rolled her eyes. And, you know, and, you know, and stuff like that. It—these are adults and professionals—supposed to be professional people. And if something is wrong they shouldn't be offended if the parent is concerned or asking questions and being if there is a—if they have a valid point then it's—they shouldn't try to—to try to cover it up. It's like the children with disabilities. Like I say they got them pushed all the way to the back of the school.

Carlisle explains although she does not have issues advocating for her son the strain of advocating can be isolating:

Any problems advocating—oh my behalf, no. But on the other side as far as maybe the school system and the other organizations out there—that are supposedly out there to help the kids, sometimes, yes, because they pretty much generalize the kids and it just makes it hard because they really don't listen to your individual situation. Sometimes it just feels like you are tearing down walls, you know, because it's—it—you do feel like you are carrying a banner by yourself and sometimes I don't know it—it—it is really hard and you're looking around like, okay, is anyone else experiencing this because if so why aren't you stepping up and saying anything or asking questions to the other parents. So, but, you know, it's rough because a lot of the parents don't even talk to each other and I think if they did it would probably make a difference because there are strength in numbers but . . .

Collaboration

The need for collaborating emerged as a theme within the group. The mothers acknowledge the importance of working with educators, therapists and doctors concerning their children's special education decision making process. Collaboration can be defined as “working jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor” (Merriam-Webster, 2013, p. 87). Additionally the mothers consistently mentioned the role of the teachers in the collaboration between parents and the school. Patricia highlights the sentiment felt by the mothers of the importance of collaboration in the special education decision making process:

Attend the IEP meetings like I do. Like I said, check up on the classroom, see what the progress is, even down to the report card. If it's a little different, you know, check on it. If I keep saying—seeing, you know, certain comments on the report card, I want to know what that means. Are we reaching our goals? What are we doing to reach our goals? I mean, we don't just sit in there and just write goals just to put on a piece of paper and stick in a file. You know, it takes the parent working along with the child as well. Everything doesn't happen at school. I mean, again, it's the same as with a typical child. Not all the learning should be at school or put on the teacher. Some of the responsibility has to be on the parent, checking the homework. Now, Cree doesn't have any homework, so looking at what is sent home, making sure that it matches to the goals, you know, stuff like

that, having interaction with the teachers, finding ways that you can help improve the skills of your child while they're at school. With Cree, it's a lot of repetition. If I don't take the initiative to ask his teacher, "What can I be doing outside of what you're doing?"—especially when goals are not reached. What can I expect? And how will I know what to do at home?

According to Patricia, forming collaborative partnerships is a responsibility of parents concerned and committed to their children—whether they are typical or special needs.

Next, Carlisle explains both parties are responsible for building a successful collaborative relationship. She goes on to explain however that teachers can make parents feel unwelcomed in the classroom:

And I think that's where some parents make the mistake because they don't try to build that relationship. And when their child comes back and tells them something negatively it's automatically the teacher's fault. And so, and that's mostly in a typical scene, but it's important to build the child, do your best to have that communication between you and the teachers, and you need to know (what's going on) . . . I mean, I feel them not wanting the parents to be in the classroom, I've experienced that also, where I've gone up to Dwight's class and they were getting ready to have speech therapy and they were kind of trying to rush me out the door. And I said, well, I'm going to sit up here for a while, I've got some free time. And they didn't like it, and it was almost like they couldn't function or concentrate because I was in the classroom with them. And it was like, well, what is so different about me sitting here is changing the way you normally do what you're supposed to do?

Carlisle suggests here that an opportunity to develop and facilitate a more effective collaborative process was missed because teachers were uncomfortable with her presence in the classroom. Although parents are encouraged to be involved in their children's education, how and where is often controlled by the schools. The teacher's attempt to control how Carlisle participated at Dwight's school impacted her desire to collaborate

with his teacher. As Demetria explains collaboration can be difficult when it is needed the most.

D: Exactly. Exactly. But the teachers are not real receptive of parent participation at all. Not in the EC classes. They really aren't.

ARA: Well, what do they expect?

D: They—they expect them to come there, do what they say do and go home, basically. And whatever—how they talk to them and what they—it doesn't—it doesn't matter. I mean whether they speak to these kids—the way they—or whether they—they treat them, the way they handle them. It shouldn't be an issue because they're—they're EC students and they're not—they're not as good as the other students. That's the way they treat them.

She continues with an example of how her attempts to collaborate have impacted

Whitley:

D: So she has, the teachers, they are not always very kind to the students. They call them names. Of course, they don't let the people that, the authorities hear this, but Ashley tells me, because I encourage her to not be afraid to tell me anything. And they have said things to her like, you know, like "you're not going to go to college," and telling her that, you know, just "you need to sit up, you need to do," it's not so much what they say all the time, but the way that they say it. And I know and believe her because when I have gone to the school and confronted with some of these issues they have come back around and they've taken it out Ashley in the classroom. And in which I feel is very unprofessional. These teachers with kids in Special Education should not be holding grudges against these kids because a parent questions something in the classroom. And she has been, they have intentionally left her out on field trips because they didn't want to deal with the wheelchair.

ARA: Intentionally?

D: When I say intentionally I mean it in every sense of the word, they left her.

By contrast Patricia feels the welcoming environment at her son's school and she contributes that, in part, to her successful collaboration with his teachers:

I love—I love this school, because people that are on opposite ends of the hall that Cree has never been in their class, they know who he is. They know who I am. They may not know my name, but they'll be like, "Cree's mom" or "Hey, Ms. ----." Or we'll walk down the hall and they say, "Hey, Patricia, Hey, Cree." I'm like, "How do these people know me?" But pretty much I am a pretty straightforward, shoot-from-the-hip kind of person once you get to know me. It just is what it is. And they know if come up there, I ain't just coming up just to look at the wall, you know. I have a really good relationship with (his principal). But I think it's important that, again, just like I was visible to the administration for my typical kids, the same is true with Cree. But they don't—if you don't come and say something every once in a while or show your face, then your child will be another statistic. Your child will be another under-the-rug type of situation.

Rose desires better collaboration with her sons' teachers because it is difficult for her to help them with their homework without it:

It's been stressful. It's getting frustrating. It—it be frustrating sitting and if you know something and the child doesn't know what you're trying to show them—okay—I'm—I'm trying to show you like you don't understand why can't you get this. And then he try—it's just frustrating trying to tell him over and over again. Then sometimes they don't get it. Sometimes they get it and sometimes they don't. Then sometime you can show them and then five minutes later they wants to do it another way even though you keep telling them. It's just difficult sometimes and stressful. Stressful.

An improved collaborative relationship would help Rose and the teachers to work together on the stressful homework assignments and potentially improve the academic outcomes for Rose's sons.

Teachers seek out Thomasina's advice during meetings but also in passing to figure out how to better instruct Catherine and Thomasina is available with detailed feedback. She has found it easy to collaborate with the exception of one IEP meeting:

Well, all the IEP's was good except for preschool. When she did preschool she had a physical therapist that just basically didn't want to work with her. I don't know why. I don't know what the attitude was about or if she just didn't like her job. But don't tell me my baby can't do this or my baby can't do that and she's doing it at home with a therapist that we brought in ourselves. So if our therapist can get her to do it, why can't you. Just take the time out to do it.

Teachers

The role teachers play in the special education decision making process emerged as theme among the mothers. For the mothers in this study teachers serve as the primary ambassadors of the school. Teachers initiate the special education referral process when disabilities are not identified before entering school (need citation). As Thomasina explained, the teachers were the only school faculty she and her husband interacted with concerning her daughters classroom change at her new school:

T: Well, what happened was—is we went to open house *and we was trying to get there a little earlier but* they say like—they said all the teachers were in meetings and [inaudible]. So we ended up going to open house and—um—they kept giving me the run around about where the classroom was at. And see, no one told us this, you know. We went and talked to the principal—uh—a week before open house and she guaranteed us, you know, there's no more than ten kids per class, three teachers per, you know, per class. She—she said they had four classes like that but then when we get to open house we saw a totally different story from what, you know, this is not what the principal told us it was going to be.

ARA: Have you had any interactions with the—the principal—um—in all of your dealings?

T: No, just the teachers, yeah.

The special education decision making process occurs both formally and informally. Also, teachers are involved in IEP meetings, giving them a critical role in the special education decision making process. Thomasina's story illustrates the powerful role teachers have in collaborating with parents regarding the special education decision making process. Patricia explains the critical role teachers have and why parents must be aware of it:

P: I mean, other than just being active and just taking the time to get to know the teachers. I mean, anytime—and it was very rare, but anytime that a teacher called me or sent a note home—I know my child. If she says something off the wall, I might be—that doesn't really sound like him, but let me investigate. I wouldn't go, "Oh, no, that wasn't my baby."

ARA: Right.

P: And you go up there and lay everybody out. And my kids knew that. They knew they had 110 percent of my support as long as they remained honest to me. I think it's just important that parents just make themselves known to the administration. I feel like teachers the type of parent they can call and discuss a problem, and they know the type that don't give a rat's tail. And those are the ones that they write off.

ARA: That's what I wanted to talk about, the write off. Can you explain to me what you mean by that?

P: It means if they think that they've already summed up what kind of parent you are, labeled you as, you know, short-tempered and hard to talk to, confrontational, then they're going to put that child on their little list of "Okay, we ain't going to deal with this. Whatever he do, he just do, pass or fail, succeed or whatever." The parent that comes there and is not like the big bad wolf ready to blow the house down and says, "Look, let's sit down together. Tell me what he's doing. What can I do?" Bring that child in. That's what I do with my kids. I bring them in. Okay. "Do you know what Ms. So-and-so was doing?" Service notice and let them know, "Oh, they didn't tell me what you've been doing." To me they're going to be one of two things. They're either going to continue and you have to go over their head and get better results, or they're going to say, "You know what? This parent is concerned. They're looking at me. Let me alter." Sometimes it's not all the kids. Sometimes it's not all the teacher.

Because Rose and Michelle have had difficulty maintaining a presence in the schools, they describe their experiences collaborating with teachers cautiously. Rose shared a conversation she had with her son's teacher about his academic record:

Yeah. Okay. Yeah. It was Jerry's teacher because she was asking me—um—about certain things how he was doing in school and whatever. And I was like, okay. You have records. You should know. He's slower in this and this and this. I mean—I mean—I—I just assumed they already knew when he go to school they already know what he was slower in and whatever and what he couldn't do and what he needs help on. I think it was something he wasn't in class doing like everybody—all the rest of the children. He wasn't up to what all the other children was doing . . . well don't you know that this, and this, this. And that's when she asked me well he's already been—has he been retained before and I was like, yeah, and she was like, that's not an option. So I don't know if she was saying just because that he—that he done been retained before that they couldn't retain him again or something or something like that. But it was something in school that the children—everybody—all the other children was doing that he—he wasn't able to do at that time and she wanted to ask me about it. Why wasn't he able to do this and why wasn't he able to do this? And I was telling my—he's—I mean a special needs child and he needs certain things and he needs help with some of this. But, that's the way it is. And I didn't hear anything else from her. But she passed him.

Rose is unsure why the teacher addressed the issue so blatantly and she was confused about the line of questioning especially when she notes her child was passed to the next grade. Similarly, Michelle describes candidly how confusing and frustrating collaborating with teachers can be when your child is in with behavioral issues:

M: The attitude first. I mean, it's just like they don't care, you know. It's just when they first speak to you—I mean—not when you first speak. I mean, you know, they might, you know, greet you well but after that it's just no feeling or nothing towards what they're saying or—and it's all one-sided, you know. They don't want to—it's like they don't want to—um—what I'm trying to say—um—it's like they want to just—they just want you to hear their side of the story and not, you know, something that I'm quite sure is more going on than what they're explaining. But, it just—it's just a one-sided

story with them. Just—I still talk polite but I still—I still got my thought about it. You know, I talk polite okay and I'll talk to them but I know—I know it be more towards what—what the [teachers think] you know.

ARA: And how teachers, you know, make you feel—well you talk to me—you talk to me and tell me how do you feel when you have to interact with the teachers; when they call you—um—what's it like?

M: Um—I guess it depends on the person, you know, regardless of whether you're a teacher or not. I mean nobody's perfect. You know, everybody got their own opinions and I don't know. When they—maybe it's just me or—um—some of them I can pretty much deal with. I'm sorry to look away but I'm just kind of thinking of like what I'm trying to say. Some of them, I mean, you can kind of talk to and—but some of them, you're just like—you feel like you're talking at them or—I mean like they just don't understand what you're trying to explain to them about your children, you know. It—it can be hard sometime. You know, you got some that's understanding; some is—is not.

Although her son was having extreme behavior problems in school, the teachers chose to promote him to the next grade in spite of his mother's repeated requests for help. Demetria and Carlisle in their joint interview describe feelings of anger and frustration towards teachers. Demetria explains how important collaboration with teachers is for parents but it is essential for students:

Just like I said, they have issues with us questioning their, what they do in the classroom, as far as Ashley is concerned. They had a problem (inaudible) they would have problems with her school work. We've had to put things in her IEP, she can't, her hands are affected, she can't write as well and as quickly as everyone else, and so they call her "slow," and all this stuff. And so we had things documented in her IEP that we wanted to have done, and even with that we've met challenges that they don't want to do it. Right, exactly. They can see you on a calm, in a calm state. One of her teachers, I was standing there, you know, she was talking with another parent, and when that parent left me and Ashley went to, and we know she saw us, she turned away from us and went back and called that particular parent back and was talking with them. And so I even pulled back and waited, she never acknowledged our presence. And so I said, Ashley let's go. And we went on to the next teacher. That just really said a lot to me. Now, this is a teacher she sees every day, and it's because of the relationship from 9th grade up

to that point hasn't been positive. But still you're in a setting where if you don't have a relationship, to me you should strive to have a relationship with the parent. It's kind of like, oh, she makes me sick. Here she comes. You know you can see it in their face. They don't try to hide it because it's like they give each other a look, you know, like now I got to deal with this. Okay. If you're acting like this in front of me how are you treating my child? Well, I found that—um—trying to advocate for Ashley—um—has been very difficult since we started her in the school system. Um—we have had her IEP meetings. We have had things stated that we would like to see done—um—in her IEP and sometimes things will be carried out and then sometimes they wouldn't. Some of the teachers aren't as willing to go along with what's written in the IEP as they—as they should.

Carlisle is fearful of what the future may hold for her son and the necessity of forming new collaborative relationships in the future:

Yes, I, in Dwight's class I know a few times (inaudible) going on (inaudible), I don't feel like the teacher was actually paying attention to the child. And one kid in particular, he was like having a seizure, where he had like (inaudible) and (inaudible) and she's like he didn't saying nothing (inaudible). And you know, so I feel like my presence in the classroom is very important. And not just for my son but for the other students as well. Like Ms. Demetria said, you know, I think they're going to be more on point when there's a parent there with all the kids, because they don't know the nature of my relationship with parents outside. They don't know if I have their telephone number, and I can say and look your kid is soaking wet over here, or your kid's sick, and (inaudible). So they don't know that. So usually when one of the parents is there they kind of do stand at attention. (inaudible). I think it's (inaudible) because, you know, a long time ago teachers were, you know, like you (inaudible), and you just have to really be aware of what's going on with your child in Special Ed or Regular Education, especially with, you know, Dwight's situation, you've just got to really watch. It is, since I've been through it with, you know, (inaudible) family, but I've also gone through it with my son, so it's like a double whammy, because I'm looking at it like, okay (inaudible) when he gets there, so I'm kind of learning from her example, and how I should approach things and things that I should do because it's just, it's ridiculous the way they treat these children in school.

Here Carlisle draws on Demetria's knowledge and experience to inform collaborative efforts with teachers. She explains:

Because they are trained, you went to school specifically to learn how to deal with these type of children, and then when they, when you get in their presence, and you are to teach them, you are not treating them like how they should be treated. There's no respect, none at all for these kids. I mean, it's just like, it's—I can't even put it in words how it is, but, but problems I had with my child aren't as severe as hers because he can't talk so I really don't know what's going on with him in school, but I know the first year he was in public school he became, he lost like 8 pounds, he was thin, his bones were like just, you know, you could see everything, because they weren't feeding him breakfast and lunch. He would turn his head one time and they'd say, oh, he's refusing. So they weren't feeding him, so he wouldn't eat until I got him home for dinner. He would come home in saturated diapers, and when I would confront the teacher, oh, I just changed him 30 minutes ago, he must have just did all that. I'm waiting for the diaper to bust, it didn't happen in 30 minutes, you know. And like I would put money on his account for lunch, and he would tell me he's not eating lunch, all this money off of this account, and I pay for the month, and he was sending me a letter a week saying he has no money, you know, just if they had taken the time with him, so, he left (his last school) he went to (his current school) and his first year at (his current school) was wonderful. The teacher there she thought out of the box. She took her time with the kids. She loved the kids. But because she cared so much they told her, well, we're going to re-assign you and just going through a major change, and they got rid of her, and now the teacher that's there, she's just like, okay, in 20 minutes this is what we're going to do, in 30 minutes this, so everything is like on a time schedule. You can't be like that when you have children that have disabilities, any type of disabilities, you kind of have to just let it flow. I understand there has to be structure, but at the same time you have to look at each individual child's needs and go with that, you can't just say "okay, well he's not done eating at 12:30, I'm going to take his food." Well, if he has a swallowing problem, of course, it's going to take him 40 minutes to eat. So and, you know, it's just little things like that where as parents we take the time, you know, with our kids, and the school system is just like, you know, they want these kids to be like the general population of their school, and you can't do that. They are not like the other kids. I haven't seen anything yet. Dwight—um—he pretty much pulls that over on me like he does more at school than he does at home so that—that's what Dwight does. But,—um—his teacher is pretty good as far as like understanding his needs and knowing what his needs are. So she—right—she's good now because this is her second year with Dwight. So I think right now we're seeing eye-to-eye on things. In the beginning I didn't feel like she was trying to learn Dwight, you know, and see what he does and his likes and dislikes and, you know. I feel like before, you know, you can really start to teach a child you need to see how they are and learn things about them, you know, what works for them, you know. And I—I don't care if you have two students or twenty you need to know your kids because that's going to make a big difference in their

education and how you teach them and the outcome. So she—she’s—she’s getting pretty good. Yeah. I don’t have any complaints right now.

This long quote helps to elucidate the important role teachers play in the lives of students, particularly when those students have special needs. And further illustrates how building school-family partnerships eases tensions between parents and educators, helps teachers to provide lessons “outside the box” and promotes dialogue.

Issues of Discrimination and Difference

Discrimination is defined as “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex” (Merriam-Webster, 2013, p. 203). The legacy of discrimination in the Winston-Salem schools, and the country, makes the emergence of this theme significant. Although the focus of this study is primarily race and education, for the participants issues of race are often conflated with discrimination on the basis of disability. For many of the mothers racism was complicated however they were able to explain the need for African American parents to organize to advocate for students with special needs, at the same time acknowledging not all African American parents are able to be involved in their children’s educational decision making process, and that special education can be dangerous for African American students. One example of this comes Patricia believes race plays a role in the interactions between parents and teachers:

ARA: Do you feel like race is a component of the interaction with students?

P: Absolutely. I think society has kind of molded African-American men in a certain way, and until the teachers get to know—and I’m not saying all teachers are this way, but I think some teachers already have in their mind what kind of

student or what kind of kid they are, you know, where they come from or vice versa. And then that'll determine their interaction with them, they're going to deal with them and how they're going to deal with them. That's just my thinking.

However she goes on to explain some differences do not apply with special needs students:

I think the answer to that—because I'm seeing it from both sides. If I only had a special-need child, that would be all that I would know. But with me having both a typical—three typical and one special needs, I'm seeing both sides. And some parents are just not going to get involved, for whatever reason. I would say, in response to that, the demographics, I feel, of black to white with special needs, I don't think there's a certain type of parent that has a special-needs kid. But I think some of the parents tend to, one, not know resources that are available. They have kind of gotten into the mode where they just accept certain things, because they say, "Well, my child has a special need. There couldn't be anything else available, or if there is, I couldn't possibly say anything about it because it's not going to matter." That's my outlook on it.

According to Patricia, the apparent apathy some parents display regarding their children's education is not related simply to race. In her view, these parents would have apathetic attitudes without regardless of race.

Rose described several instances of racial discrimination related to her sons but found it difficult to say she believed racism could be a motivating factor for educator's behavior toward her children. She recalls one such incident related to her older son's educational experiences:

. . . but basically if you try to sit down and try to tell him to spell and sit there and write and whatever he can't do it. And I don't understand how he got—when I found out that he couldn't read he was what about let's say about fourth or fifth. I think it was like fourth, fifth grade. And he had went through all those years of not being able to and teachers just letting him go, letting him go, letting him go, letting him go. And then so he got real good at math and he would pass by by just

looking at certain stuff that he did know and he would pass that. But I just don't understand how he got up to that and wasn't able to read. Like now he can't—he can't read like that.

Rose felt the teachers promoting her illiterate son reflected a lack of respect and expectation for children from low economic backgrounds.

Carlisle describes a complicated scenario where African American parents are viewed as complacent and uninvolved however discrimination is less about race and more about disability:

What I'm saying is that the (black) parents are trusting, they trust the teachers, because when you're in their face it's a whole different attitude with you and the teachers. And you know, like everything is lovely, oh, I just love your child, and they are doing this and they're doing that. But when they are not there, the parents are not there and your child is in the presence—it's a whole different thing. And some of these (black) kids do not go home and discuss with their parents what goes on in the classroom. And I feel like the parents don't ask. And you know, it's just like that thing of don't ask, don't tell, you know, ask them, because of their mind setting they don't tell you. . . . so I think the only discrimination I see is against the children with the disabilities, they just don't want to deal with it. It's like, you know what, these kids are doing all right, they are potty trained, they doing this, let's keep them, but these, you know, David (inaudible) they are severe (inaudible) need to be in a class where they watch TV all day, and that's not what they need.

Carlisle's statement reflects an acknowledgement that parents are viewed in schools on the basis of color although she does not directly define this as racism. For her, discrimination is the failure of schools to provide equitable opportunities to students with disabilities.

Demetria agrees with Carlisle and pinpoints racism is tricky especially when it seems some African American parents are apathetic about their children's education:

Cause so many things that went on if she hadn't told me I never would, I would, you know, I never would, but I'm so glad that, that my husband and I were there, cause I did, I have found that there are parents who don't have a clue what's going on with their child. And most of them are African American. From what I see, I can't say that our (African American) parents don't care it's just hard to see how they do sometimes because they may work and may not be able to come to school. But in my experience, African American parents are not as involved in their children's education as the White parents. I don't know why that is though.

Carlisle shed lights on why African American mothers may feel unable to participate in the special education decision making process:

African American mothers don't know that they have a voice until they meet someone else who can show and tell them they have rights because they are their child's advocate. But I find that they don't know, "oh, I can say that and I can do this." Once they know, they get a voice and are able to advocate for their child.

This lack of voice may also impact African American mothers working together to form groups. Thomasina cites a need for Black mothers to coalesce to discuss the myriad of issues affecting students with disabilities:

Because if it was then there would be more understanding to what their child needs and, you know, what—what their child needs are and won't be so fast to give up on—on their child [inaudible] situation. Um—and it's just not with African American women, you know, but it's been some white people, too, that, you know, take their child to school and never go back and get them and they end up in foster care.

The stress of managing family life and a special needs child adds a burden that is difficult to overcome for some families. However, as Thomasina explains, these difficulties may not have a connection to race. She goes on to describe how some mothers may confuse racism with personality conflicts between teachers:

ARA: I have a question for you. Do you think that race played a part in any of the—I don't know. I don't know how to even describe it—the way that people have reacted to you and Catherine? Has race ever been an issue?

T: As far as I can see, it hasn't. But I've talked to other parents here, both black and white, and they've had their different views. I mean, you know, I was just talking to a different parent. You know, she was telling me how they treated her son here, you know. And I'm saying, you know, in the last four years I've been here, I've never got that response. "If I had any type of issue, the same person that did whatever to you, I never got that type of response to you." You know, she was actually like—you know, she say just the way they talked to her or—they just upped, without no reason, pulled her child out of school. And I was like, "Well, basically that's not [inaudible]." You know, she was telling me all kinds of stuff, and I was like, "Well, I've never seen that here. So you're either telling me half a truth or you came up here and raised so much sand till don't nobody want to be with you anymore."

ARA: Oh. Uh-huh. So you think that's more what it is, like, you know, not necessarily a racial issue, but it's just, you know, like hard-to-handle parents.

T: Right. You know, because if I come up here every day busting up at the door and _____, eventually they're going to get tired of that.

ARA: Right. And you want them to be able to work with you because you want them to work with your baby.

T: Exactly. Exactly. Or if I come through the doors and I have the nerve or audacity to tell a PT, "Well, you don't know what you're doing. I could have your job," you know, eventually they're going to get—eventually they're going to say, "Okay. This lady is a problem. How can we fix this problem and get this problem out of our hair?" And for me, I don't like problems. I don't like confrontation. If you come to me and tell me my child is having a issue, I'm going to try to best to handle that issue. And that's with Catherine or any of my kids.

Again, separating racism or issues complicated by race is difficult to pinpoint and describe for this mother.

For Michelle, the issues are easier to identify. Living in a low income housing development for years, she details a life of being looked at as "less than." Her hesitance to place her son in special education is directly related to this perspective:

I mean, because—and it has to do with the [violence] we live in too around. I mean, you don't want your—it's hard enough being a young black male in this environment around here in the projects, and then just to be labeled, you know. It's a lot—I mean, I can't put it into words what I want to say. And then I feel sometimes that he might, you know, be angry at me because, you know, he's in that—you know, I went along with the decision about him being in, you know, special education. There's a lot that goes along with it. I just—Um-hmm. But you would be surprised at how they do the children around here. I mean—and the truth be he had friends along with him that was acting the same way and they got passed right on along, too. Um-hmm. Don't pass the EOGs, yet they pass them on. And they have, you know, behavioral problems and wasn't doing their homework and stuff like that.

Michelle's story emphasizes the lack of social and cultural capital residents in her neighborhood possess.

For some African American mothers discussing their children's disability is a sensitive subject. Some of the mothers discussed how acknowledging their children are different leads to feelings of isolation. Family support and love of their children are cited as coping mechanisms for overcoming what some termed the "taboo" of disability in the African American community. Rose poignantly shared her story:

A: Is it easy for you to talk with other people about the fact that you have—your—that your kids are in special education?

R: I—when I talk to people other than you if—if somebody—if I'm talking to somebody other—another parent or something—if they—say like the woman across the street?

ARA: Um-hmm.

R: Telling me about her daughter. I don't sit and tell her everything, all the problems that my child's going through. Like my child, he's having problems reading this, this, this, this, this. That's not something that I—I—I want everybody to know.

ARA: Okay. And talk to me about why.

R: I don't want anybody treating my children different.

ARA: Um-hmm.

R: Or trying or talking about them. I don't want them to go through—them—them—somebody like a parent telling a little child and then the child they go back and tell somebody else and then my children have problem at school. They going to mess with my children or whatever. I don't—it's—it's just—my—me and my family business and I'd rather just keep it that way—not—I don't think everybody in my neighborhood should be involved.

ARA: Well, do you think it would be easier, though, if you had other people who had the same issues?

R: Yeah. That would be easier because they would understand. But—I mean if somebody child ain't nothing wrong with them or whatever then they going to look at like, oh, what's wrong with him or whatever and then they're going to talk to the children and the children—if the parent arrogant—I mean the child going to be a little bit arrogant, too, in that area. So if they're saying, okay, something wrong with him. The child a little slow, this, this, this. That's the way they're going to say it and that's how the child going to treat my child and then they're going to say something and then my children have to go through that at school and I don't want my children feeling no different from nobody else or anybody messing with my children. I don't want to see my children come home crying because somebody been picking on them or somebody been doing anything. I don't want that to happen. And I know I can't protect them in life like that all the time but I try to protect them as much as I can.

For Rose discussing her sons' disabilities with other parents who do not understand what she is going through is unbearable. She does not want her children to be picked on because parents talk to their children maliciously about her children's differences.

Critique of Special Education Curriculum

The mothers in this study offered several suggestions about improving special education based on their lived experiences in the special education decision making process. Their recommendations center on their concern that special education is viewed by educators as “daycare” and a “baby-sitting service,” or a place where students go to

receive a sub-par education. Demetria describes her views of the special education curriculum:

To me special education is, it's more, well, let me put it this way, my idea of special education before Ashley got into this setting away from Children's Center, it was like a bear to me, I felt like it was going to just, and this is from a student's perspective, not the teachers, I was more concerned how the students would accept her. Because I didn't feel like I would have a problem with the teachers. So that—but once I got into it I saw that they were my least of worries, that it was the teachers that I need to be, that were more of a concern to me. And it seems like special education from a perspective in North Forsyth is more so a baby-sitting purpose than a learning, a place of learning for these, for these students. I mean, it's like they are supposed to be learning this, but they're sitting and they're chatting, and they're, I mean, it's not saying that they don't teach them anything, but the things that she has brought home that, some of the things that they are teaching she has brought home, I felt like could be structured a whole lot better. And so they're more like on a kindergarten level to me than on a high school level. Which I know that they are not going to be as advanced as the other kids, I know that. But I believe that if special education was taken seriously these kids can go further, a lot further than where they are now.

ARA: So, you don't feel like special education is being taken seriously?

VP: Yes, ma'am, that's exactly how I feel. And they don't pay, they're not going to do much more than what's required of them. And so, and it's just, and it's sad when you look at the kids. Because like I say, they put them all in a setting, and they are all—they're all different. And so, and they're trying to treat it like a typical class where they want every child to be, you do this, and you be finished at a certain time, and I don't expect you to not complete this particular assignment. And it's so unfair to the kids that can't keep up.

Because mothers like Demetria and the other participants have encountered the special education curriculum in their special education decision making processes they are knowledgeable about the practical functions of the curriculum for students. One specific complaint about the special education curriculum asserted by the mothers in this study is

the feeling that all students in exceptional services/ special education are grouped together without regard for ability level, age, or grade appropriateness. Carlisle explains:

But another thing with the teachers building relationships with the parent, they need to do that. And really need to start learning the kids, cause like they don't, you know, I don't want to say they should study the kids but learn, you know, some patterns that they do so you'll know, you know, what makes them upset, or what works for them. 'Cause like Ms. Demetria said, I mean, Dwight, they kind of like generalize everybody, instead of looking at each individual kid and seeing what their specific needs are. What works for this kid may not work for this child, you know. And so, I don't think they do enough of that, and it's a problem. That's the way I feel. it isn't being taken seriously. I think the children are being left behind, and they are being segregated from other kids, and it's just not being taken as serious, they don't put as much thought into their curriculum as they do the other kids. You know, it's kind of like, okay, well, let's just teach them the basic function skills and then we're done. You know, it's not, let's teach them, okay, now we've got that done, let's go further. It's just like, okay, this is where we are, forget—this is the minimal, we'll get there, and that's it. And I don't think that's fair to the kids because they want to go home, you know, it's like the family, we're teaching them more, they're doing more, and then we take them to school, and it's just like, oh, they know how to do this. Well, I didn't know this was (inaudible), did you try? I mean, did you ask, you know. And it's just like, they just really don't care, you know, the school is just completely different from what I remember it being when I was a child to now, the teachers are just like, you know, at 3 o'clock, you know, I'm done. You know, it's just like that's it. We're only going to do this, this is all that's required of me and that's it.

These feelings and perceptions influence the special education decision making process because mothers feel special education is often inadequate and unequal to a typical education. Thomasina and her husband have experienced this first hand. They had to advocate for curriculum changes at Catherine's new school when they realized she was not provided with the educational experiences they were promised:

Yeah. So that's when, you know, he—he voiced his opinion then when they told us it was a confined classroom K through five. And he was like I'm not in agreeance with the [inaudible] shouldn't be in there with the big kids, you know.

She's in first grade now. Yeah. So that's when we started voicing our opinion then, you know. I was like—because what if she's just sitting there playing one day and he just haul off and do something, you know. She can't push herself out the way. Or if she's sitting on the floor she can't, you know, [move out the way on her own]. And I'm like, why are these kids—I mean I can teach those kids more flash cards than, you know, sitting around in a classroom all day with kids that are in first, second, third grade. You know, what's—what's the point of—you know—it's fun time daycare as far as I'm concerned. What are they learning? So that was my point about it. Um—because if I can teach Kaitlin basic colors, shapes and numbers with flash cards that should be what the older kids doing—um—they have the math, you know, flash cards—subtracting, adding. You know they have more difficult. Or when I was younger I can remember my mom used to buy us these books and they was graded K through six or something like that. And she would buy us these books just to, you know—the little activity books.

Thomasina also questions how Catherine is taught in school. Although she has concerns she tries to allow teachers space to do their jobs and explains her point of view clearly in meetings:

When they do the testing or other special-needs testing, I try to stay back, because then I know Catherine won't pay attention. Like when she did the speech test, a lot of the stuff that was on the test I know she can do. But I guess I would have did it differently than what they would have done it. So I can't say that didn't do their job because of the way the test was done or the way the test was worded. Say, for instance, like you have a test and the picture is a tree, and it have leaves on it, they point to the tree and say, "Catherine, what is this?" you know, you're pointing to the leaves, saying, "What is this?" quite naturally she going to tell you, "A tree," even though you're pointing at the leaves. Okay. Then you say, "No, Catherine. What is this up here?" You're pointing to the leaves. She going to say to you again, "That's a tree." So because she's saying that this is a tree and not a leaf, you know, she failed the test. You know, it could be just simple things that _____. But, you know, I respect them and stay away from them and let them do their job. But when they tell me what's on the test, I say, "Oh, she knew what that was. All you had to do is say, 'What is on the tree?' and she would have told you what was on the tree.

Michelle describes difficulty understanding the function of curriculum policy for her son:

M: I had—I had worked with the teachers. Tell you the truth, they put some of these children And they're just basically there. And basically for my son that's the way it was. I mean, I may have some in-school conferences with the teachers or whatever, but other than that I didn't know about any behavior problems.

ARA: So it sounds like to me the thing with James just sort of happened quickly.

M: Yeah, it did. It did, because he was good child up until after—he was a good child until we separated. But that's crazy though. I mean—but—you know—the thing I don't understand about it how can they—how can he not be held back—I mean and you not passing your EOGs.

ARA: Oh. So you feel like they were just moving him along?

M: Yes, exactly, because he hadn't passed his EOG since middle school. Um-hmm. And—but, yet, they was still just passing him all along.

Michelle's difficulty understanding her son's behavioral problems may be elucidated by a comment from another participant. Here Rose poignantly discusses conflicting feelings about placing her sons in a school dedicated to special needs children versus a typical school setting:

. . . And they had wanted me to do that but I didn't want my children to go to a school with children that's like them and some of them worse. I didn't want them to go to a school like that. So I wanted them to go to regular school and whatever. And since I chose that I wouldn't think they would try to—to—to give them the best education possible because I think they were trying to teach them on a level that all the other children or whatever the ones with special needs—um—have. But now since they're in a regular school they get—they be in a classroom with regular children so they're learning and—and hearing everything else that regular children are seeing. And so I think now, yeah, they—they getting the best education they can be getting right now. If I would have sent them to that school that—I don't think even though it would have helped them I don't think they would have—could have—I don't think they would have learned all they needed to learn or what everybody else on their level or that age should be learning. And maybe that was a mistake because they did—they did get retained. And if I would

have probably sent them to the (another) school they wouldn't—wouldn't. But I just wanted them to—I know I can't make them be like regular children but they're—they're regular to me. They're my babies. And so I just want them to be treated the same way everybody else is treated.

Concern about her children's learning potential are conflated with the fear of the stigmas of special education. These feelings and concerns led Rose to send her sons to school in a typical setting so they could receive "the best education possible."

Educational Choices

Related to the theme of curriculum critiques is the need for more educational choices for students with special needs. In fact, several mothers described feeling comfortable with the exclusive special education setting but knew better educational opportunities were available outside of that protected atmosphere. Thomasina said Catherine needed a new learning environment to continue to grow academically:

T: I think it is. I think it is because the more she see other kids do the more she want to do. For instance, the kids at the (her current school) now—um—the farther up in grade you go at the (her current school) the older kids they're really not doing, you know, too much of anything for themselves. And a lot of them have feeding tubes and, you know, what not.

ARA: Oh, okay. As you—as you get older the kids are more severe at the (her current school)?

T: Yeah. At the (her current school), yeah, they're a little severe.

ARA: Okay. So in order for—for Kaitlin to keep up academically she needs to be moved?

T: Yeah. And just for somebody to have a special-needs child, just for the school system to say, "Okay. I'm going to put them here." And you say, "Okay," and just go and roll with it. No, I'm going to look into that. I'm going to look into that, because if I'm not comfortable with my child being there, then I'm going to find a way to help her somewhere else.

Patricia feels the needs of students with special needs are not being adequately addressed by the school system:

Um—well one of the things I think is already in place which is—um—an update to the facilities. Um—choices in—in places where you can send your child for special needs—um—are very limited. It's kind of like you're here for this age and you have to go here or you have to go there. There is no middle ground. Um—so I would like to see the same way that they build new middle schools and high schools that same—um—focus to be on special needs schools—um—for special needs education within the school. Some of those things I feel like are not addressed—um—in the way that they would do a typical child. You know where you have AG or you have certain schools like the, you know, the other side of Hanes is, what, a science whatever. Um—I don't see any—any schools or any programs within schools that speak to that—that special, you know, child's needs. Not only like my son but, you know, kids with Down syndrome and those types of kids that—um—that are a little more intellectual in some degree but maybe still, you know, have a disability in another way. You know, are they being addressed? Are their needs being thought of? Or is it just that they just get coupled over here and—and okay here's the straight line you do this, this and this and then push them out. You know, first it's like a typical child who I feel, you know, has more opportunities to further their selves, you know, in education. There are more—um—programs that are available. You know, AG and Crosby Scholars and all this other stuff, but that there's not any programs that I know of out there that speaks to developmentally or behavioral children to help them to tighten up on their skills and to learn more and—and to be all that they can be. Because that's basically all I want for my son, for him to be as self-sufficient as he possibly can within—within reason—within his boundaries. Um—I'm not trying, you know, to get him to be anything that he can't do, but it is important to empower them to use what skills they're able to use and—and it starts with education. Giving him the tools to say, hey, you may not be able to do it like this kid, but you can do it at your level and still be successful and—and still be applauded, still be celebrated for what you're doing.

According to Patricia diverse educational opportunities are needed for students across the educational curriculum spectrum. Likewise Carlisle finds discrepancies in the opportunities given to students with special needs:

And another problem I have is the special ed kids they are not going on field trips like the other kids do. They go on all these field trips, but when it comes to my son's class the parents have to pay for gas. We have to rent the school bus. It's like, okay, we pay taxes, we own this bus. Why do we have to rent? And why do we have to put gas in it when that's something paid out of our county taxes. We pay taxes for that, why are we—you know, and it's not fair, you know. And it's kind of like, okay, well, we'll let the other kids go to the zoo and all these other field trips but these guys will do one trip a year and the parents are basically going to have pay for it. And it's not fair, it's not fair at all. And they say it because we have to have lift, and we have to have extra staff, because we've got so many wheelchairs, and you know, so it's just things like it would be just too much of a bother for them to even try and do it. And it's not fair to the kids because they're missing out on really good opportunities and adventures, and you know, they're just not being able to have any fun, you know.

Overall there is a feeling of disenfranchisement and limited access to the same experiences typical students have in school.

The Essence of African American Mothers' Special Education Decision Making Process

Overall, the participants in this study expressed a sincere commitment to their children's education. Although ability to participate varied among the women all stated a desire to provide open communication between the home and school. While they acknowledged the importance of presence in the school, PTA was not seen as a meaningful form of participation. Further, based on the mother's experiences disability and race complicate and influence their special education decision making process. Collectively, they yearn for more choices to address their children's unique educational needs. A detailed analysis of the themes derived from the theoretical framework is the goal of the final chapter.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine African American mothers' special education decision making process from theoretical, empirical, and historical perspectives, in order to shed light on the politics of containment that leaves the participants and their children perpetually excluded from educational prosperity. As a former school social worker and emerging educational researcher, it was my suspicion at the onset of this research that African American mothers experience in the special education decision making process was that of an inclusively excluded participant, meaning their presence was certainly and respectfully requested, however their full participation and input into the process was only superficially granted. Ultimately, the participants poignantly reflected on how their experiences making decisions is often an ongoing process dependent on their school presence and communication with teachers and other school staff in what can be a hostile and emotionally charged environment. In this the final chapter of my dissertation, I analyze themes and the common experiences of the mothers who participated in this study, given the historical context, using the conceptual framework. Specifically, examining the participants' experiences can help educators explore the ways in which the politics of containment operates in the special education decision making process and how power relations, institutionalized racism, and surveillance influence the system. The chapter concludes with new theorizing and

recommendations for research, theory, and practice for a re-articulated vision of educational opportunities for African American students in special education, and all students, based on social justice advocacy, educational liberation ideals and equity for all students. These are lofty goals and I lean heavily on theorists who came before me and my scholarly imagination to compose my dream of a just education for all.

The Struggle for Knowledge and Power

The politics of containment addresses the complicated relationship between property, citizenship and the struggle for knowledge and power within the special education decision making process. Because full citizenship-and the power associated with it- is a battle African American women are still fighting, their position as powerless members of the IEP team is exaggerated as their full participation in the educational choices for their children is denied by institutional practices. The mothers in this study described a struggle for knowledge and power in multiple ways. First, they shared feelings of dissonance and conflict navigating the Winston-Salem school system, painstaking efforts to understand their child's disability, and instances of advocating for their children with teachers who were generally described as resistant to collaboration. One of the primary ways to exercise their power identified by the six women in this study takes place in the IEP meeting. Although the mothers were invited, even encouraged to attend they were forced to assume defensive postures to claim power and exhibit their knowledge of their children's needs, abilities, and strengths (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Particularly for the mothers of developmentally disabled children, knowing their rights under the IDEA legislation was a critical to them feeling empowered to advocate on

behalf of their children. Unfortunately, mothers of behaviorally disabled children remained on the fringes of the decision making process although they expressed an understanding of their rights. For Rose and Michelle, IEP meetings were contentious spaces where their lack of self-confidence, education, trouble communicating were emphasized. All of the women agreed, the IEP meetings were a strategic locations for asserting their rights while maintaining a position of purposeful resistance for their children. The mothers position on the outside of the decision making process, their powerless presence, illustrates meaning of surveillance within the politics of containment. According to Collins (1998), “surveillance seems designed to produce a particular effect- Black women would remain visible yet silenced; their bodies become written by other texts, yet they remain powerless to speak for themselves” (p.38). It is evident from the responses of the participants that in spite of attempts to silence them, they are resisting subordinate power arrangements although according to Collins, breaking the silence alone is not enough to combat the politics of containment. In order for African American women to effectively resist contemporary forms of racism they must collectively use their everyday experiences to inform and change commonly held misperceptions because “maintaining dialogues among Black women that are attentive to *both* heterogeneity among African-American women *and* shared concerns arising from a common social location in the U.S. market and power relations” (pg.73) is critical for mothers in within the special education. This is important in aid in the process of changing the deficit based views of African American mothers’ involvement in their children’s education.

Patricia, Carlisle, Thomasina, and Demetria draw on their involvement in their children's education comes from knowledge of the IDEA policy and fear that "they will make decisions for you" if you do not attend the meetings. It is interesting to note, however that while parents are encouraged to attend IEP meetings, no provisions are made in the North Carolina EC handbook regarding parent input. In fact the word input is used only twice. Once in reference to functional behavioral intervention plans for problem behaviors, and again when mediation is requested due to disagreements about procedures or placement. Further, parents are informed that if they cancel meeting can take place without them. This begs the question: why are parents needed in IEP meetings if their opinions are unsolicited?

Answers to this question can be seen in African American women's ability to resist hegemonic power structures. As Collins (2000) explains:

The significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies. As Black women's struggle for self-definition suggest, in contexts such as these where ideas matter, reclaiming the "power of a free mind" constitutes an important area of resistance. Reversing this process whereby intersecting oppressions harness various dimensions of individual subjectivity for their own ends becomes a central purpose of resistance. (p. 285)

When there is an asymmetry of power and status between schools and the families they serve and when prejudice, ignorance, and fear expose broader social and economic hierarchies, then parent-teacher encounters are more likely to become the sites of misunderstanding and conflict (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). However, any regime of disciplinary power and knowledge brings with it the power to frame the nature of the

alternative (Jardine, 2010). Because relations of power are dynamic and complex; individuals who experience themselves as subjugated through power relations also are able to resist their subjugation through their own exercise of power (Ross, 2007).

Foucault explains the relationship of knowledge and power here:

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (Foucault, 1980, p. 52)

Indeed, any regime of disciplinary power and knowledge brings with it the power to frame the nature of the alternative (Jardine, 2010).

Illustrations of attempts to resist the hegemonic power structure can be seen in the history of Winston-Salem. Specifically, the women workers and members of Local 22 were instrumental in to the labor organizing efforts. Contemporary depictions are seen in the participants' responses which suggest their attempts to advocate for their children come out of resistance. While it seems their actual power in the meetings is limited they use their power for resistance. The mothers themselves offered few instances where their opinions were taken seriously unless they attempted to resist disciplinary practices used to silence them. The disciplinary practices refer to the hierarchical observation, or surveillance tactics, used in IEP meetings which force African American mothers into a seemingly powerless position. Many times parents are the sole representatives of their children-in a room of educators who view themselves as experts creating an intimidating

environment which can make voicing opinions frightening. This is an example of how institutionalized power relations can impede collaborative school-family partnerships.

In this way, the participants can be described as outsiders-within the special education decision making process. Although they attend the meetings, must approve of decision made and have the ability to share in the meetings, by the time they arrive at the school the decisions have been made by the professional members of the team. The IEP meeting serves a means of reporting to the parents what will be done for their child. In spite of gaining knowledge about the IEP process the do not gain full power given to the IEP team members (Collins, 1998). In fact, this view of the mothers' decision making skills effectively infantilizes poor Black women and further alienates them from active participation in the management and administration of their children's education (Collins, 1998). From a Black feminist perspective, the failure to engage in dialogue with the mothers about their concerns for their children, renders them invisible and reinforces the outsiders-within position in spite of their apparent role in the process.

Finding a Voice—Individually and Collectively

A theme throughout this dissertation is the use of voice and counterstory, as conceptualized by critical race theorists and Black feminist theorists, to reshape commonly held misperceptions of marginalized African American women. Examples of the use of are seen in the historical data, as the citizens of Winston-Salem strove to access decent working conditions, equal rights, and equitable schools. The empirical data suggest that the struggle of African American mothers to find and keep their voices as

they advocate for their children continues. One such poignant statement comes from Carlisle, who captured the sentiment of the group:

African American mothers don't know that they have a voice until they meet someone else who can show and tell them they have rights because they are their child's advocate. But I find that they don't know, "oh, I can say that and I can do this." Once they know, they get a voice and are able to advocate for their child.

Undeniably, Carlisle's statement reflects the connection of voice to power. This account highlights how mothers' voices and viewpoints can be used as potent tools of resistance. In order for teachers to benefit from parents' perspectives, the parents must be willing to communicate their point of view, willing to offer their version of the truth about their child (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Carlisle also shared that she gained the confidence to speak in IEP meetings, in spite of being shy, because her son would benefit from her bravery. Certainly, in IEP meetings and other school-family interactions it is critical for parents to assert their opinions in spite of disciplinary power structures used to silence them. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) wrote eloquently about parent-teacher conferences and how the experience of watching her parents' (who were highly educated professionals) show discomfort highlighted for her the difficulty parents must face finding and sharing their voice in school settings. She writes:

School was a place—perhaps the only place—where my parents seemed off-balance and reluctant; where their activist instincts didn't serve them well, where it was hard for them to figure out the best way to protect and advocate for their daughter. (p. xv)

This statement magnifies the trepidation felt by Michelle and Rose, who as poor and uneducated women, describe themselves as self-conscious about communicating with educators. In fact, to avoid the uncomfortable situations IEP meetings bring they would often attend via conference call or not at all. These mothers cared deeply about their children's educational success, however because they were not available to attend IEP meetings it appeared to educators that they were perpetuating negative stereotypes of African American women-namely complacent, disinterested and apathetic regarding their rearing of their children. In this case, from a Foucauldian perspective, disciplinary power tactics refers to the normalizing judgments used to bring conformity to African American mothers school involvement. Because the ways in which the participants engage do not reflect the desired and prescribed methods of involvement (i.e., PTA) there are unable to become full participants in the decision making process.

A counterstory, or revising of the historical perspectives rendering marginalized people invisible, would establish a place of understanding for mothers like Rose and Michelle in the research literature. As critical race scholars, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argue, "engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world" (p. 41). A critical component of shaping the revisionist historical perspective for this research was the historical data collection process. Using both historical and marginalized voices, we can reconstruct the history of the major acts of power and knowledge in our society and the rules that justify them (Collins, 2000; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Foucault, 1980; Jardine, 2010). As I

discussed my project's focus with local historians I was struck by one former librarian's comments upon hearing my study topic she said:

No one has ever wanted to hear our story. No one has ever cared about what we had to say about our experiences and if someone did try to tell it, someone white comes to tell our story, and the truth and the meaning get lost because they don't know or care about our community. So it's wonderful that you are doing this research. (I. Deberry, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

The work done in this dissertation will help to define a collective voice for mothers involved in special education decision making.

Desegregation, Inclusion, and Interest Convergence

Critical race theory is useful in examining the impact of desegregation and inclusion on the participants and the Winston-Salem community. The concept of interest convergence can offer some explanation for the perpetual disadvantage experienced by African Americans in Winston-Salem. One theme identified by the participants is the conflicting benefits and burdens of desegregation and inclusion. Interestingly, the mothers portray a sense of resignation and regret at the educational options afforded to their children. In the end, their choices were segregated EC placements within a typical school setting, leaving their children isolated with few peers; or opting for an inclusive environment where their children are unable to experience an appropriate academic curriculum. The insights shared shed new light on special education and inclusion. Ultimately, interest convergence and politics of containment theories emerge as a way of viewing the IDEA legislation. Certainly, for the families questioned here the burden of inclusion is on those it should help the most.

Black subordination in American society is firmly entrenched even after the implementation of civil rights measures to rectify past cruelties (Bell, 1989). Indeed, it has been shown here, that in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where the participants reside, the legacy of oppression is entrenched not only in the schools, but in the community at large. As WSFCS and the nation resegregate, the matter of choice between segregation and inclusion is resurfacing. In Winston-Salem, school choice zones, which are passive attempts to encourage voluntary desegregation after mandatory bussing was ruled unconstitutional, have emerged as options for parents to choose among several schools for their children to attend. What has resulted, according to the local paper, is poor performing schools, mostly in predominantly minority neighborhoods, however the paper emphasizes, “it’s not race that creates the disparity but economic circumstances” (WSJ, 2012). In spite of evidence to the contrary, the newspaper and its editorial board refused to make the connection between race and class. The racial segregation and increase poverty levels occurring after the bussing changes are not seen as a problem. The legacy of racism is, according to critical race theorists, an indication of the racial realism in American society. Further, critical race theory questions the subsequent undoing of the educational equity laws. By removing the illusion of colorblindness from the issue of resegregation, it is apparent that racism a motivating factor for the system policies which led to racial polarization in schools.

Thus, the achievements of *Brown v. Board of Education* have eroded and have forced advocates for racial justice to acknowledge the intricacies of the barriers racial equality established in the law by society at the beginning of this nation’s history (Bell,

1989). The legacy of the *Brown* decision and subsequent legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the EHCA of 1975, led many to believe a more democratic, socially just and multicultural United States society was on the horizon (Bell, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Collins, 2009); however, as Collins (2009) explains,

What we have now is an imperfectly desegregated society where some parts are racially integrated (but not color-blind), whereas other parts remain as isolated and disadvantaged (for example, schooling for low-income African American and Latino youth) . . . yet the invisible effects of past racial segregation, as well as the workings of new forms of racial segregation, continue to shape American social institutions. (p. 59)

Conflicts with inclusion and integration resulting from IDEA legislation can be seen in Patricia's reasons for not participating in PTA. She makes reference to the different yet equally repressive environments inclusion has created. Her description of a PTA "concerned with buying wood chips for the playground" at her son's school even though he is unable to use the playground and any of the equipment on it highlights the complexity of inclusion.

Critics of inclusion believe it never had the potential to be inclusive of all children because it is built on the premises of a deficit based model of race which failed to consider the intersections of ability and disability with race, class, culture, and language (Bell, 2005; Collins, 2009; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). To complicate matters, a changing society has made what was once radical social policy irrelevant, as Bell explains:

Today while all manner of civil rights laws and precedents are in place, the protection they provide is diluted by lax enforcement, by the establishment of difficult to meet standards of proof, and worst of all, by the increasing irrelevance

of anti-discrimination laws to race-related disadvantages, now as likely to be a result of social class as of color. (Bell, 1989, p. 5)

Despite being lauded by Black families across the country for its promises of racial justice, more than fifty years later the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision has not fulfilled its expectations. Indeed, it has done the opposite, as Zion and Blanchett (2011) reflect, “it seems appropriate to acknowledge proponents of inclusion educational movements likely did not consider the implications of inclusion on students of color, and thus it has been used as a tool for practicing segregation” (p. 2200). Zion and Blanchett have described the interest convergence principal posited by Bell (1989). The principal is explained here as an allegorical conversation:

We knew we were in the right, that God was on our side, and all of that, but while we spoke and thought in an atmosphere of “rights and justice” our opponents had their eyes on the economic benefits and power relationships all the time. And that difference in priorities meant that the price of black progress was benefits to the other side, benefits that tokenized our gains and sometimes strengthened the relative advantages whites held over us. (p. 108)

To combat the practice of segregation maintained by the Brown decision, Collins suggests finding new forms of anti-racist resistance to account for the intricate role inclusion plays in reinforcing oppressive environments in schools and communities. The nationwide struggles with the legacy of desegregation are mirrored in the historical context of Winston-Salem. The citizens of the city were forced to react to the system wide use of tracking to re-segregate schools as early as the 1981, just 10 years after integration.

Discrimination

The participants shared their feelings about discrimination and when pressed identified instances where they experienced discrimination in the special education decision making process or in schools, generally speaking. It appears, however from their responses the mothers in this study are uncomfortable discussing racism when probed. It seemed much easier for the group to discuss disability discrimination; however they offered several examples of discrimination and racism, covert and overt, when the information was not solicited.

The following are examples of the type of responses regarding discrimination from each participant. Carlisle and Demetria cited instances of both racial and disability discrimination that seemed harshest from educators of color when asked directly if they had experienced racism or discrimination in schools. For Rose and Michelle, two women who view themselves as inconsequential members of society, sharing their experiences of bigotry and intolerance was much easier. Michelle referred to the existence of racism concerning the labeling of son as behaviorally disabled. She indicated an understanding of the stigma such a label carries in schools and the meaning of that label as a young Black boy from the projects (Blanchett, 2006). Rose expressed dismay because her son was promoted in spite of being unable to read. She viewed his unmerited promotion as a reflection of the low standards teachers have for black boys. Thomasina was cautious about making claims of racism with respect to the treatment one of her friends had received, she chose instead to blame unfavorable parent-teacher relationships. Carlisle claimed black parents are too trusting of white teachers implying she believes racist

practices take place in the classroom of which parents are unaware. Finally, according to Patricia, some teachers make decisions about how they are going to treat students based on prejudice.

There are several possible reasons for the wide range of responses related to race, racism, and discrimination presented here. One reason for the responses may be the complications of the colorblind society in which the participants reside. The issue of colorblindness has emerged as a discrete form of racism that justifies various social arrangements and practices that maintain white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gotanda, 1991; Howard, 2010). Because colorblindness renders people of color invisible, sometimes the obvious is difficult to see, especially when it comes to sensitive issues such as race and racism (Howard, 2010). In spite of being aware of, on some level, about the misconceptions about the African American community held by white Americans in Winston-Salem, it appears the women in this study may have internalized some of the views of racism making them difficult to acknowledge.

In a study on prejudice opinions of white Americans, Opoku-Dapaah (2007), found inequalities prevail in Winston-Salem allowing white Americans to receive valued opportunities that their Black counterparts do not have access to. Prejudice is a technique deployed by the dominant group to maintain their competitive advantage over challenging or threatening ethnic groups. When asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, "African Americans often bring discrimination upon themselves by their personal habits," 51 of 77 respondents agreed (p. 31). Further, one of Opoku-Dapaah's respondents goes on to say:

. . . blacks in the city seem happy to live up to the negative stereotypes and do not make any effort whatsoever to make a better life themselves. These people perpetuate the cycle of discrimination. (p. 31)

In fact, being aware of the discriminatory attitudes of their neighbors, the participants may be mindful of the ways African American women are viewed in society. Identified with and blamed for the deterioration of American values, poor Black women simultaneously.

Possibilities for Solutions and the Hope for Salvation

The final research question of this dissertation asks, “what are the possibilities for an equitable, socially just set of solutions based on African American mothers’ experiences in the special education decision making process?”. The analysis of data provides insights into the functions of the politics of containment in special education. Although African American mothers work to advocate for their children by resisting disciplinary power structures such as intimidating IEP meetings, covert and overt expressions of racism, and the devaluation of their knowledge. To combat this, the participants tried different forms of advocacy. As Ruffin-Adams and Wilson (2012) explain:

Advocacy entails families not accepting the victim position or an apathetic role in education whereby they give up their power or wholly defer to the decisions, preferences, and expectations of educators and special education placement policies that do not always have the child’s best interest in mind. (p. 83)

In spite of their resistance and attempts by some to exert authority in the decision making process their actual power is limited. However, the experiences of the mothers who chose

to advocate, and those who tried but became discouraged, advocacy efforts further marginalize already disenfranchised students. Thus, African American women and their families remain in isolated and segregated environments-left out of the promise of educational equity. As Collins (1998) laments, “for African American women the more things change the more they stay the same” (p. 3). Leaving us to ask, is there a solution to this nearly fifty year old problem of discrimination in special education? How do you address and interrupt this dilemma which is so deeply embedded in the historical legacy of institutionalized racism in this country? What are the possibilities for social justice in education?

Derrick Bell’s seminal work, *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*, begins with a quotation from the Bible, Jeremiah 8:20 “the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” This quote reflects the desperation of a people with no options in the foreseeable future to meet their basic needs and no hope of salvation. Likewise, theories used to analyze the lives of African American community members, such as the theories used in this dissertation, depict a pessimistic view of the possibilities for sustained racial equality and social justice in United States society. As I struggled to consider my contribution to the theorizing that has left such a considerable mark on my work and my life, I wish to propose a critique of hope, which I will call enabled hope, for the racial realists I identify with so deeply. It is my contention that there is an absence of hope in the application of liberatory theory. Thus, my response to Bell’s opening quote is another Bible verse, Romans 8:24-25, “for in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But

if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” These scripture verses acknowledge that while there is no plausible or detectable rationale for the possibility of a just and equitable society, there must be hope.

To address the goal of broadening the theoretical hopelessness of frameworks addressing Black people, who remain marginalized, oppressed, and stigmatized, I turn to Henry Giroux. In his 2004 essay entitled, “When hope is subversive,” Giroux maintains a promising gaze towards a future of social change in spite of evidence to the contrary in the current state of our world. This type of radical and meritless hope does not promise solutions, instead “what hope offers is the belief, simply, that different futures are possible. In this way, hope can become a subversive force, pluralizing politics by opening up a space for dissent, contingency, indeterminacy” he goes on to define the purpose of what he calls educated hope, “the goal of educated hope is not to liberate the individual *from* the social . . . but to take seriously the notion that the individual can only be liberated *through* the social” (p. 39). Therefore, what I propose is an enabled hope which authorizes racial realists like me to believe in the evidence of things not seen. That is to say, have faith, that the promise of freedom, justice, and equality is possible. Enabled hope allows theorists and practitioners to envision and challenge the pervasive effects of racism, the subtlety of colorblindness and the evils of discrimination on the basis of disability. Because there have been no solutions posited that have accomplished the goals of liberating the oppressed in our society, social justice gains have instead further ingrained the state of disenfranchisement. Thus, I offer enabled hope, the permission to view and imagine a future of liberty and justice for all. The complexity of the theoretical

framework asserted in this dissertation encourage educational practitioners and researchers to analyze how the historical discrimination of African American families in the country and within schools impacts how African American families currently engage with schools. By employing a critique of hope to this dismissal and seemingly impenetrable problem educators will soon be able to create lasting systemic change for all children.

Implications for Education Research and Social Work Practice

The knowledge gained from this dissertation is useful for educational researchers. Educational theorists attempting to advocate for African American women and children should recognize the need to combine and extend theoretical and political perspectives regarding the influence of race, class, gender, and disability. Collins (2000) suggests:

By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, individuals from other groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects—Black men, African women, White men, Latinas, White women, and members of other U. S. racial/ethnic groups, for example—can identify points of connection that further social justice projects . . . U.S. Black feminist thought fully actualized is a collaborative enterprise. It must be open to coalition building with individuals engaged in similar social justice projects. (pp. 37–38)

This study has the potential to expand the theoretical frameworks used in education by presenting the possibility of combining theories to tackle the meaning of disability on lives of African American children and their families. Once this is accomplished there will be a space to create “research on the organization of academic opportunity in schools that can serve as a means to reveal the practices through which racial (and disability) inequality is produced and maintained” (Noguera, 2008, p. 145).

As a trained school social worker and current social work educator, I would be remiss if I did not consider the implications for this study on social work practice. Because social workers have a commitment to diversity, cultural competence, and work with underserved populations, this project should motivate and encourage social workers to reaffirm their social justice commitments and work to interrupt the politics of containment by addressing the role of racism and colorblindness on our society. Using this knowledge based on the lived experiences of African American women, social work practitioners will be able to critique and reframe cultural competence in the professional Code of Ethics which may unintentionally reinforce and perpetuate discriminatory social work practice.

Limitations

The perspectives elucidated here can be considered a starting place for educational researchers interested in extending the present understanding of African American children and families involved in special education specifically, but in education in general. However, there are some limitations which must be acknowledged. First, in order to gain a comprehensive view of the special education decision making process the insights of more mothers is needed. The small sample size precludes generalizability of the findings beyond the respondents in this study. In spite of attempts to recruit and enroll participants, these efforts were to no avail. Because of the personal nature of this phenomenon—discussing a child's disability—it was difficult to find large numbers of willing and knowledgeable participants.

Another concern, and possible limitation, is the relationship of the researcher to the participants. Issues could be raised about the complexity of whose knowledge is presented; where and how was the knowledge obtained; and by whom, from whom, and for what purpose (Olesen, 2000; Saunders, 2007). In fact, there were moments during the interview process where both the participants and I were struck by the realization that “there were silent understandings, culture-bound phrases that did not need interpretation, and non-verbalized answers conveyed with culture-specific hand gestures and facial expressions laced throughout the dialog” (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, p. 670). As a Black woman, mother and educator, I was cognizant of my position, however I treated each interview as if I was the collaborator/facilitator and the participants were the knowers/tellers. To combat these cultural communication connections, I used member checking, I had participants repeat answers to assure clarity, and I maintained field notes of my experiences in each interview.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research which emerged from this dissertation. Indeed, the scope of this project was miniscule in relation to the numerous epistemological possibilities of a topic involving Black women in education. The recommendations were created in conjunction with the women who shaped this project.

One theme for future research to explore is that of betrayed trust. Carlisle described African American parents as too trusting of teachers that teachers will act on behalf of their children’s best interests. The implication is that teachers betray parents trust by portraying care, concern, and compassion for students when they are motivated

by prejudice and fear of confrontation. Exploration of this issue is needed regarding the meaning African American women assign to loss of trust in school-family partnerships. This is central to understanding successful how to improve working relationships between teachers and parents.

At its inception, the intent of this study was to examine the disproportionate representation of African American boys in behaviorally disabled special education settings. Unfortunately, recruitment efforts precluded this possibility; however this topic is still relevant to the educational community. The fact remains that adding the perspectives of the participants will shed light on their muted experiences in the special education decision making process as well as their insights on the overrepresentation problem. While some promising strides have been made with this dissertation, more robust sample size is needed to gain generalizable findings.

Finally, the participants felt strongly that more creative educational opportunities are needed for developmentally and behaviorally disabled students. Researching this topic is far outside the scope of this dissertation but the opportunity for a truly collaborative process exists where mothers can assist educators in designing responsive curriculum for children with disabilities.

Conclusion

By using several complimentary theories to consider the standpoint of African American mothers' special education decision-making process has provided a more robust and meaningful analysis of how and why African American mothers participate in their children's education. First, the work of Michel Foucault (1980) and his discussion

of power was used to highlight the historical relationship between knowledge and power in modern society. Next, critical race theory (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1999) was added to provide a historical lens for the racial inequities embedded into the legal and education institutions in the United States. Finally, black feminist theory completed the framework merging the theories to address the impact the politics of containment (Collins, 1998) has on the lives of African American mothers' special education decision making process. I have shown that understanding the historical contexts of African American parent involvement can help to shed light on contemporary parent involvement, participation, and advocacy efforts leading to more effective relationships between educators and parents. Certainly the voices and experiences of the participants has helped to shed light on this phenomenon.

In fact, the new theoretical framework which integrates and extends existing theories lends itself to a qualitative research methodology. The phenomenological research design of this dissertation allowed participants to articulate and define their lived experiences. Because mothers have been given an opportunity to be share their insights educators can better understand the motivations for their decisions and behavior and poignantly express the reality of the six mothers who are involved in the special education decision making process on a regular basis. By adding a historical snapshot of Winston-Salem, North Carolina to highlight and provide context for the racial and social tensions that have existed in the local community for many decades I was able to further synthesize a historical understanding of African American parents in Winston-Salem with empirical data gained from the experience of African American mothers analyzed

through a new theoretical perspective will contribute to the educational literature by adding insight into the dilemmas facing African American mothers involved in the special education decision making process and provide information to improve school-family partnerships. I concluded the dissertation with a critique of hope for possibility of lasting solutions to the problem of educational inequity and the legacy of exclusion that infects our country and schools.

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