

BLACK PARENT INVOLVEMENT: AN UNTOLD STORY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016

Urbana, Illinois

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## **Abstract**

For over four decades, research has unequivocally proven academic achievement and parent involvement are directly linked. Much of the literature on parent involvement suggests it should be at the forefront of social concern if one hopes to advance towards academic excellence in America. According to researchers (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000) children whose parents are involved have higher education attainment rates, perform better on high stakes testing and in school achievement. However, absent from the literature are the voices of marginalized parents who bear the brunt of the blame for the achievement gap that currently exists between Black students and their White counterparts.

This exploratory study examines the roles low-income Black parents construct for themselves in their children's academic and social emotional success at home and in school. In this study, parent involvement refers to school-sanctioned, and school-authored activities in which parents participate. Ecologies of Parent Engagement (EPE) and Social Stratification were the theoretical frameworks used to situate the study. Ecology of Parent Engagement considers the how and whys of parent engagement, and how parents' experiences with educators determine the way they engage in their children's education in and out of the school community. Social Stratification was utilized to display how people are stratified into groups determined by their social status and social position in society.

Qualitative research methods, specifically Critical Race Methodology (CRM), a counter storytelling method, and Portraiture methodology were used to provide a detailed picture of parent involvement based on the participant stories and experiences with school personnel and in their respective communities. In this study the findings unearthed race, social class, and educator

perception as mitigating factors in how and why parents engaged or disconnect from their children's school environment.

***In memory of:***

*My Grandfather,*

*Ralph C. Santora “DaddyRalph”*

*You are the source of my strength. You taught me the importance of loving myself, and the value of silence and observation. I miss you so much and wish you could see the fruits of my labor. I leaned on your words of encouragement, and though this journey has presented many challenges, I never quit. I love you, and will see you when I get there. Until then, Rest in God’s loving arms.*

*My former student,*

*Kendell Adams*

*I do this work for you, and all of the possibilities I see in every young person. Thank you for changing my life. R.I.P*

***Dedicated to:***

*My husband and biggest supporter,*

*Dr. Mark Lavizzo*

*Even when I was at my worst, you loved and supported me. You are a blessing to me!*

*My children,*

*Mark II & Michael*

*This is all for you. You are the best part of me! Thank you for being patient as I pursued my dream. My life and focus is committed to you and your success, henceforth.*

## Acknowledgements

This journey could not have been accomplished without the support and guidance of great people. It truly takes a village to write and defend a dissertation.

None of this could be accomplished without the love and covering of JESUS!

*A doctoral student cannot succeed without the support from a great committee*

Dr. Span, thank you for seeing in me what I was incapable of seeing in myself. I have grown as a person and continue to seek knowledge because of your influence. You helped me to realize I have a voice that needs to be heard and I am forever grateful for your guidance and support.

Dr. Trent, words cannot express the gratitude I have for your guidance and the wisdom you have imparted on me. I view the world from a different lens and fully understand my role in society due to your belief in me. You helped me to use my trials and turn them into triumph; that is no easy task, and I promise to pay it forward.

Dr. Welton, Thank you for stepping in and taking on my project despite being overcommitted. I never took one minute of your time for granted. You are an invaluable contribution to my life, and my project. If I can be half of the scholar that you are, I will be successful.

Dr. Lindsey, you are far more than a committee member, you are a friend, role model, advisor, confidante, and an amazing woman! Thank you for pushing me to look beyond my past hurts and failures to see the possibilities of what I could truly accomplish if I just stayed the course

*My family:*

Momma we did it! Who would have thought this would be my testimony? Thank you for the tough love and raising me to fight despite the circumstances I faced. I am my best self because you loved me first. I have so much to offer the world because of you. *Lori*, you are my sister, and my best friend. You were my bully and my biggest protector throughout my life, and even today!

Your strength to persevere in the face of adversity motivated me to fight even when I wanted to give up. I am honored to be your sister, and love you beyond measure. *Devin*, my nephew, and my heart; I see the best in you even if you are unable to see it. You mean more to me than words can express, and I am thankful to God we can celebrate this journey together. Never quit! Live your best life!

To my aunts Cookie, Niecy and Toni and cousins, Topaz, Tre, Jai, Anthony, Nikki, and Mariah, I thank you for being my biggest supporters and rooting for me. Each time I felt unsure and wanted to give up, I thought of you and you and fought harder, we are more than conquerors!

A special shout out to my in-laws: Dr. Joseph & Sheila Lavizzo- you breathed life into me with every encounter. We have been through three degrees, two children and nearly 17 years of love and laughter. Thank you for your unwavering, love and support.

**To my “A-Team”:** Andrea Wynn, my soror, my friend, your check-ins and championing me to persist helped to me to stay encouraged. You are a treasure and I adore you. Dr. Tiffany Puckett, my soror and lifelong friend, I am so grateful for the bond we have built through this process.

Our weekly breakfast powwows provided me with inspiration and support. I love you girl!

Future Dr.’s Shana Riddick, Brenda Sanya, you two, was the highlight of my experience in this space. Our lunches and dinners talking research, and everything in between kept me focused.

Thank you for helping me to stay sane throughout all of the madness I encountered from outside sources. Real friends are hard to find. I look forward to the great work we will all do in the future!

**My very best friends:** Valarie Perry and Renee Bolton thank you for being my superpower!

**Ah to be a Delta: My LS’s and Faves-** Marion Malcome, Dr. Jessical Milward and Jere Moore. I love you more than words can express. My appreciation for your love and support cannot be

described with words. *Sorors*: Dr. Gina Olukoya, you are truly an amazing woman and friend. Ave Alvarado, you are grace and class personified. Your guidance and love uplifts me. Laina Carney, Sydney Battle, Dr. April Warren-Grice, Dr. Chanee Anderson, Jen Stroud, Abbey Adesope, Nicole McCurry, Lashonna Harden & Dr. Shondra Clay, I love you all beyond words – CU Alumnae Sorors, there are too many to name, but know that I love you.

Thank You to Dr. Angie Slates, Rafiqah Mustafaa, Asia Fuller, and Gennifer Gilbert, Theo Moton, and Dr. Tamara Hoff (my favorite AKA)—your motivational support and encouragement fueled my passion and spirit. I value you!

A special thank you to my participants. I hope I shared your stories in a way that not only helps your children, but also the children of parents children who are unable speak up and speak out. Keep fighting the good fight. I will not rest until your stories are heard, and you are included in the discourse on parent involvement.

Lastly, Thank you to my Champaign-Urbana family: Linda Page, Deshe McClain Chris Jones, and Dr. Tiffany White, you made this place palatable, and I am thankful for your support.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **My story**

Parents are their children's first teacher despite their ability or desire to take on such a role. They are responsible for nurturing and providing a loving, supportive home environment for their children to learn and develop the skills needed to become well-rounded and responsible citizens.

For the reasons stated, I am interested in understanding how Black parents, particularly low-income parents, engage in their children's schooling experiences. My interest in this topic is an outgrowth of my personal reflections from childhood experiences in school, and within my community. My mother was a poor single parent, struggling to provide food and shelter for my sister and I, while battling her own personal struggles. She never provided help with homework, or assisted me with exam preparation; I succeeded in school with little to no academic struggle. I was always assigned to teachers whose classes were known to have high achieving students; it wasn't until I began pursuing my PhD in education that I learned I had been tracked. I was recommended for participation in school plays, the school spelling bee, and I always participated in extracurricular sports and school activities. My mother never attended those events and there were many times throughout the course of a school year when my teachers would send my report card home in lieu of a parent-teacher conference. I assumed they knew my mother had no intention of gracing the school with her presence, except for the times I was threatened with suspension for my disrespectful attitude and physical aggression toward classmates.

In today's society, my mother's inaction would be construed as an uninvolved and uncaring parent. After researching parent involvement over the course of three years, I decided to ask my mother about her "lack" of involvement. With no ill intent, I outright asked, "Mom, why didn't you ever attend parent teacher conferences or get involved with our education?" My mother simply stated, "I was involved. I put food in your stomach, and clothes on your back, I did whatever it took to make sure you had everything you needed, and some of what you wanted. Now, it may not have been what you thought you wanted, but I did the best I could, with what little I had." As a result of my mother's honest and transparent response, I was challenged to think more critically about parent involvement, as well as confront the dominant cultural perception that poor Black parents are disengaged and uninterested in their children's schooling.

After reflecting on my conversation with my mother, I was left with an emptiness and sadness, thinking I had misjudged her based on a limited definition of parent involvement. It wasn't until my youngest son's first grade teacher made similar judgments about me, writing on his math exams "you need to work with him at home" and "it would help if someone helped him study math facts" that I learned I was living inside of my own research project. She made the assumption that I was to blame for my son's inability to grasp certain math concepts. Why couldn't it have been her inability to reach him and/or the fact she never made him feel he was capable of learning math? This prompted me to investigate what problems impoverished parents and their children face in schools as a result of misperceptions of involvement. I wanted to understand how they enact involvement being poor and possibly unaware; I couldn't help but wonder how they navigate the biases of teachers and other parents after experiencing it myself. There is a difference in my social condition: I am educated, upper-middle class, and my children attend private school. Nonetheless, the perceptions held by cultural majority were unfairly thrust

upon me. After overcoming the initial shock and anger, I knew this work was necessary. I had to give a voice to marginalized parents who are engaged, and who do care about their children's academic successes and failures in school, but lack the platform to share their experiences. I am blessed because both of my children are high achieving students. If I had allowed the opinion of one teacher to dictate my son's trajectory, he may not have had the success in school he has had to date. I am, in fact, a very "engaged" parent. Due to my work as a doctoral candidate, I am unable to sit in classrooms, attend field trips, bake and sell desserts, fundraise or serve on the PTA. I do assist with homework, ensure my children receive optimal educative experiences in and out of school, and foster healthy self-esteem and the social-emotional skills they require to be productive, successful people. The all-too-common assumption that Black parents are not "involved" and do not care about education must be challenged and replaced with an enlightened and more inclusive view of Black parents. My dissertation will serve as a catalyst to inform researchers and educators about engaged-involvement, the act of participating in a child's education experience through non-normative practices. Whether it takes place at home or within the community, it does occur. I will provide an ear and a microphone to marginalized parents who are participating in engaged-involvement and are unjustly labeled as uninvolved.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1956, sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan discussed the devastating impact of poverty, racism, and mobility on the Black family in his report: *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, known as the Moynihan report. Moynihan's report discussed the grim realities Black families faced as a result of unemployment and the effects of segregation and discrimination. He traced the demise of the Black family's limited social mobility and lack of opportunities to slavery and *Jim Crow*. Due to the destructive impact poverty and joblessness

had on the Black family, Black children's educational attainment opportunities have suffered tremendously, resulting in the academic achievement gap that underscores generational poverty and the underperformance of marginalized students of color in the school setting. Parent involvement emerged as a topic of interest when educators reported a drop in achievement outcomes of Black children, particularly those living in poverty; citing the need for a larger presence of Black parents in the school setting.

For over four decades research has unequivocally proven academic achievement and parent involvement are directly linked. Much of the literature on parental involvement suggests it should be at the forefront of social concern if one hopes to advance towards academic excellence in America. According to researchers (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000) children whose parents are involved have higher education attainment rates, perform better on high stakes testing and in school achievement. As a result, [children whose parents are more involved] display more positive classroom behaviors than children whose parents are not involved. To further explicate this theory, Henderson and Mapp (2002) state, "The educational benefits to children include higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitudes about school" (p. 7). Much discussion and debate has centered on the role of low-income Black parents' involvement in their children's schooling experiences. Studies of parent involvement are typically limited to the relationships between home and school negating the impact home and community have on academic outcomes. The degree to which a parent is involved suggests it produces benefits for students, parents and schools. When parents are visible advocates for their children, teachers and school administrators are responsive to requests for assistance and are more likely to encourage the student in achieving a more favorable academic outcome (Huang &

Mason, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lareau, 2003). Through parental involvement, children develop a healthy self-concept and work to meet the demands of the curriculum knowing they have an ally in their academic pursuits. In addition to building capital and self-esteem, the impact of parental involvement aids in developing parent-teacher communications resulting in better outcomes for the child. It is important to note, students develop an intrinsic motivation to learn as a result of parental involvement and work to meet academic goals and expectations (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005).

Various studies indicate that parental involvement is salient in determining how well children do in school at both the elementary and secondary school levels. In addition to increased student achievement, parent involvement increases teacher morale, resulting in a healthy school environment for all stakeholders (Warren, Nofle, Derin Ganley, & Quintar, 2012; Gonzalez-HeHass et al; Lareau, 2003).

It is undeniable; parent involvement is a very important component in ensuring that a child succeeds academically. However, I argue that the current definition of parent involvement is problematic; it is restrictive and fails to include out of school factors that promote social, emotional, and academic success at home and in the community. For this reason, I challenge the construct of parent involvement to expand and include engagement. Community and home environments, coupled with cultural norms and values, have a more profound impact on a child's development and school success than traditional involvement practices (Clark, 1984; Yosso, 2005). The "curriculum of the home" is essential to the social, emotional, and academic development of children. Parents ascribe cultural norms that guide their personal parenting styles and though there are no academic standards assigned to the home curriculum, it does not negate the value of its impact and the importance in shaping a child. The curriculum of the home is an

integral piece in a child's life. It is a form of cultural capital and it manifests differently based on familial contributions and social class. Parental involvement at home and within the family structure has more influence on a child's educational attainment, than the day-to-day work occurring inside the classroom (Ballentine & Hammack, 2009; Cooper-Wilson, 2007).

This study will examine the how a one-dimensional definition places limitations on families who do not fit within the confines of involvement, but are engaged in various ways unseen by school personnel, thus developing a new frame of reference known as engaged-involvement.

***Statement of the problem:***

Our nation's school system has failed to mitigate educational inequality and racial disparities in public schools. As a result, a shift in focus has moved from curriculum and instruction to parental involvement as a primary source of the achievement gap currently existing between Black and White students. The problem with this shift is the failure to include the voices of the parents that are targeted in the discourse.

Research has indeed established that parental involvement has positive outcomes for children in many developmental areas including student academic achievement as well as social and emotional development. Despite these benefits, various contributions of Black parent involvement are missing from the literature; therefore, research examining the factors that influence parent involvement is of great importance. There is a limited amount of research focused on gaining an understanding of parent involvement from the parent perspective; Black parents voices are absent from the discourse in the research regarding their engagement in their children's education. Black parents, particularly those who are low-income, are often scrutinized and overly criticized whenever Black children are underperforming or exhibit behavioral challenges in school, blaming a lack of parental involvement as the cause for the child's inability

to succeed academically or display acceptable classroom behavior (Applebaum, 2007; Cooper, 2007; Cooper, 2009; Epstein, 2003). Despite the research supporting the value in parental involvement, key elements of involvement miss the mark. Black parents need to be present in the dialogue and the construction of policies designed to “help” address underachievement of all students, more specifically, impoverished students of color. This study seeks to address these social problems by contributing to the literature on parent involvement and challenge the deficit-mode of thinking relative to poor Black parents.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to catalyze the voices of marginalized Black parents in a small urban setting. I want to provide these parents a platform to share their stories of engaged-involvement from their own perspectives. In addition, I hope to garner an understanding of how this group of Black parents participates in their children’s schooling experience.

In order to explore the issue of parental involvement in their child’s education, this study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. How do low-income Black parents conceptualize parental engagement?;
2. Do race and social class influence how parents are engaged in their children’s education?

If so, how and why?

3. How do school personnel encourage and/or challenge Black parent engagement?

### **Significance of study**

Parent involvement is essential in the educational attainment outcomes of a child. However, parent involvement is limited to the Eurocentric normativity of parental involvement. In this dissertation I argue the need to reconstruct the meaning of parent involvement to include, parental engagement, as well as provide a space for marginalized Black families to partner with

the schools in a way that allows them to utilize strategies of engagement that are suitable for them.

This study is important because the literature on parental involvement is scant or non-existent as it pertains to the parents' frame of reference. This study provides a counter-narrative to the current research from the dominant culture asserting that low-income Black parents are uninterested in their children's education and uninvolved in schools. This work adds to the literature and gives voice to parents who may not otherwise be heard. Failure to include the voices of this group further marginalizes families and restricts access to educational opportunities. To explicate the value in educating all students, Wilson (2009) postulates that the result of missed learning opportunities can devastate an entire community, resulting in exponential increases in crime and poverty, joblessness and mass incarceration. Having an educated citizenry provides the United States an opportunity to compete in global markets and increase the country's economic capital. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2006) further expounds on the need to have an educated public, stating that those with lower levels of education normally do not have health insurance, yet experience greater health problems and often engage in unhealthy lifestyle choices. They have higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, poor eating habits, and smoking; ultimately leading to an increased financial burden placed on the United States government to provide subsidies and entitlement benefits.

### *Definition of terms*

In order to properly contextualize this study, there are terms that will be utilized with regularity and defining them will aid in providing clarity and depth.

*Achievement Gap:* is a persistent disparity in educational achievement outcomes between minority and low-income students and their White and middle-class counterparts.



Black: for the purposes of this study, I will use the term Black in lieu of African Americans. I use this label because the term African American is assigned to non-native Americans of African descent. Black Americans have African ancestry, but do not have connections to their ancestral roots in Africa.

Cultural Competence: the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own.

De facto segregation: segregation that is not officially prescribed by law and occurs as a matter of custom, such as housing patterns, and does not violate the Constitution (Savage, 1959).

Engaged-Involvement: a term coined to include a hybrid of engagement and involvement as it pertains to parents and their children's schooling experiences. It provides a space to include parents who are not visible at school, but fully supports their children at home and in the community.

Low-Income: the eligibility of a family to receive free or reduced meals from the Federal School Meals Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). For the purposes of this study, low-income was defined by families receiving free and reduced lunch.

No Child Left Behind 2001(NCLB): federal legislation that enacts the theories of standards-based education reform. Pursuant to 20 USCS § 6301, NCLB ensures that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. It is based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education (uslegal.com).

Parent Engagement: the Harvard Family Research Project (2009) defines parent engagement as having the following principles: First, parent engagement is a collaborative effort in which

schools and other community agencies and organizations seek families who are dedicated to supporting their children's academic learning. Second, although parent engagement continues throughout the course of a child's life, the parent's role changes as the child matures. Third, effective parent engagement is linked to children's learning in a variety of settings such as in the home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

*Parent(al) Involvement*<sup>1</sup>: the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring: (a) that parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning; (b) that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school; (c) that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and (d) the carrying out of other activities, such as those described in section 1118 of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

*Social Class*: for the purposes of this study, I use the term social class to refer to the economic position held by a person or family based on annual income. I operationalize this by using three distinct categories Upper Class, Middle Class, Lower Class, each having a position in society that affords or limits access to educational opportunities, housing and cultural capital.

*Social Distance*: the degree to which people are willing to accept and associate with those having different social characteristics. For the purposes of this study, I used social distance in concert with the Black-White binary in educational settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Parent and parental involvement will be used interchangeably within the context of this study, however the meaning will be the same.

## **Organization of study**

There are six chapters in this dissertation. Chapter one lays the foundation of the study. It provided details about the problem, purpose, research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter two contains a review of current literature related to Black parental involvement. Five issues: (1) defining parental involvement, (2) parent involvement versus parent engagement, (3) intersections of race and social class, (4) barriers to involvement, and (5) teacher perceptions were contextualized to provide the reader a deeper understanding of the research topic. The theoretical frameworks, Ecologies of Parental Engagement, and Social Stratification serve as the lens to situate the study. Additionally, a discussion of the gaps in literature and the limitations of the study are outlined. Chapter three describes the methodological approach, the use of Critical Race Methodology and Portraiture, as well as details about the research site, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. Chapter four discusses data analyses and findings of the study. Chapter five presents the portraits of three families whose stories of engaged-involvement resonated during data collection. Chapter six summarizes the findings, and discusses how and if these findings answer this dissertation's central research questions and contributes to addressing gaps in literature on parental involvement. Also discussed is the conclusion as well as projections for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”*

—[Benjamin Franklin](#)

Research on parent involvement emerged as a topic of interest as early as the 1960s. This initial body of research focused primarily on relationships between characteristics of the family and school achievement. The research focused primarily on identifying parallels between socioeconomic status (SES) and student achievement, indicating that students from more affluent families were shown to have higher educational attainment outcomes including higher grades and an increased level of education than students from lower income families (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Hauser, 1971). In order to explicate this achievement gap, early researchers constructed a “culture of poverty” theory, also known as the deficit model. The deficit model viewed low-income families living in impoverished communities as having restricted access to cultural capital, thereby limited opportunities to improve their social condition. The “culture of poverty” theory suggests that low-income families remain in poverty due to their ability to adapt to the burdens of poverty. As a result, children in poor families are disadvantaged and unable to reach similar academic milestones as their affluent counterparts due to a lack of resources and parental knowledge (Moynihan, as cited in Yancey, 1967). Wilson (2009) further expounds on the culture of poverty theory, stating children as young as six years of age adapt to their subculture absorbing the attitudes and values associated with poverty restricting them from accessing opportunities for upward mobility that may present later in their lives (Wilson, 2009).

Furthermore, in the 1970s and 1980s, research on parent involvement grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and social reproduction began to challenge earlier deficit

models. Bourdieu's theoretical model emphasized class conflict and cultural difference. Researchers associated the education achievement gaps with class conflict and cultural difference (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu (1977), schools represent and reproduce middle and upper class interests, class values, and worldviews and as a result social reproduction of poverty occurs within the school dynamic.

Feuerstein (2000) contends that reproducing class values, experiences, and worldviews of middle and upper class make it difficult for teachers to communicate effectively or value parents and students who come from a cultural background that lacks the cultural capital resources required to engage and participate in their children's schooling experiences. Bourdieu's theory shifts the problem of deficiencies of low-income and minority students and their families to the classist and often racist assumptions of schools.

Additional research has shown that parent involvement has a significant influence on student achievement (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001, Lareau, 2003; Mapp & Henderson, 2002). Becher's (1986) literature review on parent involvement found that there was "substantial evidence" which shows that students whose parents are involved in their children's schooling have increased academic performance and overall cognitive development. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has found that parent levels of education and parent involvement in schools have a significant influence on student performance. The NAEP data report a 30-scale point differential on standardized achievement tests between students with involved parents compared to those students whose parents were not (Dietel, 2006).

Much of the research claims students whose parents are visible in the school have higher rates of self-efficacy and improved standardized test scores. They build social capital and are

given access to social networks that will provide long-term benefits throughout their schooling experience and beyond (Epstein, 2001; McDonald et al., 2012). According to Davis (2000), regardless of educational background of the parents, or whether a family is monetarily well off or struggling, a parental contribution to the daily school lives of children increases student achievement. The benefits, according to Davis, for the students when families are actively involved in school include “higher grades and test scores, better attendance and more homework completed, fewer placements in special education, more positive attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in post-secondary education” (p. 44). School and family partnerships can bring together a significant collection of strategies and resources that enhance a more caring school-wide community that can support children and their families to maintain success at school and well beyond (Adelman & Taylor, 2008).

Through parental involvement, children develop a healthy self-concept and work to meet the demands of the curriculum knowing they have an ally in their academic pursuits. In addition to building capital and self-esteem, the impact of parent involvement on a child aids in developing parent-teacher communications, resulting in better outcomes for the child. It is important to note, students develop an intrinsic motivation to learn as a result of parent involvement and work to meet academic goals and expectations (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005). Various studies indicate that parent involvement is salient in determining how well children do in school at both the elementary and secondary school levels. In addition to increased student achievement, parent involvement increases teacher morale, resulting in a healthy school environment for all stakeholders (Warren, Nofle, Derin Ganley, & Quintar, 2012).

Children of parents who do not participate in school sanctioned-activities are said to have lower grades and behavioral problems. The degree to which a parent is involved produces varying benefits for students, parents and schools. When parents are visible advocates for their children, teachers and school administrators are responsive to requests for assistance and are more likely to encourage the student to achieve a more favorable academic outcome (Lareau, 2003;Huang & Mason, 2008; Berliner, 2013).

Additionally, when educational opportunities are missed, children are resigned to live in communities with higher concentrations of poverty, unemployment, low aspirations, family instability, higher probability of criminal engagement, drug addiction, alcoholism, frequent illness and untimely death (Wilson, 2009). Wilson's (2009) assertion speaks to the current state of poverty and the need to ensure all children receive a fair and equitable education, despite their financial condition. The backlash of Black student underachievement and restricted access to equitable education will be disastrous for an entire culture of people.

There are contrasting studies that assert parent involvement can be counterproductive depending on the student perceptions and response to their parent being involved in their schooling experience, particularly in high school (McNeal, 2001). According to McNeal (2001) students did not necessarily achieve better academic results due to their parents being involved. He found quite the contrary, that students underperformed and acted out, but this was due in part to the inability to transmit cultural and social capital. He suggests much of the literature on involvement is inconsistent and fails to account for the differential effects on parent involvement based on capital stating: "despite comparable levels of involvement, low SES students simply receive less for their involvement" (p. 178). This confirms assertions made by researchers who

see social class as the determining factor in academic achievement, and parent involvement as a by-product of status and social class.

### **Defining parent involvement:**

For over four decades, parent involvement has taken center stage in research focused on disparities in the gaps in achievement existing between Black and White students (Christenson, Rounds, & Gourney, 1992; Davis, 2000; Epstein, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Researchers, educators and the dominant culture have socially constructed parent involvement to align with their value systems. Despite discrepancies about what actually comprises parent involvement, generally the concept refers to a parent's direct participation and investment of time and resources dedicated to their child's schooling, with the expectation of positively influencing academic outcomes and social emotional development (Epstein, 1995; Grolnick & Slowiazcek, 1994; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Reynolds, 1992). Bronfenbrenner (2001) posits home and school are two of the most influential systems for school-aged children, providing instructions and academic support to meet the primary developmental challenges children need to succeed in school. The partnership between parents and teachers assists children with the challenge in transitioning from home to preschool and through compulsory education. Still, several researchers have spent time and energy crafting what they believe holistically defines parent involvement.

Joyce Epstein (1992) developed a typology model of parent involvement outlining six types of involvement needed for children to achieve successful academic outcomes.

TYPE 1 – **Parenting**: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at



each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

**TYPE 2 – Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

**TYPE 3 – Volunteering:** Improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

**TYPE 4 – Learning at home:** Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum linked activities and decisions.

**TYPE 5 – Decision-making:** Include families as participants in school decision, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

**TYPE 6 – Collaborating with the community:** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.

Additionally, Epstein (2001), defined parent involvement as “twelve techniques that teachers used to organize parent assistance at home, including reading, discussions, informal learning games, formal contracts, drill and practice of basic skills, and other monitoring or tutoring activities” (p. 181). Olivos (2006) states, “parent involvement is...often characterized quantitatively rather than qualitatively,” such as high attendance at Back to School Night or Parent-Teacher Conferences as opposed to participation on decision making committees (p. 19). Other educational researchers and practitioners define parental involvement as home-school partnerships; parental participation and parents as partners (Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010). Based on a study conducted by Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte and Bertrand (1997) parent involvement is defined as presence at school, communicating with the teachers, or helping at home with

homework. Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) defined parent involvement as any parent attitudes, behaviors, style, or activities that occur within or outside the school setting to support children's academic and/ or behavioral success in their currently enrolled school. School sanctioned activities such as attending parent-teacher conferences, school fundraising and volunteerism are synonymous with definitions of parent involvement said Ishimaru (2014) in a study of the challenges parents face when they fail to adhere to majoritarian parent involvement practices in urban centers. Supporting this majoritarian notion of parental involvement is Grolnick and Slowiaczek's (1994) definition of involvement as the devotion of resources by the parent within a given domain. These researchers extended their definition to incorporate three types of involvement practices to include children's schooling such as behavior, cognitive-intellectual, and personal (as cited in Karakus & Savas, 2012). Understandably, these are important factors to consider when defining parent involvement, but the definition, again, marginalizes parents who lack the skills needed to replicate these behaviors and fails to include home environment as an involvement practice, yet, the standard continues to focus on affluent middle-class normative standards as the sole proprietors of "good" parenting involvement strategies.

### **Educational policy on involvement**

The fusion of research and data collection on the achievement gap provided an opportunity to revisit policy and school reform efforts to include parent involvement. Due to the emphasis placed on involvement, national policy has intertwined parent involvement into the fabric of education as a primary source to enhance school success. The adoption of *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227)* included Title IV Parental Assistance. Sec. 401 allocates grant funds to schools that develop parent information and resource centers aimed at strengthening partnerships between parents and school personnel. The intent was to educate low-

income and immigrant parents by providing educative opportunities that will benefit both the parents and the children in the home. With the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the central focus of closing the achievement gap is now placed on parent involvement. *No Child Left Behind Act 2001(NCLB)* PL 107-110; introduced in 2001 and ratified in 2002 included section 1118 for parent involvement, in section 9101 paragraph 32. *Parent Involvement* is defined as involving the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring (a) that parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning, (b) that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school, (c) that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (d) the carrying out of other activities, such as those described in section 1118. (NCLB, 2002, section 9101, paragraph 32).

Furthermore, this section of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) mandates that parents become involved in school activities including improving the academic quality of schools, identifying barriers to greater participation by parents, and designing strategies for more effective parent involvement (NCLB, 2002). Moreover, President Obama has instituted a government mandate reauthorizing NCLB to include Race to the Top (RTT) and School Improvement Grants. The grants require an implementation of community engagement resources within the parameters of school turnaround initiatives, citing community engagement as one of the most influential factors impacting school achievement and success. The program initiative seeks to turnaround chronically low-performing schools using the community-school engagement model (ed.gov). Additionally, in *In School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success*, Reynolds and Clements (2005) point out that parent involvement is a major element of

school-wide reforms such as Schools of the 21st Century, the School Development Program, and the charter school movement, as well as new governance arrangements that give parents greater input in decision making and thereby facilitate school-family partnerships (p. 109). Again, when educators and others make traditional assumptions about parental involvement in schools, they privilege a limited collection of normative practices (Ishimaru, 2014).

Consequently, parent involvement has a multi-dimensional definition despite the limitations placed upon how it is defined. Hickman (1999) noted that of all of the issues associated with education, parent involvement has been the most difficult to characterize as it could mean different things to different people. The use of similar or identical exclusive terms to define involvement restricts marginalized groups from entering into partnerships with school personnel. In turn, this adversely impacts educational attainment for students whose parents do not meet the normative standards established by dominant cultural definitions of involvement (Hickman, 1999; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Carreon, Drake & Calabrese-Barton, 2014; Ishimaru, 2014). Although many researchers and practitioners have worked to operationalize parent involvement, they oftentimes conflate definitions of involvement with actions associated with involvement, thereby convoluting the definition with behaviors and practices in lieu of a holistic definition. For example, collective knowledge from existing studies suggests the importance of several other specific types of parent involvement, including the following: provision of a stimulating literacy and material environment, higher expectations and moderate levels of parental support and supervision, appropriate monitoring of television viewing and homework completion, and autonomy promoting parenting practices (Clark, 1993; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991, as cited in Baker & Soden, 1998).

### **What counts as parent involvement?**

With the expansion of involvement to include engagement, the practices employed by parents remain limited to unilateral views of what constitutes parental involvement in schools and at home. School officials contend that parent involvement is comprised of parent-teacher organization involvement, monitoring and educational support measures, schooling situations which entail attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school and being involved in school sponsored activities (Brandon et al., 2010; Flynn, 2007). However, parent involvement may include reading to a child, checking homework, limiting television viewing, meeting with school staff to discuss a child's progress, voting in school board elections, advocating for better education, or simply asking a child about his or her day at school (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In order to fully assess what counts as parent involvement, it is imperative to understand that parents, particularly low-income minority parents, are often dictated to, given prescriptions of involvement based on a dominant culture, upper middle class model (Auerbach, 2007; Auerbach, 2010; Barton et al, 2004; Delgado-Gaitain, 1991; Delgado-Gaitain, 1992; Lareau, 1993). Though teachers and parents may want parent involvement, the degree, expectations, and type of involvement may differ with diverse cultural beliefs and practices (Cooper, 1998). Involvement, according to researchers and educators, view school officials as the principal authors of the roles parents are to assume in schools. With involvement, preferably, parents are to conform with mandates and participate in school-sanctioned activities that the officials consider appropriate and helpful in meeting the goals and objectives the school has established without including the parent's voice (DeCarvalho, 2001; Lareau, 2005). Researchers have concluded that "subtle" aspects of parental involvement, such as parenting style and parent expectations, had a greater impact on student outcomes than more "concrete" forms, such as

parent attendance at school conferences and other school functions or enforcing rules at home regarding homework (Fan 2001; Feuerstein 2000; Jeynes 2007; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Sanders 1998; Sheldon, 2003).

Parent involvement is measured by parent-child discussions about education-related issues and by parental monitoring of the student's behavior socially and academically. The relationships described above are indicative of social capital between parent and child and unfortunately, most low-income families are not privy to these forms of capital (Epstein, 2007; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Lareau (2003) affirms this belief as she asserts that parents with limited education are often in lower social positions. Class culture becomes a form of cultural capital and relies heavily on teachers to teach their children and prepare them for success.

As such, parent involvement, as with any social construct, is assigned value based on the dominant culture's ideological views. According to several scholars, parent involvement in education has been socially constructed to privilege White, middle-class norms and the expectations of educators (Auerbach, 2001; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; Lareau, 1989, as cited in Auerbach, 2007). Since school officials dictate what constitutes parent involvement, questions of power, agency, and capital arise when parents resist or push against the traditional roles of involvement (Hagiwara, Calabrese-Barton, & Contento, 2007). This is evidenced in the numerous studies reporting White teachers and school officials asserting Black parents are disengaged, uninterested, and disconnected from their children's education and schooling experiences. Researchers have noted the way in which schools marginalize Black parents and low-income parents; they have pointed to the limitations of traditional conceptions of parent involvement, geared to the schools agenda, failing to account for parents perceptions of

involvement and how they assist their children outside school (Auerbach, 2007; Auerbach, 2009; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2003).

There are varying degrees to involvement including but not limited to parent-child relationship, parent-community relationship and parent-teacher relationship. Though these spaces are not specifically included in the definitions of involvement, they are associated with involvement practices. Successful connections between family and school can enhance children's motivation to learn. For example, parents' participation in education is associated with children's learning engagement, school attendance, and literacy performance. Accordingly, most literature in this area addresses the importance of parent involvement in children's educational development and emphasizes the teamwork between families and schools (e.g., Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Despite its instinctive meaning, the operational definition of parent involvement varies and is not consistent across studies (Fan & Chen, 2001).

The impact of parent involvement is heavily emphasized in the formative schooling years. Students, despite SES, show increased levels of academic achievement in kindergarten through eighth grade as a result of parent involvement; students matriculating in secondary grade levels do not show significant gains in achievement when parents are involved (McNeal, 2001; Davis, 2012).

### **Involvement versus engagement**

*“Parents, families, educators and communities- there’s no better partnership to assure that all students pre-K- to high school have the support and resources they need to succeed in school and in life”*

*—Dennis Van Roekel, National Education Association President, 2008.*

While parental involvement is said to be the key determinant in school readiness and academic success, there are contrasting differences in the literature of what serves as parental involvement versus parental engagement. Parent involvement is rooted in a set of rigid guidelines authored by school officials and government mandates with no input from parents. The roles of parents in schools have been agreed upon chiefly in terms of what parents do, and how that fits or does not fit with the goals of the school or child. Involvement would be those instances in which Black parents are positioned as receivers of school-initiated, school authored interaction. This approach to comprehending parental involvement is grounded in a deficit model; especially where involvement in impoverished urban communities having a higher minority population is concerned (Barton et al, 2004; Ferlazzo, 2013; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000;). Involvement is more of a dictatorship whereby parents are told how to participate and when they fail to conform to dominant ideological practices of involvement, they are labeled disengaged, un-invested and outright bad parents. As a result, the children of the “bad” parents suffer a horrific academic blow and without proper advocacy and opportunity, are permanently relegated to lower social positions in society.

Traditional research on parental involvement abandons the ways in which parental engagement is a social practice, continued through active participation and dialogue in schools and communities. It is a representation of parent involvement that is linear, unidirectional, and not particularly tied to other external factors, but one that accounts for subtle and overt displays of involvement (Jeynes, 2010). McWayne et al. (2004), however, showed that parent reports of educational involvement at home, defined as providing a supportive home learning environment, were positively associated with teachers’ ratings of children’s reading and mathematics achievement. Other researchers have found that parents' attitudes (e.g., their educational



expectations and aspirations for their children) are associated with academic achievement (Fan, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000).

The Harvard Family Research Project (2009) defines parent engagement as having the following principles: First, parent engagement is a collaborative effort in which schools and other community agencies and organizations seek families who are dedicated to supporting their children's academic learning. Second, although parent engagement continues throughout the course of a child's life, the parent's role changes as the child matures. Third, effective parent engagement is linked to children's learning in a variety of settings such as in the home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community. Auerbach (2007) posits, "Engagement signifies that there is an ongoing conversation or dialogue; there are ongoing activities at a variety of different levels. Some of them might be volunteer work some of them might be how to teach your child how to read sight words...Because in our communities, parents need to be shown how to help their children, how to help the school in ways that in middle-class homes, it's already part of that culture. The best-performing schools are the schools that engage parents on a consistent basis, that know the difference between engagement and involvement" (p. 15).

Parent engagement, beyond involvement, provides an opportunity for parents to successfully impact the daily activity of schools, and have the ability to articulate their children's needs and wants in an effectual manner. Unlike involvement, parental engagement centers on building trusting relationships with the school and community. The parent's voices are heard and ideas are taken into careful consideration when decisions are made. Engagement is a mediation of space and capital where parents are co-authors of policy creation and implementation and are viewed as important stakeholders in the school and community. They are able to understand how

to fully engage and why it is important. Parental engagement allows parents to be viewed as partners who have a voice and one that is heard, and not seen as an agitator or subservient as with involvement (Barton et al., 2004; Ferlazzo, 2013). Parental engagement from cradle through college is a critical ingredient for children's school success (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009). Moreover, acknowledging the values, beliefs, and ideals of others is essential to creating lasting relationships between school and home (Osher & Huff, 2006). Authors of parent involvement adhere to traditional normative practices that privileges White families who believe involvement is solely based on visibility on the school campus and participating in school-sanctioned activities, while engagement precludes school personnel and researcher from utilizing a one-size fits all model. Engagement incorporates the home and community aspects of family life to include community cultural capital. Constantino (2003) further explicates the value in parent engagement stating "the home learning environment has a positive effect on academic achievement in school and can have an effect on achievement that is three times as large as family socioeconomic status" (p 21).

When parents are equipped with the knowledge of the traditional capital schools operate within, they are able to fully engage in their children's educational attainment and work within the space using interactive capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This type of engagement stands in stark contrast to traditional prescriptions for parent involvement that solely require the activation of traditional forms of capital within school spaces. Engagement carries with it the power to reform school practices, recreate schooling processes, and make decisions regarding budget, school operations, personnel changes, etc. Mapp & Henderson (2002) asserted there is a need for a culturally sensitive and empowering definition of parent involvement. This definition includes engagement. The distinction is important as researchers unpack this work and work to build

stronger family-school partnerships. Unfortunately, many under-represented low-income parents are not privy to the intricacies of engagement and their children suffer as a result. Yosso (2005) discusses the importance of understanding community cultural wealth to understand how marginalized students are advantaged by their capital. She critiques Bourdieu's social capital theory because it suggests Black children can only achieve social mobility when they ascribe to White normative parent involvement practices. A failure to comprehend the value in engaged-involvement, which is normally practiced in under-represented homes, encumbers Black parents from participating in their children's schooling experiences and further excludes them from the discourse on involvement (Yosso, 2005).

Parent engagement is empowering and reinforces teacher-parent relationships and overall greater educational outcomes for students despite race or social class. Once school officials release parents from the dictatorship associated with involvement and provide a more inviting school environment where parental engagement is encouraged and allowed, students will have greater academic outcomes and achieve favorable educational attainment goals. Engagement sets the bar higher for parent expectations of teachers and school administrators and draws boundaries on what they will and will not accept for their children. These notions of engagement prove beneficial; yet again, many low-income Black parents lack the knowledge and resources to fully engage in their children's education and schooling experiences (Barton, et al., 2004). Because of the multiple dimensions of parent educational involvement at home, it may be best to examine a number of separate measures of involvement (Desimone, 1999; Fan, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000; McNeal, 1999).

Auerbach (2007) discusses the importance of parent engagement and the roles school administrators' play in inviting urban low-income minority parents to the table. She conducted a

study to examine how school administrators shape a vision of parent engagement and construct their role in furthering it. In her study of parent engagement as a tool for raising achievement emerged as a critical theme, she spoke to the need to look beyond traditional one-sided views of parent involvement to include a deeper level of engagement. Her work highlighted the limitations of involvement to serving only the school's agenda, meanwhile explicating the value of engagement as benefitting parents and school environment (Auerbach, 2007). Though Auerbach's study unveiled many emergent themes, engagement was overarching and many of her participants preferred the term parent engagement to denote a more proactive, holistic approach to activities geared to student achievement based on an understanding of the community and its needs (p. 710). Auerbach's study supports the concept of the limitations of involvement when engagement is omitted from the definition. Parent engagement occurs in many forms and placing restrictions on what constitutes an involved parent prevents opportunity for families to draw upon community cultural wealth acquired by low-income families.

In conclusion, it is duly noted that parent involvement is pivotal in the academic and social emotional development of a child, but when their parents' conceptions of involvement are silenced in the discourse, children receive less favorable results in school. As previously stated, engaged-involvement is a more fitting term that combines the best attributes of both school and community. Black low-income parents are more inclined to actively participate if they feel invited and their experiences are welcomed (Auerbach, 2007).

**When social class and race intersects: Where do children land?**

*“The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible.”*

– *Gustavo Gutiérrez*

Studies of race and social class in education have reported detrimental effects of poverty on academic achievement. When race and social class intersect, more often than not, marginalized families of color are adversely impacted and often receive discriminatory unequal treatment in schools. Indeed, racism and its intersections with other forms of subordination shape the experiences of people of color very differently than Whites (Baca Zinn, 1989; as cited in Yosso, 2005; Bell, 1986; Bell, 1998; Essed, 1991). It is no surprise that students of color and of low SES experience a social world far different than the dominant group (Auerbach, 2007; McNeal, 1999; Yosso, 2005). This experience transfers into the classroom setting where they are further excluded by teachers and peers (Berliner, 2013; Delpit, 2006; Diamond, 2000). Current research suggests that being exposed to poverty and poor-quality environments during childhood has greater effects on cognitive, behavioral, and academic skill development than at later points in life (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, Leventhal, & Sidle-Fulgini, 2000; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung, & Smith, 1998).

Previous research identified a relationship between socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity and parental involvement practices within schools, and has supported the idea that higher SES parents are clearer about expectations for their children and are more involved with the educational process since they have access to more resources than their lower SES counterparts (Griffith, 1996; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Epstein & Dauber (1991) point out that limited economic and academic resources may not be the only [incomplete sentence]. Although the notion of apathy might be invitingly applied where lesser-involved parents are concerned, many times they fail to participate because of a lack of invitation from the school (Bracey, 1996). Prior research investigated why some parents choose to engage in their children's education and

fail to do so (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Some have concluded that ethnicity is an essential family background factor contributing to parents' decisions about how and when they choose to be involved. Still, results remain inconclusive. Previous studies have documented Black parents' beliefs in the importance educational involvement, as well as their interest in assuming a range of parent-involvement roles (e.g., program supporter, home tutor, and audience).

Many critical race scholars assert the disparate treatment of low-income Black parents in education settings compared to White parents and children restrict academic excellence and growth. They argue marginalized parents are silenced and excluded from developing partnerships with school staff, further alienating their children from academic spaces. The lack of cultural competency and preconceived notions of impoverished communities permeate public school settings, preventing opportunities for parental engagement and access to social mobility (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billing, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005). When schools fail to respond to racial and cultural differences or fall short of treating families equally, it is likely that minority families may not participate in institutional programming (Lawson, 2003).

The failure to comprehend the living conditions of many families residing in urban centers is disconcerting. Inner-city Black families are often victims of poverty, housing re-segregation and high crime rates (Wilson, 2009). Lareau (2003) indicated that parents living in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to the same financial and educational resources as their middle-class counterparts. In addition to living in sub-par housing, many Black families are often led by single-parent homes working low-wage jobs, suffering underemployment or unemployment. These parents often experience time poverty, referring to the lack of poor working families' free time to dedicate to their child's educational concerns (Epstein, 2001;

Newman & Chin, 2003; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Parent-student involvement is often measured by parent-student discussions about education-related issues and by parental monitoring of the student's behavior. The relationships described above are indicative of social capital between parent and child and unfortunately, most low-income families are not privy to these forms of capital (Delpit, 2006; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Though the research does suggest the lack of parent involvement of low-income Black students has an adverse impact on educational attainment goals and achievement of students it doesn't provide a space to include parents who are incapable of sitting in classrooms, volunteering at the schools and actively participating in the school due to work or financial constraint. Many studies explore involvement from varying perspectives and identify the barriers many low-income parents face when attempting to navigate the space between home and school. Parents, particularly low-income minorities, are seen as cultural outsiders as it pertains to the culture of the academic space (Epstein, 2005; Hagiwara et al., 2007; Lareau, 2003). Their inability to navigate the political aspects of involvement in the schools often results in a distant position taken on schools and ultimately results in the school officials perceiving the parent as uninvolved. As a result, parents are not invited to participate in discussions on school policy or involvement decisions in schools. Once the veil of racism has been lifted, teachers and administrators make superficial attempts to invite marginalized parents to the table.

This superficial invitation is presented as though parents are equal partners in the school-community relationship, when it is known that low-income parents reside in low-income communities where again their voices are muzzled because they are not seen as valuable participants due to class differences as well as race (Fine, 1993; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In essence, school officials are equally responsible for their contributions to student

achievement and they must refrain from resisting parent involvement from the parents' perspective and leave room for open dialogue and differences in how involvement is enacted.

Furthermore, issues of social class and race are prevalent in these conversations and there are still large gaps in achievement between affluent Black children who have access to resources compared to White and Asian children with equivalent socio-economic status. The stigma of low parental involvement follows affluent and middle class Black parents as well. These gaps in academic achievement and perceived lack of parental involvement are in conflict with the research that states underachievement in Black students is synonymous with poverty and low parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2003; Posey, 2012). Black parent involvement has decreased over the last two decades. Many identify socio-economic status as a key indicator of student success and/or failure as well as an increasingly high number of single parent households. Despite statistics and data supporting lack of college readiness for Black students being disproportionate when compared to White students, there are some fundamental barriers preventing parents from being involved in the academic success of their children (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Posey, 2012). A lack of time, money and resources limits poor Black parents from actively engaging in their children's schooling activities, in addition to school official efforts to thwart parental involvement. Kahlenberg, a leading advocate for economic integration (as cited in Posey, 2012, p. 4) argues educated middle-class parents are more likely to be involved in their children's schools, to insist on high standards, to rid the school of bad teachers, and to ensure adequate resources (both public and private)—in effect to promote effective schools for their children. Posey (2012), further expounds on issues of capital and space discussing the benefits of middle-class parent involvement when converged with low-income urban schools. She discusses the positive impact affluent parents have in schools and how they



have the ability to impact change as a result of the capital they bring with them. It is argued that middle-class parents are the driving force in school-authored activities; the literature on middle-class Black student achievement suggests there are still disparities in academic achievement between Black and White students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that in a school with predominantly White students and faculty, even though the middle-class African American families had an advantage in their interactions with schools when compared to their less privileged counterparts, “they still face an institutional setting that implicitly privileges White families” (p. 49). They reported that the Black parents who experienced discrimination in school and society had difficulty complying with the standards and practices of the schools, and that this difficulty was exacerbated by school values that preferred supportive and understanding parents. This again contributes to deficit thinking and labeling parents according to dominant cultural ideology.

The middle-class experience of White families differs drastically in comparison to the Black experience. Social class differences in how Black parents approach educational participation result from the exchange between the educational environments to which they are exposed and prior race and social class-rooted family and schooling. Research has shown that White middle-class parents are more likely to find active roles for themselves in the schools. While White middle-class parents may articulate their reasons for taking on such roles they are unlikely to consider the resources they draw upon in doing so or how such resources are distributed among different groups of parents. Nor are they likely to understand how the school affirms these differences. Social relations of schools operate in complex ways between groups differentiated by social class and ethnicity (Horvat, Weninger & Lareau, 2003; Levine-Rasky, 2009; Posey, 2012). These actions may look very different from those White-middle class parents

to whom the literature most often refers and discusses. Ideas are elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. They emerge from parent/community needs and priorities. More parent energy drives the efforts. As such, scholars from multiple disciplines have discussed the impact of culture and ethnicity on parenting and child socialization (e.g., Garcia-Coll et al., 1995; Ogbu, 1981, as cited in Kotchick & Forehand, 2002), but very little empirical research has been devoted to the question of how ethnicity or cultural heritage may directly or indirectly affect parenting beliefs and behavior (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002, p. 10).

### **Race, parent education, and involvement**

The educational attainment of a parent plays an important role in how they conceptualize parent involvement. Lavin-Loucks (2006), places a strong emphasis on familial support as a predictor of academic success. Parent's educational attainment and income plays a key role in academic outcomes. She stated parenting styles and the degree of involvement account for a great deal of the disparities in education and achievement. Also, despite SES, social support is fundamental to student's academic success and readiness. Parents of lower socioeconomic status are typically less educated and lack the structural resources to provide more stimulating environments for their children that characterized parenting interactions among higher SES families. This lack of resources and access often presents as uninvolved, when in fact, parents are using the tools they have to advantage their children in school and at home (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lavin-Loucks, 2006). Parents on the lower social strata have educational deficiencies that prevent them from having the confidence to participate in school-based parent involvement for fear they may be judged and viewed as a bad

parent because they are poor and uneducated (Clark, 1983; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2003; Cooper, 2010).

The level of education a parent attains may not adversely impact their level of engagement. In fact, in many instances it is quite the contrary. Parents aspire for their children to have more opportunities and access to a better life than they experienced (Clark, 1983; Cooper, 2010). Duncan and Blau's status attainment model gives an explanation of how parent aspirations truly advance a child's ability to succeed. The basic Duncan model uses SES of origin and ability to explain educational attainment, and then all of those variables are used to explain occupational attainment (Kerkchoff, 1976, p. 368). However, Blau and Duncan's model of attainment shows the importance of family and significant others influence on the goals and aspirations of a young person; these goals are instrumental in the attainment process. The theory expects that the encouragement by significant others varies according to the social position and the ability demonstrated by the child at home and at school. The encouragement will positively affect the child's aspiration level (Kerchkoff, 1976, p. 369). The status attainment model supports the idea that despite the lack of education attained by parents and those significant to the child, upward mobility is achievable. Many educators and researchers fail to acknowledge the value of cultural capital from the family and within the community. Limited views of capital contribute to the deficit thinking of dominant culture with regards to the Black community.

### **Community cultural wealth: A hidden gem**

Due to the prevailing issues with social class and race in education, many underrepresented students are on the brink of failure. They are unable to meet academic standards and their social position in society is often the blame. People of color, but primarily Black and low-income populations, are pushed to the margins of society with limited access to

advance out of their social condition. Bourdieu (1986) forms of capital highlight the problems marginalized children face when they lack cultural and social capital. He says capital is transferred between families, and schools socially reproduce an underclass as a result of insufficient capital. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory utilizes a deficit-model of thinking. Many White practitioners' employ this model of thinking, incapacitating students' academic trajectory and rendering their parents powerless in educational settings. Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework provides a critical lens to understanding the detrimental impact race and social class has on school outcomes for Black students. Moreover, she refutes Bourdieu's theory that poor Black families lack capital and, in fact, suggests it is quite the opposite. Assumptions that people of color lack social and cultural capital needed for social mobility disadvantages an entire community (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) states impoverished communities have an abundance of capital that can be beneficial to a child's educative experience when White educators acknowledge the cultural differences they experience with their students as a form of cultural capital. Assumptions made by educators suggest parents whose primary involvement is at home and within the community fail to meet involvement standards within the school settings and yield limited value towards academic achievement of low-income Black students. These assumptions often result in negative outcomes for students and restrict access to social mobility.

In sum, there are proven connections to parent involvement and academic achievement, but parents' of low-income underperforming Black children are critiqued as a result of under achievement and a perceived lack of parental involvement. One may conclude this judgment deflects from the issues of racial inequality and poor schooling practices and places blame solely on Black parents for the achievement gap, taking no responsibility for institutional practices and

policies that systematically restrict the social mobility of Black families (Epstein, 2001; McNeal, 2001; Horvat, Weninger & Lareau, 2003; Noguera, 2004). In fact, studies have shown social class does not have to equate to inequality because many poor students outperform their affluent counterparts (Berliner, 2013; McNeal, 2001). Berliner (2013) compares the education system of United States (USA) to Finland because they are known for their high academic achievement and his findings were very telling as it relates to social class. Finland has a poverty rate of 5% and despite the social condition of the student he found they outperformed students of higher social class. He suggested schools in America are designed to reproduce inequality and low academic achievement. His work highlights the importance of teacher perception of students and how their perception adversely impacts their educational outcomes. Poverty is indeed a factor in how American parents, especially Black parents, engage in schools, but the difference is how they are treated as a result of teacher and administrators perceptions that results in a lack of involvement in the school setting. Berliner's (2013) work speaks to the need to look beyond social class to understand the root cause of underperformance of Black students in schools. It is proven, Black middle-class students continue to lag behind their White counterparts when SES is similar or higher in some instances. The notion that cultural capital only exists in middle-class and affluent communities marginalizes underrepresented students and restricts their ability to change their trajectory. This should incite scholars to delve deeper into the true causes of the achievement gap and look beyond SES and parental involvement as the source of inequality in student achievement.

### **Barriers: "Restricting access"**

Belief in intellectual and cultural deficit thinking can hinder parental participation in relationships regarding the education of their children (Auerbach, 2002; Olivos, 2006).

Educators' deficit perceptions about Black parents and their engagement in the education of their children negatively impacts educators' interactions with Black parents, creating conflict, confusion and frustration for the relationship that occurs between parents and schools in academic spaces (Delpit, 2006; Olivos, 2006; Yosso, 2005). These perceptions often guide the exchanges between Black parents and the school and can position the school and parent in opposition to one another and further relegate Black parents to subordinate positions within the social institution and larger society (Asberry, 2009; Olivos, 2006). Fine (1993) asserted that parents enter public education with neither resources nor power and are not usually welcomed by schools. Connell et al. (1982) argue that low-income parents are often blocked from participation in schools by broader institutional practices including failure to follow through on promises, use of bureaucratic rules as a shield to deflect parent participation, and "the insinuation of [parents'] ignorance and uncouthness"(Connell et al. 1982: 53 as cited in Diamond, 2000). Unfortunately, teachers sometimes resist the involvement of parents into school affairs, because education is simpler without outsiders, including parents (Hoy & Sabo, 1998 as cited in Karakus & Savas, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991).

There are structural barriers in place preventing low-income Black parents from taking their seat at the table. Black parent involvement has decreased over the last two decades. Many identify socioeconomic status as a key indicator of student success and/or failure as well as an increasingly high number of single parent households. Despite statistics and data supporting lack of college readiness for Black students being disproportionate when compared to White students, there are some fundamental barriers preventing parents from being involved in the academic success of their children (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Lareau, 2001; Wilson, 1986). Brandon, Higgins, Pierce, Tandy & Sileo (2010) conducted a study using a modified version of the

*Barriers to School Survey* where they surveyed 421 Black parents. Their work sought to understand why perceptions of Black parents by educators suggested they were uninterested and disengaged from their children's schooling processes. Contrary to educator perceptions, they found in fact that many parents reported feelings of teacher alienation when they attempted to participate in their child's education causing them to take a step back. In their findings, parents reported feeling a lack of communication and respect interfered with their participation in school. They also reported financial and educational barriers prevented some parents from engaging in on-site activities.

Additionally, inner city Black families are often victims of poverty, housing re-segregation and high crime rates. Lareau (2003) indicated that parents living in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to the same financial and educational resources as their middle-class counterparts. These parents often experience time poverty, which refers to the lack of poor working families' free time to dedicate to their child's educational concerns. To assert Black parents do not care about education is a disservice to the parents struggling to provide clothing and shelter for their children with hopes of sending them to school prepared to learn without focusing on hunger and homelessness (Epstein, 1989; Williams & Sanchez, 2011).

Aside from issues of poverty, Black parents are often intimidated by school, oftentimes due to the educational jargon that teachers use, the nature of the curriculum, and at times because the teacher does not show the parents the proper respect. Black parents have reported they feel isolated and alienated in the schools due to the interactions they have had with school officials. They have also stated they feel as though they are viewed as and treated like second-class citizens (Flynn, 2007; Williams & Sanchez, 2011). For many parents negative childhood experiences in school prevent them from engaging in their child's education. Feelings of

inadequacy due to limited educational achievement and poor academic success prevent many parents from actively participating in their child's education. Some parents experienced failure, ridicule, and many dropped out before graduation (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Katz, 1996).

Abrams and Gibbs (2002) noted that Black parents reported being ignored, dismissed, or insulted by parents, teachers, or administrators. Many feel anger and frustration at being treated like second-class citizens. The current situation is a call for educators to evaluate and understand the "sometimes idiosyncratic historical relationship between a particular school or school district and its parents, as well as how it relates to parents' existing involvement or noninvolvement" (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999, p. 454). A longitudinal investigation of inner city Black parental involvement in special education contradicted initial predictions of low participation (Harry et al., 1995). Contrary to expectations, Black parents in this study made consistent efforts to support their children's schooling. Over time, however, school-imposed limitations and barriers to parental participation frustrated parents and reduced their rates of involvement in school. For example, parent-teacher meeting content failed to reflect parental concerns, and parents perceived school personnel as insensitive and condescending. Thus, inner city Black parents may be more inclined toward ongoing participation in inclusive parental involvement programs that emphasize relevant and collaborative approaches toward supporting their children's school success.

### **Cultural competency**

In many instances, Black parents are disconnected from schools, not because they lack a genuine care and concern for their child's educative process. It is primarily due to a cultural disconnect from their home life and the culture within the school setting. Some White teachers lack the cultural competence needed to effectively communicate with low-income Black parents



and as a result the parents refrain from participating in school-sanctioned activities (Cooper, 2009; Delpit, 1988; Delpit, 2000; Irvine 1991). This disregard may be a direct outgrowth of the teacher's lack of experience in working with varying cultures and ethnic groups (Thompson, 2003b). The divide formed only advances parents' feelings of isolation (Calabrese, 1990; Diamond, 2000; Scott-Jones, 1987).

In a study conducted by Gay & Howard (2000) found that a critical factor in the education of Black students was their interaction with staff members who often had little understanding of the experiences of Black families that sometimes resulted in exclusion and negation of Black parents and their children at these schools. They also addressed the need for pre-service teacher education programs need to include multicultural education. Gordan (1990), King (1991), Gay and Howard (2000), and Ladson-Billings (2000) examined various aspects of pre-service teacher training and how the training either helped or hindered the development of relationships with students. The studies supported the idea that when teachers and students were unable to effectively communicate with one another, their insufficient communication had a negative impact on achievement. Irvine (1991) states communication issues are directly related to a lack of cultural competence between student and educator. Trent (1990) substantiates this assertion stating teacher education programs house up and coming educators from the dominant culture whose perspectives and rearing fail to acknowledge cultural differences, thereby reinforcing stereotype-threats and restricts educational attainment for low-income minority students. If teacher education programs continue to skirt the issues of race and ethnicity in their curriculum, the issues with Black parent communication and involvement with regard to White teachers will continue to be strained. Students will have negative outcomes if they are incapable of accessing empathy and compassion from their White teachers; the inability to form cohesive

respectful relationships ultimately results in low academic achievement (Delpit, 1996; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Teachers who are able to build relationships with students make learning exciting, they demand academic excellence, they are aware and support the various cultures of the students in the classroom, and they inform students of the impact of racism in their lives. (Ladson- Billings, 2000, p. 210). Additionally, researchers have found that with such dissimilarities, it is easy for Black parents and teachers to develop misperceptions that lead to poor communication and lack of respect (Cairney, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Ogbu, 1993). Parents with low levels of education, for example, may be less involved at school because they feel less confident about communicating with school staff owing to a lack of knowledge of the school system, a lack of familiarity with educational jargon, or their own negative educational experiences. Parents from different ethnic cultures may value home educational involvement more than involvement at school (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

***(mis)Trust: A barrier to involvement***

Trust is critical in assessing the barriers presented to parents when they want to engage in their children's schooling experiences. Mistrust of school personnel irrespective of race prevents Black parents, more specifically low-income parents, from engaging in school-sanctioned activities. Issues centered on trust cause a social distance between community members and school engagement. If families and schools want to collaborate effectively, they must do so on the basis of "mutual trust, confidence, and respect" (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 5).

Lareau (1987) asserts that parents with limited education are often in lower social positions. Class culture becomes a form of cultural capital and relies heavily on teachers to teach their children and prepare them for success. Though research suggests both low-income and

middle-class Black parents heavily rely on their child's school for resources there are many Black parents who have a profound distrust for teachers and school personnel, particularly those that are predominately White or are under the guise of White leadership (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Lareau 2003; Wilson-Cooper, 2005). Black parents reported mistrust of the school system is due to the historical mistreatment of Blacks by and in the educational system (Ogbu, 2003). In their case study of parent involvement by Black and White parents at a public elementary school located in a predominantly White and affluent town, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found Black parents were more likely to harbor suspicion and mistrust toward the school institution compared to White parents. These Black parents cited concerns with the potential for racial bias against their children as reasons for their mistrust and suspicion of educators at their children's school.

The mistrust Black parents have for the White teacher is not at all alarming, Black parents enter into parent-teacher relationships cautiously because they understand the historical problems related to racially discriminatory practices White teachers are known to express towards Black children despite social class. Many Black parents believe teachers use prejudicial biases when engaging their children and do not empathize with the Black childhood experience (Irvine, 1990; Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Mistrust between parents and teachers cause a wedge between school, home and community, and results in larger gaps in achievement and further marginalization of Black students.

Tschannen-Moran (2001) found that when school administrators collaborated with their teachers, and when teachers collaborated with each other, they both indicated higher levels of trust. Similarly, when school staff collaborated with parents, each group indicated a greater level of trust. Consequently, they found that when schools and communities share a sense of purpose and exhibit greater levels of trust, there is more outside stakeholder influence in the school

decision-making processes (p. 10).

In order to foster positive community-school partnerships trust and communication must take place. Erickson (1982) states: trust is the foundation to all relationship building (as cited in Swick, 2003). When there is an absence of trust, communication and relationships are adversely affected and the students are often the recipients of the negative educational outcomes i.e. low-test scores, underperformance, poor student-teacher relationships and negative attitudes towards school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Swick, 2003)

### **Teacher perceptions: A cautionary tale.**

*“Nothing makes more of a difference in a child’s schooling experience, than a teacher”*

*-Lisa Delpit*

Several studies reveal teachers perceive Black parents as disconnected and disengaged from their children’s learning experiences and believe they are the reasons their children are failing to advance, meet, or exceed grade level standards (Delpit, 1996; Irvine, 1990). Preconceived ideas about the Black family, which have also served as the lens through which mainstream educational researchers have looked at Black parent involvement, have greatly influenced the beliefs that teacher educators, educators, and policy makers hold about Black parent academic involvement (Delpit, 1996, Delpit, 2012; Harry et al., 2005; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Urban school educators have openly expressed frustrations with their assessment of Black parents lack of involvement in schools (Edwards et al., 1999; Epstein, 2001; Noguera, 2001; Noguera, 2004). Educators consistently point to Black parents lack of on-site school presence and school-endorsed activity participation. They question whether the parents promote learning at home, and many also question the extent to which Black families care about their

children's school achievement (Edwards et al., 1999; Epstein, 2001; Fields-Smith, 2005; Noguera, 2001; Noguera, 2004; Yan, 2000). One critical component in teacher-parent perceptions is communication. Many teachers do not effectively communicate with their parents, and the failure to inform parents of their expectations and need for involvement often results in low parent participation. Halsey (2005) conducted a study consisting of parents, teachers and adolescents; she sought to learn how each participant perceived parental involvement. She found teacher perceptions of parents were consistent across the literature and they felt parents were unwilling to become involved in their children's education. The parents reported a lack of knowledge about the teachers need for on-site involvement, citing a lack of communication on behalf of the school. In fact, Halsey reported several misconceptions about parents desire to become involved in their children's education and she stated a failure to communicate resulted in teachers' low expectations and poor perceptions of parents' involvement practices (Halsey, 2005).

Perceptions of what constitutes parental involvement are often misrepresented when educators allege Black parents are not as involved in their children's academic experiences. Previous studies have explored the impact of educator behavior on the weakened home-school connections within the Black community. Results indicate that educators often discount parenting styles that differ from their own, which often demoralizes parents' power (Lareau, 1987; Thompson, 2003a). School perceptions and parents expectations may affect participation, especially in low-income and minority communities, where school personnel may view parents as part of the challenges of education as opposed to useful resources (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Fields-Smith, 2005). As a result, the inefficiency of communication can further encourage climates of exclusion and mistrust, as well as discomfort

about perceived and actual cultural distinctions (Rosado & Ligions, 1999). Most low-income Black parents are required to work in order to maintain their living condition, which prohibits them from being visible on school grounds, but they may be making valuable contributions on the home front and work tirelessly to deposit educational attainment values into their children.

Current research acknowledges how participation in events such as parent conferences is affected by factors such as time, energy, and ability to get to the school as well as other factors, but in the end it is the participation in these events that label a parent as participatory or not (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Lightfoot, 2004). What is most unfortunate is many teacher perceptions are formed upon first glance at a student with no regard for their character or academic ability. The literature does not include much in the area of involvement outside of the school setting; however poverty is the recurrent theme that arises in the research. Perceptions of parental involvement are primarily focused on how a student performs academically, but many teachers and school officials judge the level of involvement based on personal assessments of a student. For example, students who appear well dressed with good hygiene are perceived as cared for, while the students appearing unkempt with clothing that appears worn and unclean are often viewed differently, and as a result their parents are judged severely (Irvine, 1990).

Teachers perceive parents as uninterested in education when their child is truant and neglects to complete homework assignments. Teachers are often quick to label students who are reared in single-parent homes and quite often judge low-income mothers with multiple children. Socially constructed norms institutionalize relationships among teachers, administrators, and schools that often lead to negative teacher reflections of parents who are not involved (at least visibly) in the development of their child's education (Gordon & Louis, 2009, p. 8). Teachers often make assumptions about parents based on personal morals and ideologies; they set

standards for parents and students despite their social conditions. For example, students living in poverty often reside in substandard housing and more often than not reside in single parent homes headed by underemployed mothers. The teacher's view of parent lifestyles beyond the school setting often dictates the teacher's view of the family as a whole and his or her action or inaction towards the child often reflects this judgment (Cooper, 2003, 2009; Irvine, 1990; Oakes, 1988).

The literature is imprecise on this topic and many sources focus on teacher perceptions of parents being visible and involved according to the teacher's ideals of involvement. There is emergent research focusing on the ways school administration (i.e. principals as leaders) foil school engagement efforts due to their inability to share leadership with parents and view them as partners in education. School leadership tends to skew their views of involvement according to their personal perceptions of parent-student and parent-teacher relations. Auerbach (2009) conducted a study where she studied school leaders (principals) and how they engaged parents in their schools. She discussed the importance of principals "walking the walk" and not talking about involvement and placing blame on parents for their lack of involvement when students fail, but instead truly opening up opportunities for low-income parents to actively engage. She stated: "the limited research on leadership and families suggests that though many administrators "talk the talk" of engaging parents as partners in education, they typically manage parent involvement in conventional ways that support the school agenda and contain parent participation, acting as a buffer rather than a bridge to the community" (Auerbach, 2007b; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 2001; Griffith, as cited in Auerbach, 2009). Interestingly, we know very little about how administrators actually "walk the walk" of leading for family engagement. Additional studies have explored many expectations placed on parents were from the

administrators perceptions and not the teachers as most research suggests. Despite these findings, there is little information on how teachers perceive involvement outside of school. More importantly, race and social class can skew a teacher's perception of parents and students. When asked about parent involvement, researchers found that several White teachers and parents said they did not feel Black parents were involved in their child's education because they did not see them at open houses, PTA meetings, fundraisers and/or back-to-school events. In addition, the school officials assert that Black parents are actively engaged primarily when it comes to sporting events and are not committed to supporting academic achievement (Harrison & Waller, 2010; Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Brown, Widdowson, Dixson & Irving, 2011). Bakker et al. (2007) found a disconnection between teacher and parent perceptions of parent involvement of low SES families. Where educators generally place emphasis on particular parent involvement activities such as participation in school-based activities and parent-teacher contact, parents perceive parent involvement in less defined terms. Perceptions are not reality; yet many educators impose their values on parents and children. When students' actions fail to align with values teachers do not hold as their own, Black parenting practices are called into question.

Whenever conversations center on the achievement gap or underachievement in schools, the focus is directed towards Black parents and their children. Most, if not all studies cite the lack of Black parental involvement as the underlying cause in the underachievement of students (Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Auerbach, 2007; Auerbach, 2009; Epstein, 2001; Lightfoot, 2004; Peterson et. al., 2011). There are factors that are not being identified when comparing parental involvement of Black families to their White and Asian counterparts. However, the focus of parent involvement is aimed towards Black families. Teachers who hold low expectations or believe that parents do not care about their children and do not want to be involved in their



education may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and directly contribute to the lack of parental involvement and to student failure. Parent involvement is an important factor in teacher expectations. Some teachers lower their expectations based on the race of the child, the income of the child's family, the gender of the child, and the child's appearance (Oakes, 1988, as cited in Trotman, 2001). Similarly, research indicates that teachers working with low SES students generally have lower efficacy compared to teachers working with higher SES students (Bakker et. al., 2007; Diamond et. al., 2004). Teachers with low efficacy are more likely to have lower academic expectations and have fewer interactions with students (Diamond, et. al., 2004; Tucker et. al., 2005; Delpit, 1996).

Furthermore, teacher perceptions of parents were stereotyped based on social class. These negative teacher perceptions of low-income parents were associated with lower academic achievement of students. Although some principals and teachers assume that low levels of parental involvement reflect parent's low interest in their child's education, evidence indicates the opposite; that parents, including inner city, low-income parents, generally display positive attitudes toward their children's educational development (Clark, 1983; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 1987;). As such, socially constructed norms institutionalize relationships among teachers, administrators, and schools that often lead to negative teacher reflections of parents who are not involved (at least visibly) in the development of their child's education (Brandon et. al., 2010; Peña 2001; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001, as cited in Peña, 2001).

Multiple studies presented findings asserting low-income Black parents are primarily responsible for their children's underachievement; they state maternal status attainment goals and education attainment as contributing factors in the academic decline of low-income Black children. They also suggest children succeed in school as a result of "good" parenting at home

and in school which includes attendance at parent-teacher conferences, school open houses, parent-teacher association (PTA), and any school-endorsed activity (Brandon et. al., 2010; Epstein, 2001; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Lightfoot, 2004; Mapp & Henderson, 2002; McDonald et al., 2012). Wright and Willis (2003/2004) argue that “teachers often focus on soliciting parents’ support for academics, while parents typically focus more on the whole child, including his or her physical and emotional well-being” (p. 54). Schools design more opportunities for some parents than others. Specifically, teachers working with higher-income parents indicate that their school offers more opportunities for involvement at the school level than teachers working with lower-income parents. These limited opportunities often result in parents being labeled as uninvolved; in fact, many parents do not know how to get involved (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Epstein, 1991).

Consequently, administration and educators are intolerant of Black parent involvement practices, which may be related to their own perceptions and beliefs about the limited efficacy of the parents to effectively contribute in valuable ways (Auerbach, 2007; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Yim, 2009). Lewis and Forman (2002) posited that most parent involvement programs are more accurately “school involvement programs” in which school staff invite parents to become involved in the school and home to teach parents how to do their jobs (expert/child model of training and managing parents) (p. 10). Challenging these misperceptions of Black parents is not easy. There are many parents who disconnect emotionally from schools, some even disengaging from their children’s schooling experiences, but nothing is more harmful to children (underserved in particular) than a teacher who fails to acknowledge and adjust the role they play in restricting academic growth because they are biased and lack the cultural competencies needed to help navigate the learning space in their classrooms.

## **Gaps in the literature**

When researching this critical issue of parent involvement in the Black community, I found little to no literature providing a space for parents to share their voices on involvement and how they engage in their children's schooling experiences. Much of the literature focused on highlighting the success of the dominant culture's ability to academically outperform underrepresented populations and praised White parents as a result of their children's success. Meanwhile, Black parents of any socioeconomic status, but primarily low-income marginalized parents, pervaded the literature when referencing the achievement gap and underperformance of Black children in education. There were virtually no studies providing counter-narratives to the majoritarian findings and perspectives on involvement. As shown throughout this literature review, several studies profiled low-income Black parents as disengaged and uninterested in education, and as a result the achievement gap has widened at an unprecedented rate. As a researcher and confessed cultural insider, I would be remiss if I failed to lend my ear to the silenced voices and share their stories of involvement. Though they may be viewed differently and are quite often measured with a different yardstick, low-income Black parent perspectives and stories need to be heard and included in the discourse. I expect my work to open a space for communication to occur between communities and schools where culturally responsive teaching can enter and cultural competence can begin to take hold both in the classroom and within the community. One can never know the story of another person until it is told. This work will add to the literature and provide opportunities for interventions and discourse to occur which can be inclusive and hopefully close cultural gaps in school settings.

## **Theoretical framework**

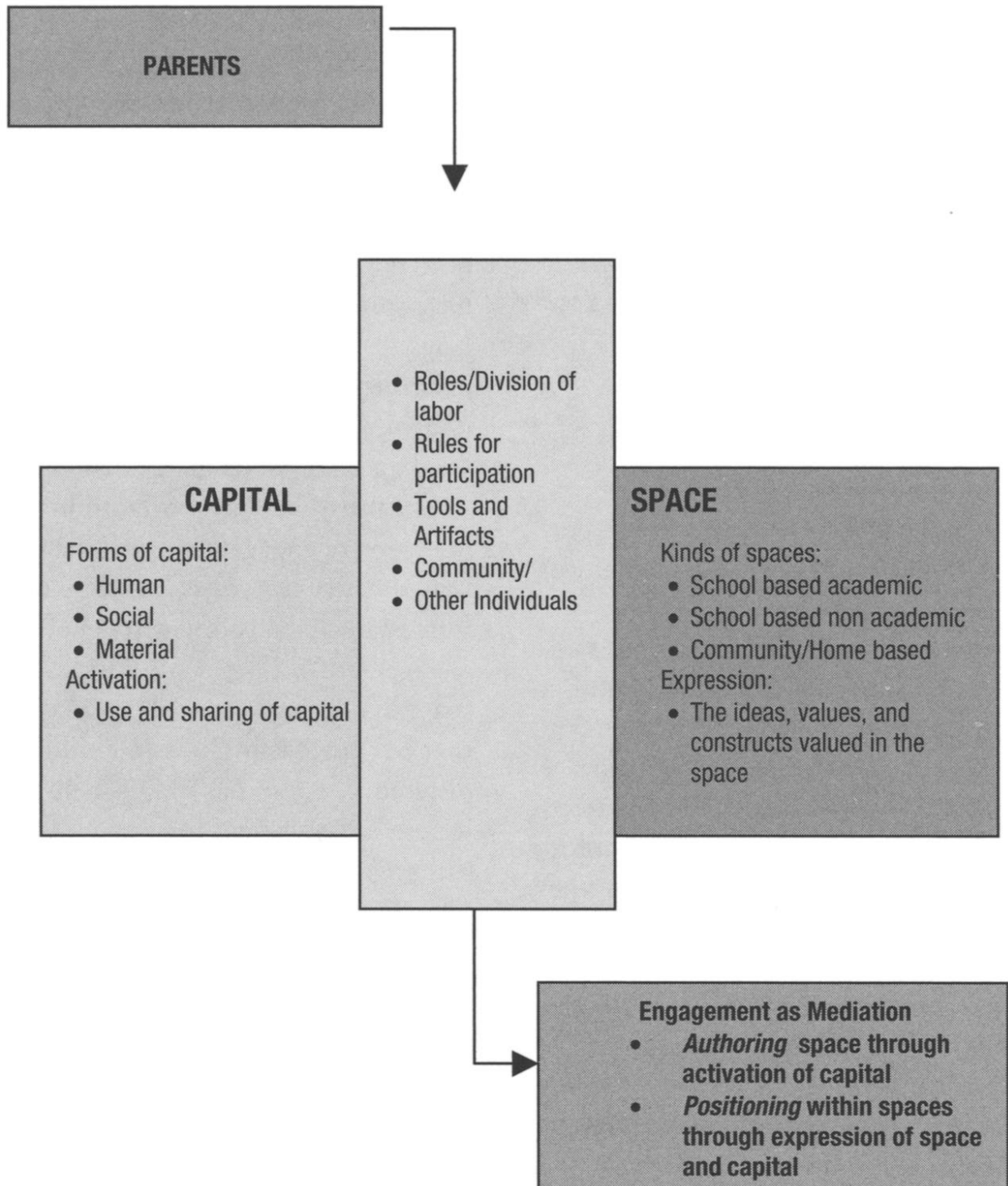
The researcher's decision to employ the theoretical frameworks chosen stems from personal interest in the problem: parent involvement and the intersectionality of race and class. According to Sharan B. Merriam (2009), the theoretical framework is the lens by which the problem is viewed and the questions are formed. Understanding the theory lays a foundation for the problem and purpose for researching the phenomenon. The theoretical framework lays a foundation for understanding the phenomenon to be studied. The purpose of the chosen frameworks will aid in answering the following research questions:

1. How do low-income Black parents conceptualize parental involvement?
2. Do race and social class influence parental involvement? If so, how? Why?
3. According to low-income Black parents, do school personnel help or hinder their level/efforts of involvement? If so, how?

For the purposes of this study, I elected to utilize two theoretical frameworks, Ecology of Parent Engagement (EPE) and Social Stratification. When issues of equity and inequality are present in schools, students are adversely impacted. These two frameworks will serve as a lens to understand the devastating impact race, class and gender have on educative experiences of Black students and their families in school settings.

Ecology of Parent Engagement is used to show a shift in how educators comprehend parent's involvement in their children's education and how they enact involvement through various action-oriented measures (Barton et al., 2004). This framework explores how parents engage in their children's schooling experience and why parents engage. More importantly, it provides a lens to fully understand the benefits of parent engagement and the contrasting differences of engagement versus parental involvement.

Table 1



The act of parental engagement takes on different forms; parents engage in schools, at home and within the community (Barton et al., 2004). EPE helps to understand how Black parents actively engage in their children's education and what recourses are taken when faced with barriers and opposition from school officials. This framework is fairly new and there are not many studies utilizing it, however, it offers a new way to conceptualize parent involvement that frames parents as both authors and agents in their children's schools.

Furthermore, EPE situates parent engagement as an interactive process in which parents rely on their multiple experiences and resources to describe their interactions with schools and school personnel. Barton, et al. (2004) suggest parent engagement is the mediation between space and capital; where parents are co-authors of policy creation and implementation and are viewed as important stakeholders in the school and community. They are able to understand how to fully engage and why it is important. Parental engagement allows parents to be viewed as partners who have a voice and one that is heard, and not to be seen as agitators or subservient as with involvement. This is a major contribution to the schooling and achievement of Black students since Black students fail to persist and achieve academic standards as a result of low parental involvement. EPE framework provides a space for discussion that dictates the participatory action that many Black parents may choose to engage in.

To broaden the scope of this study, Social Stratification will serve as the second framework. It provides a lens to understand how inequality is reproduced when race, class, and gender intersect. Social Stratification is the social process that hands down rewards; for example, wealth, prestige, and power are systematically and unequally distributed within or among social systems and passed through generations. In essence, it is a group's position in society and how they are sorted into categories based on race, class and gender (Johnson, p. 313).

Social Stratification and educational inequality are conflated in this study in order to highlight the grave injustices and institutional inequalities thrust upon groups based on socially constructed ideologies.

Social stratification is used to situate this study in accordance with the racial and social injustices low-income Black families experience as a result of being stratified into a lower group position. Once race and social class intersect, Black children are further marginalized with limited educational attainment outcomes. Stratifying Black bodies results in social inequality and this study will highlight the ways Black bodies are stratified academically and socially based on social class and race, and the impact systemic institutional racism has on a group. Social mobility is the by-product of social stratification. Though some Black people have access to upward mobility, undereducated Black children living in poverty will undoubtedly have decreased mobility between strata. When social stratification theory is employed in public education an underclass is socially reproduced, and more often than not, Black students and families are the beneficiaries of said class.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The exploratory approach chosen for this study is informed by the need to provide a platform for the participants' voices to be heard, while offering counter-narratives to the majoritarian narrative on parental involvement of low-income Black parents. In this section I will explain the methodological design of the study. This will include the site selection, participants, the sampling method, as well as strategies employed for data collection and analysis. I will also reflect on my fixed position and role as researcher; which is important because it guides my role during the study and determines the relationships I have developed with the participants.

The purpose of this study is to catalyze the voices of marginalized Black parents' in a small school district. The research seeks to provide the participants a platform to share their stories of parental involvement from their own perspectives. In addition, I am striving to garner information and an understanding of how this group of Black parents participates in their children's schooling experiences. In order to explore the phenomena, this study addresses three research questions:

1. How do low-income Black parents conceptualize parental engagement?
2. Do race and social class influence how parents are engaged in their children's education? If so, how and why?
3. How do school personnel encourage and/or challenge Black parent engagement?



## **Critical race methodology**

In order to strengthen my argument that many Black parents are unfairly labeled by the dominant ideology as uninvolved and uninterested in their children's academic achievement and schooling experiences, I employed Critical Race Methodology (CRM). This methodology allows the participants to share their personal experiences and stories of engaged-involvement. Critical Race Methodology is often used in concert with Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework; it provides a lens for understanding how racism is engrained in the fabric of society and how it is enacted in school settings. A critical race theory in education challenges White privilege and exposes deficit-informed research that distorts and silences marginalized people in society (Solórzano & Yasso, 2002). Critical Race Theory "privileges the voices of those who bear the brunt of inequalities in society and relies heavily on storytelling, as opposed to analytic means, as a methodology to represent them" (Duncan, 2005, p. 200). According to Parker and Lynn (2002) "CRT has three main goals: (a) to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in the law and in society; (b) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct; and (c) to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination" (p. 10). Additionally, CRT has five basic tenets: (1) CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric of American society; (2) CRT challenges dominant ideology, neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy; (3) CRT asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and an integral part to analyzing and understanding racial inequality; (4) CRT challenges ahistoricism and the narrow focuses of most analyses and insists that race and racism be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods; and (5) CRT is a framework that is committed to a social justice

agenda to eliminate all forms of subordination of people (Delgado, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Although CRT is central in exposing racial disparities in education, I am not using CRT as a framework for this dissertation; I am employing it as a method using the methodological tools informed by Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Theory scholars. Critical Race theory “privileges the voices of those who bear the brunt of inequalities in society and relies heavily on storytelling, as opposed to analytic means, as a methodology to represent them” (Duncan, 2005, p. 200). My study focuses on the voices and perspectives of a marginalized group of parents’ therefore Critical Race Methodology is the best method of choice to conduct this project.

Critical Race Methodology (CRM) is used to provide a counter-narrative through the guise of story telling; this rebuts dominant cultural narratives of low-income Black parental involvement and includes the narratives of the participants. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-storytelling is defined as “a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). According to Delgado and Stefaniec (2001), counter storytelling can serve to redeem the voices and validate the experiences of those who have been the targets of racial discrimination.

They assert,

“Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence, or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination; once named, it can be combated. If race is not real or objective, but constructed, racism and prejudice should be capable of deconstruction” (p 43). Delgado (1989) says stories told by underdogs are frequently ironic or satiric (p 2414). He explicates the importance

of marginalized groups sharing their stories or counter stories, because they challenge received wisdom, and open new windows into reality. Counter storytelling sheds new light on old perceptions, it suspends judgments in ways normal discourse cannot (Delgado, 1989).

To further the argument for storytelling, Fuertes (2012) posits, “Storytelling is an effective tool in transforming the negative energy of trauma into something constructive, especially in settings where oral traditions remains strong. The entire process of storytelling...can bring the whole community into a consciousness of history with a strong appreciation of their individual and societal resilience. The experience of telling stories enables a community to plan and implement the course of action that people want to take, and further affirms their being active participants in social healing and community building” (p. 333). In essence, it makes the lived experiences of people more meaningful and valued by those who are receptive to their stories.

Counter storytelling serves as a catalyst for low-income Black parents to have a voice in the discourse and deconstructs the majoritarian ideology on parent involvement. This method allows victims of racism and classism a platform to share their cultural experiences and stories giving a voice to those who have been marginalized and refutes the majoritarian story often held as truth about any matter related to people of color. More importantly, and central to this study is the Black-White binary. Through the use of both cultural intuition and theoretical sensitivity during the data analysis stage a counter story will be produced (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert such a methodology generates knowledge by examining those who have been disenfranchised, silenced, and disempowered. The primary reason for using CRM as a method is its’ characteristic use of storytelling and providing the

counter-narrative from the participants perspectives. Producing a counter story reveals the deficit discourse provided by the majoritarian story and allows marginalized voices a space to be heard. Scott (2011) affirms this stating storytelling is at the core of history. It provides a space for marginalized groups to write their personal stories into history (Arendt, 1958). The tradition of storytelling, or oral history, remains a key tool for passing down cultural practices to generations who often cannot find *their* history in written textbook form (Suarez, 2014, p. 45).

For these reasons, the counter stories of my participants will enhance the literature and provide a space for open and transparent dialogue. This methodology empowers a marginalized group and enriches their experiences through their stories.

### **Research design and methods**

Since this study is seeking to understand how low-income Black parents conceptualize parent involvement, I used qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), particularly in-depth interviews in order to gather and explore the lived experiences of low-income Black parents level of engagement in their children's educative experiences. This option allowed me the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of how this group of low-income Black parents contextualized the concept of involvement from their personal experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In an attempt to provide a clearer picture of the participants and their experiences, I utilized the portraiture method; it detailed the lives of three of the 10 participants whose stories resonated with me and specifically spoke to the need to expand the definition of parent involvement to include parent engagement.

## Portraiture

Portraiture is a creative qualitative approach to researching leaders and groups in action, and also in telling the stories of individuals in life (English, 2000, p. 21). Portraiture was introduced by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, in her award-winning book *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (1983). In her book, she suggests that portraiture represents the essence of our endeavors in social science research to represent the research participant through the subjective, empathetic, and critical lens of the researcher (p. 10). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) further explicates that the meaning and rationale behind portraiture is to include *voice*. She asserts: “Voice is the research instrument, echoing the self or the “soul” of the portraitist —her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic. Voice is omnipresent and seems to confirm that portraits reflect more about the artist than about the subject” (p 85).

Regarding portraiture in social science, Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) define it as:

“A method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom”.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) further states that portraiture encompasses voice in three modes: epistemology, ideology, and aesthetics and narrative. She goes on to say that a rigorous commitment to research is necessary in order to effectively give voice to both the participant and the portraitist (researcher). Lawrence-Lightfoot also cautions the researcher to not incorporate

too much of their own voice to the point that it silences the participants voice. She states the portraitist's voice works together with the participant by enhancing themes, insights and expressions. Moreover, she posits that in many respects, the researcher creates a self-portrait that "reveals her soul but produces a selfless, systematic examination of the actors' images, experiences and perspectives" (p. 86).

I used the portraiture method of drawing out themes using "five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193) to develop the story outline. Serving as the portraitist, I remained impartial, only reporting the stories of the participant from their own voice and used my interpretation of their meaning to give life to their stories. I wanted to capture everything that was "good" about these participants and their lives in lieu of the traditional focus of social scientists who tend to focus on liability and what is wrong, describing pathology of low-income parents involvement rather than the health and wellness they exude (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

I drew upon scholars who utilized portraiture to capture the essence of the participants and highlight the lived experiences through the participant's voices. Warren-Grice (2014) utilized portraiture to create the macro image of her participants in conjunction with where they fit into her study of Black educators working in White suburbia. Dixson, Chapman, and Hill (2005) discussed portraiture as an aesthetic approach to research utilizing poetry, jazz sonnets and artistic individuality of the portraitist and participants to counter the dominant pre-suppositions of their participants. I employed Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) strategy, entering the interview and observational spaces with a commitment to providing a holistic, complex and contextual description of my participants' realities.

## Site, participants, and recruitment strategy

### Oaktown: A school district in peril

The city of Oaktown (pseudonym) is located in the central Midwest region. It is a city many have characterized as “a great place to raise children.” Based on preliminary findings from my data collection, that statement is relative and subjective depending on whom you ask.

According to the United States Census (2014) Oaktown’s population is roughly 86,000. The racial and ethnic demographic is 67.8% White, 15.6% Black, 10.8% Asian, 6.3% Hispanic/Latino, 3% or more reported two or more races, and 0.3% American Indian or Pacific Islander, and of the population, there is a 27% poverty rate (United States Census, 2014). The city is racially and economically segregated, and due to *de facto* segregating housing trends, Black families live on the north side of town and Whites live on the south side of town. The city’s major employers include a prestigious university, two hospitals, and several factories.

The Oaktown school district is home to 16 schools—10 elementary, three middle-schools and three high schools, one of which is designated an alternative learning space for students who struggle with discipline, attendance and academic proficiencies. There are 750 teachers and 9,439 students matriculating in 2015 (State Board of Education, 2015). There is a discrepancy between student and teacher demographics as shown in tables two and three. The educators in Oaktown school district do not have a remote resemblance to the student population it serves. According to the school district superintendent, Oaktown’s mission is inclusivity and academic excellence; yet, many parents do not share this sentiment.

Figure 1: Teacher Demographics

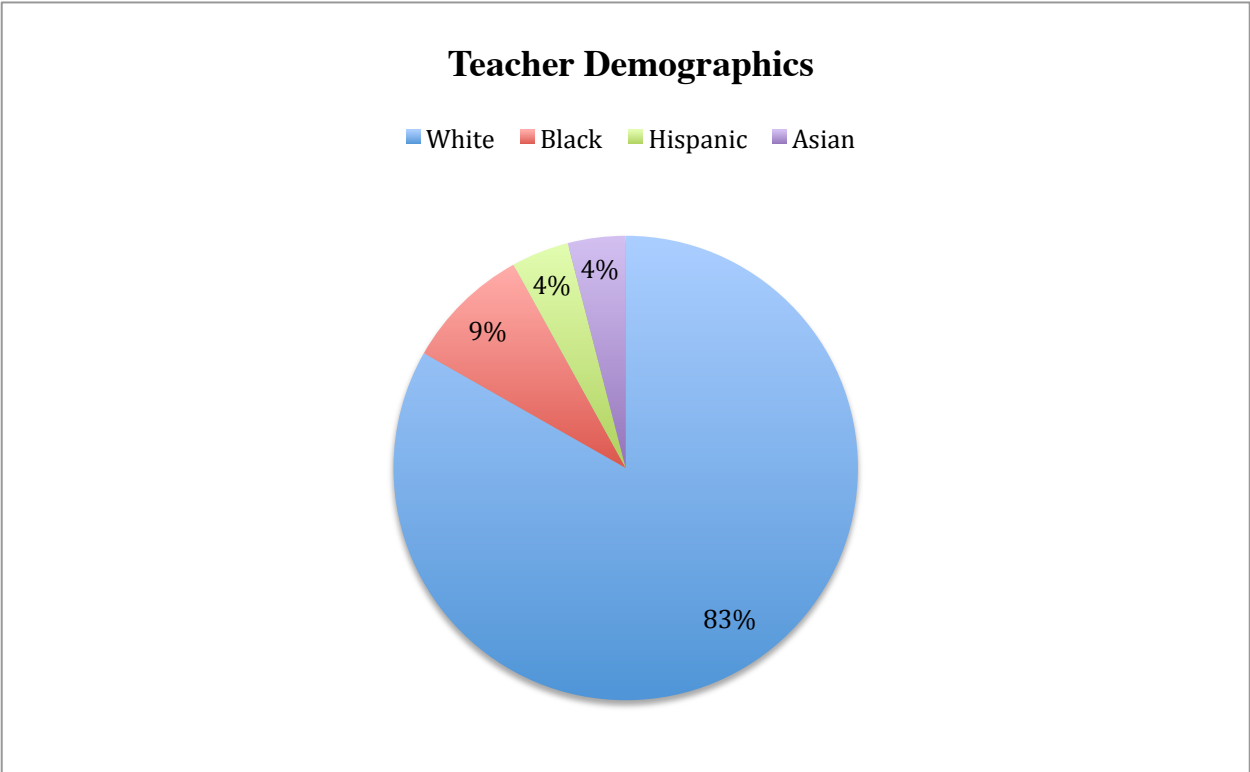




Figure 2: Student Demographics

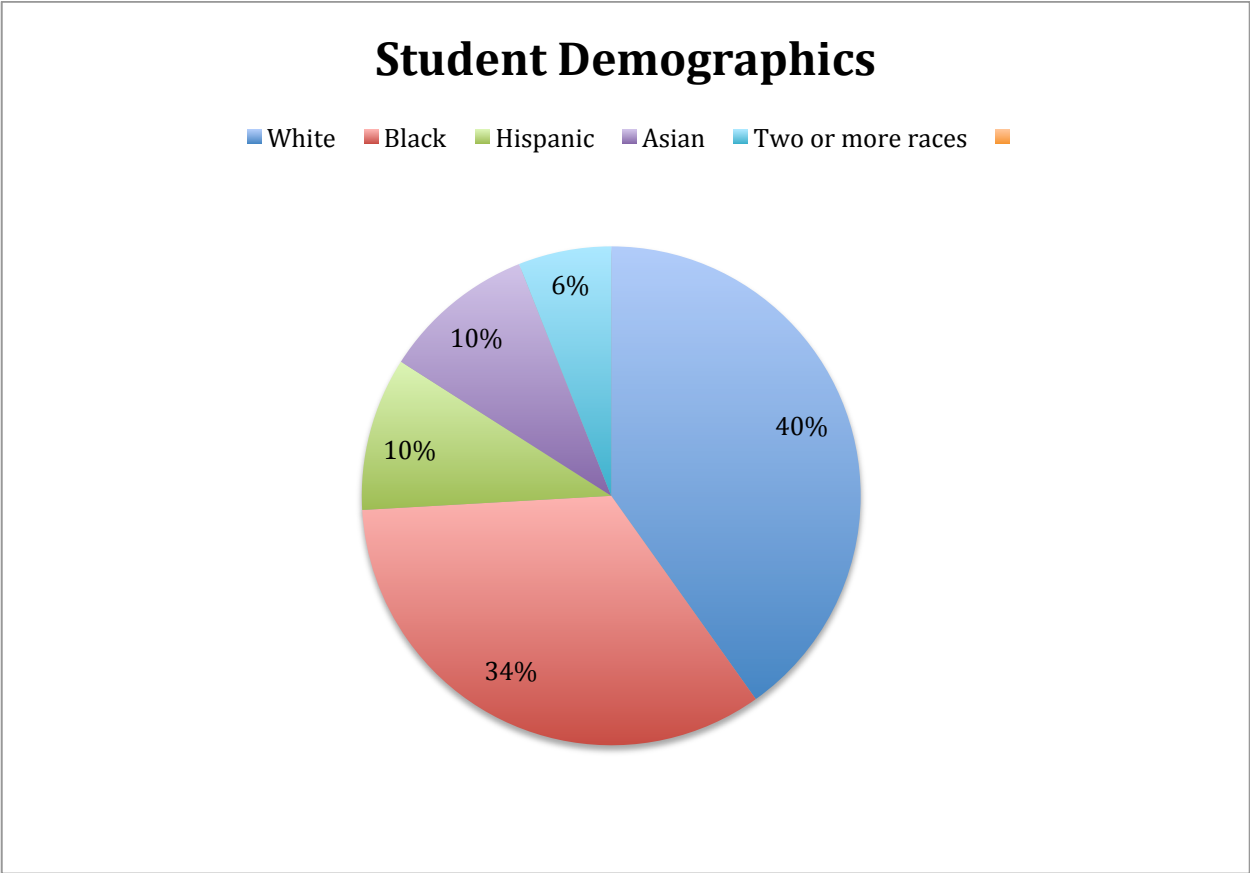
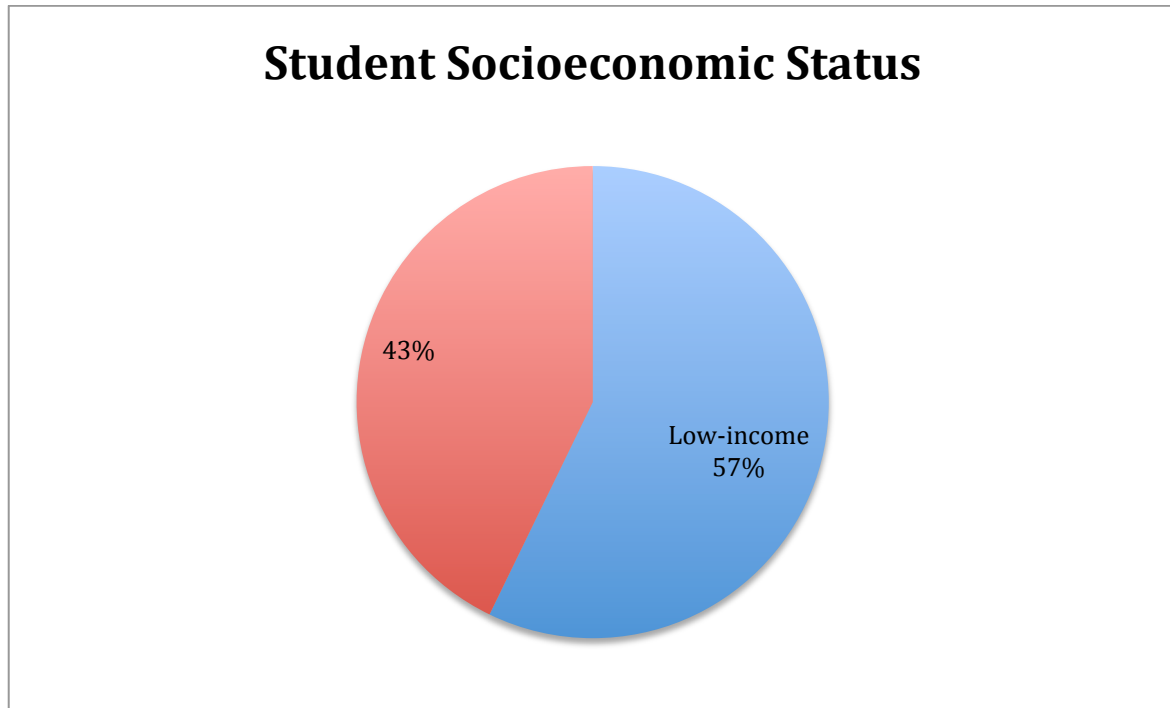


Figure 3: Student Socioeconomic Status



I selected this district as my site due to the prevailing issues with race and inequality existing between the school district and the Black community. To fully grasp the gravity of the racial incongruence between Black community members and the predominantly White school district, I drew upon the lawsuit filed in 1996 by a group of Black families with children matriculating in the Oaktown school district. The suit cited racial disparities in equal distribution of educative resources, school segregation, discriminatory practices in tracking and discipline, staff hiring and assignment, and a host of other racially unequal practices. This lawsuit resulted in a Resolution, a Consent Decree between the school district and the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). On June 15 1998, the school district entered into the Resolution agreement with OCR, resolving issues from initial complaints and OCR investigations (cite). As a result of the school districts failure to enforce the court ordered

Resolution, on October 4, 2000, Black students filed a school desegregation lawsuit in the United States District Court of the Central District of Illinois against the school district. The lawsuit, based on complaints of racial segregation in schools, arose under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (“Title VI”), and other state and federal law. The plaintiffs sought to have the court approve and enforce the consent decree from 1996. On July 28, 2000, another suit was filed against Oaktown School District seeking financial compensation for attorney fees, and the desegregation of affluent White schools to allow seating capacity for Black students. The new consent decree was set to expire the 2008-2009 school year; this prompted the parents to move into action. They petitioned the courts to modify the Consent Decree or to vacate it and initiate a trial. The lawsuits resulted in a Federal judge ordering increased seating capacity to remedy student assignment problems, a budget for educational equity reforms, improvement of hiring practices, and a Controlled Choice Plan to incentivize school improvement and increase diversity (Lally, 2015).

The result of the numerous lawsuits resulted in a legal battle between the school Board of Education and Racial Justice Now (a group formed to pursue damages) ending with an agreed settlement of \$496,290.24 in legal fees for the plaintiffs. It is no question the lawsuit and settlement resulted in racially charged tensions between the Black and White community, ultimately resulting in the hiring of an acclaimed Psychology Professor from local the Tier-1 university to conduct a Climate Study assessing the need for intervention and change within the school structure to promote equity, racial equality and harmony. Upon the adoption and enforcement of the consent decree, racial tensions were high and intolerance began to take hold. Parents from affluent White communities began threatening to, and many removed their children from public schools when the court enforced the consent decree, claiming it would disrupt education practices and dilute curriculum (Dempsey & Silverberg, 2011).

As a new resident to the Oaktown community in 2003, I became aware of the inequitable challenges poor Black students were facing in this school district. My oldest son began kindergarten in the Oaktown School District. The residential guidelines I had to follow to enroll my son were convoluted and constricting. Luckily, we secured a space in one of the more reputable high achieving schools, but the negative comments and aggression shown by the district personnel hired to assist families with their school choice selection was disheartening. When I called the office to garner a full understanding of the process, an administrative assistant told me to “thank the Black community and this stupid consent decree for your confusion and difficulty finding a school for your son.” I was taken aback and quite offended by her comments, however, I remained silent and completed the dialogue with a “thank you and have a good day.” Despite the challenges I faced, we successfully registered for kindergarten, and when the school year started, I had a front row seat to witness the racial and classist disparities marginalized students and parents faced. The administration was all White and there was one Black teacher in the entire school. The lack of cultural competence was evident and yearly school reports showed a larger gap in achievement between Black students and their academic counterparts. For the reasons stated, I felt this school district would serve as an ideal site for my work on parent involvement.

### **Pseudonyms**

Adhering to Institutional Review Board regulations and Ortiz’s (2003) suggestions regarding confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all personal identities and locations, including the school district. In this research, I did not disclose any information that would reveal identity, or violate participant confidentiality.

## **Participants, Recruitment and Sampling**

The participants for this study include parents of students who are matriculating in the Oaktown school district. Approximately ten parents and families will be selected to participate in this study. The participants will be selected according to the following criteria:

- Must identify as Black or African American non-immigrant
- Rearing children in single parent homes or dual parent homes
- Any grandparent serving as custodial parent
- A foster parent serving as custodial parent
- Any relative serving as custodial parent in accordance with state laws
- Must have a child/children matriculating in Oaktown school district
- Must meet state income guidelines to receive free and reduced lunch

The parents will be the primary respondents. Their stories will foreground the research and the data collected on the school district will serve as the underpinning. It is incumbent upon the researcher to obtain a holistic and clear understanding of parent involvement from all perspectives. However, this study's sole focus is centered on how the participants in the sample from Oaktown school district conceptualize their involvement and how and why that differs from majoritarian views on parental involvement.

Table 2  
*PARTICIPANT DATATABLE*

| <i>Name<br/>(pseudonym)</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Marital Status</i> | <i>Education</i> | <i>Employed</i> | <i>Number of<br/>Children</i> |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Sharon                   | 27         | Single                | Associate degree | Yes             | 2                             |
| 2. Annette                  | 50         | Divorced              | Some College     | Yes             | 4                             |
| 3. Tonja                    | 37         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 2                             |
| 4. Brian & Alicia           | 35/ 33     | Married               | High School      | Yes             | 3                             |
| 5. Stacy                    | 28         | Single                | Some College     | Yes             | 2                             |
| 6. Loren                    | 32         | Divorced              | Bachelor's       | No              | 2                             |
| 7. James                    | 25         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 1                             |
| 8. Tiffany                  | 42         | Engaged               | Bachelor's       | Yes             | 3                             |
| 9. Roslyn                   | 36         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 2                             |
| 10. Carla                   | 23         | Single                | High School      | No              | 2                             |

Each participant's identity will be protected by the use of pseudonyms, and no identifying information will be revealed in the study to assure confidentiality and anonymity. Upon completion of recruitment and during the final writing phase of the study, a descriptive portrayal of each participant will be outlined in the final report. My goal is to garner information from the participants' perspectives on how they construct their role in their children's schooling experiences both at home and at school. The school district data and reports were used to emphasize discriminatory practices and negative teacher perceptions about Black families and parental involvement in school. Additionally, I used the results and interviews from the district's

racial climate study to explicate the racial disparities between the school district and marginalized children and families matriculating in Oaktown schools.

Recruitment for this study occurred through the use of a letter of intent sent to parents who meet the income guidelines as well as racial requirements. In order for a participant to participate in the study their child must be enrolled at any school within the Oaktown district, and eligible for free and reduced lunch in accordance with the state income requirements for free and reduced lunch. The participant will self identify as a Black American born in the United States. The Local Office of Education (LOE) (pseudonym) representative sent my letters of intent to the participants who met the guidelines of the study. Upon receipt of the letters, the participants I was given their names and contact information and I called and emailed each of them to establish a date and time to hold our telephone interview.

The liaison from the LOE will assist in parsing out the racial determination prior to their first encounter with the researcher, in an attempt to reduce the time spent on identifying participants and finalizing the sample. It is important to note: although the LOE liaison will aid in identifying parents who meet the racial component, the researcher will fact check by asking the question of racial identification early in the first interview. The researcher has chosen to work with the LOE in lieu of the school personnel in an effort to provide anonymity and to alleviate fear of retaliatory actions for the participant's role in the study.

This study will utilize a purposive sampling method in order to select participants. According to Bogden & Biklen (2003) a purposeful sampling occurs when a researcher chooses subjects, places, and other dimensions of a research site to include in the research in an effort to enlarge the researchers analysis or to test emerging themes (p. 261). The use of a purposeful

sample also allows the researcher to use a set of standards and criteria for participant selection. For the purpose of this study, participants must identify as Black Americans, meet minimum income guidelines (i.e. receive free and reduced lunch), and have one or more children enrolled at the research site.

Sampling occurs when the researcher selects individuals to participate in a study because participants are willing, available and/or volunteer to participate (Creswell, 2005). This sample will be convenient because parents will self-select and volunteer to participate after initial recruitment strategies identify those participants eligible to participate.

### **Data collection procedures**

Fieldwork is “the way most qualitative researchers collect data” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 82). Data collection for this study utilizes three methods, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviewing, and school documents. I decided to apply these three strategies to reduce the threats to data validity. The unobtrusive observations also called non-participant observations are one of the best ways to collect data because observations are a form of primary data. It is the researchers’ opportunity to have a first hand account of what is taking place in the setting (Creswell, 2005; Yin, 2010;).



*Data Collection Matrix*

| <b>Research Questions</b>  | <b>Data Collection Sources</b>   | <b>How did I access the data?</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| <b><i>Qualitative Phase</i></b>  |  |   |
| <i>1.) How do Black parents conceptualize parent engagement?</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interviews with a sample of Black parents in Oaktown School district</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I accessed the data via semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample of parents from Oaktown School district.</li> </ul>        |
| <i>2.) Do race and social class influence how parents are engaged in their children's education? If so, how &amp; why?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interviews with a sample of Black parents in Oaktown School district</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I accessed the data via in-depth interviews with sample of parents from Oaktown School district and district survey on racial climate</li> </ul> |
| <i>3.) How do school personnel encourage and/or challenge Black parent engagement?</i>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interviews with a sample of Black parents in Oaktown School district</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I accessed the data via semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample of parents from Oaktown School district.</li> </ul>        |

**Non-participant observations** occur when the researcher enters a site discreetly and does not engage in any discourse with participants and the interactions are minimal. This type of observation allows a researcher to observe interactions, execution of policy, social culture and climate, and activities of a population within a space without actively engaging with the individuals or participating in the activities. This form of observation is beneficial because its' non-intrusive manner allows gatekeepers and participants to feel safe in their environment (Creswell, 2005). The use of this form of observation affords the researcher an opportunity to view the school-community interactions in their natural state.

For the purpose of this study, I observed activities involving parents, for example, each year prior to the start of school there are registration days when parents register their children for the upcoming school year, and they are given information concerning expectations and opportunities for engagement. Additional observations occurred during my attendance at three school open houses. In an attempt to diversify my observations, I attended an open house at every level in the school structure, elementary, middle school and high school. To remain consistent with my observations, I have unobtrusively observed PTA meetings, multicultural night, and National African American Parent Involvement Day (NAAPID). To ensure I followed the data and the research, I attended three sporting events, a football game, and two baseball games at three different schools. While observing each event, I took copious field notes. I wanted to recall interactions and observations of parents in the school setting as well as the interactions between school officials and parents. Though field notes were taken, this observational method will serve as an aid during data collection and to help inform data analysis and findings.

## **Semi-structured interview**

A qualitative interview, specifically a semi-structured interview will occur to gather data from the perspective of the participant. Semi-structured interviews are used to collect detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational (Harell & Bradley, 2009) and allows the participant to provide his/her narrative on the phenomena. This interview method involves asking the same general questions or broaching topics to each participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The semi-structured interview is also a dynamic exchange of ideas based on the researcher's use of open-ended questions or areas of interests with probes that are designed to elicit details and explanations from the participants (Trainor, 2013, p. 126). The use of this interview strategy allows the researcher the opportunity to rearrange or shift questions in order to provoke feelings from the participants with the expectation they will give an in-depth response (Kvale, 1996, as cited in Trainor, 2013, p. 126).

The use of interview research is intended to provide the researcher an understanding of how people, particularly the participants in this study, make meaning of their lived experiences. According to Trainor (2013), this method of inquiry is best because it eliminates any guesswork or misinterpretations of participant's feelings or thoughts about the phenomenon. To garner information and a breadth of knowledge about the participants, I conducted three audiotaped interviews at the location chosen by the participant. Prior to beginning the interviews I discussed the purpose of the interview. I availed myself to the participant for any unanswered questions about the study prior to the start of each interview and obtained informed consent from each participant. I made certain I reiterated the importance of the participant understanding his/her

role in the study, as well as providing a safe space that allowed them to speak freely with confidentiality and anonymity.

My first interview with the participants was conducted over the telephone; this served as a rapport-building interview. I wanted to develop a sense of trust and connectedness, allowing the participants to ask me pertinent questions, and I too, shared a small piece of my family history. I gathered background information about the participants' financial, educational and familial data. The second interview consisted of more in-depth detailed questions focused on the goal of the study and the research questions. I allowed the participants the opportunity to share personally in a space that was safe and comfortable for them and one of their choosing. The questions centered on their personal experiences in school, their perceptions of the school district and educators, and their stories of engagement at home and in their communities. The third interview served as a follow-up in an effort to triangulate the data from previous interviews and a fact checking process. The participants were provided with highlights from our interviews that were particularly pertinent to the study and I provided an opportunity to add or subtract information based on the transcriptions.

The conversational style of interview is advantageous to both participant and researcher as it is a dialogue and a two-way interview allowing the participant to feel comfortable and at ease to openly discuss their points of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Additionally, an informal interview structure allows the researcher a chance to gain clarity on comments through the use of probes while being cautious of guiding the participants' toward a biased a response (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

## **Triangulation and credibility**

In order to prevent a threat to validity, I utilized two of Joseph Maxwell's (2009) strategies, *Respondent validation* and *Triangulation*. Respondent validation, also known as fact checking, consists of obtaining feedback from the participants to lessen the misinterpretation of their self-reported behaviors and views. Upon completing the interview series, I scheduled a final interview meeting to discuss the validity of the respondents answers to the particular questions and allowed him/her to add or withdraw statements from the transcripts. This process provided the participants influence in how their voices are heard in this study.

Triangulation occurs when the researcher collects evidence that conjoins from different sources. Through this method of collecting data, the validity of one source of evidence can be weighed against multiple sources to strengthen the argument of the study. Many studies that employ a single source of data are more likely to have errors associated with that particular method. Triangulation of data reduces threat to validity and strengthens internal validity of a study due to the variations and multiple observations on "what is really going on" (Merriam, 2002).

To establish credibility, Eisner (1991) stated: "We seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions" (p. 110). The multiple types of data used should serve as proof by confirming evidence to support the interpretations. Triangulation, according to Yin (2010) "is an analytic technique, used during fieldwork and later during formal analysis, to corroborate a finding with evidence from two or more different sources" (p. 313).

To triangulate data, I utilized the school districts public records identifying demographics of the students and educators, in addition to the ten-year racial climate study performed in 2000 and again in 2009. The artifact represents the voices of the school educators, administrators and community members regarding the racial climate and race relations between schools and the Black community. Semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observations served as the remaining two strategies employed to triangulate data. It is important to note, the use of the social climate survey data is not intended to serve as a true representation of “all” White staff and families in the Oaktown community, it is used to serve as a guide to understanding the historical issues of racism in the schools and within the minds of community members. This study’s primary focus is on the perceptions of Black parent involvement from this small sample of parents and their lived experiences.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis as defined by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings” (p. 159). Data analysis processes for this study occurred in multiple stages. Interviews were transcribed by an audio transcription service named Casting Words and summaries were presented in a follow-up interview with participants for member checking. To ensure accuracy and reliability, participants were given an opportunity to respond to follow-up questions or withdraw information they did not want included in the final report. The interviews were analyzed using a theoretical model of analysis and an inductive analytic approach; interview data were organized into patterns, categories, and recurrent themes, which were refined and organized into a thematic codebook (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2009).

The ten interviews were reviewed for both themes from the related literature and for emergent themes that arose during the interviews. When all interviews were coded with these initial themes, a matrix was developed to compare the themes across the participant categories based on the sampling criteria. After combining, excluding, clustering, and redefining themes, I focused on four themes that were evident across all ten interviews. Interview data were then interpreted and compared based on participant responses to their contextualization of parent involvement. Additionally, I critically analyzed and coded educator responses in the racial climate report that was conducted district-wide in an effort to stabilize racial tensions between the community and the schools. The educator responses to questions in the racial climate survey are highlighted in the findings chapter of this study. Upon completion of coding and triangulation a representative set of codes were identified, and are outlined in the findings chapter of the study. The themes identified for the study are guided by participant responses to semi-structured interview questions and the theoretical frameworks that situate the study.

### **Role of researcher**

As a former school social worker, and as a parent, I entered into this project with a plethora of knowledge and experience on Black parental involvement in schools. Having had the opportunity to witness varying degrees of involvement and engagement within the public school sector, and being a part of the group that possessed the power to oppress and defame marginalized students and their families, I am both the victim and the victimizer. At the onset of this study I considered myself a cultural insider due to my lived experiences of being Black and poor in educational settings. Growing up in the inner city of Chicago, a byproduct of Chicago Public Schools (CPS); reared on the lowest strata of cultural, social, and economic capital scales, I wholeheartedly believed I knew the ins and outs of this project, and could relate to the lived

experiences of my participants. It wasn't until I began data collection that I quickly realized the duality of my role as the researcher. I straddled the fence of cultural insider **and** outsider. As much as I hated to admit it, I no longer identified with the social condition of my participants. I made it out of the impoverished neighborhood I once called home. I am upwardly mobile and ahead of the achievement gap. I pulled myself up by my "bootstraps," despite living most of my life without "boots." I represent the American Dream, however distorted the reality of being Black and having the ability to dream may be. Nonetheless, I could have been considered an outsider to this group of participants.

Due to my positionality, I struggled to remain neutral during my research and found myself in constant turmoil as I listened to parents discount race as a reason they felt disconnected from their children's school. I wanted to shake a few parents into consciousness. I felt sympathy for some of the parents who lacked the understanding of how race and social class restrict upward mobility, but I had to realize they were socialized to believe this community is fair and resources are equitably distributed, despite the ruling by a court affirming unfair and unequal educational opportunities existed and them issuing a mandated consent decree that served to desegregate schools and allow access for minority students into restricted academic spaces. Despite all of the aforementioned issues, I used discretion and worked to remain unbiased during the project.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

Using a critical race methodological approach coupled with social stratification and ecologies of parental engagement lenses, I sought to understand how low-income Black parents conceptualized parental involvement, and how they enacted involvement in their homes and within their communities. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), uses of rich thick descriptions of the data are necessary to ensure that the findings are transferable between the researcher and the participants. In an effort to achieve transferability, I provided detailed accounts and several quotes or vignettes from the responses received from interview participants. By sharing the actual answers given during the interviews, thick descriptions of these data will be established. All of these strategies are employed in an attempt to provide a more detailed picture of the participants' lived experiences. This will also aid in validating data collected and analyzed for this study.

Upon completing the three interview series and coding the data, thematic themes emerged as a result of participant responses. The themes not only represent the stories from the participants, but they connect to the theoretical framework used to guide the study. In an attempt to contextualize the lived experiences of my participants, I focused on similarities in responses and used a cross-case comparison of their stories. Portraits of each participant will be used to share their profile and highlight their family's stories of involvement. In this chapter, I employed the storytelling method. A findings section should be reflective of the data collected and tell a story, one that provides the audience a clear picture the lives of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997;Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

## **Participant Portraits**

In this section, I drafted portraits of seven of the ten participants. The remaining three will have more in-depth portraits drawn and highlighted in chapter five. Though they share similar social conditions of poverty and underemployment, they each bring a wealth of capital to this study through their lives and personal experiences. The cultural capital of the participants should not be dismissed as urban culture and having no merit; it is reflective of their lived experiences and adds value to the participant's lives (Yasso, 2005).

*Tonja* is a 37 year-old single mother of two daughters ages five and 12. She is a native of Oaktown community. She is a member of a large family in Oaktown and has a lot of support with her children. She is high school graduate working two minimum wage jobs to take care of her children. Tonja shared her stories of poverty and struggle during our interviews and discussed how she barely receives entitlements from the government for food due to her income. According to her, she lives well below the poverty level and the income from both of her jobs barely makes it possible to keep her apartment and provide the basic essentials needed to care for her children. Her family lives in a two bedroom rent controlled apartment in a low-income Black community on the north-side Oaktown.

*Stacy* is 28, single and employed. She has two children; her daughter is five and in kindergarten and her son is seven and in the first grade. At the recommendation of the teacher, her son repeated first grade. Stacy wanted me to know it was against her better judgment to allow her son to be retained, but she felt she had no other options. Stacy relocated to Oaktown from the inner city of Chicago in hopes of securing a livable wage and a better opportunity to rear her children; her son is her primary concern. She feared his life expectancy would be shortened if she remained in the city. Stacy was able to transfer her section-8 voucher to Oaktown where she

now rents a small modestly decorated two-bedroom home on the city's north end of town. Due to Stacy's relocation, she relies on support from friends and community members to assist with her children in times of need. She has taken two classes at the local community college, but financial and time constraints prevent her from continuing her education. Stacy reported feelings of despair over her financial condition, but has hope and a strong faith in God that things will get better if she persists.

**Loren** is a 32 year-old divorcee born and reared in Oaktown. She has two sons ages 10 and 12. Both boys are facing challenges in school behaviorally and academically. Loren believes it is a by-product of her divorce. Loren holds a Bachelor's degree from Eastern Illinois, but lost her job due to the economic downturn and has yet to find suitable employment. She works several temporary positions in hopes of securing full-time employment. Loren lives with her mother in a neighboring town in a four-bedroom home in a middle-income community.

**James** is a 25 year-old single father of a seven year-old son. James graduated from the alternative high school and works a part-time night shift at Federal Express (FedEx). The mother of James's son is incarcerated at a women's correctional facility serving a 10 year-sentence. He is raising his son with the emotional support of family and friends, but does not qualify for government entitlements due to his salary with FedEx. His wages are a result of securing overtime when available, but his base salary does not afford him the luxury of living on his own. He and his son reside with his family on the north end of Oaktown in an overcrowded rent controlled house. His mother is a recipient of a section-8 housing voucher which allows him to share a home with his siblings and his child, albeit illegally. He worries if anyone reports him living in the home, his mother will be in jeopardy of losing her voucher. Each time I met with James, he was well manicured from head to toe, and spoke with confidence and genuine care for

his son. Our conversations were “real” and his passion for giving his son a better chance at life was evident in his responses.

*Tiffany* is 42 and recently engaged and relocated to Oaktown from Marietta, Georgia, a middle-class suburb of Atlanta. She has three children from two previous relationships. She has two sons, ages 18 and 13, and a 15 year-old daughter. Tiffany has a Bachelor’s degree in Communications from Georgia State University and works as a customer service rep for the local cable company. Tiffany is struggling to find balance and regain her financial footing in the community. She relocated to wed her fiancé, and feels she was forced to take a significant pay-cut and a job that lacks the prestige from her former position. Her fiancé is a full-time doctoral student at the local research university. Tiffany’s eldest son attends the alternative high school to make up deficient credits in hopes of graduating May 2016 and transitioning to one of the local colleges. Because Tiffany’s profile is unique, I have altered and omitted details in an effort to adhere to the confidentiality agreement and protection under the IRB regulations.

*Roslyn* is a charismatic 36 year-old single mother of two. She has one daughter 8 years of age and a three year-old son. Roslyn was born and reared in Chicago and moved to Oaktown as a teenager in her junior year of high school; she refers to Oaktown as home. Roslyn is a cosmetologist by trade, but in a non-traditional sense, as she has no formal training; she is self-taught. The revenue from her home salon yields a suitable income that affords her a quaint two-bedroom apartment on the south end of Oaktown. The apartment complex she resides in has a poor reputation due to high crime rates in the community. She does not report her income to the Internal Revenue Service and is considered low-income by state standards. She has limited educational experience, having only completed high school, but hopes to return to school to secure official cosmetology licensure.

*Carla* is the youngest of my participants. Carla was born in Chicago, but moved to Oaktown when she was three years old. She is by her own admission, a townie. She's 23 years old with a strong determination to change her social condition and make a better life for her two children. She has a 5 months old son, and the other is an energetic five year-old daughter. She lives in an impoverished, crime-ridden community that would give anyone a reason to lose hope and give up, but not Carla. She is a high school graduate with her eyes focused on the goal of attending the big university in town, in spite of her high school counselor telling her she had no chance of attending. She wants to pursue a Bachelor's in Nursing and go on to obtain a Master's as a nurse anesthetist. Her energy and enthusiasm was infectious, and although I know the challenges she faces as a poor Black unwed mother of two, I wanted to root for her and give her a sense of hope, despite the dismal outlook she encounters in her daily life.

The participants are vulnerable and marginalized in various capacities. Though two of them may have obtained four-year degrees, most have no formal education post high school, and they are each struggling in one area or another area in their lives. Nonetheless, they are all concerned parents who seek the best outcomes for their children in school and throughout their lives. When I explained to them that I needed to give a synopsis of their family portrait in my work, each of them stressed the importance of remaining anonymous and did not want their children's school identified in any way. For those reasons, I have intentionally omitted the grade levels and school pseudonyms previously selected for this study.

### **Theme one: Constructing parent involvement: A parent's perspective**

As research has shown, parental involvement positively impacts the schooling outcomes of all students, but stories of involvement from the perspectives of parents are omitted from the discourse and further marginalize poor Black families. The participants of this study were

enthusiastic about the opportunity to be heard, and more importantly, they want the world to know they aren't disengaged, disconnected or lack a genuine care for their children's education. In fact, it is the quite the opposite of dominant cultural perspectives, yet, their voices are muzzled during the discourse on how parental involvement is defined and what constitutes parent involvement.

The assumptions held by the dominant culture on Black parent involvement are aligned with the review of literature in this project. The belief that Black parents are disengaged and emotionally detached from their children's schooling experiences is in contrast to the views held by the parents in this study. When asked how they construct parent involvement from their own perspectives, the responses were quite similar from each participant. Though each respondent has his or her own ideas of involvement, it is evident from their response that each parent wants what is best for their children. I chose to highlight the responses of Roslyn, Tonja, James, Stacy, Carla and Loren because their responses resonated with me and provided an in-depth view of how they conceptualized involvement despite the many barriers they face in their daily lives.

**“How do you define parent involvement?”**

Loren: “I define parent involvement by going up and checking up on my children. I, as far as their homework, I double-check their homework, I go and I have conference with their teachers and make sure that they're grounded and on the right track, when I can, because I can't take off a lot. When I can and I have the opportunity, I do go and I try to be at the meetings that they're asked. On report card days, I am there or my sister is there. Someone is always there and involved in their education”.

Tonja: For me, what I've done with my children is just meeting the teacher. When I take my children, be it their first day or what have you, I take them to school. Their first day

of school, I don't care what grade they're in, I'm going in to meet the teacher, introduce myself, learn the routine of the day just as my child will. I like to get email addresses so I can have open communication with the teacher throughout the year. Contact information for every period, and I exchange with the teachers.

James: How I define involvement is I take good care of my son. I make sure he look good and is clean. I ain't got time to be running back and forth up to that school. I do make sure he get his homework done and I try to go to all them teacher conferences, but to me, parent involvement is about how I take care of my responsibilities. He got a roof over his head and he a good kid. I will whoop him if he acting a damn fool in school. Shit, that's involvement. A lot of these people don't whoop they kids, that's why they act so bad in school. I'm doing it by myself, his momma can't do it. So I can't do what that school want all the time. They call and think I'm 'posed to run up there, but I work at night, man, I can't do that, I gotta sleep. I want him to do good in school, he smart and funny. Is that what you asking?

Stacy: I think if a parent is involved, that means that they are here as much as they can be, because most parents have to work also. It's not so much about being involved in the school as much as it's about being involved with their kids. I feel like it should be more focused on what you're doing at home with your kids versus me having to come to the school and do stuff there.

Carla: Parent involvement, hmm, I don't know how to put it. I mean, it's giving your kids a chance to make it out. Make it out of this place and see something different, you know. I hate it here and I was born here. I just believe I have to support my kids by putting them in stuff like sports and dance class. I know it cost a lot, but that's what I think being

involved is. I mean, yeah, I went to her school for open house, but it was weird and I have to go to her teacher conference cuz I don't want them to mistreat my baby, she so smart and I know how they do here. They stomp your joy, especially for us young Black kids. Well, that's what I think involvement is.

Roslyn: I define parent involvement by going up and checking up on my children when I can. I can't always go up to the school cuz I work. I put food on the table, roof over their head and I try to do what I can to help with homework and tell them school is very important and they need to be good and pay attention cuz these teachers don't care about them so I have to care, and I do.

The remaining participants all shared very similar stories of involvement from their perspectives. They each agreed it is certainly important to be engaged in a child's experience in school, but they also shared the difficulties they have with being involved in a traditional sense. Though these parents' responses may not be representative of the normative practices valued by dominant culture, the passion I witnessed in their eyes and voices when asked how they "do" parental involvement, informed my decision to use their statements. Their stories certainly counter the negative narratives suggesting they aren't involved in their children's education and schooling experiences.

Literature states early childhood educative experiences determine educational outcomes and advantages children during compulsory school years. It has been reported that Black children enter kindergarten with a thirty-six thousand word deficit when compared to their White counterparts (Kingston, Huang, Dawson-McClure, & Brotman, 2013). These staggering numbers prompted me to inquire about early education programs and how my participants engaged in



their children's school processes inside and outside of school. Additionally, I sought to understand if they viewed parent involvement from a deficit lens and if their childhood experiences dictated how they participated in the lives of their own children. Several questions were asked to gather their stories of involvement. When asked whether their own parents were involved in their schooling experiences, the responses were varied and there was trepidation in answering the questions. A few of the participants feared I would judge them based on their responses and even prefaced their answers with short story explanations. After explaining that the question was asked for informational purposes and that the responses would only serve as a guide to support their narratives, they relaxed and began speaking of their experiences.

James's response was candid and seemed very open and honest. He discussed how troubled he was as a youth, not because he lacked love or support from family, but because he was a leader who led friends and even girls down the wrong path. He spoke of things being easy for him because of his athleticism and good looks. He said his mother and father took an interest in him early on, but as he got into middle school his behavior forced them to take a stricter approach and he rebelled even more as a result. His son never attended pre-school or any early education programs, but he feels he is doing well. He stated he didn't have custody of him until he was four so he wasn't really involved until then.

Rosalyn spoke of her regret in neglecting to place her third grader into a pre-school program because she said it would have helped her become more outgoing and social. This regret is why she has her younger son in a part-time daycare. She said it may not be regular school, but it helps him with his behavior and they learn a little. Roslyn said her parents did not have to come to school for her and she had a pretty decent schooling experience despite the fact she

hasn't finished a formal higher education program; she still feels she's intelligent and has what it takes to help her children.

Carla and Loren both expressed deep concern over both questions concerning pre-school and their parents' involvement. They shared similar stories of parents working or being absent from their schooling experiences, but they did not have horrible memories of school as a result. They did not recall help with homework or science projects, but they both felt their parents loved them. Both Loren and Carla made use of early education programs for their children and felt their children benefitted greatly from the experience. Carla has a carefree attitude, but is very in tune with what she feels will work best for her children. Loren being more mature and having older children understands the advantages early education programs provide young children. Neither of the two women recalled whether they attended pre-school programs prior to starting kindergarten. Their stories are paired because their answers were nearly identical.

Tiffany's mother was a teacher and she knew nothing but parental involvement during her school years. She feels parents do not have to put their kids into pre-school programs to ensure they learn, they just need to love them and be consistent. Her initial response prompted a dialogue between the two of us, as I wanted her to understand how her comments are commonplace in society and can be misconstrued.

ML: Are you saying early childhood education is unnecessary?

Tiffany: No, I'm not saying that, but there's too much focus on early childhood and pre-school as a way to close the achievement gap and more focus needs to be on what's taking place in the home. My parents were (she uses her fingers to imply quotes) involved, but I did more dirt than anyone. I was like the PK's..

ML: Explain what you mean by PK's for those who don't know

Tiffany: laughing, you know, Preacher and Police Kids. They were some of the worse kids in school. I was a PK in a sense cuz my mother was a teacher, I was expected to do and say all the right stuff, you know? My kids are successful in school because I care about their education and that's it.

ML: Can I push you on that response?

Tiffany: Yep.

ML: Are you suggesting that if children aren't doing well it's because the parents don't care? I mean that's what this work is all about. Combatting that type of thought process.

Tiffany: (emphatically answers) Oh, heck no! I'd never suggest a thing like that, but I guess I can see how you would think I thought that. Alls I'm saying is kids respond to love and a caring parent and that definitely looks different based on household. Did I answer your questions cuz I go off on a tangent about my kids.

Tonja's narrative regarding parent involvement and early education arose from memories of growing up in a large family. She said involvement meant everyone checked on you, from your older siblings to your aunts and uncles. She said her family's name had a reputation for fighting, therefore, her mother was well known in the school and the teachers never hesitated to contact her if anything was wrong. She also mentioned she did not seek help for homework, she had older siblings and friends who helped with school, her mother was a traditional, hard-working, don't take no mess kind of parent. Her children definitely attended daycare because she had to work to feed them, "who could stay home with babies if they ain't rich? Daycare ain't that much different than the early childhood center in Oaktown, it's safer if you ask me," she said. "We all family, we know each other and my aunt had a daycare, so of course my kids will go there."

When speaking with Stacy, it was a heart wrenching and eye-opening experience. She talked about not having anyone in her corner supporting her through school. She didn't have really good schooling experiences in Chicago, which is why she decided to relocate her children to Oaktown. She is hopeful things will be different here. "I know my kids will have a better chance than I did. I'm not saying it was "all" bad; I just didn't like my childhood. I saw too much in my short life, from drug dealing to drug using, from gang banging to armed robbery, you name it; I've seen it. I can say this, I won't let me kids go out like that. That life ain't for the faint of heart and my kids are good kids for the most part. I did do pre-school for both of mine, they had to go cuz I was in school with my son trying to make a better life, but it was too hard to stay in school, but I know God will make a way. That's why I participated in this project, I want you to know, all of us ain't bad, y'all college people like to look down on people like me, but I'm gon' make my life good."

It was important for Stacy to understand we weren't as different as she thought, so I engaged her a bit more to give her some insight into who I am as a woman, mother and person, not just a scholar. Clarifying this perception of me allowed me to secure an insider position during our conversations.

ML: If I may, can I interrupt you?

Stacy: Yeah

ML: I'm born and raised in the inner city of Chicago, just like you, I grew up poor, and like you, I always wanted more. I worked very hard to get where I am, so I applaud you, I don't judge you.

Stacy: I could tell, cuz you always smiling and even when I say stuff that these people here don't get, you knew what I was talking about. You don't look like you grew up poor though.

ML: (laughing) I'm not sure what that looks like, but I wouldn't lie to you. I know my life isn't the normal experience of growing up poor and Black, but I have hope that people can change their trajectory or direction, you know what I mean?

Stacy: Yeah, you do use those big words, but you ain't acting like you better than me, you don't be trying to treat me.

In addition to understanding how my parents constructed involvement, I wanted to gauge how they engaged in their children's lives outside of a school setting. Researchers report school personnel believe involvement is enacted through school-sanctioned activities and rarely include out of school factors as parental involvement practices (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). I would argue the need to revisit the impact out of school involvement has on behavioral issues and successful academic outcomes. Throughout dialogue the participants spoke of many out of school activities their children participated in, however, most of them pointed out the limited resources and outlets available to children, particularly teens, and how they felt it left too many opportunities for them to get into trouble. I wanted to know what kinds of activities the participants' children participated in on a regular basis and how these activities informed their levels of involvement within the school setting. Tonja discussed ways she engages her children beyond the school curriculum, as well as the out of school activities she has her children participate in.

Tonja: Mostly, keeping them in tune with what they're doing at school. I ask my children all the time what they're doing in school. I have them explain to me what they did, because the way I learned it at school is totally different from the way

that they're learning it now at school. We do that and then, I'm always picking up extra workbooks for them to do. I probably drive them a little crazy, but I feel like that that's going to keep them on task and keep them a step ahead of the game. I always try to do extra stuff, but I just can't go to the school all the time so I work on things at home when I can. I have them in swimming, basketball and dance, you know, stuff that keeps them busy. It keeps me busy too.

James spoke more about the lack of social activities available on the weekends or during extended time away from school or work.

James: "It ain't nothing here for kids to really do, I mean a few bowling places and Skatefest (pseudonym), how many times can you do that without getting tired?" He said his son was involved in a local predominantly Black Cub Scouts program. He also said his son plays sports in the summer baseball leagues and basketball at the local YMCA. He talked about the need to have extra money to pay for the extracurricular activities to keep his son busy during weekends and summer vacation. He was honest in saying: "I got into a lot of trouble smoking and drinking because we was bored. There ain't nothing here, I mean I have my cousins and stuff, so I have a lot of people around me, but I know a lot of people who don't, and they looking for stuff to get into."

ML: Do you go to church? Is your son involved in church activities?

"I mean, my mom takes him to church, but I don't really go. I do believe in God, but I don't go every Sunday and neither does he. I know people who go to church everyday and be doing so much," he paused, "man I ain't even going there."

James

The purpose for inquiring about religion and church attendance was informed by the historical perspectives of how Black people, women in particular, rely on religion and spirituality as a source of support and as a coping mechanism (Mattis, 2002). Attending and participating in a spiritual setting was one of many questions I asked to garner information about out of school involvement practices. I found it interesting, a few of the women emphatically answered “yes” they attended church and made sure their children attended on Sunday’s as well. As for how it informs their involvement practices, I can’t say I learned much in that regard. Most of the moms spoke of attendance, but no participation in choir or bible study groups, however they attend on Sundays to worship and fellowship, and returned to their normal home activities.

Tiffany: church in Oaktown is nothing compared to Atlanta. I was raised in the church, so I know the importance of having my kids go to church early to learn about faith, cuz we all know the way this world is going we all need it. Things aren’t the same today as it was yesterday, is it?

ML: What are you referring to?

Tiffany: you know, Black folks went to church and you were prayed up. Everybody had a praying grandmother (chuckles), but the grandmothers today aren’t like the one’s when I was growing up, shoot, they just as young as the mothers are. I’m from the south you know, we pray, we worship, we fellowship and I just don’t see that here. It’s been tough finding a church here.

ML: I can refer you to a few places if you’d like, but none will compare to your home church. I felt the same way when I moved here from Chicago. Tell me more about the kinds of activities your kids participate in outside of school.

Tiffany proceeded to talk more about how her children have always participated in some kind of extracurricular activity, but says things have shifted since her relocation. She too, says, “this place is ‘dead’ there’s no life! My kids are always going to be good, cuz I will make sure we do something fun even if it’s driving back home to visit family, cuz it’s just not that much going on here.” Her daughter participates in the African American club at one of the local high schools and her boys are just social with friends, but do not have interest in much other than that.

“We are fairly new here,” she said, “and since my kids weren’t here in their earlier years like elementary school, they haven’t participated in much other than going to dances, social outings, skating and bowling. It’s tough trying to entertain teenagers to keep them out of trouble. I mean, kids will be kids, but you have to put things in place that will distract them from outside influences, well the bad ones.”

Loren shared the same sentiment as the others; she says her children rarely, if ever, attend church.

Loren: “It isn’t because I don’t believe in God, I’m just not a big fan of getting dressed up and going to church every week and I don’t like when the pastor always asks for money. We all poor, I think they should be doing more to help stop some of this violence in the community. It’s like we are living in a big city like Chicago or New York or something. I mean, my mom has always attended church, she is devout like that, very loyal. She goes to church pretty much every week, but it’s also her social outlet. My kids don’t have that. They do need to go, but I’m not forcing them.”



Loren's sons aren't as involved in out of school activities as she'd like, but they do attend the local Boys and Girls club after school program, and have always participated in the park district summer camps. She expressed that she wants them to have exposure to things, but due to her limited funding and living with her mother, she cannot afford some of the activities she would like to enroll them in. She said the university has a lot of programs she would like to have her boys engage in and thinks being on the campus would really change their perspectives on school and give them an idea of what it would be like to attend college, but the prices are too much for her to afford. Her youngest plays baseball in the summer baseball league, but doesn't play with his school because he isn't in middle school yet. "I really think karate or something like that would help with their anger and bad behavior, but who can afford it?"

Questions of how these participants engage their children outside of school resulted in lengthy conversations about monetary restrictions and limited options; still, many of the parents provided some form of extracurricular activity for their children.

Roslyn: Girl Scouts, that's pretty much it. Not too much to do in this town. I know it's not Chicago, but I wish there was more for her to do to keep her busy.

Carla: dance and Brownie (a rank in Girl Scouts).

Stacy: Boy Scouts and dance, there is really nothing else for them to do.

Many of the participants replied in a very similar fashion, making references to the lack of activities and resources available to children of any age, but those with teenaged children reported having no activities available for their children and shared a genuine concern that idle time could result in them getting into some type of trouble.

The responses of the participants are indicative of life for poor Black children in any setting, however, in a small university centered community like Oaktown, one would think there

would be a host of activities to engage the young mind. Sadly, that isn't the experience of my participants. For those who were born and reared in the community, they see the city for what it is, and really do not expect too much aside from community centered programs and activities. In their opinion, it's better than when they grew up. The city has evolved from flat cornfields into a small micro-urban center; but there are no fun activities for children to participate in outside of sports, according to the participants.

Additionally, the participants all support the idea that being involved in school and outside of school is important, but they all show their involvement in varying ways. Making use of community-based programs and activities seemed to be a common thread that connected all of them. Their socioeconomic position limits their children from accessing more culturally engaging experiences. There was a general sense of frustration from these parents; they desperately want their children to be engaged in socially constructive activities, but find themselves restricted to the options available based on locale and financial constraint. Again, there is no doubt, a parent of any race and/or social class would want the absolute best for their children, the problem lies within the social context in which they are exposed and how they are viewed. Limited access to financial and equitable educational resources prevents the dreams of many underprivileged families from becoming a reality (Epstein, 1987; Auerbach, 2007; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003).

### **Theme two: Black parents don't care**

*Messages from society: They don't care about education*

This theme emerged from the climate study on race and unequal distribution of resources within the Oaktown school settings and across various school levels. The voices of Black and White educators, students, and families were included in the survey. I reported the responses

from educators and community members to show the disparate views of inequality in educational outcomes, preconceived judgments of Black parents, and unfair treatment of Black students in Oaktown's school community.

The narratives of the participants counter the views held by White educators and community members regarding Black parental involvement. As outlined previously, the climate survey was administered to the Oaktown school district in hopes of gauging how educators, students and parents viewed the social and racial climate in the school, as well as to assess the ways in which race impacts the allocation of resources to students. The climate survey results unveil a chilling view of how Black parents are perceived by their White counterparts. When asked about racial disparities in the schools, the results showed many Whites blamed parents, socioeconomics and/or society and mostly the Black parents. Two of the educators on staff exclaimed: "I don't feel race has anything to do with academic performance or behavior. I do believe that all these problems stem from a lack of good parenting". Another stated: "This is a joke! And a waste of paper and my time. Children do poorly in school because of many issues. Their parents aren't well educated and don't value education. The children are poor and live in chaotic homes. They are neglected at best and often terribly abused—by their parents—NOT THEIR TEACHERS. We are often the only good thing they have going for them. Until people start parenting their children, nothing will get any better. WHY DOESN'T THIS SCHOOL DISTRICT HAVE THE GUTS TO SAY THIS?" (Aber, 2000).

To further explicate the negative perceptions of Black parent involvement a White parent asserted: "Having been involved with the schools, I see almost no [African American] parents who are involved. I feel if the parents do their part in child-rearing the children will be equal. The schools can only do so much to change the inequities without the parents help. If there are

more [African Americans] in special education and less in gifted, it's because the parents do not try to enrich their children's lives (by reading to them, etc.) from the time they're born ... If that's a cultural thing, then their culture is adversely affecting their children, if they want them out of special ed and in gifted. That's how its done- either play by the rules or stop whining. If lack of parental education is to blame, there's free adult ed for them. If they want their kids to not get in trouble at school, teach them values at home, back the teachers, watch the children. Know where they are” (Aber, 2000).

Furthermore, the social climate survey reported responses from educators on their belief that Black student misbehavior is attributed to family issues. This scale measured respondents' perceptions that student misbehavior at school results from families not valuing education. Roughly equal proportions of staff either endorsed (35%) or disagreed (36%) with the view that student problems stem from a failure of parents to adequately value education. Slightly less than a third of staff (29%) were neutral or not sure. Based on these findings, it is clear White educators hold a belief that Black parents do not value education without any evidence to support their ideology.

The stories of the participants confirm the need to change how society defines parent involvement to include an engaged-involvement model. It speaks to how parents, poor Black parents in particular, construct their roles in schools, but more importantly, in their homes. The participants each have high expectations for their children post high school. When asked about their aspirations and expectations for their children Stacy stated: “I just want them to do their best, and I want them to go further than I went. I want them to graduate and go to college.” Tonja expressed a similar expectation.

“I expect them to go to college. I do understand that college is not for everyone. With that expectation, I expect for them to have some type of plan. If they get through high school and say, "Mama, I don't feel like college is for me," you need to have a trade. I expect by senior year, if they don't want to go to college, they need to tell me what profession they're going to go into and that they have looked into that. And tell me what their salary's going to look like and where they're going with that.”

Loren said: “If college wasn't an option, I would just want them to whatever made them happy. I would want them to be doing something though. They would have to get a job or find a trade of some sort, but they would need to be doing something. They can't just sit at home.”

James posits: You know, I didn't do exactly what I wanted to do, so I want my son to go to college. I know he can do it, he gets real good grades. He just need to chance and that's why I'm trying to get on with FedEx full-time so I can help him be the man I didn't become.

Tiffany asserted: Higher education isn't an option; it's a requirement for my children. Black children have to have an education in order to be successful in this world. Especially Black boys! My kids already know my expectations and if they don't go to college, they have to set themselves up in a career that will pay for their lives, it really isn't an option (laughs). I guess they could be labor workers, but that just won't cut it in this economy and they are exposed to

college-educated people. College is the only way, in my opinion. I just don't want them to struggle financially.

Carla: (Laughs) I want my kids to go to college and have a good life where they aren't waiting on the government to help them because it's hard being poor, and if they have a college education they will be able to live how they want. That's why I'm trying to get my education to show them how it works and what it looks like in life.

To assume a parent does not care about education or the success of their child because they do not represent majoritarian middle-class norms or practices confirms the need to reevaluate the one-dimensional definition of parent involvement. Recent investigations extend both Epstein (1995) and Bronfenbrenner's (1986) parent involvement models by identifying empirical parent involvement constructs indicating that parent involvement is a multidimensional construct that cannot be simplified by actions seen within the school context and do not include out of school parent involvement practices that occur in the home (Epstein, 1995; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Garbacz & Sheridan, 2011; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Manz, Fantuzzo, & Power, 2004, as cited in Garbacz, McDowall, Schaugency, Sheridan, & Welch, 2015). When families are different from White middle-class families, teachers hold a belief that those parents' education-related values are different from their own and those families are viewed as deficient (Kim, 2009) further restricting access to educational opportunities for advancement.

### **Theme three: Lets talk about race!**

The purpose of this study was to understand how low-income Black parents conceptualize parental involvement; moreover, I wanted to know how they enacted involvement in their homes and within their children's schooling experiences. During my inquisition into this phenomenon, I sought to make sense of racial disparities and challenges faced by families that resemble my participants, thus posing the following questions:

*Do race and social class influence how parents are engaged in their children's education? If so, how and why?*

I felt it was necessary to understand if, and how, race and/or social class affects marginalized parents' engagement in their children's schooling experiences. To answer this question, I conversed with each participant at great length to appreciate how they conceptualized race and class, more importantly, whether or not race impacted their views and/or experiences with educators and public school practices. The results of my interviews were similar with some participants and extremely different with others. My questions about race were deliberate because I wanted to alleviate loose interpretations or misunderstanding of where I intended to take the conversation.

*Do you think race plays a role in how teachers treat/teach children in school? If so, please give me some examples of how and why you think this is the case?*

I was prepared to ask additional questions if any of the parents answered no. Given the history of racial tensions in the Oaktown school district, I expected each participant to answer yes. I was, however, taken aback with how some participants viewed racialization in schools. There are contrasting views of racial disparity in the school and community depending on the participant. I found the parents who were born and reared in Oaktown, or those who identify

Oaktown as their home, viewed issues of race vastly different from the participants who relocated from larger cities.

Tiffany hadn't been in the Oaktown community very long before noticing the disparate treatment of her children compared to their White counterparts. She reports many instances when her children received disciplinary referrals for talking or as she stated, "doing what kids do." She said her son was being silly in the hall with another White male student and when the monitor admonished their behavior, her son was the only one sent to the Dean's office for consultation and received a discipline referral and detention. She also spoke of a time when her daughter had difficulty with a particular teacher's unfair grading practices.

My daughter and a White female student were working on a group project in English and the project was late, the White girl (according to Tiffany) lied and blamed the incident on my daughter saying she didn't turn in her part of the assignment on time to have it typed. The teacher penalized my daughter's grade, but not the other student. I went to speak with the assistant principal and she said there was no formal grievance policy for grades and that my daughter should take responsibility for her part in the project being late. I was pissed off when she said that, so I said, 'you aren't going to have the teacher take points from the other student since it was a group project and you both are only taking one side of the story,' and the AP said 'No, I'm not getting involved and will allow the teacher to use her discretion. Maybe your daughter isn't telling you the truth.' I knew then we needed to pay really close attention to what's happening in these schools. I ain't never dealt with nothing like that in Georgia. This place is something else. They are just overtly racist huh?



ML: Are you asking me?

Tiffany: Yeah, are they that racist here? I just can't believe some of the stuff that has happened since we've been here and not just at school, in the stores, at the mall, I mean it's everywhere and they don't hide it. I think they hide it in Georgia because they know people aren't going to tolerate that crap. I guess you know what they think of you in Oaktown don't you? A shame!

Stacy's response did not differ very much from Tiffany's. She said her biggest concern in Chicago was the violence; she didn't have to worry too much about race. According to Stacy, schools are meant to teach kids how to learn and be productive in society, but they can't do that with all of the bad behavior and violent children in the schools.

Stacy: To answer your question, yes! I see the White teachers treating kids and parents differently. They act like I'm not even standing there when I come in. At first I thought it was because I was young and I dress young, but I really think it's because I'm a single Black parent and they hate to see us coming. They think we are dumb and talk to us like we're dumb too.

ML: I've heard other parents say that, what do you mean when you say, they talk to you like you're dumb?

Stacy: You know, real slow and a lot of times try to say words they think I don't understand like I'm stupid, but I'm not stupid. I think its sad cuz when I come in the room the teacher don't even speak but when these White folks come in she tripping over herself to ask how she can help. Here's how I know she's a racist. My daughter is pretty popular with the other girls and there are four Black girls in her class. Her teacher told them they can't play with each other, they need to

learn how to play with other girls that don't look like them. She said the teacher told her, "this world is made up of more than just people who look like you." I snapped! I went in the next day and asked if she separated the White girls and she blatantly said no. She said she's been teaching over 20 years and can see when a group becomes a clique and they needed to learn to play with other kids. So I said you acting like they doing something wrong. Can you believe she told me, she thinks they are going to try to bully cuz that's what these girls do. I said, what girls? You mean Black girls? She said yes. I grabbed my daughter and went straight to the principal and told him I think she's racist and holding something against my daughter and her friends. I asked them to put my daughter in another room, but they said it was too full that year and no space available. The thing that really made me mad was the principal said I may have misunderstood her and he doesn't think she is racist. Girl, they all stick together and we can't win. How you gon' tell one group they can't be friends and hang out together, but you let all White girls and boys do it? That's crazy! I told my daughter to play with who she wants and let me know if she [teacher] says something to her because I will not be bullied by a teacher. She barely speaks to me and she has to deal with me whether she likes it or not.

When discussing race in the school system Roslyn emphatically expressed her discontent with the teachers and school administrators in the Oaktown community.

Of course, yes I do, especially in this school. I think she's a little racist. I truly do. Him and another guy, I'm not going to say no names but he's Caucasian, they were doing the same thing. She punished my child severely for it. They were

both doing the same thing. I truly feel that way and I don't like to feel that way about thing but, she just comes off like that even in how she talks.

ML: Can you give me some examples of how and why you think that way?

Roslyn: As I just told you before, how my son and his friend have both been doing the same thing but yet my son got punished severely for it. The other kid barely got a slap on his hand. Even though the other kid is also doing it, my son got the long, but because he is Black he got punished more for it. I see this kinda stuff happen all the time. The boy my son hangs out with told me out of his own mouth he knows he gets away with things my son gets in trouble doing the same. They see it too, it's sad these kids can tell they get favored over the Black kids.

Sharon's stories of racism were alarming when she discussed her an incident in detail stating, "my son has experienced so much racism in this school district it's unbelievable. He was talking to the principal of his elementary school and told her he wanted to be a doctor and she pat him on the head and said you need to worry about passing to the next grade you can't set your aims that high and he said she laughed and he said he heard her say he'd be lucky to graduate. I went to the district on that one I couldn't think straight I was so mad. I transferred him to private school, but couldn't afford the tuition after a few months and he had to go back to public school, but I made sure he wasn't at that school with that racist. She did that to so many Black kids they finally moved her out of the school.

Racial disparities are salient in the instances described by the participants. Despite the evidence provided, they may stand alone in their judgment of the district and school's

disciplinary policies that visibly advantages one group of students over others. Not all participants share the same feelings; in fact, some participants speak of their experiences in stark contrast to the views held by the non-native Oaktown residents.

### **Playing the race card**

The sub-theme of “playing the race card” emerged from conversations centered on race. A few Oaktown born participants believed that identifying race as a key issue in the underachievement and social challenges Black children face is a result of the families “playing the race card.” Based on their responses, they viewed racial injustices in a very benign way. Despite my initial shock at hearing a few participants dismiss racism and racial inequality in schools, I felt there was a need to investigate their ideas in a more in-depth way. Unfortunately, some Oaktown natives have been socialized to believe they are living in a post-racial society, one that gives equal footing to people who work hard and deserve it. They subscribe to a meritocratic ideology, that privileges a dominant culture and disadvantages minorities, primarily poor people of color (cite). The race card conversation is also prevalent in the responses of the White educators and community members when questions of race arose during the climate survey. However, when the White educators and community members spoke of race, they were clear on their positions and blamed a lack of Black parental involvement as the source of inequality in schools.

Tonja said race is a problem in some schools, but it isn’t the only problem. “These kids are bad and they don’t want to listen to people in charge. I hear them cussing and talking like they grown. All that fighting and stuff is ridiculous, then when they get suspended or kicked out, they parents want to claim it’s because they’re Black.”

ML: So are you answering the question as no, that race doesn't impact teaching and treatment in schools?

Tonja: Nah, I believe these White teachers are prejudice some of them act like they don't even want to be there. They talk to you like you stupid and I don't like that and I don't see them doing it to other people.

ML: When you say other people, what do you mean?

Tonja: You know, the White parents. They are friendlier to them and my sister said the same thing when she goes to the school for my kids. I try to do everything to help my kids do good in school so I don't like playing the race card when things aren't good even though I know for a fact these White teachers are racist. They were that way when I was in school and some of them are still here.

ML: You have referred to playing the race card or people claiming things happen to them because they're Black. Can you tell me why you think addressing issues they are concerned with is looked at as playing the race card?

Tonja: Well, I grew up here. I know a lot of these people and they kids are just wild and bad and I can say that cuz my family had a name for fighting so I can say admit it. They just get mad at the teacher and say it happens because they're Black. They don't take responsibility for they kids and they get mad at the teachers saying they racist and stuff, but they need to get they kids in check. I know my kids aren't angels, but they are good and do what they supposed to. They get pretty decent grades and they get treated ok at school.

ML: Are you saying if kids get good grades they deserve better treatment than those who don't? I'm only trying to understand your position on race, you know?

Tonja: What do you mean exactly?

ML: Well, you said in your answer that the teachers are prejudice even from your childhood experiences, but you don't believe the parents who claim race is an issue when their kids are "bad" or to put it nicely, making bad choices.

Tonja: Ooooo, ok! Yeah, I do think they play the race card and I don't like to do that just because I don't get my way or my kids aren't teacher's favorite, but I do know they mistreat some Black kids. I have seen it myself. I have problems with my kids' teachers. One of them is really good. Communicate well, anytime I send her a letter or email, she responds back. The other one, not so much. She's not welcoming. When I come in her room, she's not friendly. She barely speaks. She's just not welcoming. It bothers me. It makes me wonder why she doesn't welcome me when I come in the class, or the children. I haven't noticed her being enthusiastic when the children come in the classroom.

ML: Do you notice that same behavior towards other parents or you feel like, maybe, it's isolated to you? I know you said you see her not engaging with other children but is that something you feel like you've noticed primarily with you?

Tonja: I've noticed it with a couple of other parents as well. I think a lot of the White teachers that teach in this community, some which they should, because we have quite a few Black families in this community, they have worked in this community for so long. They don't have any experience outside of their job with Black families. You would think it's odd that you would live in a community with Black people and you have no outside business relationships with Black people. They don't have any experience. It's hard for you to teach or be

socialized with someone. You can't teach them if you can't be on their level, so it's hard for them to teach. It's frustrating but I just deal with it.

ML: So, you do feel that race is an issue with how teachers treat or teach Black children in the community or the school where your kids attend at least?

Tonja: Oh definitely.

Conversations like the one with Tonja were recurring with other participants as well.

Unfortunately, they view race as a primary issue, but have strong feelings associated with parents who file grievances or publicly advocate for their children when racial injustices arise. The term “playing the race card” was repeated numerous times. For example, James said he felt targeted on several occasions by police and school officials and yet he continued to say he wasn't the type to “play the race card”. He said: It's hard out here for Black men, I mean they don't seem to give you a fair chance, but I know my reputation was bad in school even though I was smart. I think that's what holds me back, not my race. I didn't graduate top of my class and didn't go to college so I have to work and hustle out here. In order to garner more information, I probed further and asked, “Are you saying race doesn't play a role in how Black children are taught or disciplined”?

James: Yeah, it does, it's hard out here for us. Especially, Black men we ain't got a chance. They killing us left and right, but we killing each other too. I know my son is a good kid. He don't fight or nothing. He likes school and get good grades. I think he knows I will whoop him or my momma will, we gotta get right out here and he will be good cuz he going to college and getting out of here. I know what you asking me, but I just think some of us say everything is because we Black and it's not always true.

Carla was open about her feelings about racial injustice and how it negatively affects schooling and educational outcomes, but she too used the term “playing the race card” when asked if she felt race played a role in how teachers treat/teach Black students. I think they crazy here! I mean these White people don’t really care about our kids, they here to get a paycheck and go back home. Most of them probably don’t even live in Oaktown, they from these small White towns and they probably hate teaching all these Black kids (laughs). I’ve seen stuff at our school and I know for a fact teachers did stuff to me when I was in school, which wasn’t too long ago, so my daughter is interacting with the same teachers I had, but I made some bad choices, and I know they didn’t care about me, but I just don’t like to play the race card. I think too many people say it’s race when it’s just us doing crazy stuff. I had a lot of cool White friends in school and they weren’t racist, I don’t think.

Upon combing through results of the social climate study, race was illuminated as the cause of the disparate treatment of Black students in Oaktown. Many White educators and parents shared the “playing the race card” sentiment with the Oaktown participants in this study. Racially charged statements such as “playing the race card,” privileges White families and disadvantages Black families. The Black participants do not seem to understand the detrimental impact of dismissing race, or accusing someone who seeks racial harmony and equality of “playing the race card” has on an entire group. Based on the responses from the White community, they do not seem to acknowledge, nor, value issues associated with racial disparity, and place sole responsibility for the achievement gap and alleged discriminatory practices against Black students on the students and their parents. They view Black people as a problem



and show no desire to seek a solution, in fact, they were opposed to spending time and tax dollars on programs or research dedicated to equalizing opportunities and fairly distributing educational resources to Black students. This, irrespective of the court order mandating the desegregation of schools and ordering that advanced level courses be more inclusive of minority students, particularly Black students. For the purposes of this study, I extracted their comments directly from the climate team survey report findings. It wasn't enough to blame Black parents for the underachievement and limited resources available to their children; the sentiment was generalized to the entire Black community:

*Educator comments regarding race in Oaktown school district:*

“Talking about racism tends to enlarge the problems revolving around it” (Aber, 2009).

“I felt this survey was very anti-White, NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT RACISM!!”

(Aber, 2000).

As usual, the district only looks at outcomes and draws conclusions about race. We are race obsessed. The Black community refuses to face its responsibilities. So the primarily White teaching staff is constantly accused of racism. The only racists in the district are [named Oaktown district office] officials who allow shallow thinking disguised as “research” to replace the truth. The truth might get us sued, so we avoid it at all costs. Meanwhile, the business of our district, designing the curriculum, teaching it, and assessing it is something we never have time to do” (Aber, 2000).

“This survey, and the very existence of this survey is insulting to our professional staff”

(Aber, 2009).

“Black students are given too much lenience in disciplining because it looks bad for your school when too many behavior problems are documented for the Black students. The

students know that they won't get into trouble for not following school rules and the White kids know that the Black kids get away with things that they do not" (Aber, 2009). "I don't understand why the Black students get a special day for parents to come visit their class (NAAPID), and none of the other races, (White, Asian, Native American, etc.) get a special day. All parents should have a special day to come visit their students also. UPWARD bound also targets Black students also, what about all the other underprivileged students that go to school here and are not Black? We also have an AVID program that is predominately Black. Everything has been changed that Black students are to be allowed in everything, but we have special dances for the Blacks and White students aren't included, they have a Black talent show. Any other active all students are to be included, except for these, it sounds like reverse discrimination to me.... I have never really understood the consent degree, because no one has ever really explained it to me" (Aber, 2009).

"There has been too much emphasis put on the achievement of Black children AT THE EXPENSE of the education of children of other races" (Aber, 2009).

Many White educators and parents shared the same general feelings that spending time and energy talking about racism suggests it exists, when in their opinion, it does not (Aber, 2000).

*White parents comments regarding race and the Oaktown school district:*

"I am saddened by the amount of time, money and energy diverted from the educational process by this controversy. It is distressing that a few attention-seeking individuals can detract from the true mission of our schools" (Aber, 2009).

“I feel that everything that has happened in the [district name] over the past 2-3 years is a gross overreaction to a few people’s perception that there is rampant racism in the public schools” (Aber, 2000).

“I think [Blacks] are looking for someone to blame” (Aber, 2000).

*Black parent and staff comments on race and fairness in school:*

Why White students will always be favored, principal won't even deal with students or parents of African American. They always take White side, every time. I have experienced many many times, nothing was ever done. (African American Parent)

Staff have been subjected to documentation, scrutiny, and trendy interventions instead of real discussion on the issue at hand. Our school district is a "system" that "systematically" is biased to the "other"--non-White/poor/non-English speaking/undereducated population. (African American staff)

... we CANNOT change a racist school district while we live within a RACIST society. Those hard discussions need to happen, people need to be more aware, racists need to be exposed and disposed, and quality resources need to be put into place in a comprehensive manner looking at long-term goals in conjunction with the community! (African American Administrator)

This district does not respect non-certified Black staff. They are underpaid, under valued, and are treated as caretakers...rather than individuals that possess a vast knowledge database. This district also does not do an adequate job in the teaching of African American History, and seems to not want to acknowledge the years of oppression for Blacks. (African American staff)

The climate survey reported that while differences between African Americans and Whites in their perceptions of whether they have experienced racism were not particularly large (between 3% and 7% across samples), it should be noted that when disaggregated from Whites, high proportions of both middle (21%) and high school (16%) African American students reported experiencing racism at their school monthly or more often. Fewer adult respondents, both staff and parents, reported having such experiences (Aber 2009, p. 19).

Despite the evidence provided in the results delivered to the school district and the community, many White parents (44%) viewed racial disparities as unfairly directed towards White students than Black students and 64% disagree that White students have more advantages in the schools because of their race. Very few White staff (9%) or White parents (5%) perceived these qualities of desegregated schools as very important (Aber, 2009, p. ?).

As previously reported, there were contrasting views of race pertaining to participant parent perceptions. Despite the incongruence of how race is conceptualized, each participant agreed race plays a critical role in how students are perceived, treated, and taught in Oaktown schools. Though each participant had personal experiences with racially discriminatory practices in the Oaktown school district, several negated the fact that race is an issue and minimized it by placing blame on the children and their parents, not the educators charged with their learning and emotional development. It is an undisputed fact that some teachers do in fact lower their expectations based on the race of the child, the socioeconomic status of the child's family, and the gender of the child (Oakes, 1988; Irvine, 1990).

These lowered expectations result in underachievement and low educational outcomes of the children under their instruction. The inability for some educators to identify race as a source of unfair educative practices limits their opportunity to effectively educate and impact change in

their school settings. Based on the educator responses, the desire to change the negative trajectories of underperforming Black students do not appear to be of great concern. Given the results of the climate survey and the data collected in this study on race, the Oaktown school district appears to have returned to pre-consent decree practices; the outlook for racial harmony and social change in the Oaktown community seems a near impossible task.

#### **Theme four: Class matters**

Social class is undeniably a barrier to accessing resources and impedes parents' ability to engage in school-sanctioned activities, thus adding additional stress and laying the foundation for misperceptions of teachers and community members about Black parental involvement. The participants in this study qualify for free and or reduced lunch according to the state financial guidelines; they are at or below poverty (see table in appendices). By their own admission, they consider themselves low-income. Though never explicitly identifying socioeconomic influence on their inability to be on-site at their child's school, each parent referred to the fact they had to work, some multiple jobs, just to afford minimal living standards for their family.

Loren: I go up to the school when I can, but I can't take off a lot.

Tonja: Don't nobody have time to go to the school every time they call, which is ALL the time, I work two jobs.

James: I'm only working part-time, I have to hustle to make extra money. I can't be up at the school like that.

Stacy: Ain't nobody got time to be going up to that school. I work and I have to keep my job.

Roslyn: I'm trying to hustle doing hair and get my coins together so I can get back in school.

Tiffany: It's so hard in Oaktown. They aren't hiring for the kind of jobs I qualify for. We are really struggling. I know it's for a short time, but I just don't have time to run back and forth to that school.

Financial constraints often challenge involvement practices. It is known that single parent homes have fewer resources (e.g. time, social support and financial support) and they are least likely to participate in on-campus school activities (Auerbach, 2007; Epstein, 1995; Garbacz et. al., 2015). Throughout the course of this study, issues of social class re-emerged in conversations about education equity and access as well as behavioral challenges. Social class was not a prevailing issue with the participants and their children; they held a stronger position on race as the cause of inequality permeating the schools and communities in Oaktown. When confronted with allegations of racism, White educators and parents shifted the focus from race to social class stating economic issues are more likely the cause of underperformance of Black students.

A staff member said "Do not make this an education problem, this is a SOCIAL and ECONOMIC problem. That is why NOTHING is ever done when we try to revamp education because THERE IS NOT where the problem lies." Another noted that one survey question, "hit the nail on the head! MOST issues that come up with a struggling student is more about economy than race!"

Oftentimes, people in dominant positions of race defer to social class as the primary cause of injustice and unequal treatment of Black people in society. This ill-informed notion that social class has a more direct impact on academic achievement and success in school for Black students is invalid. There is a ring of truth, to this; Black students from higher-income households and/or those with higher educated parents do far better in school and society than Black students from low-income homes with or without educated parents. However, the playing

field remains uneven when comparing White and Black students with identical economic profiles. White students outperform Black students in school despite economic, cultural, and social capital, and that is where race becomes the determining cause of inequality and underperformance in schools and ultimately in a societal context (Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2003; McDonald et. al., 2012). Black families experience greater difficulty in life due to racial injustice and when race and social class collide, the chance of social mobility is virtually impossible (McNeal, 2001; Wilson, 2009;).

The involvement practices of Black parents on the lowest economic strata are viewed from a deficit lens no matter how they engage in their children's education (Epstein, 1987; Lareau, 2003; McNeal, 2001). The participants often referenced negative experiences with school personnel when entering the school setting and/or interacting with their children's teacher. To better understand how social class impacts parent involvement and parent-teacher relationships the following questions were asked:

*Is there anything that prevents you from being engaged with your children at school or at home? Tell me about your relationship with your child's teacher(s).*

*Do your children's teachers provide opportunities for you to support them at school or at home? Do you feel your child's teachers talk to you in a way that you have a clear understanding of their expectations for your child(ren)?*

There were no interview questions explicitly asking the participant their views on their class position; it was, however, a recruitment criteria. Throughout the course of the interview, participants repeatedly shared perceptions of how school personnel treated them when in the school setting and more often than not, their positionality became synonymous with social class. In most instances, a teachers class position is in contrast to the population they serve. Cultural

dissonance becomes evident and is enacted through failed communication and a lack of respect for the capital brought into the classroom by the student and his or her parent. The parents' fund of knowledge is undervalued and the level of in-school participation suffers as a result (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Thus, parent participation is viewed as "temporary and peripheral" to the classroom experiences of children; the teacher relegates the parents to the position of receiver and observer rather than active participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1975). Rather than viewing cultural capital of parents as beneficial, many educators view the level of involvement from low-income Black parents as unhelpful (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The participants each spoke of the barriers they faced when engaging in their children's education. Loren said: "I am involved, I mean, it may not look like how all the White parents get involved, but I mean they don't have the same issues we have. I see the same mothers volunteering at the holiday parties or in the building. They don't have to work, but I guarantee their bills are paid". Tonja's response was parallel with Loren, she replied saying, "Besides work, nothing will keep me from being engaged. If I have to work, and I can't make it to something that they may have. I know my children have missed some after school ice cream socials and different things like that. I felt horrible that they couldn't go to because I've had to work. Things like that".

Many of the participants identified their child's teacher as a barrier to their involvement. Tonja candidly explicated her perception of the teacher's tone and condescending attitude towards her saying: "When she talks, it's just like if you talk to your kids. When you talk to a child, I don't want to say dummy it down but everything is like if she's explaining as she's talking to her child and not an adult. It's like, "You don't have to explain it." It's so simple; I get it kind of thing. I've watched her interaction with



other teachers as well. I'm always the last to make any similarities to race but it's everybody. Carla's experience is somewhat similar, she stated: "Overall, I think these teachers are crazy! I can't really put my hand on it, ya know, but they talk so crazy to you like you stupid or something. I know they don't talk to everybody like that. I wanna just treat them sometimes".

This issue appears to be a recurring theme with many participants, Stacy said, "I think that they sometimes talk to me as if I'm a student. They treat me like I'm, I don't know, I'm slow maybe, or like I'm one of their students. They don't talk to me as an adult that is they're teaching my child. They talk to me as if they think that I'm their student in their classroom and they have to talk to me a certain type of way. When they do that, I tune them out, and I don't really even pay attention".

Tiffany's experience is equally disturbing she shared, "It's hard to really pinpoint issues with these teachers, but I feel if they think you aren't smart or educated they can talk to you in a really bad tone and with a nasty attitude, but I know that is not appropriate and I have shut them down. I'm no dummy and I expect them to speak to me with respect." I asked Tiffany, Do you think your having a degree changes their view of you?

Tiffany: Oh yeah, definitely! I made that clear at the beginning that I'm educated and I'm not from here so they better come right when they talk to me. I will not tolerate being disrespected, nor will I allow them to mistreat my kids. Black teachers do it too!

ML: Really? Hmm. why do you think Black teachers talk down to Black parents? Tiffany answered by stating, I think they look down on them too. They forget they are Black, and if a parent is poor they really mistreat them sometimes. This exchange between Tiffany and I gave me pause. My work looked at how the dominant culture views low-income Black parents and to learn some Black parents feel they are disrespected by Black teachers was very disturbing because I assumed the Black teacher would have empathy and understanding for the plight of another Black person, however, I now realize it is irresponsible of me as a research to make that assumption.

Parent involvement is sought, but within narrow and circumscribed boundaries, which ultimately limit meaningful participation of parents, especially impoverished minority parents who are viewed from a deficit lens. White middle-class parents are seen as contributors while Black parents' are viewed as confrontational, aggressive and non-conforming, resulting in a breakdown in communication between teachers and parents (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). The mismatch between White middle-class normativity and perceived non-normative values and practices of Black working-class parents creates a social distance in the school culture. When social distance occurs, Black students are the recipients of low expectation and exclusion, resulting in failure and under-performance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PORTRAITURE

In this chapter, I used the portraiture methodology to capture the lives of three participants whose experiences and stories of parental involvement resonated with me throughout the course of my study. Portraiture is a qualitative research methodology that bridges science and art that merges "the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). The portrait has four dimensions: conception—the development of the story; structure—the layered and placement of the themes; form—emotion throughout the piece; and coherence—the unity. "The aesthetic whole is the "actual portrait that evokes context, voice, relationship, and emergent themes of the research" (Hill-Brisbane, 2008, p. 646).

Additionally, portraiture pays close attention to context as an important tool for interpreting meaning. Also, in response to what Lawrence-Lightfoot sees as a tendency in social science research to focus on "pathology and disease rather than on health and resistance" (p. 8), portraiture actively seeks "goodness," though with the understanding that goodness will always be laced with imperfection. Notwithstanding, the portraitist is charged with the duty of creatively painting a picture by listening to stories and listening for stories. They cautiously insert themselves into the stories through the use of reflexivity without biasing data collection and analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Being able to give voice to my participants, using my own voice was one of many reasons I chose the portraiture methodology.

Through the portraiture process, I sought to capture the richness and the complexity of the human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who negotiated those experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3).

The participants in this section exemplified parent involvement from multiple viewpoints. They ascribed to the traditional standards prescribed by school personnel and they engaged in non-traditional involvement practices that are not taken into account when socially constructing involvement. Brian and Alicia Anderson, a married couple born and reared in Oaktown community, work tirelessly to provide their children with a strong family foundation, and a quality public education. They are active parents who support the teachers, school vision, and have high aspirations for their children's educational attainment.

Annette, an Oaktown native, born to a large family with roots in social justice and civil rights; she is an advocate for all children in the Oaktown school community. Annette's story of involvement incorporates the home and community curriculum as well as school-sanctioned involvement practices.

Sharon was born and reared in Chicago; she was reared in a middle class home with two parents and relocated to Oaktown in search of a safe environment to rear her children. She is engaged inside and outside of the school setting.

### **Participant portraits**

#### *Brian and Alicia Anderson: Beating the odds*

After speaking with the Andersons via telephone, I was eager to meet with them in person to begin my work. The Andersons live in a rent controlled home on the east side of Oaktown in a predominantly low-income Black community. As previously described, Oaktown is segregated by race and social class. There are streets in town that divide the affluent from the poor community. As you cross a bridge over the highway on Main Street, the world seems to change drastically within a mile's drive.

It was a sunny and fairly warm day and many families on the north east side of town had

children running and playing in their front yards on this extremely busy street. Lawns were un-manicured and debris filled many front yards along with toddler-sized swimming pools, barbeque pits, folding chairs and tons of people socializing and playing music. I took mental notes of every home and/or housing complex that aligned the street. I was overly aware of my surroundings; several White parents' whose children attend school with mine, often referred to Main Street as the ghetto and a high crime area, stating they drive cautiously in fear through the community. I drove slowly to etch the picture in my mind more clearly. I noticed the difference in the quality of homes in this community versus those in affluent Southwest Champaign. The trash was strewn on the lawns and the deterioration of the street increased as I traveled from west to east. For a city dweller like myself, this was commonplace in an inner city Black community, a bit chaotic, often dirty, and fast-paced, however, Oaktown is far from an inner-city, and there is an overrepresentation of poverty and racial segregation in this community, but particularly surrounding the border of Main Street.

When I pulled up to the Anderson home, I noticed something different. Their lawn was freshly mowed and nothing aside from their children's bicycles graced the lawn. There were words and pictures on the concrete drawn in colored chalk, a few flowerpots on the porch with vibrant colored flowers. As I entered the home, I was given a warning by Alicia, "please don't mind my mess, I've been busy trying to get these kids in order and I haven't cleaned up." I smiled and replied, "I don't see a mess", and in my opinion there was no mess. I just saw a home that appeared occupied by a family of five. Alicia dusted off the sofa to prepare a place for me to sit; that is when Brian entered the room. On first sight, I felt I was in familiar company. Alicia was a dark brown woman in her mid to late 30's, full figured, with very short dark brown hair cut low in a stylish manner. She was dressed in jean Capri pants, a flowing purple shirt, and wore

a beautiful smile. Brian had medium brown skin with black hair that appeared freshly trimmed. He stood about 5'10 inches tall and wore a pair of cutoff blue jean shorts and a white t-shirt. They were both very welcoming and inviting.

The Anderson's home was modestly decorated. A brown faux suede sofa and oversized patterned chairs with a matching ottoman was carefully placed in the living area. Framed family pictures covered the walls and sat on the coffee and end tables. The house looked aged and structurally worn, but it was neat and clean and I felt an overwhelming feeling of love and peace in their home. They both thanked me for the care and concern they felt I have shown the community and wanted to give me everything I needed to write an accurate story of their lives in the Oaktown school district and community.

### *Background*

The Andersons are by most American standards, a model family with a strong Christian foundation and belief system. Both Brian and Alicia were born and reared in Oaktown. Brian has two brothers and a sister. His parents are deceased and all of his siblings currently reside in Oaktown. Brian is a factory worker at a local plant working overtime shifts to help support the family. He has a high school diploma and hopes to attend the local community college to secure an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice. He wants to serve and protect the Oaktown community as a police officer. Brian's family, by his own admission, was working class. He was reared in an impoverished single parent home. His father was absent from the home for as long as he could remember. He is determined not to make the same mistakes he felt his father made when he abandoned his mother and siblings. Brian values his wife and children and in his words, is willing to go to "hell and back" to ensure they have everything they need. Brian is no stranger to poverty and struggle, but he has a strong work ethic. He has a low-waged job that forces him

to seek alternate work as a janitor or handyman obtaining work completing small projects to grow his income and care for his family.

From my time spent with the Anderson's, I learned that Alicia was a quick-witted outspoken woman who does not shy away from a challenge. She is a high school graduate and works as a part-time civil service employee at the university. Alicia said she has always aspired to work at the university and now that she does, she says the dream was overrated. Due to her employment status, she does not receive university benefits, nor does she receive a livable wage. Alicia's story is a bit different from Brian. She grew up in a working class home, but both of her parents were in the home until her junior year of high school when her father passed from cancer. She watched as her mother struggled to care for her and her sisters, which in her own words was "no easy task". Alicia said, "my sisters seemed like they went out looking for trouble, they gave my mother the blues." Alicia said school was a challenge for her and she lacked the passion she needed to continue on and go to college. Alicia and Brian were high school sweethearts. Brian is a year younger than Alicia, but they loved each other at first sight according to Alicia. Both Alicia and Brian said growing up in a small community like Oaktown had many social challenges. Alicia never felt Oaktown provided opportunities for advancement and was too segregated. Brian agreed and said Oaktown has grown in size and opportunity, but the city is designed to benefit the university and hospital physicians, not the residents who were born here.

#### *The Anderson children*

Brian and Alicia have been married over 15 years and have four children two boys and two girls. Their eldest child Jessica is a sophomore at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She is a graduate of one of the Oaktown's local high schools. According to her doting parents, Jessica was an exemplar high school student who participated in several activities. She was the

former president of the African American club, a co-editor of the school yearbook, a member of student government and served on a host of other committees and community service projects.

Brian and Alicia have three children currently matriculating through the Oaktown school district. Jamal is a vibrant eighth grader who enjoys basketball, baseball and playing his video games. He is a student who has been identified by school personnel as having behavioral problems. Jamal has never received any formal testing to diagnose a behavioral disorder. Alicia said she thinks it is a result of him “acting like a boy, and doing what boys do. She said, “he can get mouthy and has had several physical fights, but he really is a good son, he just don’t let nobody treat him any kind of way.” He is on a behavioral modification plan to aid in monitoring and supporting his behavior and redirect him when he becomes distracted in school. He also meets with the school social worker regularly, where he receives help with anger and outbursts. Their daughter Jenyce is a fifth grade student attending school with her younger brother Justin. She is an honor student who’s very popular, athletic and outgoing. She never has any issues in school and is well liked by her teachers and peers. Their youngest is Justin. He is in second grade and his teacher has advised the parents that she thinks he has ADHD. Justin talks a lot in school and does not sit still. “He doesn’t act bad or anything, he’s just moving around a lot”, says Alicia. Alicia said, “she thinks the teachers does not understand him”. She also stated he is very calm and loving at home and believes his behavior may be because he is bored and unchallenged in school.

Overall, the Andersons believe they are a typical American family. They attend church every Sunday. Their children are involved in youth groups and participate regularly in weekly church activities. All of their children are good athletes, and the girls are academic scholars; “they aren’t the kind of children who get into trouble in the community”, says Alicia.



*Constructing parent involvement: The Andersons's perspective*

I understand painting a portrait of the Anderson family should be done organically and in the proper context; however, I wanted to use the same protocol I did with each of my participants. I asked both Alicia and Brian to define parent involvement in their own words. I also asked them to tell me what they have done in the past to engage in their children's schooling experience.

Alicia: Parent involvement for us is um, we try to attend everything our children are involved in. We go to all of their sports functions. We go to parent-teacher conferences. (Brian interjects) We go to plays, everything that involves our children, we are there. Alicia continues to say: I communicate a lot with the teachers. Uh, parent involvement means to us is. Communication, communication is a big deal for us. I'm always wanting to know what's going on with my children? Wanting to know what's going on in the school? So I call or email a lot. I need to see what's going on with my kids cuz I want them to know, I want my kids to do well and I know from my own experience they will treat them differently if they think you don't care.

Alicia: being involved means doing things at home to help with homework and support our kids no matter what's goin on, um, I think it's important to just support your kids.

Brian: We always do things with them too, like we take them bowling and reward they school success, you know. In my opinion it takes more involvement to be at home then at school. We try to make sure we help them in every way possible. We can't always be at the school so we try to cut stuff off before it

happen.

ML: what do you mean exactly when you say cut it off before it happens?

Brian: well, if the kids say something is happening at school, we email or call the teacher

Alicia: (interrupts) I even text teachers if I have to. I don't care, they gone hear from me because I don't want my kids to fail. Our expectations is to be straight A students. I know that can be hard depending on what classes they have, but our expectations are for them to go to school and strive to do the best they can do and if they don't then they have consequences at home. Our oldest daughter is in college and she has always been a strong student. All three of our kids do pretty good in school. We expect the boys to go to college too. It's not an option for them. They have to go. I think parents and school district are responsible for helping our kids be successful.

Brian: yeah, we really just do whatever we can to help them. They know we want them to be successful, well, let me say this, we know our boys need more than our girls, but we give all of them the same. We love them and we know that's more important than school stuff.

ML: Are either of you in PTA

Brian: No, we don't have time for all that. The kids are all in sports. Plus they don't really care what we think. It's the same people on that PTA. We don't only engage during sports, we go to whatever is going on at the school. We even attend pep rallies. We go to NAAPID.

Alicia: We think it's stupid. It's an insult.

Brian: We go just for the kid's sake. We don't want to be those parents who let our kids get teased about stuff. We don't want to put our kids through that. So we attend as much as we can, but we also work and don't get paid if we miss.

Alicia: yeah that's hard.

According to the literature on parent involvement, the involved parent participates in school-sanctioned activities, they ascribe to normative and traditional involvement practices that are constructed by affluent and middle-class societal norms. The Anderson's construct their role in their children's schooling in alignment with that of the dominant culture. They spoke extensively of the value they placed on participating in school-based activities and took great pride in how they actively engaged in their children's education. They also discussed the ways in which they support and contribute to their children's learning environment at home and within their community. Their actions are in direct conflict with the literature and the perceptions of school personnel with regard to Black parent involvement—they are involved.

#### *Out of school involvement*

Alicia: we run ourselves crazy trying to keep up with all of the stuff these kids do. They play baseball in the spring and summer and basketball and football. I mean, I try to keep them busy so they can succeed.

ML: Do you think success is measured by outside influences?

Alicia: To a point yes. Kids have to have outside influences that are successful.

ML: ok. You mentioned you attend church regularly. Do you feel those activities impact your children and how they engage in school or society?

Alicia: ABSOLUTELY! Being a part of church and participating in youth groups helps them socialize and be better people. They love God and know they have to

do things “his” way.

Brian: I don’t really believe that it helps them, but I know it’s good for them. But so does sports. They are all in sports

ML: Is there anything that prevents you from engaging in your children’s education?

Brian: Yeah when you talking about at school. I wouldn’t say we drop in to sit in on a class, but we rarely miss activities.

The Andersons’s express the importance of communicating with their children’s teachers and they exhibit their love and support by engaging in their children’s school-based activities as well as outside extracurricular programs. They are very loving and supportive parents and though they try to participate in traditional parenting practices, they spoke extensively about the importance of children having a loving home environment and the value it adds to the social and emotional growth and development of a child. The Andersons are proactive participants in their children’s education. They understand the importance of being emotionally and physically connected to the school and their children to yield a more successful academic outcome. They discussed at length the contributions they have made towards ensuring academic success for their children. According to Brian and Alicia, all of their children attended Oaktown Head Start programs and they supplemented their children’s education with workbooks, library visits, and attending the literacy events hosted by the schools.

### *Perceptions of Teachers and Schools*

In order to understand how Alicia and Brian perceived teachers and school staff, I asked a series of questions regarding their relationship with the school. I wanted to know if the teachers provided them a space to participate in their children’s education and if they felt respected and

supported in their efforts to engage in their children's education. Oftentimes, I asked questions that would allow them to explicate why they felt the way they did about the teacher and school personnel.

Alicia: I never get a teacher that do not respond to me. For instance my son is slacking a little, he is not really struggling in school but I been communicating with his teachers almost everyday. They're really good about responding back to me, like if something doesn't get turned in or he's having a bad day. The communication is really good for me. I can't speak for anyone else. I've always had a good outcome with the staff.

Disrespect hasn't been a problem in the schools for us.

Brian: one question we are having is his teacher wrote a note home asking why he couldn't be still in class. she was asking a lot of questions on the note, but to me she was asking if he has ADHD, but that's the only problem I came across with the teachers. I wouldn't say I dislike her, but she makes it hard cuz a comment she made saying she used to teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade but I don't like that she doesn't like 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. I think she labeled my son. I don't see it as disrespect but she put herself in a doctor shoes and I don't think she should've done that.

I don't say they try to involve us in stuff much. I mean they have the open house we attended and multicultural night and literacy night, but no, the teacher don't give me a chance to be involved. I can't say that.

Brian: we have 4 children two daughters are excellent students both of our sons aren't as good students as our girls. You can see a difference in how they talk about boys than the girls. I feel our youngest son's teacher talks to us in a way

that seems like she don't think we are involved, but she don't know what's going on in our household. He continues to say: Lets put it like this; we have 4 children on both end of spectrum. Put it like this, our boys well I shouldn't say this, but it's expected from boys at this age. You can see a difference the way they talk different about the boys than the girl. If you can understand what I'm trying to say.

ML: Sure, I understand.

ML: Do you feel judged by the teachers?

Brian: With the middle schooler no, but the younger son teacher is a little bit is a little condescending to me. She talk to us like she's smarter than us. I mean, she trying to play doctor! She just the teacher and she need to leave that to the doctor to determine.

Alicia: He's very active but nobody has had problems since pre-k or kindergarten. I really didn't like that she tried to pull that, but I don't have a problem with her.

ML: Do you think race played a role in her assessment of your son?

Alicia: No, I think I thin; I don't really know. I just think her patience is short with active children. When my oldest was in daycare she was very active, but it was brought to my attention she was just bored. So I'm starting to think this is going on w/my son as well cuz he is still young. I think she just has an issue with him not being still. He's too active for her class.

Brian: I disagree; I think race is a big issue with the boys. I just feel these White teachers see Black boys different and they treat them bad a lot. I mean, she wrote

a negative note and in my opinion it was disrespectful cuz she jumped to conclusion and it was like she blaming us or something. And like I said, we have two girls straight A's so we doing something right. She don't know what's going on in our house she was wrong for that.

ML: What was the outcome of this diagnosis or assumption. I'm not sure what to call it.

Brian: Nothing. No paperwork or doctor ever got involved. He just active like Alicia said. He's not ADHD!

Both Brian and Alicia spoke of having positive relationships with their children's teachers and school staff. They discussed concerns with the teacher who self-diagnosed their son with having ADHD and both felt there were challenges they faced when engaging and communicating with teachers throughout their children's schooling experiences. According to their perceptions, many families have problems with children because they are not involved.

#### *Race and social class in Oaktown*

During multiple conversations with Brian and Alicia, I was able to expound upon questions of racial tensions or perceived racism beyond our semi-structured interviews. The Andersons were apprehensive in naming race as a factor in the challenges Black students faced in the schools. It became apparent they did not necessarily agree on race, but wanted to present a united front. As previously reported, Alicia denies race is an issue despite some of the commonplace practices of micro aggressions Black children are presented with in schools across the country. Alicia made multiple references to not wanting to label race as a outlying cause of the ADHD misdiagnosis by the teacher, she repeatedly refused to identify race when discussing unfair and unequal treatment of poor Black families and children at the hands of White school

personnel. I did ask specifically if they felt the 1996 lawsuit and consent decree helped or hindered Black student achievement and Alicia said with no uncertainty, “Yes, I think it really helped. The schools that most of the Black kids attended weren’t even good, it seemed like kids were just forgotten.” I asked, after all that you mentioned about the huge discrepancy in schools do you maintain your position that race does not play a role in how teachers treat or teach Black children? “I stand firm on my belief that race aint the only problem in the schools and should not be the focus. We (Black folk) gotta stop doing that.” I asked her what it was that Black people needed to stop doing and she replied “blaming white people for everything.”

Brian seemed to have a differing opinion on race relations and schooling practices, but his apprehension in answering questions initially rested on his wanting to support his wife. When I asked if he thought race played a role in how teachers treat or educate children in Oaktown, Alicia stood firm in her belief that it was not a problem. Brian interrupted her and disagreed.

Brian: I definitely do. It’s hard, I don’t think some teacher don’t push our kids to be as good as they can be. Some teachers, if our kids get a “C” its satisfactory. Like, they don’t care if they do good or bad they are getting paid. In this household you should get at least a B with all the resources out there. They just don’t care it seems. We do get resources though. Our youngest son has problems with his reading and is getting individual resources so I think the school is helping there.

The Oaktown community has a history of racial discord. The results of the climate survey, which ultimately led to a consent decree supports this assertion. In an attempt to gauge the school district’s level of commitment in bridging the gap between community and schools, I asked specific questions aimed at garnering the community’s perspective of the school board and



district overall. I wanted to know if they felt the “powers that be” were doing all that they could to support the Black students in the district.

Alicia: (laughs) I think you heard for yourself how people feel about this school district when we was at the game, right? I know a lot of parents who think they kids get the short end of the stick, I don't have that problem though. I guess people really have a problem cuz there are hardly any Black teachers in this district or counselors or stuff like that, but we don't depend on them to help us like that. We are (emphatically) VERY involved! (Brian was trying to speak) My husband was saying something.

Brian: I've seen it both ways, welcoming and I've seen other parents mistreated. Maybe people with lower class. You know I don't know how to word it, but you know people really get treated bad. I don't think they treat us bad, but I do see it happen to people.

ML: why do you think it doesn't happen to you, but to other people?

Alicia: I really can't say, I mean, I know my husband said he sees it, but I can't really say I have.

Brian: I think they know we won't play with them or tolerate them treating us that way, that's why I think.

ML: do you think your level of involvement with teachers impacts how they treat you versus other parents who may be perceived as uninvolved?

Brian and Alicia: (simultaneously) Yes.

Brian: I don't know about other school district we've been in Oaktown all of our lives. We've seen students can succeed, but we know it's possible. The success

of our girls is both us and the school contribute to their success. The school involved them in programs that helped them without our recommending it. So I think the school district is doing a good job.

Alicia: I mean really, I don't have a problem with the district my kids are good. I said earlier I think NAAPID is stupid and they need to do more to include Black history and Black education and stuff, but I don't have a problem.

Brian: yeah, like I said, we just don't have time to sit in on class and be in PTA, so I guess I can say no. I don't think they really care about involvement, you know like other than sending home stuff they don't take our opinions or stuff like that seriously. I think we need to change the whole structure.<sup>2</sup> Like that tax plan to have that school "ALL" the way outside of town. That's crazy you know. They just want money not input cuz they wouldn't have thought that was a good idea.

The salience of social class related issues recurred throughout my discussions with the Andersons. Though no questions were asked specifically about their class position, they often mentioned their inability to "make ends meet" and the challenges they faced as a result of being Black and poor in America. Alicia spoke of her desire to be more of an active participant in onsite school activities. For example, she and Brian both would like to sit in Justin's classroom and observe his behavior to validate and/or officially discredit his teachers ADHD diagnosis. Unfortunately, their jobs are inflexible and they rely heavily on their income to keep their family afloat. Any unscheduled time off from work results in lost wages and decreases their salary. The

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<sup>2</sup> The Oaktown school district purchased land without the permission of taxpayers for a new high school on the outskirts of town. The location would have prevented parents without transportation access to the facility, as the transportation system in the community is limited. The taxpayers were asked to vote on a new tax referendum to support the school. It was voted down in 2015.

Andersons are no different from any family seeking to advance out of their social condition. They want the best for their children, but do not have access to the resources needed to accomplish their goals. Their limited education and low waged jobs makes it near impossible to change their socioeconomic standing in the community.

Brian explicates this when he said Christmas never come early for the Andersons (laughs). If we could just catch a break, we could do more for our kids, and maybe get a better house or something if we had better jobs, but this place aint no place for Black folks to prosper, um, you know. I don't like to say everything is race or racial and stuff, but I can't help to think its better for the White people in town. Look how Blacks live, we aint got no extra money to even take our kids out of town on vacation or nothing.

#### *Summary*

I was given several opportunities to engage with the Andersons. Although I was privy to spending quality time with a few of their children, I did not interview them about their schooling experience, as I did not want to bias my data. They were not a part of my IRB protocol, nor were they the focus of this study. In order to ensure privacy and maintain confidentiality of their identities, I have altered dates of school-based and sporting activities I attended with the Andersons.

My engagement with the Andersons extended well beyond the three interview sessions held with other participants. Alicia invited me to attend her son's fall baseball game in early September. When I arrived at the park, I was welcomed into a large group of Black spectators. Many were family and close friends; others were parents of players and residents from the community. It felt as though I was in a collective space of community. The residents were

welcoming and loving towards one another. They treated each other with respect and praised each child for his or her efforts on the field. The fans were chanting and cheering their home team to victory. During the game, I was able to have in-depth conversations about the importance of community and the Anderson family values. Alicia talked about the importance of supporting her children and keeping them connected to their community. She said many White coaches have attempted to recruit her sons to their baseball teams due to their athleticism, but both she and Brian refused the offers. They want their boys to have friends who understand the challenges they face daily. She said she did not want to place her sons in an all White environment where they may experience racism and feel left out socially. We talked extensively about the importance of sports and extracurricular activities, and their impact on the socialization of Black children.

Community collectivism extends beyond sports; it is a form of capital that is often disregarded by the dominant culture, Black communities have a form of capital that extends beyond social class, but includes a racial cohesion and harmony experienced by Black families (Yasso, 2005). Alicia petitioned her peers to openly discuss challenges they had with the Oaktown school district and how they mitigated the problems. Issues of inequality and unbalanced distribution of resources in schools were evident during these casual conversations. Alicia allowed my role as the researcher to remain confidential. I knew a few of the families because I too, live and have worked in Oaktown serving many of their children during my tenure as a school social worker. Alicia talked the about times she intervened on behalf of other children whose parents were absent when she noticed unfair treatment of the child, she spoke of how the parents on the baseball team work together to help one another in times of struggle and hardship. They carpool to and from games, they bring snacks and water to fuel the children and

many of them donate money to support children who cannot afford the player registration fees. The families in the community support one another and work together to encourage each other. They operate from the mindset that it takes a village to raise a child. These relationships will serve them well and help their children form stronger communal ties. Yosso (2005) speaks of this type of cultural capital wealth as necessary and undervalued.

In keeping with my plan to understand how the Anderson's construct their role in the educational spaces of their children, in late to mid-October, I attended the youngest daughter Jenyce and son Justin's school open house. I unobtrusively observed both Alicia and Brian interacting with other parents and their children's teachers. I jotted field notes detailing the evening.

My Field Notes:

*Jenyce's Class*

Impressed. The room is filled with positive energy. The teacher is a young White woman in her early to mid-twenties, light blonde hair, very petite and vibrant personality. She is welcoming and engaging each parent and child. She's eager to show the accomplishments of students. There are cookies for the children on their desks in cute cellophane bags. I feel welcomed. Andersons are actively looking through Jenyce's work and teasing about the neatness of her desk. Typical girl. They show enthusiasm when speaking with teacher and they're interacting with other parents.

*Justin's Class*

Interesting. The room is very neat and organized the students work is strategically placed on walls in the hall and inside the classroom. I can tell this teacher is seasoned. The teacher is White with short brown hair to her shoulders. She's about late 30's early 40? Not sure. Her clothing

doesn't say youthful, but not old. Rigid and cold. The teacher isn't very inviting. Chilly reception. The Andersons aren't engaging with teacher. She barely spoke to them. Diverse groups of parents (Black, White and Asian) coming in and out. Parents greet one another, teacher greets parents but really isn't welcoming. Justin's desk is neat and orderly which is weird given the ADHD assumption/diagnosis.

My field notes were revealing, as I reviewed the transcripts of my interview sessions with the Andersons, I realized I did not remain neutral in my observation of Justin's class, but his teacher's behavior gave me pause. It was a night to engage parents and students, and she failed to do so. I did replay conversations with Brian in my head as I observed her and his assertions were accurate. It was disheartening to see Alicia who claimed to have a great relationship with the teacher, struggle to make sense of the teacher's attitude towards her and hid her embarrassment once she realized I noticed the rude reception she and Brian received. Unlike Jenyce's teacher who seemed very invested in her students and parents, Justin's teacher fell short of the mark. I know everyone has bad days and maybe outside factors played a role in her behavior, but a negative and unwelcoming teacher attitude is infectious and does not bode well with me, and shouldn't with other parents and school administrators. Nonetheless, both Alicia and Brian carried on with their tour and never mentioned the teacher's behavior. I could not resist asking how they felt after leaving her classroom and Brian replied nonchalantly, "the same as always, she doesn't seem to care about her students." I asked Alicia if she had experienced this behavior in the past, retorting in a stern voice, she replied "NO!" There was an awkward silence as we proceeded through the school. I knew that meant it was time for me to depart. I said my goodbyes; shook Brian's hand and gave Alicia a hug and walked outside to my car. I made contact with Alicia twice after the open house to be certain she and Brian were content with me

using my notes, interview data, and observations from the open house in my study, and she consented. She said our meetings and discussion was an eye-opening experience and said it wasn't until the open house that she realized the teacher's behavior was unprofessional. She mentioned having had experienced it several times prior to the open house but brushed it under the rug to prevent any ill feelings and negative behavior towards the teacher.

The Andersons, by majoritarian standards are involved in their children's education in and out of the school setting. They ascribe to middle-class values and standards; they hold their children accountable for educational attainment, they engage in their children's schooling and expect excellence, they have aspirations of higher education for their children and they support their children. Despite the fact they live at or near the poverty level. Their personal reports of financial distress and struggle align with low-income, yet they situate themselves and identify as middle-income. This became clear when Brian made it a point to note he witnessed unjust and maltreatment of "low-class" Black families, leading me to believe he dissociated himself and his family from those on the lower stratification scale of social class. The family is united and committed to supporting their children, and the children are on a path to academic success. Though they make every attempt to engage in traditional standards of parent involvement, they rely heavily on home and community involvement practices to support their children. They are participating in engaged-involvement and it appears to have a positive impact on their children.

*Annette Johnson: Keeping A Dream Alive*

I had the privilege of speaking with Annette over the telephone for our first interview session that was expected to last 25-35 minutes. Annette and I spoke for over an hour after the interview was completed. I requested to meet her in person and she was apprehensive to have me come to her home, I explained I understood her reservation and agreed to meet her at her office.

Upon entering the building I was greeted by a student worker. The environment was rich with students entering and exiting the small building situated on a side street near White Greek Fraternity and Sorority houses. Annette's office is extremely neat with pleasant fragrances being released from a candle warming on a heated holder and a bowl full of candy on her desk. Pictures of her children and family were strategically placed on a bookshelf along with each child's school paraphernalia. The office was dimly lit and extremely cold. There were tree chairs aligned neatly by Annette's desk. I pulled up a chair and waited for Annette to return.

Annette entered her office with one of the biggest and brightest smiles, she was everything I expected she would be. Annette is 5'2 inches with a medium build, full hips, caramel skin, warm welcoming eyes and her hair was dark brown with light and dark brown streaks. She walked towards me and embraced me with a loving hug and smile. Full of questions about me, she was vetting me and thought I didn't know what she was doing, but I obliged; giving only the details I felt were necessary to put her heart and mind at ease. Once her interview of me ended, I began asking my interview questions. I will admit, I was a bit partial towards Annette; she made me feel as though she was a big sister and friend. We talked and laughed and spoke of everything from parent involvement to Black Lives Matter.

During my interview and based on her responses, I knew Annette would serve as one of my portraiture parents. After completing our interview I asked Annette if I could meet with her a couple of times in one her children's school settings or at her home to observe her interacting with her children and their teachers. She emphatically replied "yes", I scheduled my follow-up meetings with her prior to departing from her office. We exchanged a hug and said our good-byes.



### *Background*

Annette Johnson is a divorced 50 year-old mother of six children and grandmother. She was born and reared in Oaktown. During her schooling she attended parochial elementary school and one of the public high schools in Oaktown. She hails from a very large family. Her family name is synonymous with Civil Rights and advocacy and is well known in Oaktown. She has 3 sisters and 2 brothers, all currently residing in Oaktown, but both of her parents are deceased. Annette is accustomed to living a middle-class life since childhood. Both of Annette's parents were educated and post-secondary education was impressed upon her and her siblings at a very early age. Her father was a pillar in the community. He was actively involved in mobilizing and empowering Black families in Oaktown to challenge racial injustice and segregation within the schools and the community. He was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement and worked with many Black community leaders to impact change in various capacities, Because I am bound by IRB protocols preventing me from providing identifiable information, I am unable to delve further into the work Annette's father engaged in at the local University, but I will say, it was paramount in challenging racist ideology and disparate treatment of Black students.

Given Annette's family history, her parents were actively engaged in the school setting and academic achievement of her and her siblings. She spoke highly of both her mother and father's involvement in her education. Annette recalled numerous instances where her parents served on committees, participated in school-based activities, and definitely kept she and her siblings on a tight leash expecting nothing short of academic excellence from each of them. Annette has a high school diploma and has completed three years of college at one of the prestigious Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). She still longs to complete her degree and become a teacher. At present, Annette is a civil service employee at the university

managing various duties campus wide. She begrudgingly admits her father's reputation is the only reason she has a position at the university. Although she is a full-time employee at the University, she is grossly underpaid and barely makes enough to keep her family financially solvent. Prior to working for the university, Annette worked as a teaching assistant for 15 years in the Oaktown school district. She takes great pride in being an Oaktown native. Annette has three daughters matriculating in Oaktown school district and because she is known and actively participates in her daughter's education and schools, she has asked that I refrain from identifying their grade levels. I agreed to honor her request. She does not receive support from her ex-husband; he has been incarcerated and unemployed over the past 10 years. "He made a lot of mistakes when he was younger selling drugs and stuff, and that is preventing him from securing gainful employment" according to Annette. However he is a great man and excellent father, he shares in the rearing of all of our children and our grandson, says Annette. Annette is a devoted mother and committed to her family in every way possible. For example, ..... She says all three of her daughters are strong academically and maturing into well-rounded, respectful humanitarians. Annette is committed to community service and gives of her time serving many parents and children and many capacities. Annette spoke of many challenges she has faced because of her father's reputation and how she often feels pressure to honor his name and keep his legacy alive through her work on campus and within the community.

#### *Constructing Parent Involvement: Annette's Perspective*

Annette's interview is a picture perfect tale of parental involvement from any perspective. I was impressed with her level of commitment and dedication to seeing her children excel beyond any expectation. She is the epitome of parental involvement and yet, according to the literature, she is grouped into the category of uninvolved and disconnected from schooling

experiences because she is Black, poor and undereducated. Contrary to dominant ideological beliefs, Annette outperforms the affluent White middle-class parents when it comes to being an active and engaged parent in her children's school, and for other children too. When asked to define parent involvement in her own words, she posits:

To me, parent involvement means me showing my face in the place. There's five days in a week, at least three. For me, I take my lunch, I take my break. Parent involvement, for me, would be like I said, there's five days a week, at least showing my face in the place at least three days a week. Everyone is not able, so if you're able.

I have a job that allows me, on my breaks and my lunch, and for me, I just choose not to use my breaks and lunch for me. My children are for me. For me, I get full off of knowing that their school is up to par, they're doing right, they're sitting down, they're behaving, they're getting their work done. If they're missing work or falling behind, I have three days. For me, it just means being involved. I have to show my face into both schools three times a week, at least. Again, I will be clear, that is exactly why I have the rapport. I can call on any teacher at their school, and they are there, hands down. I'm a hands-on mother, I'm very involved. I don't care what job I'm working, I'm very involved and any teacher that my children come in contact with absolutely know me on a first-name basis. I think sometimes, I recall there was...They'd like for you to let them know when you want to come, and they want to be advised early on, and I'm really not quite sure only because I have such a rapport with the school officials and the superintendent, it doesn't matter.

Annette is devoted in her commitment to ensuring her children succeed academically, and she works tirelessly to dispel the myths and lies swirling around low-income single Black mothers, stating they are disconnected and uninvolved in their children's education. Despite having a low-waged job and struggling to make her money stretch to afford monthly bills, she said she does whatever is necessary to be present and vigilant for her daughters and grandchild. Annette's commitment and advocacy is not limited to her immediate family, it extends to any of her extended family and community members. During our telephone interview, Annette shared an incident regarding her niece and she moved swift into action.

I called, I had a problem the other day it was with my niece and it was a little bit of bullying that was going on with her. I made one phone call. When I tell you it was taken care of in less than an hour...I was personally getting a call on my cell phone saying, "Everything is taken care of. If your niece has any more problems, [revealed her own name], please let me know and we will be the first..." I said, "OK because I would hate to have to call over to the [named school district administration] building, but I will."

Again, I told you about an incident that just occurred with my niece. Her mother works 10 at night, to seven in the morning, I am her voice, I am her mother. So even though it is my niece's daughter, it's just like mine. I have friends, and then I have some that are very educated. Highly-degreed and it doesn't matter. If I can be a vessel, or I know someone that can be a vessel for that person that does not have the voice. If I can't do something, I will absolutely direct them, or get in touch with someone that can do something for them. The assistant superintendent, she and I started together at the bottom, now she made it to the

top. But the whole 15 years we literally were in the same room, same building, all the way to the top. So they know, and she definitely...but they're thorough. I have two alliances I can cover. I have friends. They are not as educated, or as not involved as I. Again, it's the whole philosophy I was born and taught, reach one, teach one. If I can step in, and it takes a village, it definitely does.

The assistance Annette provides her family and friends' is a form of cultural capital; dominant culture cites a lack of capital as the cause of the Black communities demise economically and academically (Auerbach, 2007; Auerbach, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). When Annette transfers capital within her community, she is bridging the gap between households and schools through a transmission of knowledge that Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez (1992) describe as funds of knowledge.

#### *Perceptions about Teachers and Schools: Relationships*

According to Annette, she has not encountered any problems with school personnel, unlike the experiences of many low-income Black families in Oaktown; Annette's experiences are on par with White middle-class parents. She is highly regarded and respected, her children, irrespective of their academic performance, receive optimal treatment and instruction and the playing field appears leveled for her children, according to Annette. Her interpersonal relationships with school personnel is outstanding, she contends the teachers and school officials are nothing short of amazing where she and her children are concerned. Her presence onsite at her children's schools have significantly impacted the way her children are perceived and treated. When asked about school-community relationships and her perception of teachers she replied:

I will definitely say...I can only speak for the school my children attend and that's the middle school and the high school. I can be a voice for those two. When they were in elementary I really honestly never had a problem. I've run into people that have, and again I always look at who it is because when you know who you're dealing with, then you know what to expect. If I see a confrontational friend or family member or whomever, I'm a lot of times not surprised the outcome was what it was involved. I've learned but by being a part of it, that you can get a little more honey or little bit more bees with the honey. It's a way to address anything and still get the same outcome.

I think it's getting a lot better because a lot of times when you have people just coming for jobs. Sometimes with me working in the district it was just that, I knew a lot of the teachers that was there just for the paycheck.

Then there were a lot of people that I've had the honor of working and pleasure of working and dealing with, that were phenomenal, and would not ever see it any other way than giving and doing their best. I've seen some there for the paycheck, and I've seen some there that just because, it doesn't matter, "I'm here for the love". I've witnessed them both, I've experienced them both, and it's kind of heart wrenching, and gratifying at the same time. Like I said again, if I see somebody in distress or in the need, I try to do what I can or network with the teacher that I know definitely does have my back. I know a lot of people that are taking their children out of the district and put them in private school because they felt as though they were failed. For me, it could be that they have a rapport

with me and that I work there, and that I've generated this so they're going to give the best to my children.

Based on Annette's response, there are clearly drawn lines between her experience with school personnel and the experiences the average Black working class parent in Oaktown has with schools. She relies heavily on the relationships she has built with many of the higher ranked school officials and does not hesitate to utilize her social capital to impact change for her children or anyone she supports. Unfortunately, marginalized families often do not have access to superintendents, nor do they know how to initiate contact with them. Their contact is limited to building administration, and in most instances, those relationships are strained due to cultural incompetence and structural barriers placed in their paths (cite).

Neither race, nor racial inequality emerged as an issue during my discourse with Annette, in fact, when asked about race and the impact it has on teacher-student relationships, she posited:

I think race can play a role. For me, it hasn't, I've never felt like my children were mistreated, being misused, or the race card was played. Now I can be a voice for some others and I'm actually seeing their situations be totally different from mine, and it has played a part in a role. For me, and I've had six children go through, and race has never been an issue. I may have been blessed to have been, actually, hands on. What you would normally do, and I'm actually in the building with my children. That might be a bit far-fetched, or like I said it's still one unit. Even if you add another school, word gets bad fast, doesn't take long for bad news to travel. For me, it's been a very positive reinforcement, but for others that I do know, family members, friends, and other allies, it hasn't been such a great experience.

I can't really speak on what it is, but whatever it is, it's working for their sake. It won't ever not work because they hate to see that girl, and they will if they ever fail my children, or I clearly see them fail somebody else's in a purposely done manner. They will hear from me.

ML: Let me ask you something, I want you to expand on something. It sounds like you are somebody who has connections so to speak in the community and the school district. What do you think happens to somebody who doesn't have those connections?

Annette: I think you can easily, well you know what you may not. Everyone doesn't have, again I think it's who you are, and how you're perceived, and what your deliverance is. That will tell a lot. I know a lot of people here that are here new to the university and their children go over there, they have no problem. They don't know anybody. Now they may have the potential to have the contacts being with their status, but when they first come in they don't have that. I really think it's your deliverance on how you approach any situation. I'm pretty confirmed with the staff that I've dealt with that. We've even had irate parents. I've seen irate parents that don't have the contacts. With me being there, but you still can get something done. If I see somebody that I know doesn't have a chance in hell of getting anywhere, I'm their voice. I'm speaking up.

"Reach one, teach one" don't let me catch it and don't let me hear about it because I'm going to do what I can. No child will be left behind. I don't care what your situation or your circumstances are.



During our extended conversations, I was able to garner additional information from Annette regarding why she believed some Black parents experienced racism while others do not. She believes people who are less educated want to cause problems and disrupt the school environment with negative outbursts or, those who display aggressive behavior are the only ones who purport racism prevents their children from excelling academically. Annette's views do not vary from the other Oaktown participants who suggest many underprivileged Black parents play the race card. Annette is not exposed to overt racism, and I cannot confirm whether or not she operates with a full knowledge of what constitutes racism or prejudice for that matter, such as the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, or the disparate number of Black students suspended and expelled from school for the same infractions as White students that are given alternate forms of discipline. It is my belief, however, that Annette is the heir to her father's legacy of civil rights advocacy and social justice in Oaktown, and the transference of that form of capital is invaluable. She may never experience the societal ills that many like her have and will face until she exits the comforts of her hometown and ventures out into a world where racist ideology permeates schools and communities with no regard for parental legacy or socioeconomic status.

### Summary

In conclusion, my time spent with Annette was informative and enjoyable. We met several times outside of her office for coffee and lunch. We had long engaging telephone conversations and I accompanied her to meet her daughter during her lunch break on three different occasions. When Annette enters the school building, a bystander would assume she is someone of great importance in the community or the school district. She is greeted with enthusiasm and respect. The teachers and staff addressed her on a first name basis and they are

receptive to her and seem happy to oblige any request. Upon meeting two of her daughters, I quickly garnered a sense of high self-esteem and self-worth they were articulate, well groomed, and polished. They were energetic and appeared well balanced. Annette made note of their outstanding academic accomplishments. They are active in sports, cheerleading, and dance. Annette said she never misses an event they participate in. Annette is parent involvement personified. She does not have access to an abundance of financial resources, yet she operates with a majoritarian middle-class mindset. She does not allow her social condition to dictate her trajectory or educational attainment outcomes for her children. Annette is unlike most parents in her social class, because she was reared with the type of capital middle-class families enjoy, however, due to her lack of education and her low-waged job, she remains economically disenfranchised and socially immobile.

Annette's connection to her community and neighborhood is unique. As a lifelong resident in the neighborhood, a prior student in the Oaktown school system, an active community member and a university employee, Annette accesses resources unlike the other parents interviewed. She was exposed to the inner-workings of the school system at the administrative and community levels and has a distinctive way of engaging staff and students that yields good results. Annette's high level of community engagement was also unique to the experiences of other parents. She serves on local community boards and works tirelessly to ensure all children receive fair and equitable educational experiences through her service. As she acknowledged, access to these social networks is instrumental in her ability to successfully engage in parent involvement practices, at home, at school and in the community.

*Sharon: A Woman of strength & determination*

Sharon is a young mother of two, struggling to balance the rigors of single motherhood and poverty. She is by far one of my favorite participants, not because she is from my hometown, Chicago, but because she exudes confidence, strength and determination. These are qualities I possess and respect in anyone despite, racial or financial background.

I received a telephone call from the LOE asking if I had room for an additional participant and I ecstatically said YES! I was given Sharon's contact information and immediately emailed her with a request for a telephone interview. I had lost contact with a previous participant and was hoping to secure another to meet my goal of ten participants; Sharon was a welcomed addition. While on the telephone, I explained to her that I would only take about 20-25 minutes of her time and since she was on her lunch break, it worked out perfectly, or so we thought. Sharon and I spoke for over an hour and she had the flexibility of talking while sitting at her desk. This made our conversation carry on over 30 minutes more than I had anticipated, but the conversation was organic and flowed naturally. After asking my initial background questions, we spoke about life in Chicago and the challenges of rearing Black sons in a world we both agreed seems to hate the idea of their existence. While I cannot personally attest to the struggle of single motherhood, I certainly empathize with any single mother, but more with a low-income Black mother because I understand the constraints placed on her and the challenges her children will encounter as a result of being poor and Black in America. While I know it is a struggle for any family to live in poverty, I refuse to believe a person has to finish in life where they start. Maybe that is the social worker in me, but I am hopeful, and meeting and working with Sharon has confirmed my belief.

## Background

Sharon is not a victim of poverty. She possesses a “by any means necessary” work ethic and persona. She works temporary placement secretarial positions and as a part time retail sales associate to provide food and shelter for her two children. She is seeking alternative financial resources in an attempt to complete her Bachelor’s degree. Sharon is an only child, born and reared with both parents; her father works as a middle-school teacher and her mother now deceased, was a homemaker. She is a product of Chicago Public Schools and has completed an Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education at a local community college in the Chicago land area. Sharon has a strong faith in God and wants to further her education to become a teacher. Based on her strong will and determination which exuded during our meetings, I have no doubt her dream will come to fruition. Her parents instilled a good work ethic and a commitment to excellence inside of her, and she definitely values education. Sharon’s desire to change her living condition and provide her children with a better home and life was evidenced through her balancing multiple jobs and maintaining support of the children’s education.

Sharon is the mother to two children, a son who is a freshman in high school and a daughter in second grade. She had her son at a very young age and received support from her parents until she graduated from community college. Her parents were instrumental in raising her children and ensuring they had a safe and loving home environment, but Sharon said her decision to have a child while still in high school devastated her parents and damaged her relationship with them. However, the values her parents instilled in her as a child were also given to her children through their love and support. Neither of Sharon’s children have loving supportive fathers, in fact, Sharon’s son’s father has since married and started anew. He does not financially support their son and has disassociated himself from him. The father of Sharon’s daughter is

financially stable, but did not want to start a family at an early age, and according to Sharon, he believes she was deceitful and used trickery to conceive their child. For those reasons, he has violated a child support order and refuses to support her daughter financially. When I asked why she has not enforced the support order through the child support division in Cook County, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “it’s his loss, and what goes around comes around.”

Due to the emotional fragility of her children and their non-existent paternal relationships, Sharon works twice as hard to display love and support to her children in all of their endeavors. They are very active in extracurricular activities. Her daughter attends a local dance company and gymnastics program, and her son plays basketball for his high school.

Sharon is a firm believer that education is the key to success and everything outside of it is a bonus. Her son has some academic challenges, he attends school under an Individual Education Plan (IEP) designed to assist him with his reading and math deficiencies. The guidelines of his IEP were not being met in the private school he attended on a basketball scholarship. Since the government offers funding for special education in public schools she felt he would receive the services he needed to be successful in school and she opted for public education over a private school in Oaktown where he was offered a scholarship for basketball. Sharon’s daughter is academically sound; she has tested for the gifted program and is anxiously awaiting the results of the exam. She did not report any major concerns with her daughter academically, or socially.

With the growing concern for the safety of Black boys living in urban cities, Sharon relocated to Oaktown in search of an opportunity for social mobility. She lives on the North end of Oaktown where the majority of poor Black families live. I did not have the privilege of seeing Sharon’s living space; she resides with a roommate and her children in a small rental home. She

did not want her roommate to feel uncomfortable with my presence in their home, so we met at local coffee shops and café's around town. At our first meeting, Sharon entered the coffee shop wearing a bright and engaging smile. Sharon was roughly 5'5 inches tall, she was a light honey brown skinned medium built young lady with a beautiful energy. Her hair was straight and shoulder length; she wore jean shorts and a Black t-shirt that read, “#Black Lives Matter” written in white letters. Her personality was filled with energy and charisma. She walked over to me as if she had known me for years, hugged me and smiled incessantly. She thanked me repeatedly for the work I was doing to empower the marginalized parents with a voice and for the opportunity to share her story. I thanked her for volunteering and shared it was my passion to explore this work, and I assured her that I would do everything in my power to share her story and the stories of each participant with accuracy and compassion. She smiled and said she knew from speaking to me on the phone that she could trust I would use the information I was given to enlighten and assist parents and teachers. I agreed. She and I both ordered a sandwich and a cup of coffee prior to beginning our interview. I wanted to keep with the time I set aside for the in-person interview and she made sure to inform me she was off work and was happy to give me the time I needed to answer each question thoroughly. Sharon appeared eager to begin and based on her demeanor and comments made about the community and schools, I surmised there were issues with the Oaktown school district she wanted to share.

*Constructing parent involvement: Sharon's perspective*

By the time I met with Sharon, I had completed the interview series of the other nine participants and many of their responses were similar as to how they see themselves and construct their roles in the lives of their children through involvement practices, Sharon was a little different in her response. When asked how she defined parental involvement, she stated:

I define parent involvement as parents having the final say in their child's education. I say this because I am my children's keeper. I am ultimately responsible for what happens to them, not the school or the teacher. I know that sounds strange, but I think going to parent-teacher conferences to pick up a report card does not an involved parent make. My daddy always takes full responsibility for his students, but it was tiring and it takes so much out of him. My parents made sure I was on top of my game. They taught me my education was my responsibility and I had to take it seriously. So, I tell my kids the same thing. Of course I help with homework when I can (she says sarcastically), I make sure they have every need met and my dad pitches in when I can't make it happen for them. I'm doing what I can to show them their life is based on choices; I made bad choices. I chose to have babies and not finish school and I'm suffering with no money and I want them to understand that the choices they make, impact their lives eternally.

ML: Are you saying they cannot make mistakes?

Sharon: No, I'm saying don't make stupid mistakes like having a baby makes all the difference in how things turn out. I was a great student but fell in love with a damn boy and he aint care nothing about me and has not helped me. I kept making the same mistake and now I have two kids and no career or college degree. I wasn't raised like that. I'm teaching my son to be smart when messing with these little girls and my daughter to be smart and put her education first and not have a baby. So, basically, I teach them the same lesson but differently.

Parents gotta stop trying to be their kid's friends and be the parent, that's why we have so much violence out here. These kids don't have no guidance.

ML: It's very interesting hearing someone your age talk about kids having no guidance. Younger people say the older generations don't understand them (laughs)

Sharon: Mia, I'm not stupid. I know people look at me and think I'm young and have two kids by two baby daddy but I'm very smart. I had good grades, but I sacrifice the way my parents did for me. I make sure every need is met. That means at school too. They know me at my kid's schools. They know I care, and I make sure those teachers know I don't play with my kids or them (laughs).

Sharon utilizes a blended parenting practice. She engages her children at home and in the community, utilizing an authoritative parenting style; characterized by high levels of parental nurturance, involvement, sensitivity, control, and encouragement of autonomy (Baumrind, 1971; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). She also uses an authoritarian style, which is a contrast to authoritative parenting. During several discussions about parenting, Sharon spoke about the use of corporal punishment with her children suggesting fear works in concert with respect. An authoritarian parenting style isn't uncommon in the Black community, in many instances a firm directive approach and oftentimes, physical punishment is used as a discipline practice (Steinberg, et al., 1992). Whether one agrees with Sharon's approach or not, it works for her family, and her children are thriving socially and academically, according to Sharon.

*Race and social class: They go hand in hand*

*You can't even think about social class without talking about race, they go hand in hand*

—Sharon



Sharon grew up middle-class and was afforded entrance into a world many Black families may never experience. She attended academically challenging schools, participated in the illustrious Jack and Jill (an affluent social group for Black middle and upper class families), was a debutante in the cotillion, a member of the National Honor Society (NHS), and served on the speech team in high school. The possibilities were limitless for anyone given the opportunities Sharon had. Despite all of her many accolades, her current social condition haunts her. She spoke of the obstacles in her path now that she has been demoted to a lower position on the economic stratum. Being Black and poor is an insurmountable challenge, one that Sharon never imagined she would face. Poverty is an abstruse social ill that no child should encounter, yet, many do and Sharon is rearing two children in poverty. She receives government entitlements and has aspirations that far exceed her living condition and her drive is unstoppable. When Sharon and I discussed racial injustices she said she could not recall experiencing discrimination in Chicago the way she has seen it manifest in the school and within the community in Oaktown. I specifically asked if she believed race played a role in how teachers educate/treat Black children? Sharon answered with an emphatic YES!

Oh yeah, my son experiences it quite often. He has a learning disability, so that makes it worse. Black, poor and academically challenged? That's a recipe for disaster, as my daddy puts it. It's worse for my son because Black males are a threat to our society. They don't want to see him do well and I won't let them fail him. It can't happen. I have my daddy who tells me what needs should be met and when they don't meet them, which is often, I treat their life.

ML: (laughing hard) what does treat their life mean?

Sharon: Are you serious? You really don't know? Well, it means I will curse them out, give them a piece of my mind or get with them, you know what I mean? I aint playing with these teachers especially the White ones cuz I know what they see when they see us. I have to let them know, I aint no dummy. I'm very smart and they will respect me and my kids and this darn IEP will be followed the right way.

ML: Do the teachers speak to you in a way that makes you feel inferior?

Sharon: I mean, they'll try it, but I'm not going. I will speak to the principal, the superintendent if I have to. I know my rights and my son and I will be treated right. Plus, when I tell them my dad is a teacher near retirement, they know I know what to expect and my daddy told me it's against the law to not follow the IEP. You know I make sure to tell them they aren't obeying the laws. I bet any money they don't treat the White kids with IEP's this way.

Sharon is an advocate for her son and having access to the knowledge her father provides empowers her to stand in the gap for him. She rarely spoke of any school-related issues with her daughter; her primary focus was centered on her son and the gross negligence in adhering to his IEP, as well as, the barriers she faced when trying to advocate for him. Frequently, she referred to maltreatment or disrespectful tones used towards her when interacting with teachers; more specifically, the special education teacher. She felt she seemed rushed and disconnected from her son and his disability, however, she knows that there are guidelines in place allowing him additional time for exams and in class assignments and she expected her son to receive every provision in his IEP. She hopes he will eventually meet grade level standards and no longer require the learning plan.

Despite Sharon's social position, her aspirations for both of her children include a college education and financial freedom. She is no different from the other participants in this study or any parent in general, who wants their children to excel beyond the limitations of their social context. Fortunately for Sharon's children, she has entrée to capital that is not easily accessed by most Black's in her financial position. Sharon relies on her social and cultural capital to aid in the social mobility of her children and does not sit idly by watching from the sidelines. Sharon is an active participant in the rearing of her children and will not hesitate to advocate for her children in school.

Sharon expressed grave concern about racism and the discrimination she has experienced while residing in Oaktown, moreover, in the school district. She mentioned several incidents where her son was reprimanded for behavioral issues and felt his punishments rarely matched the violation. When asked to give more specific details, she mentioned a time when her son was in class laughing and talking with other students and the teacher issued a discipline referral for talking which ultimately led to detentions. Since it was not his first infraction, her son was suspended for a day for failing to serve detention. When she tried to remedy the problem by scheduling a conference with the teacher, she was unsuccessful. She said the teacher was unresponsive and her son said none of his friends, who happened to be white, were issued detentions when they were all engaged in the same conversation. Sharon went to the dean of students in an attempt to prevent her son from having to serve the suspension and he recommended in school suspension. In her opinion, none of the school personnel listened to her and shunned her advocacy efforts. She said she blurted out in the dean's office that she believed her son was being targeted because he was Black, to which the dean replied, "here we go again, you people always cry racism when you should just take responsibility for your actions". Sharon

said she became enraged and both she and the dean were yelling at one another, the assistant principal entered the office to mediate the argument. Once she explained the circumstance to the assistant principal, she was taken into her office to calm down and discuss an alternate solution. It was at this point Sharon believed the administration wanted to accommodate and appease her because they knew the dean committed an egregious discriminatory act against her and all Black families attending the high school with his prejudicial statement. Once the dust settled, Sharon's son was ordered to serve two of the four detentions previously issued and the dean apologized for his actions. Sharon said she wanted to escalate the incident further, but felt there would be no recourse and decided to drop it and move on.

Incidents like the one that occurred between Sharon and the dean as well as the disparate disciplinary actions taken against Black students compared to others, is one of many reasons the Oaktown school district was sanctioned and forced to undergo the social climate survey; which ultimately resulted in the court ordered consent decree. Unfortunately, racial disparities and injustices appear to be common practices in public school settings. Researchers have reported higher numbers of disciplinary actions are often taken against Black and Hispanic students than White students and school personnel's treatment of students worsens based on race and social class factors (Diamond, 2006; Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Throughout the course of our meetings, Sharon often spoke of the Black Lives Matter movement and during our final meeting while sipping coffee, she asked my opinion on how to mend the broken relationships between Blacks and Whites in schools and in the community. Though, I understand and sympathize with the struggle of the Black community, I did not want that to become the foci of our discussion; it could bias the data collection and skew Sharon's responses to my questions. I grew weary that she may alter her response to appease or agitate me

based on how she perceived my position on the current issues affecting the Black community. I did share that I felt a change from both sides was mandatory in order to move forward and progress towards racial balance and justice. However I refrained from engaging in an in depth conversation on the topic and redirected our dialogue back to parent involvement and the study in general. Given the recent events unfolding in Chicago and nationwide; the denigration and lack of love and care for Black lives, more specifically Black males, I couldn't help but wonder what judgments Sharon made about me as I diverted from the topic. I wish I could have shared that my reticence didn't mean I was antithetic, after all, I have Black sons and I fear for their lives daily. However, my role as the researcher prevents me from entering into a dialogue formulated by opinion and fueled by anger. Nonetheless, I stood firm on my position and continued with the task at hand—finishing the interview.

As our time came to an end, it was difficult to disconnect from Sharon emotionally. She was a young woman who really impacted my life with her story and her determination. Her determination and drive is inspiring and I did not take one minute of our time together for granted. I saw in her everything that was right and wrong in the world. I checked my ego and my self-pity at the door whenever I entered her presence. Sharon is the reason I wrote this dissertation; she is the untold story. Sharon's passion and commitment to being a "good mom", overcoming obstacles, and the tenacity to endure her pain and hardship as well as accepting the role she played in what she considers failure is incomparable to any young person I have encountered in my time as a social worker, teaching assistant or researcher. Sharon is a warrior, she is what single motherhood should resemble, a never give in or give up attitude and the embodiment of hope and possibility. I hope to reconnect with her in the next couple of years to witness her drive and commitment become a reality for both her and her children.

## Discussion

Through the use of portraiture I was able to capture the “goodness” of these participants based on their personal lives and experiences. As the portraitist, I did not seek to find and report the things I saw as good, I reported how I viewed the participants in context. My goal in conducting this methodological piece was to speak to a broader audience beyond the academic world (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Giving voice to this group meant more than just asking questions about their experiences as low-income Black parents, it meant going deeper into their lives, talking about their personal dreams, and the dreams they have for their children and community. Portraiture afforded me the opportunity to step outside of the fine lines drawn by the academy on what constitutes qualitative research, such as..... and explore and glean personal information about my participants that would not normally happen during a traditional interview protocol. I would be remiss if I neglected to state that portraiture is not the only qualitative methodology used to widen pedagogical views through a hands on approach, however it draws on the analytic character of description and it invites readers into the interpretive process, allowing opportunities to draw multiple insights from a specific account (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 16).

This chapter uncovered the nuanced differences between the portraiture participants and the remaining seven participants. The portraiture participant stories are very similar, yet vastly different from the others. They engaged the schools differently as outlined in their profiles. The participants understood their rights and enacted parent involvement with expectation of results. They did not wait on the school to help their children; they took the actions necessary to impact change. It does not mean the remaining participants are incapable of navigating the educational space their children occupy, it suggests they may not have the tools or the knowledge needed to

properly advocate on behalf of their children. It seems that each of the 10 participants enter unchartered territory on a daily basis as they attempt to provide an equitable space for their children to be nurtured and educated, yet they persist and do not give up. Each participant makes valuable contributions to his or her child in ways that are often misunderstood by the dominant culture and unless the dominant culture understands the need to challenge their own viewpoint on parent involvement, inequality in education will continue to permeate the schools and Black children of any social class will keep lagging behind their White counterparts.

## **CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This exploratory qualitative study sought to catalyze low-income Black parents voices on parent involvement practices, share their stories of involvement, and provide a space to be represented in the literature and discourse concerning parent involvement. Through the use of Critical Race Methodology, the voices of Black parents will be included in the literature and dialogue on parent involvement. The first chapter introduced the issues that influenced the importance for researching this topic. Chapter two presented the theoretical frameworks used to situate the research and the literature selected. In chapter three I discussed the methodological approach used to investigate the topic. Chapter four provided descriptions of participants in the sample, the emergent themes garnered from data analysis, and the findings are presented based on the responses given by the participants in the study and the social climate survey. Chapter five uses the portraiture research method to present the stories of three participants whose parent involvement practices are unique and encompasses the shared traits of all the participants in the study. In this chapter the findings are elucidated by revisiting the research questions posed in chapter one, next I discuss how the theoretical frameworks chosen in chapter two inform the findings. Additionally, I discuss how the findings may or may not align with the literature on Black parent involvement. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the summary of findings based on the research inquiry, provide implications for researchers, school personnel and parents, and provide recommendations for future research and practice.



## Revisiting the research questions

### ***Question one: How do low-income Black parents conceptualize parental engagement?***

Motivated by the literature and the findings in the social climate survey, proclaiming Black parents lack the care and concern necessary for their children to succeed in formal educational settings; I sought to examine how a group of low-income Black parents conceptualized and constructed their roles in their children's educational experiences. Upon thorough analysis of data collection, it was found that each participant engaged in their children's schooling and held education in high esteem. Some participants adhered to the strict unforgiving guidelines of parent involvement as defined by practitioners, policymakers, and the dominant culture. Other participants participated in an engaged-involvement strategy employing the home and community curricula that is omitted from normative standards of involvement.

Contrary to the literature and the sentiments of the White parents and staff outlined in the Oaktown District's social climate survey that asserted Black parents negate their roles in the academic outcomes of their children, the parents in this study, not only spoke of their investment in their children's education, they put words in action. The group of participants spoke extensively of their engagement in school-sanctioned events; attending parent-teacher conferences, school open houses and sporting events. The participants also discussed the out of school activities they enrolled their children in to enrich their educational experiences. For example, participation in community churches, summer camp programs, swimming and community athletic teams. These out of school activities support Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework that states marginalized Black communities do in fact have cultural capital irrespective of the dominant narrative claiming Black communities fail to achieve educational and financial success because they lack cultural and social capital.

The parents in this study collectively discussed the value they placed on their children's academic success in school. As outlined in the findings chapter, each of the parents discussed the educational aspirations for their children with hopes of exceeding their own educational outcomes. To support the value in parent aspirations, Harvey (2005), found that parental expectations of a child's educational attainment made the strongest unique prediction of academic achievement. Parents in this study viewed their level of involvement or engagement as an indispensable factor of their children's academic, moral, and social development; they were very engaged in the schooling process.

These findings are consistent with DeMoss and Vaughn (2000) who found that although parents with young school-age children agreed that parental presence at school is important, they also recognized other ways that parents are involved who are unfamiliar to school personnel and researchers. Similarly, Gutman and Lloyd (2000) also found that Black parents used a range of methods to support their children's schooling experiences, this includes the home and community curriculum as well as school-sanctioned activities

**Question two: Do race and social class influence how parents are engaged in their children's education? If so, how and why?**

Social class and racial disparities in education were the motivation for this inquiry. Race emerged as a recurrent theme in both the literature and the findings of this study. However, not all Black parents in the study identified race and/or racism as a barrier or contributing factor in how they constructed their roles in the schooling outcomes for their children. Nonetheless, there were many instances of racial injustice discussed throughout the study that contradicted the participants who felt Black parents who named race as the primary factor in the cause of the achievement gap, and inequitable disciplinary actions against Black students were "playing the

race card”. The findings showed all participants, and their children, experienced some racial inequality despite their capacity to recognize and name race as the problem. When comparing responses regarding race, there were extremely differing views on race based on the participant’s city of birth and/or where they were reared. Parents from larger urban centers identified race as the impetus for unequal access to resources, disparate discipline actions against Black children compared to White children, and the maltreatment of parents by White school personnel. Several parents from Oaktown refused to allude to race when discussing their issues or concerns with Oaktown school district. Quotes reported from the social climate survey substantiated the allegations of racism and racial disparity in the Oaktown community and school district.

The findings of this inquiry unearthed the grim realities marginalized families are forced to encounter with regularity. However, due to the inconsistencies in the findings from the participants, I cannot report race as an influential factor in how this group of parents engaged in their children’s schooling experiences. I surmised many Black parents in this study do not understand racism and more importantly, what institutional racism is, and may lack the ability to recognize it; resulting in their use of the term “playing the race card”.

Research has shown that middle-class parents are more involved in schools than working-class poor parents, however when race is factored into the equation results differ and underachievement in Blacks when compared to White students remain static. Despite the results of numerous studies showing the intersection of race and class as mitigating factors in school achievement and parent involvement, the parents in this study did not fully commit to the two being intertwined.

Social class was a salient issue that recurred during the investigation of this topic. The staff and parents from the climate survey denied race as the cause of the achievement gap and

disparate treatment of Black students and exclaimed social class was the primary cause of underperformance of Black students. The parents in this study supported those claims citing a lack of financial resources, underemployment, and unemployment as barriers preventing them from accessing the resources needed to help their children thrive in challenging educational spaces. They understood their roles in providing external academic support, but spoke of the inability to provide the help needed due to financial constraints. Many of the participants rely on government entitlements as a primary source of income or to supplement their income.

**Question three: How do school personnel encourage and/or challenge Black parent engagement?**

In an effort to remain committed to the literature I chose for this study, I sought to examine the findings regarding low-income Black parent's conceptualization of involvement, the barriers they faced, and how and if race and social class factored into the ways they engaged in their children's schooling. The findings unearthed barriers that prevent parents from engaging in their children's schooling experiences. Consequently, educators and administrators were formidable barriers to overcome for parents and students. Teacher perceptions of low-income Black parents encumber their ability to provide effective instruction to students whose culture and values differ from their own. Educators often assume that Black parents' culture and values are not aligned to the culture of education (Noguera, 2001; Yan, 2000); thus many educators believe that Black parents are a detriment to their children's educational attainment. A lack of cultural competency adversely impacts how educators view and teach Black children from any social class (Delpit, 1996; Irvine, 1990).

The findings in this study reported strained relationships between the teacher and parents as a barrier to their level of school involvement. A lack of trust of the school staff also inhibits

parent participation at school. Several of the participants expressed concern for the lack of respect their child's teacher held for them. One parent said the teacher spoke to her in a way that made her feel she was being treated as if she was a child. When visiting the school open house with the Andersons, the dismissive, rude behavior of their son Justin's teacher supported Brian's assertion that the teacher was disrespectful towards the family. Perceptions held by the participants regarding teacher and administrators strongly supports the argument that school personnel thwart parent efforts to engage in their children's schooling. Researchers have found that teachers' low expectations of low-income minority parents lead them to treat such parents without full respect, thus undermining parent involvement (Epstein and Dauber 1991; Comer 1980).

It is critical to student success for the parents and teachers to have an amicable relationship and have open dialogue and communication. McNeal (1999) explicates this further stating the weakened dyadic relationship between teacher and parent has the greatest impact on the attainment outcomes of children in education (McNeal, 1995,1999; Lareau, 1989). The barriers teachers and administrators place in the path of parents prohibits meaningful dialogue. Parents who do not understand how to properly advocate for their children shrink into the background and the social distance between the teacher and parent increases; resulting in children left hanging in the balance and struggling to meet grade level standards, ultimately leading them into a life of poverty and quite possibly crime.

### ***Limitations of study***

This study has a couple of limitations despite the strengths. The first limitation is due to the small sample used in this study, results may not be generalizable beyond the population from which the sample was drawn. The second limitation is my own personal bias. As a Black mother

and parent, I have had many experiences with the public and private school sector that are similar to those of my participants. As a researcher, I understood my role was to solely collect and report the data driven by the participant responses. Despite these limitations, this study adds to the gaps in literature and provides a space and platform for parents to become visible and viable resources to their children and the school system.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

In this dissertation I employed Ecologies of Parent Engagement (EPE) and Social Stratification to frame this study and to provide an alternate lens for practitioners, researchers, and society to view parent involvement from the perspective of my participants and many parents who share the same and or similar experiences and social conditions.

### **The use of Ecologies of Parent Engagement**

The primary purpose in employing EPE is to recognize and understand that parents, specifically Black parents, are their child's first teacher and the educational opportunities and life-lessons they provide their children outside the school environment are as important as the ones being offered in the school environment. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, EPE is a process in which parents and schools interact in particular spaces using specific forms of capital to create a level of engagement that benefits a child's schooling experiences (Barton et al. 2012). The framework allows for a richer more inclusive definition of parent involvement that includes parent engagement. If researchers wanted to focus a study solely on parent involvement and engagement practices, EPE is able to stand alone in that process, however it does not contextualize race and class disparities and how they factor into the ways low-income parents navigate schooling spaces. Therefore, the use of Social Stratification is critical when viewing how society influences the roles and spaces marginalized families occupy in society. Combining

the two frameworks enables a deeper investigation of involvement and engagement practices of Black parents and the way intersectionality of race, racism, and classism play in negotiating space, power and capital in the school setting.

### **The use of Social Stratification**

For the purposes of this study, I used Social Stratification as a lens to view how inequality manifests at the intersection of race, gender and social class. When this intersection occurs the stratification of people, primarily those who are underserved and marginalized are then relegated to lower social positions in society with limited to no opportunities to advance out of their social condition. Opportunity for upward and social mobility is probable, but not likely to occur for certain groups of people based on their position on the stratum (Neelsen, 1975). In this study I used Social Stratification to enable an understanding of how my participants experience inequity and inequality as a result of their position in society and on the stratification scale. Thus, their position in society dictates how they are positioned in the school setting, how school personnel, and other parents view and treat them and how educational opportunities are missed for their children as a result. As evidenced in the findings and throughout the study, the community and school personnel blame the Black parents in Oaktown for gaps in achievement and unequal distribution of resources in school settings. Failing to reflect on social problems in the community and how poverty limits a parent's ability to effectively engage in schools according to their prescriptions of involvement.

### **Implications**

The stories of the Black parents in this study inform the research and challenge the dominant narrative on parent involvement. These stories should dispel the negative stereotypes in society about academic achievement and Black parents level of involvement in their children's

schooling practices. The goal of this work is to connect my findings to practice and policy in an effort to positively impact how marginalized parents and educators contextualize their roles and responsibilities at home and within the school context. It is my expectation that this work will change how educators engage students and parents whose culture and norms differ from their own, and it will help parents effectively advocate for their children's education in a meaningful way. To realize the goal of this study, I present implications for researchers, school personnel, and parents.

### *Researchers*

Researchers must be cognizant of the home and community factors that shape how low-income Black parents engage in schools and the education of their children. The role of the researcher is vital in disseminating information and resources for policymakers and practitioners; they cannot discount the experiences of Black parents when they identify race as the source of their concern and apprehension when engaging in their children's education. It is imperative to include the voice of those who are targeted as uninvolved and disengaged. The parents are the only ones who can provide the best articulation of their rationale behind why and how their engagement differs from normative definitions of parent involvement. By providing time and space for the voices of parents offers an opportunity for open communication and dialogue between school personnel and parents. The voice of Black parents is necessary for an in-depth understanding of the educational system and parents' roles within it (Ladson-Billings, 1988).

Additionally, understanding the EPE framework and building upon its foundation helps to mitigate the barriers that exist between community and schools. It is my hope to expand the use of this framework to further the research and practice on parent involvement/engagement.



### *School personnel*

Schools are instrumental in the social reproduction of underrepresented students through their (mis)education of Black and Brown students. Entering the classroom with preconceived notions of students based on their social position and racial makeup marginalizes students and limits their ability to effectively engage the curriculum. Findings from this study uncovered a barrier that can seem insurmountable for a parent—teacher perception. When teachers are incapable of seeing a child’s potential due to cultural differences they fail the child and restrict social mobility and educational attainment (Epstein, 1989; Lareau, 1987,2003;Irvine, 1990; Delpitt, 2006;Berliner, 2013). It is my recommendation that school districts develop multiple school-community partnership facilitators to bridge the gaps in communication and relationships between the community and schools. The person holding this position must be culturally competent and have experience working with underserved communities. The position would assist the school personnel (social workers, educators, counselors and administrators) in navigating cultural differences and provide training on how to meet the needs of the community, as well as offer support for the staff. It is not enough to provide a professional development training on culturally responsive teaching, the staff must have full buy-in and a support system in place to circumvent conflicts that may arise from a cultural disconnect between personnel and the community. The facilitator will also aid parents with trainings on how to best advocate for and support their children at home and at school. This position is normally viewed as the role of the school social worker (SSW), however it is my experience as a former SSW that many social work programs fail to instruct students on how to navigate cultural differences and this lack of cultural competency in the social worker leads to a denial of effective services for the students and staff. I am not suggesting the school-community facilitator be Black, however it would serve

a district well to have at least one person of color holding the position and definitely one who empathizes and understands the structural and institutional barriers marginalized families face and serve as a liaison for all stakeholders.

### *Parents*

This study does not absolve parents from their role and responsibility to teach and parent their children. Parents must be co-contributors in their children's educational experiences. Parents must also understand they have a voice and regardless of their social class, they are valuable assets and resources to their children's teacher and school. Active and engaging participation shapes the educational outcomes of children, and parents must be present and responsive to the needs of their children, and their teachers.

The parents in this study are the counter-narrative to the literature and dominant culture's view of low-income Black parents. They supported their children academically inside and outside of school through the use of community engagement and social networks. They were advocates for their children and their aspirations for their children to succeed beyond the limitations of their living conditions are no different than those of middle and upper class parents of any racial makeup.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Presently, Black parents are critiqued for a perceived lack of involvement in their children's educational process. It is frequently argued that Black parent involvement is limited due to cultural barriers, as well as parents' past schooling experiences, maltreatment by school personnel, issues with trust, and time poverty due to work commitments. What appears absent from the literature on parent involvement are the voices of marginalized Black parents as to how they construct their roles of involvement in the educational experiences of their children. I

propose the change of the construct of parent involvement to include engaged-involvement as outlined throughout this study. Cooper (2007) emphasizes that traditional parent involvement models rarely account for the many ways that low income and working class African American parents participate in their children's education. These traditional models, instead, privilege white, middle-class behavior norms. (p. 381). An inclusive model of engagement will be beneficial to all stakeholders.

In considering how home community connections shape educational experiences, due to limited time and resources, this study collects the parent perspective only, excluding perspectives from the students. Having students for participants may have information that is critical to understanding whether parent involvement factors into their academic pursuits. Future studies should attempt to collect data from students and other important community members. Research has shown as the student ages through the schooling process, they respond negatively to parental involvement practices (McNeal, 1995, 1999).

As I continue researching this topic, I would like to replicate this work by conducting a study of White parents using the same selection criteria in the Oaktown school district. In my data analysis I would compare and contrast the findings of this study with those of the new study to determine if barriers in involvement are isolated to social class or if race plays a role in how teachers and staff respond to parents living in poverty.

At present, I have yet to find a study that identifies the differences in low-income White parent involvement and Black parent involvement, yet the literature overwhelmingly supports the idea that Black students fail due to non-existent parent involvement and participation. This new study would provide insight into how teacher perceptions change or remain static for low-income students or whether their cultural differences impact how they educate low-income children.

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## APPENDIX A

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects  
528 East Green Street  
Suite 203  
Champaign, IL 61820



March 31, 2015

William Trent  
Ed Organization and Leadership  
351 Education Bldg  
1310 S Sixth St  
Champaign, IL 61820

RE: *Black Parent Involvement: An Untold Story*  
IRB Protocol Number: 14279

Dear Dr. Trent:

Thank you very much for forwarding the modifications to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) office for your project entitled *Black Parent Involvement: An Untold Story*. I will officially note for the record that these minor modifications to the original project, as noted in your correspondence received March 13, 2015: changing title to "Black Parent Involvement: An Untold Story"; and adding an interview with a school administrator; and changing the age group from parents of high school students to parents of elementary school students (children are still not involved as research subjects), have been approved. The expiration date for this protocol, IRB number 14279, is 12/03/2015. The risk designation applied to your project is *no more than minimal risk*.

As your modifications involved changes to consent form(s), I am attaching the revised form(s) with date-stamp approval. Please note that copies of date-stamped consent forms must be used in obtaining informed consent. If modification of the consent form(s) is needed, please submit the revised consent form(s) for IRB review and approval. Upon approval, a date-stamped copy will be returned to you for your use.

Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and approval before the modifications are initiated. To submit modifications to your protocol, please complete the IRB Research Amendment Form (see <http://irb.illinois.edu/?q=forms-and-instructions/research-amendments.html>). Unless modifications are made to this project, no further submittals are required to the IRB.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me at the OPRS office, or visit our Web site at <http://www.irb.illinois.edu>.

Sincerely,

Anita Balgopal, PhD  
Director, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Attachment(s)

c: Mia Lavizzo

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

#### **Phone Interview**

1. What is your name, how old are you?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Were you born and raised in Champaign-Urbana community? If not, where are you from and how long have you resided in this community?
5. What is the highest grade-level you completed in school?
6. What is your occupation?
7. Do you have children in the school district? If so, how many?
8. What's the gender, age, and grade levels?
9. Do your children receive free and/or reduced lunch?
10. Tell me a little bit about your family background (siblings, parents, education, residence)?
11. What are your thoughts/feelings about this community? Schools, employment, racial climate etc.?

#### **In person Interview**

1. How do you define parent involvement? What does parent involvement mean to you?
2. Were your parents involved in your schooling experience as a child?
3. Tell me about your schooling experiences? How would you describe your experience in elementary through high school?
4. What do you think are important goals for your children to reach in school?

5. What do you think a child needs to be successful inside and outside of school?
6. How have you been engaged in your child/children's schooling experiences?
7. Did you enroll your child/children in preschool or a head start program?
8. What kinds of activities do your children participate in outside of school?
9. Are you or your children involved in a local church or place of worship?
10. What are your expectations for your child/children after completing their education?
11. Do you know if your child's school has a policy on parent involvement?
12. If so, do you feel you follow their guidelines? Is yes, how? If no, why not?
13. Is there anything that prevents you from being engaged with your children at school or at home?
14. Tell me about your relationship with your child's teacher
15. Do your children's teachers provide opportunities for you to support them at school or at home?
16. Do you feel your child's teachers talk to you in a way that you have a clear understanding of their expectations for your child(ren)?
17. Based on your experience, do you feel your child's teacher wants him/her to be successful in school? Explain why you feel that way?
18. Does school staff encourage you to participate in your child's school? If so how? If not, please explain why you feel this way?
19. Do you think race plays a role in how teachers treat/teach children in school? Give me some examples of how and why you think this is the case?
20. When speaking with other parents and community members, what do they say about parent involvement? What are their perceptions of community-school relationships?

21. Is the district doing all that they can to engage parents?
22. What are your thoughts about NAAPID (National African American Parent Involvement Day)?
23. Do you have any suggestions or ideas about how to improve parent involvement?

## APPENDIX C

### *PARTICIPANT DATATABLE*

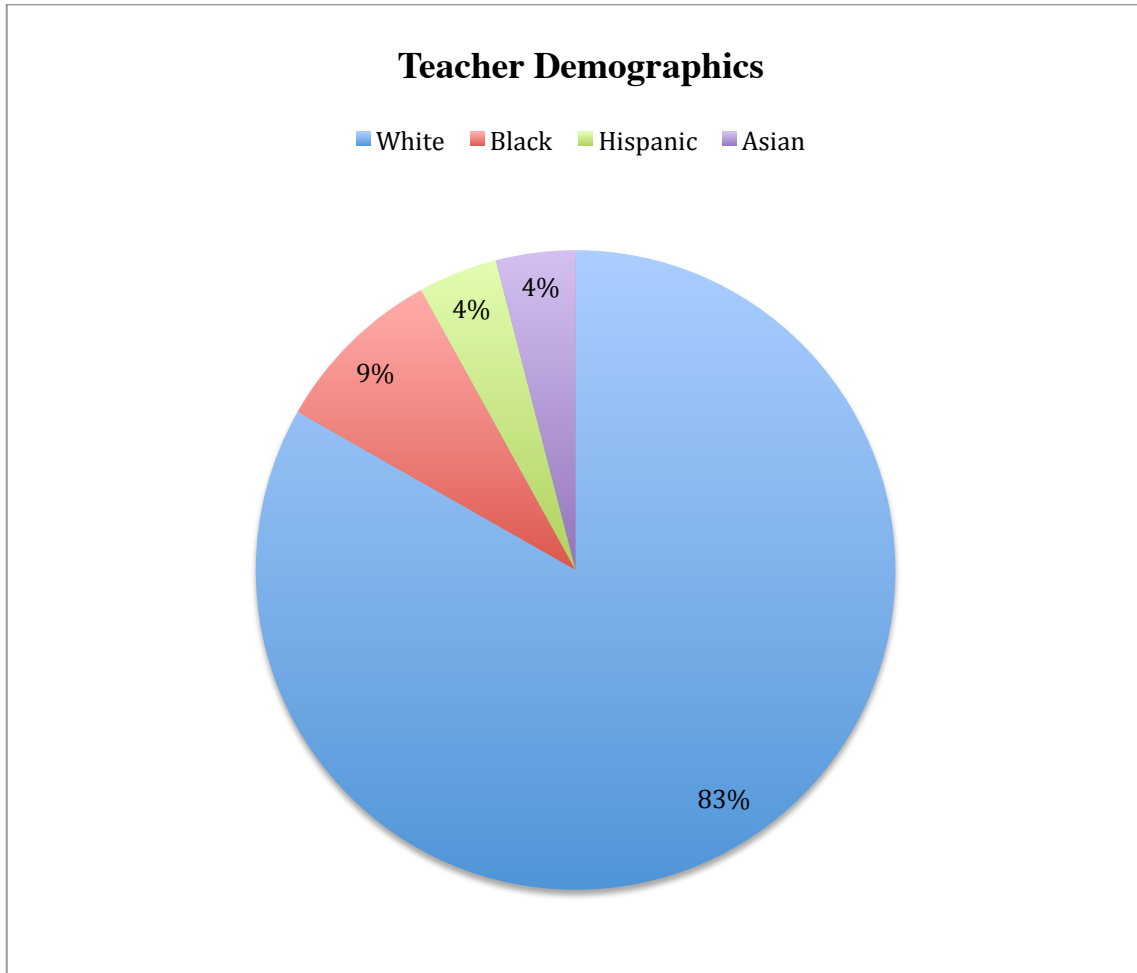
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| <i>Name<br/>(pseudonym)</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Marital Status</i> | <i>Education</i> | <i>Employed</i> | <i>Number of<br/>Children</i> |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Sharon                   | 27         | Single                | Associate degree | Yes             | 2                             |
| 2. Annette                  | 50         | Divorced              | Some College     | Yes             | 4                             |
| 3. Tonja                    | 37         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 2                             |
| 4. Brian & Alicia           | 35/ 33     | Married               | High School      | Yes             | 3                             |
| 5. Stacy                    | 28         | Single                | Some College     | Yes             | 2                             |
| 6. Loren                    | 32         | Divorced              | Bachelor's       | No              | 2                             |
| 7. James                    | 25         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 1                             |
| 8. Tiffany                  | 42         | Engaged               | Bachelor's       | Yes             | 3                             |
| 9. Roslyn                   | 36         | Single                | High School      | Yes             | 2                             |
| 10. Carla                   | 23         | Single                | High School      | No              | 2                             |

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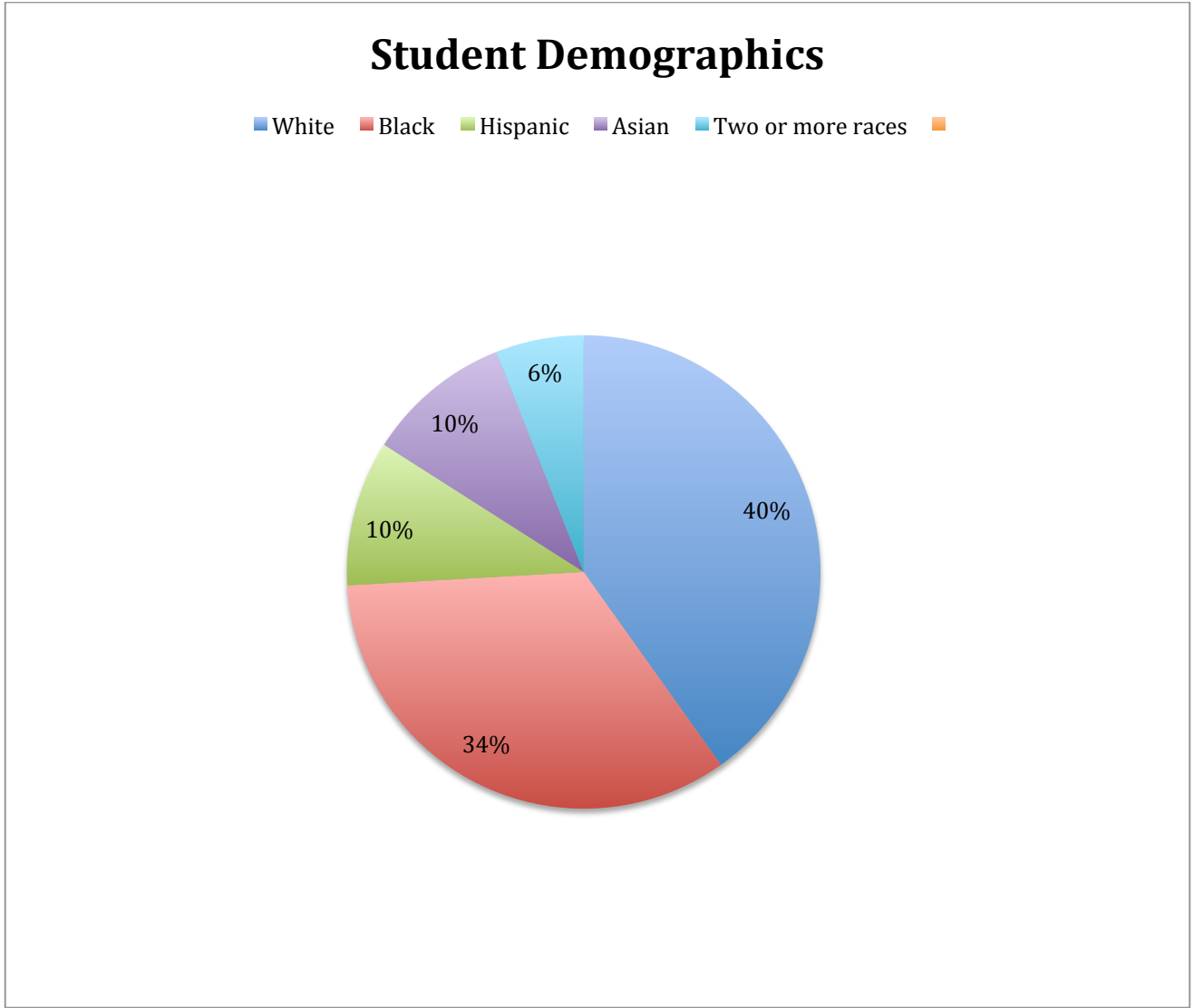
**APPENDIX D**

Figure 1: TEACHER DEMOGRAPHICS



**APPENDIX E**

Figure 2: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS





**APPENDIX F**

Figure 3: STUDENT SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

