African American Parents' Perceptions of Public School:

African American Parents' Involvement in Their Childrens' Educations

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ABSTRACT

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The goals for public schools are to educate all students so that they may attend colleges and/or develop relevant job and citizenship skills. African American students enrolled in American public schools struggle to keep up academically, revealing a so called "achievement gap." Consequently, many African American children are unable to realize their potential and participate as successful contributing citizens. This study examined how African American parents might engage in their children's schooling and how schools might support this participation to better meet the needs of these students.

The segregation and racism historically practiced in public schools has led to negative perceptions between educators and African American families and communities. The gap in traditional measures of academic achievement between Black and White children has been debated and analyzed by scholars, legislators, and practitioners for decades. School based issues associated with this trend are lower teacher expectations for students of color, lack of curriculum rigor, effective teacher development and training, inadequate resources, tracking of African American students into less demanding programs, a lack of appreciation for Black cultures and inappropriate/misguided school administration.

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This study examines African American parents' perceptions of public education and how it impacts Black student success and offers a synopsis of significant events that may have shaped some of these perceptions. Findings include evidence that African American parents perceive that schools do not reach out to them to foster a partnership or encourage participation, but most often engage them when behavior or academic issues arise with their children.

Additional areas for investigation surface by the findings include evidence that the disconnect perhaps does not come from a lack of engagement, but from a lack of active participation and partnership. Parents are left feeling as if they have no influence on school culture. Recommendations for improving school and family interactions that may improve African American student outcomes include teacher led parent-school partnerships, communication outside the classroom and school setting, and consideration for cultural differences.

DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to my family for their unwavering support: My wife, Nycole and my sons, Balthazar and Carter; my parents, Nita and Johnny Howard, Donnie and Ava Robinson; my grandparents, Henry and Cora Lou King and Ms. Bessie Howard; also to Ms. Julia Nooe, MSW.

To my African Ancestors, I may never know your stories, but without your resilience and toughness my story would have never been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTON

Public schools in the United States face a broad range of challenges. One significant to

most public school systems is the disparity between White students and Black students, and the

long-standing concern with historical issues and traumatic consequences that have rippled

through our society and educational system (Leary, 2005). The study of African American

students has been ongoing in public education in recent years, with a new focus on the parents of

African American students because of the ever-widening achievement gap. Federal and State

policies in the United States public schools have elevated parental involvement in schools to a

national priority, in part due to the large number of failing schools and the increased achievement

gap between White students and African American (as well as other ethnic minority) students

(Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Parental involvement has been stressed for

many reasons, from better student performance in a multitude of areas to improved behavior and

lower absenteeism and positive attitudes toward school, it is clear that parents play a vital role in

the academic success of their children (Hayes, 2011).

Hayes (2011) suggests that when considering research on parental involvement and

predictors of different forms of involvement, an area that has not always received adequate

attention is the focus on a more heterogeneous group of urban African American youth. Most of

the general parental involvement literature fails to fully consider not only the role of race, but

also the role that class plays when examining parenting practices within schools. Furthermore,

when race and class were considered, rarely were upper-class African American families a part

of the analysis. This is evidenced by studies that have focused on African American students

and families, most of which reference data collected from underprivileged African Americans

without consideration of the effects of parental involvement across various socioeconomic levels of African American families. Focusing entirely on African American families from low socioeconomic backgrounds can create incomplete findings on potential predictors of parental involvement and/or the influence of parental involvement over student outcomes (Hayes, 2011).

Thompson (2003) posits that it is critical for parents to be involved in the educational processes of their children. However, schools all over the United States have found it challenging to reach parents of color. Many systems do not reach out to this group to gain their perspectives.

Teachers in public education have wide ranging perceptions of Black parents. For example, some believe that Black parents are lazy, poor, and are not committed to education (Howard, 2010). According to statistics from the Department of Education, 83% of American teachers are White. (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2003). Leary (2005) writes that with widespread ideas of White supremacy, a significant gap and discourse between racial and ethnic groups in American society is formed. This gap may skew how public schools view Black parents, and conversely, how Black parents view public schools.

Background of the Study

This qualitative study examines perceptions of eight African American parents whose children are enrolled in the Asheville City School district, and how these parents feel about different aspects of these public schools. Recognizing that there are many areas of the African American experience in relation to the American public school experience, this study explores the experience of African American parents with students enrolled in Kindergarten through fifth grades within the Asheville City School system. An important component and contributing factor to these perceptions is the history and trauma of the African American experience in

schools. Additionally, this study could expose themes that may identify the most and least effective strategies used to involve African American parents as well as new strategies to support them, and to help them feel like they are a part of the school community.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perceptions of parents of African American students in the Asheville City School District. The study focuses on parents' perceptions about their children's district, how they perceive that they and their children are treated by the district, and whether or not they trust the district when it comes to issues such as discipline, academic work, and approachability.

Significance of the Study

School districts across the United States struggle to engage African American parents. Parent engagement is a critical component of K-12 public education because of its ties to the Title I program, and because of the suggested impact on children's educations, especially the education of minority students in relation to the widening achievement gap (Thompson, 2010). This qualitative study may offer more effective ways to engage African American parents to help improve the relationship between Black parents and the local schools that serve them.

Research Questions

This study will examine the perceptions of African American Parents in the Asheville City Schools District as to:

1. How do African American parents perceive their influence now in the school district?

2. Do African American parents think there should be changes in the school district?

3. What would African American parents like their influence to be?

4. Who in the school district has the greatest influence on African American parents?

Key Words

There are several key terms used throughout this study. To clarify meaning, terminology specific to the field is defined here.

Purposeful Sample: Selecting a group of participants who meet criteria (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

In-Depth Interview: Use open-ended questions to gather data on participants' meanings and how they make sense of the events being investigated (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

Interview Guide: Topics and questions are outlined in advance. The researcher determines the sequence and wording during each interview (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

Participant Review: Having the participant review the transcript of their interview. The participant is asked to modify any information from the interview data for accuracy (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

Semistructured Interview Format: The questions being asked have no preset choices. Rather, the participant shares his or her own individual response (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

Validity: Refers to the degree of congruence between the explanation of the phenomena and the realities of the world (McMilan & Schumacher, 2010).

Scope of the Study

This research consists of a qualitative study, conducted by collecting data from personal, in-depth interviews with eight African American parents with elementary school age children. All of these students attend elementary schools in the Asheville City Schools district.

Limitations

The study contains some limitations such as the size of the school district, which has an enrollment of less than 5,000 total students. This limits the number of participants available in the collection of data. Because the study was conducted in only one district, the experiences of Black parents nationwide may not be consistent with these findings. The participants for the study were chosen from parents whose children attend afterschool programs at their respective community centers. This is a limitation in that generally, parents requiring services of afterschool programs tend to be working parents who may not have as much time as non-working parents to access the schools that their children attend. Therefore, their experiences and perceptions of schools vary from those parents who spend more time inside the schools and classrooms. Furthermore, the parents participating in the in-depth interviews are parents of kindergarten through fifth grade students. Their experiences with and perceptions of their children's schools may differ from those who have students in sixth through twelfth grades.

Other limitations are the author's affiliation with this district, racial identity, and social background.   As a former school social worker employed in this district, the researcher has some prior basic knowledge of parent perceptions before conducting research. There is also some knowledge of data regarding the achievement gap, the disproportionate discipline prevalent in this district toward Black students, and the district's lack of retention rates among Black employees and educators. The researcher's status as an African American male means that his perception may be consistent with that of the participants. It might also be a resource because African American parents may be more prone to discuss issues of race with a person of the same ethnic background.

Overview of the Study

       This study examines African American parents' perceptions of public education, in an effort to increase understanding. Through the qualitative research methods in this study, the participants' perceptions provide great insight into Asheville City School district's ability to engage and educate African American students. Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the study, detailing the background, statement of purpose, significance, and research questions. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the historical context of the African American experience in education and a review of the literature used, including landmark court decisions which changed the course of education in this country, school discipline, and the roles teachers play in student success. Research methods are described in Chapter 3, including the selection of participants, research design, and data collection. The data collected in the study is reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 holds the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Historical and Social Context of African American Parents' Experiences with Schooling

To understand issues that may affect African American parents' perceptions of public schools, one must first understand the plight of the African American people and their experiences with American institutions. African Americans have a long and challenging history in the United States, enduring trials such as the hideous brutality of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, school integration and various levels of present day racism. The argument can be made that the legacy of slavery may have left its fingerprints on both the struggles and the achievements of African American students in public schools (Mubenga, 2006).

Laws during and after slavery restricted how much a Black person could accomplish and the amount of education he or she could receive (Legislative Papers, 1830–31 Session of the General Assembly of North Carolina). In some circumstances, Blacks were terrorized if Whites knew or suspected that Black people were being educated, especially in the southern states. Much of the contempt was encouraged and promoted by government. For example, the Acts Past of the General Assembly of North Carolina during the 1830-1831 legislative session mandated that anyone who taught slaves and free Negros to read and write would be punished with a fine of no less than $100.00 dollars and no more than $200.00 dollars, including possible imprisonment; free slaves could receive as many as 39 lashes (Legislative Papers, 1830–31 Session of the General Assembly). These laws reflected the attitudes of that particular time period and the attempts made by Whites to preclude African Americans from receiving an education.

In addition to laws that perpetuated racism and hindered the education of African Americans in those times, there were further setbacks for the race with the implementation of "Black Codes." Leary (2007) explains these as 19th century local and federal laws, passed to limit the physical movement and advancement of enslaved Africans (Leary, 2007). Black Codes were the starting point for Jim Crow laws and for modern day institutional racism (Carpenter, 2013). Wilkerson (2010) suggests that due to and during the implementation of Black Codes and laws, many African American people fell victim to lynchings throughout the South. That is, the act of being beaten, burned or hung (among other hideous things) by white mobs. Jim Crow laws lasted from the 1880's until 1965 in some states. Post emancipation laws promoting segregation and the restriction of resources, or the peonage system of the 20th century a developed system of debt servitude most commonly identified as sharecropping (Wilkerson, 2010). Alexander (2010) suggests that this also led to the racial profiling of the 1990's, that is the deliberate act of law officials and others in positions of administrative authority to interrogate and arrest African Americans primarily because of their racial identity.

Alexander (2010) additionally explains that the implementation of mandatory minimum sentencing laws have had a negative effect on African Americans nationwide. Federal laws and guidelines enacted in the 1980's and 1990's which made crimes (usually drug possession) uniform in terms of sentencing resulted in a disproportionate number of African Americans incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons, further perpetuating the racist system. Tatum (2007) explains that school re-segregation in the 21st century played a role in the intergenerational traumatic legacy of many African American people. Tatum (2007) defines school re-segregation as the legalized practice of educating African Americans in educational settings which are void of ethnic diversity and economic resources and engaged teachers. Based on some of these

findings, there is evidence that many African Americans have developed a mistrust of basic American systems and institutions, developing varied views or perceptions.

Leary (2005) posits that the severity of slavery alone could have impacted the perceptions of African American parents in relation to all public institutions, but especially in public schools. Trauma such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) could present a clear argument as to why many Blacks are resistant to and not trusting of public institutions. This form of trauma may still impact the subconscious minds of many African American parents and children (Leary, 2005).

Leary (2005) writes that African Americans have endured the trauma of slavery and Jim Crow throughout their history in the United States, proposing that many descendants suffer from "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," a condition similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The difference is that the actions of Black parents may be related to the stressors of slavery, brought on by America's investment in White supremacy and the American slave trade tradition (Leary, 2005). If this theory is correct, it provides insight into the actions of many African American parents and why some choose not to trust or engage leaders of public agencies, including public schools.

Smolin (2012) discusses the more recent past, including tragedies such as the Tuskegee experiment - a study designed as a short term examination of the effects of syphilis on human subjects in Macon County, Alabama. Although touted as "short term", the experiment spanned more than forty years. The subjects were all poor and Black. Additionally, they were deceived and uninformed about the study and the drugs that were administered. Smolin (2012) asserts that

because the subjects were Southern Blacks, they were considered expendable at the time, and deemed unworthy of basic ethical considerations.

Similarly, the eugenics projects in North Carolina provide a similar accounting of deception perpetrated on Blacks in the South. The eugenics program spanned from 1929-1973 and was initially designed to target individuals who were mentally disabled or mentally ill. The program eventually began sterilizing significant amounts of African American women (Kaelber, 2014).

Education in the Jim Crow South

Many African American parents of today's students are only one or two generations removed from Jim Crow laws and overt racism in America's public schools. After slavery officially ended in the United States in 1865, African American parents faced new challenges and hardships. American systems seemingly traded the overwhelming severity of chattel slavery with decisively unfair laws that further degraded Black communities and limited their growth. These actions were most intensified by Jim Crow laws which prevailed in the American South (Smith, 2012).

Through the Jim Crow era, segregation of Blacks from Whites became the primary focus of southern legislation. From the end of slavery until the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow laws prevented Blacks from using the same public facilities as Whites, from riding in the front of public transportation buses, and from attending the same schools. As a result, Black facilities – including schools – were viewed as inferior to White ones. Black schools were not given the same resources as White ones. Textbooks at Black schools were outdated or secondhand from

White schools, school buildings were all but forgotten in terms of state budgets and funding, and achievement of Black students was not a concern of leaders in the Jim Crow south (Waugh, 2012).

Certainly, an effective method to slow the progress and growth of any demographic is by denying them access to knowledge and education. As such, the relationship between Jim Crow, public education, and African American parents and students is significant in that it was the beginning of the creation of a legacy of disparity between the races in terms of education (Exum, 2012).

Plessy v. Ferguson

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court heard the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) and upheld the segregation of White and Black students in the Jim Crow south. The foundation for Plessy did not lie in the education realm at all. In 1890, the State of Louisiana passed a law requiring separate accomodations for Blacks and Whites on railway cars. Prominent Black, White, and Creole residents in New Orleans persuaded a bi-racial citizen, Homer Plessy, to buy a ticket for an all White train car. He was subsequently criminally charged and attorneys appealed his conviction on the issue of Constitutionality. On appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court found that it was constitutional to have separate schools, businesses, and public places for Blacks and Whites as long as they were equal (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896).

Sadly, schools in particular tended to be decisively unequal in the south, with many accounts of dilapidated buildings, second-hand books, and lack of transportation for African

American students. It became evident that separate facilities for Black students would never be equal to those of their White counterparts (Landman, 2004).

Brown v. Board of Education

From 1935 until 1938, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked to attack Jim Crow laws where they appeared to be the weakest, which was in the area of education. Case after case was filed, seeking equality for Blacks in the educational setting until finally, in 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a handful of cases dealing with equality in education, among them was the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954). The landmark decision that was eventually reached would change the face of education in the South forever.

With assistance from the NAACP, the case was filed after Black parents and some White socialites located in Topeka, Kansas decided to take action against the abysmal conditions in Black schools such as dilapidated buildings, overcrowded class rooms, no text books or insufficient texts. African American teachers received less training and there were limits to what African American students could be taught. Additionally, many of the African American parents were sharecroppers and would need to pull their children from school often to farm, generally at the request of the White farmers. This resulted in campaigns to resolve these issues and gain better accommodations for Black students (Linder, 2011).

Black parents advocated for schools that were equal under the law. In 1954, when the Court reached a final decision in the Brown case, Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) was overturned. Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the opinion of the Court, stating that "in the field of public

education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" and that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." (Brown v. Board, 1954).

The Brown v. Board (1954) case was a great victory for many but caused uproar nationwide, bringing about great protest from every level of government. The actions of many Whites and White educators could have framed some of the perceptions of Black parents and students alike. Most White leaders and educators in the south thought that the outcome of the Brown vs. Board (1954) case was absurd (http://www.naacpldf.org/). Many agreed that the decision was thrust upon Whites and they did not have the time or resources to make accommodations for their children. Many White leaders and educators believed that schools and communities should be segregated and should remain that way because it was natural, and that individuals preferred to be with their own (Henry & Feuerstein, 1999). The actions that followed these concerns were profound in many White communities. Numerous White educators, leaders and parents either created or advocated for the creation of private academies funded by public vouchers, gerrymandering attendance districts, and creating entrance exams to prevent Black children from attending. Although many of these proposed methods did not materialize in support of White students, these efforts further disenfranchised African American students and schools in the south remained segregated for years. In some states, segregation existed well into the 1970s (Henry & Feuerstein, 1999).

Governor Orval Faubus had perhaps the most prominent stance against African American students attending public schools: he sent the National Guard to stop nine Black students from attending class at Little Rock Central High School, in Little Rock, Arkansas. His stance prompted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to federalize the National Guard and order them back

to the armory and deploy the 101st Airborne to enact a federal court order to protect the nine students attempting to attend the school (Brown, 2006).

Lyons and Chesly (2004) indicate that many African American administrators and teachers believed that the Brown v. Board (1954) decision benefited many Black educators and students. However, many of these individuals reported that the decision had a myriad of unintentional consequences. Green (2012) suggests that after the passage of Brown v. Board (1954), attitudes of White teachers remained. Communities were unmoving and segregated. Black students were bussed into mainly large White school districts (Green, 2012). Moreover, many Black principals and teachers lost their administrative positions and teaching positions, especially in southern states (Lyons & Chesley, 2004).

Henfield (2011) describes these unintentional consequences as microaggressions, explaining that discourse on racism has shifted from one of overt acts, such as legal segregation or Jim Crow laws, to a more contemporary view of subtle discriminatory behaviors and expressions. These implicit forms of racism have been described as racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily" verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Henfield, 2011).

According to Henfield (2011), there are three types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are defined as intentional verbal or nonverbal attacks. Henfield (2011) explains the behavior with these examples, a White student hurling a racist epithet at a Black student while walking down a hallway is an example of a microassault. Microinsults are defined as unintentional rude and insensitive verbal and

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nonverbal communications that demean someone's racial heritage or identity. A Black student being asked by a White student, "How did you make it into a gifted program?" would be an example. The perpetrator of this form of microaggression is typically unaware of the negative implications of such a statement, but it is clearly understood as such by the recipient. Microinvalidations are defined as verbal and nonverbal communications that serve to exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, when a Black student is told to stop being so sensitive when responding with disdain to a racist joke or that race is unimportant because we are all people, their feelings are being nullified, as well as the salience of their experience as racial beings (Henfield, 2011).

Jackson, (2007) suggests the impact of this restructuring of schooling was significant for many families because most Black schools were located in Black communities. Teachers and principals were very respected in communities of color and the schools and their personnel created strong relationships with parents. The unintended results of the Brown vs. Board (1954) decision may have created a ripple effect moving forward, resulting in increased concern by African American parents about the safety and achievement of their children. Additionally, Jackson (2007) suggests that the Supreme Court case resulted in the most social gains for African Americans, signifying that they have managed to maintain more education, wealth and opportunities, and the ability to move into the middle or upper middle class.

Nevertheless, Jackson, (2007) describes themes relating to these issues including incompetent school leadership, educators who view Black people in a negative light based on America's history and portrayal of them, and political leaders who took positions against the Brown vs. Board (1954) case by exploiting bigotry and racism to maintain power by opposing it.

Jackson (2007) further asserts educational leaders and teachers should consider the implications of language used by politicians, such as reverse discrimination, forced bussing, and quotas. By fueling hatred, coupled with the media's negative portrayal of African American people, Black communities became stagnated in regard to business and educational opportunities (Jackson, 2007).

The Need for Minority Mentors

American public schools face even more scrutiny with the implementation of common core curriculum and attaching student progress to teacher accountability. The largest gaps are between White and Black students. Anthony, Kritsonis, and Herrington (2007) indicate that seventeen percent (17%) of the student population nationwide is African American. African Americans make up six percent (6%) of the teaching force, and there are many schools without one African American male teacher represented. Most students see people of color in positions such as custodians, security guards and P.E. teachers, but the minority representation is much lower in core curriculum classes, in elementary schools, and especially in administration.

Seemingly, schools focus their hiring efforts of African American males to manage African American male students' behaviors, which are perceived as "bad" (Anthony et al., 2007). The recruiting of Black male teachers is increasing, with schools seeking to place Black male mentors in core classes and at the elementary level. The two most robust programs are the Griot Program at Marygrove College in Detroit Michigan and the Call Me Mister Program at Clemson University in South Carolina. Some colleges and universities are exploring the idea of recruiting teachers from the student athlete pools on college campuses, citing that colleges have very little issues with attracting Black males to their college or university (Byrd, et al., 2011).

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However, the challenge continues to be encouraging student athletes to pursue the teaching profession (Byrd et al., 2011). Moreover, Byrd et al. point out that many student athletes pursue coaching positions and positions that will pay significantly higher salaries than teaching. The research also suggests that student athletes are often under advised about career tracks and degrees they should obtain, advisors stating that many athletes choose sports management degrees which limits their opportunities to receive a teaching certificate (Byrd et al., 2011). Academic advisors can also unconsciously discourage student athletes from the teaching profession because of pressure to help keep them eligible for play. Additionally, most teaching programs require a high GPA which can deter black male college athletes (Byrd et al., 2011).

<u>White Teacher Perceptions of African American Parents and Students</u>

According to studies from the National Center for Education Information and The National Center of Education, released in 2011 and 2013, respectively, statistics show that the majority of teachers in the United States are White (Goldring, Gray, Bitterman, & Broughman, 2013). Feistritzer (2011) points out that there is an even percentage of White educators in all settings, rural and urban. With such a wide distribution of educators of the same race and similar class across all educational settings, it is reasonable to consider communication and cultural challenges between African American parents and White educators.

Henfield and Washington (2012) emphasize when discussing race and 'Whiteness' with teachers, the dialogue further complicates the issues of race in the classroom. Discomfort and obliviousness are assurances of 'Whiteness' within educational settings that are homogenous. Defensiveness among White teachers is not uncommon when notions of 'Whiteness' and White privilege are invoked. Teachers often exhibit confusion and frustration when they dialogue

about race and their relevance to classroom instruction are initiated. Most often this is because they do not identify as members of a racial group or they adopt the notion of unearned racial privileges (Henfield & Washington, 2012). Some active White teachers have seldom considered the implications of racial privilege or what impact the dominant cultural perspective has on culturally diverse students (Henfield & Washington, 2012). White educators report that one of their greatest concerns is that many White teachers have limited personal and professional encounters with individuals who are racially, ethnically, linguistically and culturally different from themselves (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests that many teachers in urban or multicultural settings are inadequately prepared to work within multiracial classrooms. Pre-service teachers have expressed concern with being underprepared in regards to receiving training for teaching diverse students (Gay, 2002). This unfamiliarity with diverse students can leave teachers ill-prepared to function effectively in multiracial schools, which may contribute to how White teachers respond to African American parents in the school environment (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

It is possible that Black parents view the disconnect between White teachers and Black students as a negative aspect of their child's school experience. However, with the right training and preparation, White teachers can be effective when serving African American students and communicating with parents. To reach this goal, teachers should be conscious of their racial and cultural backgrounds and biases, and how those factors impact their beliefs about students and learning. They must employ strategies that support rather than alienate minority students (Dickar, 2008). Howard (2006) discusses in his study the interactions between White teachers and African American students. He explains that several of the teacher participants needed

support and assistance to clarify pedagogical strategies for instructing African American

students. Some White teachers were even confused as to why consideration of race and culture

was necessary for instruction.

<div align="center">Deficit Thinking</div>

According to Milner (2006), in the eyes of African American parents, White teachers and

administrators expect less of their children. This attitude further increases trust issues between

parents and educators. One frequently discussed theory regarding relationships between White

teachers and Black students is "deficit thinking."   Murray (2012) defines this issue more closely,

proposing types of deficit thinking:

> Some parents believed African American children are disproportionately labeled as
>
> having attention disorders or other disabilities. They also believed the consequence of
>
> labeling, especially around issues of behavior, prevents a child from having a "second
>
> chance" in which underlying issues remain unaddressed and low expectations follow a
>
> child from grade to grade.

This behavior, or way of thinking, has an impact on learning in the classroom. Deficit

thinking manifests as a fixation with African American students' differences and categorizes

these differences as impairments to learning (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Consequently, when

issues of academic difficulties arise, the victim is often blamed (Milner, 2006).   Many Black

parents can distinguish this difference through their own experiences in public education and

through community social norms portrayed in the media establishing certain boundary issues

(Sleeter & Grant, 2007). That is, professionals use poverty or disadvantages to drive policies and

methods which lower expectations because educators think that students of poverty, or subgroups such as African American or Latino students cannot meet the same high expectations of middle class or White students. This deficit thinking behavior can cause teachers to lower their expectations of African American students (Ford, 2004). The results imply that it is possible that African American parents' perceptions of the public school system can often mean that they see schools and school administrators and personnel as a form of threat instead of a place of safety and encouragement for their children. Black parents tend to have high expectations of their children in public schools. However, due to deficit thinking among White teachers, there may be substandard curriculum and rigor for Black students, and these lowered expectations may lead to problems and misunderstandings with African American parents (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Murray (2012) indicates that the relationship between African American parents and teachers is complicated because African American parents may have the perceptions that White teachers lower standards and treat Black children less favorably. This can also be represented in teachers' attitudes toward African American students and parents, implying that White teachers focus on student behaviors while overlooking academic needs; instead, they focus on relevant curriculum to support Black students and academic achievement. Teachers have the power to support student growth or hinder it (Murray, 2012). Anagnostopoulous (2003) surmised that teachers reduce homework assignments and eliminate required readings for African American students, further hindering their academic achievement.

Carter and Goodwin state that some educators attempt to justify this behavior by citing teachers attributing student failures to what they perceive to be chaotic home environments that

complicate learning. Unfortunately, the existence of deficit thinking among in-service and pre-service teachers seems consistent and ongoing.

<p style="text-align:center">Discipline, Tracking, and Labeling</p>

Similarly, the overwhelming disproportionate discipline tactics applied by school administrators has had a profound impact on Black communities. Skiba, Eckes and Brown (2009) state that the removal of students for a short term may be reasonable at the time of disruption; however, frequent suspensions of African American students may be an intrusion of their civil rights by eliminating the opportunity for them to learn. Disproportionate or even inappropriate discipline measures have been a frequent concern of parents and one of the many issues that surface when Black parents are asked to participate in school activities (Skiba et al., 2009).

Murray's (2012) study further revealed that many Black parents choose not to engage with their children's teachers or school because of discipline issues and feel that schools only reach out to them when there is a perceived problem in regards to how their children are treated by school officials. Murray (2012) asserts that some parents feel that their children are mislabeled and targeted, and students have reported that teachers are "being mean" to them and not supporting them academically; again, the attention is seemingly magnified only when there is a behavioral issue.

Furthermore, the Black family is often portrayed as lazy and not committed to education. Davis posits that African-American students' academic achievements cause discomfort in most

educational settings because some educators do not understand the educational experience of the African American people or how they learn (Davis, 2007).

Black Boys and the New Jim Crow

African American parents will likely face many new challenges as public education continues to evolve. Some factors that may influence behavior and increase stress among Black boys are environmental challenges. Many experts agree that the rapidly increasing population of poorly educated African American men is increasing and these young men are becoming more disconnected to mainstream society (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). National statistics and studies have indicated that African American males are overrepresented in juvenile detention centers and prisons and underrepresented in graduation rates, and on college campuses (Hines et al., 2013). Additionally, African American males are consistently being reported as underachieving in today's schools.

The Schott Foundation for Public Education (2011) monitors the progress of African American males. According to their study, nearly half of African American males do not graduate from high school. Black males – more than any other ethnic group - experience unemployment and underemployment, have more health concerns, and have less access to health care, die younger, and are many times more likely to be sent to jail for longer periods of time. The data mirrors school discipline practices and outcomes with Black males being overrepresented in almost every discipline category. Other influences range from parenting styles, poor parental supervision and monitoring, inconsistent disciplinary practices, and infrequent parent-adolescent communication, and all have been linked to negative behavioral outcomes among adolescents.

Furthermore, 43% of African American homes have single mothers as opposed to 12% of non-African American families (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2011). The US. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights brief, completed in March of 2014, found that Black preschoolers make up 18% of the preschool population and represent 48% of the preschool suspensions and White preschoolers make up 43% with a 26% rate of suspensions. Therefore, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than White students; on average 5% of White students receive suspensions opposed to 16% of Black students. Black students are more likely to be referred to law enforcement and be arrested in public school. Additionally, Black students with disabilities are more likely to be arrested and disproportionately disciplined in school. Black students also have a higher rate of exclusion and are more likely to be restrained in the public school setting (US. Department of Education, The Office of Civil Rights, March, 2014).

With new measures in accountability, many educators and school professionals are focused on ways to successfully work with and educate African American students. Some teachers have expressed discontent with their evaluations, pay and promotions being tied to student achievement, especially minority sub-groups. Some educators believe this model is justified because oftentimes Black students come to school unprepared for kindergarten, which places them at a disadvantage for their entire K-12 career. To compensate for these disadvantages, researchers offer that minority students will be overrepresented in many special education categories. Anthony et.al. (2007) explain that Black boys are three times as likely to be labeled learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or retarded in public schools nationwide.

The Achievement Gap

The gap or deficit that African American students experience is one of the most pressing issues in American public education. Although educators and researchers have committed to studying this topic, problems still exist and very little progress has been made to correct them (Davis, 2007). The achievement gap is described mostly by the consistent margin between White and Black students. Even though there are significant gaps with other minority groups, the largest margin remains between these two groups. The achievement gap is a challenging mixture of several factors. Blackford and Khojasteh's (2013) research suggests that after the Brown decision, Black people thought that schools would be more equal under the law. However, a study in the 1960's by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed a disparity between Black and White students (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013).

The disparity in academic achievement is now known as the achievement gap among education scholars. Berlak (2008) surmises that the achievement gap could be a result of inferior Black student performance based on history and culture. Conversely, Blackford and Khojastech (2013) place the responsibility on poor teaching and teaching practices. They suggest the achievement gap could be due to inadequate schools and less rigorous curriculum. Despite efforts in education, for many black students who live in poverty, the disparities continue to exist (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013). Long (2011) suggests that the achievement gap can also be attributed to low teacher pay, less resources in poorer school districts, and teacher retention, saying that teachers are quick to leave when offered more money or better schools with less issues.

Davis (2007) asserts that African American culture was created during the period of chattel slavery, and that the thoughts, feelings and behaviors from that era may still exist in the people. The damage and resistance to change conceived in the inherit belief system was pushed onto slaves, making them believe that they were intellectually inferior.

The biggest learning gaps affect African American males, and their largest deficits are usually in the area of literacy. Schools often hold literacy events to provide parents with reading strategies and to support them as they hope to make the literacy gap smaller. Often teachers find it challenging to bring parents in for the instruction (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). One of the concerns expressed by teachers is that many parents are very young and may not have been successful in school themselves. Other factors include the overwhelming poverty that some parents face, transportation issues, and low literacy rates. Teachers tend to be discouraged by the attendance rates of parents at school functions, some reporting that at open house events as few as 5 out of 19 parents showed up; the year before attendance was even worse (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000).

McLoyd, Hill, and Dodge (2005) collected data about African American families in 2002 which showed that nearly one half (48%) of all African American families were married-couple families, as compared with eighty-two percent (82%) of non-Hispanic white families. Forty-three percent (43%) of African American families were maintained by women with no spouse present, and nine percent (9%) were maintained by men with no spouse present. The corresponding figures for non-Hispanic white families were thirteen percent (13%) and five percent (5%), respectively. During this period, almost half (48%) of African American children lived with a single mother. When those living with a single father five percent (5%) were included, more than

half (53%) of African American children were living with a single parent. This contrasts with sixteen percent (16%) of non-Hispanic White children living with a single mother and four percent (4%) living with a single father (McLoyd et al., 2005). From the data reflected here, it can be surmised that if one is a single mother with multiple children of different ages, emphasis is placed on survival and day-to-day living, even though African American parents want their children to succeed in school. Despite the fact that teachers may feel frustrated with parent involvement, one must consider the harsh reality of being a single Black mother with significant economic disadvantages (McLoyd et al., 2005).

Yan (1999) suggests that teachers should consider that there is a sharp contrast based on the data presented. It is more likely that the frustrated teacher grew up in a two-parent home with multiple supports and sufficient transportation, factors that drastically change one's life perception and norms. Yan discovered in his study of high achieving African American students from low-income home environments that parents of such students engaged in distinctive parent-child interactions. That is, they typically created emotionally supportive home environments, engaged in frequent and meaningful dialogue with their children, helped them with homework, and communicated clear and consistent behavioral limits and expectations to them. Yan analyzed other cases of high achieving Black students and found that Black parents' efforts promoted their children's positive racial/ethnic socialization and helped to promote the latter's academic success as a response to racism and discrimination.

Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that the focus of many of the strategies used by White teachers to support the education of African American children has been on academic achievement. If implemented correctly, the strategies could bolster student outcomes and parent support. Ladson- Billings maintains that teachers should exhibit confidence in African American students, presenting to them high expectations and high academic standards while affirming their cultural identity. If teachers affirm these students, they may gain the support of Black parents which could result in a more positive view of American public school systems. Some scholars believe that this statistical makeup could affect African American parents' perceptions of how public schools operate and the tactics used by many of the White leaders and teachers because there is a possibility that they may not trust teachers based on race and past mistrust.

On the other hand, perceived fears of African American parents and students by White teachers are usually based on race and gender. Thompson (2003) suggests that some White educators believe Black parents are unwilling to participate in school functions, help with homework, or be supportive of their children's educations. Even with evidence that Black parents are very supportive of their children's educations, trauma may have falsely portrayed many African American parents and created a fabricated perception of Black parents and children alike (Thompson, 2003). Other problems between African American parents and White teachers could be communication, body language, voice and tone. Murray (2012) states that several other issues may also be factors: Black parents need communication and advocacy skills; Black parents have reported that they feel educators stereotype their children. These negative

relationships between teachers and parents may affect students' behavior and performance (Murray, 2012).

<center>Poverty and the New Segregation</center>

With an increase in urban renewal in many cities, Black communities and neighborhoods are being challenged by widespread gentrification. Rothstein and Santow (2012) suggest that African American parents of school-age children in many urban centers must readjust to life in their own communities. The public school is the center of such change and families increasingly move from the familiar to the unknown, sometimes leading to increasing mistrust and skepticism between African American parents, teachers and school administrators (Rothstein & Santow, 2012). Bridges, Awokoya and Messano (2012) state in a 2012 United Negro College Fund study that African American parents are more likely to trust clergy, church members, other parents, or the actual teachers than public school administrators (Bridges et al., 2012).

The academic growth and success of African American students have a serious impact on communities' short-term economic recovery and long-term growth (Bridges et al, 2012). The importance of African American parents' participation in public schools has communal and national implications. Their study further contends that educators should earn parents' trust and appeal to parents' desires for their children to attend college. It revealed that most parents feel that schools do not prepare their children for college. Ironically, these same parents report that their childrens' schools are excellent or pretty good (Bridges et al., 2012). African American parents and students reported that the race of the teacher was not significant as long as the teacher was empathetic, effective and fair (Casteel, 2000).

What is Parent Involvement?

A multitude of studies define parental involvement as specific acts of engagement, such as helping children with their homework, volunteering in schools, or attending parent teacher conferences (Jeynes, 2010). Many of the studies based on these measurements are often based on general ideas of parent involvement and do not include culturally distinct parenting techniques (El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drazl, 2010). For example, African American parents may use unique techniques that encourage behaviors that develop and promote their children's academic outcomes (Neblett, Chavous, Nguyen, and Sellers, 2009). However, much of the culturally distinct behaviors of African American parents is often not reflected in current parent involvement literature which may result in a perception that African American parents are less involved in their children's academic lives than they actually are (Roberts, 2011).

Some literature suggests that African American parents may show their involvement through enrichment activities such as sporting events, celebrations (honors, school plays, concerts) along with checking homework and correspondence through students' journals or logs (Bridges et al., 2012). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) (NCLB) specifically outlined many definitions of parent involvement. Moreover, the policy outlined the importance of parents involvement at the local school level, and additionally the NCLB Act tied Title I funds to incentivize LEA's to encourage schools to encourage parents to be more involved in their children's educations, especially in underserved areas (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). However, the law created unforeseen challenges, especially with individuals and families that live below poverty in urban or rural areas. Examples of these challenges would be single parent homes with multiple siblings, parent(s) having multiple jobs to take care of household expenses,

food shortages and lack of transportation (Trotman, 2001). Socioeconomic challenges changes the traditional definition of parent involvement additionally the economic pressures suggest that African American parents have developed ways to compensate for these inequalities such as, making sacrifices so that their children can attend better school, reducing chores so that their children have more time to study, and discussing the value of hard work (Watson, Sanders-Lawson & McNeal, 2012).

<div align="center">Methods for Engaging Parents</div>

Building relationships with disenfranchised or marginalized populations is necessary to gain the trust of parents, given the historical perceptions of public schools and other institutions in the United States. School leaders often encourage teachers to reach out to students and their families but when school events only occur once or twice a year, an environment that concentrates on relationship building does not exist.

Christianakis offers several models that can be explored by school leaders; one is the parent-teacher partnership model. The partnership model is made up of six components:

(1) Parenting: to encourage and support learning at home.

(2) Communication: to exchange information between home and school.

(3) Volunteering: to recruit and train parents to help in school.

(4) Learning at Home: to train parents for homework and to create learning environments at home.

(5) Decision Making: to involve parents in school governance, such as the PTA, committees, and councils.

(6) Collaborating with Community: to coordinate resources and work from civic organization & businesses to strengthen and bolster community ties.

This method supports children as students in the home environment as well as in schools. Christianakis (2011) contends that this is effective because students have better outcomes when teachers and parents work together.

Another way schools can encourage parents is by involving them in the school decision-making process. Christianakis (2011) describes this method of engagement as the Empowerment Model. He proposes that by encouraging parents to engage with schools, the empowerment model could influence policy and power structures within schools to create a more recognizable culture based on the needs of various communities. Ultimately, the result is better outcomes for the students that live in the community. Additionally, the parent empowerment model may also help parents feel more connected to the school community. Christianakis (2011) emphasizes that the model requires a high level of social networking and interaction. Schools may need to recruit school liaisons to facilitate meeting parents' needs and advocating for students.

Teachers also reported that they felt the lack of parent involvement was due to the impersonal forces and nature of a large school district. Parents thought the school district was unresponsive to their children's learning needs and therefore resisted the school's attempts to support them (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Some teachers observed that parents are fully engaged through elementary school and their involvement slowly declines as students enter

middle and high school. Many argue that poor parent involvement is a result of poor parenting.
Others believe that African Americans are at a 20% disadvantage based on White supremacy
practices in the United States.

<u>A Working Model</u>

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system in Charlotte, North Carolina, has seen
significant growth in student population, and in their African American student population. The
system is in the process of building community partnerships with parents in the Charlotte area,
specifically African American parents. Cousins, et al. (2008) suggest the program used by the
Charlotte school system, known as the Math Science Equity Program (MSEP) is built on the idea
of the foundation of community organization and development theory. The Charlotte
community received data that Black students were not enrolling in high level Math and Science
courses. It was concluded that the most logical pathway to increase students' readiness for
college is for schools to build partnerships with the parents and stakeholders in the Black
community (Cousins et al., 2008).

The MSEP partnership considered the following factors as the program was
implemented: the community's social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics in
contemporary and historical contexts (including indigenous and official community stakeholders
and leaders in development and implementation activities); the need to employ an empowerment
model that built upon the strengths of program participants; the desire to resist "top down"
approaches in which social service agency experts or academics unilaterally control and enforce
programs for community residents; and the impact of social and cultural norms and interests that

motivate and give meaning to the lives of people in whose communities change is sought (Cousins, et al., 2008).

Many other districts like Charlotte-Mecklenburg implement programs to address issues surrounding the achievement gap among their own Black student populations. However, schools seldom meet students and families where they are (Sealey-Ruiz & Lewis, 2011). The Charlotte school system used a comprehensive strategy, working with barbershops and beauty shops, as well as local businesses and sports teams to support African American parents in familiar settings where they feel most comfortable, also this shows Black parents that educators are willing to meet them were they are to achieve this goal (Cousins et al., 2008).

<div align="center">Strategies for Success</div>

The other aspect of Black parent involvement related to high achieving Black students is the association of varsity sports. O'Bryan, Braddock, and Dawkins (2006) claim that the potential of sports to bring parents, specifically African American parents, to schools, cannot be over-emphasized. As a result of their child's athletic involvement, sports may overshadow the skepticism and perceptions of discrimination of African American parents. School-based sports participation has the potential to bring parents in direct contact with the school and school personnel, where they may have otherwise been reluctant to venture (O'Bryan et al., 2006).

School officials should strongly consider promoting literacy efforts around sporting events, given the data in this study. By doing so, teachers can meet parents and build solid relationships to stress academic success (O'Bryan et al., 2006). Sporting events also present opportunities for the formation of social capital by bringing parents on campus. In fact, seventy-

six percent (76%) to ninety-one percent (91%) of the parents acknowledged that they were likely to very likely to discuss their child's academic performance while attending a school sporting event. As school reform efforts continue to search for ways to improve the academic achievement of African American students, parents, teachers, researchers, and policymakers might consider the potential for increasing parental educational involvement through school-based sports participation (O'Bryan et al., 2006).

Collaboration between families can also be very effective. Families can communicate better with schools when they have peers or families that understand their circumstances and needs. Huang and Mason (2008) discovered that home visits, classroom volunteer programs, PTO/PTA involvement, and conferences foster relationships between families and students as well as families and schools. Among these practices, family education programs are widely used to encourage parental involvement in their children's learning. Families who participate in their children's education prefer family education programs because of the tangible services offered, such as materials and respite child care. Huang and Mason offer that schools should provide opportunities for families to meet and share thoughts and ideas about how to best educate their children with other families. Additionally, these programs allow parents to realize that they are not alone in having certain issues, and peer support provides them with opportunities to give as well as receive assistance. However, families vary tremendously in their structures, needs, and resources (Huang & Mason, 2008).

Effective school outreach considers all possible situations based on need. This is very important when developing good parent involvement programs in which an effective community assessment is completed to gauge the need of the population that the school community is trying

to reach. Educators often remove themselves from the reality of poverty and the serious

constraints it has on the most disenfranchised populations. School leaders should consider as a

general rule that all individuals and families want what is best for their children. Districts should

consider building strong relationships with colleges to train and support teachers that may work

in high poverty areas where the majority of students are students of color (Sealey-Ruiz & Lewis,

2011).

CHAPTER 3

REASEARCH METHOD

Introduction

American public schools face many challenges with regard to the achievement gap between African American and White students (O'Sullivan, 2013). Schools have begun to explore many strategies to decrease the achievement gap between these two groups, but this issue remains at the forefront of American education (Pitre, 2014). The reason for such focus is because of changes in school policies and expectations for all public school children (O'Sullivan, 2013). Educators and researchers have discovered that the increase in parent participation is a significant factor in lessening the achievement gap in this country. However, some schools and communities find it difficult to engage African American parents, especially those who live below the poverty level (Whaley & Noël, 2012).

This study utilized a qualitative design to explore perceptions of African American parents about their local school district, to determine what influences their participation in public schools. These are in-depth interviews based on the perceptions of African American parents and how they perceive their local school district. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) suggest that the in-depth interview study is how participants conceive their own world and how they make sense of the in their environment (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Through the in-depth interview process, this methodology distinguishes the opinions and patterns of thought from African American parent participants regarding their perceptions of the local school district.

Research Questions

This study explored the perceptions of African American Parents in the Asheville City Schools District as to:

1. How do African American Parents perceive their influence now in the school district?

2. Do African American Parents think there should be changes in the school district?

3. What would African American Parents like their influence to be?

4. Who in the school district has the greatest influence on African American parents?

Selection of Participants

For the purpose of this study, I selected homogenous participants based upon specifically identified criteria (Patton, 1990). Participants consisted of eight (8) African American parents of school children in grades Kindergarten through Fifth grade, enrolled in the Asheville City Schools district. Efforts were made to use participants who were both male and female and from different socio-economic backgrounds, but the parents who agreed to be interviewed as a part of this study were all female.

The Asheville City Schools district is located in the city of Asheville which is the County of Buncombe in the State of North Carolina. According to the U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts (2013), the city of Asheville has an estimated 83,417 residents of   these, an estimated 13.2% of these residents are identified as African American suggesting that there is a significant number of potential respondents to complete this study. The Asheville City Schools estimated demographics is total population 4,327 African American students alone are an estimated 24% of the total student population demographics (ncpublicschools.org 2012-2013 Facts and Figures).

Validity and Reliability of Research

Validity is defined in McMillan and Schumacher (2010) as, "the degree of congruence between the explanation of the phenomena and the realities of the world" (p.330). O'Donoghue (2007) suggests the following to support validity and reliability:

> The development of an audit trail has become an accepted strategy for demonstrating the stability and trackability of data and the development of theory in qualitative studies. The permanent 'audit trail' created in this study allows one, if required to 'walk the readers through' the work from the beginning to the end so that they can understand the path taken and the trustworthiness of the outcomes. (p.100).

Transparency with the work done in research lets readers understand the process a researcher has used to obtain the conclusions (Golafshami, 2003 p. 599). Hence, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcribed interview with a process known as participant review (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Furthermore, for transparency in order to increase the level of validity of this study, the interviews were recorded. I used the member checking as a validity measure. Member checking permits the participants to confirm the meaning of their responses (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Potential for Research Bias

I am an African American man with experience working as a paid employee of Asheville City Schools with students and families that are considered "at risk" in a variety of settings within the City of Asheville. I have collaborated with several of the groups and agencies that serve many of the same students and families who will be participants in this study. I also have experience as a professional development leader and have done work with many schools, groups, and agencies including training and lectures. This work has influenced my interest in African

American parent's involvement in public schools. It has also increased my concerns about the current challenges faced by black students, prompting me to question why these particular groups seem to have low or no participation within their school communities. My background and past experiences are important in this qualitative inquiry, as they are not standardized instruments, but utilize the researcher as instrument. Patton (2002) eloquently indicates that the human being is the instrument of qualitative methods and that the credibility of the qualitative methods depends on the competence of the person doing the fieldwork. Although researcher as instrument is deemed as one of the great strengths of qualitative inquiry, it can also be a potential weakness. Researcher as an instrument is a strength "as it allows human insight and experience and experience to blossom into new understandings and new ways of seeing the world" (Patton, 2002, p.513). However, it is dependent upon the researcher's skills and training. Patton (2002) suggests that these background characteristics are important and relevant to know because knowing how the researcher was received in the setting, and what sensitivity the researcher brings to the issues under study is vital.

Knowledge, understanding and previous experience with qualitative inquiry under research experts contribute to the credibility of the researcher /instrument. As self as researcher, I am the key instrument in data collection and analysis, using inductive analysis in order to understand the phenomena under study.

<u>Recruiting Protocol</u>

The population for this study was African American parents of kindergarten through fifth grade students enrolled in the Asheville City Schools District in Asheville, North Carolina, in the county of Buncombe. For the purpose of this study, participants were chosen from afterschool

programs at their neighborhood community centers. I acquired permission from center directors, and fliers were placed along with a signup page for parents to sign up for interviews. I then contacted the parents to gain verbal consent, and at that time scheduled their interviews. I received the appropriate consent forms for their participation. The consent forms included the purpose of the study, outlined the way in which information would be collected, and gave a summary of the findings. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Each participant was mailed or emailed after their interviews to review the session. After the participant reviewed the material, they were asked if they wanted any changes made and then finalized their responses for approval. Following the transcription and approval, the interview was coded to establish common themes and patterns of the interview responses.

Data Collection

The researcher interviewed respondents as the primary source to gather information from African American parents in the Asheville City School district with a high incidence of African American parents. Interviews were collected in a private space provided by the afterschool programs. All locations were comfortable, accessible, and semi-private to allow for interviews without interruptions and distractions for digital recording and complete interviews. I used an interviewer's guide and digital recorder to record interviews, and a notebook to record notes. A time schedule was developed by the researcher in phases. Phase 1 consisted of a budget for travel and transcription. Phase 2 consisted of obtaining consent from interview participants and After School directors. Phase 3 consisted of scheduling interviews, conducting interviews, with voluntary participants, and concurrently analyzing data. The researcher used a high definition recorder and Dragon software to record and transcribe all of the digital interviews. Each

transcription was analyzed and coded using thematic coding method. Thematic coding is a form

of qualitative analysis which involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are

linked by a common theme or idea allowing you to index the text into categories and therefore

establish a "framework of thematic ideas about it" (Gibbs, 2007).

The instrument used in this study was the in depth interview. McMillian and

Schumacher (2010) define the purpose of an in-depth interview as using "open-response

questions to obtain data on participants' meaning" (p. 355). Interview guides were developed

prior to the conducting of interviews and the guide was used with each participant. As defined in

McMillian and Schumacher (2010), an interview guide includes, "[t]opics [that are] are outlined

in advance. The researcher decided the sequence and wording during the interview" (p.356).

The interview guide was used to create an environment for a semi structured interview format.

Additionally, the intention of interviewing was not only to shed light on the topic being studied,

but also to produce alternative accounts and varied ways of thinking about the topic

(Polkinghorne, 2005).

The interviews were audio recorded and accurately transcribed. Each participant's

responses were coded. With any data, interpretation of that data is necessary to pull out meaning

and understanding. Taylor-Powell, Renner, and the University of Wisconsin Cooperative

Extension Service (2003) suggest that the researcher should become familiar with data. The

method I used is open coding (O'Donoghue, 2007). Open coding is, defined as "a process

whereby concepts, drawn from data are identified and developed in terms of their properties and

dimensions" (O'Donoghue, 2007). When examining interview transcripts, I pulled out key

concepts and made connections. O'Donoghue (2007) suggests the researcher will complete two

tasks with the data: First, he will "ask questions of the emerging categories of data" (p.92) and second "make comparisons between the data concepts and categories" (p. 92). I also used my code notes to cross analyze and identify phenomenon and emerging concepts.

Data Analysis

Patton (2002) suggests that qualitative analysis constitutes a specific way of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data; in that sense it represents an analysis process. The purpose is to gather comprehensive, systematic, and in depth information. The researcher used an in-depth interview method. An in-depth interview study is focused on understanding people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular phenomenon. The pivotal task during analysis is to identify common themes in people's descriptions of their experiences (Barritt, 1986).

In order for themes to emerge, data is analyzed using various techniques. The final results of analysis are a description of the interview through the eyes of the people. Polkinghorne (1989) says, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that."

Analytic noting and coding is a type of data conducted throughout the research process, where the researcher may speculate about what is going on (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These analytic notes are also referred to as memos to yourself, and they contribute to the understanding of the patterns and themes in your work (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In the process of analytic noting, notes to self should suggest possible categories or interpretations (Leedy & Ormond, 2001).

In addition to analytic notes, coding is another analysis technique used to gain understanding of phenomena. Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and

defining and sorting those scraps of collected data that are applicable to your research purpose

(Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). For example, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) state the following:

> Begin by reading through whatever data you have –your observation notes, log. . .
> Identify what appears to be important and give it a name (code). Coding is a progressive
> process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data
> (i.e., observation notes, etc. . .) that are applicable to your research purpose.

First, the data is coded for information. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that for

manual coding, not computer software-based, the researcher codes transcripts or material in the

following manner. First, code by words, phrases, and sentences based on meaningful units of

data. Next categorize data. Find meanings in the data by grouping it into categories, and then

classify data accordingly.

Like Bogdan and Biklen (2003), Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest coding for

commonalities that reflect categories or themes within the data in order to reduce the data to a

smaller set of themes that describe the phenomenon. Next, examine categories and sub

categories for interconnections. After interconnections emanate, combine categories and their

interrelationships to describe what happens in the phenomenon being studied.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This study followed an in-depth interview qualitative design format. The research

methodology used with this study presents information based on the interviews of eight (8)

parents in a local city school district. The researcher used purposeful sampling methods that

included interviews with eight (8) parents of school-age children in a specific school district.

Interviews were analyzed and coded to reveal themes like thoughts and perceptions that African American parents have of their district; whether or not parents feel that their children are treated differently than White children and why; and whether or not White educators make efforts to reach Black parents and why. The analysis of the interviews reflect the perceptions that African American parents hold of their local school district. Analysis of the data consists of the interview notes, post–interview debriefing notes, memos developed while transcribing, transcripts of the interviews, and 'all parts of the interview material' (Wengraf, 2001). In addition, further analysis and interpretation includes coding to understand relevant information about the central research question.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS of DATA

<u>Introduction</u>

The findings of this study were developed through in depth interviews with African American Parents. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perceptions of parents of African American students in the Asheville City School District. The study focuses on their perceptions about their local school district, how they perceive that they and their children are treated by the district, and whether or not they trust the district when it comes to issues such as discipline, academic work, and approachability. The goal of the study is to gain a better understanding of African American parent involvement within the school district, by interviewing 8 African American parents within the Asheville City School district with children enrolled in Kindergarten through Fifth grades.

Ethical issues with this study were carefully considered and examined. The study was approved by East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board as a human subject research study (see appendix). The eight participants were briefed about the study and signed consent forms. Confidentiality was maintained and the names and schools of the participants are not included in the results. Participants were allowed to pick a place in which they felt comfortable and had some privacy to ensure confidentiality. A private conference room was provided in the local afterschool program building for many of the interviews. Responses obtained from the interviews were transcribed so that the responses could be evaluated and themes extracted. Interviews lasted about an hour.

Participant Information

Each participant chosen was an African American Parent (which includes guardians and custodians), over the age 18 years old, and had a child or children enrolled in the Asheville City School District in grades Kindergarten through fifth grades. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were coded as Parent 1 through Parent 8.

Parent 1 is an African American female with two children enrolled in the Asheville City school district. Parent 1 has had a child enrolled in the Asheville City School district for four years. She is a single parent but her child's father participates in the child's education as well. Parent 1 considers herself an active parent in terms of participating in her child's education. She remained engaged throughout the interview process and provided thoughtful, candid answers to interview questions.

Parent 2 is an African American female with one child enrolled in the Asheville City school district. Parent 2 has been involved with the district for four years. She considers herself a somewhat actively involved parent, with some schedule constraints due to her work schedule. Parent 2 is a single parent. The answers that Parent 2 offered during the interview were not as developed as some of the other participants, and she reported that she did not know the answer to some of the questions asked.

Parent 3 is an African American female with two children, one of whom has been enrolled in the school district for 2 years. Parent 3 considers herself a somewhat actively involved parent. However, she too has a full time job which prohibits her from being as available for school related events as she would like. She is a single parent. Parent 3 informed the interviewer of comprehension issues at the beginning of the interview and asked the

interviewer to explain certain words throughout the interview process. She participated actively in the interview and established a good rapport with the interviewer.

Parent 4 is a single African American female with one child enrolled in the Asheville City school district. Her child has been a student in the district for one year. Parent 4 was open and candid during the interview process and spoke casually to the researcher about her experience with the school and with her child's teacher.

Parent 5 is a single African American female parent whose child has been enrolled in the Asheville City school district for 6 years. She characterized herself as a very frustrated parent who tries to be involved but generally attends to matters concerning and pertaining to her own child.

Parent 6 is an African American female with one child enrolled in the Asheville City school district. Her child has been enrolled in the district for 3 years. Parent 6 considers herself a somewhat involved parent, but mostly attends to issues with her own child. Her child has a one on one worker provided to him by a local mental health agency who attends part of the school day with the child. She views this worker as a great source of support and a valuable resource when interacting with the school. She is a single parent.

Parent 7 is an African American female with one child enrolled in the Asheville City Schools district. Her child has been enrolled in the district for 3 years. She considers herself a very active parent and feels that she is well informed. Parent 7 was the youngest participant in the study, a single parent in her mid-twenties.

Parent 8 is an African American female with one child enrolled in the district. Her child has been enrolled in the district for 4 years. She considers herself a very active parent, consistently visiting the school around her work schedule. She meets with teacher, staff, and

administration regularly and has taken an active role in trying to connect other parents, becoming something of a leader among the parents with children enrolled in this school. She had much to say during the interview, offering thoughtful and candid feedback and answers throughout the process. She is a single parent.

<u>Findings for the Research Questions</u>

Four main Research Questions were used to conduct this study:

1. How do African American Parents perceive their current influence in the school district?

2. What would African American parents like their influence to be?

3. Who in the school district do you perceive has the greatest influence in the school, principal, board member, superintendent, staff, directors or teachers?

4. What do African American Parents think the changes should be in the school district?

<u>Research Question 1</u>

<u>Research Question 1: How do African American Parents perceive their current influence in the school district?</u>

The research revealed that Parent 1 and Parent 8 reported that they had adequate influence. They both consider themselves active parents. Both of these participants were of the opinion that their influence was directly related to their effort and participation. Parent 1 stated that she has an influence in the school district, "because I've been considered as an active parent in my daughter's education." Parent 1 elaborated that parents who are not involved may not feel the same, "For individuals that don't see the connection of why they need to be advocates for their children, they may feel like their voice isn't heard." When asked about the perception of

African American parents concerning their influence in the school district, Parent 8 offered that these parents would perceive they had influence "if you put forth an effort."

The perception of Parents 3 and 4 regarding their influence in the school district was limited to issues pertaining to their respective children. Parent 3 answered that she felt she had influence, "when it comes to my child, my children. We make decisions in our meetings on what's best for him and that's about it." Similarly, Parent 4 reported that, "I influence my child."

One-half of the participants believed that African American parents have no influence in the school district. The responses given by Parents 2, 5, 6, and 7 indicate that they do not feel that they have any influence in the school district. Specifically, Parent 2 responds with the following regarding her perception of African American influence: "I don't feel like I have. I don't feel like they see, I don't talk to anybody about it, nobody's asked me any questions or asked me to do anything for the school." Parent 6 reported that she had no influence "because the neighborhood we live in, they [the school] think kinda bad of us. They don't want her [her daughter] there really. Basically it's what they're saying, they don't want her there."

Four interview questions were used to formulate a better understanding of Research Question 1.

Interview Question 1-1: How often/when do you communicate with or offer feedback to someone at your child's school or within the school district?

For Question 1-1, Parents 1 and 8, (the parents who feel they have adequate influence) reported that they communicate with the school at least on a weekly basis. Parent 4 reported weekly communication as well, saying that she took snacks to school often for her child's class

and that she, "love[s] going to the school." Parent 5 reported that she communicates with her

son's teacher, "all the time" but interestingly felt that she had no influence in the school. Parent

3's communication was twice monthly. Parents 2, 6, and 7 said that their communication was

limited to those times when the teacher contacts them. However, Parent 6 gets frequent reports

on her child because the child has a one on one worker who accompanies him to school daily and

the parent communicates daily with this worker regarding her son's behavior at school.

Interview Question 1-2: How do you convey your feedback? (handwritten notes, email, in

person, for example)

The responses to Question 1-2 were varied and indicative of the many forms of

communication available to parents and schools. However, the majority of parent participants

preferred in person visits or text messages when communicating with the school. Parents 1, 2, 4,

5, 6, and 8 report going to the school in person as one method they use when communicating

with their child's teacher. Parents 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 also report sending and receiving text

messages to and from their child's teacher. Parent 7 was the only parent who used hand-written

notes as a form of communication. Parents 3 and 6 were the only parents who reported phone

calls as a method of frequent communication.

Interview Question 1-3: What acknowledgment and how quickly do you expect a response to

your communication?

For Question 1-3, parents 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 expected a response the same day. Parents 1

and 2 expected a same day response only if there was an issue of grave concern or an emergency.

For "smaller" issues, they indicated that a response within the same week was acceptable. Parent

5 expected to be contacted within 1-2 days.

Interview Question 1-4: Under what circumstances do teachers, principals, administrators, and others at your child's school solicit feedback from you?

For Question 1-4, Parents 1, 4, 5, and 8 reported that the school inquires of them regularly about a number of issues. Parent 8 has even been approached by her child's school to reach out to other parents to encourage their participation in school activities and often acts as a mentor, sharing her experiences with parents in after school meetings because her son has gone from an underachieving student to a student who consistently performs well academically. Parent 8 reported that her son's school does an excellent job informing parents about what is going on at school as well as soliciting their opinions and feedback:

> [School] calls about everything. There's so much that they tell us about community stuff, pretty much everything. I don't attend everything they call for but anything that's going on around that school, anything that's got to do with PTO, we get a call for it. Everyday. They'll send me an email. If I don't answer my phone, they'll send it in an email. Even if it's a recorded message, they'll call back until you pick up the phone.

Parents 2 and 3 feel that the school only solicits feedback when there are issues involving their child. Similarly, Parent 3 reported that she is only contacted regarding her child but never for positive feedback, only when school personnel is looking for ways to handle her child's behavior problems. When asked under what circumstances the school asks for her feedback, Parent 3 responded, "Never, not willingly. It would have to be at a meeting about my child." Likewise, Parent 7 feels the same that she is never asked to provide or offer feedback.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What would African American parents like for their influence to be?

When asked this broad, overarching research question, many of the respondents were unclear as to how to respond. Parents 3, 4, and 7 had no answer, reporting that they did not know. Similarly, Parent 5 responded that she would like to have a positive influence but was unable to elaborate beyond that limited response. Parent 6 said that she would like for her influence to be the same as every other parent's influence.

Parent 2's only concern was with her own child's growth. She responded, "I don't know about the school as a whole. This might sound selfish but just my child is what I'm concerned about and her growth. That might be selfish but that's just me."

The answers given by Parent 1 revealed that she would like to have an impact on her child's school in and around the broad topic of racial equity:

> I would like for my influence. I've never really thought about that. I would say around racial equity. I would like for my influence to be in that arena, in that area because of even getting racial equity curriculum into the schools on a professional development level as well as on a student level.

Parent 8 had the most specific and powerful response in that she hopes to influence other parents (especially younger parents) to become more involved in their school and in their child's educations, stating that, "I would like to talk to people my age. I mean I would like to influence them to go and make sure the teachers know that you care about your student because a lot of people my age don't. They don't." When asked to elaborate on this issue, and what Parent 8

might recommend to other parents to encourage them to become more involved with their child's school and education, she responded:

> I don't know what else you need, if it's your child. Why do they have to do something for you to participate in what your child is learning? For you to pay attention with what's going on with your child at school? Or even go eat lunch with your child to let your child know you care at least?

Three additional interview questions were used to gain greater insight into the perceptions of the participants.

Interview Question 2-1: What issues seem to be the most frequently discussed between school administration/staff?

The responses for Question 2-1 were much less varied. Each parent (with the exception of Parent 1) reported that they most frequently discussed issues pertaining to their child. However, the issues regarding their respective children did vary. Parents 5, 7, and 8 discuss their child's academic progress and growth most frequently. Parent 5 stated specifically that her child's reading level was usually the issue teachers wanted to talk about. Regarding academic progress, Parent 7 spoke with the school about how her child was doing academically "and what we can do to make him better and what he's having trouble with." Parents 2, 3, 4, and 6 most frequently discuss their child's behavior in school. Parent 7 had discussions regarding many aspects of her child's behavior and stated, "He talks a lot. Instead of raising his hand, he just blurts it out, so that's basically it."

Parent 1 is the only participant who reported frequent discussions regarding transitions within the school setting or upcoming changes that are being made to the school itself.

Interview Question 2-2: What issues are most important to you regarding your child's education?

The responses to this question were again less varied, with each participant responding from a place of concern for their child. All were concerned with the academic growth of their child. Parents 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 responded that their child's academic progress was most important, with Parent 3 and Parent 5 stressing the importance of reading, specifically. Similarly, Parent 8 stressed the importance of academic achievement but with less emphasis on progress and growth and more emphasis on having her child's needs met at school. She stressed the importance of having appropriate materials and supplies on hand in the classroom to foster his academic achievement. Parent 7 is the only parent who reported her child's behavior was the most important issue.

Parent 1 is the only parent who offered a response that was not specifically tailored toward her child's academic growth or progress and reported that racial equity was the most important issue regarding her child's education. She expressed her desire to see more teachers and administrators of color and the importance of having culturally competent teachers in the classroom:

> What's important to me is for her to be with a teacher that understands that they have to make their classroom and the educational experience culturally appropriate for children of color. It was hard for me as a student in the school system that I came up in being in front of these teachers using these words and dialect and language that is not spoken in my community and in my own home. That caused a big disconnect. And so, if the teachers can be racially competent, culturally competent, with their educational practices and approaches, that's what's most important to me.

Interview Question 2-3: What action does your child's school take to ensure that your concerns are addressed?

Interestingly, Parents 2 and 6 reported that the school does nothing to ensure that their concerns are addressed. Parents 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 report that the school follows up with them whenever they have concerns. Of these five participants, all were satisfied with the school's

follow through regarding any concerns. Parent 8 stated that the school "does whatever they need to" to ensure that her issues are addressed. While each of these parent's respective methods of communication were different, the contact with school personnel regarding their children helped them feel that their concerns were addressed properly. Parent 3 reported that her school shares data from the assessments completed for her child and shows her his strengths, weaknesses, and improvement. Parent 1 reported that the school has offered training and conducted surveys surrounding the issue of racial equity (an issue that she reports as most important to her), and that these events were possible due to a grant received by the school.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Who in the school district do you perceive has the greatest influence on the school? (for example, principal, board member, superintendent, staff, teachers)

Parents 1 and 6 said principal and/or assistant principal. Parent 2 said members of the school board, elaborating that the person/people with the most influence "can't be inside the school." Parents 3, 4, 5, and 7 disagreed and believed that teachers have the most influence. When it came to teacher influence, Parent 3 explained that it is "because they spend the most time with the children. They know them. The principal knows some of the kids by name and stuff but they're not hands on like the teachers are." Parent 8 also believed that the influence came from within the school itself, answering that principals and teachers had the most influence.

Three additional interview questions were used to gain greater insight.

Interview Question 3-1: Which students seem to get the most attention at your child's school?

For Question 3-1, the participants overwhelmingly associated the word "attention" with negative reactions. Parents 1, 2, 5 report that most of the attention goes to children or students with behavior problems. Parent one elaborated on her answer to say that black male students were most likely to get attention:

> The little black boys get the most attention because they are always, they're being little boys. Their jackets, their files, follow them grade to grade. If they've had any history of being busy bodies, they get the most attention but its in a way that is not benefitting. The disciplinary actions aren't matching up to what they might be experiencing overall in their education.

Parent 7 reports that students with special needs receive the most attention. Parent 8 was the only parent interviewed who felt that the students at her child's school received attention equally. Parents 3, 4, and 6 did not answer the question because they said that they did not know which students received the most attention.

Interview Question 3-2: Which parents seem to have the best relationship with the teachers, administrators, and staff at your child's school?

For Question 3-2, Parent 3 could not answer this question because she did not know which parents had the best relationships with teachers, administrators, and staff at her child's school. Parents 1, 6 and 7 believe that white parents have the best relationship with school personnel. While Parents 6 and 7 did not elaborate on their answers, Parent 1 offered:

> White people. White people and also the black people that has this exceptional negro syndrome. Meaning they are up here and I am down here. The ones that are willing to play the games that white culture have you play in order to be accepted, those two groups of people have more influence in things within the school system.

Parents 2, 4, and 8 report that the parents who frequently visit the school have the best relationship with personnel, with Parent 2 elaborating that parents who donate the most money

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might also have a better rapport with staff. Parent 5 reported that parents who have children with

behavior problems have the best relationship with teachers, administrators and staff because

these parents interact the most frequently with school personnel.

Interview Question 3-3: How might teachers/administrators be constrained or prevented from

addressing your particular issues?

Only one participant, Parent 1, reported that policies and/or regulations may be a

constraint for teachers/administrators when addressing parent issues. The rest of the participants

reported that teachers and administrators should be able to address whatever issues they have

without any constraints or barriers.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4: What do African American parents think the changes should be in

the school district?

With the exception of Parents 4 and 7, who stated that no changes were needed, the

research revealed that most of the parents interviewed reported that change and improvement

should happen. Parents 1 and 5 talked about cultural changes within the school itself. Parent 1

said that diversity and cultural competence were big issues and should be addressed in the

district and changed. Elaborating that if teachers can "apply just more culturally related

situations in classroom settings, that would really help a child that's in a predominantly black

and Latino school be able to learn something." Parent 5 also reported that an increase in teachers

of color and diversity within the system would be a positive change. She stated that, "I've seen a

lot of teachers, they are quick to get on that phone, or they are worried about the child's gonna

act out on them. A lot of African American teachers, they don't play that."

Policy and procedure were other areas in which parents reported a need for change.

Parent 3 felt that schools should change the way that they deal with students with behavior

problems, offering that "maybe when a student is acting out, address him outside the classroom

and not in front of everyone. Some kids can be embarrassed. Like with my son, that

embarrasses him so he acts out. He shows out." Parents 5 and 8 talked about the dress code and

uniform policies of their respective schools but took opposite sides in terms of whether or not

such policies would be beneficial to students and school culture. Parent 5 felt that schools

should not have a dress code or uniform policy, that they should be free to express themselves.

Parent 8 advocated for school uniforms. Parent 8 also advocated for year round school, saying

that she liked that schedule. Parent 6 believed that schools could improve communication and

keep parents better informed.

Two additional Interview Questions were asked to assist parents in elaborating on their

responses.

Interview Question 4-1: Who can play a role in implementing positive changes (for example

administrative assistance, cafeteria staff, PTO, etc.)?

For Question 4-1, despite the fact that Parent 8 said that school uniforms and year round

school would be positive changes, she reported that she wouldn't change a thing about her

child's school. Parent 1 responded that in order to implement positive change, every single

person should be a part of the change, from the custodial staff to the school board, that everyone

was necessary. Parent 2 put the burden on the government, reporting that more money should be

allocated for education in order to implement positive change, saying that "money makes the world go round." Parent 3 reported the one on one worker, teacher, and counselor could implement positive changes for her child specifically but did not address changes in the school culture as a whole. Parents 4 and 6 stated that the principal plays the biggest role in implementation of positive change. Parent 5 reported that the superintendent was instrumental in implementing change. Parent 7 responded that parents were the biggest change agents in the school system.

Interview Question 4-2: What do you think works well currently and what specifically should remain the same?

For Question 4-2, Parent 1 averred that the entire system needs a complete overhaul and should be changed, stating that "the whole system needs to be revamped." Parent 2 reported that communication at her school is something that they do well, but that there is room for improvement. She makes no findings as to what should remain the same, choosing to skip this portion of the question. Parent 3 reports that she does not know what is working well at her child's school. Parent 4 favors extracurricular activities at her child's school, reporting that the after school reading group and a running club have both had positive impacts on her respective children. Parent 5, 7, and 8 report that the teachers are doing a great job and should not change. Parent 6 reported that she was most satisfied with her child's one on one worker, who attends the school day with the student.

<div align="center">Summary of Research</div>

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of research data gathered from the interviews of eight (8) African American parents with students enrolled in the Asheville City Schools district in Kindergarten through Fifth grades. The data was enriched by the participants' ability to candidly

communicate about their individual experiences with their children's respective schools and

teachers. A summary of the findings from the analysis of the data received is provided in

Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<u>Introduction</u>

Educators across the country have tried to find ways be more inclusive and improve and increase parent involvement, especially with regard to African American parents and students who live in poverty. This study used a qualitative design to explore the perceptions of African American parents. Specifically, the study focused on African American parent perceptions of their local school district to gain a better understanding of their involvement. The findings of this study were based on the responses of eight African American parents during individual interview sessions. In-depth interview sessions with each parent were used to gain insight into aspects of these parents' perceptions of the public schools their children attend. Participating parent's responses were used to identify patterns and themes.

<u>Research Question 1: How do African American Parents perceive their current influence in the school district?</u>

The majority of the participants stated that they did not have any influence in the district, or that their influence was limited to only those issues involving and relating to their child. Interestingly, only two of the participants related their influence in the school to their level of participation.

When expanding upon their responses, the parents all indicated that their schools kept them informed and that they maintained consistent contact with their children's teachers. All of

the participants listed a number of ways that the schools contacted them. They preferred face to face communication. Seven out of the eight participants communicated with their child's teacher through text messaging and phone calls on a weekly basis. One-half of the parent participants reported that their child's schools regularly solicited feedback from them. The remaining parents reported that schools only contacted them when their children were in trouble or that they never contacted them. Even though Parent 2 said that she has some influence in her child's school, she reported that the school did not solicit feedback from her unless there is some issue with her child. Parent 8 has the most unique perspective regarding influence because she has assumed a leadership role in her child's school, mentoring other parents around issues of participation.

The data suggests that parents who take on leadership roles within their child's school, feel that they have some influence in the district. Otherwise, their perception about the influence that they have is either limited to their own child or does not exist. An emerging theme from Research Question 1 was the parents' reporting that while schools were effective in their communications with them, the mere contact was not enough for them to feel that they had any real influence on school culture as a whole. Communication was limited to issues concerning their child and often was related to behavior problems or academic struggles.

Research Question 2: What would African American parents like their influence to be?

Three of the participating parents could not answer this question and stated that they did not know what they want their influence to be in the school. Two other parents were vague in their answers, one stating that she wanted to have a positive influence and another answering that she wanted to have the same influence everyone else. One parent expressed that her concern was only with her own child, and that she felt like this might be a selfish answer. Only two parents

expressed a desire to have an influence on the school culture. One parent wanted to impact their school in terms of something she referred to as "racial equity" and another hoped to influence younger parents to become more actively involved. Interestingly, both of these parents are already participating in programs at their respective schools in order to further those goals. The data indicates that the parents with specific ideas about how they would like to influence their children's schools are already doing so. Perhaps the parents who feel they have no influence would feel differently if they were involved in programs at their schools that they are truly passionate about.

Seven of the eight participants reported that their most frequent conversations with school personnel were centered around issues involving their children. One-half of the respondents indicated that these issues were usually behavioral in nature. The remaining three parents said that their communication was mostly about their child's academic progress. Only one parent communicated frequently about issues relating to changes and transition occurring within the school.

For issues related to the schools' willingness to address parent issues, two of the participants reported that the schools did not address their concerns at all. The remaining parents agreed that the schools followed up frequently, one parent even elaborating that the schools shared data with her in conferences in order to track her child's progress. Clearly, the data indicates that for the majority of the parent participants' communication and engagement is occurring between schools and parents. However, this communication is not encouraging parents to become more involved nor is it making them feel that they have any real influence over the schools that their children attend.

Research Question 3: Who in the school district do you perceive has the greatest

influence on the school? (for example, principal, board member, superintendent, staff, teachers)

All of the parents interviewed except for one felt that teachers and/or principals and

assistant principals had the greatest influence on the school. The parent who disagreed believed

that the school board had the most influence. Among these parents, the consensus was that the

teachers and principals knew the students better than anyone else and that the hands on nature of

the relationship between teachers/principals and students garnered the most influence over the

school as a whole.

When elaborating on the issue of influence, the parents were asked about who receives

the most attention as an interview question. Three of the participants did not answer, stating that

they did not know. Of the remaining five participants, only one said that everyone was treated

equally at her child's school. Surprisingly, all of the other parents associated the term

"attention" with negative attention as opposed to affectionate or praise-worthy attention. Three

of the parents believed that the most attention was paid to students with behavior problems. One

parent even went so far as to say that black male students received the most attention because of

their behavior and that the school's discipline policies were unfair for these students because

they were labeled at an early age. The remaining parent answered that students with special

needs probably received the most attention.

When questioned about which parents have the best relationships with school personnel,

only seven of the eight participants answered. Three of the participants answered specifically

that "white parents" had the best relationships with school personnel. The only parent who

offered a reason for this perception explained that the parents who were accepted into "white

culture" were the ones who had the best relationships. This suggests that a good portion of the participants perceive "school culture" and "white culture" to be one and the same. If that is true, then some African American parents perceive that they are at a disadvantage from the very beginning, simply because they are not white. One-half of the participants believed that parents who frequently visit the school have the best relationship with personnel. One parent in this same group who believed that you had to frequently visit the school also believed that it benefitted parents to donate money. Another parent in this same group believed that parents who had children with behavior problems had the best relationships because they got to know the teachers and staff better than other parents because they were at the school on a regular basis.

Only one parent acknowledged that teachers and/or administrators might be constrained from addressing parent issues in any way. This parent reported that policies and/or regulations are sometimes a constraint or challenge for teachers/administrators to overcome when addressing parent issues. The remaining participants agreed that teachers and administrators had the ability to address whatever issues parents had without any barriers.

A clear theme that emerged from these discussions is the influence of teachers on school culture. All of the participants stressed the importance of the teacher because it was the teacher who had the most contact with the students. The majority of parents were most concerned with their child's success as an individual student and not necessarily the performance of the school as a whole. Therefore, teacher effectiveness is of the utmost importance to the participating parents.

Research Question 4: What do African American parents think the changes should be in the school district?

Even though the parents who participated in this study had similar goals when questioned about what was most important to them regarding their child's educations, their answers to this question were quite varied. Two parents believed that no changes were needed at all. Two others believed that cultural changes needed to be made. They recognized and acknowledged the need for cultural competence and advocated the hiring of more African American teachers. One parent in particular expressed the need for students to relate to their teachers and vice versa. The other offered that an African American teacher would be better at handling any behavior problems in their classrooms. Another parent agreed that schools should change the way behavior problems are dealt with but reported that this could be better addressed through policy change. The remaining parents stated that policies and procedures were issues as well. Two parents talked about uniforms and dress codes but one was an advocate for a school uniform, and the other was against, stating that students should be able to express themselves and dress how they want.

While the responses to this question were varied, it is evident that almost all of the parents participating in the survey had valuable ideas about how positive change could be implemented. The participants were asked who they thought could play a role in implementing positive changes in their child's school. One parent did not answer. Most of the other parents believed that the only people who could implement positive change were people who had direct ties and contact with the school. Teachers, parents, and school superintendents were among the

answers. Only one parent answered that the burden should be on the government and more money should be allocated for education.

When asked what should remain the same, one parent said that everything needed to be changed. Two other parents could not say with specificity what should remain the same and chose to skip this portion of the question. Of the things that parents do appreciate and support, most parents believed that any program that affords their children extra help should remain. Three parents reported that nothing in their school should change.

Another important theme to discuss is the parents feeling regarding discipline practices. When discussing the issue of attention, most of the participants answered that attention was given to students with behavior problems. None of them answered in a way that suggested attention at school could be a positive experience. This is telling in that it is consistent with the research which suggests that African American students are more heavily disciplined that White students in public schools.

<center>Recommendations to Improve Practice</center>

Schools may elect to pursue a teacher led parent-school partnership. Because parents overwhelmingly stated that teachers had the biggest impact on school culture, it is important for parents and teachers to know where each other are coming from. This would mean that not only should parents visit schools, but teachers should visit homes and communities. Open, honest communication is important for Black parents to feel influential. Teachers need contact with parents outside of the classroom or school setting so that their perceptions about communication only occurring when their child does something wrong is dispelled. In the alternative, the partnership between parents and schools could be parent-led, giving parents an even greater amount of influence.

Schools might also consider changing the times for events that would maximize parental involvement and exposure to school culture. Often, parents who work cannot eat lunch with their children. They cannot volunteer in classrooms. They still want to aid in their child's academic success. Schools might tailor programs and meetings around holidays or community based events. For example, schools could participate in area festivals or make their presence known at area cultural centers as one more way to encourage and ensure access for parents who cannot participate or volunteer at school during typical school day hours.

Racial equity and cultural competence are big issues with African American parents. Schools should stop ignoring cultural differences and begin recognizing them, celebrating them so that not only school faculty and personnel get to know the parents, but parents of different backgrounds come together. This would assist schools in becoming more inclusive and welcoming to African American parents. Perhaps principals and administrators could implement policy changes to mandate that teachers visit the homes of their students at least once during the school year. Teachers could communicate amongst themselves and encourage each other to get to know the families and the communities of their students.

<u>Recommendations for Further Research</u>

It is recommended that research of school teachers and principals perceptions be conducted using similar research and interview questions. Although schools seemingly do a very good job informing parents of what is going on at school, they are lacking in their ability to foster true engagement. All of the parents interviewed maintained consistent contact with their child's schools but few felt that they had any power or influence over school culture. Therefore, while parents are somewhat involved, few are actually engaged. It would be interesting to interview teachers and principals to gauge their willingness to not only ask for feedback and

ideas, but to implement or apply the information that parents provide. Furthermore, the perceptions of White teachers of Black students or Black students of White teachers would be interesting topics as well in that the student and parent perceptions could be intertwined and similar. Black students' perceptions could also be indicative of their propensity for academic achievement or failure.

White female parents of the same or similar socio-economic status may have similar perceptions as the participants in this study. Further research could better determine if the perceptions of the African American parents interviewed are in fact rooted in the traumas associated with racial discrimination or if they are the perceptions of single parents with limited time and resources.

A common theme that emerged during the research process was that parents did not feel as though schools were interested in what they had to say. As a matter of fact, most communicated with the schools only about issues concerning their child, and much of the time even this communication was negative in nature. Schools contacted parents consistently but it was usually because of behavior issues with their children. Further research in the area of parent/school communications should be conducted to ascertain whether or not the perceptions of these African American parents are actually true.

Further research should also be conducted to expand the parent participant pool. The eight participants in this study were single African American females. Most lived in public housing. Their answers could be impacted by their respective genders, education levels, socio-economic status, marital status, and race. It would be interested to know if other groups would have the same or similar perceptions.

Concluding Statement

The widespread gap between the academic achievement of White students and African American students is well documented nationwide. Black parents are very often viewed as parents who are not engaged or involved in their children's educations. Furthermore, it is a common perception in the African American community that schools do not reach out to Black parents or make efforts to engage or assist them in becoming more active. The research suggests that the disconnect perhaps does not come from a lack of engagement, but from a lack of active participation and partnership.

Based on the themes that emerged from this study, recommendations were made as to how schools and school administrators, teachers, and personnel can truly involve African American parents in a positive and meaningful way. School systems in which the achievement gap is an issue may use this study to gain insights that assist them in fostering a partnership with Black parents (and therefore Black students) to promote academic success. Findings from this qualitative research study may help bridge the communication gap by creating an understanding of African American parents' perceptions of public schools.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter to External Site

Dear Ms. Elinor Earle, Director Youthful Hand,

I am writing seeking permission to conduct a study, interviewing participants who may live in public housing. For the convenience of the respondents, I am requesting permission to conduct some of the interviews (at participants' request) on public housing property. The study is for my dissertation, with the topic of such being "African American Perceptions of Public Schools". It consists of 8 qualitative interviews of K-5 parents with children enrolled in the Asheville City Schools District. The purpose of the study is to explore African American parents' perceptions of the local public school and to gauge parent involvement.

Participants will be selected at random by taking a pull tab to contact the researcher directly to protect confidentiality of participants. A flyer will be posted at after school program sites. All participants will have to the right to refuse the study and if they agree to be interviewed, will retain the right to withdraw their participation at any time. All information of participants will be kept confidential and will be pre-approved before use. The study will also be approved by East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board before any interviews are conducted. I will furnish you a copy of the completed study and give a presentation of my findings if requested. This study is a requirement for the completion of my Doctoral studies at East Tennessee State University.

- My contact information is: Eric Howard, MSW Email: howarde@goldmail.etsu.edu
- Chair of My Dissertation Committee Is: Dr. Pamela Scott Email: SCOTTP@mail.etsu.edu
- ETSU ELPA Dept. Number Contact is: Betty Ann Profitt executive Assistant 423-439-4173

Sincerely,

Appendix B

IRB Approval

EAST TENNESSEE STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

June 3, 2015

Mr. Eric Howard
39 Periwinkle lane
Burnsville, NC 28714

Re: African American Parents' Perceptions of Public School:
 African American Parents' Involvement in Their Childrens' Educations
IRB#:c0615.1s
ORSPA #:

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:
 • new protocol submission xform, CV of PI, interview protocol, ICD version 5/22/15, flyer,
   inclusion/exclusion criteria and site permission from Lee Walker Heights Youthful Hand

On **June 3, 2015**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire
on **June 2, 2016**. The expedited approval of the study will be reported to the convened board on
the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped
with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each
participant prior to participant enrollment:
 • ICD version 5/22/2015 stamped approved 6/2/2015

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the
principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

**Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA
following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.**

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA
R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The
only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to
eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a

Accredited Since December 2005

Appendix C

Participant Information

Participants Needed for Research Study

East Tennessee State University Doctoral student is looking for volunteers to take part in a study of *African American Parents Perception of Public Schools*

The study will explore how African American parents view their local public schools in an effort to gain a better understanding of African American Parents involvement in their child's education.

If you meet the following criteria: African American Parent(s) (which includes legal Guardians and/or Custodians), male or female, over the age of 18, with students enrolled in Asheville City Schools in Kindergarten through Fifth grades, then you are eligible to participate.

If you are interested in participating please contact:

Eric Howard (828-242-7211or howarde@goldmail.etsu.edu)

Thank you for your interest!

Eric Howard

Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828 242 7211	Eric Howard 828 242 7211	Eric Howard 828-242-7211	Eric Howard 828 242 7211

Appendix D

Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: African American Parents Perceptions of Public Schools: African American Parents' Involvement in their Childrens' Educations

Researcher: Eric Deshane Howard

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Pamela Scott

Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Eric Howard for a dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Scott in the School of Education Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University. You are being asked because you a member and parent in the African American community in the city of Asheville, and are above the age of 18. There will be a total of 8 participants in this study. Please read the form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding to whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of African American parents experiences with the public school system.

Procedure:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following:

Participate in a face to face interview with the researcher to be interviewed and discuss your experiences of being an African American Parent of an elementary age student. The interview will last approximately 20-55 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio taped.

APPROVED
by the ETSU IRB

JUN 0 3 2015

Ver. 05/22/2015   By _____   Page 1 of 3   subject initals _____
Chair/IRB Coordinator

DOCUMENT VERSION EXPIRES

JUN 0 2 2016

ETSU IRB

VITA

ERIC D. HOWARD

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