BLACK PARENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RACE AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was conducted in order to examine the experiences of Black parents with parent involvement at predominantly White schools. Eleven interviews with Black parents were completed and analyzed qualitatively using the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and the case study method (Yin, 2009). Parental involvement has been identified as a factor that influences student academic outcomes from preschool through high school (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Research has found Black families are more likely to be involved at home when compared to White families; however, White families are more likely to be involved at school when compared to Black families (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Since research on African American families has centered on families at racially segregated public schools, there has been little investigation of the experiences of Black families in predominantly White school settings. Given the historical context of the education of Blacks in America and parent concerns with the social and emotional development of their children within school settings, African American families at predominantly White schools may engage in parent involvement practices that do not follow the traditional framework of parent involvement accepted by schools and researched in the literature. This study revealed several themes connected to African American parent involvement at predominantly White schools. These themes were the importance of education, cross-racial tensions, parent self-efficacy, biculturalism and cultural competence. Implications for future research were discussed. Recommendations were made for Black parents, educators, school counseling personnel and school-sponsored parent organizations regarding the improvement of Black parent involvement in activities and programs at predominantly White schools.
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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

Parental involvement has been identified as a factor that influences student academic outcomes from preschool through high school (Henderson & Berla, 1994). However, much of the research specific to Black parent involvement has primarily focused on Black parents at predominantly Black and Hispanic public schools located in poor or urban neighborhoods (Koonce & Harper, 2005; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown & Lynn, 2003; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999; Trotman, 2001).

Prior research on parent involvement has found that African American families are less likely to be involved at school when compared to White families (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Additionally, Black parents may experience barriers to parent involvement that are related to socioeconomic status, race and culture (Koonce & Harper, 2005; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown & Lynn, 2003; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999; Trotman, 2001). However, practices developed to improve parent involvement of Black parents based on these findings may not apply to Black parents at predominantly White schools. The above noted potential obstacles to parent involvement, particularly issues of race and culture are likely to become more salient for African American parents within predominantly White school settings, thus influencing their parent involvement behaviors. Additionally, parenting issues somewhat unique to African American parents,
specifically racial socialization and racial identity development can pose a challenge to Black parents at predominantly White schools (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Tatum, 1987; Tatum, 1997a), again having the potential to influence parent involvement practices by these Black parents.

Currently, approximately 30% of Black students attend public schools which are predominantly White (Orfield, 2001). Given this relatively small percentage, it is not surprising that little research has investigated the experiences of Black parents with children in these settings (Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Tatum, 1987; Tatum, 1997a). Most research on African American families and schools has centered on families with low incomes residing in urban areas. When this paradigm of Black families is applied to research within the public school system, a much overlooked variable is the racial backdrop in today’s public schools. Due to residential racial segregation, many students and their families attend racially segregated public schools (Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003). As a result, research on African American families and their parent involvement has not explicitly investigated the racial context of schools or the experiences of these families at predominantly White schools. This is an interesting finding since some Black parents may perceive predominantly White schools as unwelcoming due to the salience of race and culture within these settings and the potential for these factors to hinder African American parents from being involved in these settings. Also noteworthy, is that school receptivity or how welcoming a school is perceived by parents has been identified as a strong predictor of at school parent involvement (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996), a finding that has been replicated with Black families with low incomes (Overstreet, et al., 2005). Since
school receptivity has been identified as an important factor in the parent involvement practices of Black families and Black parents’ perceptions of school receptivity may be influenced by the racial context of the school, it is possible that the experiences and perceptions of Black parents at predominantly White schools may impact their parent involvement behaviors.

Given the historical context of the education of Blacks in America, many Black parents of school-aged children are concerned not only with the academic, but also the social-emotional development of their children within the school setting. For Black parents whose children attend predominantly White schools, these concerns are translated into ensuring positive racial socialization, cultivating the development of a positive racial identity, and facilitating appropriate educational placements for their children (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Tatum, 1987; Tatum, 1997a). While attending predominantly White schools, the process of positive racial socialization and positive racial identity development can become quite challenging for African American families (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000). Black parents’ vigilance around appropriate educational placements for their children should not be surprising given the current over-representation of Black students, specifically males in special education programs and the under-representation of Black students in gifted and talented programs across the United States (Ford, Harris, Tyson & Trotman, 2002; Hoffman, Llagas & Snyder, 2003;). Given these historical, social and racial contexts, Black families at predominantly White schools may engage in parent involvement practices that do not follow the traditional framework of parent involvement accepted by schools and researched in the literature. This dissertation explored and documented these experiences.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

*Parental Involvement*

Research findings have repeatedly found a positive relationship between parent involvement and student academic outcomes (Barnard, 2004; Catsambis, 1998; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). While this has been a relatively consistent finding in the literature, few have proposed a theoretical model which explains how this relationship occurs. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) posit that parent involvement influences student educational outcomes through modeling, reinforcement and direct instruction. By modeling, parents who engage in involvement practices provide an example to their children of the importance of school and school related matters. Parent involvement behaviors can also reinforce children’s pro-school related behaviors with parental attention, praise and rewards. With direct instruction, parent involvement includes teaching, reviewing and practicing academic content to aid in the process of learning factual information. Direct instruction also involves teaching and practicing skills related to problem-solving (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). These three mechanisms, modeling, reinforcement and direct instruction are believed to be the ways in which parents, by their actions, can have a positive influence on their children’s academic outcomes.
In a recent revision of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) model of the parent involvement processes, Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) noted the psychological factors that are believed to influence or predict parent involvement behavior. These factors include parents’ motivational beliefs, parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others and parents’ perceived life context. Parents’ motivational beliefs consist of two constructs, parental role construction and parental self-efficacy. Parent role construction is defined by what parents believe they should do for their children’s education. Parental self-efficacy encompasses parents’ beliefs that their involvement will result in expected outcomes for their children. Parental perceptions of invitations for involvement consist of a parent’s view that their involvement is desired, welcomed and appreciated by their children, their children’s teachers and their children’s school. Finally, parents’ perceived life context comprises the beliefs parents have about the time, energy, knowledge and skills they posses for involvement in their children’s education. According to the revised model, parents’ perceived life context acts to moderate the relationship between the above noted constructs (parents’ motivational beliefs and perceptions of invitations for involvement) and parental involvement behaviors at home and at school (Walker et al., 2005). A review of the literature completed by Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2005) validated the above noted psychological constructs in the revised Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) model of the parent involvement process (Walker et al., 2005).

Epstein (2001) developed a theoretical model of overlapping spheres of influence for understanding the mechanism for parent involvement practices which is based on the perspective that families and schools have shared responsibilities and goals in the
socialization and education of children. The external structure consists of three spheres which represent the family, school and community. At varying times, these spheres may overlap or not overlap depending upon time, experiences of families and experiences of schools (Epstein, 2001). Time includes individual time, such as grade level and age of child. Time also includes historical time, as in societal conditions during a specified period (Epstein, 2001). During the early elementary school years, schools and families are more likely to interact and collaborate in the interest of children. According to the model, time as an instrumental factor would act as a force in creating an overlapping of family and school spheres (Epstein, 2001). The experiences of families and schools over time create greater or lesser overlap of the family and school spheres by generating increased or decreased collaborative behavior between these two systems.

Epstein’s (2001) framework of parental involvement focuses on various partnership and collaborative practices between families and schools. The most current framework consists of six major types of involvement with an emphasis on schools to provide opportunities for parents to engage in these six forms of involvement. This typology of involvement includes: Type 1 – Parenting, Type 2 – Communicating, Type 3 – Volunteering, Type 4 – Learning at Home, Type 5 – Decision Making and Type 6 – Collaborating with the Community. Parenting involvement encompasses support of families to establish home environments which promote children as students. Communicating requires schools to provide effective forms of school-home communications about student progress and school programming. Volunteering includes recruitment and utilization of parents as in-school helpers. Learning at Home involves the provision of information to parents about how they can help their children with
curriculum-related activities. *Decision Making* means including parents in school decisions as leaders and representatives. *Collaborating with the Community* entails identifying and relaying information about community resources to parents, in addition to developing partnerships with community organizations to provide services to students and their families. This framework for parental involvement has been widely used in research and in practice. In 1997, it was adopted by the National Parent Teacher Association as their National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement programs (Moles, 2001). Even though parental involvement research has influenced educational practices and federal policy, schools and families continue to experience challenges to achieving adequate parent involvement.

A study of the frequency of parent involvement behaviors of African American and European American parents found that African American parents were more involved at home, but less involved at school when compared to European-Americans (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This finding was replicated by Nzinga-Johnson, Baker and Aupperlee (2009) who found that in their sample of African American, Latino and White parents of children enrolled in a kindergarten program in a public school, African American parents were less involved at school when compared to parents of other ethnicities. Findings from research on African American parents at an inner-city, public elementary school indicated that parent involvement at home and at school positively correlated with parent racial socialization practices, specifically racism awareness (McKay et al., 2003). Additionally, opportunity for parent contact with teachers at school was positively related to parent involvement at school (McKay et al., 2003). In their study, Overstreet et al. (2005) included African American parents who resided in an
urban, economically disadvantaged community. This study, investigating predictors of parent involvement, found that school receptivity was the strongest predictor of parent involvement behaviors of African American when compared to parents’ attitudes about education and parents’ community involvement behaviors (Overstreet et al., 2005). Another study which analyzed factors related to positive student outcomes for African American students, i.e. pursuit of a post-secondary education, found that parents of successful African American students were more likely to be involved at school and to have more contact with school regarding their children’s academic progress when compared to other parents (Yan, 1999). Literature on the parent involvement behaviors of Black parents has also included recommendations to improve low levels of parent involvement due to barriers related to race, culture and socioeconomic factors (Crozier, 2001; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999; Trotman, 2001). Generally, this literature has focused on the importance of collaboration and active engagement between Black parents and educational institutions in order to effectively understand and address parent involvement by Black parents (Koonce & Harper, 2005; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999; Trotman, 2001).

**Blacks and Public Education**

A consideration of the historical context of African American and formal education in the United States of America is an important factor in understanding the perceptions of Black parents regarding the public school system and an aspect of their motivation for parent involvement. During the period of slavery, Black slaves were denied access to formal education (Washington & LaPoint, 1988). In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision created the “separate but equal” doctrine which legalized racial
segregation within the educational system (Ogletree, 2004). The establishment of separate schools to educate Black children created an educational system that was inferior to that of White children as evidenced by comparisons between the two school systems and between Black and White student outcomes (Washington & LaPoint, 1988). It was in 1954 when the United States Supreme Court issued the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that public school systems were legally required to desegregate (Ogletree, 2004). Ultimately, school desegregation meant the integration of the two separate yet unequal educational systems. Resistance to public school integration varied from violent riots, public school closures, creation of private schools by and for White families and re-segregation within the schools, referred to as tracking (Morgan, 1995).

Some of the current systemic issues within the public school system impacting Black children are: racial segregation, the achievement gap and the disproportionately high placement of Black students in special education programs and low placement in rigorous academic programs (United States Department of Education, 2003). The average White student in public school attends a school with an almost 80% White student body. The average Black student in public school attends a school with an almost 70% ethnic minority student body of Black, Latino, Asian and Native Americans (Frankenberg et al., 2003). By the time African American students reach the twelfth grade, they have acquired math and reading skills equivalent to that of a White student in the eighth grade (The Education Trust, 2003). Over-representation in special education programs for Blacks is evident when 13% of all Black students are recipients of special education services as compared to 11% of all White students (United States Department of Education, 2003). In 1998, a smaller percentage of Black students (30%) than White
students (45%) enrolled in advanced level mathematics courses (United States Department of Education, 2003). According to 1992 figures, Black students made up 21% of the student population, but represented 12% of students in gifted education (Ford et al., 2002). These educational disparities or achievement gaps between Black students and White students are also evident at high-achieving suburban schools (Ferguson, 2002). Based on research of the achievement gaps between Black and White students, Ferguson (2002) recommended a “tripod” approach to improving achievement for Black students, which included a focus on content, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships, with an emphasis on strong teacher relationships with Black students as an important motivational strategy. Consistent with the importance of teacher relationships with Black students, educators have cited the need for teachers of Black students to engage in multicultural professional development, specifically addressing teachers’ own perceptions and beliefs about race, culture and social issues in order to engage in effective instructional practices when teaching Black students (Gay & Howard, 2000; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Currently, with approximately 86% of teachers being European American and approximately 17% of students being African American, Black students are more likely to be educated by White teachers (Gay & Howard, 2000). As a result, concerns regarding the existence of a cultural divide between Black students, their teachers and the school environment are present. Also concerning is how this cultural divide is addressed by educators and the impact this may have on student outcomes for Black students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Laosa, 2005). Taking a cultural-ecological perspective for explaining school failure for some African American, Ogbu (2006) cited, among other factors, hostility and mistrust by some Black people toward the public
school system as hindering their ability to support and internalize the goals, expectations
and procedures found in today’s public schools. Finally, in her theory of African
American school achievement, Perry (1993) identified factors believed to be associated
with school achievement for Black students, which were a social and political perspective
of school, i.e. pursuit of an education for “leadership, citizenship, racial uplift and
freedom” in addition to competency in navigating social identities related to being Black
and being part of mainstream culture.

**Parenting and Black Families**

Black parents and their parenting responsibilities cannot be fully understood
without a consideration of the impact of race, specifically, why and how race is an
important factor. Race exerts its influence on parenting for Black families due to the
continued experience of racism and discrimination by Blacks as a group, regardless of
class. Individual Blacks are faced with the constant reminders of the negative
perceptions that exist within society of things associated with “Black or Blackness.”

Given this hostile and racialized context, self identification or societal identification as
“Black” has significant implications. The challenge for Black parents becomes how to
raise their children with a healthy sense of individual identity and group identity as a
member of a marginalized group (Coard & Sellers, 2005; McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002).

In addition, Black parents must help their children develop bicultural skills in order for
them to successfully navigate the world (McAdoo, 2002).

**Racial Identity Development**

In the literature, racial identity has been defined as an individual’s social identity
as evidenced by her/his sense of belonging to a particular racial group (Murray &
Mandara, 2002). In Cross’ theoretical model of Black racial identity development, he postulated the “becoming Black” transformation occurs in five stages. The progression through these stages results from fluid changes in a Black person’s thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, related to themselves and other to Black people (Cross, 1991; Franklin, Carter & Grace, 1993). Stage 1 (Pre-encounter) is the pre-existing identity to be changed. During this stage, individuals hold White society and culture as the ideal and harbor negative attitudes toward being Black. Stage 2 (Encounter) occurs when the individual has an experience that challenges their attitudes and thoughts regarding race resulting in the individual seeking to become more identified with being Black. This begins the process of changing the pre-existing identity. Stage 3 (Immersion-Emersion) involves the actual process by which an individual transitions from the pre-existing identity to the new identity. At this time, there is typically an idealization of Black culture and the Black experience along with negative attitudes and feelings toward White culture and White people. Stage 4 (Internalization) is likened to a self-acceptance of being Black along with a more realistic view of the negative and positive things associated with being Black and with being White. Finally, at Stage 5 (Internalization-Commitment) an individual devotes a large portion of their life to working in the interests of the Black community (Cross, 1991; Franklin, Carter & Grace, 1993).

Racial identity development in Black children is dependent on their cognitive readiness and their social context (Murray & Mandara, 2002). During the pre-operational stage of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, children are aware of skin color and can characterize themselves and others accordingly; however, knowledge of skin color does not necessarily indicate knowledge of racial group identities (Murray & Mandara,
It is not until the formal operational stage that adolescents understand the social and political implications of racial group identities (Murray & Mandara, 2002).

Black children may not readily identify themselves as Black due to the negative view in American society of things that are dark or associated with the word “Black” (Murray & Mandara, 2002). Within the school context, most Black children receive explicit and implicit messages about the intellectual inferiority of Blacks as a racial group (Murray & Fairchild, 1989). Black parents’ attempts to buffer the negative messages in American society about race during the development of racial identity in their children are part of the racial socialization process. Theoretically, racial identity development is influenced by parental racial socialization practices. Studies have shown a positive relationship between parent racial socialization practices and racial identity development of Black children (Hughes et al., 2006).

**Racial Socialization**

McAdoo (2002) identified racial socialization as one of the most important parental responsibilities of Black parents. Racial socialization requires Black parents to help their children manage and navigate themselves in an environment that continues to marginalize not only themselves, but also their children (Coard & Sellers, 2005). Within the Black community, these specific and unique child-rearing strategies are believed to facilitate the healthy psychological development of Black children (Coard & Sellers, 2005). In the literature, racial socialization has been broadly defined as “…the process by which messages are transmitted within or between generations about the significance and meaning of race…” (Coard & Sellers, 2005). In their review of the research on racial socialization, Hughes et al., (2006) noted and proposed the following themes: cultural
socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust and egalitarianism to further refine the distinctions in types of racial socialization. Cultural socialization includes specific practices that promote racial, ethnic and cultural pride by teaching racial and ethnic history or cultural traditions and customs. Preparation for bias encompasses attempts to increase awareness of and preparation for racial discrimination with a focus on helping children develop coping strategies against racial bias. Promotion of mistrust emphasizes distrust and caution related to cross-racial interactions. Egalitarianism behaviors include the emphasis on individual characteristics over racial group membership (Hughes et al., 2006). Thus, when Black parents utilize racial socialization strategies, they are performing an important parenting task, which they perceive to be supportive to the healthy psychological development of their children.

Black Parents and Students at Predominantly White Schools

Once Black children begin the formal process of schooling, they are exposed to and immersed in another context of socialization, the school system. The ability of parents to engage in the process of racial socialization can be challenging when their children spend a considerable amount of time within an institution that has historically marginalized them and in which they are racially isolated (Tatum, 1997a).

In her research on Black families in White communities, Tatum (1987; Tatum, 1997a) found that some Black parents were dissatisfied with the lack of representation of historical contributions by Blacks in the curriculum at their children’s schools. Black parents also perceived the school staff in these settings as neglecting the needs of Black students in their classrooms (Tatum, 1987; Tatum, 1997a). In Tatum’s study (1987), parents also reported their children had experienced racist name calling from White peers.
and isolation from a Black peer group. School counselors in predominantly White school settings may not encourage Black students to enroll in academically challenging classes, even when these students have demonstrated the academic ability to achieve higher level classes (Ogbu, 2003). Black parents in White communities reportedly mistrust the school system due to the historical mistreatment of Blacks by and in the educational system (Ogbu, 2003). In their case study of parent involvement by Black and White parents at a public elementary school located in a predominantly White and affluent town, Lareau and McNamara-Horvat (1999) found Black parents were more likely to harbor suspicion and mistrust toward the school institution compared to White parents. These Black parents cited concerns with the potential for racial bias against their children as reasons for their mistrust and suspicion of educators at their children’s school. Additionally, class differences were noted in how Black parents managed these concerns through parent involvement behaviors. Middle-class Black parents were more likely to actively monitor their children’s academic progress, in response to the above noted concern, when compared to poor Black parents (Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999).

In 1984, Banks conducted an exploratory study of Black youth and their families who resided in predominantly White suburbs. Part of the study examined the attitudes these Black youth had toward school, which found that the more Black youth liked their predominantly White school, the less likely they wanted to attend school with more Black youth (Banks, 1984). The study also found that as age increased, Black youth held more negative attitudes about Blacks in their schools and neighborhoods (Banks, 1984). Overall, Black youth reported positive attitudes about their predominantly White schools, including their peers and teachers. Overwhelmingly, 92% of the Black children in
Bank’s study endorsed high opinions related to their physical racial characteristics (Banks, 1984). Tatum similarly found that Black children at predominantly White schools enjoyed their surroundings (Tatum, 1997a). Conversely, both parents and students in Ogbu’s study (2003) reported racial inequity in the discipline of Black and White students, with Black students receiving greater frequency and intensity of disciplinary actions compared to White students. This was reported and observed to begin in middle school and proceed through high school (Ogbu, 2003). Dynamics within peer relations have been reported by Black students as perceived social isolation from White students, and rejection by Black and White peers of academically successful Black students (Ogbu, 2003; Tatum, 1997b). Black students labeled high achieving Black students as “acting White” and saw them as rejecting their Black identity (Ogbu, 2003; Tatum, 1997b). An exploratory study of Black undergraduate students at predominantly White institutions of higher education found that many Black students experienced a mistrust of White faculty, being ignored in classroom settings and overt discriminatory behavior by White faculty (Willie & McCord, 1972). Similarly, in their review of the literature, Thompson and Fretz (1991) noted that Black students at predominantly White colleges and universities perceived greater racial tension, isolation and environmental hostility when compared to White students in similar post-secondary settings.

Limitations of the Current Literature

Research on parental involvement and Black families primarily focuses on the behaviors of and challenges experienced by parents at de facto Black and Latino schools (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Few studies (Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Ogbo, 2003; Tatum, 1997a) pointedly examine the experiences and behaviors of
Black families at predominantly White schools. While a comprehensive framework for parent involvement behaviors has been developed to categorize and analyze parent and school behaviors (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994), this framework does not recognize the concerns of Black families at school, i.e. racial socialization and racial identity development (McAdoo, 2002) and how these concerns may ultimately influence parent involvement behaviors and collaboration between parents and schools. Therefore there is a need to examine the experiences and behaviors of Black families at predominantly White schools with a focus on parent involvement behaviors related to race.

*Research Questions*

Given the lack of prior research in this area, the proposed study will engage in hypotheses generation rather than hypotheses testing. Research questions:

1. What expectations do Black parents have about the racial climate at predominantly White schools which their children attend and how do these expectations influence their parent involvement behaviors?

2. What perceptions do Black parents have about the school-parent-community relationship at predominantly White schools and how do these perceptions influence their parent involvement behaviors?

3. How do Black parents at predominantly White schools engage in parental involvement practices?

4. What suggestions do Black parents at predominantly White schools have related to the education of Black children in predominantly White school settings?
It is believed that answers to the above research questions will give voice to a neglected population and their experiences. These research questions also serve to expand the knowledge about Black families and parent involvement, hopefully towards a more contextual understanding of the parent involvement practices of Black families.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

Participants

Eleven Black parents between the ages of 38 and 78 participated in the study. Participants were all mothers who described themselves as African American or Black. Participant ethnicity was established by their country of origin and their parents’ country of origin. All of the participants identified their and their parents’ country of origin as America. Participants had all completed high school. Eight of these parents had completed college and attained a bachelor’s degree. Out of all the participants, four had attained advanced educational degrees. The median age of the participants was 55 years old. At the time of the study, participants had biological children who were between the ages of 18 and 53 and had attended a predominantly White school during the kindergarten through grade 12. Parents of adult children were chosen in order to allow these parents an opportunity to reflect on and to provide a comprehensive account of their experiences at predominantly White schools. All of the participants had children who completed high school and some college-level courses. Six of the eleven participants had children who were in the process of completing or had completed advanced educational degrees. Participants were recruited through a networked sample of parents. All names have been disguised in order to protect the confidentiality of all participants.
Measures

Demographics questionnaire. Each participant completed a 2-page demographics questionnaire which collected information about each participant’s age, gender, marital status, race and ethnic background, place of birth and parents’ place of birth, highest educational level achieved and current occupation (see Appendix A). In addition participants provided demographic information regarding age, gender, race, ethnicity, highest educational level achieved and current occupation for each of their children. Information was also collected regarding the predominantly White school each child attended, such as the location and type of institution, the child’s age during the initial year of attendance and the total number of years in attendance.

Semi-structured interview. The interview consisted of open-ended questions regarding each parent’s thoughts and perceptions about their experiences with parent involvement and predominantly White schools their children attended (see Appendix B).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through a networking sample. They completed an informed consent agreement which was kept in a separate locked file away from any participants’ responses in order to maintain confidentiality. Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, both developed by the researcher as described above.

The principal investigator conducted all interviews in environments that were comfortable, private, and convenient for the interviewees. The interview process lasted approximately one and a half hour. Interviews were audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Participants were assigned a case number which was the only
identification used on response materials. No identifying information was attached to the transcriptions or audiotapes. The principal investigator was responsible for the transcription of all interviews. All recordings, transcriptions and other data collected from participants will be kept in a locked file cabinet for seven years after the completion of the study. After this period of time has elapsed, all research materials will be destroyed by the principal investigator.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data that were collected through the use of open-ended questions were analyzed using the grounded theory approach, which has the designed purpose of generating hypotheses and theory rather than testing them (Corbin & Straus, 2008). Data analysis involved the review of transcriptions and audio recordings by the principal investigator following the steps or phases of grounded theory, which included open coding, axial coding and selective coding/integration. Selection of this methodology was in anticipation that results of this study would offer hypotheses and themes to be later tested or refuted in future research.

Open coding involved the process of reducing raw data to conceptual labels through a comparative analysis of similarities and differences within and across respondents. The principal investigator then assigned a conceptual label to data which reflected the concepts expressed within the data. As a result, data reduction occurred as data were collapsed under abstract labels in order to connect concepts through the process of axial coding.
Axial coding involved reconnecting data by relating concepts/categories together. This was done in order to further elaborate concepts or categories and to create abstract hypotheses, but not to generate theories.

Selective coding was the final step of the qualitative analysis according to grounded theory. It involved the formation of core categories/themes by connecting and integrating previously identified concepts and categories. The integration of categories formed a grounded theory, which was validated through feedback regarding the development and refinement of themes examined (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Case Study Methodology

Yin's Case Study Method (2009) was also used for illustrative and comparative purposes. Two interviews were selected and formatted as case studies in order to further portray the experiences of Black parents with parent involvement at predominantly White schools and to highlight similarities and differences with findings generated from the grounded theory methodological approach. Cases chosen were representative of the commonalities between and the range of experiences among the Black parents in this study who had experiences with parent involvement at predominantly White schools.
CHAPTER IV

Results

*Predominantly White Schools*

Six of the participants (55%) in this study had children who attended a school where the student body was 90% or more White. Four of the respondents (36%) noted that their children attended schools where the student body was between 80-89% White. One respondent indicated that her child had attended a school where the White students made up 70-79% of the student body. Finally, two of the respondents (18%) had children who attended a predominantly White school where the student population was 60-69% White. Of the eleven participants, two had children who attended multiple predominantly White schools where the White student body population varied between 60-98%. Of the eleven parents interviewed eight (73%) had children who had attended a predominantly White public school and four parents (36%) had children who attended a private or religious school. One of these parents had children initially enrolled in a predominantly White private school, but who later transferred to a public school, which was also predominantly White. Eight of the parents interviewed (73%), had themselves attended a predominantly White school. Of these, all had attended a predominantly White school where the student body population was at least 70% White.
Choosing a Predominantly White School

Parents gave multiple reasons for the decision to have their children attend predominantly White schools. Seven of the participants (64%) reportedly chose predominantly White schools in order to provide their children with access to a high quality education. In so choosing, parents either moved into predominantly White neighborhoods and enrolled their children in the local public school district or enrolled their children in private schools, regardless of the distance between the school and home. Four of the respondents (36%) had previously established residency in a predominantly White neighborhood and chose to send their children to the neighborhood public school because they were satisfied with the quality of education available. Three parents (27%) preferred the type of setting offered at predominantly White schools, such as safe, religious or predominantly White. As a result, these parents chose to enroll their children in private, religious schools. One parent mentioned that her daughter had attended a predominantly Black and Hispanic elementary school and did not want her to experience this again in high school because “that’s not what the world is made of.”

When asked what was done to prepare their children for the experience of attending predominantly White schools, many parents discussed general racial socialization practices they performed. Eight of the parents (73%) engaged in some form of racial socialization, such as cultural socialization and preparation for bias. One parent stated how she attempted to instill cultural pride in her daughters,

…but The things that we did to make them proud of themselves and where they come from, were things that we did constantly in the house…We took them places
where they saw other Black people doing things and achieving…They did learn about their history and their people because it was not talked about much in school.

Another parent explained how and why she helped her child prepare for bias,

We talked extensively about…some of the things she might face, some of the things she might even hear…I didn’t want her to run away somewhere and start bawling and crying. I wanted her to be able to deal with it. She had to defend herself as an African American. I wanted her to be able to do that.

Four of the parents interviewed (36%) encouraged their children to engage in cross-racial interactions. One parent encouraged her daughter, “…not to be afraid to interact with other people.” Another parent felt it was important for her son “…to be accepting of diverse populations.” One other parent emphasized, “…I taught my children to be citizens of the world.”

While all of the parents interviewed had attempted to help their children adjust to predominantly White school settings, six of these parents (55%) did nothing to prepare themselves for dealing with race related challenges their children might experience at predominantly White schools. Two of the parents (18%) reported that their own cross-racial experiences in predominantly White settings helped prepare them to deal with potential race related challenges at their children’s predominantly White schools. Two other parents reported that learning to advocate for their children helped prepare them to handle race related challenges at their children’s predominantly White schools.

Race-Related Concerns

Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) who had been students at predominantly White schools recalled negative or mixed experiences related to race in these settings. One of the experiences reported by three parents (27%) was the disproportionate placement of Black students in classes, specifically small percentages of Black students
in higher level classes and large percentages of Black students in low level or remedial classes. One parent recalled,

…We were tested and placed at various levels and the level was more like a slow, medium, high accelerated course and then there was a gifted and talented course. I was in the high course. The lower levels were mostly African Americans. There was also a special education course which had a lot of African Americans. The high level course that I was in…there were only 2 African Americans in a classroom of about 28 kids.

Another experience recalled by three respondents was the lack of cultural awareness by school staff as demonstrated by lack of a multicultural curriculum and exclusionary school policies. As one parent recounted her experience related to presumed school policy “…we were beginning to wear afros as they were called then, natural hair. The principal told us we were not allowed to wear our hair that way. This is our natural hair. This is beautiful…” Two other parents reported feelings of isolation and being different while attending predominantly White schools. As one parent indicated, “I knew that I was quite different. It was almost like you were invisible. You were acknowledged, but you weren’t really acknowledged. You could put your hand up and eventually, occasionally, you’d get called on.”

Eight of the eleven participants (73%) were concerned that their sons or daughters would be exposed to negative racial messages, resulting from the presence of racism and the lack of a multicultural curriculum at predominantly White schools. One parent cogently summed up her concerns as, “…racism on the part of staff and other kids and their parents, inadequate exposure to instruction that incorporated their history and reflections of themselves and social isolation.” However, this was not a concern for three of the parents interviewed. One parent cited her childhood experiences as support for her lack of concern,
I grew up in a mixed neighborhood...Jewish, Irish and Polish and a few Blacks, not a lot. We had a lot of White friends because we did things that they did...my mother always told us we were as good as everybody else. So we didn’t have to worry about that.

Only three of the eleven parents (27%) worried that attending predominantly White schools would influence their children’s racial self-identification. The source of these parents’ concerns centered on the lack of Black images reflected in the curriculum or present within the staff and student body at predominantly White schools. One parent commented, “I definitely felt that my children didn’t get that sense of self when no other people looked like them. The image of yourself was definitely a little...less positive within the school.”

However, eight of the eleven parents (73%) were not concerned with how their children’s racial self-identification might be influenced by attending predominantly White schools. These parents cited confidence in their children’s sense of self and parent racial socialization practices as reasons for their lack of concern. As one parent noted,

I was not concerned about how she saw herself, because I believe that her self-esteem was where it should be for a child her age. I’m very proud to say that her level of self-esteem is good. I’ve never had a problem with her feeling that she was less than someone else because of her ethnicity.

Similarly, another parent commented,

I felt I did a pretty good job of telling her who she was. I think that’s important. I think children need to know who they are as a people. Once they know that, I think they can move on and they can be alright. They can handle anything that’s thrown their way.

Of the eleven participants, seven (64%) were concerned that race would influence their children’s educational placement at predominantly White schools. These parents worried that, in these settings, the lack of Black images present and teachers’ low
academic expectations of Black students would be a factor in their children’s educational placement. As noted by one parent,

I knew she wasn’t going to receive any inferior classes based on her ability, but I was concerned they would put her in an area where they were just letting her get by and not making her do what she needed to do to get a good education.

The other four parents interviewed (36%), who were not concerned about the impact race might have on their children’s educational placement believed that parent knowledge, parent expectations and parent behaviors were stronger influences on their children’s educational placement when compared to race. Simply stated by one parent aware of her daughter’s ability, “She was bright, so we never worried.”

Nine of the parents interviewed (82%) had children who had talked to them about their experiences of attending predominantly White schools. Of the parents interviewed, eight (73%) recalled their children reporting mixed or negative racial experiences within the school environment. Four of the parents (36%) indicated their children were exposed to negative racial messages from school peers in the form of name calling and comments about physical characteristics. One parent recounted her sons’ experiences, “They have occasionally mentioned things, like name-calling…That’s when they first heard the word nigger.” Another parent recalled one of her daughter’s early exposures to negative racial messages from a school peer “…when another little girl, a White girl, told my daughter that she had nappy hair and she wasn’t pretty because of her hair… that kind of gave them a negative image of themselves.” Only one parent reported neutral racial experiences.

Of the parents interviewed, three (27%) also reported that their children were exposed to negative racial messages in the form of exclusion from school sport teams,
unequal application of school policy and curricular instruction that rarely included the diversity of Black culture or experiences. As recounted by one parent, “I think my son would’ve been on the basketball team if they had Black kids on it at that point.” One of these parents also recalled how low teacher expectations about her daughter’s academic ability and poor teacher-student interactions, conveyed negative racial messages. In this case, her daughter was told by a high school teacher on the first day of school, “…I suggest you go to another class because you’re not going to make it in my class.”

Positively, one of these parents reported that her younger son, years later, felt accepted at the predominantly White school where his older brother had experienced exclusion,

Now, by the time Dan got to Hilltop East High School, he was on the basketball team. He got 10 awards when he graduated. He made the most points on the basketball team. Hilltop East had a contest for Mr. Hilltop East and Dan won it his senior year. He had to compete with all…the White males, but they overwhelmingly voted for him to be Mr. Hilltop East. So, he had very good experiences there.

Race-Relations in Predominantly White Schools

Cross-race relations. When asked to describe their relationships with staff members at predominantly White schools, parents responded with strategies they used to interface with school staff members. Ten of the parents interviewed (91%) actively engaged teachers and administrators at predominantly White schools through various means, such as status checking, presenting concerns and making known their expectations. Noteworthy, is that seven of the parents interviewed (64%) identified staff responsiveness as a factor when characterizing the quality of their relationships with staff members, as either positive, negative or mixed. Four parents (36%) described their relationships with staff members at predominantly White schools as mixed or negative
due to unresponsive or avoidant responses to concerns that parents presented to members of the school staff in these settings. One parent recounted her attempt to address her concerns,

I talked about the high school library…when I was at a meeting. …My daughter can’t come here and read about herself. She comes here to read about everybody else. What is this school going to do about that?…Well, we’ll look into it. It’s been an issue for a long time. The end.

Another parent plainly reported, “It was strained as I started to be more vocal. It was like an approach-avoidant relationship. You could tell that look. Oh, here she comes, now what. It varied, depending on the issue I was addressing.” One parent recalled her efforts to address her son’s academic performance with his teacher,

I asked his teacher “Why is a bright child getting all Cs?” She said, “I don’t know. He just sits in the back of the room and plays all day.” I said, “Can he see the blackboard?” She said, “I don’t know.”

Conversely, five of the parents interviewed (45%) reported a positive relationship due to responsiveness by staff members to parents. As noted by one parent, staff members at the predominantly White school her child attended, identified and responded to her daughter’s academic and social needs,

They were very attentive. Her teachers pushed her a lot. They pushed her for her honors classes. They were attentive to her. They knew what she was capable of doing and they pushed her. They were very caring, very concerned. They watched the type of friends she hung out with and voiced their opinion on who they thought was okay and who they thought was not her cup of tea.

When describing the relationship between staff members at predominantly White schools and other Black families, five of the parents interviewed (45%) reported that the relationship was negative or mixed. Reasons cited were consistent with parents’ explanations of their own relationships with staff members in these settings, specifically unresponsive and avoidance behaviors by staff members when presented with concerns
by other Black families. One parent recalled her experience with her daughter’s school principal, providing a revealing perspective on these behaviors,

A high school teacher had a book with Black jokes in it, downgrading Blacks. The kids came back and told us what was going on. The White kids began to make fun of the Black kids in the classroom. I went to talk to the principal about it, but the principal made the comment to me, “No other Black parents came to see me about this.” I said, “Well, I don’t care that they didn’t show up, I showed up.”

Another parent commented, “If there was a function and they needed help, they were very gracious. Other than that, I don’t think they saw a need for us to be there.” Three of the parents interviewed (27%) described the relationship between staff members and Black families at predominantly White schools as positive, noting that Black families were treated as equals, their needs were understood and their involvement was welcomed by school staff members. One parent recalled,

I think the relationship was pretty good. The school started getting some African-Americans as students and I think the staff was kind of careful and cautious. Staff understood how people felt about different things. So I think they did their best to make things well balanced.

As for the relationships between Black parents and White families at predominantly White schools, only one parent reported a negative relationship resulting in social isolation due to socioeconomic and class differences between the parent interviewed and the White families in her child’s school. Five of the participants (45%) characterized their relationships with White families as positive. One parent recounted the relationship was “…cordial in the beginning. As time went on, working on various committees… people became somewhat closer…” Another 45% of parents reported their relationships with White families as mixed due to inauthentic or superficial interactions. One parent simply stated,
…You’re only kind of being engaged. The parents are mostly interested in what the children are doing, not really caring what the adults are doing...It was knowledge of who you were, but to forge a bond, relationship or going out for drinks or any socialization, that wasn’t working.

Similarly, another parent commented, “People are polite, but they go their own separate ways in large part. There is some minimal interaction when kids were at each others’ parties or visited each others’ homes.”

*Same-race relations.* Of the eleven parents interviewed, eight (73%) reported relationships between White families and staff members at predominantly White schools as positive, generally because staff members were responsive to White families and there were many opportunities for interactions between staff members and White families, both inside and outside of the school setting. As one parent reflected,

On the outside looking in, you kind of feel sometimes that the White families get better treatment or, school staff paid more attention to them. That’s why every meeting that the school had, I made it a point of attending. I wanted them to know that I was just as interested in my child as some of the other parents were interested in theirs.

Relationships between Black families at predominantly White schools were frequently characterized as close and positive. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) noted that Black families had developed positive, close relationships, through the mutual support they provided to each other. As one parent recalled, “We pull together and share some experiences and try to help one another figure out what we can do.” Another parent noted, “…many times…we had to talk to each other just to keep people in tune…and…not give up because it was difficult…” Similar to the relationships between White families and school staff at predominantly White schools, Black families had many opportunities to interact with each other outside of the school setting. As noted by one parent, “…There was a greater likelihood for people to bond socially and to form
friendships, to go to the same church, to know people…in common.” However, three of the eleven parents (27%) reported negative or mixed relationships with other Black families at predominantly White schools due to socioeconomic and class differences.

One parent recounted how these differences served to isolate some Black families,

…I think as a people, we have a tendency to size each other up…We stand there and interview each other…What kind of car are you driving? What do you do? Okay, you’re a professional, you can come in. We isolate each other before we get to know each other….

All of the parents interviewed (100%), provided opportunities for their children to interact with and develop relationships with Black people outside of their homes and schools. Six of these parents (55%) perceived this as fostering their children’s competence in Black culture. Four parents (36%) viewed these interactions as creating emotionally supportive environments for their children. One parent indicated this was an opportunity for her daughter to be a cultural envoy, by transmitting mainstream culture to other Black peers and parents,

There have been positive relationships forged because of what she brought to the table, or maybe because of the material wealth or the exposure of coming from Suburban High School and what it had to offer to other people and to build hope for other families. We work and worship in the city and often times in our churches, you can see the different blend socioeconomically…She was able to provide some exposure from her own personal experiences…and to discuss at a Vacation Bible School class or a Sunday school class…what we’re doing at my school or this is what’s acceptable or this is how we do things. It became an awareness…to talk about what other students were doing so that parents could be enlightened and even the kids could say “Oh we need to catch up.”

Advantages and Disadvantages

All of the parents in this study perceived some benefit to their children from the experience of attending predominantly White schools. Advantages reported by parents were educational, social and individual to their children. The most frequently cited
advantage by parents was educational. Nine of the eleven parents interviewed (82%) believed their children received a high-quality education while attending predominantly White schools, which was a benefit. One parent noted the educational outcomes for students at her children’s predominantly White school were consistent with the high educational expectations she held,

We moved to Suburban Township because, 98% to 99% of the kids go to college. In the inner city schools in Urban High School, 58% of the kids finish high school. Now my anticipation for my children was not just to finish high school. What college are you going to? Not if you’re going to college, but what college?

Another parent cited,

…To be in a school like Suburban High School…speaks to the level of proficiency they have academically…When you look at the annual report card that goes out about the school districts in the state, you can see where the rankings are…When Kenya began to apply to colleges and she’d speak to college admissions offices…and they see you’re coming from Suburban High School, that’s pivotal…It’s the school district that you survive through. It speaks volumes to what you’ve been exposed to.

The next frequently cited advantage was social. Eight of the parents interviewed (73%) believed their children benefitted from being exposed to the diverse populations and experiences available at predominantly White schools. As one parent noted, the predominantly White school provided her son with “…Exposure to things that he wouldn’t necessarily experience, while attending a public school in the South Bronx…”

Another parent recalled the various opportunities her daughters had to interact with peers from other cultures, “…The oldest child went to France and lived with a French family. We’ve had French students stay with us, Spanish students stay with us and an Australian student stay with us…that was each child’s age…” One parent talked about the benefit to her children of being exposed to mainstream culture,
…In truth, that’s what the world looks like. It’s about Caucasians, and African Americans are a small part of the population… It gives them a view of what the real world looks like and how they’re going to need to be prepared to deal with whatever issue may come before them.

The last advantage reported by parents was identity and character development. Two parents talked about their children developing integrity and gratefulness from the experience of attending predominantly White schools. One parent who chose a predominantly White school, specifically to allow her daughter more exposure to White people noted, “I think it prepared her for the workforce. I think that’s why today she has no problems defending anything.” Another parent recalled, “…We used to tell her all the time… before forced bussing and integration we had used textbooks from the White schools. I think it made her appreciate it a little bit…”

Nine of the parents interviewed (81%) reported some disadvantage to their children resulting from attending predominantly White schools. Six parents (55%) believed their children were disadvantaged due to limited exposure to Black peers and Black staff members at predominantly White schools; however, parents provided varying reasons for explaining why this was a disadvantage. One parent lamented, “…Not seeing enough people that looked like him, children of color. I think you need to see people that look like you, so that you can relate and identify.” Another parent observed, “They did not have…the same ability to make friends with peers of their own images… When you get the boy-girl relationships in the school, they did not have those same relationships at all.” Still another parent presented a different perspective, “…not having educators that look like them, that could be role models and mentors for them…” For this parent, lack of Black staff members meant that her child had no access to Black role models or mentors in predominantly White school settings. Four of the parents interviewed (36%)
identified lack of cultural competence by school staff members at predominantly White schools as a disadvantage to their children. One parent responded, “I felt that they weren’t knowledgeable about culture.” Another parent commented, “The expectation was that Blacks were not capable in the White school. At the White school if you do well, they’re surprised, not that it’s expected, which is kind of stupid. People rise to their level of expectation.” Two of the parents interviewed did not identify any disadvantages.

**Parent Involvement at Home**

When asked what they had done at home to be involved in their children's education, all of the eleven parents interviewed (100%) cited numerous examples of their at home parent involvement behaviors. Responses from parents revealed that at home parent involvement was accomplished by monitoring academic performance, providing access to resources, establishing educational expectations, providing emotional support, exposing children to various cultural activities and seeking supports from other parents. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) reported that they provided their children with access to educational resources. Another seven respondents indicated they also monitored their children’s academic performance. As one parent offered,

> I would check her work, communicate with her teachers via e-mail, help with homework, take her to school early if I thought she needed extra help with a subject, and provide any educational resources I could find that would help her. I also enrolled her in college level courses in her junior and senior year…

Additionally, seven of the parents interviewed reported at home parent involvement behavior, which involved establishing educational expectations for their children. This parent created educational spaces and routines at home for her children,

> I would say early on, our kitchen was transformed to be like a classroom setting…In the small cabinets were their school books, pencils, folders,
envelopes, paper clips. When we’d pick the kids up from school, we’d come home and homework would be done in the kitchen.

Other means of establishing educational expectations at home were achieved through parent discussion and parent modeling of their expectations. As one parent recalled, “I took a speed reading course to emphasize to them the importance of reading.” Also, five of the parents interviewed (45%) exposed their children to diverse cultures and experiences. For one parent, exposure involved “…taking them out for activities, exposing them to social and cultural activities, different places and college tours. Whatever it took to inspire them and ensure that they had some exposure…” Exposure was also meant to inspire their children to achieve more. As noted by one parent, “expecting them to do their best and the message that average is not good enough….it was absolutely necessary and expected that they continue their education beyond high school.”

When asked, five of the parents interviewed (45%) were reportedly satisfied with their level of parent involvement at home. Another 45% of parents wished they had been more involved at home. As one parent lamented,

I would have loved to have been more involved at home, where I could have been a stay at home mom. I could have been somebody that was home when they came home from school, have a snack, then, we get into homework. I think – I could have done so much more, but having a full time job is a limit to what you can do.

Only one parent wished she had been less involved at home. This parent recounted a conversation with her daughter, who had graduated from high school a few days before this interview,
I may have been a little overbearing. Not to the point where Tiffany resented me, but I think I needed to be able to let her show me how mature she was... The other day... I said, “I don’t have it. Did you do your homework?” She looked at me, and said, “Mom it’s over.” So I may have been a little overbearing...

**Parent Involvement at School**

When asked what they had done at school to be involved in their children’s education, all of the eleven parents interviewed (100%) provided numerous examples of their at school parent involvement behaviors. Responses from parents showed at school parent involvement was accomplished by, attending meetings, attending events, participating in parent organizations and volunteering labor at predominantly White schools. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) cited their attendance at parent-teacher meetings as demonstrating their involvement at school. Six of the parents interviewed (55%) indicated participation in school-sponsored parent organizations, such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) was an example of their involvement at school. Another 55% of parents noted that they volunteered their labor in order to be involved at their children’s school. Two parents identified their attendance at student-centered events and activities held at predominantly White schools as a form of at school parent involvement.

Overwhelmingly, nine of the eleven parents interviewed (82%) wished they had been more involved at school for various reasons. As noted by one parent, schools can benefit,

...I would love to have been more involved at school because I think the more you’re involved, the better the school becomes. It can only get better. If you’re there, you encourage others to work along with you and you have that much more in terms of strength, in terms of everything.
Another parent viewed her involvement at school as a direct benefit to her children “… I could have done even more at school…I always feel you could do even more at school. If parents aren’t there at the school and involved, then you don’t get the best for your kids.” Only two parents were satisfied with their level of involvement at school. None of the parents interviewed wished they had been less involvement at school.

**Parent Involvement in the Community**

Nine of the parents interviewed (82%) voluntarily engaged in activities that allowed them to be involved in the education of other students at predominantly White schools. These activities included, mentoring students, organizing and hosting student-centered social events outside of school, volunteering time and labor in the school, and participating in school-sponsored committees and organizations. Also, six of the parents interviewed (55%), collaborated with other Black families at predominantly White schools, providing each other with mutual support.

**Supports and Hindrances to Parent Involvement**

Parents interviewed cited various factors that facilitated their parent involvement behaviors at home. Five of the parents interviewed (45%) reported that parent expectations helped them to be involved at home. Another 45% of parents identified the value placed on education as a facilitator of parent involvement practices at home. As revealed by this parent,

I wanted my child to succeed. I did well academically at school and I just wanted the same for her. It’s a tough world out there. Realizing that we probably wouldn’t get academic scholarships for college, I still had to help her to see how important education was. I’m the first person on my Mom’s side of the family to get a college degree. And since then others have gotten degrees, but she needs to keep this legacy going. College is important. Education is important. I wanted her to be able to compete with others.
Parent access to resources, such as knowledge or finances was also noted as a support to parent involvement at home by four of the eleven (36%) parents interviewed. Even though all of the parents interviewed identified numerous supports for parent involvement at home, seven of the parents interviewed (64%) believed that their own work, school and parenting responsibilities presented obstacles to their parent involvement behaviors at home. At the same time, four parents (36%) reported that nothing hindered their parent involvement at home.

Of the parents interviewed, seven (64%) reported that visibly demonstrating their care, support and concern for their children helped them to be involved at their children’s school. As noted by one parent, “I think as a parent…that’s your child…and you want to be there for them and show your support. I think it makes a child feel good when their parent comes to school…and it’s not for something negative…”

Two of the parents interviewed (18%) reported that having available opportunities to be involved at school helped, which included being invited by the school or the flexibility of parents’ schedules. Additionally, two parents noted that resources, such as social networks and parent knowledge enabled them to be involved at school. One parent stated she was encouraged to be involved at school because it was an enjoyable experience for her and her child. One other parent identified the cultural value placed on education as an important factor for her to be involved at school. All of the eleven parents interviewed (100%) cited that their work and parenting responsibilities hindered their level of involvement at school. As one parent revealed, her typical work day kept her from being as involved at school as she would have liked “… My day starts at 5am and ends at 6-6:30pm when I get home. You really don’t have much time.”
Role of the school. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) revealed that predominantly White schools supported parent involvement by providing opportunities for parents to be involved in their children’s education and by communicating this information to parents. One parent noted the impact of “…making you aware of what programs and events were occurring so that you could have planned your schedule around those particular events.” School staff responsiveness to parents was reported by three of the parents (27%) as a factor that helped them to be involved in their children’s education. School responsiveness to parents included, school staff members responding to parent concerns and welcoming parent-initiated involvement at school. Two parents (18%) believed school staff at predominantly White schools did not support their involvement at the school. As one parent observed, “A lot of times they’ll say ‘Oh, we’re always open to communication’, but you don’t find out things sometimes unless you call and make yourself engaged and make them tell you things that you need to know.”

Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) did not perceive the school as hindering parent involvement in their children’s education. Two parents (18%) reported that poor responsiveness to parent concerns did hinder their involvement at school. Poor responsiveness included avoidant or defensive responses by school staff to parent concerns. One parent recounted her disengagement from the local Parent Teacher Association and ultimate remorse about allowing herself to become disengaged,

I just felt that they weren’t really sincere about the African American concerns…I felt like they heard what I said and then that was it. She won’t be back. We don’t have to do anything… That PTA thing did kind of bother me…So I let that, their lack of response get the best of me. I think I should have been more involved in the PTA if nothing else.
One parent perceived that school policies/procedures also hindered her involvement at school. “Certain times you couldn’t visit the classroom. If you wanted to just pop in unannounced, it was not acceptable.”

**Parent Retrospect**

Reflecting on their experiences, six of the eleven parents interviewed (55%) anticipated some of the positive and negative events that occurred. Positively, one parent reported, “I think we got what I expected… with all of the ups and downs and challenges, I think we came through it pretty good.” In comparing her educational experiences to her children’s, one parent simply stated, “I went to predominantly White schools, so I had all this crap before.” On the other hand, five parents (45%) did not anticipate some of their positive or negative experiences. One parent was surprised by the positive outcomes,

She looks back and sees. In fact she and I were on our power walk Sunday night and we came back in front of the elementary school and she stood there and she said, “I remember my first day here.” She was in 4th grade…She got a little tearful and so did I. I told her, “Wow, it seems like only yesterday.” She’s grown up and in her junior year of college and to have a moment to reflect…It wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t a bad experience…She’s more appreciative of the sacrifices we made for her to go to this school.

Conversely, another parent was unprepared for the lack of support around post-secondary transition for her daughter,

I was surprised by the lack of resources available to minority students and to the students…in general. I had a talk with a family member and her children go to predominantly Black schools. Their guidance counselor actually helped them fill out their college applications. Our school told us, write whatever schools you want to go to, fill it out online and do what you need to do. The school did a seminar, Okay your child is going to college. This is what’s available on the website. You need to go on and do what you need to do. There were a lot of unanswered questions. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do next.

If given the opportunity to allow their children to attend predominantly White schools again, seven of the eleven parents (64%) responded in the affirmative; however,
these parents also indicated they would do things a little differently the second time around, such as increase their level of involvement at school, interact with a larger number of Black families, and provide their children with more opportunities for same-race peer interactions. For three parents (27%), the quality of education provided was their main focus. As one parent indicated, “It’s about who can provide them the best and if it’s predominantly White schools, then that’s where I’d send them.” Another parent noted, “If it had a very good reputation, I probably would…but my children would be doing something where they had to interact with other Black students all the time.” One parent highlighted the importance of race relationships at the school,

I’d probably do more research about how they’ve handled situations in the past. What race issues have come up in the school in the past and how did you handle it? Yeah, I would ask. I would ask the principal and if he said none, I would know he was lying. Then, I would probably look somewhere else.

Four of the eleven parents interviewed (36%) indicated a preference for a more racially mixed school environment as opposed to a predominantly White school environment. One parent reflected on the advantages of students being educated in a diverse school environment,

…I think if you can find a neighborhood that’s just a wonderfully mixed area and the same thing with the school. I think it’s important for children to learn how to get along with each other. I think it’s important for them to understand that people are people and because your skin may be a different color or you speak a different language doesn’t make you any worse – we’re all just people… So I would not want my children to be in a school that’s all White or predominantly White. I think that a mixed setting is great…

Another parent simply stated “…why should he have to go somewhere else, out of his neighborhood, to get the education he’s going to get at the predominantly White school…it should be equal…”
Recommendations

Schools. Nine of the eleven parents interviewed (91%) noted cultural competence for school staff as a factor in the education of Black students at predominantly White schools. Cultural competence was identified as an area in which school staff needed to develop knowledge of Black students and their experiences and skill in successfully educating Black students. Parents suggested specific activities for staff members to perform in order to improve their cultural competence, such as hiring Black staff, diversity training for staff and implementing a multicultural curriculum. One parent stated, “…They need to learn about the students that they are educating…their culture…and areas that will increase their learning, i.e. mentors in the school…more administrators, teachers that are African American rather than… the majority being Caucasian.” Another parent suggested, “They should increase their cultural sensitivity. Implement a curriculum that encompasses African American history, which is important to both African American and White students.” Similarly, another parent commented on the curriculum content, “…They should have a curriculum that includes Black history, not as a miniscule project, but an equal part of the process and it shouldn’t be focused entirely on the fact that African American were slaves.” Finally, commenting on the social and emotional development of Black students attending predominantly White schools, this parent recommended,

Try to make sure that you do not make the Black kids feel invisible. Acknowledge that they are different and there are things that the kids can do together, but make sure that they have a sense of pride in who they are as a Black person and not try to make them fit in as the majority.
One parent recommended that staff members at predominantly White schools, should seek to increase Black parent involvement at school. Using Parent Teacher Associations as an example, she explained,

Let’s say their PTA… is comprised of … 80%-90% White...I think one of the things they need to do is try to get as many Black families as possible involved…on those boards. They need to be a part of the decision making process…

In order to improve the school-family relationship between staff at predominantly White schools and Black families, six of the parents interviewed (55%) recommended that school staff proactively engage with and seek input from Black parents. Five of the parents interviewed (45%) indicated the need for staff members to improve their cultural competence, by increasing numbers of Black staff members, by cultivating knowledge of the experiences of Black students and by developing skills in educating Black students.

*Parents.* All of the parents interviewed (100%) cited parent involvement at home, at school and in the community as necessary practices for Black parents whose children attend predominantly White schools. As one parent explained, parent involvement at school can influence teacher behavior and prevent teacher mistreatment,

…Definitely talk to your child’s teacher. Let them know that you’re involved, because I think …when a teacher knows, if I do that, that parent is going to be at my front door, then no I shouldn’t do that. I think the more involved you are the better.

Another parent commented on how being involved at home can influence children’s social and emotional development,

…Parents should make sure their children acknowledge their culture. It’s important to them. They’ll feel comfortable whether they’re around children that look like them or around children that are diverse and they can express to children of other cultures that people are all the same.
One parent noted how involvement in the community, specifically with other Black parents, can be the impetus toward school-wide changes at predominantly White schools, “Black people need to do more in a lot of these schools, and especially the White schools in terms of our own history…Maybe that’s something that parents together can sit down and talk about…”
CHAPTER V

Case Studies

Data are further illustrated in this chapter following procedures for case studies as described in Yin (2009). Cases were selected based on how similar and dissimilar they were to experiences reported by other parents in the current study. One case was especially representative of many of the experiences reported by other parents interviewed, specifically, the choice of a predominantly White school, parent concerns regarding race and culture, and race relations in this setting. The second case highlighted a few exceptions, such as the parent’s level of community involvement and her own relationships with staff and White parents in predominantly White schools. Additionally, the experiences of the second case were embedded within a context unique to other parents interviewed as part of the current study. These cases were chosen in order to provide additional detail and “voice” to data previously reported.

Case 1

Linda

Linda was a thirty-six year old African American woman who worked for over ten years in the auto insurance industry. She was married and had two daughters and a son. Her eldest daughter attended a predominantly White public high school where the student body was approximately 80% White and 20% non-White. Linda’s daughter attended this school from the 9th through the 12th grades. During this time, Linda and her
family also resided in the suburban neighborhood where the high school was located. As a result, her family lived in a predominantly White neighborhood. Linda talked about how her daughter happened to attend a predominantly White high school,

We actually moved here based on the location of our jobs. That’s where we moved and that’s what the schools were made up of. When we were doing research or looking to where we wanted to move, the research we did was not necessarily about race, but more about what the SAT scores were, the percentage of kids that graduated and the percentage of kids that went on to four year universities.

For Linda, the decision to allow her daughter to attend a predominantly White school was primarily based on the quality of education available and how it was consistent with the education goals she had for her daughter. The family relocated due to work responsibilities; however, access to a good education was a major factor when deciding on a place of residence.

Linda was aware that her daughter might be exposed to an unwelcome climate at the predominantly White school, due to race and cultural differences between her daughter and other students and staff members. She recalled an incident when students at her daughter’s school expressed their thoughts about the presence of Black students in the neighborhood,

My daughter was having cheerleader practice at one of the White cheerleader’s homes, and one of them made a comment. There was a Black student walking across the lawn and one of them said, “Who’s that Black person? Black people aren’t around here. Who’s that?” They didn’t realize that the Black person that they didn’t know was a former cheerleader who had already graduated. They realized after that, they needed to be sensitive to my daughter because she was also Black.
Given her concerns, Linda attempted to help her daughter successfully adjust to the predominantly White environment at school, by talking with her daughter about her own experiences of being a student at a predominantly White school and by proactively engaging with staff at her daughter’s school,

I’ve always spoken with her. Although I grew up in a city, the schools that I went to were predominantly White and had racial problems. I felt like it was because of my experiences I was able to share those with her. So when she went to school, she wasn’t necessarily totally naïve to things that might happen, but I was also trying to keep her mind open to learn new cultures and new experiences also. I did try to show my face in the school, introduce myself, made sure I went to the open school night so they knew who I was. I would get to know her teachers, and make them aware that I’m an approachable person, and you can speak with me. I would make sure if there were any concerns that we could address it together for the success of her education.

In sharing her experiences with her daughter, Linda hoped her daughter would be prepared to handle issues of racial bias, if they occurred. While her daughter needed to be aware of potential racial bias, Linda still wanted her to develop biculturally through exposure to other cultures and diverse experiences. Linda also made attempts to establish collaborative relationships with staff at her daughter’s school.

In characterizing her relationship with the school staff at the predominantly White school, Linda reported it was generally good; however, she did have to address an issue shortly after her daughter enrolled in the school,

I think that my relationship was really good. I won’t say that I had any – I should say bad experiences. I did have a couple of incidents where I had to kind of nip it in the bud. One thing that I will tell you that I experienced. As soon as we moved to the school district, apparently there was some racial tension going on with the African American students against the Middle Eastern students. With my daughter being African American, she was pulled into it just by her associations and her being the new girl. The resource officer tried to make it seem like, oh, your child’s coming from these schools in a predominantly Black area and bringing this drama here. It was like you’re trying to push it off like this was something that wasn’t in here way before she got here. I basically explained to him, I’m not sure where you think I’m coming from but, you’re not going to
put this off on my child when you had these racial tensions going on before. So, when I say nip it in the bud, I mean just because you see that we are a small population in this area, I’m not going to have you treat my daughter any different because my money is the same as everybody else’s money.

In this instance, a staff member at the predominantly White school prejudged Linda’s daughter primarily based on race. The resource officer accused Linda’s daughter of contributing to racial tensions between different student ethnic groups at school because she was a Black student that had recently moved from a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Linda’s experiences of cross-racial relations at the predominantly White school were quite similar to many of the experiences reported by other parents interviewed; however, she added the unique perspective of a parent with a student athlete,

I think that they’re cordial. You really don’t see a lot of interaction, where there are a lot of Black families involved in things, unless it’s a sports related event. A lot of the Black families that have been here for a long time, a lot of the kids that they do a lot of the talking about are the kids that are African American and that are athletic. They look at them as being athletes as opposed to necessarily scholars. Those are the kids that they try to push along even if there may be problems. We’re going to make sure we can do what we need to do to get this kid where he needs to be because he’s a good athlete not, we’re going make sure we can do what we need to do to make sure this kid gets a good SAT score. Whereas, the White kids, they just know them because maybe they live next door to them, or they may all belong to the same type of organization or other things like that.

Linda noted that staff-parent and parent-parent cross-racial interactions at her daughter’s school primarily focused on Black students as athletes.

Much of Linda’s parent involvement behaviors were directed toward helping her daughter graduate high school and successfully transition to college, in order to attain the high educational goals she had for her,

The most I’ve done is make sure she did her homework, tried to have her take SAT’s, told her about resources that she has available and made sure she
understood how to use those resources in high school. I did research myself to see what was out there, to make sure we were getting everything we were supposed to be getting from the school. I’ve attended PTA meetings, open school night and contacted teachers if I had any type of concerns. We went to the guidance office also when we were doing research for colleges and spoke with her school guidance officer or counselor.

Challenges to Linda’s ability to be involved in her daughter’s education were consistent with the experiences recalled by other parents interviewed; however, Linda also questioned the authenticity of the school’s role in supporting parent involvement,

The fact that I worked and had school and childcare responsibilities was challenging. If I had more time, I would definitely have wanted to give more time to the school. I guess you always wish that you have more time and more involvement in your children’s life. Now that she’s graduated and she’s going into her adulthood, you always wonder if there were things that you could have done differently. Maybe take the TV out the room for more study time, and enforcing more study time. I really think it’s you as a parent taking the extra step. A lot of times the school will say, “Oh, we’re always open to communication”, but you don’t find out things sometimes unless you call and make yourself engaged and make them tell you things that you need to know.

Despite challenges to parent involvement, Linda, like many of the parents interviewed, was motivated by the expectations she held for her daughter,

I wanted to be involved and wanted the best for my child in general. For me growing up, I always saw that the parents that were always involved in their children’s school, it seemed like those were the children that did the best in school and that’s what I’ve always done with her also.

While Linda was able to identify advantages and disadvantages her daughter experienced by attending a predominantly White school, notable is that Linda struggled with the differences in the quality of education available at predominantly White schools compared to what is available at predominantly Black schools,

One of the things that I always felt was an advantage of going to a White school is that, a lot of times, unfortunately, when we get to the workforce, that’s what your workforce is made up of. So, you’re used to dealing with other races as a student. When you get older and become an adult, your transition in the workforce will be smoother. At the predominantly White school they’re not going to teach African
American culture like they would if you were in a Black school and you miss interacting with a lot of people that basically resemble yourself. When I looked at the schools, I just wanted someplace that was safe. I felt that the schools were relatively safe. I wanted someplace that she could get a good education. I don’t know if that was an advantage of being at a White school or if that’s just what was made up of this school district. Unfortunately, in the state that we live in, the predominantly Black schools, the test results and all my concerns weren’t at the same level as at our school. I’m saying that, but I am trying not to be naïve either. Unfortunately, it just appears that the White schools get the resources they need to get to their children, even if it means newer textbooks or things that maybe some of the other schools just don’t have the advantage of having.

Linda’s decision to allow her child to attend a predominantly White school was consistent with what many other parents in the current study reported. She wanted her child to get a good education and the academic outcomes at the predominantly White school met the high educational expectations she had for her daughter. Similar to other parents interviewed, Linda was concerned about her daughter’s exposure to a school setting that possibly would not affirm her race or cultural experiences. Additionally, her perception of race relations in this setting was consistent with some of the perceptions reported by other parents in the current study.

While Linda’s case had many similarities to that of other parents interviewed, she was the only one who acknowledged the inequity in access to a good education which fell along racial lines, specifically access to a good education is more likely to be available at a predominantly White school than at a predominantly Black school. Though she attempted to explain this inequity as resulting from differences in availability of resources, voicing the presence of this inequity in education was troubling for her.
Case 2

Pamela

Pamela was a sixty-two year old African American woman who worked for many years with the state as an administrative assistant. She was married to Bob and had four daughters. All four of her daughters attended predominantly White schools in a public school district where the student body was approximately 80% White and 20% non-White. Pamela’s daughters attended schools in this district from kindergarten through the 12th grade. While her daughters attended these schools, Pamela and her family resided in a small, suburban predominantly Black community that was embedded within a larger, predominantly White neighborhood.

Pamela and her husband were educated in the same school system their daughters attended. She recalled her experiences in this setting related to race,

Bob and I were two of six Black students in a class of 600, and we were often confronted by the ‘n’ word and nappy headed. On the bus one day, I got off the bus at school, and a boy called me Black kid. I just hauled off and decked him, so they sent me to the discipline office. We saw fighting everyday on the bus…because of the color of our skin.

In recalling her own experiences as a student with race in this setting, Pamela portrayed how the school environment was not always accepting of Black students.

While Pamela’s own experiences made her aware that her daughters might be exposed to an environment that did not affirm their race or culture, she relied on various supports to help her daughters navigate this predominantly White setting,

I really never thought about it, because I thought they were rounded and centered enough in themselves that if they had any issues they would either handle them or they would come home and tell us about them. My husband always had an open dialogue with the kids. He talked to the kids after school and before school. So we really never discussed it. I think part of that was because we were in a safe
environment. We lived in a Black community, and they were only at the predominantly White school for a couple of hours out of the day.

While Pamela was able to improve her relationship with staff at these schools, she revealed a rather complex relationship between staff members and other Black families,

I think it improved, because they knew me well enough to know that when I came in and I called them, it was about a concern. It was not really about an attack on them as much as it was that I wanted fair treatment for my kids.

It comes down to understanding that you want the same things for our kids. I feel, when we walk into a room it always seems to be adversarial. They always think we’re there as an adversary as opposed to someone who is concerned and can help the process. They immediately put up antennas and I think it’s because they don’t see a lot of us out there. By the same token they’re not doing anything to bring us in there. I don’t think they really got to that point where they encouraged participation. Oh, I think it’s cordial. You know what bothered me? I have talked to a number of parents about this. When a Black parent walks into a PTA meeting, it’s like, Okay, what do you want here? You don’t belong here. It’s almost like a club that you can’t break into. So I never used the PTA as a vehicle, because I figured, why do I need this aggravation? I don’t have to come to here.

Pamela’s perceptions of the negative racial relations between staff and Black parents were somewhat similar to what other parents reported; however, in this instance school staff responded in an adversarial manner rather than being avoidant and unresponsive to Black parents.

Unlike many other parents in the current study, Pamela was able to develop positive, authentic relationships with White families in these schools, wherein she gained access to vital informational resources which influenced her ability to successfully engage in parent involvement behaviors at school. Pamela viewed many of her relationships with White families as an opportunity for her to learn how to navigate the school system and improve her ability to be involved in her children’s education,

I’ve had some real good, strong relationships with White parents. When my kids were in elementary school, the children would navigate towards certain kids, and they became friends. They would do sleepovers and things like that. I was able
to talk to these parents about what they were doing with their children. I learned a lot about how they work the system. I would have never dreamed to go to a district and say, “I don’t want my child in that class.” I just figured that’s what they did and that’s the way it was going to be. If I had not had that connection and that interaction with White parents, I wouldn’t have learned how to say that.

As a parent who worked full-time outside the home while her daughters attended school, Pamela managed to be involved in their education in many ways, by monitoring work completion, establishing routines and emphasizing the importance and value of education in their family; however, she also built relationships with teachers and administrators,

When they were younger, the first thing we would do is go over what they’d done at school and what their homework assignments were. That was a priority. You come in from school and you hit the books first. You let me know what your homework is. You do your homework first. After your homework is done, your time is your own. You can go watch TV or play a game, if there’s a game you want to play, but they always knew that homework was done. Their book bags were to be packed and at the door so that there could be no reason why a teacher called me up to say my daughter didn’t bring their homework in today. I always encouraged the kids that it’s difficult enough for us in this world, and to not have an education triples that. So they always understood that education came first.

I went to Back to School Nights. I always let teachers know that I was going to be a parent that was involved. Even though I might not attend PTA meetings, I was going to make sure that I made my children responsible for their actions, but also would hold the teachers accountable for what they did in the classroom. Basically, they came to know me and I got to know them. I would say to them, “I can be your best friend and your worst enemy. We both want the same thing. We want to educate my children. I want my children to get the best education that is possible. I don’t want any more for them than any other student across the district. I just want the same opportunity.”

I told them that if they had an issue with my child I wanted to know about it. I told my children all the time. “Don’t argue with the teacher. You be very respectful in that classroom. If you have a problem, come tell me. Then let me handle it.” I would go to the board meetings and listen to what was going on at the board meeting. So I got to know the administrators. In so doing, if there was something that came to me, from one of my kids, my first call would be to the principal. Then he would tell me who I needed to talk to and if I had any problems to come back and talk to him.
Unlike other parents interviewed, Pamela acknowledged her personal relationships and social networks, including her husband who was a school board member, as key factors in facilitating her ability to be involved in the education of her children,

I had the opportunity to work with and for someone whose background is in education, who taught me a few things about how to navigate the system. Then with Bob being on the school board, he knew what could and could not be done. Having graduated there myself, there were still some teachers there that I could go to and say, “I have a question and this is off the record. Tell me what I should do.”

Similar to other parents, Pamela’s responsibilities outside of the home, at times, hindered her involvement in her daughters’ education. Pamela also acknowledged that her community involvement, at times, was instrumental in hindering her involvement and ability to collaborate with school staff,

I was gone an awful lot. I was an administrative assistant. Our schedules were really, really busy. Bob was doing the security for the school district. At the same time he was doing a project called Neighborhood Watch, so he was gone a lot. We both were like ships passing in the night. The older daughter, a lot of things fell on her shoulders. I think that was difficult. Through my work in the state and the fact that I did so much with the civic association, my name was often in the paper along with comments I would make. A lot of people were under the impression that I was there to hurt, not help. The teachers, the staff, saw me as a thorn rather than a rose.

Looking back, Pamela reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of attending predominantly White schools. For her, attending predominantly White schools was instrumental in the social development of her daughters. It prepared them for dealing with cross-racial relations as adults. At the same time, similar to other parents interviewed, Pamela lamented the lack of attention to culture and diversity at these schools, specifically as it pertained to African Americans,
I think the advantage is that it gave them a view of what the real world looks like and how they’re going to need to be prepared to deal with whatever issue may come before them. Had they gone to an all Black school, I think they would have been sheltered.

The White schools really don’t give you enough of who you are. There is more to African Americans than being just slaves. There’s a rich history. It not only benefits our children, but it benefits the White kids. They all would benefit by having the facts and they really just glaze over it.

Like many other parents interviewed, Pamela wished she had been more involved in the education of her daughters,

I think by being more involved we would have caught some things early on, and maybe have been able to change the direction. For example, it wasn’t until we got involved much later that we learned about tracking and how that really worked. A lot of parents don’t understand that by taking some electives, you are really changing the course of your child’s class ranking. Had we known that early on, we would have fought guidance, particularly in high school. I think, even in the middle school, and the latter part of elementary, is when they really start tracking your child. You see that they’re taking these courses, but they aren’t really preparing them for the next level. I would say around fifth and sixth grade, we really needed to watch what they were doing and where they were putting my children, because that set them up for what they did in high school. I really wish I had been more involved then. I think that if we had been more involved earlier on, they probably would have chosen different career paths.

Pamela identified factors she would consider if she was going to send her daughters to predominantly White schools again. She felt that while her children attended predominantly White schools, it was important to their social and emotional development that they be exposed to Black culture,

I think that the predominantly White school really gave them a look at the world as it is. I’d always be mindful that because they’re in a predominantly White school, there probably needs to be some supplement at home with regard to Black history, that would better prepare them to be strong in who they are. The one thing that we had going for us is that in school they were with predominantly White kids, but they came home to a Black neighborhood. So they could relate to everybody that had the same kinds of issues in their homes. We had that going for us. I think that if I had lived in a predominantly White neighborhood and had a predominantly White school, then I might have felt a little bit different than that.
In talking about what predominantly White schools can do differently, Pamela identified the need for staff to implement a culturally inclusive curriculum, to proactively engage with Black parents and to increase the number of diverse staff members employed in these settings,

To make sure that they have a curriculum that includes Black history, not as a miniscule project, but an equal part of the process. It shouldn’t be focused entirely on the fact that African Americans were slaves. You know they all want to talk about Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman. Well we are more than about Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman. There is a lot more than that, and not only White but Black students need to know.

Make sure that their staff reflects the student population. If kids see somebody that looks like them, works like them and talks like them, they can model that individual and say ‘They can do that and I can do that too.’ It’s hard for a Black student to be in school all day and not see anyone that looks like them.

I think they really have to do a better job of reaching out. I think they’re put off or afraid to approach us for fear of how they will be accepted, but they have to really make an honest effort to open up the lines of communication. They can’t rely on putting it in that kid’s backpack, because there’s too much stuff in backpacks. Pick up the phone and call. I’ll talk to you. They have to take the initiative at their level. Then the reaction by the parent will be different. Traditionally, the only time a school official or teacher reaches out to a Black parent is because it’s a disciplinary problem. So right away if somebody calls them, they say, “Oh, what did they do?” So they really have to do a better job of reaching out to Black parents. It wouldn’t hurt to go to an area where parents might feel more inclined to speak about what’s concerning them about the district.

The contextual factors of Pamela’s case cannot be separated from her experiences with parent involvement at predominantly White schools. Pamela’s connection with her community and neighborhood was unique. As a lifelong resident in the neighborhood, a prior student in the neighborhood school system, an active community member and a state employee, Pamela had access to resources unlike the other parents interviewed. She was exposed to the inner workings of the school system at the administrative, governance and legislative levels. Pamela’s high level of community involvement was also unique to
the experiences of other parents. As she acknowledged, access to these social networks was instrumental in her ability to successfully engage in parent involvement practices, at home, at school and in the community.
CHAPTER VI

Discussion

This chapter will discuss major themes that emerged from the current study based on participant responses to queries about their experiences as Black parents whose children attended predominantly White schools. Themes were identified by their frequent and consistent presence in the experiences of the parents interviewed, and are delineated as follows: the importance of education, tensions in cross-race relations, parent self-efficacy, cultural competence and biculturalism. Recommendations to other Black parents and predominantly White schools as provided by the parents of this study will be outlined. Limitations to the findings of the current study, particularly due to the methodology used as part of this study, will be discussed. Implications for future research, for Black parents whose children attend or will attend predominantly White schools, for school-sponsored parent organizations, for educators, and school counseling professionals, including school psychologists at predominantly White schools, will also be discussed.

Importance of Education

The importance that parents placed on their children obtaining a quality education cannot be understated. Seven of the eleven parents in this study (64%) chose to let their children attend predominantly White schools because of the educational benefits offered in these settings. Whether the school was publicly or privately funded, the main criterion
these parents used to select the school was the quality of the education. This resulted in parents bussing their children to these schools or moving their entire family into the local school zone, in order to gain access to the quality education believed to be present in these predominantly White settings. The fact that these school settings happened to be predominantly White was coincidental rather than a purposeful act by ten (91%) of the parents interviewed.

Many of the parents in this study clearly had high educational aspirations for their children as noted above. This becomes more meaningful when compared to the supposition by Overstreet et al. (2005), in which they hypothesized that parents are more likely to become involved in their children’s education in order to realize their high educational aspirations for their children. This hypothesis is supported by the results of the current study and is consistent with the thematic importance of education found within the current study. All of the parents interviewed (100%) prioritized education both at home and at school by engaging in many parent involvement behaviors that allowed their children to benefit from the access they had to a quality education. Parents were not complacent once their children were enrolled in predominantly White schools, rather, they continued to monitor, emphasize and reinforce the importance of education with their children through both their words and actions, thus working in ways to realize the high educational aspirations they had for their children.

Nine of the eleven parents (82%) in the current study identified exposure and access to a quality education were advantages to their children while attending predominantly White schools. This was despite concerns that eight of the parents interviewed (73%) had with the ability of staff members at predominantly White schools
to provide and foster a positive racial socializing environment for their children. Even in retrospect, seven of the parents interviewed (64%) indicated they would send their children to predominantly White schools again. This willingness by many parents to place their children in school settings that they expected would not provide a positive racial socializing environment for them underscored the importance of getting a “good education” by these parents, but also highlighted their sense of self-efficacy in being able to counter or supplement the negative racial socializing environment expected to be present at predominantly White schools, another theme to be discussed shortly.

The historical and political experiences of Blacks in America regarding education, documents the singular importance of education to Blacks (Morgan, 1995; Washington & Laport, 1988). Perry (1993), in her theory of African American achievement, provided a compelling recount of the historical experiences of African slaves as they struggled to gain access to education and of Blacks as they struggled to gain educational equity in America. Recent studies involving Black parents and parent involvement have documented the importance of education to these parents (McKay et al., 2003; Overstreet et al., 2005; Yan, 1999). The link between the importance of education and parent involvement has always been how Black parents demonstrated their value of education, particularly in ways that were visible to schools. In Yan’s (1999) study of Black and White parents and their children, Yan found that high-achieving Black students had parents who were more likely to engage in parent involvement activities that were visible to schools (i.e. volunteering at school, Parent Teacher Association membership) when compared to parents of low-achieving Black students and high-achieving White students. While the methodology of the current study precludes replication of Yan’s findings,
noteworthy is that all of the Black parents in this study did engage in parent involvement practices very similar to the parents of high-achieving Black students in Yan’s study, thus demonstrating the premium they placed on education. The thematic presence of the importance of education in the current study continues to support that Black parents still want their children to have a “good education”, believing that this will provide their children with greater access to life opportunities (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; McAdoo, 2002).

Cross-Racial Tensions

Cross-racial tensions were consistently reported as part of the experiences held by many of the parents interviewed. The source of these tensions resulted from parents’ expectations of staff behavior at predominantly White schools and parents’ perceptions of cross-racial interactions between staff, Black parents and their children at predominantly White schools.

Seven of the eleven parents interviewed (64%) reportedly experienced mixed or negative experiences related to race at predominantly White schools they had attended in the past as students. This finding is consistent with a review of the literature reported by Thompson and Fretz (1991). In this article, prior research suggested that Black students who attended predominantly White colleges and universities perceived the presence of tension and hostility in these environments. In the current study, parents’ less than optimal experiences with race and education were likely not limited to their attendance at predominantly White schools. While not directly queried in this study, but as suggested by other researchers (Crozier, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Ogbu, 2006), many Black parents are distrustful of educational institutions due to the history of racial
For many of the parents of the current study, cross-racial tensions were present in the expectations they had regarding the setting at predominantly White schools, with these expectations likely being influenced by their own experiences with educational institutions and the historical legacy of racism in these institutions. Eight of the eleven participants (73%) worried about their children’s exposure to negative racial messages at predominantly White schools. Seven parents (64%) were concerned that their children’s race would negatively influence their educational placement at predominantly White schools. Overall, as noted above, many parents expected that, within predominantly White school settings, their children’s race or culture might not be affirmed or view positively by staff or students at these schools.

Seven of the eleven (64%) parents interviewed identified staff responsiveness as a factor when characterizing the quality of their relationships with staff members at predominantly White schools, suggesting that staff responsiveness was a crucial factor within these relationships. Prior studies have cited the importance of these two factors, quality of parent-teacher relationships and school responsiveness, in the parent involvement behaviors of Black parents (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009; Overstreet et al., 2005). Overstreet, et al. (2005) found that for economically disadvantaged Black parents, who resided in urban communities, school responsiveness positively predicted their level of parent involvement at school, highlighting the importance of responsiveness by school staff to the needs of Black parents. In the study by Nzinga-Johnson, et al. (2009), the quality of relationships between parents and teachers was examined; however, factors of
race, culture and social class were also taken into account. Findings revealed that the quality of parent-teacher relationships positively predicted parent involvement behaviors at school; however, Black parents were less involved at school when compared to all other parents in the study (i.e. Latino, less educated, educated and White), suggesting that race and relational dynamics may be at play in the parent involvement behaviors of Black parents (Nzinga-Johnson, et al., 2009).

Findings from the current study are somewhat inconsistent with those from the Nzinga-Johnson, et al. (2009) study. While four of the eleven parents (37%) in this study characterized their relationships with staff at predominantly White schools as mixed or negative due to staff unresponsiveness, these parents continued to employ proactive strategies to interface with staff. All of the parents in the current study engaged in some form of parent involvement behaviors. In essence, the quality of relationships between Black parents, in the current study, and staff at predominantly White schools could have been an obstacle to the involvement practices of these parents as suggested by the findings from the Nzinga-Johnson, et al. study (2009); however, all of the Black parents in this study continued to be involved in their children’s education, despite some who had experienced less than optimal relationships with staff members at predominantly White schools.

In contrast, eight of the eleven (73%) parents in this study, perceived staff at predominantly White schools as responsive to the needs of White parents and generally described these relations as positive. When characterizing relationships between staff and other Black families at predominantly White schools, three of the eleven (27%) parents reported these relationships as positive. However, five of the eleven (45%)
parents in this study perceived their relationships with staff at predominantly White schools as positive. When describing relationships between Black families and White families at these schools, only one parent described the relationships as negative; however, five parents (45%) did perceive relationships as mixed due to inauthentic interactions, and interactions which did not extend beyond child-focused activities. In this study, cross-racial tensions were present in the perceptions by Black parents of relationship differences that fell along racial lines at predominantly White schools.

Parent Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy was interwoven throughout the experiences of many of the parents interviewed, emerging as one of the themes of the current study. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to perform specific behaviors that will result in a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). It also influences the level of effort and persistence a person demonstrates in the face of challenges to accomplishing their goal (Bandura, 1977). Eight of the eleven (73%) parents interviewed for the current study were motivated to be involved at home by internal factors, such as expectations and beliefs. These parents were confident in their ability to translate the educational goals and beliefs they held for their children into demonstrable actions. Parent involvement, at home, at school and within the community, was cited by all parents in the study as a critical factor in the education of Black students at predominantly White schools, illuminating the high self-efficacy these parents held in their ability to influence their children’s education for better.
Noteworthy was the presence of potential obstacles and challenges to parent involvement for the Black parents in the current study. Cross-racial tensions, in the form of mixed or negative quality relationships between Black parents and staff at predominantly White schools were potential obstacles to their parent involvement at school; however, these parents continued to engage with staff at predominantly White schools despite cross-racial interactions that incorporated the racial tensions discussed above. Parental level of self-efficacy was a factor in helping these Black parents overcome obstacles and meet challenges to their parent involvement behaviors, both at school and at home.

Despite eight of the eleven (73%) parents interviewed being concerned with the ability of staff members at predominantly White schools to provide and foster a positive racial socializing environment for their children, all of the parents interviewed still allowed their children to be educated in these settings. This willingness by many parents to place their children in school settings that they expected would not provide a positive racial socializing environment for them highlights high parent self-efficacy in being able to counter or supplement the negative racial socializing environment expected to be present at predominantly White schools.

In their review of the literature, Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (2005) cited numerous studies which revealed a positive relationship between parent self-efficacy and parent involvement behaviors, both at home and at school. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s (1995) revised model of the psychological factors believed to influence the parent involvement process, included parents’ motivational beliefs, defined as parent self-efficacy and parent role construction (Walker et al., 2005). Consistent with the model,
parents in the current study demonstrated high self-efficacy by translating their beliefs and expectations into parent involvement behaviors and by sustaining these behaviors in the face of obstacles and challenges.

*Lack of Cultural Competence by School Staff*

A lack of cultural competence by staff at predominantly White schools developed as a consistent theme within the experiences related by ten of the Black parents (91%) interviewed for this study. Gudykunst and Kim noted that persons demonstrating cultural competence develop “…cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics…open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of only one culture…” (as cited in McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 4). Utilizing this definition, ten of the Black parents (91%) interviewed perceived staff at predominantly White schools as limited in their focus on one culture, namely, mainstream culture as reflected in educational institutions. Four of the eleven parents (36%) interviewed cited lack of cultural competence as a factor which disadvantaged their children while attending predominantly White schools. Consistent with the literature (Gay & Howard, 2000), ten of the parents (91%) in the current study identified cultural competence of staff at predominantly White schools as a critical factor in the education of Black students in these settings, noting that staff members had little understanding of the experiences of Black families which sometimes resulted in exclusion and negation of Black parents and their children at these schools. Additionally, staff members at predominantly White schools, whether consciously or unconsciously, engaged with Black students in negative, stereotypical ways, such as holding low academic expectations for Black students or inequitable treatment of Black students compared to other students. Also, though not reported by parents as an explanatory
factor for the differences in parent-staff relationships that fell along racial lines at predominantly White schools, one hypothesis generated by this study was that lack of cultural competence by staff may have been a contributory factor, which would be an area for future research.

Black parents’ experiences of predominantly White schools as a setting for intercultural interactions were consistent with the literature (Laosa, 2005; Ogbu, 2006). For students and families whose home culture is incongruent with the culture found within a school, cultural discontinuity may be present, which may in some cases render the home culture to be perceived as either deficient or different from the culture of the school (Laosa, 2005). However, in this study, Black parents’ experiences of the intercultural interactions between home and school led to Black culture being seen stereotypically, as deficient or unacknowledged by staff at predominantly White schools. Parents’ recommendations for improving the cultural competence of staff at predominantly White schools mirrored recommendations found in the literature for educators working within a multicultural education framework. These recommendations included implementation of a multicultural curriculum and teacher professional development to improve culturally sensitive instruction (Gay & Howard, 2000; Laosa, 2005; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Biculturalism

Biculturalism, competence in Black culture and mainstream culture, was a characteristic that eight of the eleven (73%) parents, in the current study, wanted their children to possess. The experiences of these parents underscored the significance they placed on the bicultural development of their children. Racial socialization practices
cited by eight of the eleven parents (73%) interviewed, served to help their children develop competence in Black culture, by exposing them to the history, culture and traditions of African American, in order to cultivate their children’s ethnic, racial, and cultural pride at the same time. Four of the eleven parents (36%) interviewed actively encouraged their children to engage in cross-cultural and cross-racial relations, with eight of the eleven parents (73%) citing these opportunities as benefitting their children’s social development and facilitating their post-secondary success. However, recognizing the limited possibilities their children had to develop same-race relationships at predominantly White schools, all of the parents interviewed ensured that their children socialized with Black peers and Black adults outside of the school setting. At the same time, six of the parents (55%) in this study perceived the limited access their children had to other Blacks within the school setting as a hindrance to their children’s social development and competency within Black culture. As a result, if given a second chance to have their children educated at predominantly White schools again, five of the parents (45%) interviewed would base their decision solely on the opportunities for their children to have a greater exposure to same-race peers.

Similar to the findings of the current study, in the literature, Black parents have been found to engage in socialization practices that help their children develop biculturalism (McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002). Needing to help their children cultivate skills which would allow them to successfully function within Black culture and be accepted within mainstream/White cultural communities is presumed to be an important and unique aspect of Black parenting (McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002). This allows Black children to develop into adults who are able to effectively operate within both worlds.
Findings from a study of Black students at predominantly White universities support this link between biculturalism and positive student outcomes (Thompson & Fretz; 1991). In their study, Thompson and Fretz found a positive relationship between bicultural variables and positive adjustment among Black students attending a predominantly White university. This finding supports the belief of parents in the current study that biculturalism is a prerequisite to post-secondary successes. Biculturalism has also been postulated as a critical factor in Perry’s (1993) theory of African American school achievement. In her discussion, Perry recounted the institutionalization of biculturality within Black schools, which occurred prior to school integration. Wherein, Black students were taught the “superficial features” of mainstream culture with the explicit purpose of helping them to successfully navigate the landscape of the dominant culture (Perry, 1993). However, as noted by Perry (1993), “Such clarity about the capacity and the need for biculturality might not necessarily function as a given in the culture and lived experiences of desegregated schools” (p. 28). By contrast, the findings of the current study revealed eight of the parents interviewed (73%) believed their children had gained competency in mainstream culture through exposure or the “lived experiences” at predominantly White schools. However, the role these parents may have played in helping their children attach meaning to their competency in mainstream culture is unknown at this time. Developing competence in Black culture through experiences with other Black people can be challenging for Black children in predominantly White settings, either schools or neighborhoods (Tatum, 1997a). Consistent with the literature, this was recognized by all of the parents in the current study, who actively sought opportunities outside of school for their children to develop competence in Black culture.
While the literature has identified biculturalism as an adaptive and protective factor for Black students and as linked to their achievement (McAdoo, 2002; Perry, 1993; Peters, 2002; Thompson & Fretz, 1991), research is non-existent on the relationship between biculturalism and parent involvement, particularly as it relates to parenting practices specific to Black parents. This indicates the need for future research on this relationship.

*Research Questions*

Due to the limited amount of previous research in the area of Black parent involvement at predominantly White schools, the current study sought to generate hypotheses rather than test hypotheses, by answering several research questions. In the following section, each research question will be noted along with a discussion of findings from the study which answers each question.

*What expectations do Black parents have about the racial climate at predominantly White schools which their children attend and how do these expectations influence their parent involvement behaviors?* Parents’ expectations about the racial climate at predominantly White schools contributed to the emergence of cross-racial tensions as a consistent finding within the current study. Eight of the eleven (73%) parents interviewed worried that their children would be exposed to negative racial messages, in the form of cultural discontinuity that ignored the cultural experiences of Black students and in the form of racism on the part of staff and students. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) expressed concern that race would be a factor in their children’s educational placement, for the same reasons noted above.
These expectations appeared to influence parents’ involvement behaviors in two ways. First, all of the parents in this study regularly engaged in traditional at home and at school involvement behaviors in order to monitor their children’s academic progress. This was done to ensure their children truly had access to the “good education” found at predominantly White schools and were not susceptible to teachers’ low academic expectations of Black students. Second, parents engaged in at home involvement practices not generally recognized by current typologies of parent involvement, such as Epstein’s (2001) model of parent involvement. Eight of the parents (73%) in the current study, recounted their practices of racial socialization as opportunities to strengthen their children’s ethnic, cultural and racial pride and to prepare them for bias they might experience at predominantly White schools. Additionally, recognizing the limitations in their children’s ability to develop biculturally, all of the parents interviewed found ways to supplement their children’s experiences in order to help them cultivate same-race peer relationships.

What perceptions do Black parents have about the school-parent-community relationship at predominantly White schools and how do these perceptions influence their parent involvement behaviors? A larger percentage of parents in the current study perceived positive relationships between staff and White families when compared to staff and Black families at predominantly White schools. This suggested that relational dynamics fell along racial lines. Eight of the eleven (73%) parents interviewed reported relations between White families and staff at predominantly White schools as positive; whereas only three of the eleven (27%) parents noted positive relationships between staff and other Black families in these settings. Four of the parents interviewed (36%)
characterized their relationships with educators as negative or mixed primarily due to staff unresponsive and avoidant interactions with these parents. Five of the parents interviewed (45%) perceived staff relationships with other Black parents in these settings as mixed or negative for the same reasons noted above. While five parents interviewed (45%) viewed relationships between Black and White families as positive, another five parents reported these relations as mixed due to inauthentic or superficial interactions.

Descriptions of same-race relationships were overall positive. Eight of the eleven (73%) parents interviewed perceived relations between White families and educators as positive due to staff members responding to the concerns of these parents and opportunities to interact with each other both inside and outside of school. Seven of the parents (64%) in this study noted positive relationships among Black parents at predominantly White schools due to the supportive nature of these relationships and the opportunities for interacting outside of the school setting.

Despite school-family-community relationships that fell along racial lines, all of the parents in this study demonstrated involvement at home and at school, but in different forms. Positive relationships among Black families enabled six of the parents in this study (55%) to engage in community type involvement with other Black parents in order to access resources available, such as emotional support and knowledge. Additionally, although parents perceived a difference in the quality of relationships that staff members had with Black families compared to White families, findings from the current study suggested these Black parents maintained a high level of parent involvement and were not discouraged by the inequality they perceived. This is an important lesson for other Black parents who may experience this challenge at predominantly White schools.
How do Black parents at predominantly White schools engage in parental involvement practices? Using Epstein’s (2001) typology of parent involvement as a framework to categorize parent involvement behaviors from the current study, these parents engaged in all six forms of parent involvement. Parenting and Learning at Home involvement was demonstrated by the many at home practices these parents performed in order to help their children develop and progress academically. Communicating, Volunteering and Decision-Making involvement was exhibited by parents through the activities they reportedly engaged in at school. All of the parents interviewed demonstrated involvement behaviors that could be characterized as Communicating and Volunteering; however, only two of the eleven parents interviewed cited activities that could be categorized as Decision-Making involvement. Finally, when directly queried about parent involvement behaviors in the community, five of the parents interviewed (45%) reported formal community activities, such as organization membership; however, six parents (55%) engaged in informal community collaboration with other Black parents, by providing emotional and informational resources. As noted above, all of the parents (100%) in this study demonstrated at home parent involvement practices that are not typically recognized by current parent involvement typologies, but that are culturally relevant parenting practices, such as racial socialization and supporting bicultural development.

What suggestions do Black parents at predominantly White schools have related to the education of Black children in predominantly White settings? Recommendations by parents highlighted many of the themes within the current study. To educators, cultural competence was noted as an area in need of improvement, specifically staff
training and development and the implementation of culturally sensitive curricula. Additionally, it was suggested that educators in these settings attend to the social and emotional development of Black students, by acknowledging the presence of cultural discontinuity and addressing it in a way that promotes positive ethnic, cultural and racial pride in these students. Finally, educators were advised to proactively engage Black parents in these settings in order to understand their needs and to improve relations between these parents and school staff. Recommendations to other parents simply noted the importance of being involved, at home, at school and in the community.

*Limitations of the Study*

Given the qualitative methodology utilized for the current study, certain limitations exist regarding study results. Research questions were developed by the researcher and were exploratory and not designed to confirm or refute research that examined the experiences of Black parents at predominantly White schools as related to race and parent involvement. Second, the sampling of Black parents was derived from a networked sample. This sample was not randomized nor was there a control group included for comparison of results. Third, the small sample size did not allow for generalization of any findings to other Black parents. Fourth, the study was vulnerable to examiner bias resulting from researcher involvement in the development of research questions, location of participants for the sample, analysis of data, development of findings, recommendations, and conclusions. Finally, because this was an exploratory study, its findings had limited generalizability; however, though exploratory in nature, the study generated a wealth of data, which might be further examined in future research. Given these realities, readers are cautioned against generalizing results from this study.
Implications

Implications for Future Research

Given the subject focus and methodology of the current study, there are broad and varied areas for future research. As noted earlier, few studies focus on the experiences of Black parents and their children within predominantly White educational environments (Banks, 1984; Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Tatum, 1987). Replication of the current study with a large, randomized sample and a control group may validate its findings and extend the body of research in this area.

The current study sought to portray the experiences of Black parents with parent involvement at predominantly White schools, from their perspective. As such, only Black parents were included in this study. However, these parents’ experiences involve other groups, particularly educators at predominantly White schools. Their perspective, though absent from the literature is of equal importance. In light of the themes which emerged from the current study, future research designed to capture the experiences of educators at predominantly White schools would be useful, not only in validating the current findings, but also in unraveling other factors associated with the themes identified in the current study. Additionally, the parents in the current study engaged in various types of parent involvement practices, with some assistance by schools. Seven of the parents interviewed (64%) reported that schools supported their parent involvement practices by providing opportunities for involvement at school and by the communication of information to parents. Future research, with predominantly White schools as the sample, could focus on identifying the type of parent involvement opportunities these
schools provide to parents and whether the opportunities offered met the needs of Black families in these settings.

The sample of Black parents in the current study demonstrated parent involvement behaviors, both at home and at school. Their experiences with parent involvement at predominantly White schools may not be consistent with Black parents in these settings who do not demonstrate parent involvement behaviors, specifically at school. In the literature, it has been documented that Black parents display higher levels of parent involvement at home as compared to school (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Based on the findings of the current study, it is hypothesized that cross-racial tensions, educator’s lack of cultural competence or low parental self-efficacy may present obstacles to at school parent involvement for some Black parents in predominantly White school settings. The emergence of biculturalism as a theme may provide an alternate explanation for lower levels of at school parent involvement by Black parents, particularly when their children attend predominantly White schools. Given the complex task of facilitating Black children’s competence in Black and mainstream culture, particularly in predominantly White settings, Black parents may focus much of their energy in at home parent involvement behaviors. The hypothesized relationships noted above deserve further research.

Other areas for future research involve findings of the current study that were somewhat inconsistent with the literature. Prior research has suggested that at school parent involvement by Black parents may be influenced by race and relational dynamics (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009); however, Black parents in the current study continued to engage in at school parent involvement practices despite the presence of cross-racial
tensions and poor parent-staff relationships at predominantly White schools. It is the
current author’s hypothesis that, high parent self-efficacy may moderate the relationship
between parent involvement and race or relational dynamics that may be present between
Black parents and educators at predominantly White schools, enabling Black parents to
overcome these potential challenges and obstacles to parent involvement. Future
research would be needed to explore this hypothesis.

Also an expansion of prior research was the experience of Black parents regarding
cultural discontinuity at predominantly White schools. Laosa (2005) noted that cultural
discontinuity between home and school environments may render the home culture either
deficient or different, from the perspective of the school. Black parents in the current
study believed their culture was deemed deficient or completely ignored by educators
within predominantly White school settings. Discounting of Black culture and
experiences at predominantly White schools, may be specific to these settings, given the
small percentage of Black students and their families within these schools. Future
research may replicate this finding, supporting the above hypothesis. Also, further
investigation may reveal an “ideal” ratio of Black families within predominantly White
school settings that may prompt staff to give attention to cultural differences that may be
present.

In her theory of African American achievement, Perry (1993) questioned the
ability of desegregated schools to effectively socialize Black students in their
understanding of the need and relevance for competency in mainstream culture, alluding
to the ineffectiveness of exposure to mainstream culture through the “lived experiences”
found in desegregated schools when compared to the explicit instructions undertaken by
Black teachers at Black schools prior to desegregation. Although, many parents in the current study believed their children’s experiences at predominantly White schools had facilitated mainstream cultural competency, the role of Black parents in constructing meaning for their children is worthy of further study.

Finally, in the literature, biculturalism has been linked with Black parenting practices and with positive outcomes for Black students (McAdoo, 2002; Perry, 1993; Peters, 2002; Thompson & Fretz, 1991); however, research on parent involvement has failed to incorporate these findings as legitimate parenting practices which may influence student achievement. As such, further research on these relationships is indicated in this area.

Implications for Black Parents

The importance of education and wanting a “good education” for their children is not unique to Black parents. Most parents, if queried, would assign similar importance to education. For Black parents whose children attend predominantly White schools, the focus on a “good education” may result in little to no attention given to the influences of the school setting, particularly as it relates to children’s racial socialization and bicultural development. Working to instill ethnic, racial and cultural pride, while developing competencies in both Black and mainstream culture is further complicated when Black children live or are educated in predominantly White settings (Tatum, 1997a). As noted in the literature and supported by the findings of the current study, Black parents in these settings are encouraged to actively facilitate the development of same-race peer relations, in addition to supporting cross-race peer relations. It is also recommended that these parents regularly engage in activities that support the development of cultural, ethnic and
racial pride in their children, in order to counter negative racial socializing environments that may be present at predominately White schools.

Black parents may assume that the quality of education present at predominately White schools is better than at predominately Black and Hispanic schools. Thus, these parents may fail to engage in parent involvement practices which support their children educationally, assuming that their children are receiving a “good education” by virtue of their presence in predominately White school settings. However, research has shown that the academic progress of Black students at high-achieving schools continues to be susceptible to low teacher expectations (Ferguson, 2002). As such, parents are cautioned to regularly monitor their children’s academic progress, both at home and at school to ensure their children indeed have access to a “good education.”

The potential presence of cross-racial tensions at predominately White schools (Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu, 2006), suggests the need for Black parents to develop skills and to seek support in order to successfully navigate this landscape. Seeking support from other Black families at predominately White schools may be helpful in handling the negative emotions associated with feelings of mistrust of educational institutions and in sustaining engagement with educators at predominately White schools despite mistrust. Black parents are encouraged to work collaboratively with other parents when bringing issues of cultural competence to the attention of staff members, potentially lessening the chances that staff may be unresponsive. Parents may find it advantageous to talk with staff about issues of mistrust. Again, given the potential for negative responses by school staff, consulting with other Black parents who have
been successful in this endeavor may be useful in developing the necessary skills to successfully address this issue.

To successfully engage in the above, requires high parent self-efficacy, which parents are encouraged to develop, by modeling other parents who are skillful in the above. This highlights the need for Black parents at predominantly White schools to form authentic relationships with other parents in order to access resources that may promote successful parent involvement.

Implications for Educators

The emergence of the importance of education as a theme in the current study, suggests that Black parents and staff at predominantly White schools share a common goal, the desire for Black students to receive a “good education.” Thus, a lack of visible presence of Black parents at predominantly White schools may be indicative of obstacles hindering these parents from being involved at their children’s schools, rather than evidence of these parents devaluing education. Educators should not assume that parents devalue education as this could hinder staff from identifying obstacles to parent involvement and developing opportunities to help parents overcome these obstacles. Acknowledging the importance of education to Black parents, can facilitate the development of positive and trusting parent-staff relations and lead to educators and Black parents collaborating in the education of Black students.

The presence of cross-racial tensions has the potential to hinder Black parent involvement at school and to threaten the creation of positive relationships between these parents and staff members at predominantly White schools. Thus, educators in these settings must first acknowledge that some Black parents may be distrustful of school
institutions due to prior negative educational experiences or the historical and political experiences of Blacks and American educational institutions. Additionally, staff should engage in thoughtful reflection on how cross-racial interactions may reinforce parents’ perceptions, particularly unresponsiveness to parents and differences in parent-staff relationships that may fall along racial lines. To foster development of positive relationships, educators at predominantly White schools are encouraged to engage with Black families outside of school settings. This may involve visiting organizations within the community which serve Black families. Staff members at these schools can also be instrumental in helping Black parents develop high self-efficacy, by acknowledging the many ways in which these parents are involved and by providing opportunities for them to successfully participate in parent involvement activities. This would require staff to become knowledgeable about the Black parents at their schools, learning their strengths and abilities related to parent involvement practices. One way to pursue this may include soliciting support from Black colleagues or other Black parents to aid in this endeavor.

In addressing issues related to cultural competence, educators in predominantly White settings must first acknowledge that cultural discontinuity may be experienced by some Black students and their parents. It also requires that educators identify how cultural differences are addressed within this setting (i.e. different, deficient or ignored) and consider the implications of this, in terms of student and parent outcomes. In other words, educators at predominantly White schools should analyze how their handling of cultural differences may facilitate or hinder Black parent involvement. Educators seeking to improve their own cultural competence are encouraged to utilize culturally sensitive instruction and participate in staff development, as recommended by parents in the
current study and findings in the literature (Gay & Howard, 2000; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Staff members at predominantly White schools who acknowledge the importance of biculturalism in the lives of Black parents and their children may have additional opportunities to influence parent involvement behavior, by engaging in practices that help Black students develop biculturalism. This can be accomplished by simply providing information to Black parents regarding cultural events and activities occurring in the community or even by co-sponsoring these events with other organizations within the community. At school, staff members can utilize culturally sensitive curricula and provide activities that support the creation of positive cross-racial peer relationships.

Implications for School Counseling Staff and School Psychologists

School counseling staff and school psychologists have a unique opportunity to work with students, parents and educators at predominantly White schools in the supportive roles they hold. These support roles can and should extend to include efforts to facilitate the involvement of Black parents at predominantly White schools. School counseling staff and school psychologists may be in a position to help Black parents address issues of mistrust they may feel regarding school institutions. These staff members can also use their supportive roles to develop quality relationships with Black parents at predominantly White school settings. Efforts to help educators improve their own cultural competence can be carried out by school counseling staff and school psychologists with adequate training in this area.

In terms of program development, school counseling staff and school psychologists can work collaboratively with Black parents to better understand their
strengths and needs, ensuring that parent involvement programming and activities at predominantly White schools incorporate the experiences of Black parents in these settings.

*Implications for School-Sponsored Parent Organizations*

Similar to educators, school-sponsored parent organizations, such as Parent Teacher Organizations or Parent Teacher Associations, should actively engage Black parents at predominantly White schools and seek to identify obstacles that may hinder their ability to participate in visible parent involvement practices. Cross-racial tensions that may exist within these organizations should be acknowledged and addressed as noted above.

These organizations are also in a unique position to provide emotional support to Black parents, particularly when dealing with issues of mistrust of school institutions, but also in providing necessary resources to these parents that may enable them to successfully navigate the school setting. Regarding specific concerns of biculturalism, parent organizations can support and provide opportunities for students to develop in this capacity.

*Conclusion*

While parental involvement has been identified as a factor that influences student academic outcomes from preschool through high school (Henderson & Berla, 1994), research has found differences in parent involvement behaviors along race, ethnic and socioeconomic status variables. Research on Black families and their parent involvement behaviors has not explicitly investigated the experiences of these families in predominantly White schools. With the school context identified is an important factor in
the parent involvement practices of Black families (Overstreet et al., 2005), it is possible that a school context, which is predominantly White, may impact these practices. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of Black families at predominantly White schools with a focus on parent involvement behaviors related to issues of race.

One of the themes to emerge as a finding of the current study was the importance of education. Many of the parents in this study had high educational aspirations for their children, which influenced their parent involvement behaviors.

Cross-racial tensions were present in this study due to parents’ expectations of staff behavior and parents’ perceptions of cross-racial and same-race interactions between staff and parents at predominantly White schools. Parents’ negative expectations were likely influenced by their own experiences with educational institutions and the historical legacy of racism in these institutions. Also, contributing to cross-racial tensions were the mixed and negative relationships between staff and Black parents and the unequal relationships between parents and staff, which fell along racial lines.

Self-efficacy was a theme interwoven throughout the experiences of the parents interviewed. Parent level of self-efficacy likely allowed Black parents to overcome potential obstacles to parent involvement, such as racial tensions at predominantly White schools. Additionally, high self-efficacy may have helped these parents to engage in parent involvement practices designed to counter or supplement the negative racial socialization expected to be present at predominantly White schools.

Another thematic finding of the current study was cultural competence. Black parents interviewed perceived staff at predominantly White schools as limited in their
focus on mainstream culture resulting in the exclusion and negation of Black parents and their children at these schools or stereotyped interactions between students and staff.

Biculturalism emerged as the final theme within the current study. Parents perceived their children’s competency in both Black and mainstream culture as a crucial factor in future outcomes for their children. As a result, parents attempted to cultivate their children’s racial, ethnic and culture pride while at the same time, they actively encouraged their children to engage in cross-cultural and cross-racial relations. Additionally, recognizing the limited opportunities their children had to develop same-race relationships at predominantly White schools, all of the parents interviewed ensured their children socialized with Black peers and adults outside of the school setting.

Black parents’ focus on their children attaining a good education may result in minimal attention given to the potential influence of predominantly White school settings on their children’s racial socialization. Black parents in these settings should seek opportunities for their children to actively develop same-race relations, in addition to supporting cross-race peer relations. Parents are also encouraged to regularly engage in racial socialization practices that may counter negative racial messages that may be present at predominantly White schools. Black parents in these settings may need to regularly monitor their children’s academic progress, both at home and at school to ensure their children indeed have access to a good education. Working collaboratively with other parents, both Black and White, may also provide emotional and informational resources to these parents.

Findings from the current study suggest that educators at predominantly White schools may have opportunities to improve parent involvement of Black parents in these
settings. This may be done by analyzing their settings for the presence of obstacles to parent involvement by Black parents, which should include issues of race and culture. Educators may also seek opportunities to improve relations with Black parents at predominantly White schools by proactively engaging with these parents in settings both inside and outside of the school setting. Finally, parent involvement programs for Black parents at predominantly White schools should be relevant to the needs and concerns of these parents.

School counseling staff, school psychologists, and parent organizations are similarly positioned to provide support to Black parents at predominantly White schools in the form of resources to these parents. They can also work with educators at predominantly White schools to identify, create and implement parent involvement programs and activities which are relevant to the needs of Black parents in these settings. School counseling staff and school psychologists can also be instrumental in helping educators improve their own cultural competence through professional development programming.
REFERENCES


Ferguson, R. F. (2002). *What doesn’t meet the eye: Understanding and addressing racial disparities in high-achieving suburban schools.* Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED474390)


APPENDIX A

Parent Demographic Questionnaire

Black Parents at Predominantly White Schools: An Exploratory Study of Race and Parent Involvement

Parent

1.) Age_______________

2.) Gender_______________

3.) Marital Status_______________
   O Married
   O Widowed
   O Divorced
   O Separated
   O Living Together
   O Single
   O Other:____________________________

4.) How would you describe yourself racially?_____________________________________
   O Black
   O White
   O Asian
   O Native American
   O Non-white Hispanic
   O Other_____________________________________

5.) Where were you born?_____________________________________________________

6.) Where were your parents born?____________________________________________

7.) How would you describe yourself ethnically?_______________________________

8.) Highest education level completed________________________________________

9.) Current occupation________________________________________________________
Black Parents at Predominantly White Schools: An Exploratory Study of Race and Parent Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Age and Gender of Child</th>
<th>Location of predominantly white school (state; county; city; town; district)</th>
<th>Type of school (public; private; religious)</th>
<th>Years when child attended predominantly white school (from 19__ thru__)</th>
<th>Age when child first attended predominantly white school</th>
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<th>Child/ren</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
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APPENDIX B

Parent Interview Protocol

Black parents at predominantly white schools: An exploratory study of race and parent involvement

PART I – Expectations about Predominantly White School

1.) Please estimate the percentage or number of white students and non-white students at the predominantly white school your child attended during grades K-12.

2.) How did it happen that your child attended a predominantly white school?

3.) At the predominantly white school, were you concerned that your child would be exposed to negative racial messages?

4.) Were you concerned that attending a predominantly white school would influence how your child saw herself/himself racially?

5.) Were you concerned that at the predominantly white school, your child’s race would influence her/his educational placement?

6.) If not, do you think other black parents anticipate any of these concerns when their children attend predominantly white schools? Please explain

7.) Did you do anything to prepare your child for any of these race related challenges she/he might face at a predominantly white school? If yes, what specifically did you do?

8.) Did you do anything to prepare yourself to deal with any of the race related challenges your child might face at a predominantly white school? If yes, what specifically did you do?

PART II – Perception of Predominantly White School

9.) Did you ever attend a predominantly white school?

10.) If yes, at what grade or education level(s)? Please estimate the percentage of white students and non-white students at your school.

11.) What were your experiences in this setting regarding the above race related challenges?
12.) Has your child talked to you about his/her experience of attending a predominantly white school? If so, what has he/she told you?

13.) Describe your relationship with teachers and administrators at the predominantly white school?

14.) How did the school and white families interact with each other?

15.) How did the school and black families interact with each other?

16.) How did white and black families interact with each other?

17.) How did black families interact with each other?

18.) Outside of school, where did your child interact with black people?
   o neighborhood
   o extended family
   o church
   o clubs
   o other

19.) Would you describe the contact as positive or negative and why?

20.) During this time period, did anyone help you with child-care responsibilities? If so, who did?

PART III – Parental Involvement at Predominantly White School

21.) Did your child experience any race related challenges at the predominantly white school? If yes, please describe.
   o during elementary school
   o during middle school
   o during high school

22.) What did you do when your child faced these challenges?

23.) How were these challenges resolved?

24.) Were you pleased with the resolution?

25.) How did teachers and administrators at the predominantly white school interact with you afterwards?

26.) What have you done at home to support your child’s education? Please be specific.
27.) How frequently did you engage in each of these activities?
   - more than once a month
   - once a month (10x/academic yr)
   - once every 2 months (5x/academic yr)
   - once every semester (2x/academic yr)
   - once every academic year

28.) What do you think helped you to be involved at home?

29.) What do you think hindered your involvement at home?

30.) What have you done at school to support your child’s education? Please be specific.

31.) How frequently did you engage in each of these activities?
   - more than once a month
   - once a month (10x/academic yr)
   - once every 2 months (5x/academic yr)
   - once every semester (2x/academic yr)
   - once every academic year

32.) What do you think helped you to be involved at school?

33.) What do you think hindered your involvement at school?

34.) How did the school help you to be involved in your child’s education?

35.) How did the school hinder your involvement in your child’s education?

36.) What have you done to support the education of other children at the predominantly white school? Please be specific.

37.) How frequently did you engage in each of these activities?
   - more than once a month
   - once a month (10x/academic yr)
   - once every 2 months (5x/academic yr)
   - once every semester (2x/academic yr)
   - once every academic year
PART IV – Reflection and Guidance

38.) What were some of the advantages of your child attending a predominantly white school? Please explain.

39.) What were some of the disadvantages of your child attending a predominantly white school? Please explain.

40.) Do you wish you had been more or less involved at home? Please explain.

41.) Do you wish you had been more or less involved at school? Please explain.

42.) What specifically, if anything, about the experience surprised you?

43.) If you had the chance, would you send your child to a predominantly white school again? What, if anything, would you do differently?

44.) What suggestions or recommendations do you have for black parents whose children attend predominantly white schools?

45.) Given your experiences, what suggestions or recommendations would you give to predominantly white schools that educate black students?

46.) What suggestions do you have for predominantly white schools that want to strengthen the school-family relationship with black families?
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Black parents at predominantly white schools: An exploratory study of race and parent involvement

You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. If you have any questions, please ask the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of the Study
This study seeks to explore the parental involvement practices of black parents whose children attended a predominantly white school. Specifically, the study will explore your experiences, expectations and perceptions of predominantly white schools, the ways in which you were involved in your child’s education and your relationship with the school. In addition, we want to learn what suggestions you have for other black parents whose children attend predominantly white schools and what suggestions you may have for predominantly white schools that want to maintain partnerships with black parents. As a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, this study is being conducted to fulfill dissertation and doctoral degree requirements. There will be between 10 to 20 individuals who will participate in this study.

Study Procedures
You will be interviewed about your thoughts and opinions related to your experiences as a parent whose child attended a predominantly white school with the purpose of providing further direction for black parents and schools who seek to support them and their children at predominantly white schools. The interview will take about 1 ½ hours to complete.

Interviews will be audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Interviews will be transcribed and tapes will be destroyed after transcription. Any tape recordings, transcripts of interviews, or other data collected from you will be maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

Risks
The interview focuses on your past experiences as a parent whose child attended a predominantly white school. Recalling some unpleasant memories may cause discomfort to you. If you experience major distress related to the study, please contact the researcher, so that she can provide you with the necessary referrals.

Benefits
Your experience and knowledge have tremendous value to further the understanding of issues that black parents may face when their children are educated in a predominantly white school setting. In addition, the opportunity to share your experience and expertise related to this topic may be valuable to you.
Confidentiality
All records will be stored in locked files and will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. The data about your interview will be stored on an electronic data file in the researcher’s personal computer in order to be kept confidential. The data will be available only to the research team and no identifying information will be disclosed. Audiotapes and other paperwork will be assigned a case number.

As a participant in this study, you will also be providing information about some experiences your child shared with you. Your adult child will not be asked to consent to the release of this information. Your responses will be grouped with other participants’ responses and analyzed collectively. All common identifying information will be disguised to protect your confidentiality. This will include changing your name and other demographic information, such as occupation.

Research Standards and Rights of Participants
Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, or if you decide later to stop participating, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Also, if you refer other individuals for participation in this study, your name may be used as the referral source only with your permission.

I understand that I may contact the investigator or the investigator’s dissertation chairperson at any time at the addresses, telephone numbers or emails listed below if I have any questions, concerns or comments regarding my participation in this study.

Candice R. Burke (Investigator) Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D. (Chairperson)
Rutgers University Rutgers University
GSAPP GSAPP
152 Frelinghuysen Rd 152 Frelinghuysen Rd
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085 Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085
Telephone: (856) 779-2786 Telephone: (732) 445-2000
Email: candiceb@eden.rutgers.edu Email: boydfrank@aol.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University at (732) 932-0150, Ext 2104 or email humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu.

I have read and understood the contents of this consent form and have received a copy of it for my files. I consent to participate in this research project.

Participant Signature _____________________________ Date _________________

Investigator Signature _____________________________ Date _________________

I Give My Permission for the Interview to be Audiotaped.

Signature _____________________________ Date _______________