

**MIDDLE CLASS AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
WHITE TEACHERS' INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR AFRICAN  
AMERICAN CHILDREN IN PREDOMINATELY WHITE  
SUBURBAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

A Record of Study

by

TWYLA JEANETTE WILLIAMS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

December 2006

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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Approved by:

Chairs of Committee,	Kathryn McKenzie Norvella Carter
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**ABSTRACT**

Middle Class African American Mothers' Perceptions of White Teachers' Interactions  
With Their African American Children in Predominately White Suburban  
Junior High Schools. (December 2006)

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This research study was conducted as a qualitative case study of six middle class African American mothers living in a suburban community. Their children attended a predominantly White suburban junior high school in their community. The study was designed to hear the voices of the six mothers and their perceptions of their children's experiences in suburban schools. The intent of this study was to broaden the limited research base relating to the academic achievement of African American students from the mothers' perspective. Specifically, this study investigated the African American mothers' perception of their children's interactions with their White teachers and the difficulties their children faced in advanced placement courses.

This study used the specific words of the mothers to share their narratives. Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured individual interviews followed by focus group sessions. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously from the

interviews, focus group sessions, and field notes. From the analysis, themes emerged and were formulated into categories.

The results revealed that mothers perceived: (a) teachers as holding a lack of cultural appreciation for their children's culture, (b) low expectations held by the teachers (students constantly had to prove their ability), (c) a lack of communication from the teacher to the mother, (d) the teachers' lack of understanding of the mothers' preparation of the success of their children, (e) the need to maintain a role of advocacy, (f) the need to maintain a role of visibility, and (g) the need to maintain a role of proactive parenting.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The National Picture

One of the greatest challenges in the United States today is the education of African American children. Academic achievement levels have “lagged behind” White students in American public schools for generations. In order to understand the achievement of African Americans in the present status, it is necessary to address the historical tradition that is embedded in our nation’s history. Anderson (2004) believes it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the progress of African American students from one generation to another and to examine the historical context in which progress occurred. This researcher further adds that this examination provides a perspective on how African Americans have dealt with a variety of “achievement gaps” over time.

During slavery, it was illegal to educate the Black population that was enslaved. White slave owners were threatened by slaves obtaining an education; they would lose their workers, their investments, their power they had over an uneducated group of people and the overall quality of their comforts and lifestyle (Anderson, 1988). However, slaves realized the importance of education and risked their lives to become educated. In the 1700’s, 90% of Black Americans were not educated as opposed to 90% of White Americans who were educated (Anderson, 1995). Anderson (1995) acknowledges this

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The style and format for this dissertation follow that of *The Journal of Educational Research*.

statistic as an enormous achievement gap. Despite the achievement gap, the slaves believed that education was a means for a better life. The value of education was priceless. According to Anderson (1988), education was valued as a means of resistance that took shape during slavery. During slavery, education also served as a mechanism against oppression. For example, slaves learned to read and write by candlelight secretly to prepare themselves for a better life. Furthermore, African Americans valued education as a means to liberation and freedom, and this particular frame of reference influenced their motivation to achieve formal schooling in the post-Civil War South (Anderson, 1988). The slaves embraced education as a matter of life and death. Without education, they would remain oppressed and bound. This valuing of education in African American families has been passed down from generation-to-generation. The value of education in African American families was noted during slavery and continues in African American families today as a gateway to a better life.

Education as a gateway to a better life was a primary motivator for African Americans to seek education. The dreams slaves had of obtaining an education sparked a movement of empowerment. This empowering movement began during slavery, continued through Reconstruction and into the Civil Rights Movement (Chapman, 2005). In the 1960's, this empowering movement was influenced by Civil Rights leader and activist, Dr. Martin Luther King. His dream of Black and White people being judged by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin began to manifest itself through our nation via the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's (Blumberg, 1984). A precursor to the Civil Rights Movement was the landmark decision of *Brown v. the*

*Board of Education* in 1954. The parents of Linda Brown, the African American student referenced in the landmark case, desired educational opportunities as a means of “liberation and freedom” and as a “mechanism against oppression” by fighting for their daughter’s rights through the court system (Anderson, 2004, p. 5). Desegregation of schools was viewed as a gateway to a better life by the Brown family and other African American families throughout the nation. As a result of desegregation, African American students were physically immersed into the classroom with White students to receive better educational opportunities (Payne, 2004). Yet, there was widespread belief in the “melting pot” theory of immersing Black and White students into the same schools and classrooms as a means of assimilation and elimination of the achievement gap. In the midst of these “educational opportunities,” the achievement gap remained. Since the 1950’s, the responsibility for the gap was placed on the African American student, their uneducated family, and their community of poverty (Anderson, 2004; Tatum 2004). The problem with these African American students being responsible for the achievement gap was the emergence (since the 1970’s) of an African American middleclass that has motivated children, educated parents, affluent communities, and middle- to high-income levels. There is a presence of an achievement gap between African American and White students regardless of the “home and community circumstance.” Therefore, other reasons for the gap must be explored.

### **Academic Achievement**

African American students were physically immersed into a system that was not prepared for their ultimate success (Tatum, 2004). Since the days of integration in the

1950's, researchers have determined that too often, African American students still sit in classrooms that blatantly and covertly engage in discriminatory practices that impact student achievement. Our nation has a great commission to educate all students; yet, research continues to demonstrate that our education system is not prepared with the skills, knowledge, or desire to create an environment for equitable educational experiences of African American students (Tatum, 2004).

Moreover, questions of equity are forcing educators to revisit the underlying reasons why many African American students are experiencing difficulties in schools, specifically difficulty in academic achievement (Zirkel, 2004). Graybill (1997) argues that there have been many areas of concern for the achievement status of African American students when compared to the academic achievement of White students. Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson (2000) contend that “the apparent inability of our public education system to be as successful academically with children of color, particularly with those from low-income families, as it is with middleclass White children is a direct threat to our claims to be a truly democratic country” (p. 14).

However, in an effort to ensure children's success in schools, middleclass African American parents have made purposeful decisions based on beliefs about the best interests of their children. Often, given their income levels, they move to suburban towns and enroll their children in schools they perceive to be on the cutting edge of academic achievement. However, these middleclass parents report obstacles of educational opportunities after purposeful preparation of their children. Furthermore, the middleclass African American parents' voices, voices of concern and advocacy for their children,

have rarely been reported in research. As a middleclass African American researcher and parent, I value education as a gateway to a better life for my children. I went to college and earned a bachelor's degree and continued on to graduate school as a purposeful decision. As I began to prepare for this study, I reflected on her beliefs regarding the educational experiences of my daughter in a predominantly White suburban classroom. The following personal experience is given in a first person account of the researcher's experience.

### *Personal Experience*

Destiny, my daughter, is a very bright girl. During her pre-school years, she could read, she learned conversational Spanish, and could quote Bible verses from memory. Academically, Destiny excelled and her communication skills were exceptional among her peers. She was very confident and would start a conversation with anyone willing to listen. She continues to be logical and able to problem solve in difficult situations. She has a passion for music, singing, and dancing. Destiny participates in dance at church and community gatherings. Upon entering kindergarten, she was extremely excited and eager to learn. However, after a few weeks of school, she came home disappointed because she said the students in her class were only learning one letter of the alphabet a week. As her mother, I was extremely disappointed and felt as though Destiny's academic ability was not being addressed.

Destiny soon became bored and lost interest in school. She complained of stomachaches and did not want to go to school. Those characteristics served as a red flag to me. I felt my daughter was not enjoying a time in her life that served as a rite of

passage into public education. My husband and I toiled with the decision of having her tested to accelerate her to first grade. We believed that kindergarten was a monumental year, and we did not want to rush her. Before making a decision, we decided to schedule a meeting with the teacher. The teacher decided to give Destiny a portion of the testing before our meeting so we could discuss the results at the meeting. At the meeting, we were told (by the teacher) that Destiny was advanced according to the results of the standardized test, and the teacher was impressed; but she was not sure the results were enough for her to be successful in first grade. She was also reluctant to recommend Destiny for first grade because of Destiny's unfamiliarity with some of the language used on the exams. For example, Destiny was expected to identify the uppercase letters as opposed to capital letters. We wondered, "Were White children being accelerated to first grade if they could read or was it a policy to keep all children in kindergarten?" I felt as if Destiny was being excluded from enrichment because of technicalities and not because she did not have the ability.

We were also told by the teacher that by the end of the year, all children in the class would be at the same level. At this point, I asked myself what the teacher was thinking about my child. Did she believe Destiny was capable of excelling? Did she expect Destiny to conform to her low expectations? We did not push the issue, but rather decided to allow her to remain in kindergarten. As the year progressed, we encountered behavior problems that caused us to reflect about the beginning of school. We received notes and phone calls that Destiny was talking to other students during quiet time and she was talking on the "red carpet." (The "red carpet" indicates the place where the students

were to sit quietly.) Although I believed my child was extremely bored and because we value education, we decided that she must conform and obey the rules. I also wondered if Destiny was the only student with these issues or if the teacher needed help with classroom management. We believed the teacher must have recognized Destiny's potential because of the responsibilities Destiny was given in class.

From the first day of school, Destiny became the teacher's helper by assisting students who experienced learning difficulties. She was allowed to tutor the students who sat at her table. She also was assigned to be a "special friend" to a student who experienced separation anxiety from her mother. We did not send our child to school to be a teacher's aide but to interact with her peers at her level and to excel in reading, math, and other academic subjects. We were also concerned about Destiny feeling as though the rules did not apply to her because of her special privileges that manifested into behavior problems. We became concerned and decided to have her screened for the gifted and talented program.

There were five components to the screening. After completion of the first two components, she was advanced to the remaining components. Although parts of the screening were exceptional, she did not qualify. She needed to have positive marks in four of the five components and was exceptional in only three. I contacted the gifted and talented specialist for further explanation and none could be given specifically concerning Destiny's score. Many questions came to mind. Could the teacher have intervened? Did other children who were White enter the program by qualifying in only three areas? How many African American students were in the gifted and talented

program? Did other African American parents have this problem? I felt disappointed with the school system. I knew Destiny was exceptionally bright with many gifted and talented characteristics. Destiny's teacher also believed she was extremely bright based on the teacher checklist she completed, but not bright enough for the educational system to recognize her abilities. We decided not to fight the decision but rather to provide enrichment through community and church initiatives.

This was my first experience in a suburban school district with White middleclass teachers. Like most parents, we have high expectations for Destiny, which was our purpose for placing her in a school district whose reputation superseded most in the area. However, having encountered numerous difficulties and frustrations in the beginning stages of our child's education, we were left with questions in our mind regarding our choice of school districts. Did we make the right decision? Will Destiny receive the best education possible to be successful in life and be able to embrace her ethnicity in a positive light? We regrouped and decided to do whatever we could to support our child academically and emotionally. We wanted to support her, so we decided to have lunch with her throughout the year, to enrich her reading experiences at home, and to cultivate a love for learning.

On one particular lunch visit, I witnessed a cafeteria monitor giving an African American student a harsher punishment for an offense that was committed by a White student only a few minutes earlier. In this incident, a White female broke one of the cafeteria rules and the monitor quietly walked over to her and asked her very nicely not to "break the rule," and the monitor gave the little girl a friendly pat on her hand. A few

minutes later, an African American male broke the same rule and the monitor walked over to him, reprimanded him very harshly in front of all of his peers, and ordered him to take his lunch tray to the isolated area. I sat and watched quietly to see if the action would be addressed by the other adults in the cafeteria, but it was not addressed. I noticed if any one else witnessed the event. I saw an African American custodian and asked her if she saw what happened. We discussed the situation, and she said what I witnessed happened on a regular basis. I asked her if she shared the information with the administrators at the school. She said she had not shared this information with the administrators. I encouraged her to do so. I decided to ask the monitor why the two students received different treatment. She would not give me an answer.

I thought at that moment as I sat across from my Destiny, that she could have experienced this kind of treatment. I felt very sad and begin to think about race and race issues. I was concerned for the students of color at Destiny's school and in the district. I thought that they deserved better treatment. I wondered what was really going on in the educational system regarding race and covert and overt discrimination. At that moment, it was confirmed in my heart that the voice of the middleclass African American parent with children in suburban schools should be heard. Therefore, as a researcher and a middleclass African American mother, I explored middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of their children's school experiences in White middleclass suburban junior high schools. In particular, the focus of this research was on middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of their children's' interactions with their White teachers in their schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Previous studies (Carter, 2003; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) have focused on the achievement of African American students in low-income urban areas. Specifically, these studies have focused on the experiences that have been reported from the perspective of the educational system regarding the over representation of African American students in special education programs and the under representation of African American students in advanced placement programs. Few have taken into consideration the challenging experiences of middleclass African American students from the parents' perspective.

Middleclass African American students have been groomed by their parents to obtain high academic achievement. In an effort to improve their social and economic status, and thus to provide better opportunities for their children, middleclass African American parents have earned advanced degrees, established financial security for their families, and relocated to suburban areas. In addition to improving their quality of life, these parents have prepared their children through enrichment experiences that enable them to compete in rigorous academic environments.

Often these students demonstrate high academic achievement. They score high on national standardized assessments, maintain high averages in their course work, and enroll in advanced placement courses. By participating in advanced placement courses, students receive specific advantages such as the opportunity for a high grade point average and college credit for course work. Having realized the advantages of advanced placement courses, some middleclass African American students enroll in these courses

and are recommended to exit by school personnel. Many, however, choose to remain and are often forced to deal with what these parents perceive as difficult experiences and struggles within these classrooms as they interact with their teachers. Through this study, the researcher has addressed the perceptions of these middleclass African American mothers' concerns about their children's experiences in suburban classrooms with their White teachers. Their perceptions and insights could prove valuable in helping educators to become more successful with their children, yet their voices are not being heard. There is a dearth of research on the voices of mothers who can define experiences and suggest solutions to the challenge of educating middleclass African American students.

#### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to add another voice to the narrative of schooling of African American students, specifically, to include the voice of those parents who have well prepared their children for the schooling experience. By adding another voice, it is the researcher's hope that a clearer picture will be presented of the challenges African American students face in suburban schools and the perspectives of the parents, particularly in a junior high school setting.

#### **Significance of the Study**

This study will provide a clearer picture of the African American middleclass mothers' perceptions of their children's experiences and will provide an opportunity for a better understanding of these experiences. In addition, these perceptions will provide insights to administrators, teachers, and others involved in education in an attempt to close the achievement gap and improve equitable academic experiences. Therefore, the

goal of this research was to add the perspective of middleclass African American mothers living in suburban communities in the quest for improving the equality of educational opportunities for their children. It could provide possible solutions to perceived inequities in suburban classrooms. This study also allowed insight to be gained about perceived teacher relationships with African American students.

### **Research Questions**

Themes throughout the literature on perceptions of middleclass African American mothers were utilized as the basis for research and analysis in answering the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers about the interactions between their children and their children's White teachers in a predominantly White suburban junior high school?
2. From the perspective of the African American mothers participating in this study, what are the difficulties these African American students experienced in their suburban classrooms?
3. What impact do the African American mothers believe their perceptions have on their role as a parent?

### **Definition of Terms**

*African American* – United States citizens who are non-Hispanic and classified as

“Black” by the Bureau of the Census. African American individuals are classified as descending from any of the Black racial groups of Africa. (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

*Junior High Students* – Students in grades six, seven, or eight.

*Middleclass* – The members of society occupying a socio economic position intermediate between the laboring classes and the wealthy (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1982).

*Perceptions* – The process, act, or faculty of perceiving.

*Suburban* – Pertaining to a residential area or community outlying a city.

*Urban* – Characteristic of the city or city life.

*Voices* – The right or opportunity to express a choice or opinion.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher addressed the need for middleclass African American parents' voices to be added to the current research conversation concerning the academic achievement of African American students. The current research conversation overwhelmingly revolves around the deficit model, implying that African American children could be educated well if it were not for poverty, broken homes, and community social ills such as drugs, gangs, and lack of parental involvement. However, an examination of middleclass African American families indicate a struggle by the education system to educate their children in the absence of poverty and the social ills that plague poor African American children. If the social ills are not present, why do American school systems continue to have an achievement gap between African American and White students in our public schools? Researchers have begun to explore other explanations such as tradition, race, and teacher belief systems. The voices of

African American parents lend themselves well to providing stories and insights that add to the understanding of achievement among African American children.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Historical Background

##### *From the Tradition of Segregation to Integration*

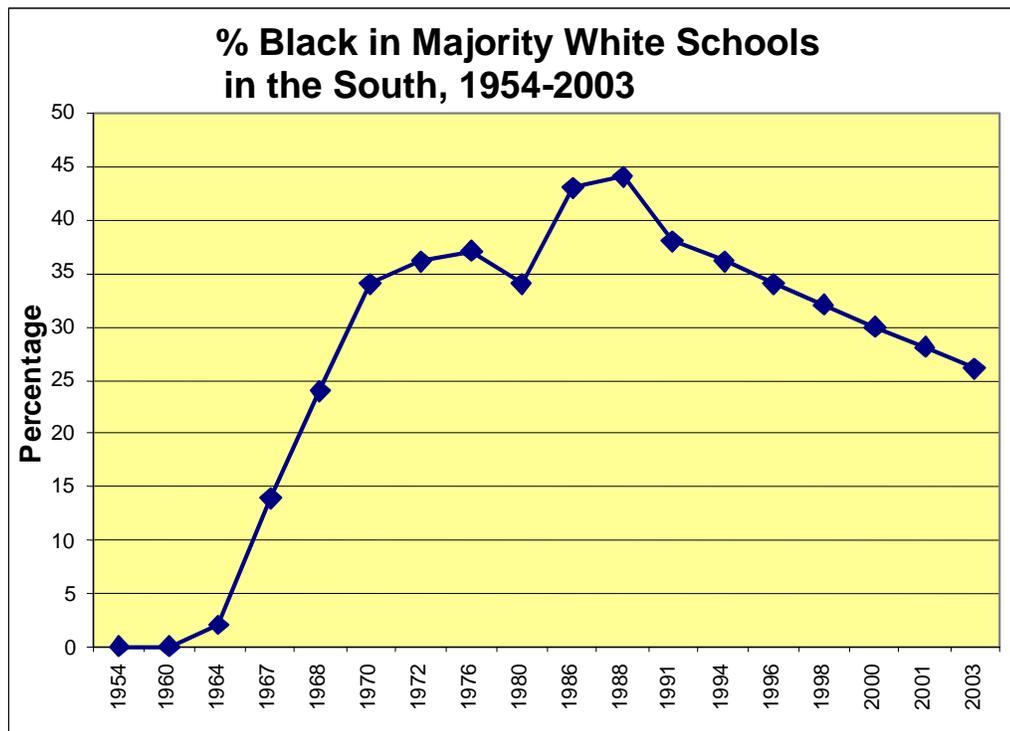
Orfield and Lee (2006) addressed the changing nature of segregation through *The Civil Rights Project* at Harvard University. The perception of “the tradition of segregation” in schools appears to be an old and obsolete issue. It is believed to have occurred long ago and was taken care of through the court system as to imply a resolution. Contrary to this perceived notion, segregation and integration have yet to be resolved (Orfield & Lee, 2006). As a result of this unresolved notion of segregation and integration, the percentages of African American students attending majority White schools particularly in the south have changed noticeably (Orfield & Lee, 2006).

According to Orfield and Lee (2006), the fast growth of integration in the South began with the passage and enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The most noticeable change took place between 1964 and 1970 (Figure 1).

During this time, the percent of Black students in majority White schools jumped from 2 percent to 33 percent. Desegregation for African American students reached its peak for African American students during the 1980’s when 44% of Black students attended majority White schools, and the South was by a significant margin the least segregated region for black students throughout this period. (Orfield & Lee, 2006, p. 13)

This was a significant period in the history of African American education spiraling from the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 to the milestone case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, to the most recent status in 2003. Although the percentages

of the African American student population increased, the academic achievement of these students became a possible concern.



From Orfield and Lee (2006).

*Figure 1.* Percent Black in majority White schools in the South, 1954-2003.

African American students perform at lower academic levels than their White counterparts, therefore creating an achievement gap (Graybill, 1997). The reasons given for this gap include the low socioeconomic status of African American students, the over representation of African American students in lower academic tracks (Fritzberg, 2001), the perceptions of some teachers and administrators that African American parents lack

concern for education (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and the low expectations some teachers and administrators hold for African American students as well as these teachers and administrators deficit thinking regarding their African American students (Carter, 2005). In general, the experiences of many African American students in low income urban schools often include under-representation in Advanced Placement courses (Noguera & Akom, 2002), over-representation in special education placements (Oakes, 1995), and referrals for discipline that far exceed their representation within the general student population (Simpson, 2001).

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* verdict set the precedent that “separate” facilities for Blacks and Whites were constitutional as long as they were “equal.” The “separate but equal” policy was quickly extended to cover many areas of public life, such as restaurants, theaters, restrooms, and public schools. Not until 1954, would the “separate but equal” policy be struck down by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Cozzens, 1998).

During the separate but equal era, some would argue that segregated African American schools were not a total failure. Chapman (2005) contends, “there were quality segregated African American schools that often academically out performed their all White counterparts” (p. 32). In addition, African American parents were pleased with the academic progress of their children and appreciated the care and concern the teachers had for their children. Parents held great respect for their children’s teachers as it was one of the few professions in which African Americans were highly accepted (Chapman 2005). Both African American and Whites benefited from the economy during the 1950’s and

early parts of the 1960's. Economic prosperity was the reason a large number of African Americans migrated to urban or metropolitan areas where schools were considered superior institutions with better teachers and resources. When these urban areas experienced a decline in economics, the schools that serviced African Americans lost funding to White schools (Walker, 2000). The funds lost to White schools forced African American schools to become inferior because the teachers could not be paid and the buildings could not be maintained (Chapman, 2005).

During the 1950's and 1960's, the Civil Rights movement served as a catalyst to demand a change in the national arena of injustices and inequalities in many areas of African American life, including the education of African American students (Myers, 1997). Education for the African American student has been a journey that has been long and extremely challenging. During the 1950's, African American students were forced to enter the school doors as a result of court rulings and were escorted by police in the midst of violence and national turmoil (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003). Out of this turmoil, the landmark case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* manifested into a change of life for many African American students. For example, this monumental case highlights the importance of desegregation as an attempt to achieve equality of educational opportunities for African American students across the nation (Detlefsen, 1991; Myers, 1997). As an attempt to address these inequalities, African American students were forced to enter the unwelcoming harsh and sometimes brutal "For Whites Only" classroom doors that marked the beginning of desegregation within the Civil Rights movement (Payne, 2004).

As a part of the Civil Rights movement, desegregation of schools was the primary strategy for change in equality of educational opportunity for African American students but has not served as a cure all. From the time of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, school desegregation has been seen as a means of providing African American students with the access to the physical and financial resources of White schools, but also a means of allowing them to share the educational opportunities of White classmates (Myers, 1997; Payne, 2004; Tatum, 2004). Desegregation was the law of the land, but unfortunately, it was not reflected in the heart of the people (Carter, 2003). White teachers and students did not embrace the “new students” who were bussed into their all White schools, and White parents took their children out of schools rather than have them bussed to predominately Black schools.

Furthermore, predominately White school systems did not embrace cultural appreciation, but rather assimilation (Anderson, 2004). Therefore, African American students were expected to enter the classrooms and “act like the White students.” The strangest component of this expectation was that regardless of tedious efforts by African Americans to assimilate, it was not permitted by an American society steeped in racism. It was during the 1950’s when Black soldiers, supported by the G.I. Bill, gained higher education and income levels, that Americans begin to admit that it was not class, but race that prevented African Americans from assimilating into American society (Bound & Turner, 2002). Racism as an insurmountable barrier to assimilation was more clearly visible during the Civil Rights movement when African Americans obtained greater education, mobility and income yet some did and some did not assimilate. The inability

to assimilate gave birth to the “Black Power Movement” in which African Americans denounced assimilation in mass for the first time since the era of reconstruction and Marcus Garvey. African Americans forged an identity based in African American culture that became separate and distinct from White America. “Black is Beautiful” became the new symbol in African American pride, and the demand for equality for cultural appreciation and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” became a renewed battle cry. Desegregation in this nation is still a hotly debated issue. Some researchers say we are an integrated society, while others suggest we are still a nation of segregated people (Orfield & Lee, 2006). An examination of schools will find new methods of segregation via private schools, charter schools, home schooling, and within-school segregation.

### **The Struggle: Low Income Urban and Middleclass**

#### **African American Suburban Experiences**

##### *Poverty and Academic Achievement*

It is argued that children from poor environments lack the intellectual stimulation to be successful academically (Ansalone, 2001). Although this has been the argument, ironically, Americans have considered education as a means to break the cycle of poverty. This means to an end is also viewed as a major obstacle for poor students and creates an educational paradox. In other words, education is said to allow African American students the opportunity to have a better life; yet, so many obstacles in the classroom cause the students to experience difficulties that may hinder their academic achievement. Spring (2002) contends that an emphasis has been placed on an increasing economic and social importance of education in today’s society, yet many minority

groups struggle for equal access to schooling. These struggles are directly related to the educational system's concerns about educational opportunities to the mainstream population. This limited educational performance is exemplified through Henderson-Cole's (2000) claim that African American children attending high poverty schools currently rank at the bottom of many measures of academic achievement; almost two-thirds score below basic proficiency levels on basic standardized tests.

According to Spring (2002), the positions of the educational system:

Include (a) opposing the expansion of educational opportunities because it might undermine the obedience of lower income groups to upper income groups and make lower income groups unwilling to work at menial occupations; (b) expanding opportunities for the lower income groups so they can be educated for obedience and for their place in society; (c) expanding educational opportunities because they supply citizens with the knowledge to protect their political and economic interests; and finally, (d) if the government provides schools, then justice requires that schools should be provided equally to all citizens. (p. 86)

Students do not receive the adequate resources to improve their academic achievement. In addition to receiving inadequate resources, these students do not receive the support from teachers for various reasons (Spring, 2002). The experiences in urban schools are often impacted by the socio-economic status from the courses they are allowed to enroll to the programs in which they participate (Spring, 2002). In other words, these African American students' lack of money is believed to account for the lack of achievement and the lack of equitable educational experiences in urban schools.

Many of the experiences urban African American students have encountered have been based on the rationale that poverty has inhibited their ability to have high academic performance, therefore, limiting their opportunity for equitable educational opportunities.

These limited educational opportunities have been noted through an exclusion from poor and under-funded schools, dilapidated facilities, an under representation in advanced placement through tracking (Noguera & Akom, 2002), over-representation in special education placements (Oakes, 1995), and referrals for discipline that far exceed their representation within the general student population (Simpson, 2001).

### *Parents' Beliefs*

#### **Low Income**

The priorities of low-income African American parents with children in urban schools are sometimes misrepresented because their value system may not follow the traditional or common path of middleclass parental involvement (Crozier, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, 2001). Although the manner in which involvement occurs may differ, low-income African American parents are genuinely interested in their children obtaining academic success (Crozier, 1999). In many cases, parents feel they are not as educated as teachers are; therefore, they cannot be helpful in offering suggestions or helping their children with homework. These parents view their roles in schools as separate from their daily and cultural world and thus create a parent-teacher role as a "division of labor" (Crozier, 1999). The parents do not want to interfere or do not feel qualified to engage in what is going on in the classroom. The parent's role may lend itself to instructing children to have appropriate behaviors and to gain knowledge from their teachers to be prepared for their future (Carter 2003). Lott (2003) contends that this division of labor causes parents to feel powerless in improving the quality of their children's education. Other researchers suggest that low-income parents are reluctant to

become involved or talk to their children's teachers for fear of being judged as inadequate parents, in whom Lott (2003) acknowledges, they more than likely will be judged.

Crozier (1999) states these parents have a dependency on the educator to serve as advocates for their children and to keep their child's best interests at heart. They are also overwhelmed with the magnitude of how much they are expected to contribute to their children's learning. Crozier (1999) further suggests that lack of self-confidence in addition to the lack of information and guidance by the school system may present itself as an unwillingness to become actively involved in the "school life" of their child.

However, prompting and specific guidance can encourage parents to take action that promotes the academic achievement of their child. Lott (2003) states:

Parents can become particularly helpful as sources of knowledge about their children—a source often ignored by schools. Parents can report on the strengths teachers and standardized assessments often miss. Parents have long-term observation of their child's inclinations and aptitudes; therefore, parental reports provide a type of information that cannot be obtained from tests. (p. 96)

Parents are a crucial link to the educational process of African American students although they may not be perceived as important by the educational system. Drummond and Stipek (2004) conducted a study and concluded that low-income African American parents were not very confident concerning school matters and usually accepted the teacher's expertise. Other findings of the study suggested that because these parents did not feel confident with educational concerns, they perceived their role should be different than the role of the teachers. In this circumstance, parents believed they would be more helpful when they encouraged autonomy in their children when completing schoolwork.

Drummond and Stipek (2004) identified these parents as those who support teachers and encourage the teacher's chosen educational activities rather than as parents who collaborate by intervening or suggesting student activities themselves.

### **Suburban Middleclass African American Parents**

Many African American parents living in suburban areas have selected their residence based on the reputation of the schools (Richards, 1997). Parents purposefully seek information about specific schools that will guide their choice of educational advantages for their children. They also want an environment that will enhance the academic achievement of their children. Richards (1997) further adds that parents feel a highly ranked school system may automatically ensure that each child fulfills his or her potential. In addition, middleclass parents believe curriculum and school reputation are indicators of the commitment level of the school to its students.

Middleclass African American parents have a sense of entitlement because of their educational status that allows them the capability of challenging the expert, which is the educator for the purpose of this research. According to Vincent (2001), these middleclass parents differ from low-income parents in the sense that low-income parents are often positioned in relation to educational involvement and are unable to effectively challenge the school system. However, middleclass parents can be described as possessing an educational awareness, interconnectedness between family and school life that suggests that education is a shared responsibility between the teacher and the parent (Crozier, 1996).

With the acceptance of the school-home relationship as a shared responsibility, professional middleclass African American parents take on the role of interventionists as they become engaged in the educational system and process to secure an expected level of education for their children. The parents actively engage in conversation with school personnel to suggest alternatives or additions and to support and enhance the academic achievement of their children (Crozier, 1996). This exceeds volunteering in schools and moves to impacting the daily process and curriculum of the school organization. This type of parental participation also entails parents consciously equipping their children for success in an environment in which they are truly the minority (Crozier, 1996). In support of their children's education and their involvement in the schools, these parents support their children at home by providing supplementary educational opportunities, also viewed as cultural capital.

### **Middleclass African American Suburban Experiences**

According to Bankston and Caldas (1996), if students create the social environment of schools from the advantages or disadvantages they bring to schools, it could be viewed as schools having a negative influence on students, beyond the influence of the student's race. These researchers have found that the percentages of African American students in suburban schools may have a negative effect on student achievement, controlling for a variety of student and school factors. The negative influence may be the result of continuing social, economic, and educational handicaps imposed on African American students by the dominant society. It may also be that a

history of oppression and deprivation has attached disadvantages to race and has caused a hindrance to academic achievement (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

The experiences of African American students in suburban schools are as perplexing as the experiences in urban schools. According to Hu (1997), it is a myth that students of color “will perform as well as their White peers in good suburban schools and the reality is that the racial gap exists even in the best suburbs” (p. 54). Hu (1997) further contends in this study that “some affluent suburbs did no better than nearby urban areas, and even at best suburban schools, Blacks on average lagged behind their White classmates” (p. 54). Therefore, African American students in predominantly White suburban schools still experience the achievement gap that is commonly associated with urban schools. The issue of academic achievement still remains a pervasive problem when poverty is not a factor to be considered. There is the need to address challenges of African American students in suburban schools just as there is the need to address challenges in urban schools (Ferguson, 2001; Hu, 1997; Parker & O’Conner, 1970; Rothman, 2001). Evidence in suburban schools suggest that African American students are under represented in gifted and talented and advanced placement through tracking (Grossman & Ancess, 2004; Tatum, 2004), over represented in special education placements (Oakes, 1995), and referred for discipline that far exceed their representation within the general student population (Simpson, 2001). Contrary to popular belief, the challenges for urban poor and suburban middleclass African Americans are comparable.

*Parental Involvement***Low Income**

It is a common expectation for African American parents to be involved; however, a consensus of the manner in which involvement is considered effective has not been determined (Crozier, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, 2001). African American parents visit their children's classrooms for different reasons. Some frequently initiate contact with their children's teachers to check on their progress or because they are active participants in the school's parent organization. Other parents only visit their children's school in response to the educator's request as a result of poor performance or school discipline issues (Clark, 1983). These parents are not very likely to make spontaneous visits to the school; the visits are usually planned and expected. Gutman and McLoyd (2000) further add that parental involvement is perceived as evidence of parental expectation of their children's success of their performance and the parental acceptance of their responsibility for the children's performance as well. Whether parents frequent the classrooms more or less than others, there is strong evidence to suggest that there is a strong correlation between children's academic achievement and parental involvement (Thompson, 2003).

Parental involvement continues to arise in addressing the concerns of the academic achievement of African American students. Thompson (2003) argues that in some instances, parental involvement is associated with improved attendance, higher test scores, improved grades, higher graduation rates, higher homework completion, and

increased opportunities for higher education. Research supports the interests of African American parents to be actively involved in their children's education (Thompson, 2003).

According to Drummond and Stipek (2004), parents are concerned with involvement in schools; however, they view school success in context of family and community support and the overall welfare of their children's development. Parents indicate the needs of having good relationships with their children and equipping them with necessary skills to form and maintain healthy relationships with others (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

Gutman and McLoyd (2000) share their belief in regards to parenting and the achievement of African American students by stating that the achievement of African American students may be best understood in the environmental context of children's everyday lives, which includes the home as well as community settings like schools, churches, and recreation centers. Parents as managers of their children's environments within the home also encourage, organize, and supervise their children's educational opportunities in the community. Moreover, parents interact with community institutions such as the school on their children's behalf. These interactions are no less consequential for children's academic success and are common among African American parents from low-income and urban settings.

### **Middleclass**

Development of African American students is an intricate and complex component of their success in school. Given the many inequalities these students face and learn to overcome, middleclass African American parents have assumed the

responsibility for preparing their children through socialization. Hughes and Johnson (2001) state:

Over the past several years, researchers have become increasingly interested in how parents shape children's learning about their own race and about relations between ethnic groups. Commonly referred to as racial socialization, parents' race-related communications to children have been viewed as important determinants of children's race related attitudes and beliefs and of their sense of efficacy in negotiating race-related barriers and experiences. (p. 981)

These race-related barriers and experiences are embraced by parents as an opportunity for African American parents to nurture competent and effective children as well as promote racial pride in order to prepare them to succeed in a culture where values differ from their own (Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

It is a strategy that parents use to raise competent children in environments that can be viewed as racially challenging. African American students in suburban schools are faced with challenges on a daily basis. As their parents have certain experiences, they tend to become concerned about adequately preparing their children for race-related barriers and experiences. Hughes and Johnson (2001) continue to explain that these race-related experiences are influenced both by original family practices and by the nature of parents' daily experiences. These researchers proclaim that the parents' racial socialization influences children's identity development and well-being.

If students have a good sense of who they are and an overall feeling that is positive about themselves, then they are likely to be more productive in school. The efforts of parents to ensure this, have yielded success of African American students in the areas of improved academic performance in school as well as a feeling of self-efficacy

(Hughes & Johnson, 2001). These parents work hard to develop positive feelings in their children despite the obstacles and barriers faced.

### **Cultural Capital of African American Students**

Cultural capital entails the common relations of schooling and family life that correspond with the social relations such that class hierarchy of the larger society are reproduced and reinforced in the educational system (Delpit, 1995; Simpson, 2001). Cultural capital also involves the experiences students bring to the classroom after exposure to societal experiences that enrich their educational experiences. Cultural capital can be used as a tool for the advantaged or disadvantaged student to move from one academic level to another. Vincent (2001) states that the middleclass parent has access to cultural capital and material resources to act more aggressively in terms of school involvement.

The socioeconomic status of middleclass parents contributes to the educational achievement of their children. Elite status groups generate a status culture or cultural capital of distinctive tastes and styles, which work to gain privileged access. African American students are often encouraged by their parents to do better or obtain more than their parents because education is viewed as a means of resistance against oppression and a gateway to a better life (Anderson, 2004; Vincent, 2001). Middleclass African American parents' advocacy includes encouraging their children to participate in advanced placement courses and at times spending time at school to negotiate and gain access to higher level courses. One cannot dispute that schools are social settings that are to some extent, political and racially bound, according to Vincent (2001). Having brought

behavioral and attitudinal capital from family to school, middleclass students establish a peer culture that makes their form of behavior and attitude a part of their family's general expectations (Bankston & Caldas, 1996). These parents have parenting styles that are similar to White middleclass, meaning, their children's performance will be the result of equitable educational opportunities.

Some African American students have been at a disadvantage because the cultural capital they bring to school not being the same as the cultural capital brought by the dominant group of students. According to Bankston and Caldas (1996), if students create the social environment of schools from the advantages or disadvantages they bring to schools, it could be viewed as schools exercising a negative influence on students, beyond the influence of the student's race. These researchers have found that the percentages of African American students in suburban schools may have a negative effect on student achievement, controlling for a variety of student and school factors. The negative influence may simply be the result of continuing social, economic, and educational handicaps imposed on minority students by the dominant society.

It may also be that a history of oppression and deprivation has attached disadvantages to race and has caused a hindrance to academic achievement. Because of the current state of African American students' achievement, middleclass African American parents take specific steps in the preparation of their children for success.

#### *Race and Within School Segregation*

Oakes (1995) argues that African American children usually score lower on commonly accepted assessments of ability and achievement that serves as a justification

for placements of lower track, remedial, or special education assignments for these students. These assignments for African American students can be associated with within school segregation. Within school segregation occurs when African American students are removed from the general population and given remedial assignments, therefore, limiting their academic achievement (Oakes, 1995). Oakes (1995) continues to argue that “despite its widespread legitimacy, there is no question that tracking, the assessment practices that support it and the differences in educational opportunity that result from it limit many students’ schooling opportunities and life chances” (p. 682). Within school segregation in low-income urban schools is manifested by the over representation of African American students in special education programs. In middleclass suburban schools, within school segregation is seen by an exclusion of African American students in advanced placement courses. Whereas most of the literature regarding African American students’ experiences has been reported from a low income urban perspective, there are concerns regarding middleclass African American students’ experiences.

### **Tracking**

School tracking practices produce racially separate programs that provide African American students with limited educational opportunities and performances. In a study conducted by Oakes (1995), it was concluded that lower-track placement worked to the disadvantage of African American students. “Whether these students began with relatively high or relatively low achievement, those who were placed in lower-level courses showed lesser gains over time than similarly situated students placed in higher-level courses” (Oakes, 1995, p. 681) The results of this study indicated three specific

disadvantages facing the African American students: “(1) unjustifiable disproportionate and segregative assignment to lower-track classes and exclusion from accelerated classes; (2) inferior opportunities to learn; and (3) lower achievement” (Oakes, 1995, p. 689) This has been the common expectation of the experiences for African American students.

In addition, school districts use certain criteria to keep African American students separate. The criteria used to make placement decisions make segregation within schools a cultural norm (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003). The current state of segregation within schools is harming students. Educational practices have the effect of favoring White students and hindering the educational opportunities of African Americans and Latinos. This is particularly true when it comes to tracking and sorting students based on ability.

Tatum (2004) conducted a study with 18 upper middleclass African American college students. These students were interviewed to gather data concerning their adolescent years having grown up in suburban and predominantly White areas. In this study, they were asked to discuss their school experiences. These students agreed that their families have access to educational and economic resources that would possibly prepare them to assume leadership positions in American society. There was not an indication in this study that suggested teachers of these African American students were encouraged to take advanced classes, but rather their parents’ expectations guided them to excel.

Grossman and Ancess (2004) conducted a study to address the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts in 11 suburban school districts in

New York City, Newark, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. These particular districts investigated remedies to narrow the achievement gap. The students who participated attended a two-hour weekly study group that focused on problem solving and study skills in math. The lead teacher for the group encouraged the students to view this group as enrichment and not as remediation. These middleclass African American students reported they were not encouraged to excel and take advanced courses. The findings of this study revealed that this group did not provide these students with the necessary skills to be placed in a higher-level math class.

### **Over Representation in Special Education**

Oakes (1995) explains that African American children usually score lower on commonly accepted assessments of ability and achievement that serve as a justification for placements of lower track, remedial, or special education assignments for these students. The lower track may seem appropriate because they are designed to provide students with the education that is believed to best suit their abilities. Simpson (2001) argues that African American students are at a greater risk for being placed in remedial and special education classes which subject them to varying forms of school discipline.

In addition to the specific educational experiences of urban African American students, educators believe these parents are contributors to the problems of the low achievement of these students (Carter, 2003; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

### **Advanced Placement**

According to Noguera and Akom (2002), an analysis of test scores reveals a close correlation between the scores children obtain and broader social inequality. Noguera and

Akom (2002) continue to add that students of color are more likely to be excluded from classes for those deemed gifted in primary school, and from honors and advanced placement (AP) courses in high school.

Whereas schools have been physically desegregated, there are questions of segregation within the realm of educational practices through teaching and opportunities for African American students to participate in advanced placement courses, which can be added to the idea of inequality of educational opportunity.

Test scores are used as a placement component for students to gain access to advanced placement courses as well as the subjectivity of a teacher or counselor's recommendation. Although these techniques are used, the results are usually not in favor of the African American student.

Simpson (2001) contends that minority students who meet the criteria for access to advanced courses are more likely to be turned away based on the recommendation of a counselor or teacher. When students come to school prepared to excel, they are encouraged to participate in advanced courses; however, not all students come equipped with the necessary skills to achieve academic success. These are the students of concern. What measures are taken to ensure equal opportunity for all students? How are these students educated and prepared for success when they are not considered to be students who are teachable of an advanced curriculum?

Advanced placement courses contribute to the relationship of student achievement and equality of educational opportunity. According to Simpson (2001), curriculum placement is dependent upon ability, past achievement, and socio-economic

status. Simpson (2001) concludes that race is an additional factor that affects the academic track in which students are assigned. African and Hispanic Americans are over represented in lower tracks, whereas European and Asian Americans are over represented in higher tracks.

As a result of the track assignment with the higher track proven to equip students for preparation of college and high achievement in general, African American students do not always experience access to the equality of educational opportunity. This researcher further adds that minority students are often encouraged to select a trade or technical approach to education. Even if they are college bound, they do not always have the opportunity to major in the sciences to become engineers or doctors because they have not been prepared through AP courses or other advanced courses throughout their school experience (Simpson, 2001).

### **Teacher Efficacy and Expectations**

Deficit thinking would describe beliefs educators hold in relation to urban African American students and their parents (Carter, 2005). It is the belief of these educators that parents do not value the education of their children, and they have poor parenting skills. The views of parenting skills and values vary according to the perspective. Parental values are sometimes perceived as a lack of interest on the parent's part as it relates to visibility in schools. These particular parents may not attend school functions that can be interpreted as a lack of concern regarding education (Delpit, 1995; Flores, Teft-Cousin, & Diaz, 1990; Poplin & Weeres, 1992).

When educators have high expectations of all students, training and knowledge is sought to improve the achievement of all students. Teachers must promote high expectations as well as foster cultural differences in order to close the gap related to academic achievement, since academic expectations can be associated with academic achievement (Graybill, 1997). This is not always the case since African American students are placed on lower academic tracks and discouraged from enrolling or remaining in advanced placement courses and then compared to the achievement of White students.

Graybill (1997) continues to argue that teachers must avoid measuring African American children next to the norm for a White student that can lead to thinking in relation to deficit education and necessary skills instead of focusing on how to better become accustomed to African American learning styles. Classroom strategies must be implemented to accommodate the need for all students to learn (Delpit, 1995). Teachers may or may not be aware of the outcome of their expectations of African American students in comparison to their White students. Spindler (1963) reports that teachers with the best intentions can clearly encourage positive goals in students as well as guide students away from high expectations because of the teachers' beliefs that African American students are low achievers.

### *Teacher Efficacy*

Teacher efficacy is the teachers' confidence in their ability to promote student learning (Hoy, 2000). Bandera (1982) defines teacher efficacy as the belief in one's ability to achieve success in a given situation. Carter (2003) adds that teacher efficacy

relates to the extent in which a teacher believes he or she can teach children and make a difference in their lives. Teacher efficacy has been attributed as one of the characteristics associated with the low achievement of African American students (Carter, 2003; Hoy, 2000). Do White middleclass teachers believe they can educate African American students to obtain high academic achievement? Is it possible that these teachers can positively impact students they believe are low achievers? Is it possible that White middleclass teachers attribute high achievement based on White middleclass values? Carter (2003) contends that efficacies along with expectations are teacher characteristics that have been associated with student achievement, specifically with students in diverse classrooms. Carter (2003) further adds that many beginning teachers possess a low sense of efficacy when teaching students from diverse backgrounds. These teachers believe their efforts are limited because the students' situational factors will determine success or failure in the classroom. These teachers believe if the students' background is favorable to middleclass standards, they will be successful. If the students, however, are from an impoverished background, then failure is the expectation. Teachers with high sense of efficacy believe their hard work will bring success, and those teachers who have little effort will fail. That being said, teachers who maintain a high sense of efficacy believe that effort instead of external factors causes outcomes in the classrooms (Carter, 2003).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Inequality of educational opportunities plague the school system for African American students' in spite of the cultural capital some bring to the classroom. Students are faced with issues of within school segregation through tracking, low enrollment in

advanced placement courses, and teacher expectations. These inequities have caused middleclass African parents to mistrust the system and to assume the responsibility of preparing their children to meet the barriers and challenges in order to succeed. Parents must go beyond just being involved in the schools and become actively involved in the development of their children's identity and sense of well-being. Parent involvement in any case has been instrumental in the welfare and academic success of middleclass African American students (Crozier, 1999; Thompson, 2003).

The research surrounding parental involvement has primarily focused upon low-income urban areas. African American parents in this setting typically view the educator as the professional and accept the recommendations made by them. They also visit schools upon request or in response to specific needs as they arise (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Gutman & McLloyd, 2000). Middleclass African American parents have a different view of their roles in the educational system.

Middleclass African American parents have a sense of entitlement and ownership in their children's education because of the educational level they possess (Vincent, 2001). It is very common for these parents to question educational practices and intervene on behalf of their children when necessary. The racial experiences that middleclass African American parents encounter have caused them to prepare their children for racial or dual socialization (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). This is deemed necessary because of the inequalities African American students continue to battle daily.

The inequalities African American students battle are within school segregation through tracking, low enrollment in or discouragement from advanced placement

courses, special education referrals, student dropout, and teacher rationale. These inequalities are viewed as systemic procedures and policies that are not discriminatory. Teachers may sometimes accept this view because of the familiarity of lived experiences without consideration of the perceived implication of cultural insensitivity.

Teachers may exclude students or not consider African American students because of low expectations or a difference of learning styles. They have the ability to encourage or discourage students to reach their potential through spoken or unspoken methods (Graybill, 1997; Spindler, 1963). This is an example of the perceived inequalities African American students face despite the socialization parents provide for their students as well as the cultural capital their students bring into the classrooms. Cultural capital depicts the resources students bring to the classroom after exposure to societal experiences that enrich their educational experiences. Cultural capital is inclusive of, but not limited to, educational opportunities through activities that expose them to various life's experiences that enhance their understanding of knowledge (Simpson, 2001).

Past research supports parental involvement, regardless of status as an extremely positive and necessary action; however, the emphasis has been placed on traditional, White middleclass involvement from the educational system's perspective. Other research blames non-traditional parental involvement of low-income urban parents as a focal point of the rationale for lower achievement of African American students. This research has a strong implication on the absence of money accounting for the lack of involvement, thus, yielding lower achievement. Few studies address the educational

opportunities from the middleclass African American parents' perspective in suburban areas. The voices of these parents must be heard to address the concerns of what appears to account for the perceptions of continual inequitable experiences of the middleclass African American students in predominantly White classrooms.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

##### *Epistemological Frame*

The research design was a basic interpretivist research study that investigated middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of the ways in which White teachers interact with their African American children in predominately White suburban classrooms. The researcher's intent through this study was to allow the middleclass African American mothers' voices to be heard as an advocate for their children in these particular schools. Middleclass African American mothers in this study were defined as parents who identified themselves as middleclass. These mothers live in a suburban community and their children are zoned to the school in their neighborhood as opposed to being bused from another area. Suburban is defined as an area that is comprised of families who are college-educated professionals with at least a middleclass income where the minimum value of the homes is \$140,000.

Typically, in many suburban areas, the communities in this research are predominantly comprised of middleclass Whites; thus, the research participants in this study, African American mothers, are the minority population in these communities. Although previous studies have focused on African American families from impoverished environments, this study examined middleclass African American mothers who are considered middleclass and therefore "privileged" based on current societal standards.

Through interpretivism, the researcher was able to share in the lives of the participants' narratives in an effort to make sense of the data. Thus, the focus of this study was on making meaning through interpretation. Merriam (1991) contends that characteristics of interpretivist research are discovery and process driven. One of the main aspects of this paradigm is the process in which things happen. The how, as well as the why, is important. Therefore, in this study, the researcher used the participants' stories, their narratives, in an attempt to understand the participants' interpretations of their experiences and their children's schooling experiences in White middleclass suburban schools.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contend that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic method to the phenomenon investigated. In this research, the phenomenon, the mothers' interpretations of their children's schooling experience, was investigated through group and individual interviews that oftentimes mirrored the communication style seen in traditional Black churches. For example, throughout the group sessions, one participant would begin to share only to have another participant chime in to share her very similar perspective. Throughout this process, the other participants would nod their heads simultaneously while commenting audibly. These comments were similar to the sights and sound experienced in the traditional Black church that includes the waving of the hands, the sounds of "Amen," and "um hum." All these expressions served as a testament that the very essence of the mothers' perceptions were being captured and understood accurately as the researcher sat as an observer during their conversations that occurred naturally.

### **Critical Lens Focused on Race**

In this interpretivist study, a critical lens focused on race was employed. This approach was influenced by critical race theory. According to Lynn (1999), critical race theory emerged as an ethical and moral discourse on race and racism. It begins with the notion that racism is “normal,” not abnormal in American society, because it is intertwined in the fabric of social order. Lynn (1999) also described critical race theory in education as a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the marginal positions of students of color.

Ladson-Billings (1998) incorporated storytelling into critical race theory. Storytelling is a method that allows the reflections and life stories of people of color are used in ways that build theories about the nature of race and racism. In this study, the stories of middleclass African American mothers were used to examine how race and racism are enacted in the daily lives of their children in middleclass predominantly White suburban schools.

This, then, is consistent with Lynn’s (1999) contention that a major point of critical race theory as it relates to education is to place race at the center of analysis with respect to how many White American educators assume normative standards of “Whiteness,” which in turn ignores or subjugates students of color. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), critical race theory in education seeks to uncover the history of racial subordination and thereby impact the “color blind” perspective often seen in the classroom. Through narratives and other historical evidence, critical race theory

documents minority students' exclusion and the ways some have had to compromise their race to survive at predominately White schools.

### *Qualitative Study*

Qualitative methods were used for the interpretivist study. According to Patton (1990):

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting. (p. 1)

Moreover, Merriam (1998) contends that all forms of qualitative research include the following characteristics:

- It is important to understand the phenomenon from the participant's perspective, not the researcher's.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
- Qualitative research usually involves fieldwork in which the researcher physically goes to the people in order to obtain the data.
- Qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy by building theories rather than testing existing theories.
- The product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive since qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding. (pp. 6-8)

Consistent with Merriam's (1998) qualitative characteristics in this study, the researcher attempted to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective. That is, the researcher used individual and group interviews, took field notes, audio taped the sessions, and conducted member checks throughout the research. In addition, the

researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. the researcher conducted the interviews that were conducted in the homes of the participants, and analyzed the data using inductive strategies and rich description.

### *Case Study*

Specifically, this qualitative research was a case study. The case studied here was a group of middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of the ways in which White teachers interacted with their children in predominantly White suburban junior high classrooms. Stake (1995) explains that case study uses research on a specific case or cases to obtain deeper understanding of the complexity and contextuality of issues related to the case or cases. Merriam (1998) confirms that a case study is used to gain an in-depth understanding of situation and meaning for those involved. The focus of case study is on the process as opposed to the outcomes.

### **Background of the District**

Three schools were chosen on the south side of a major interstate of a large suburban school district with over 40,000 students that encompasses 181 square miles in the southeastern part of the United States. A description of the demographics of the student population in the district includes 6.7% African American, 22.1% Hispanic, 63.5% White, 0.2% Native American, and 7.5% Asian/Pacific Islander. The teachers' ethnicity consists of 2.7% African American, 5.7% Hispanic, 90.7% White, 0.2% Native American, and 0.6% Asian/Pacific Islander.

### **Purposive Sample**

Six middleclass African American mothers were chosen by the purposive sampling method through snowball sampling. Merriam (1998) states that snowball sampling involves asking participants to refer the researcher to other participants. Patton (1990) adds, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). As stated before, the mothers were selected from three junior high schools on the south side of a major interstate in a suburban school district with over 40,000 students.

The following criteria were used to determine if the referred mothers met the criteria to participate in this study via a phone conversation:

- If they lived in a suburban community within the attendance zone of the district.
- If they had at least one child attending or once attended one of the three junior high schools (included in this study).
- If they self-identified themselves as middleclass African Americans.
- If their child was recommended to exit at least one of the advanced placement courses in junior high.

Interested mothers were given a preliminary phone interview to screen for eligibility to participate in the study. Upon qualifying, the mothers were invited to participate and asked by the researcher to refer names and contact information of other mothers they knew who would be interested in participating.

## **Data Collection**

After the preliminary phone interviews, each mother participated in two, one-hour semi-structured interviews. As stated before, the first interview was used to obtain basic descriptive information about the participants, to establish expectations and procedures, to share the race of their children's teachers, to establish a rapport, and to share general experiences of their children. For example, participants were asked to share their family's educational and professional background as well as insightful information regarding their children including personality, honors and awards, academic achievements, and their socialization interests. Participants were then asked to share how their children were prepared for academic and social success. The first interview ended after the mothers shared their stories about their children's experiences in predominately White suburban classrooms. The participants were then asked to refer the names and contact information of other mothers who might be interested in participating in this study. The second interview for some participants immediately followed the first, while other participants were rescheduled for a later date.

The second interview began with the participants continuing their narratives. They were asked guiding questions about their perceptions of their children's experiences in regards to the White teacher interactions. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for further assistance with the collection and analysis of the data. In addition to the tapes, the researcher wrote field notes to have a record of the observations and key words during the interviews. As the mothers told of their experiences, notations were made of the collage of emotions ranging from happiness to outrage. These emotions were

exemplified through humor, sarcasm, and even trembling voices with tearful eyes. It was at those tearful times that the researcher felt an enormous sense of responsibility to “fix” their problem. This feeling was similar to the way in which a young child would look to their mom to answer the sad “why” questions. Both individual interviews were analyzed to look for emerging themes to guide the two, two-hour group sessions that followed the individual interviews. It was important to bring the participants together to further explore the information given and to continue collecting the rich thick description. In addition, the researcher wanted to verify that the emerging themes reflected the perceptions of the participants through member checks.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were collected and analyzed at the same time using the constant comparative method according to Merriam (1998). The researcher began with a “particular incident from an interview, field notes, and compared it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set” (p. 159). After the first set of individual interviews that were audio taped and transcribed, the transcriptions and the field notes were reviewed and analyzed. Key words along with the phrases were highlighted to further guide the research. Comparisons between the first and second set of interviews were made. By constantly comparing the individual interviews, words and phrases were coded, which in turn guided the group sessions using the themes that were emerging. Member checks were conducted during the group sessions to verify the participants’ perceptions. It was with these themes that the participants were able to verify their realities through member checks during the group sessions. It was anticipated that each

theme would be discussed one at a time following a well-organized format; instead, the themes were intertwined in thick descriptions of testimonials. For example, one participant would begin to share while another would continue their narrative replacing only the name of the children. After careful consideration of the concerns of these participants in this study, the researcher investigated the possibility of the race factor. The researcher was led to investigate a possible connection to the African American mothers' perceptions of their children's experiences to critical race theory as these mothers shared their stories.

### *Trustworthiness and Credibility*

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, intentional methods were employed to authenticate trustworthiness and credibility of this study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). One method was prolonged engagement of four to six months with the participants. It is important for the researcher to spend enough time with the participants as to eliminate distortions and to understand events the way in which the participant would interpret them. In addition to prolonged engagement, member checks of the individual transcripts were important to ensure an understanding of the perceptions of the middleclass African American mothers' regarding their children's experiences. "Because the realities that will be included are those that have individually and collectively been constructed by persons within the context of the study, it is imperative that both data and interpretations obtained be verified by those persons" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 31). It is also imperative to note that triangulation was used as an attempt "to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist

within the context of a study to collect information about different events and relationships from different points of view” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 31). Triangulation included individual interviews, group sessions, and field notes.

### *Positionality*

As the primary research instrument for this study, it is important for the researcher to state her positionality. The researcher is a middleclass African American mother with a child entering kindergarten this year and currently employed as a junior high counselor in a predominately White suburban school. Having been an African American counselor in a predominately White suburban school with African American parents coming to her for answers and support for the difficulties their children have experienced has been the fuel that ignited the fire of reporting the concerns of middleclass African American parents through this study. The researcher’s position has caused her to serve as an advocate for African American families as well as for the school in which she works. It has been an extremely challenging position as the researcher made decisions concerning where her true loyalty lies. She listened to numerous concerns of the families as well as the teachers and the administrators regarding the experiences of African American students and the interaction of White teachers with these students.

It was the dual advocacy role with the educators and the families that caused the researcher to realize that although it was difficult, she tried not to impose her views; however, she recognized the need to state her position. That was a challenge during the interviews because the parents made points that the researcher could identify with and

caused her to want to add a comment not only as an African American, but from an educator's perspective as well. The researcher wanted to elaborate on many instances because their perceptions once again were constant reminders of the rationale for this study. The mothers expressed their concerns for the struggles and obstacles that were very common to their children after all the parents did to purposefully prepare their children for success. Some of the preparation included becoming educated, obtaining middleclass status, exposing their children to various experiences, as well as maintaining a role as an involved parent and advocate for their children. The African American families living in this area possessed a comparable standard of living to that of the White middleclass families such as having high-end incomes, educational levels, involvement in the community, and involving their children with school and extracurricular activities.

The researcher provided a comprehensive methodological approach through this chapter. In this Methodology chapter, an explanation for the design of the study was explained to support the actual data collection and research findings. Chapter Four will address the data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

This data analysis reports the voices of middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of White teachers' interaction with African American students in predominantly White suburban classrooms through the researcher's eyes. In this study, the researcher used the actual words of the mothers as an attempt to provide a rich-thick representation of the narratives shared. The researcher also attempted to share each participant's story through data from the interviews, field notes, and observations. In order to make meaning of the data, the researcher chose to organize the data in the following manner: (a) an introduction of the participants, (b) a presentation of themes arranged categorically supported by the data from the individual interviews and groups sessions, and (c) an analysis of the categories.

If one were to listen to each story as a separate entity, then perhaps the conclusion may be drawn that these mothers' particular stories were mishaps, unfortunate situations, a mother venting, or merely unforeseen misunderstood events. The mothers spoke words that were repetitious and quite rhythmic in nature in isolated environments. For example, they spoke phrases such as "it is a continuous struggle," "there is always a battle," and "it has been hell." These phrases were used in reference to the mothers sharing their perceptions about the teachers' interaction with their children. Through an in-depth analysis of thick rich description of experiences that overlapped the experiences of another, and yet another, it became the researcher's desire to express these mothers' voices with the same passion and emotion that was observed during the meetings. These

passionate narratives told of an endearing, distressed concern for the educational opportunities of their children. The researcher began this project with three overall arching research questions to guide this study. The questions were:

1. What are the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers about the interactions between their children and their children's White teachers in a predominantly White suburban junior high school?
2. From the perspective of the African American mothers participating in this study, what are the difficulties these African American students experienced in their suburban classrooms?
3. What impact do the African American mothers believe their perceptions have on their role as a parent?

The individual interviews allowed the mothers to share their narratives, while the group sessions allowed for further investigation and understanding of the mothers' voices. The replication of their narratives allowed me, as the primary instrument for data collection, to narrow the research questions to share the lived experiences of these mothers.

### **Introduction of Participants**

#### *The Platoon*

The introduction of participants provides insights into the wealth of professional and personal experiences each added to the research. Pseudonyms replaced the participants' names throughout the analysis to ensure anonymous and confidential responses. Although there were distinctive characteristics, the participants shared similar

experiences that appeared interchangeable at times. These mothers welcomed me into their homes. They offered me refreshments and a tour of their homes. Each home reflected the personal style of the mother with murals and Afro centric art. The researcher was introduced to their husbands and other family members in the home. All of the homes had pictures in various places, whether on the walls, on bookshelves, or on tables. The lawns were perfectly manicured and the interior was spotless.

The first participant will be referred to as Lytia who is a native of Louisiana and has lived in the suburban area for approximately five years. She is single with one son in junior high. She is typically quiet in nature, but very profound in action. She is a certified school nurse and is currently working on her master's degree. Her future plans include opening a community center for the elderly that will be designed to be all inclusive of their medical, spiritual, and social needs.

Nia, the second participant, is a native of Michigan and has lived in the suburban area for five years. She is married to an executive who has accomplished major advancements throughout the years in a major corporation. They have been married for 20 years and have three children, two of which attended one of the schools in this study. She has a bachelor's degree in social work and is currently working as a full-time wife and mother. Previously, Nia worked as a consultant for a school district that had lawsuits filed against them for the mistreatment of students of color. She believes that being a mother is a calling and contributed more than 200 volunteer hours to her children's school the previous year. She is also interested in systemic change of the school system.

Sheila, the third participant, is from Houston and has lived in the suburban area for three years. She and her husband were raised in a rural area and are both products of integration. Sheila's husband is a retired engineer from a major oil company who loves to spend his time playing golf. They have one adopted daughter who they have had since she was an infant; she is currently 13 years old and in the seventh grade. She is a retired corporate attorney from a major oil company. The move from a large city was a major change for them because they moved from an affluent area with other African Americans with reputable careers to an area with majority White families. Sheila views herself as a real mover and a shaker, someone who makes things happen.

Barbara, the fourth participant, is a native of New Mexico. Her husband is a high-ranking officer in the military whose job has caused them to relocate frequently. They share two sons, one in junior high and one who is a junior in college. She received an associate's degree from a community college in New Mexico. Barbara is very laid back and believes in being very persistent, while she chisels away at problems. Barbara is very active in her son's school by volunteering in many facets.

Condi, the fifth participant in this study, has been a resident in her particular suburban community for 17 years. Her husband is a lawyer and a professional writer; he has self-published his first novel. They have two children, a son in junior high and a daughter in high school. She has obtained a master's degree in social studies and is currently working on a Ph.D. to integrate social studies and technology in the curriculum. Condi is a stay-at-home mother who volunteers in her children's school as well as in the community. She serves on several boards including a campus-based decision-making

committee. Condi is a very interesting participant because she is somewhat privy to the district's policies and understands her rights as a parent and has accepted the challenge to educate other mothers of their rights as well. Condi is considering running for a position in the next school board election.

The sixth participant, Theresa, is a native of Louisiana and has lived in the suburban area for 17 years. She and her husband, who is a district manager in the food industry, were high school sweethearts. They share two children, a son and daughter both in junior high. Although she has been a stay-home Mom, she recently returned to work as a teacher's aide and is completing her degree to become a special education teacher. Theresa views herself as very proactive and outspoken in relation to her ethnicity and her children's schooling experiences. She is an activist for the rights of African Americans.

The narratives these six mothers shared as they relived each account of their children's experiences in these suburban schools were filled with various emotions including frustration, anger, disgust, sadness, and even sorrow. The desire to allow their voices to be heard escalated to a burden that had to be released by sharing the perceptions.

Nia stated:

I want to say thank you for doing this, because I know this is a risk for you...And I hope you understand that some will love you for doing this and some will hate you. I have a strong belief that you know my children will be over comers...Some went before us... to steal away and read a book or a Bible by candlelight even though it would mean they would receive a lashing or death if they were caught...So we take education very serious.... Education gives us the opportunity to live in these [suburban] neighborhoods and receive a quality education...Thank you for sharing my story.

Sheila stated,

It is not enough for you to gather this material and move on to the next level and think “gee, that’s a recognizable event.” You are charged with doing something about that [the situation]... and you can do that respectfully, and you can do that within the law; but do something about it! Let our voices be heard. Don’t let it be reduced to some pages in a book.

Condi added, “This study is going to be the tool to usher in a change... maybe our Caucasian counterparts will see we are not making this up, and we are not going to change the world, but if we could change a handful.” These mothers felt the need to plea for someone to listen to their once silenced voice.

It was after hearing these mothers’ plea to be heard and to promote change to improve the educational opportunities for these African American students in suburban schools that the researcher accepted the challenge that tugged at her heart. The challenge became a calling; the mothers were saying “We Want You” in a way that resembled the motto “Uncle Same Wants You!” This message guided the data analysis as these middleclass African American mothers shared their children’s suburban classroom experiences.

### **Presentation of Themes**

#### *You’re in the Army Now—Parent Perceptions*

#### *About Their Children’s Actual Experiences*

This category captures the general perceptions of these participants regarding the children’s experiences in these predominantly White middleclass classrooms. The perceptions of these mothers were categorized into four main themes: (a) lack of cultural appreciation, (b) low expectations held by the teachers (in which the students constantly

had to prove their ability), (c) a lack of communication from the teacher to the parent, (d) and the teachers' lack of understanding of the mothers' preparation of the success of their children. The perceptions based on these experiences supported the mothers' views of once giving these teachers the benefit of the doubt and at times feeling like the problem was with their child. These mothers realized that these experiences were not the expected difficulties that children may encounter in a typical schooling experience; to the contrary, they believed their children were being treated unfairly.

These experiences at the beginning of the school year caused these mothers to leave registration and conferences reevaluating their decision to enroll their children in schools in this district. The first impressions these mothers held regarding this district were not positive. The impressions these mothers held were based on experiences from registration and enrollment as well as conferences held within the first two weeks of school. These mothers expressed the difference in backgrounds that left these teachers with the lack of desire to relate to these African American students. These experiences also validated their perceptions about the stereotypes White educators have regarding the academic performance of African American students. Sheila shared an experience regarding her daughter's experience at the beginning of her 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. An incident occurred during class that led Sheila to believe that the teacher did not want her daughter in the classroom. Sheila perceived the teacher excluded her daughter from classroom discussions. Sheila perceived the teacher was not very inclusive of her daughter in class participation. Sheila explained it by saying,

My daughter is being treated like a second-class citizen...I don't feel like the teachers get it. I think because of their background and some of their expectations of dealing with people of color that when they encountered someone like us (an educated middleclass African American family) they take it personally when I am only trying to get the best for my child, and I know there is prejudice, but it should not enter that classroom door. They should leave them at the front door and pick them up when they go home.

Lytia added her perception regarding the background of her daughter's teachers:

Because they [the teachers] are the adults and their upbringing was totally different from what his [Lytia's son] is... and they lived through segregation...things were different for them and so they were accustomed to living a certain way.

Sheila shared a narrative about her registration experience. During the course selection process of the enrollment of her child, Sheila sat at the table across from the counselor frustrated. She was frustrated because the counselor tried to convince her that her daughter did not belong in any advanced placement courses. The counselor was not willing to listen to Sheila's concerns. At this point, Sheila was grateful for her corporate background that she believes prepared her to address White people who were not willing to give African Americans the benefit of the doubt. Sheila remembered looking at her daughter and seeing a puzzled look on her face. Sheila stated:

But had I not been exposed to a corporate environment and had I not known what questions to ask, I think I would have walked out of registration as bewildered as my child...I guess my experience with this school was with registration and there was not any support. After I told them I am from a different school district, it did not matter. It was at that point, I could see that it was going to be sink or swim.

Sheila believed she knew the ability of her child, but their registration experience was so impersonal because it appeared they used a script for the students and the children were expected to fit a certain "mold." If they did not fit that mold, there was not any

support. Barbara, Condi, and Nia expressed their perception for their child needing to “fit this mold” of what was expected in other areas of their classroom experiences as well. It was also important for these mothers to “know what questions to ask” in order for their children to receive a quality education. In addition to registration and enrollment meetings, these mothers also attended conferences regarding their children’s placement in pre-advanced placement courses. Sheila shared that during a conference; her daughter’s teachers recommended her daughter exit pre-advanced placement courses after the teacher shared a writing assignment with the parent. Also, during the conference, Sheila would not agree to remove her daughter from the advanced placement courses. The teacher became angry when Sheila was not accepting of her terms. Sheila stated:

The teacher threw up her hands very demonstrative and said, “I don’t understand her—her thoughts seemed jumbled and look at this paper.” She read it out loud and it sounded pretty good to me. I guess that was my first experience with her. Okay, so she is different. You should embrace difference, not everybody is going to write the same, talk the same, or act the same....on the basis of a paper that she wrote and on the basis that she seems talkative....I said that is an attribute of a Black child. They did not want her talking a lot so that let me know right then that what she was supposed to do was sit in one of those chairs, preferably in the back and not make any trouble. It was horrible from then on.

Sheila left the conference feeling that this teacher did not accept her daughter because she was different and there was a lack of acceptance for cultural appreciation. Her writing style was different and because she did not “fit the mold,” she did not belong in the advanced placement courses.

Sheila shared her daughter’s experience that was similar to Theresa’s when her daughter was asked to exit advanced placement courses. Sheila’s daughter was doing

quite well in the beginning and then she began to struggle. Theresa felt the teacher immediately wanted to remove her daughter from the class because removal of the class was the only option offered to her. She also perceived the teacher was unwilling to offer other options for her daughter's success. Theresa was willing to provide support for her daughter because she knew her daughter's abilities. She stated:

My daughter started out doing well in the advanced placement courses. She was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and I believe the pressure from being a Black young lady in a predominantly White school added more pressure and her grades started to fall. They [the teacher and counselor] wanted to take her out of the classes and I said, "No." I told them I would provide tutoring opportunities. I suggested we meet to discuss my child because I know my child's capabilities and we need to try to work together to keep her in these courses.

Theresa's perception of her daughter's experiences mirrored the experiences of the other participants. She believed it was in the best interests of her daughter to remain in the advanced placement courses.

Barbara perceived the teachers wanted her son out of advanced placement courses before they realized his capability. She received calls from the teachers to remove him from the classes without a discussion. Barbara did not believe her son was given the opportunity to succeed in these courses because of the teacher's perceptions of her son.

Barbara stated:

He was in all pre-advanced placement courses, and it started right away. They [his teachers] said he was misplaced. Because of the teachers' continual prompting, I took him out of advanced math, but he remained in the other advanced placement classes and it has been a struggle.

These mothers perceived a continual struggle to keep their children in advanced placement courses. Condi reported how she felt about a novel her daughter had to read in

her advanced reading course. After a discussion with her daughter's teacher regarding the novel the class was reading, Condi left the meeting frustrated by the teacher recommending that her daughter leave the advanced placement course. She stated:

I suggested to her that they may be part of the difficulty is the class; however, the novel has difficult language; also, it is difficult for the kids to relate to. She [the teacher] said if it was too difficult for her [Condi's daughter], then perhaps we need to consider removing her since she was struggling. She suggested we move her to an academic class.

Lytia stated:

I went to the teacher to discuss what was going on. I got the impression that the teacher did not believe that he was able to keep up with the pace of the advanced class because he asked a lot of questions. I also believe she [the teacher] did not believe he belonged in the class because he questioned her assignments. He began to struggle because he did not feel comfortable asking the teacher questions. When his grades began to fall, the teacher asked me to consider moving him to a lower level class.

Lytia also referenced the night she met one of her son's teachers (White) at Open House. The teacher appeared uncomfortable talking to her. Lytia stated that the teacher would not make eye contact with her and was not very accepting of her questions. Lytia remembered leaving the school with great concern for her son having to sit in this teacher's class who appeared very uncomfortable with African Americans.

Nia stated:

I believe these teachers do not want to try hard for some reason because they believe our children [African American children] should not be in there [advanced placement] classes. For my daughter, they [the teachers] did not want her in any PreAp courses. I did not understand that because her grades were good from her previous school. They [the teachers] said they did not recommend her for these classes, and I heard comments such as if she had certain capabilities...I knew many of the students in those classes because I knew their parents.... Those [White] kids did not have the capabilities they were expecting to see in my

child...For them [White students] they [teachers] see potential for ours [African American students] they [teachers] see problems.

During meetings with their children's teachers, these mothers wanted to know how these teachers drew these conclusions so rapidly. When referring to her perception of the teacher's view, Lytia shared that although her son had excellent state test scores, he asked too many questions during classroom discussions and the teacher, probably assumed that he should have known the material already and because of that, he did not belong in her class. Lytia's perception was that although her child had high-qualifying test scores, which supports his ability to belong in this class, the teacher did not agree with the results and instead of embracing a difference in the student, the only option was to accept that he was misplaced. This is important because the researcher wanted to show the high academic ability of these students, according to the national standards.

Sheila stated:

Two weeks into the school year (so that was the end of August), we were called together, my husband and I, to meet with my daughter's team of teachers. We were told that she was not pre-advanced placement "material," and of course, the first thing we asked was, "What is the basis of that? Well, you don't have a basis because you have not had any tests or maybe one...If you look at her standardized test scores, you will see that she qualifies to be in this class."

Sheila believed this teacher ignored the test scores and would not give her daughter the opportunity to be successful in this class.

Advanced placement courses have been a focal point of this research because the students who participate in these courses are bright students and have the ability to excel academically. These classes prepare students for higher education by increasing the value of their grade point averages as well as improving class rank. Students are taught to think

critically and analytically in advanced placement courses. The mothers support the curriculum because they mirror the high expectations they have for their children. One of the criteria for participants in this study was to have a child who qualified for pre-advanced placement courses (the junior version of the advanced placement in high school), but was asked or recommended to exit.

These mothers in accordance with Simpson (2001), believe students who meet the criteria for access to advanced courses are more likely to be turned away based on the recommendation of a counselor or teacher. Simpson (2001) and these mothers further believe that placement into advanced courses is contingent on ability, past achievement, and socio-economic status. Although these students' ability on standardized assessment and previous grades were in favor of advanced placement, each one of these students struggled for access into the advanced placement courses. Some struggled during the registration process, while others struggled at the beginning of the school year. In addition, Simpson (2001) states that race is an additional factor that affects the placement of students. The students placed in these classes meet the criteria to participate, they are high achievers, and they are not from impoverished environments. These students have been groomed to do well as a result of their parents' choices to provide a life of opportunities for their children; however, these mothers believe the race of their children is an additional factor that contributes to the difficulty their children experience.

With all of the intentional preparation and the purposeful decisions, these mothers maintain that their children's experiences have been a catalyst for many exhausting battles they must fight. The perceptions these mothers have regarding their children's

experiences in suburban classrooms with White teachers are very desolate as any war would be. These were the beginnings of the long and hard times of endless battles for these mothers. Although the experiences of these mothers occurred within the first two weeks of the school year, these mothers placed these experiences in the back of their minds while trying not to allow these experiences to shape a negative image about their children's schools.

Early into the school year, these mothers approached the educators to fight for their children's rights for equitable educational experiences. They discovered these teachers did not believe their children were advanced placement "material." Having these experiences, these African American mothers quickly realized they were not responding to small battles, but they were ambushed into fighting a war to have what rightfully belonged to them: a quality education experience for their children in a suburban school.

*Basic Training—The Teachers' Lack of Understanding of the  
Parent Preparation for the Success of Their Children  
(Hiding in Plain Sight: Camouflaged Intolerance)*

Throughout the data analysis, these mothers shared how they took purposeful steps to prepare their children for success. This category is referred to as basic training because of the specific strategies these mothers used to prepare their children for "battle" in the day-to-day reality of school life. In this category, research question one is answered. These themes emerged into the overarching research project themes of (a) high expectations, (b) social engagement, and (c) building self-esteem. In many instances, these mothers believed it was mandatory for them to have high expectations for their

children by involving them in social activities outside of school to help them feel successful and building their self-esteem constantly. These areas were important because they recognized that purposeful decisions to prepare their children for educational opportunities would also prepare them for day-to-day battles. These battles were first viewed as situations that had to be dealt with by the mothers. The mothers did not realize the preparation would ultimately be used for survival skills to assist them with what they believed their children were entitled to be in the school.

During one of her interviews, Theresa shared her belief about the difficulty of her children's experiences. The researcher remembered her sighing, sounding sad and exhausted as she explained her perception of her children's schools based on her volunteer experiences. This particular statement was in reference to a conversation with one of her daughter's teachers. She perceived the teacher assumed they [African American parents and students] wanted what they did not deserve. It was also her perception that the teachers wished her child would go away because she was an interruption to her White middleclass comfort zone. Theresa stated, "We are here. We are not going anywhere, and they need to realize that we are not asking for handouts. We do not want special treatment....We just want what any parent wants. We want what's best for our kids."

### **High Expectations of School**

One feature parents looked for in schools was high expectations. The parents began by researching school districts and attempting to select the educational environment that would accommodate their value of high expectations. These parents

believed this particular school district's reputation far exceeded most in the state for being the best according to test scores, reports from the Texas Education Agency, the Internet, publications, by word-of-mouth. Theresa and her husband decided to move here because of the reputation of the school district. Her parents were already living in the area and often talked about how great this district was. Theresa and her husband decided to move here because they perceived this district would prepare their children for higher education. When referring to this district, Theresa stated:

That's why I am here...because I heard this was a good school district, the kids scored well on tests—they were able to pass the SAT...they were preparing these kids for a higher education, and that is what we want for our kids. I want my kids to go to college; they want to go to college. I just want them to be prepared.

The purposeful decisions these mothers made to contribute to the success of their children were exemplified through the selection of this particular school district for their children. Nia was previously hired as a consultant by a school district in the Northwest to offer strategies to decrease the mistreatment of students of color. When she heard about this particular school district, she felt pretty secure in the benefits this district appeared to offer. In addition, Nia and her husband decided to move to this area because of a job transfer. Nia's husband was able to select from several regions in the area. Their decision was based on the school district their children would attend. In order to make a decision, they began researching districts in each region.

Nia stated:

I came to the district because of research via the Internet for schools that would be good for all children and that was my expectation. I feel that I am not a parent that is not informed about how schools work. So, when I saw the statistics and I saw the things that were necessary, I felt like this district had what I was looking for,

and I wanted my children in the public arena because I didn't want them secluded in a private setting where they didn't get a taste of the variety of what could be offered to them through a public school experience.

Sheila and her husband were trying to make a decision regarding retirement when they began researching school districts. They wanted to relocate to provide their daughter with the best possible educational opportunities in a "good" neighborhood.

Sheila commented:

I decided there are some good public schools around here, so my husband and I did our research, did our homework, and that is how we came to be in this district. We thought, since the district was thriving...there was so much new construction, and there were so many professional transferees in my neighborhood. This district would be a good choice. So, I went online, in addition and I talked quite frequently to TEA (Texas Education Agency) for information. They sent me booklets on where the best school districts were in Texas. So, based on that information, we came here.

Lytia desired a better environment for her son. She did not want the lack of books and resources to interfere with her son receiving a quality education. Her education experience included a lack of resources and she desired more for her son. She shared what some of the students experienced with friends from this area, and they gave her information about this particular district. Lytia stated:

I am from Louisiana and the schools there cannot be compared to the schools here. There are some areas in Louisiana without adequate supplies for the students. Some students have to go without textbooks if their parents cannot afford them. I heard about this school district from friends. I then came here to visit and decided that I would like for my son to have the opportunity to receive an education in this district. Publications I read gave this district rave reviews. My son's school was also featured in a national publication for being one of the top ten schools with the highest test scores in the state. I was extremely impressed. We moved and here we are.

Condi and Barbara have lived in the suburban areas for 17 years. They were once pleased to be a part of the district. The mothers' decisions to find a school district that would meet the needs of their children were echoed throughout the research. These mothers took advantage of information in their own way as a purposeful attempt to give their child an opportunity to obtain a quality education.

These parents purposefully seek information about specific schools that will guide their choice of educational advantages for their children. They also want an environment that will enhance the academic achievement of their children. Richards (1997) contends that many African American parents living in suburban areas have selected their residence based on the reputation of the schools. Richards (1997) further adds that parents feel a highly ranked school system may automatically ensure that each child fulfills his or her potential. In addition, middleclass parents believe curriculum and school reputation are indicators of the commitment level of the school to its students.

### **High Expectations in Performance**

The parents have high expectations for their children's academic performance and for their success in life. They express their expectations in various ways such as communicating with their children to providing educational support through tutoring and providing enriched learning if needed. Nia believes it is important for her to develop the gifts within her children. She and her husband purposefully express their high expectations with their children. During one of the interviews, after sharing how she encourages her children to do their best and to believe in themselves she stated:

I always talk to my children in terms of when you own a company or when you go to med school—when, not if...or even if they work for someone, I want them to understand that God has given them gifts and they are to be used greatly. So, our pictures are, big they are not small.

The parents also have high expectations for their children's grades. They expect them to work to their potential and also encourage them to set high goals for themselves. Theresa contacted one of her daughter's advanced placement teachers after her daughter brought home a C on an assignment. Theresa's perception of the teacher's reaction was that she [Theresa] was overreacting. Theresa believed there was a reason her daughter received the C and wanted to find out why she received the grade. She also wanted to help her daughter modify the behavior to receive a higher grade in the future. Theresa believed her daughter was capable of a higher grade.

Regarding her daughter's grade, Theresa commented:

I...spoke with the teacher when she had a C, and the teacher was like, "What's the big deal?" [implication by the parent]. I said, "Because my daughter is not a C student—that's the big deal." It seemed like that was good enough for her [the teacher], but it was not good enough for me especially when I know my daughter's capabilities....She is capable of making an A and that is what we shoot for, A's not C's."

Theresa's position was to share her belief for her daughter's performance, which is extremely high. Although the teacher appeared to believe that her grade was acceptable, this participant could not accept a grade that did not represent her daughter's best effort.

The beliefs held by the mothers were demonstrated by the accomplishments their children received. Their children were recipients of many awards and honors, some based on scholarly performance and others for involvement in extracurricular activities. All of

the participants' children have been invited to participate in the Duke University Talent Identification Program (TIP), which gives them the opportunity to take the SAT or ACT as seventh graders. Collectively, they have won science fairs, received perfect scores on state-mandated assessments, and have been published for creative writing.

The mothers did not believe their children were receiving adequate exposure to enrichment activities from their schools and, therefore, exposed their children to a diverse range of experiences from educational family vacations to business trip experiences. Along with family vacations, their children have been active participants in organized social activities including sports, dance, theatre, and community service-based organizations. The parents read to their children, made frequent trips to public libraries, and visited various museums, nationally and internationally.

The children also had opportunities to experience world travels and service learning, such as serving others in shelters throughout the year, as well as serving on mission trips with those who work with less fortunate populations. Throughout the data collections, the mothers shared how they have taken purposeful steps to prepare their children for success through well-planned strategies including social and academic activities. The mothers chose to prepare their children for success but were not aware that tools with which they equipped their children with would be needed to combat unforeseen battles in the classrooms. These students have also earned awards for their participation and performance in band and stage productions. The honors and exposure received are the results of the parents having high expectations for their children and

taking purposeful measures to give their children quality educational experiences, hence, providing them with cultural capital.

Cultural capital is an example of parents taking these intentional steps. Vincent (2001) states that the middleclass parent has access to cultural capital and material resources to act more aggressively in terms of school involvement. Cultural capital entails social relations of schooling and family life that correspond to social relations such that class hierarchy of a larger society are reproduced and reinforced in an educational system (Delpit, 1995; Simpson, 2001). Cultural capital involves the experiences students bring to the classroom after exposure to societal experiences that enrich their educational experiences.

In addition to these mothers providing their children with cultural capital, the high expectations held by these mothers reflected the value of education these mothers have. The purposeful decisions these mothers made have been a result of the mothers utilizing education as a gateway to a better life. These mothers agree with Anderson (1988) that education is viewed as a means to liberation and freedom as well as a mechanism against oppression. The high expectations held by these mothers also represent these mothers taking advantage of the verdict from the landmark case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* as an attempt to provide better educational opportunities for African American children.

According to the mothers, extracurricular involvement was essential in validating their children. The involvement is what helped to build their self-esteem, which was often challenged by their experiences in suburban classrooms. By sharing their narratives,

all six mothers told how their children's "spirits were broken" and their self-esteem was damaged." The mothers remembered how vibrant and lively their children were prior to entering these schools. They spoke about their children being fun-loving and excited to learn, and they also remembered specific moments when they realized their children were drained, unhappy and not very enthusiastic about their learning experiences.

Nia stated: "I feel like you build that self-esteem not by telling them but by showing them. So, we would do outside activities where she had success. And in every area we she would thrive." Nia shared that her daughter received national awards in Tae Kwan do. She also received national recognition in a university program; however, her successes were not recognized at her school.

In addition, Sheila added: "You just hope that you can gather enough self-esteem and enough joyous experiences to counteract what they do to your children."

There was sadness in the voices of these mothers as they expressed how their children once loved school, but now their love for their school was altered. Although these students battled with self-esteem, they were still able to score well on standardized exams and managed to excel in their academics, which afforded them the opportunity based on the requirements for them to remain in advanced placement courses.

#### *Ambushed—Lack of Cultural Appreciation*

These mothers shared their perceptions of the cultural climates in the schools in which their child attended that led them to believe that the environment was not appreciative of cultural diversity. Included in these hard times were experiences during history lessons about slavery and the Civil Rights movement. The experiences also

involved their children being victims of racism. The lack of cultural insensitivity these students encountered were horrifying for these students as well as these mothers. These mothers shared their perceptions of their children's discomfort because of the insensitive manner in which the lessons were taught as well as the discussions by classmates that followed the lessons. These African American students were ostracized and made fun of during the lessons without any regard of inclusiveness or the teacher seizing the opportunity to discuss cultural acceptance. As an example, Sheila stated:

They were discussing the slave chapter in Texas History and one of the students read a passage from the book then looked around and pointed at my daughter and said, "You were a slave and my people owned your people." And, of course, she was upset by that. That was kind of cruel. Rather than the teacher taking that kid aside and saying look we are all in this together, in other words saying something. My daughter came home upset about it. I called her and she finally called me back and said that was hearsay, and that she did not hear it all and she was sure little Johnnie (referring to the White student who made the comment) did not say all of that. In other words, "whatever you say over there, you are just a troublemaker, and you are asking for special treatment. Just go ahead and get along no matter how you feel."

Sheila felt that the teacher did not embrace cultural appreciation and that her child was left to deal with her feelings on her own. Sheila also believed the teacher was not accountable for handling this situation any differently.

Condi's daughter was in a class in which her history teacher taught a lesson about slavery. Condi's daughter was disturbed by the teacher's comment and shared it with her mother. Condi echoed Sheila's narrative from her perspective regarding how uncomfortable her daughter was during the lesson. Condi shared her experience:

My daughter came home and told me that her social studies teacher said that was not bad because the slaves were fed and given shelter, and that actually freeing them [the slaves] had more of a negative impact than being slaves.

Condi was extremely angry when her daughter shared this information with her. She could not believe that a teacher could be this insensitive. Condi continued to add that she told her daughter that she was going to the school to talk to the teacher, but that her daughter said she would talk to him because she did not want her mother to come to the school. She allowed her daughter to handle the situation. Condi told her daughter,

If you do not go back to school tomorrow and tell him that I said in no uncertain terms that there was no positive aspect to slavery, and to tell the students in his room otherwise. That's just beyond criminal—that's horrible, and she did tell him.

Other participants shared similar instances about their children's experiences during slavery lessons. All were in the opinion of these mothers just as horrific. Lytia reflected on her numerous visits to her son's school and the absence of cultural acceptance. She notes that she did not see any bulletin boards, or any pictures hanging on the walls that would indicate a culturally accepting environment. Lytia also indicated her feelings of rage as she shared her son's experience in the locker room during gym class. She believed he was expected to get over it and that it should not affect him. Her perception was that the teachers did not have any idea how cruel and insensitive this experience was. It was also her perception this experience would alter her son's educational experience. Lytia stated:

Throughout the year, I did not see anything that showed me they [the teachers] were culturally sensitive. I did not see any celebrations of diversity...I did not see anything that would make my son feel like his school embraced a system that incorporates culture into his daily experience. However, my son experienced being called a Nigger and I do not believe the students who called him that were punished because it was their word against my son's...I called the school and talked to the principal and he assured me that he would look into it...Not only did I have to deal with that situation, but a few weeks later I received a call to say that

my son was searched in the principal's office because someone reported that he had a knife in his pocket. It was a plastic knife from the school cafeteria.

Lytia became very angry as she shared her story. She paused, then took a deep breath and continued with another experience. The following incident occurred after her son was called the racial slur. She remembered being at work and receiving a phone call from her son's school. It was after her son's lunch that he was called into the principal's office. Lytia stated:

I was at my breaking point when I received a call from the principal's office that said the Police was in his [the principal] office talking to my son. I remember leaving my job and feeling rage. I kept thinking to myself [why do they hate my son so much. He is very social, but he is not a criminal. What is the problem?] I arrived at the school to find my son crying and afraid. I instructed him not to say another word thinking that he would need an attorney.

Lytia completed the story by saying that although the incident was an accident, the police were called by the parent and the police were forced to do their job. Lytia's son had to appear before a judge. She talked about how traumatic this experience was for her son. She said she moved him to this district from an inner city school in another state because she was trying to avoid situations like this. She was also outraged because she believed the school, which did not embrace her son's culture, was quick to react to a negative experience without consideration of the type of student he is.

Similar to Lytia's son was Barbara's son's experience of being called a racial slur in the locker room. It was during athletics when a White student approached Barbara's son and felt comfortable to use the racial slur. Barbara's son became angry immediately and wanted to react. The student was disciplined, but Barbara felt the administration or the coaches should have addressed the issue with her son, but they did not. She believed

the administration handled the situation according to the discipline plan without regard to the emotional or cultural impact the incident had on her son. Barbara stated:

My son was called a Nigger in the locker room during his athletics class. The student who called him this name was disciplined, but my son was left to deal with this incident at home...He was angry and wanted to react. He said he realized that he would get into trouble although he felt justified in fighting the student. My husband handled that situation by spending the evening with our son to shed insight about the racism that exists in the world.

These mothers were left to address the wounds of these battle scars their children encountered. The mothers believed that these experiences should have been handled differently by these teachers. Had the teachers embraced cultural appreciation, they believed these situations would have been addressed so that their children and any other African American children could have learned about the slave lessons and encounters with racism and maintained their dignity for being proud of who they are. Instead, these children were left with feelings of bewilderment and embarrassment in the midst of a culturally insensitive climate.

Other experiences relating to a lack of cultural appreciation included these African American students working in groups on projects. Sheila shared a narrative of her child's experience working in a group on a project. She says her child was given menial tasks because the students did not want to work with her. Instead of the teacher seizing the opportunity as a teachable moment of cultural appreciation, her child was removed from the group and given an individual assignment. Sheila reported:

My daughter (the only African American student in the classroom) wrote some ideas on a piece of paper and a student threw it on the floor because she did not want to use her ideas. Then, she told my daughter to pick up the paper and she refused. The teacher then removed my daughter from the group (which I did not

agree with) because she says she was not cooperating. So, what I find going on over there is that rather than make trouble for the White counterpart, they just sort of smooth things over or they treat you like it's your fault when something happens... You are not getting along with the rest of the children.

This parent was so angry she had difficulty sharing that narrative. This student received an A on her individual project that was originally designed to be a group effort and as an attempt to encourage her child and build her self-esteem. Sheila framed this assignment and hung it on the child's wall over her bed. This assignment hanging on the wall represents many things to this mom including the struggles her child contends with constantly in her suburban classroom with these White teachers, as well as the lack of cultural appreciation that resides in these classrooms.

An experience Nia shared involved her child (who was the only African American student) participating in a science competition with a team that previously won the award for the best in the city. In this particular narrative, the teacher failed to allow the student to make up a test after this student made several attempts to make up the test. The teacher kept putting her off for different reasons. This same teacher then reported that this student had an incomplete (an "I") in her class, which made the student ineligible to compete and disqualified not only the student but also her team, which kept them from competing for the state championship.

These mothers believed that their children should not have been penalized for the teacher's inability to create an accepting and culturally sensitive environment for their children. Struggles of this magnitude led these mothers to believe these teachers did not create a culturally sensitive climate in their classrooms. Based on the data from this

study, the lack of cultural appreciation is associated with the history of desegregation. As a part of the Civil Rights movement, desegregation of schools was the primary strategy for change in equality of educational opportunity for African American students, but has not served as a cure all. From the time of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, school desegregation has been seen as a means of providing African American students with the access to the physical and financial resources of White schools, but also a means of allowing them to share the educational opportunities of White classmates (Myers, 1997; Payne, 2004; Tatum, 2004). African Americans were allowed in the classrooms; however, desegregation was the law of the land; but unfortunately, it was not reflected in the heart of the people (Carter, 2003). White teachers and students did not embrace the “new students” who were bussed into their all-White schools, and White parents took their children out of schools rather than have them bussed to predominately Black schools.

The African American mothers in this study do not believe these teachers have their children’s best interests at heart. They believe these teachers tolerate their children, but are not willing to appreciate the African American students’ culture. Is it possible that this insensitive environment affected the performance of these African American students? These mothers also believed that these teachers ignored the ethnic identity of these students by not creating a culturally accepting environment and caused these mothers to believe that these teachers had low expectations for these African American students.

*Can You Hear Me Now?—Lack of Communication/Miscommunication*

In the midst of all the struggles occurring in these classrooms, these teachers failed to communicate with these mothers. These mothers believed that communication is vital for the success of their children. They pleaded with these teachers to help them help their children become successful by offering many communication options. These mothers could not accept communication being so difficult in a time of advanced technology; therefore, they offered these teachers home and cell phone numbers, work numbers (if they worked). They also offered email addresses and husbands' work email addresses. Nia even offered her neighbor's phone number as an attempt to make sure she was notified. Communication was so important to these mothers because they would receive surprise grades on the report cards. They reported that their children would be passing at the mid-grading cycle and would have a failing grade at report card. They also reported that their children's grades would somehow end in nine. The grade would either be a 69, 79, or 89 and caused these mothers to wonder why their child did not get that one point. Was it an oversight on the teacher's part or was it that their child missed something that could have improved that grade? These questions could have only been answered if the teacher would have contacted them prior to the end of the grading cycle. These mothers wanted to talk to these teachers, but it was a constant struggle for this request to be honored.

Theresa asked, "Why does it have to be so difficult? I am just asking for enlightenment. I am not saying give me the answers. Just explain to me what you want."

Lytia stated:

She emailed me once, and this is after coming to her twice and giving her my email address and I said to her talk to me about my son, let me know what's going on with him...I don't think they made any effort to say you guys feel free to call us; we're here for you...I mean even setting up a meeting was a hassle to me. It was never when I can do it; it was always work around the teacher's schedule...I left many invitations for her to call me at work, left her my cell phone number, if there was something she thought I needed to know or that we needed to work on at home give me a call...you know we will do it... never once received a phone call about when he was doing well or when he was slacking. I never received a phone call at all.

After a conversation with one of her son's teachers, Lytia continued to add:

You can tell those [teachers] who do not know how to communicate with anyone other than Caucasians...or maybe they know how to communicate they just do not want to communicate with me and it shows... as far as this teacher communicating with me, our conversations have been far and few in between.

Condi said:

My daughter took an exam and received a 75 on it...there was not any contact by the teacher, there was not ever any feedback by this particular teacher. I personally felt she could do a lot better, but the teacher accepted that as her score, and I was very disappointed by the teacher's lack of interest or belief to communicate with me about my daughter's performance...I decided to email the teacher. I asked her if she could notify me if my daughter's grade began to drop and if she did not turn in assignments.

These mothers pleaded with these teachers to contact them and to communicate with them. They also believed they were not any different than the White parents who wanted to be contacted. They realized some parents were being contacted, and those parents were in constant communication with the teachers. These mothers only wanted what was due to them, and that was to have communication with the teacher concerning their child. Nia became so fed up, she would send a copy to the principal whenever she emailed a teacher. Then she would get a response. That led her to contact the principal and schedule a meeting with her regarding her frustration with the lack of communication

with her child's teachers. At this meeting, she began to feel that the lack of communication was an accepted practice because this is the way they have always done it.

They didn't understand someone having an expectation for things to be done differently...because they always related to children of color as less than. They were appalled that you would confront that very thing or that you would address that you see a difference....One of the teachers asked the principal why she has to know what her child's grade is every quarter. "Why can't she just let me teach her child?" And the principal actually asked me that. The principal asked me, "Why do you always have to know what your children's grades are?" And I simply said, "Because I have a right to." And she was shocked by that..."I have a right like every parent in this school...and you do it for every parent in this school, but I seem to be the parent that you have a problem with it, so you need to answer that question." Why does that teacher have a problem with my asking for a grade?

Nia believed if African American parents inquired about their children, they are viewed as troublemakers, but if White parents inquire about their children, then they are helpful parents. "They always had a reason or there was something that justified why they didn't have to respond to us." These mothers were extremely frustrated with not only the lack of communication, but also the continual seemingly endless struggles with which their children dealt. Vincent (2001) contends that middleclass African American parents have a sense of entitlement because of their educational status that allows them the capability of challenging the expert, which is the educator for the purpose of this research. These mothers believe they have a sense of entitlement to challenge the teachers because they do not believe their children are receiving the educational opportunities they deserve. In agreement with Vincent (2001), middleclass parents can be described as possessing an educational awareness, interconnectedness between family and school life, which suggests that education, is a shared responsibility between the

teacher and the parent (Crozier, 1996). With the acceptance of the school-home relationship as a shared responsibility, professional middleclass African American parents take on the role of interventionist as they become engaged in the educational system and process to secure an expected level of education for their children. The parents actively engage in conversation with school personnel to suggest alternatives or additions and to support and enhance the academic achievement of their children (Crozier, 1996).

*You Are Fighting Against Your Own Soldier—Low Teacher Expectations*

These low expectations were manifested by the teachers' actions and comments to these students. These participants shared their perspectives of their children having to prove themselves constantly to the teachers. They perceive White students are viewed as having potential but that these African American students are viewed as having problems. Nia shared her perception regarding the treatment her children received. She did not believe the teachers gave her children the benefit of the doubt in concerning their performance in the classroom. Nia stated:

I think it's a huge burden on a child to tell them that a teacher will never respect you when you walk in the door. That you have to work your way up, where other children get advantages of having to work their way down.

Nia is saying that these teachers had low expectations for the African American students and high expectations for the White students. The White students are given the benefit of the doubt and the African American students are not. Based on conversations with the teachers, Nia did not believe much was expected of her children. Nia referred to her daughter's enrollment experience in which she felt she had to present her daughter's

resume of outstanding academic achievement before the counselor accepted her daughter into the advanced placement courses. Nia also referred to her daughter's classroom experience in which her daughter had to receive an "A" on an assignment before the teacher believed she could receive an "A" on an assignment. Nia stated:

Well, my experience is they [the teachers] come in low expectations and they [the students] have to work their way up...no matter what their records say, no matter what their ability is, the teachers come in with very low expectations. They [the teachers] expect behavior problems, they expect low grades, they expect that they won't do as well as the other children...and it takes some hard documented evidence that will prove them otherwise...and it's like these students cannot win with teachers who have this type of mentality...If you have a teacher in a classroom who doesn't think you should be there...and once they believe you shouldn't be there, then they do things to validate that you should not be there.

Nia also shared the experiences of how her child did not receive comments on her "A" papers and other students did and how that was very discouraging for her child. It was not until her child received national recognition for scores on national exams and received honors and awards that her teacher then accepted that she truly belonged in the advanced classes. This was an example of an African American student having to "work his or her way up" to belong in these classes.

Condi gave another example about teachers accepting African American students if their parents were from an elite status such as professional athletes. The teachers were able to associate knowing the children's ability based on their parents' status in the community to which Condi references having "star power." She believes teachers have stereotyped beliefs of the ability of African American students; however, there are exceptions if the teacher believes she has something to gain from knowing the student. Condi stated:

Preconceived notions can be broken down if they think there is some star power to it, or something like that...or maybe they figure you don't smell and that you are a typical middleclass family. I still think it is on a case-by-case basis, and I do not think it is all impacting or changing their view of a race. They are willing to accept those few and willing to say you are different because you are not like them in the city.

Once again Condi as well as the other participants expressed that these teachers must get to know you before they can change their opinion about you, and they are willing to do that when they feel they have something to gain. Condi expressed having "star power," which represents the African American students being accepted because their parents are professional athletes or someone famous. The experience of Condi's daughter that was noted in the lack of communication section also applies to this theme of low expectations. Condi believed that her daughter's teacher did not expect a grade better than a 75 on an exam for her daughter. She accepts the teacher's low expectations as the reason for the lack of communication. This was the case for some African American students; however, others had problems gaining the teacher's respect and support to do well. In reference to her son's experience in advanced placement courses, Barbara perceived a lack of respect for her son. After visiting with her son's teachers on several occasions, she believed the teachers noted every mistake her son made, and she was not convinced that the White students were receiving the same treatment. Barbara stated:

He was not respected to me as a student that was learning on the same wavelength or level as the other advanced placement students. I believe he had to work harder to prove himself worthy of being there in the eyes of the teacher.

Barbara also believed the way her son dressed influenced the teacher's low expectations of her son. He dressed in a cultural style of clothing that to her represented who he is. She stated:

I believe they expect my son to attend this school for his athletic abilities. They [the teachers] all know that he is an exceptional basketball player, but that is not why he is in school. I placed him here to get a good education. He loves dressing like a basketball player....In his jersey and basketball tennis shoes...there is much more to him...he has a brain....But I do not know if they [the teachers] can see beyond that. If he does not participate in class or if his grades are not A's or B's, I believe that is fine with them [teachers]. He is not pushed to work to his potential....low expectations.

Nia added:

I don't see teachers giving our students the same benefit of the doubt. I think they hold our students to a level of perfection and they hold the White students to a level of development. They are always seen as potential, even kids who come in and cuss them out or treat them with disrespect...they're in a development stage. Our kids are sent to the principal because they are in a rebellious discipline stage.

Sheila stated, "This is an example of low expectations, thinking the worst of my daughter from the very beginning." Sheila referred to an incident in which her daughter's teacher accused her of lying about some of her grades. The teacher could not find all of the assignments and instead of asking the student, he assumed that she was lying and gave her zeros for the missing assignments. When Sheila discovered why her daughter received the zeros, she contacted the teacher and provided the assignments that were in her daughter's folders. Sheila also met with the teacher to discuss the situation. She believed this was an unfair situation, and she also believed that this situation could have been handled differently. These mothers expressed the unfair treatment these African

American students received. It was to the point where these mothers became weary and tired of fighting this war because it is constant.

They had to choose their battles because many times they believed their children would pay the price through subtle retaliations by the teachers—retaliations that oftentimes could not be proven, but the mothers believed in their heart that this was the result of dealing with issues and combating for their children. Although there was the chance of retaliation, these mothers continued on to win this war because they knew they were fighting for a larger cause, for their prize possessions to have the educational opportunities they deserved. The mothers agreed with Graybill (1997) that teachers must avoid measuring African American children next to the norm for a White student that can lead to thinking in relation to deficit education and necessary skills instead of focusing on how to better become accustomed to African American learning styles. The mothers shared how they felt their children were not being treated fairly, and they believed these teachers held high expectations for their White students in their classes. Data support this belief because the mothers reported receiving information from White parents in their neighborhoods and carpools.

For example, Nia shared a time when she asked her White neighbor to create an email they could both send to their children's teacher. Nia and the neighbor sent the email that contained the same information requesting feedback to support their child in the advanced placement course. According to Nia, the neighbor received an immediate response that was very insightful and helpful. Nia, on the other hand, did not receive a response for about a week and the response she received was very vague. Classroom

strategies must be implemented to accommodate the need for all students to learn (Delpit, 1995). Teachers may or may not be aware of the outcome of their expectations of African American students in comparison to their White students. Spindler (1963) reports that teachers with the best intentions can clearly encourage positive goals in students as well as guide students away from high expectations because of the teachers' beliefs that African American students are low achievers or teacher efficacy.

There are various reasons why teachers hold the belief that African American students are low achievers—one of which is teacher efficacy that Bandera (1982) defines as the belief in one's ability to achieve success in a given situation. Carter (2003) adds that teacher efficacy relates to the extent in which a teacher believes he or she can teach children and make a difference in their lives. The mothers believe in many instances, that these teachers were not comfortable with teaching African American students. They also believed these teachers did not have enough exposure to diversity because of the way in which the teachers interacted with their children. In addition, these mothers also believed these teachers did not believe they could teach African American children because they were quick to ask them to exit the advanced placement courses. The teachers were not willing to offer suggestions to help these students obtain success in these courses.

Efficacies along with expectations are teacher characteristics that have been associated with student achievement, specifically with students in diverse classrooms. Carter (2003) further adds that many beginning teachers possess a low sense of efficacy when teaching students from diverse backgrounds. These teachers believe their efforts are limited because the students' situational factors will determine success or failure in

the classroom. These teachers believe if the students' background is favorable to middleclass standards, they will be successful. If the students, however, are from an impoverished background, then failure is the expectation. Teachers with a high sense of efficacy believe their hard work will bring success, and those teachers who have little effort will fail. Realizing this, these mothers made conscious efforts to communicate with these teachers.

### **Analysis of the Categories**

#### *The Aftermath—The Battle Scars*

These mothers came to the conclusion that these teachers did not have their children's best interests at heart. Throughout these experiences, these mothers had to nurse the battle scars their children received by rebuilding their children's self-esteem, teaching their children life's lessons constantly, and remaining positive in the midst of the outrage they felt. These participants felt feelings of disparity and extreme fatigue from dealing with the constant struggles. As the mothers shared their narratives about the frequency of the struggles and the battles in the schools, they became emotionally drained. During the interviews, the mothers sighed as they thought about the difficulty of their experiences. In reference to the difficulties encountered throughout the year,

Theresa stated:

It should not be that I have to fight for everything, I mean every little thing. Now, it is getting to the point where I am kind of tired. You know you just get to the point where you just get exhausted because it is a daily struggle...daily....It is hard as a parent because you wonder every day when you send your kids to school—is that person going to be nice to your child? Are they going to be cordial? Can my child even feel that she can say she has to go to the bathroom

and the teacher tell her no but the next student tell them to go ahead...all these things. I found with my daughter that it has broken her spirit.

Sheila echoed the response of Theresa when she said:

It has been a terrible situation...it is such a struggle, everyday you just wonder what is going to happen to my child...It is not a healthy place to be...I guess me as a parent and she as a student really does not have any faith in the system, you know you will get out and do fairly well, but you always wonder to yourself are you going to do as well as little Daniel (representing the White student) over there...realizing he has not had to fight from our vantage point.

Barbara chimed in with, “my child is not as confident. It upsets me because I felt like they are messing with his future.”

Theresa interjected:

And I just get sick of the struggle—feeling like these teachers want to know why we want these things for our kids. We are just like everybody else. We breathe, we bleed, we love—you know—and that’s all we want.

Sheila shared her hope that they can, “gather enough self-esteem and enough joyous experiences to counteract what they do to our children.”

Barbara commented that her son’s “fire went out” as a result of his experiences in these classrooms. The struggles these mothers referred to were the constant difficult situations that occurred in the classrooms. Their children came home fatigued and drained after their experiences, and these mothers assumed the responsibility of addressing these issues. These mothers were concerned about the emotional health of their children, so they talked to their children in regards to how unfair life can be. In other words, they shared life’s lessons with their children. Hughes and Johnson (2001) explain that “racial socialization practices are influenced both by indigenous family practices and

by the nature of parents' daily experiences" (p. 983). These researchers proclaim that the parents' racial socialization influences children's identity development and well-being.

These mothers would agree with Hughes and Johnson (2001) that it is a strategy that parents use to raise competent children in environments that can be viewed as racially challenging. African American students in suburban schools are faced with challenges on a daily basis. These race-related barriers and experiences are embraced by parents as an opportunity for African American parents to nurture competent and effective children as well as promote racial pride in order to prepare them to succeed in a culture where values differ from their own (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). As their parents have certain experiences, they tend to become concerned about adequately preparing their children for race-related barriers and experiences.

If students have a good sense of who they are and an overall feeling that is positive about themselves, then they are likely to be more productive in school. The efforts of parents to ensure this have yielded success of African American students in the areas of improved academic performance in school as well as a feeling of self-efficacy (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). These mothers work hard to develop positive feelings in their children despite the obstacles and barriers faced.

### *Life's Lessons*

As an attempt to address these issues their children are faced with, these mothers find themselves constantly teaching life's lessons. It is their belief that they must counteract these daily experiences that these students deal within the classrooms because if they do not, they believe that their children will believe the viewpoint of the teacher

and consider themselves as less than their White counterparts. The life's lessons these mothers teach their children usually follow a major battle that occurred in the classroom.

In many instances, these students were discouraged about their experiences and were encouraged by their parents to consider an alternate to the outcome of their experience. In other words, these mothers would ask their children to consider how their experiences could have been handled differently. They wanted to show their children that they were not deficient. These mothers also reinforced their high expectations for their children by teaching them to believe in themselves, to work hard in the midst of obstacles. These children were also taught not to allow anyone to dictate their destiny and that the power of their success lies within them. These students were not allowed to give up in the midst of obstacles but were taught how to survive as well as how to respect teachers even when they felt they were not treated fairly. Nia shared a narrative about a conversation she had with her children after her daughter's Destination Imagination team was disqualified because of the way her teacher mishandled the situation.

Nia stated:

I don't think my daughter should have disrespect for her teachers and that was not something she learned from me....I talked to her about going after what you want and getting it no matter who discourages you from that. We speak respectfully in front of our children about the teachers and we tell them that life isn't always easy, but you make the best out of whatever you get. Because those are life's lessons, to teach them that a person has problems does not equip them, and to teach them to make excuses does not equip them, even though they are there and they are real. But for me to teach them how to overcome every obstacle is priceless.

Through these life's lessons, many valuable educational opportunities will remain with these students as they continue to prepare for the future success. Although these

mothers made many efforts to counteract the damage done to their children during this war, these mothers learned valuable lessons as well.

*Take No Prisoners—Parents Assumption of Roles*

Although these mothers became tired throughout this war, they realized in their hearts that they could not give up. The success of the children's educational opportunities depended on them remaining in the battle. The category of the roles the mothers assumed in order to combat their children's experiences is comprised of three main themes including (a) the role of advocacy, (b) the role of visibility, and (c) the role of proactive parenting. These themes were interchangeable at times, because the bottom line was for these mothers to support their children in these classrooms so they would have access to the educational opportunities they deserved. The actions were imperative to the continuing success of their children as well as equipping these mothers with the energy needed to remain in the war and ultimately win. These mothers realized there were things they needed to do differently in order to support their children and to survive. They were not interested in taking prisoners; their only interest was in making the right decisions for their children and doing what is best for them.

*Advocacy*

These mothers realized that they must be advocates for their children. This was an important role and one that seemed to be lacking within the school. These mothers felt that the school system was holding their children responsible for their own learning and were not receiving the support they needed. The mothers wanted to ensure that the school was held accountable, so they assumed the role of advocate. When requesting

information from a teacher to help her child improve her grades, Sheila discussed the problems she encountered. Sheila wanted the information to support what the teacher was doing in the classroom. The teacher told her that she did not plan anymore than a week in advance and was unwilling to give Sheila this information. Sheila responded [to the teacher]:

That's not my fault. If there is information over there, I am entitled to it, and I am not going to let you talk to me any kind of way.... We are not trying to make it seem like you are not doing your job, but we will have the information one way or the other, and I will parallel teach, and I will make sure that my child has an enriched learning environment.

Sheila wanted the resources to support the teacher in the classroom and it became a problem; however, this parent was not taking no for an answer because she believed this was in the best interests of her child. Sheila also shared her perception of how she feels the teachers view her daughter's seat in the advanced placement classes.

Sheila stated:

When they look at my daughter, they see a little White kid's seat because I have been told that if she is not going to concentrate or do this or do that, there are plenty of others who will take her seat. In other words, that's a White seat...and what I tell them is no-no-no, that's my child's seat. You may consider her a second-class citizen because she is African American, but she is not. She is going to stay right in this class, and the only way you are going to get her out is that I determine whether or not she absolutely cannot do the work.

Sheila realized that she had a say in her child's education, and she felt the need to speak out about the teachers' lack of desire to work with her child.

### *Visibility*

Visibility came to mean more to these mothers than it once did. These mothers were very active in their children's school by volunteering in various capacities from the

school store, to the library, to performing administrative tasks. Nia had over 200 volunteer hours during one school year. These mothers also served on various campus-based decision-making committees as well as some district committees. Nia stated:

They relate differently to you if you're there than they do if you are not. And I'll tell you my experience of that...I would be sitting at the welcome desk and the teacher would be coming around the corner and not see me and talk to an African American child one way...and another way when they did not see me...then they would fix it and say you know I was just joking around.

Theresa added:

I have seen where a White mom was volunteering and the teacher went to get her and explain to her what her child was doing instead of sending that student to the office. It just makes you feel like your child is under a microscope all of the time.

Theresa did not feel like her child would have received the same opportunity to receive this support but that her visibility in the school allowed her to be aware that these kinds of things were taking place.

Barbara stated:

If you are visible, they are not going to mistreat your child; but I try to be visible not just for my children, but for other Black children. They are not going to single your child out in an incident if you are visible and you also just want to make sure that they are doing things in the proper manner.

These participants believed being visible was one way to know that their children were being treated fairly, and proactive parenting is another way these mothers supported their children.

### *Proactive Parenting*

Proactive parenting is parents taking the initiative to check on the children's performance in school. These mothers do not wait to hear from the teachers, because they

found out the hard way that this does not work for their children, but rather they contact the teachers as well as communicate with their children. Lytia shared how she met with one teacher twice to check on her son's progress. She stated, "I talked to her about making sure that his average was decent and to make sure he should continue in the advanced placement courses for the next school year." Not only did these mothers talk to the teachers, they also talked to White parents in their neighborhoods and car pools. They wanted to know if they were receiving the same treatment or if it was just them. Nia shared how her child and a friend's child were both struggling in the same class.

Nia did not hear from the teacher but she reported:

The parent would get a call from the teacher saying that her child is right on the bubble [borderline] for this and if he does A, B, and C, then he'll get it. I would call the teacher and the teacher wanted to know why I have to call so much. The teacher made me feel that I was an annoying parent, but my friend received reinforcements and helps and told exactly what to study...so I found that frustrating. One time I had that parent to write a letter for my daughter to the teacher that was identical to the letter that she wrote for her son. Her son got help and I didn't hear back from the teacher for two weeks until I copied the letters to the principal, and I heard from her the next day.

Other participants in this research have communicated with White parents to see the discrepancy in the treatment they received. These participants were often baffled about how difficult it was for them to gain knowledge and the other parents were offered solutions sometimes without an inquiry. The role of advocacy, visibility, and proactive parenting these mothers assumed extended beyond volunteering in the teachers' copy room. These mothers agree with Crozier (1996) in the importance of the parent and teacher as a collaborator. These mothers had a sense of entitlement (Vincent, 2001) to

their children's education, and they utilized their rights. They also believed they were not comfortable with relying on the school system for the achievement of their students.

*Ending the War—Summary*

These mothers wanted to share a final message to the teachers who taught their children that entailed their overall perception of their children's schooling experiences in suburban schools. Condi shared, "This sounds very trite and kind of juvenile, but it's their loss. They are missing out on knowing some great kids. They are missing out on providing these kids with insight and experiences they will never forget. They are the losers." Condi continued to add how these experiences influenced her daughter:

I think this situation has prepared her for what is likely to be a common experience in her future, and I think that she has grown in her ability to maintain her ethnic identity and pride and still exist in that system, and I think that she expresses pride when given opportunities to write about something. For instance, she had to learn a poem and the poem she picked was "Still I Rise."

Nia added:

I just think it's terrible...I just can't imagine an adult who wouldn't want to plant a seed in any child to make them blossom and grow and be all that they can be. I just don't understand the rationale that would make you withhold from a child and not pour into them. I don't understand the mentality. Why would someone want to kill someone's desire to learn?

These mothers took their rightful place in advocating for the educational opportunities their children are entitled to have. The endearing need for their children to be successful gives them the strength and courage to continue their quest. It is not the desire of these mothers to fight against these teachers nor acquire the reputation of being a difficult parent, but rather fight for the academic excellence for their children. These

mothers have equipped themselves to equip their children to win the achievement gap battle. Who will hear the voices of these mothers? Will you?

Hearing the voices of these middleclass African American mothers is one attempt to finding a solution to closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts. These mothers have shared their perceptions of what is going on their children's suburban classrooms. These mothers are grieved by the experiences they have encountered. This is an ongoing battle that they would like to see come to an end with a win-win situation. The only way they see this happening is if this district will acknowledge that a problem exists in the pre-advanced placement classrooms of their African American children.

There were major categories in this analysis including (a) preparation of these African American students, (b) beliefs these mothers have toward their children's experiences in suburban schools, and (c) the strategic reactions to these beliefs. These participants shared their narratives with humor as well as the pain that accompanied the remembrance of each experience as they viewed them. There is truly a war going on in these suburban classrooms where the students are left with the battle scars of low self-esteem and needing to have positive reinforcement from their parents. These participants have taken specific measures to prepare their children for success by having high expectations for them by exposing them to social and extracurricular activities, and building their self-esteem. These mothers believe their children's experiences have been demoralizing through a lack of cultural diversity, low teacher expectations, and a lack of communication from the teachers.

Realizing the need to further impact the educational opportunities for these students, these mothers have taken on an advocacy role for their children to support them through visibility and proactive parenting and creative communication. The actions of these mothers are an attempt to make sure their children are receiving the educational opportunities that rightfully belong to them. The purpose of this research was to allow the voices of the middleclass African American mothers to be heard as an attempt to offer a solution to close the achievement gap. These mothers offer an insight into the experiences of suburban classrooms with White teachers that can aid in the students achieving greater academic performance if the scope is turned away from the African American student as the culprit and the educational system is considered.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At this point, the researcher would like to examine where she started with this research and how it developed. This qualitative case study was designed to investigate the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers regarding their children's experiences in their suburban classrooms with White teachers, specifically, their junior high children's interactions with their White teachers. She wanted to add the perspective of middleclass African American mothers to the current research conversation concerning the academic achievement of their African American children.

In an attempt to allow the middleclass African American mothers' voices to be heard, the researcher began with the following research questions as guides:

1. What are the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers about the interactions between their children and their children's White teachers in a predominantly White suburban junior high school?
2. From the perspective of the African American mothers participating in this study, what are the difficulties these African American students experienced in their suburban classrooms?
3. What impact do the African American mothers believe their perceptions have on their role as a parent?

Critical race theory was used to support these guiding questions that allowed me to investigate the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers using open-ended, semi-structured individual interviews and group sessions that were all audio

taped. The data were then transcribed and each participant's data was compared to another to develop themes. These emerging themes were further explored and confirmed through group sessions and written field notes that allowed the researcher to categorize the themes.

The researcher investigated the literature she believed would be pertinent to the study of middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of their children's suburban schooling experiences. The participants in this study believed their voice could benefit the quest for improving the academic achievement of these students when compared to their White counterparts as an attempt to address the achievement gap. The participants' conversation was a direct rebuttal to past research from the educational system's perspective.

The rationale for the achievement gap has been reported from the perspective of the educational system based on urban environments. Research concludes that African American students' performance is lower than their White counterparts because these students do not have the educational opportunities because of the absence of their parents in the school, a lack of financial resources, and an over representation of African American students in special education programs. The conclusion has also been drawn that there is an under representation of African American students in advanced programs, and these students receiving harsher discipline practices. This study is significant because it adds the voice of middleclass African American mothers of students in advanced classes in suburban schools who experience tremendous difficulties in their classrooms, difficulties that contribute to their academic performance in these classes. These mothers

have made purposeful decisions to provide their children with tools necessary to be successful in school by receiving advanced degrees, securing their financial status, moving to suburban areas, and purchasing homes. After all of the intentional planning by these mothers, these students still experienced difficulties in their classrooms.

Inequality of educational opportunities plagues the school system for African American students in spite of the cultural capital some bring to the classroom. Students are faced with issues of within school segregation through tracking, low enrollment in advanced placement courses, and teacher expectations. These inequities have forced parents to assume the responsibility of preparing their children to meet the challenges in order to succeed. Parents must go beyond just being involved in the schools and become actively involved in the development of their children's well-being. Parent involvement in any case has been instrumental to the welfare and academic success of African American students (Crozier, 1999; Thompson, 2003).

The research surrounding parental involvement has primarily focused on low-income urban areas. African American parents in this setting typically view educators as professionals and accept the recommendations made by them. They also visit schools upon request or in response to specific needs as they arise (Gutman & McLloyd, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004)). Middleclass African American parents have an opposite view of their roles in the educational system.

Middleclass African American parents have a sense of entitlement and ownership in their children's education because of the educational level in which they possess (Vincent, 2001). It is very common for these parents to question educational practices

and intervene on behalf of their children when necessary. The racial experiences that middleclass African American parents encounter have caused them to prepare their children for racial or dual socialization (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). This is deemed necessary because of the inequalities African American students continue to battle daily.

The inequalities students constantly battle are within school segregation through tracking, low enrollment in or discouragement from advanced placement courses, special education referrals, and teacher expectations. African American students typically score lower on assessment exams that serve as an identifier for advanced placement and a justification to exclude students from such courses (Noguera & Akom 2002; Oakes, 1995; Spring, 2002). These inequalities are viewed as systemic procedures and policies that should apply to everyone. Teachers may sometimes accept this view because of the familiarity of lived experiences without consideration of the perceived implication of cultural insensitivity.

Teachers may exclude students or not consider African American students because of low expectations or a difference of learning styles. They have the ability to encourage or discourage students to reach their potential through spoken or unspoken methods (Graybill, 1997; Spindler, 1963). This is an instrumental example of the perceived inequalities African American students face despite the socialization parents provide for their children as well as the cultural capital students bring to the classrooms. Cultural capital depicts the resources students bring to the classroom after exposure to societal experiences that enrich their educational experiences. Cultural capital is inclusive of, but not limited to, educational opportunities through activities that expose

them to various life's experiences that enhance their understanding of knowledge (Simpson, 2001).

Past research supports parental involvement of low-income urban African American parents as well as the involvement of middleclass African American parents living in suburban areas as an extremely positive and necessary action; however, the emphasis has been placed on academic achievement and educational opportunities from the educational system's perspective. Other research supports parental involvement of low-income urban parents as a focal point of the rationale for lower achievement of African American students. This research has a strong implication on the absence of money accounting for the lack of involvement, thus yielding lower achievement. There are few studies that address the educational opportunities from the middleclass African American parents' perspective in suburban areas. The voices of these mothers must be heard to address the concerns of what appears to account for the perceptions of continual inequitable experiences of the middleclass African American students in predominantly White classrooms.

As stated earlier in this literature review, the goal of this research was to add the perspective of middleclass African American mothers living in suburban communities in the quest for improving the equality of educational opportunities for their children. In the pursuit of achieving this goal, the researcher investigated middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of the ways in which White teachers interact with these middleclass African American children in predominantly White suburban classrooms.

## Summary

The middleclass African American mothers in this study referenced their perceptions of their children's experiences as a struggle or battle. These references led the researcher to express their perceptions through the analogy of a war. Although this war was manifest as a battle between the mothers and teacher, the ultimate goal here is to close the achievement gap between these African American students and their White counterparts. When the aftermath is sifted, the remnants of a pursuit to academic success for African American students remain. It is vitally important to consider the perceptions of these mothers in the quest for improving the academic achievement of these students. These African American mothers shared their stories as an attempt to add to the advancement of the academic success of their children. This research was not intended to generalize the experiences of these participants to all African American parents and is, however, specific to this particular suburban area. Having stated this, the researcher will discuss the categories and themes that emerged in the following section.

The mothers who participated in this study took purposeful steps to prepare their children for success. One major step was the act of researching school districts throughout the state of Texas they believed would provide the greatest educational opportunities for their children. It was a consensus that this particular suburban school district surpassed all others in writing. These mothers researched via the Internet, communicated with the Texas Education Agency, interviewed families and school personnel in the district, as well as read many publications regarding the district.

Within the scope of parent preparation, these mothers shared specific values they deemed important for their children's education experience that included high expectations, social engagement, and self-esteem. These mothers did not realize that these values would ultimately be used for survival skills after the devastation of the battles. For example, the mothers held high expectations for their children's performance. They believed their children were capable of making A's in their coursework and encouraged their best by providing the emotional, financial, and social support to make this occur.

These African American children were given opportunities to travel throughout the nation as well as participate in academic and extracurricular activities whether by trips to the museum or meeting with private tutors. These purposeful steps allowed these African American students to excel by receiving awards and honors both in academic areas as well as extracurricular areas. According to these mothers, this extracurricular involvement was essential in validating their children and is what allowed them to help build their children's self-esteem, which was often challenged by their experiences in their suburban classrooms.

These mothers believed that by placing their children in advanced placement courses, they were emphasizing their value of education realizing that with these courses their children would be able to compete for a college education. Although these mothers made purposeful decisions to provide their children with what they believed was exceptional educational opportunities, they soon realized that based on their children's

experiences in the classroom, the road to success would be more difficult than what was anticipated.

### **Research Question One**

The responses given by these mothers answered research question one: “What are the perceptions of six middleclass African American mothers about the interactions between their children and their children’s White teachers in a predominantly White suburban junior high school?” According to the data, the answer to this question was illustrated through the narratives mothers shared concerning their perceptions of their children’s experiences that included the lack of understanding of parent preparation, a lack of cultural appreciation, low expectations held by the teachers, and a lack of communication from the teachers to the mothers.

#### *Parent Perceptions Regarding Their Children’s Experiences*

The general beliefs the mothers held regarding their children’s experiences in the classrooms included a lack of cultural appreciation, low expectations held by the teachers (in which the students constantly had to prove their ability), and a lack of communication and miscommunication from the teacher to the parent. The mothers shared examples of the lack of cultural appreciation by stating:

I don’t feel like the teachers get it. I think because of their background and some of their expectations of dealing with people of color that when they encountered someone like us (an educated middleclass African American family) they take it personally when I am only trying to get the best for my child, and I know there is prejudice, but it should not enter that classroom door. They should leave them at the front door and pick them up when they go home.

The mothers believed that these teachers were not willing to relate to these African American students in the classroom.

Parents shared stories about their experiences with enrollment in the schools. They also shared the difficulties their children encountered within the first few weeks of school. Other concerns these mothers shared were the experiences in history classes during discussions about slavery and civil rights. The mothers believed that these African American students were ostracized and made fun of during the lessons without any regard of inclusiveness or the teacher seizing the opportunity to discuss cultural acceptance. Sheila stated:

They were discussing the slave chapter in Texas History and one of the students was reciting something, and he looked around and points at my daughter and said, "You were a slave and my people owned your people" and of course, she was upset by that. That was kind of cruel some. Rather than the teacher taking that kid aside and saying look we are all in this together, in other words saying something. My daughter came home upset about it. I called her [the teacher] and she finally called me back and said that was hearsay, and that she did not hear it all and she was sure little Johnnie [referring to the White student who made the comment] did not say all of that. In other words, whatever you say over there, you are just a troublemaker and you are asking for special treatment. Just go ahead and get along no matter how you feel.

Sheila felt that the teacher did not embrace cultural diversity and that her child was left to deal with her feelings on her own. The mothers believed that the low expectations these teachers had for African American students was manifested by the lack of acknowledgement of these students during classroom discussions.

#### *Low Teacher Expectations*

Carter (2005) contends deficit thinking would describe beliefs educators hold in relation to urban African American students. The mothers in this study believe that their

children must constantly prove their ability in the classroom. It is only after they have shown that they belong that they gain access to the expectations given to the White students upon entering the classroom. Nia stated:

Well, my experience is they [the teachers] come in low expectations and they [the students] have to work their way up...no matter what their records say, no matter what their ability is, the teachers come in with very low expectations. They [the teachers] expect behavior problems, they expect low grades, they expect that they won't do as well as the other children...and it takes some hard documented evidence that will prove them otherwise...and it's like these students cannot win with teachers who have this type of mentality...If you have a teacher in a classroom who doesn't think you should be there...and once they believe you shouldn't be there, then they do things to validate that you should not be there.

As these mothers handle these difficult situations, they realized it was a necessity to remain in constant communication with the teachers, which presented another battle in the war.

#### *Lack of Communication/Miscommunication*

The mothers felt they were treated like intruders in their children's schools and education. They reported how they felt they were not welcome to inquire about their children's grades or experiences. Communication from the teacher appeared to be a hassle and oftentimes resulted in notifying an administrator to get questions answered or concerns addressed. Theresa asked, "Why does it have to be so difficult? I am just asking for enlightenment. I am not saying give me the answers. Just explain to me what you want."

Lytia stated, "She emailed me once, and this is after coming to her twice and giving her my email address and I said to her, 'talk to me about my son, let me know what's going on with him.'" The mothers pleaded with these teachers to contact them and

to communicate with them. They also believed they were not any different than the White mothers who wanted to be contacted. They realized some mothers were being contacted, and those mothers were in constant communication with the teachers. The mothers only wanted what was due to them and that was to have communication with the teacher concerning their child. The mothers were extremely frustrated with not only the lack of communication but also the continual seemingly endless struggles with which their children dealt. The beliefs these mothers held regarding their children's experiences were a result of the battles that were exhausting, physically and emotionally. With so many occurrences, these students and their mothers were left with battle scars of discouragement and anger.

### **Research Question Two**

Research question two asks: "From the perspective of the African American mothers participating in this study, what are the difficulties these African American students experienced in their suburban classrooms?" According to the data, the difficulties these mothers expressed their children experienced were (a) the battle scars including fighting for access to advanced placement courses, (b) building self-esteem through teaching life's lessons, and (c) access to equitable educational opportunities.

#### *The Battle Scars*

In their discouragement and anger, these mothers did not believe that these teachers were concerned about their children's education or welfare, which led these mothers to make decisions about what was in the best interests of their children. They

begin to notice their children who were once lively and healthy children become worn and defeated which caused these mothers to take action.

### *Teaching Life's Lessons*

The action consisted of them rebuilding their children's self-esteem, teaching life's lessons constantly, and remaining positive in the midst of the outrage they felt. As an attempt to address these issues their children are faced with, the mothers find themselves constantly teaching life's lessons. It is their belief that they must counteract these daily experiences that the students deal within the classrooms because if they do not, they believe that their children will believe the viewpoint of the teacher and consider themselves as less than their White counterparts. The life's lessons the mothers teach their children usually follow a major battle that occurred in the classroom. In many instances, these students were discouraged about their experiences and were encouraged by their mothers to consider an alternate to the outcome of their experience. In other words, they are asked to consider how their experiences could have been handled differently. While taking the time to help their children to heal from the scars of the war, these mothers developed strategic reactions to combat the negative experiences to improve the experiences of their children.

### **Research Question Three**

Research question three asked: "What impact do the African American mothers believe their perceptions have on their role as a parent?"

### *Parent Assumed Roles*

#### **Advocacy, Visibility, and Proactive Parenting**

Although the mothers became tired throughout this war, they realized in their heart that they could not give up. The success of the children's educational opportunities depended on them remaining in the battle. This category of the assumed roles because of their children's experiences is comprised of three main themes including advocacy, visibility, and proactive parenting. These themes were interchangeable at times, because the bottom line was for the mothers to support their children in these classrooms so they would have access to the educational opportunities they deserved. The actions were imperative to the continuing success of their children as well as equipping the mothers with the energy needed to remain in the war and ultimately win. The mothers realized there were things they needed to do differently in order to support their children and to survive. They were not interested in taking prisoners; their only interest was in making the right decisions for their children and doing what is best for them.

The mothers took the initiative to improve their children's educational experiences in their suburban school. They became advocates for their children by contacting the teachers and encouraging their children to do their best as well as providing the means for them to make this happen. In addition, the mothers became more visible in their children's schools with not only volunteering in the teachers' workroom, but also by serving on campus and district-level decision-making committees. They contacted teachers before there was an issue of concern to inquire about ways in which

they could support their children. The mothers also formed a network with White parents in their neighborhoods as well as their carpools.

### **Conclusion**

It has been the researcher's sincere desire from the beginning of this project to allow the voices of these middleclass African American mothers to be heard as an attempt to offer another scope of addressing the concern of the achievement gap. Research regarding the achievement gap has been reported from the perspective of the educational system from the federal level and trickled down to the local level or specific school districts. The nucleus of past research has been African American students and their parents in low-income, urban settings. This research adds a twist by placing these middleclass African American parents' perceptions as the nucleus. The parents in this particular suburban area have earned advanced degrees, maintained a middleclass status, and have given their children unlimited opportunities and exposure to cultural capital to aid in their success.

The middleclass African American parents, who made purposeful decisions to improve the quality of life for their children, proclaim these children have endured continuous inequitable battles in their classrooms. As a result of the shared lived experiences of these African American students according to their parents, it is the researcher's conclusion that that race of these students is a concerning factor in the academic achievement of these students. The students endured many experiences that were uncomfortable, hurtful, and stigmatizing in their classrooms that caused the mothers

to fight many battles of equity instead of focusing on educational issues that have impacted their educational opportunities.

### **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations based on the findings of the study:

1. School districts should commit to implementing a comprehensive curriculum that provides opportunities for all students to identify with the formation of this country. Each of the mothers in this study demonstrated a concern for the teachers' responses to the experiences of their children in regards to history lessons in which racial issues were not resolved. Implementing this practice, can foster a caring environment of cultural acceptance for African American students in the classrooms.
2. Educators should reevaluate policies regarding cultural diversity and sensitivity to become more than a goal of acknowledgment and tolerance, but rather direct their attention to equity and justice for all students. The participants in this study expressed a concern for teachers seeing through the lenses of a White middleclass perspective without regard to the specific needs of students of color.
3. Educators should address the misperceptions of the low achievement of African American students to offset the negativity of low teacher expectations. Educators must build a consciousness that education is for all and all can achieve with adequate support. Teachers should recommit to

teaching all children by gaining an understanding of the differences in the cultures in their classrooms.

4. The teaching staff should reflect the student population on each campus. Educators, as well as students, need to see and interact with a culturally diverse professional community daily. A culturally diverse professional climate could reinforce the high expectations these mothers held for their children and model the results of high performance in school.
5. Teacher preparation programs should incorporate cultural sensitivity and diversity training. Teachers should be prepared to work with a diverse cultural population upon entering the classroom. Stereotypes of cultures should be addressed as well as understanding and embracing the learning styles of African American students. The participants expressed the need for cultural acceptance and inclusion in the classrooms.
6. Educators should develop a school-wide support system for students of color to create an environment for learning. The participants in this study expressed a concern for their children needing to have a sense of belonging and ownership in their schools.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings from this study, the following are suggestions for additional research:

1. This study was conducted with six middleclass African American mothers with children in suburban schools. Since the Hispanic population is a

representation of the students of color population, it would be advisable to replicate this study with middleclass Hispanic parents.

2. It would be interesting to discover the perceptions of middleclass African American students regarding their experiences in suburban classrooms with White teachers.
3. This study examined middleclass African American mothers' perceptions of their children's experiences in junior high school. It would be interesting to examine middleclass African American parent perceptions of their children's experiences in elementary schools.
4. The participants in this study reported experiences throughout the junior high years. It would be beneficial to compare and contrast the parents' perceptions relating to elementary and junior high experiences.
5. The perceptions given by these mothers were based on their children who qualified for advance placement courses. Their children qualified for these courses as a result of their ability and scores on a national standardized test. It would be valuable to study these students over an extended period of time to observe their level of academic attainment.

It is the researcher's belief that each mother in this study may offer an insight into the academic achievement of African American students in the quest for obtaining equitable educational opportunities. It appears that these mothers, like others, desire what is best for their children. Lastly, there is valuable knowledge to be gained from the narratives shared by these mothers. It is the researcher's sincere desire that educators will

hear the voices of these mothers and address the concerns of these mothers that, in turn, may address the achievement gap. These African American mothers, a valuable resource into the unlimited ability of their children, offer an array of hope and support to school districts in providing an equitable education to students of color.

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**APPENDIX A**

**PRELIMINARY GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE PHONE INTERVIEW**

**Preliminary guiding questions for the phone interview:**

1. Do you identify yourself as a middleclass African American?
2. Do you live in a suburban community within the attendance zone of the district?
3. Do you have at least one child attending one of the three junior high schools  
(included in this study)?
4. Does this child meet the eligibility requirements to participate in the pre-advanced  
placement program in this district?
5. Has your child been recommended to exit at least one of the advanced placement  
courses in junior high?

**APPENDIX B**

**GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY**

**Guiding interview questions for participants in the study:**

1. What are your child's experiences in the suburban classrooms with White teachers?
2. How do you view these White teachers' interactions with your child?
3. Why do you believe your child is experiencing difficulties in the pre-advanced placement courses?
4. What do you believe are the reasons for such difficulties?
5. How do you believe your child's White teachers view themselves racially?
6. Do you think these beliefs contribute to these teachers' interactions with students, in particular your child?
7. How do these beliefs contribute to the way these White teachers view your child?

## VITA

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