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A critical study of Black parents' participation in special education decision-making

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF BLACK PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION-MAKING

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Tamara Lynn Freeman-Nichols
June 2013

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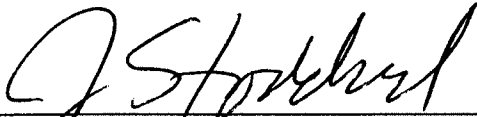
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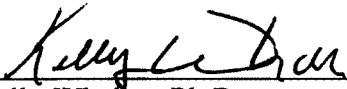
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Dedication

"If I have see further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." – Sir Isaac Newton

I dedicate my dissertation work to my devoted mother, Lillie V. Freeman and the memory of my loving father, Fred Freeman Jr. You have been constant sources of inspiration and encouragement throughout my life. Thank you for always believing in me and teaching me that the possibilities for my success are limitless.

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I would like to thank my committee members for their patience and willingness to share their expertise while helping me to hone my skills as a critical researcher. I would like to extend special thanks to Dr. Judith B. Harris, my committee chairperson, for her mentorship and friendship as she spent countless hours patiently guiding me through the dissertation process. Thank you, Dr. Jeremy Stoddard and Dr. Kelly Whalon, for serving on my committee and providing me with unwavering support and encouragement.

I would like to acknowledge my husband, Shawn L. Nichols, for loving me through this dissertation process. Thank you for sacrificing so that I was free to chase my dreams. I would also like to thank my many friends and family members for all that they did to make my life as a doctoral student easier. Special thanks to Dr. Dorian Lee-Wilkerson, a mentor and friend, for the many hours of proofreading and serving as my sounding board.

Finally, I would like to thank the parents and professionals who participated in this project. Without you, this important research would not have been possible.

Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) emphasizes the expectation that parents be actively involved in developing and monitoring the educational decisions that impact their children with disabilities. Research has long established that a positive relationship exists between parent involvement and student achievement. Yet at the same time that Black students in special education programming often experience markedly worse academic and social outcomes than their dominant culture peers, research evidence demonstrates that Black parents display lower participation rates when compared with White parents.

Unfortunately, research regarding low parent involvement in special education decision-making tends to focus on Black parents from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, using low SES as a proxy for minority status. This trend perpetuates the deficit perspectives with which Black parents are characterized, and silences the voices of Black parents from middle- to high-SES backgrounds who are involved in the special education process. Ultimately, educational decisions made on behalf of students of color are manifested within an array of negative academic and social expectations and outcomes that include disproportionality in identification for special education.

This study, which was situated in a critical humanism paradigm, examined the sociocultural contexts, processes and experiences that shape middle-class Black parents' perceptions of and attitudes toward their involvement in special education decision-making. Critical race theory (CRT) tenets that establish the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and a critique of liberalism created the research lens through which the in-depth interviews of four parents, plus three local educational agency representatives (LEAs) and three practitioners from the schools in which the parents' children were enrolled, were analyzed.

The study's results centered around three primary findings, the first of which identifies power differentials in which professionals possess markedly more decision-making power than parents, shaping interactions between parents and professionals throughout the special education process. Second, school district-based structural issues were noted that compromised the parents' ability to ensure provisions of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and the least restrictive environment (LRE) for their children with disabilities. Finally, study results showed that the parents' view of themselves and the professionals with whom they interacted shaped parent-professional partnerships in pervasive ways.

The results of this study illustrate that in order to truly understand the extent to which Black parents are engaged in the special education decision-making process, one must acknowledge that parents and education professionals approach the decision-making arena within multiple and often conflicting dimensions of their own socially imposed identities, conflated with compromised assumptions about power differentials that are rooted in perceived racial and professional identities of self and others.

A Critical Study of Black Parents' Participation in Special Education Decision-Making

Chapter 1

Focus of the Inquiry

As time has passed, our knowledge of the characteristics and needs of America's elementary and secondary students has become more comprehensive and complex. Concomitantly, the cultural and ethnic diversity of America's public school students have increased. In response, educators and policymakers have directed their efforts toward the systematic improvement of public education for all learners, regardless of similarities and differences. Research investigating the vehicles through which positive student outcomes can be achieved for students with disabilities—including those from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds—has become more commonplace.

Though America's public education system has been charged with advancing democracy through the education of its youngest citizens, parents continue to play an important role in the educational process. A growing body of literature explores the relationships between parent involvement and these student outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Additionally, one would likely find that many professionals, policymakers, and the general public believe that parent involvement and positive student outcomes are directly linked. In fact, increased parent involvement is considered to be an essential component of efforts to improve student achievement and the school reform movement (Coleman, Starzynski, Winnick, Palmer, & Furr, 2006).

As parent groups have grown in both size and savvy, the ways in which parents interact with school personnel have changed (Wolf, 1982). To understand the nature of parents' current

participation in the special education process, it is important to consider the roles parents and families have played historically in the education of students with disabilities. An historical perspective helps us understand the basis for contemporary issues related to parents' participation in special education. Over time, parents have played eight major roles in special education: (1) the source of their child's disability, (2) organization members, (3) service developers, (4) recipients of professionals' decisions, (5) teachers, (6) political advocates, (7) educational decision-makers, and (8) partners with professionals (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006).

The History of Parent Participation in Special Education

At the beginning of this discussion, it is important to note that public education was not originally intended for students with disabilities (Taylor, 2000 as cited by Simmons, 2004). In fact, compared to that of non-disabled students, the educational opportunities afforded students with disabilities have progressed slowly over time. In the 1800s, students with disabilities were typically relegated to separate special education schools or institutions, since their presence in mainstream educational settings was believed to interfere with effective teaching and learning (Simmons, 2004).

The emergence of the eugenic movement (1880 – 1930) further compromised the opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the United States. During this period, parents were regarded as the source of their child's disability (Barr, 1913 as cited by Turnbull et al., 2006). The movement was guided by research related to genealogy and heredity, and was based on the notion that delinquent behaviors were associated with mental and intellectual disability (Turnbull et al., 2006). Borne out of the eugenics movement were laws that prohibited people

with intellectual disabilities from marrying, and encouraged their caretakers to have them sterilized and institutionalized (Ferguson, 1994 as cited by Turnbull et al., 2006).

Almost a century later, sentiments that are more benign, yet similar to those perpetuated by eugenists, continue to be evident. One has only to look as far as contemporary conversations about the factors that place minority students, particularly those from Black backgrounds, at risk for special education placements in America's public schools. For example, in their discussion of the universe of variables that contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programming, Donovan and Cross (2002) acknowledge that it is impossible to clearly identify which variables are most responsible. Yet some educational leaders and practitioners focus solely on biological and social factors (e.g., birth defects, poverty, and socioeconomic disadvantage) that contribute to disproportionality. Based on my observations as a special educator in public education, I have sensed that some educational practitioners and leaders accept this incomplete information as a universal truth because it shifts the blame of poor Black student achievement from the educational system to the students' backgrounds. Moreover, considering the mistrust that I have observed in current relationships between the parents of students with disabilities and school personnel, it seems likely that the eugenics period created a legacy of blaming parents from which we have not fully recovered.

As soldiers returned from World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII) with numerous physical, mental, and emotional disabilities, society's perceptions of individuals with disabilities began to improve (Simmons, 2004). In response to this slow shift in attitude, the parents of students with disabilities began to advocate for the differentiated education of their children. Motivated by their belief that the educational needs of their children were not being met and their wish to provide emotional support for each other, family members of students with disabilities

began to organize on local and national levels between the 1930s and 1950s (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Organizations such as the United Cerebral Palsy Association (1949), the National Association for Down syndrome (1961), and the Learning Disabilities Association of America (1963), were founded for these purposes. Unquestionably, such organizations have influenced special education service delivery. Yet it is important to note that many parent organizations consist predominately of White, middle class parents. Parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and of low socioeconomic status (SES) have typically not participated in mainstream parent organizations (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Early parent advocacy efforts were thwarted, in part, by unfair educational policies and practices. Not only did administrators have the legal backing to arbitrarily exclude students with disabilities from attending school; some state laws prohibited parents from appealing or openly disputing these decisions (Yell, Rogers, & Lodge-Rogers, 1998). In response to the exclusionary practices of public schools, parents began to emerge as service developers. As such, during the 1950s and 1960s, parents enlisted the assistance of community organizations to develop a variety of residential, recreational, and employment programs for students with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Many consider the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as a pivotal point in the education of students with disabilities (Simmons, 2004). In its holding, the United States Supreme Court invalidated the "separate but equal" doctrine, upon which years of racial segregation in public schools had been condoned. As a result of the Brown decision, people began to question the efficacy of educational policies and procedures that maintained a separate and often substandard educational system for students with disabilities (Cambron-McCabe,

McCarthy, & Thomas, 2004). Thus, the Brown decision created momentum for parents' efforts on behalf of their children with disabilities.

Yet while there was an increased focus on the educational needs of students with disabilities, in their interactions with public school personnel, parents were often relegated to roles that cast them as mere recipients of professionals' decisions. Most public school personnel believed that parents should be grateful that their children with disabilities were receiving services. Consequently, parents of children with disabilities were expected to comply passively with the educational decisions that professionals made on behalf of their children (Turnbull et al., 2006). There came a point, perhaps with increased focus on students' transitions to life after high school, when parents realized that the decisions made early in a student's educational career have lasting impact upon future options in life.

As parents became more visible and vocal stakeholders in education, the strong extent to which a parent impacts the education of an individual student became more evident (Wolf, 1982). At the same time, emerging data suggested that economically-deprived families were unable to provide their children with the home lives and social capital that they needed to be successful academically (Turnbull et al., 2006). Informed by Uri Bronfenbrenner's theory of environmental enrichment (1979), education initiatives such as Head Start included parent training programs. Thus these programs, designed to provide parents with the know-how to provide an enriched home environment, shifted one of the parent's roles to that of a teacher. During this time, parents continued to mobilize and coordinate their efforts as political advocates (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Parent organizations, such as the Association for Retarded Citizens, launched crusades for legislation that would establish and protect the educational rights of students with disabilities

(Simmons, 2004). Two U.S. Supreme Court decisions, Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania (1971) and Mills v. Board of Education (1972), afforded parents the legal backing to be involved in the decision making processes affecting their children with disabilities. These decisions established that parents of students with disabilities were entitled to due process in the labeling and placement of students in special education programming (Simmons, 2004). Moreover, the Mills decision established that parents had the right to appeal educational decisions if they believed the decisions were not made with the best interests of their disabled children in mind. Thus, the PARC and Mills decisions were important precursors to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), the first piece of federal legislation to cast parents in the role of decision-makers in the education of their students with disabilities (Simmons, 2004).

Due to specifications in subsequent legislation related to the education of students with disabilities (i.e., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004), school personnel must continue to ensure that parents of students with disabilities participate meaningfully in special education decisions (Bauer & Shea, 2003). Since interpretation and implementation of this legislation often varies by region and localities, it is important to understand how the federal legislation is interpreted and operationalized by different states.

Generally, states and localities identify five phases that comprise the special education process: (1) identification and referral, (2) evaluation, (3) determination of eligibility, (4) development of an individualized education program (IEP) and determination of services, & (5) re-evaluation. The identification and referral phase takes place when a student is suspected of

having a disability and is referred to a multidisciplinary team for evaluation. The evaluation

phase occurs when school personnel use nondiscriminatory assessment procedures to determine

the nature and extent of a student's needs for additional educational support. During the

determination of eligibility phase, the multidisciplinary team reaches consensus, deciding

whether a child is eligible to receive special education and related services. Once a student is

found eligible to receive special education services, an individual educational plan (IEP) is

developed by an IEP committee and placement decisions are made based on the educational

needs of the student. IEPs are reviewed and updated on an annual basis, and students with

disabilities are re-evaluated every three years to determine if they continue to benefit from the

special education services being provided. Parent participation is an integral element that must be

included when the special education process is implemented properly.

Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and the

soon-to-be reauthorized No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) identify parent involvement as

one of several factors that impact student achievement. Despite the fact that educational

researchers and practitioners tend to conceptualize and operationalize the construct of parent

involvement differently, research results provide sufficient evidence that parent involvement is

indeed related to positive student outcomes (i.e., academic achievement and social achievement)

(Epstein, 2001). Additionally, these positive outcomes have been demonstrated for student

subgroups, especially students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. Yet

reports spanning the last three decades suggest that public school systems have struggled with

the challenge of effectively involving parents from CLD backgrounds for some time, particularly

Black students (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005).

As early as the 1970s, Wilcox (1972) asserted that public school systems failed to provide educational equity effectively to students from CLD backgrounds (i.e., Black, Spanish-speaking, Native American, and low-SES White). As such, the exercise of parental decision-making and advocacy shifted from a right and responsibility to a clear necessity (Wilcox, 1972). This position becomes relevant as one considers research results regarding the educational services and outcomes currently provided to Black students with disabilities and those suspected of being disabled.

Statement of Purpose

As special education became a legitimate aspect of public schooling in America, the roles of parents of students with disabilities also evolved. At first, parents were viewed as the reason for their child's disability. Now parents, at least in theory, are viewed as key players in the education of students with disabilities. Language in IDEA 2004, for example, encourages parent-professional partnerships by reinforcing the expectation that parents be active in developing and monitoring educational decisions for their children with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Research results suggest that Black parents are less involved in their children's school-based education than their dominant culture peers (Henderson et al., 2007). Such research typically focuses specifically on Black parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds in urban schools. As such, the current literature base fails to give the same attention to Black parents in other educational settings (i.e., suburban and rural schools), as well as those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Does existing research on parent participation in the special education process offer a comprehensive view of the entire subpopulation of Black parents? As I dig deeper into this line of inquiry, I find myself returning to the following question: "Does this information truly capture

the complexities inherent in Black parental involvement—specifically that of a significant

subgroup of parents whose children encounter the special education process in their educational

careers?" My response is "no."

Data on the academic and social outcomes for Black students with disabilities support my

assertion. For example, data included in the 26th Annual Report to Congress on the

Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of

Education, 2006) established that Black students with disabilities were disproportionately

represented in several special education categories (i.e., mental retardation and severe emotional

disturbance) and were less likely to graduate than their dominant culture peers. Additionally,

Losen and Orfield (2002) present compelling evidence that suggests that Black students from

varying socioeconomic backgrounds who receive special education services, regardless of the

geographic setting in which the schools are situated (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural), may not

fare as well as their dominant culture peers.

There appears to be a tendency for researchers to use universal labels, such as *minority*

parents, parents of color, and CLD parents to represent parents from a variety of ethnic/cultural

backgrounds, particularly from Black cultures. By doing so, researchers present the Black parent

group as a homogeneous population when in fact it is a heterogeneous population. In turn,

educational leaders and practitioners accept this faulty knowledge as truth, using it to guide their

efforts to engage Black parents in the education process in general, and the special education

process specifically. Additionally, current research oversimplifies the issue of the inequities

inherent in education by focusing primarily on Black parents from low SES backgrounds. Thus,

this tendency justifies the belief that low SES is a suitable proxy for minority status.

Yet through my observations as a special educator, I have seen that Black parents who are highly educated, middle- to upper-middle-class professionals are affected by many of the same inequities that their low SES counterparts experience, undermining their ability to participate in the special education process as equal participants. Even more compelling, disproportionality, a manifestation of educational inequity that has been linked to poor parental involvement, has been found to persist and in some cases be more prevalent as the SES level of a community increases (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006).

Most educational research is done to guide future practice. Unfortunately, much educational research, often situated in the postpositivistic realm, tends to present incomplete empirical knowledge as indisputable truth by applying universal labels (e.g., "minority parents;" "parents of color"), as well as characteristics noted in low-SES Black parent subgroups, to all Black parents. As a result, the unique characteristics of the middle class subset of this parent group go unnoticed and the voices of these parents go unheard. This silenced voice belongs to a collective body of real people that is larger than educational research and practice would have us think.

Strong evidence suggests that an increasing number of Blacks belong to America's middle class (Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007). Yet the growing population of upwardly mobile Blacks, commonly referred to as the "Black middle class," is typically overlooked in current sociological and educational research (Benjamin, 2005; Lacy, 2007). Pattillo-McCoy (1999) explains that while funding and public interest give marked attention to research about poverty, important insights about the Black middle class are often buried within the analyses and discussions of data about impoverished Blacks. Societal structures are often

reproduced within America's public education system. Therefore, the children of the Black middle class are likely to be overlooked within both general and special education processes.

If educational professionals do not have a complete and accurate picture of the Black parents with whom they are charged to partner, the nature of these parents' participation in special education decision making will undoubtedly be affected. Ultimately, the precision of the educational decisions that shape Black students' learning may be compromised. This study aimed to add to the current knowledge base by enhancing our understanding of how middle class, Black parents are involved in special education decision-making. Moreover, through an in-depth examination and critique of middle class, Black parent participants and their experiences, this study attempted to legitimize the collective voice of this often silenced subgroup by providing additional knowledge that could be used to guide improvements in the special education process.

Statement of the Problem

More than a century ago, W.E.B. Dubois (1903/2012) coined the term "double consciousness" to describe the Black person's experience in America. As I consider middle class Black parents navigating the special education process, Dubois' acknowledgement of the convolution inherent in being an "other" who skillfully finds her way in and out of multiple realities aptly fits. They are Black men and women. They are members of America's middle class. They are parents who engage in decision-making throughout the special education process. Essentially, members of this parent subgroup have to contend with and reconcile realities that may compete with one another. It is with these complexities in mind that I posed the following overarching question that guided this research study: What societal contexts, processes,

interactions, and experiences shape middle class Black parents' perceptions and attitudes towards their involvement in special education decision-making?

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was a key component of my research design. According to Maxwell (2005, p. 37), there are four sources that can be used to construct a conceptual framework: 1) one's own experiential knowledge, 2) existing theory and research, 3) pilot and exploratory research and 4) thought experiments. Consequently, I arranged Chapter 2 to first draw on existing literature to capture the theory and research that were relevant to my study, and then presented my experiential knowledge in terms of how it shaped the study. Given the critical paradigm within which this dissertation research was situated and the critical lens that was used with the research strategy, it was not necessary for me to use pilot and exploratory research or thought experiments to construct a suitable conceptual framework. Therefore, those two components were not included.

Review of Existing Literature

Parent involvement is a complex and multidimensional construct that is defined in a variety of ways (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). In general, the knowledge base establishes a sound rationale for educational professionals and policymakers to strive toward increased parent involvement as an integral part of school improvement efforts. However, there is not a universally accepted definition of the term. Indeed, through a cursory scan of the literature, one finds a variety of terms (e.g., parent involvement, parent participation, parental engagement, parent partnerships, and school-family partnerships) used to label the same set of parental attitudes and behaviors. The noted variations in definitions of parent involvement directly impact how the construct is operationalized. This inconsistency can be problematic when attempting to generalize empirical research results.

To address the ambiguity inherent in the construct of parent involvement, several typologies have been used. The most widely accepted typology is one offered by Joyce Epstein (2001). Through her work, Epstein concluded that the multiple dimensions of parent involvement can be described as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Although Epstein's typology has been adopted by the National Parent-Teacher Association and clearly serves as the basis of the Federal definition of parent involvement found in Title I of NCLB, researchers, parents, and educational professionals continue to conceptualize, and more importantly, operationalize, the construct differently.

Epstein (2001) further postulated that students are best supported when families and schools have shared goals that guide their collaborative work. She developed the model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, a framework that is multidimensional and consists of external and internal structures. The external structure highlights the family, school, and community as the three key contexts within a student's life (Simon & Epstein, 2001). The external structure demonstrates that each sphere or context is comprised of activities, behaviors, and characteristics that distinguish it from the others. Thus, from one position, the three spheres are independent and do not overlap. Conversely, the student resides within each sphere. As such, the student's presence in each distinct sphere creates an area of overlap where the family, school, and community bear shared responsibility for the student's social and academic development.

The model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence includes an internal structure that emphasizes the interpersonal relationships among parents, children, school personnel, and community members (Simon & Epstein, 2001). The internal structure is comprised of two types and two levels of interface. Interactions may occur within a sphere or between spheres. Moreover, Epstein (2001) explained that interactions may occur either on a broad organizational

level (e.g., school officials communicating to all parents about school policies) or a specific, individual level (e.g., a parent-teacher conference to address the academic needs of an individual student).

With an increased focus on accountability and high stakes assessment, school districts have focused their attention toward increased parent involvement as a means of improving academic achievement. Research has linked positive parent involvement to increases in reading, math, and science achievement (e.g., McNeal, 1999; Shaver & Walls, 1998). Additionally, research exploring the effects of parent involvement by level of schooling has established that the positive academic effects of parent involvement are evident on the elementary and secondary levels (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999). These findings are intriguing as one considers evidence (e.g., Epstein, 2001) suggesting that parent involvement decreases as students advance from kindergarten to high school completion.

Since researchers, educators, and policymakers agree that investments in improved parent involvement are prudent in the overarching aim of formalized education, it is peculiar that the lack of parent involvement continues to persist in schools throughout America. While research provides the theoretical support that legitimizes educators' attempts to improve parent involvement, it appears that the current literature base falls short of highlighting the specific knowledge needed to effectively guide educators in their practice. Thus, it is essential that researchers begin to build on the current knowledge base in this area of inquiry by identifying specific aspects of parent involvement and examining their impact on student outcomes.

As a construct, parent involvement has been described to encompass parental expectations/aspirations, home involvement, and school involvement (Jeynes, 2003; Jeynes, 2005). Parental expectation/aspiration is defined as the degree to which a student's parents

anticipate that the student will achieve at high levels (Jeynes, 2005). Parental

expectation/aspiration should be distinguished from other components of parent involvement

because rather than a specific action or behavior, it is a set of beliefs (Englund, Luckner, Whaley,

& Egeland, 2004). Research has consistently shown parental expectation/aspiration to be

positively related to education achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; Jeynes, 2005). In

a research study based on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Fan

(2001) noted a statistically significant, positive relationship between parents' aspirations for their

children's education and students' academic growth in reading, math, science, and social studies.

Other, research confirms that parent involvement benefits student subgroups, namely those who

are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and students with disabilities (Epstein, 2001;

Henderson et al., 2007).

As researchers delve deeper into the parent's role in education, the notion that parents

should partner with professionals in the education of children has gained popularity. Perhaps due

to the authority that IDEA gives parents to provide consent before students are evaluated and/or

served under special education programming, researchers and professionals in the field of special

education have championed partnerships, at least in theory, for some time (e.g., Wolf, 1982;

Dunst, Trivette, & Snyder, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986). Now it appears that terms such as

"parent-school partnership," "family-professional partnerships," and "family-school

partnership" are used interchangeably with parent involvement (Katz, 2000; Dunst et al, 2000;

Henderson et. al, 2007). This trend is consistent with Epstein's (2001) contention that "school,

family, and community partnership" more accurately captures the phenomenon traditionally

known as "parent involvement."

Diverse parent participation in education. When discussing parent involvement in education, or the lack thereof, it is tempting to simplify the issue by merely focusing on the behaviors, attitudes, and skill sets that parents should demonstrate as "good parents" who are concerned about their children's educational progress. This narrow view falls short of providing educators with the in-depth knowledge needed to foster and support parents in their aim to affect their children's education in meaningful and positive ways. A more comprehensive view of parent involvement becomes particularly important as one considers how parents from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and those who have children with special needs, participate in their children's education. Along this vein, there is a growing body of literature that aims to critically analyze the relationship between parent involvement in education and race/ethnicity.

The *Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE)* framework draws on critical race theory (CRT) and cultural-historical activity theory to redefine "parent involvement" as "parental engagement" (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). The researchers posited that by engaging in the dynamic and interactive process of parental engagement, parents draw on a multitude of experiences and resources to define their interaction with other individuals within a school community. Parents function both as "authors" and "agents" as they activate and use their variety of capital (i.e., human, social, and material) within the various spaces (i.e., school-based academic, school-based non-academic, and community/home based) of the school community (Barton et al, 2004). Therefore, the researchers offered the EPE framework as an alternate way for one to understand the relationship between the behaviors and/or actions that define parents' involvement in the educational process and how they use available resources (i.e., capital) to engage themselves.

Through their research, Barton and colleagues offer evidence disproving the perception that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents tend to be ill-equipped or unwilling to effectively support their children's education. Instead, it shows that these parents are resilient enough to use informal and non-traditional means to successfully navigate traditional school settings. However, previous research by Lareau (1987) suggested that when compared to that of working-class parents, the ways in which middle class parents participated in their children's education were more congruent with schools' expectations. Consequently, Lareau concluded that middle class parents surpassed working-class parents in their ability to garner educational advantages for their children. The inconsistencies noted in these research data illustrate the complexities inherent in the roles that ethnicity and the SES of parents play in partnerships. These inconsistencies will likely persist as the demographics of the parent population continue to shift.

America, once dubbed 'the melting pot," continues to grow increasingly diverse in heterogeneity (e.g., race/ethnicity, disability, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation). Public schools grapple with these cultural shifts on a daily basis. While terms such as *cultural sensitivity, cultural acceptance, and cultural responsiveness* have become buzz words in education, deficit thinking continues to haunt CLD students and their parents. Harry and Klingner (2006, pp. 16) caution that "when deficit interpretations are being applied to members of a group that has historically been viewed through the lens of deficit, the deck is powerfully loaded." Yet it seems that deficit thinking, a misconception that may be rooted in conscious or unconscious forms of racism, continues to be a topic too difficult for many educators to discuss.

Previous research suggests that social class position and class culture become a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977 as cited by Lareau, 1987). Thus, it is not uncommon for the

racial components of educational problems (e.g., low student achievement, and disproportionate representation in special education programming) to be disregarded by the practice of using low SES as a proxy for CLD status in educational research. Indeed, Olivos (2006) questioned the notion that SES is the only variable that explains why CLD parents and school personnel struggle to establish and maintain effective partnerships. Through his assertion that the transformation of public school is contingent upon CLD parents and educators sharing equal power and responsibility, Olivos (2006) has added credence to the conclusions reached by Barton et al. (2004). He concluded that to facilitate effective partnerships, educators must acknowledge the different ways that CLD parents participate in the educational process and accept these alternate forms of participation as valid. Special education is one process within public education in which the success of identification and intervention is contingent upon the degree of parent participation.

Parents and special education decision-making. The implementation of IDEA 2004 is guided by parent participation, one of six important assurances advanced by special education law. As a principle that bolsters IDEA 2004, parent participation is intended to ensure that every parent partners with educators in shaping how their students with disabilities are educated (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). In fact, with the provisions for increased parental accountability that Turnbull et al. note in IDEA 2004, the expectation that parents are active in developing and monitoring educational decisions for their students with disabilities was clearly established.

Epstein (2001) underscored decision-making as one of six types of parent involvement. While she described decision-making activities as parents making important decisions on the school level and emerging as leaders within the school community, "decision-making" is not a

finite term. The term can be used to delineate collective efforts to affect education, as well as, effort to affect the educational process on the individual student level (Davies, 2001). Many of the important decisions related to special education directly impact the educational process at an individual student level. Furthermore, IDEA 2004 establishes that parents are charged with making important decisions regarding the education of students with disabilities by serving as members of the evaluation and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams (Turnbull et al., 2007).

Partnerships in special education. Like its predecessor, *parent involvement,* the term "partnership" has been conceptualized and applied in many different ways. This may be attributed to the claims made that current literature on partnerships in education relies too heavily on opinion and lacks the specificity needed to guide effective practice (e.g., Dunst et al., 2000). For example, the following definition has been used to describe family-professional partnerships:

> Family-professional partnership – Parents and other family members working together with professionals in pursuit of a common goal where the relationship between the family and professionals is based on shared decision making, shared responsibility, mutual trust, and mutual respect (Dunst et al., 2000, p. 32).

By using a behavioral science lens as a tool for critique, one will note that this generic definition falls short of being specific enough to operationalize family-professional partnerships. This lack of specificity is exacerbated by the inclusion of terms such as "shared responsibility" and "mutual respect." These additional terms should be accompanied by additional explanation so that the manner in which it is being operationalized is evident (Dunst et al., 2000).

This ambiguity becomes problematic as special educators and administrators attempt to fulfill the parent participation principle of IDEA 2004 when dealing with parents in general, and

CLD parents specifically. In fact, Brantlinger (1991) warned that the image of an uninformed parent being in need of benevolent guidance from professional experts undermines the true objective of home-school partnerships in special education. If a universally accepted definition and application of partnership existed, perhaps the tendency to view parents through a deficit lens would not persist.

Turnbull et al. (2006) have provided a useful framework to describe family-professional partnerships. Consistent with Dunst et al. (2000), the authors agreed that mutual action is a key aspect of family-professional partnerships. However, expanding on previous definitions, Turnbull et al. (2006) described a family-professional partnership as an arch that connects a student's school life with his life outside of school. This visual image can also be used to depict the relationship between special education decision-making, family-professional partnerships, and outcomes for students with disabilities. Using the framework offered by Turnbull et al. (2006), one could hypothesize that an effective family-professional partnership is the conduit through which appropriate educational decisions for an individual student produce positive outcomes for students with disabilities. These authors assert that the following seven tenets must be present in order for an interaction between parents and professionals to be deemed a true partnership: trust, communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, and advocacy.

Trust. While acknowledging that it is identified in a variety of ways throughout education literature, Turnbull et al. (2006, p. 161) defined trust as "having confidence in someone else's reliability, judgment, word, and action to care for and not harm the entrusted person." Of the seven partnership principles, trust holds the most importance as it is the "keystone that holds all of the other principles together" (Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 295). Thus, if trust is absence or

breached the integrity of the entire parent-professional partnership is weakened. In behavioral

terms, trust encompasses the following practices: being reliable, using sound judgment,

maintaining confidentiality, and trusting oneself (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Communication. Effective communication between parents and professionals fosters

effective partnerships. Due to IDEA 2004 and its provisions for parent participation, it logically

follows that effective communication should be inherent throughout the special education

process (Turnbull et al., 2007). Additionally, to successfully participate in the communicative

process, one should be mindful of both the quality and quantity of communicative exchanges

(Turnbull et al., 2006). The following practices are necessary for effective communication to

occur between parents and professionals: being friendly, listening, being clear, being honest, and

providing and coordinating information (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle,

2004).

Professional competence. As local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to employ

highly qualified personnel, both NCLB and IDEA 2004 highlight the importance of professional

competence (Turnbull et al., 2007). This tenet is specific to the professionals involved in a

partnership and encompasses the following practices: providing a quality education, professional

development, and establishing high expectations (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Respect. This tenet requires parents and professionals to regard each other with esteem

that is communicated through words and actions (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). While encouraging

professionals to adopt a "posture of cultural reciprocity," Kalyanpur and Harry (1999)

acknowledged the important role that respect plays as professionals interact with CLD parents of

students with disabilities. By employing the following practices during partnerships,

professionals can demonstrate their respect for parents as partners: honoring cultural diversity, affirming strengths, and treating students and families with dignity (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Commitment. A committed professional is an individual who views maintaining a positive relationship with students and their parents as a moral, rather than a work obligation (Turnbull et al., 2006). Additionally, parents and professionals have shared goals and share a sense of loyalty towards one another (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). It is important to note that while IDEA 2004 definitely encourages professional commitment throughout the special education process, the legislation cannot mandate professionals to be committed (Turnbull et al., 2007). During their interactions with parents, professionals demonstrate commitment by: being sensitive to the emotional needs of the parents, being available and accessible, and going "above and beyond" the minimum expectation of them as professionals (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Advocacy. This tenet refers to an individual being vocal and acting in pursuit of a cause (Turnbull et al., 2006). Advocacy is a process in which a problem is acknowledged, the barriers to solving the problem are identified, and action is taken to reach a resolution (Turnbull et al., 2007). During their interactions with parents, professionals demonstrate advocacy by: preventing problems, keeping their conscience primed, identifying and documenting problems, forming alliances, and seeking mutually beneficial solutions (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Equality. Equality is the condition that arises when parents and professionals feel that they are contributing equally to a student's educational program (Turnbull et al., 2007). Moreover, all members of the partnership feel equally powerful in their ability to make educational decisions and influence student outcomes (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). While the language in IDEA 2004 may encourage equality between parents and professionals as educational decisions are made on behalf of students with disabilities, professionals continue to

possess a power advantage (Turnbull et al., 2007). As such, professionals must make a concerted effort to redistribute power equally by: sharing power with parents, fostering empowerment, and providing options (Turnbull et al., 2006). The concept of equality is particularly important as professionals strive to create effective partnerships with individuals who have a history of marginalization in the U.S.; namely the parents of CLD students with disabilities.

Black students and disproportionality. In recent efforts to eradicate the much-documented achievement gap in public education, prompted in part by the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Black students constitute one of several student subgroups targeted in school reform initiatives. Yet Black students' academic performance continues to lag behind that of their dominant culture peers (Resnick, 2004). Through a comparison of data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and state math and reading assessment results, Lee (2006) concluded that NCLB did little to result in consistent improvements in achievement or a meaningful narrowing of the achievement gap. Further, the increased accountability that accompanied NCLB had negligible effect on gaps in achievement related to CLD and low SES status.

Unfortunately, ample data suggest that the trends noted in the education of Black students within general education are mirrored in the process of special education identification and service delivery (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Data compiled by the National Research Council (NCR) in 2002 indicated that while Black students comprised roughly 17 percent of the public school population, they constituted 33 percent of all students identified as mentally disabled, 27 percent of all students identified as emotionally disturbed, and 18 percent of students identified as learning disabled. Additionally, Parrish (2002) reported that

Black students in at least 45 states were disproportionately represented—specifically

overrepresented—in special education programming.

Even more compelling is the research suggesting that once placed in special education,

Black students are overrepresented in more restrictive educational environments and

underrepresented in less restrictive learning spaces (Orfield & Losen, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-

Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). Some practitioners argue that

overrepresentation in special education is not a big problem, rationalizing that more specialized

educational services cannot be detrimental to the students in question. However, these findings

raise important concerns related to least restrictive environment (LRE), and free and appropriate

public education (FAPE), two principles that lay the foundation for special education.

Disproportionality is characterized by members of a particular student subgroup being

consistently underrepresented or overrepresented in educational programming. While students

may be disproportionately represented by gender, disproportionality based on race and ethnicity

has been discussed extensively in the literature, particularly as related to Black students (Ahram,

Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Patton, 1998). Prior to the creation of

significant special education legislation (e.g., The Education of All Handicapped Children's Act

of 1975), Dunn (1968) drew attention to the disproportionate numbers of poor Black students

who were stigmatized by the label of educable mentally retarded and served in segregated

classrooms. Similarly and more recently, Black students are often overrepresented in special

education programs for several "judgmental" disabilities (i.e., specific learning disability, mental

retardation, and severe emotional disturbance) and underrepresented in gifted and talented

programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The United States Department of Education's Office of

Civil Rights (OCR, 1995 as cited by Murtadha-Watts and Stoughton, 2004) suggests that the

overrepresentation of Black students in special education is the result of discriminatory school practices that impact the following interrelated variables: pre-referral intervention; reasons for referrals for special education evaluation; factors used in the evaluations; and placement in more restrictive settings.

Previous data have been corroborated recently by trends reported in the 31st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). While these data suggest that generally Black students are no longer overrepresented in special education programs for students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), overrepresentation persists in programs for students with mental retardation (MR) and severe emotional disturbance (SED). Furthermore, when compared with their White counterparts, Black students with disabilities are often educated in more restrictive settings and experience educational outcomes that are less positive (e.g., high dropout rates) and low graduation rates.

Interestingly, the special education trends most recently reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2012) support the commonly accepted position presented by Donovan and Cross (2002) and others (Parrish, 2002; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibbs, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008) that nonjudgmental or hard disability categories (e.g., hearing impairment, visual impairment, autism spectrum disorder) are less subject to disproportionate representation because the processes used to identify them are not influenced by social factors and subjective judgment. Yet in recent years, a growing body of research suggests that the processes used to identify cases of autism spectrum disorder may be more subjective than was originally theorized (Travers, Tincani, & Krezmien, 2011). This shift is reflected in current research that provides striking empirical evidence that Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hispanic students

are significantly and disproportionality underrepresented in programs for students with autism spectrum disorder (Tincani, Travers, & Boutot, 2009). While additional research is needed in this area, preliminary data suggest that Black children may be disproportionately underrepresented due to misidentification and/or identifications occurring at later ages than what is typically seen with White children (Travers et al., 2011).

Perhaps special education disproportionality is so detrimental because it perpetuates the inequitable treatment that has plagued Black students historically throughout their participation in America's public education system. Specifically, overrepresentation creates an educational environment in which Black students are denied appropriate access to the general education curriculum, receive unwarranted services that do not meet their needs, and held to low expectations for achievement as a result of misclassification (National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) & ILIAD Project, 2002). Additionally, the stigma often associated with a disability label coupled with the inevitable disadvantages of being unduly relegated to separate educational placements, threaten to diminish academic and social outcomes for Black students (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Different approaches have been used to describe ethnic representation in special education. Some research relies on a comparison of percentages to describe overrepresentation (e.g., NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002). Yet others estimate overrepresentation by using an odds ratio that defines the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being identified with a particular disability category (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Although the varied definitions and methods used for calculating ethnic representation cause many to debate the ultimate prevalence of disproportionality, researchers agree that the overrepresentation of Black students in special education is a complex problem (Artiles & Trent,

1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Patton, 1998). Still, Gravois and

Rosenfield (2006) note that in an attempt to develop solutions to address disproportionality in

special education, educational literature has focused on the following three themes: (1) cultural

variables that affect the initial referral of minority students for special education, (2) bias in the

assessment procedures used in determining eligibility of minority students for special education

services, and (3) effectiveness of instruction and intervention in addressing the academic and

behavioral needs of at-risk students prior to consideration for special education services.

Researchers have also explored correlations among district, student and family

characteristics and special education placement in an attempt to identify factors related to

disproportionality (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006). While it appears that a lower

rate of overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students is observed in school districts with

higher minority populations, the level of poverty within a school district is another factor

believed to be related to Black overrepresentation in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Consistent with the battle cry of the researchers who assert that low SES is a suitable

proxy for minority status in educational research, the work of MacMillan and Reschley (1998)

suggests that a relatively high correlation exists between minority status and low SES. Yet,

while controlling for poverty Skiba et al. (2005) found that Black students were 2.5 times more

likely than their peers to be identified as mildly mentally retarded, 1.5 times as likely than their

peers to be identified as moderately mentally retarded, and more than 1.5 times as likely to be

identified as emotionally disturbed. Thus, poverty was a weak and inconsistent predictor of

disproportionality, while other variables (i.e., district suspension-expulsion rates, district dropout

rates, and student-teacher ratios were consistently and positively correlated to Black student

disproportionality (Skiba et al., 2005). While the differences in these research findings do not

explain why Black students at all economic levels are impacted by overrepresentation in special education, they do suggest that institutional variables influence the already complex intersection of race and SES status in special education identification and placement.

In its explanation of the disproportionate representation of minority students in special and gifted education programming, the National Research Council (2002) cited poverty as the factor with a pervasive impact on disproportionality by presenting a cause and effect thesis that poverty leads to exposure to social risks and compromised development that in turn increases future need for special education services. This position, the Theory of Compromised Human Development (TCHD), is reminiscent of deficit thinking in that it supports the idea that Black students enter the educational setting with inherent deficits that they must overcome (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Furthermore, TCHD rejects the notion of social reproduction by failing to acknowledge the role of the educational institution as an entity that perpetuates the racial and social inequities that are so prevalent in our society.

Black parents and special education. As one considers that parent participation is an important assumption that should guide the implementation of IDEA 2004, it follows that effective parent-professional partnership may be helpful in addressing overrepresentation of Black students in special education. Yet, Black parents involved in the special education process are being subjected to the same social reproduction that undermines the social and academic success of their children. Borrowing from O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) who coined TCHD, perhaps Black parents are being thwarted in their attempt to effectively engage in special education decision-making because of a theory of compromised/culturally deficient parents.

In the same discussions that acknowledge a pervasive problem of low Black student achievement, the low rate of parent participation is often named as one of several causal factors

(Trotman, 2002). It has been noted that Black parents may benefit from training, as they may lack the knowledge and resources necessary to assist with students' educational success (Epstein, 2001; Trotman, 2002). However, Harry (1992c) asserted that such rhetoric unfairly depicts Black parents as deficient. Moreover, the imbalance of power that often exists between Black parents and special education professionals further discourages Black parents from fully participating in the parent-professional partnership.

Factors that impact CLD parents in special education. Zhang and Bennett (2003) identified the insensitivity demonstrated by school personnel with regard to religious beliefs and family traditions as a barrier that interferes with CLD families' participation in the special education process. In a review of published literature regarding parent involvement in transition for families from CLD backgrounds, Kim and Morningstar (2005) found that discrimination and cultural insensitivity may cause CLD families to withdraw from involvement or take a more passive role in school-based planning and decision-making processes. Similarly, in a qualitative study that included the families of 24 Black children with severe emotional and cognitive disabilities, parents asserted that teachers need to better distinguish between behaviors that result from a child's disability and those behaviors that are a part of a child's culture (Zionts, Zionts, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003).

This lack of cultural responsiveness may stem from the difficulty that mainstream professionals have in recognizing cultural strength. Furthermore, this barrier may be rooted in the tendency for professionals to make disability the master status over race or ethnicity when dealing with CLD students with disabilities (Harry, 2002b). By making disability status the defining feature of a student, the important cultural elements unique to students and their families may be minimized. Furthermore, by being unfamiliar with CLD parents and their

cultures, school personnel may accept stereotypes associated with certain cultures and inadvertently discourage effective parent involvement in special education decision-making (Thorp, 1997).

A professional's overuse of educational jargon can impede CLD parents' participation in the special education process by reducing the extent to which parents understand information that is important for effective decision-making. Al-Hassan and Gardner (2002) suggested that school personnel use direct and simple language when presenting important student information to a CLD parent. A longitudinal study conducted by Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) supports Al-Hassan's and Gardner's thoughts. Beth Harry and her colleagues observed the "silencing effect" that the use of jargon had on parents during IEP meetings. They found that the parents ignored details included in the technical reports in favor of relying on their children's teachers for information. Additionally, one parent admitted that she agreed to a change of placement for her child, without understanding the implications of a more restrictive placement (Harry et al., 1995). These findings compel one to question the extent to which Black parents' meaningful involvement in the educational decisions affecting their children with disabilities is mitigated by school personnel's use of educational jargon.

Collaboration is the cornerstone of the shared decision-making that should be used throughout the IEP process. However, decision-making processes can be hampered when CLD parents and school personnel possess different perceptions of collaboration. In a qualitative study that followed a group of parents, including five CLD parents of children with disabilities, Lea (2006) found that marked differences in how collaboration was operationalized led to a disconnect between the parents and their children's service providers. Parents believed that their input and expressed concerns for their children were ignored (Lea, 2006). In turn, for most of the

parents, this reinforced their perceptions of being disrespected by school personnel. Cultural

nuances can intensify the differences between a CLD parent's view of collaboration and that of

the school personnel with whom they interact. Since the concept of "equal and active"

participation may be foreign to some CLD parents, their collaborative behavior may be more

passive than school personnel would prefer (Ayala & Dingle, 2003).

CLD parent involvement in the IEP process can be adversely impacted when a CLD

parent and school personnel have different views of a student with a disability and his/her

educational needs. In the first longitudinal study to examine the evolution of CLD parents' role

in decision-making, Harry et al. (1995) noted that CLD parents' positive expectations in the

beginning morphed into disillusionment as they disagreed with the manner in which school

personnel were educating their children with disabilities. Unfortunately, current literature

suggests that this conflict between CLD parents and school personnel continues to be a problem.

In telephone interviews conducted by Lake and Billingsley (2000), 90% of the

participants (i.e., parents of students with disabilities, school administrators, and mediators)

stated that discrepant views of a student's needs initiated and/or escalated conflicts between

parents and school personnel. The participants added that differences in view arose when a

parent believed that the school did not see a student as a unique child with strengths, and when

school personnel described a student guided by the deficit model (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Similarly, Lai and Ishiyama (2004) stated that 70% of the CLD parents in their study had

priorities for their children's education that differed from those expressed by school personnel.

Moreover, 40% of the CLD parents stated that unlike the schools in their emigrant countries, the

current schools held low academic expectations for their students and did not give enough

attention to academic content. Thus, different concepts of teaching and learning resulted in

strained working relationships between some CLD parents and school personnel (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004).

CLD parents who have immigrated to the U.S. may be ill-equipped to participate in the IEP process due to their limited understanding of common educational practices used here. (Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999). Since many developing countries do not have laws for educating children with disabilities, immigrant parents may not understand the legal rights afforded them and their children with disabilities through IDEA (Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002). Additionally, Lai and Ishiyama (2004) found that immigrant parents' struggles to adapt to a new environment and low rates of acculturation hindered their involvement in the education of their children with disabilities.

The negative experiences that CLD parents have endured with school personnel may adversely impact their willingness to participate in the IEP process (Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002). Thorp (1997) stressed the detrimental impact of negative experiences on CLD parents' involvement in the future. She recounted stories of a CLD mother who was discouraged from visiting her daughter's new special education classroom, and the LEP father who was told that speaking in English would be better for his child with a disability. These stories, while being anecdotal, are powerful in that they emphasize how negative experiences with school personnel can reduce the chances that CLD parents will be willing to actively participate in placement and instructional decisions for their children with disabilities.

According to Berger (2000), when students have been diagnosed with a disability, their parents typically go through an acceptance process that includes stages of denial, projection of blame, fear, guilt, grief, withdrawal, rejection, and acceptance. Any of the stages that precede acceptance of a student's disability may impede a parent's ability to effectively participate in

educational decision making. This process may also be compounded by the variation across cultures, impacting how CLD parents view disability. Definitions of disability are colored by the parameters that each culture establishes to distinguish between "normal" and "abnormal" behavior and development (Harry, 1992, as cited by Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Cultural factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES), religious beliefs, educational level, level of acculturation, and occupation can affect how parents view their children's disability status, and ultimately affect their willingness and/or ability to make educational decisions on behalf of their children (Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

Effective communication enables CLD parents to meaningfully participate in educational decision-making. Lake and Billingsley (2000) reported that the frequency of communication, lack of communication, and misunderstood communication are several factors that may breed conflict between CLD parents and school personnel. Furthermore, all of the parents and school personnel included in this investigation reported that they avoided communication with one another as a means of escaping conflict. However, it is interesting to note that this avoidance behavior actually encouraged further conflict because it reinforced parents' perceptions that school personnel were withholding important information (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Ineffective communication between CLD parents and school personnel can also encourage feelings of distrust and promote the notion that CLD parents are not respected or valued by school personnel. It is important to mention that ineffective communication can also arise when there is incongruence in the verbal and non-verbal messages delivered to CLD parents. In a qualitative study conducted by Lea (2006), CLD parents discussed how the negative nonverbal behavior of service providers (e.g., being chronically tardy for IEP meetings) sent the message they the CLD parents were not worthy of respect. Additionally, as indicated by the

theme, "Mean what you say," CLD parents measured trust by the extent to which their service providers' actions and behaviors matched their words (Lea, 2006).

In their discussion of the communication difficulties that parents face when interacting with school personnel on behalf of their children, Valle and Aponte (2002) offered a compelling position. One of the authors is the parent of a student with a disability. By using her experiences in her child's IEP meetings to guide their discussion, Valle and Aponte (2002) asserted that school personnel have an authoritative position in that they initiate, dominate, and terminate the communicative discourse. The authors further posited that school personnel communicate using professional dialogue that is completely dissimilar to the everyday, informal language used by parents. While on the surface, professional dialogue conveys the benevolence of school personnel, it also sends a tacit message that is disempowering and condescending to parents. Valle and Aponte (2002) concluded that parents often enter the IEP process in an unequal position because they do not have access to the professional speech genre of special education. This perspective offered by these researchers confirms the notion that the ineffective use of communication can adversely impact how a CLD parent participates in educational decision-making. Additionally, it appears that ineffective communication can compound the effect of other barriers.

In a case study that examined parents from a northeastern city and a southeastern city, Patton and Braithwaite (1984) found that the lack of relevant and timely information regarding parental rights mandated by federal legislation rendered low income, Black parents ineffective in enhancing educational programs for their children with disabilities. Unfortunately, this barrier persists for CLD parents of students with disabilities (Thorp, 1997; Zionts et. al, 2003; Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002). Insufficient information leads to an imbalance of knowledge that

obstructs parents' efforts to advocate for their children with disabilities (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Moreover, Thorp (1997) contends that CLD parents are too often given information on a "one-shot basis." For CLD parents who are limited English proficient (LEP), the information that they need to be informed decision-makers may not be presented in their home languages. While interpreter services can help CLD parents with LEP, it is important to note that problems may arise when professional interpreter services are not used. In a qualitative study conducted by Lai and Ishiyama (2004), family tensions resulted as several Chinese Canadian mothers used older children and/or their children with disabilities as interpreters during school meetings. The participants believed that the translations were selective and at times, inaccurate.

Similarly, the written information provided to other CLD parents may be difficult for them to understand, due to the complexity of the technical language and educational jargon (Thorp, 1997). In a study investigating the readability of procedural safeguard documents in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.), Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) found that only four to eight percent of the procedural safeguard documents were written at or below the federally recommended reading level (i.e., seventh to eighth grade reading level), while 92% to 96% were written on the 9th to 10th grade reading levels or higher. Their findings add credence to the assertion that CLD parents often lack the knowledge that they need to be effective participants in the IEP process. Furthermore, the findings are particularly troubling considering that almost 50% of American adults read at or below the 8th grade level (National Work Group on Literacy and Health, 1998 as cited by Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006).

Todd and Higgins (1998) assert that power is implicit and explicit in the interactions between parents and school personnel. This assertion is corroborated by data compiled by Lake and Billingsley (2000), suggesting that both parents and school personnel use power, consciously

and unconsciously, to resolve conflicts. Unfortunately, as Lake and Billingsley (2000) shared in one parent's personal account of her power play with a school system, it is evident that the interactions between CLD parents and school personnel can be damaged as animosity and antagonizing behaviors increase.

Upon conducting a case study of an elementary school that struggled with effective parent involvement, Sturges, Cramer, Harry, and Klingner (2005) concluded that unequal power relations hindered substantive parent involvement. Likewise, as Lea (2006) discovered, CLD parents often perceive that they have little power in the decision-making processes affecting their children with disabilities. Both the CLD parents and their service providers reported that service providers were more knowledgeable than parents. Thus, it appears that service providers often possess knowledge power that sanctions them to make decisions during special education meetings without being questioned by CLD parents (Lea, 2006). Additionally, through observation and an analysis of IEP meetings, Lea (2006) concluded that school personnel also possessed factional, assigned, and positional power, leaving CLD parents with little power.

Power plays an essential role in society and the U.S. educational system (Delpit, 2006). Throughout her career as an elementary school teacher, Lisa Delpit struggled to understand why students of color were not acquiring the skills necessary. Consistent with data that shows a positive relationship between social capital and academic achievement, Delpit (1988) posited that a "culture of power" impacts the degree to which students excel academically. She offers five assumptions to explain how power affects the educational process:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.

2. There are rules for participating in power.

3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.

4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of their culture make acquiring power easier.

5. Those with power are frequently least aware of, or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (2006, p. 24)

Todd and Higgins (1998) remind us that power is implicit and explicit in the interactions between parents and school personnel. Additionally, while special education research has identified the misuse of power as a factor that prevents Black parents from effectively participating in the special education progress, Turnbull et al. (2006) stressed that power should be shared in a true parent-professional partnership.

Limitations of the Current Literature Base

Based on my review and critique of the literature relevant to the focus for this study, I doubt that our current knowledge base has equipped us adequately with the information and insight needed to improve the quality and nature of middle class Black parents' participation in special education decision-making. The use of universal labels (e.g., minority parents, CLD parents, and parents of color), along with a narrow focus on educational institutions situated in low-SES settings minimize the awareness of the heterogeneity that exists within the population of parents of color, and Black parents specifically. Thus, little to no research in special education gives specific attention to middle-class Black parents of students with disabilities, although statistics suggest that the "Black middle class" is a steadily growing segment of America's middle class population (Lacy, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). It was the limitations that I

observed in the current literature that initially sparked my personal interest in this dissertation topic.

Personal Interest

As a Black woman, I am familiar with the various subcultures that exist within the Black community. I consider myself to belong to the middle class and I was raised in a middle-class home by two parents who hold advanced degrees. My extended family reflects much of the complexities that exist within the Black culture based on geographic location, educational level, SES status, and income level, among other characteristics. Yet when I read much of the literature on Black parents and students in the educational system, my educational experience is not adequately captured. Although both of my parents worked outside of the home, they helped me with my homework, provided a structured home environment for me, and clearly articulated to me the importance of education. I entered school with the pre-requisite knowledge identified as necessary for academic success. Both of my parents are educators and are well-spoken and knowledgeable about all levels of education. My story is like that of most of the Black people whom I know. One might argue that my experience may differ because both of my parents are educators. However, as a speech and language pathologist working in a public school district, I noticed similar discrepancies between empirical research and the realities that I witnessed on a daily basis related to the special education process involving Black parents from middle-class backgrounds (see Appendix A).

Based on my review and critique of relevant literature, along with my experiential knowledge as a special education professional, I offer the following constructions that work together to create the conceptual framework for this dissertation research:

- There is a tendency for researchers to use universal labels, such as *minority parents, parents of color, and CLD parents* to encompass the involvement of parents from a variety of ethnic/cultural backgrounds, particularly the Black culture. In turn, educational leaders and practitioners accept this faulty empirical knowledge as truth, using it to guide their efforts to engage Black parents in the education process in general, and the special education process specifically. When their "research-based" strategies to facilitate Black parents' positive involvement as decision-makers fail, the problem is framed to belong to the Black parents, reinforcing the deficit perspectives that are often assigned to this parent group.

- Researchers focus disproportionately on urban educational settings with low-SES populations. This trend perpetuates the erroneous assumption that special education programs situated in educational settings with higher SES populations do not have to address similar issues of racial/ethnic diversity. In turn, this silences the voices of Black parents from middle to high SES backgrounds who are involved in the special education process in suburban and rural schools.

- Current educational research regarding low parent involvement tends to focus on Black parents from low-SES backgrounds and uses low SES as a proxy for minority status. This trend perpetuates the deficit perspectives that are often assigned to Black parents and silences the voices of Black parents from middle to high SES backgrounds who are involved in the special education process. Ultimately, the educational decisions made on behalf of the students are adversely impacted and are manifested in an array of negative academic and social outcomes, including disproportionality.

Chapter 3

Methods

Through this research, I allowed the voices of Black middle class parents of students with identified or possible disabilities to be heard. This line of inquiry aimed to dispel the notion that all Black parents, by virtue of their "minority status" and cultural incongruence, are ill-equipped, unwilling or unable to participate effectively in the special education process. I aimed to address the void in the current literature base that often portrays the Black parent population as a one-dimensional entity. Secondly, through this research I expected to undercover how racial inequity, more so than SES impact Black parents' ability to effectively participate in the special education process. Moreover, by shedding light on the heterogeneity inherent in the Black parent population by focusing on a subset of this population who are educated, middle class professionals, I intended to expose how the institutional practices and attitudes endorsed by schools and school personnel often undermine these parents in their pursuit to participate effectively and meaningfully in the special education process on behalf of their children.

Ultimately, through this research I strived to liberate these parents from the often tacit constraints of low expectations and deficit thinking assigned to them. Additionally, this research was intended to help educational practitioners, leaders and researchers understand how myopic views of this parent subgroup minimize the value they have and the positive impact they can and do make in the lives of their children. Such views continue to undermine Black parents' in their ability to work cooperatively toward the common goal of educating Black students; thus preventing them from reaping the same fruits of positive academic and social outcomes that have traditionally been more readily available to and acquired by their dominant culture peers. As such, the central question that drove this research was: What societal contexts, processes,

interactions, and experiences shape middle class Black parents' perceptions and attitudes toward their involvement in special education decision-making?

Research Paradigm and Perspective

A paradigm is a "way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world" (Patton, 2002, p. 69). Each paradigm is accompanied by four sets of assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, since all researchers employ explicit and implicit assumptions about the nature of the world and how it should be investigated (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). While the pragmatist view (e.g., Patton, 2002) holds that paradigms are permeable, this research reflected the position endorsed by Burrell and Morgan (1979) which asserts that paradigms are "mutually exclusive" (p. 25).

In choosing the paradigm in which this research would be situated, I decided which assumptions about the nature of reality best complemented my research questions and agenda. Ontological assumptions are concerned with the essence of a phenomenon being explored (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Therefore, I had to decide whether I believed the reality, or phenomenon that is Black parent participation in the special education process, was objective or subjective in nature. Epistemological assumptions--the grounds of knowledge--determined how I understood the world and communicated this knowledge to others (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Axiological assumptions dictated the relationships that I ascertained between human beings and their environments. It was important for me to clearly identify my assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, and axiology, as they framed the methods that I used in this study.

It was my aim to show how many of the assumptions and beliefs that educational practitioners and researchers hold either overtly or tacitly distorts what we know about Black parents involved in the special education process. These distorted views serve as "ties that bind,"

diminishing acknowledgement of the potential that Black parents possess and can mobilize towards shaping the educational decisions made on behalf of their children who have been identified or are suspected as having disabilities As such, this line of inquiry was situated in the critical humanism paradigm.

Critical humanism. The origin of critical humanism, or radical humanism, can be traced back to the tenets of German idealism and the notion that an individual creates the world in which he lives. Critical humanism goes beyond merely understanding the nature of reality and challenges the status quo by subjecting it to critique. It holds that human consciousness is controlled by the ideological superstructures with which one interacts that create false consciousness. This, in turn, results in a cognitive schism between one's self and one's true consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The critical humanist views individual consciousness as "the agent to empower, transform, and liberate groups from dominating and imprisoning social processes" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 46). Thus, critical humanism charges a researcher to attempt to release research participants from confines of existing social arrangements and the social constraints that limit their potential through the conceptualization of and emphasis on radical change, modes of domination, emancipation, deprivation and potentiality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Critical theory is the overarching category of research that encompasses the critical humanism paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As a researcher conducting a critical line of inquiry, I rejected any claims of objectivity in favor of a stance that would bring about more productive experiences for Black parents involved in the special education process by exposing how their voices had been silenced by educational practitioners and researchers.

My decision to use critical humanism to guide this research was informed both by a review of current literature regarding Black parents in the special education process and my

observations as a special educator in K-12 school settings. Much of the current literature, particularly those research studies that are situated in the postpositivist paradigm (e.g., Jeynes, 2003) present Black parents as a one-dimensional, static group, and provide merely snapshots of their experiences in the special education process. This myopic lens in turn masks the multitude of "realities" that one universal process (i.e., special education) yields, underestimating the vast diversity that exists within one subgroup of parents – thus distorting their stories and diminishing their power. I used elements of critical race theory (CRT) to develop the lens for this line of inquiry. Critical theory served as an orientational framework that supported my decision to use CRT as the theoretical lens of this inquiry. The assumptions that undergird critical humanism complemented my use of CRT as a lens since critical theory not only aims to study and understand society, but also critique and change it (Patton, 2002, p. 131).

Critical race theory. Critical theory research examines power and justice, and holds that a social system is constructed by the interaction of social institutions (e.g., education) and cultural dynamics (e.g., race and class; Kincheloe & McLauren, 2000 as cited by Patton, 2002). Critical theory focuses on how individuals' experiences and understandings of the world are shaped by injustice and subjugation (Patton, 2002). This requires a researcher to look beneath the appearance of fairness, naturalness and consistency to examine underlying issues of power, conflict, connection and exclusion (Tew, 2002). Reality may be examined at the societal level or at a micro level through particular forms or within particular settings.

From an ontological standpoint, critical theory assumes that reality is not self-evident and understanding the human experience involves deconstructing appearances and representations to uncover what is actually happening (Tew, 2002). More importantly, the use of critical theory should facilitate the processes of social emancipation and transformation. Critical theory can take

on a variety of orientations based on a number of social constructs. Critical theory related

specifically to racism and ethnicity has been used to address issues of power and equity in

education (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Critical race theory (CRT), a radical movement that seeks to transform the relationship

among race, racism, and power, is the offspring of critical legal studies (CLS) (Milner, 2007).

CLS was a legal movement that emerged in the mid-1970s when some law professors and

students noted that the legal system benefited the wealthy and powerful in America, while

ignoring the rights of those with less privilege and power (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Legal scholars,

such as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado, argued that CLS failed to challenge the racism

inherent in America's laws and its impact on individuals of color (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Thus,

CRT was initially conceived as a lens that would allow scholars to adequately address the effects

of race and racism in America's legal system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). However, CRT is no

longer limited to law and is now applied to other disciplines, including politics and education.

Specifically, CRT is useful in examining the educational experiences of marginalized students of

color and the racial inequities that persist in public education (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Ladson-

Billings and Tate (1995) were among the first scholars to explore how CRT could be applied to

research addressing the intersection of race and education.

At the heart of CRT is the assumption that establishes race as a social construct that

society creates, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Parker &

Lynn, 2002). This idea is aligned with the position advanced by W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote

against the scientific racialism that justified the marginalized position of Blacks as a natural by-

product of Blacks' inferior intelligence and moral capacity (Chang, 2002). While scientific

racialism is generally dismissed today, Chang (2002) asserts that CRT answers the social and/or

cultural remnants of this position that attributes certain characteristics to racial groups and explains racial differences as the results of meritocracy and "the natural order of things (pp. 88)."

CRT has evolved since its inception. Two strands of scholarship have been identified within CRT (Lynn & Parker, 2006). The first generation argued for social justice by focusing on the material manifestations of racism while the second generation has extended traditional CRT ideas to address issues of race and other markers of difference (Carbado, 2002). Valdes, McCristal Culp, and Harris (2002) add that the second generation of CRT is a way to think about race and other areas of difference as a set of shifting bottoms and rotating centers where not one category dominates but where there are multiple ways in which they operate. Therefore, it was appropriate for me to use CRT as a research perspective for this dissertation research because I investigated how the Black and middle class statuses of parents converged as they navigated the special education process.

The following tenets of CRT were helpful in clarifying themes within the dissertation research:

- The permanence of racism
- Interest convergence
- Whiteness as property
- Critique of liberalism

The permanence of racism. CRT establishes that racism is a constant that colors life in the U.S. (Bell, 1992 as cited by DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). By acknowledging the permanence of racism, critical race theorists hold that racism is difficult to cure as formal conceptions of equality can only remedy the most overt and blatant forms of inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Thus, CRT suggests that racist hierarchical structures assign power and privilege to

members of the dominant culture while withholding it from individuals who are less dominant (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). This tenet seems to inform criticisms made by educational researchers (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998; and Losen & Orfield, 2002) who argue that instances of both overt and unconscious acts of racism perpetuate racial inequities in special education. Informed by my understanding of relevant literature, as well as my personal and professional experiences as an Black woman and special educator (see Appendix A), I agree with Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) who assert that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in education, as well as the U.S. at large.

Education is an institution that has long been used to reinforce societal norms and maintain a system of status quo that benefits those who possess power and resources. Thus, the hierarchical structures and policies within the education system function to maintain the dominant culture's position of power (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). With this in mind, the tenet that establishes the permanence of racism comprised one aspect of my research perspective.

The permanence of racism is illustrated by both obvious and subtle structures, policies and practices of oppression that result in unfair treatment of Black parents and eventually undermine the academic advancement of Black students. By accepting this tenet at the onset of this inquiry, I acknowledged openly my belief that neither society nor the special education system has escaped our well-documented past of racial inequities. Furthermore, I used this tenet to examine how race and racial inequities continued to impact the experiences of a middle-class subset of the Black parent population who navigate the special education process. Finally, my dissertation research added depth to the body of educational research that focuses on Black parents and special education.

Interest Convergence. Another tenet, interest convergence, adds to the thesis that establishes the permanence of racism. Through the theme of interest convergence, CRT scholars contend that members of the dominant culture tolerate advances for racial justice only when it is in their best interest to do so (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). To exemplify the notion of interest convergence, Derrick Bell (1980, as cited by DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) suggests that civil rights gains that were accomplished on the behalf of Blacks during the 1950s and 1960s were basic rights that were advanced only because they converged with the self-interests of Whites seeking to maintain their level of power. Thus, interest convergence prompts one to critically analyze the apparent positive impact of the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) decision.

Interest convergence was the second element of my research perspective. Educational researchers have documented the power dynamics that exist between school personnel and parents throughout the special education process (e.g., Delpit, 1988; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, 2002a; Harry, 2002b; Lea, 2006). While this holds true for many parents, most researchers who focus on Black parents limit their investigations to those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The inclusion of interest convergence allowed me to critically examine the decisions made throughout the special education process. Specifically, I expected to demonstrate how similar to their counterparts from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the concessions and "small victories" enjoyed by middle class Black parents merely maintain the status quo and reinforce the dominance of school personnel.

Whiteness as property. Another principle of CRT is the idea of Whiteness as property. "Whiteness" is defined as qualities pertaining to Euro-American or Caucasian people or traditions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). When considering the history of race and racism in the U.S., as well as how the social construct of race has been reified by the U.S. legal system, CRT

scholars assert that Whiteness is a property interest (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). While possession, use, and disposition are the rights upon which property functions, the rights of exclusion, use and enjoyment, and the right to transfer these, are characteristics associated with property rights, and have been used to establish Whiteness as a form of property (Harris, 1995 as cited by DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Furthermore, the notion of Whiteness as property suggests that possessing the characteristics, behaviors and cultural practices of White people are considered normal, desirable, and therefore advantageous (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Conversely, any characteristics, behaviors, or cultural practices that deviate from this socially-constructed ideal are less desirable deviations from the norm and are synonymous with "the Other."

Whiteness as property is evident as one considers how White Americans have historically interacted with Black and Native Americans. By virtue of their racial identity, White Americans have wielded control over Black and Native Americans, often enjoying markedly higher social status. Laws used to legitimize the enslavement of Black Americans, and the settlement and seizure of Native Americans' land are two examples of how Whiteness has been directly linked to economic advantage throughout U.S. history (Harris, n.d. as cited by DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

CRT scholars (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) have applied the notion of Whiteness as property to the critique of the U.S. education system. In doing so, the benefit associated with Whiteness (i.e., economic advantage) has been reframed as educational advantage. Similarly, it is suggested that policies and practices that are prevalent within the U.S. educational system (e.g., tracking, admission policies, dress code policies, behavior policies, overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs, and under-representation of students of color in gifted education programs) often, but not always, serve as barriers to the

educational opportunities enjoyed by students of color. The same policies and practices reinforce the notion of Whiteness as property whereby the possession, use and enjoyment of educational opportunities are afforded almost exclusively to White students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Although it did not occur to me until I began work on this current research, I have experienced the notion of Whiteness as property throughout my educational career, both as a student and a special educator (see Appendix A). Additionally, it is embedded in the discussion of the importance of social and cultural capital in schooling. Delpit (1988) acknowledges it as she describes the culture of power. It is at the heart of deficit thinking that is used to explain low Black parent involvement as the manifestation of their lack of social and cultural capital.

My research perspective allowed me to explore how educational policies and practices shape middle class Black parents' participation in special education decision-making and exemplify the notion of Whiteness as property. Informed by this tenet, I explored the institutional barriers that impede middle class Black parents' ability to participate effectively in the special education process. Further, I examined which barriers exist as a result of the parents failing to conform to a preconceived model of normalcy. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) suggest that some Black students are able to penetrate barriers to education opportunity. One may extend this assertion to middle class Black parents. By including Whiteness as property in my research perspective, I was able to explore the strong probability that some middle class Black parents were able to penetrate barriers to effective participation in special education decision-making and investigate how this occurred. Finally, I examined how the racial and class statuses of middle class Black parents converged to impact their interactions with school personnel throughout the special education process.

Critique of liberalism. Liberalism is a political viewpoint that proposes that the purpose of government is to maximize liberty and asserts that laws should enforce formal equality in treatment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Some proponents of CRT argue that liberalism is not an adequate framework for addressing America's racial problems and have refuted three assumptions central to liberal ideology: the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Many CRT scholars hold that the acceptance of colorblindness only allows for one to address the most obvious forms of racial injustice while overlooking the existence and adverse impact of more tacit and embedded forms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This promotes a sense of "business as usual," which maintains the status quo and does little to dismantle the routines, practices and institutions that keep individuals of color in subordinate positions. Additionally, Williams (1997 as cited by DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, pp. 25) argues that colorblindness prevents one from identifying how White privilege is operationalized in society since "difference" typically refers to individuals of color while Whiteness is considered "normal."

CRT scholars are critical of the notion of incremental change, asserting that the idea that gains for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace is a position that is palatable and beneficial for those who possess power (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) firmly state that only "aggressive, color-conscious efforts" will change racial inequities. Finally, CRT scholars believe that the notion of neutrality of the law is flawed in that it fails to truly acknowledge and consider the history of racism in the U.S. and strives for equality rather than equity (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Equality simply focuses on ensuring that people have the same opportunities and experiences. On the other hand, work towards equity acknowledges that, based

on their backgrounds and experiences, people belonging to different groups do not enter a situation with equal footing.

Through this dissertation research I intended to add to the current knowledge base by focusing on a segment of Black parents who are often overlooked in special education research. Using the criticism of liberalism, I critiqued the special education process on a local level by exploring the routines and practices that the parent participants experience within individual schools and when dealing with individual multidisciplinary teams. I believe that a thorough understanding of what is occurring on a local level can serve as a first step as an institution decides how to proceed with lasting and beneficial change. Additionally, I examined the decisions made through the special education process, as well as the immediate and long-term parent and student outcomes that result. Thus, the critique of liberalism enabled me to extend the discourse from equality to equity.

Research Strategy

Multiple case study was the research strategy used to conduct this dissertation research. This research strategy involved using a set of case studies to effectively illuminate a quintain (Stake, 2006, pp. x). In his attempt to effectively capture what can be investigated using multiple case study, Stake (2006) uses "quintain" as an umbrella term to describe a phenomenon, object, or condition being studied. I identified middle class Black parent participation in special education decision-making as the quintain (or phenomenon) that I investigated. I will gain better understanding of this quintain by organizing and analyzing the data generated in cases that I will study thoroughly and compare with one another (Patton, 2002).

In order to effectively use multiple case study as a research strategy, one must understand what constitutes a case. A case is a noun, thing, or specific entity (Stake, 2006). Patton (2002)

asserts that how a case is defined is determined during the planning of research design and serves as the basis for purposeful sampling. Moreover, the researcher is interested in each case because it belongs to a collection of cases that are similar in some way (Stake, 2006).

This dissertation research was intended to add to the body of literature that focuses on Black parent participation in special education decision-making by examining the participation of four middle class Black parents and/or parent dyads as they navigate the special education process within one school district. As such, four cases were constructed with parent participants being the focal points for each. Two parents were solicited from two Title I schools serving elementary students and two parents were solicited from one non-Title I school.

Research suggests that parent involvement is most noted in elementary school and begins to wane as students advance to middle and high school (Epstein, 2001; Henderson et al., 2007). With this trend in mind, this dissertation research examined Black parent participation in special education decision-making within three schools serving elementary students – two Title I schools and one non-Title I school. Title I of P.L. 107-110 (NCLB, 2001), the largest federally funded program that addressed elementary and secondary education, provides financial assistance to LEAs and schools to ensure that disadvantaged and at-risk students meet demanding state academic standards. There are two types of Title I schools – those in which less than 40% of the student body comes from low SES backgrounds and those in which more than 40% of the student body comes from low SES backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

If low SES students comprise at least 40% of its student body, a Title I school may use Title I funds to operate a school-wide program that benefits the entire student body. On the other hand, if low SES students comprise less than 40% of a student body, a Title I school may use funds to operate an assistance program in which failing or at-risk students are identified and

targeted for remediation. Additionally, Title I fosters parent involvement as LEAs and schools receiving Title I funds are required to develop and implement a parent involvement policy. Therefore, the decision to solicit parent and professional participants from one Title I and one non-Title I elementary school will enable me to compare the experiences of middle class Black parents situated in an educational environment with a high percentage of students from low SES backgrounds with those experiences of their counterparts who are situated in an environment without a high percentage of students from low SES backgrounds.

A researcher studies a case by investigating its activities, as well as how it functions (Stake, 2006). To ensure that I satisfied this requirement, each case was constructed using data generated through parent interviews and interviews of educational practitioners and administrators. I constructed each case by soliciting parent participants through my professional connections with educational practitioners within the school district and my affiliation with a local clinic that serves children and adults with speech and language deficits. Once suitable parents agreed to participate, educational practitioners and administrators who serve the schools that the parents' children attend were solicited as professional participants. Thus for each parent who participated in this dissertation research, one local educational agency (LEA) representative and one additional member of a multidisciplinary team was interviewed.

The case researcher may serve in a variety of roles as she conducts her research, including that of a teacher, advocate, evaluator, biographer, and interpreter. As Stake (1995) suggests, it was important for me to make decisions continually about which roles are most appropriate throughout this dissertation research. My CRT lens obligated me to use my research to lay the foundation upon which the study participants would be empowered to transform the relationships among race, racism, and power within their educational communities.

The process of transformation involved me reaching both the middle class Black parents and educators involved in this research and liberating them from the subtle racist views that limit the parents' ability to effectively navigate on behalf of their children with disabilities, and prevent educators from truly collaborating with these parents to make the most appropriate educational decisions for children with disabilities. I strived to accomplish a more pervasive level of transformation as other parents, educational practitioners, educational administrators, and educational researchers read the final report of the results of this dissertation research. As such, throughout this research process, I served as both teacher and advocate.

I conducted in-depth interviews so that I was able to present the parent participants in a manner that highlights their commonalities and uniqueness, as well as the complexities inherent in their lives. During the processes of data generation, data analysis and the reporting of my findings, I served as interpreter, and to a lesser degree, evaluator.

A multiple case study research strategy shaped the procedures that I followed to generate and analyze data during this dissertation research. Additionally, I addressed quality criteria outlined by Lincoln (1995, as cited by Mertens, 1998). The specific aspects of multiple case study research implemented in this study, along with explanations as to how they relate to issues of quality, are addressed in detail in the Data Generation and Data Analysis sections of this chapter.

It was my aim to garner an understanding of middle class Black parents' participation in the special education process by chronicling their experiences as they navigate through it. For reasons previously mentioned, I used CRT as the perspective or theoretical lens that guided this dissertation research. The decision to use selected CRT tenets to create the research lens allowed me to explore the impact of institutional practices and educators' attitudes/beliefs on middle

class Black parents and their experiences throughout the special education process. Thus, CRT

and its usefulness in examining the complexities inherent in the lived experience validated my

decision to use multiple case study as a research strategy.

Quality Criteria

A number of authors (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002) offer criteria to be used

for judging the quality of qualitative research. It is particularly important for me to select a set of

quality criteria that complements the critical humanism paradigm and the CRT research lens that

I have selected. As previously mentioned, through this dissertation research I strived to liberate

both the research participants and the readers of my study's results from the myopic and unfair

views assigned to middle class Black parents. Therefore, it was appropriate for me to ensure that

this dissertation research satisfied the quality criteria associated with trustworthiness and

authenticity (Lincoln, 1995 as cited by Mertens, 1998).

Trustworthiness. To assist with one's ability to judge the quality and goodness of

qualitative inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability as elements that establish trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is

an ideal that charges a researcher to persuade her audience, and herself, that the findings of an

investigation are important enough to warrant attention and worthy of being taken into account.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), the trustworthiness of a qualitative line of inquiry is

judged by two interrelated sets of standards. Initial standards ensure that a line of inquiry reflects

acceptable and competent practice while the second ensure that a line of inquiry is conducted

ethically with sensitivity to the politics of topics and setting. Patton (2002, p. 542) asserts that

"quality and credibility are connected in that judgments of quality constitute the foundation for

perceptions of credibility." Furthermore, Patton (2002, p. 552) notes that credibility in qualitative

inquiry relies on three unique, but interconnected elements: (1) rigorous methods, (2) the credibility of the researcher, and (3) the philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry.

Credibility. A researcher must demonstrate "truth value" (i.e., credibility) by not only representing the multiple constructions of research participants adequately, but also demonstrate that the research findings and interpretations are convincing to research participants and her audience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is analogous to internal validity in conventional inquiry. I used the following strategies to ensure the credibility of this dissertation research: prolonged and substantial engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, member checks, and reflexive journaling.

Prolonged, substantial engagement. A researcher must spend enough time in the field so that she understands daily events in the ways that research participants interpret them (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). While there is no concrete rule that states how long a researcher must stay in the field, she should leave when she is confident that data and themes are repeating instead of extending her knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Mertens, 1998). I accomplished prolonged, substantial engagement by generating data until I had a complete picture of the parent participants' experiences in the process of the special education decision-making. I knew when the data captured the phenomenon in its totality when new data did not lead to new understanding. Thus, a point of theoretical saturation was reached.

Persistent observation. The researcher should observe long enough to identify the most relevant experiences, events, and relationships that can be used to explain or address the phenomenon being studied (Erlandson et al., 1993). Although this decision is based upon the nuances of a particular study, the researcher should avoid arriving at conclusions about a phenomenon without sufficient data (Mertens, 1998). I originally planned to accomplish

persistent observation by data type triangulation: analyzing participant interviews, participant

journals, and document reviews to generate data. However, I ultimately accomplished persistent

observation by thorough analyses of participant interviews as neither participant journals nor

document reviews proved to be viable ways to generate data. Additionally, I continued the

processes of data generation and analysis until I accomplished theoretical saturation.

Peer debriefing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that by addressing the credibility of a

study, one's research findings and interpretations should be convincing to research participants

and her audience. One way of accomplish this level of credibility is the use of peer debriefing.

The researcher should continually discuss research findings, conclusions, analysis, and

hypotheses with a disinterested party (Mertens, 1998). Peer debriefing is a procedure in which a

researcher uses a trusted colleague as a "sounding board" to address ethical dilemmas that may

arise or to share and validate descriptions and analysis of data as they are generated (Schwandt,

2001). I enlisted the assistance of one colleague who possesses a working knowledge of the topic

of this inquiry and who is well-versed in qualitative research methods to serve in this capacity.

We meet regularly throughout the processes of data generation and analysis. I documented our

meetings in the reflexive journal that I maintained throughout this dissertation study (see

Appendix E). Additionally, the chairperson of my dissertation committee also served in this

capacity via electronic communications.

Progressive subjectivity. It is important for the researcher to monitor her developing

constructions and document such changes from the beginning to the end of her research

(Mertens, 1998). By sharing this information with her peer debriefer, the researcher can ensure

that the research findings and her interpretation of those findings represent a complete picture of

the phenomenon, instead of being unfairly biased by her worldview. The reflexive journal that I maintained throughout this dissertation study will serve as evidence that this criterion was met.

Member checks. The researcher must confirm the data obtained by verifying with the participants the themes and constructions that develop as a result of data collection and analysis (Mertens, 1998). This is one of the most important elements of credibility. Evidence of continuous member checks are included in an audit trail that I documented throughout the implementation of this dissertation study.

Reflexive Journaling. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the implementation of this study (see Appendix E). A reflexive journal is a diary that is maintained by a researcher and is used to record pertinent information regarding the researcher herself and the methods used throughout the implementation of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflexive journal served as one piece of evidence that will be included in an audit trail that I maintained to document the implementation of this dissertation study.

Transferability. This aspect of trustworthiness is parallel to external validity in conventional inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure transferability, a researcher must provide her audience with adequate information on the case(s) studied so that other researchers can establish the degree of similarity between the case studied and the case to which findings might be transferred (Schwandt, 2001). I have accomplished transferability by providing *thick description*, an extensive and careful description of the time, place, context, and culture that is the phenomenon being studied (Mertens, 1998), in my report of study results. Additionally, as Yin (1984, as cited by Mertens, 1998) suggested, I further established transferability by presenting multiple cases.

Dependability. This quality element is parallel to reliability (Schwandt, 2001). To ensure the dependability of a study, a researcher must focus on the process of the investigation, making sure that it is logical, traceable, and documented. A dependability audit can be used to ensure that this quality criterion is accomplished (Mertens, 1998). Yin (1994 as cited by Mertens, 1998) describes the dependability audit as maintaining a case study protocol that details each step in the research process. Given the preliminary nature of this dissertation research, a dependability audit was not necessary. However, I documented the dependability trail so that an audit can be conducted as needed in the future.

Confirmability. This quality criterion is parallel to objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in conventional inquiry. To ensure the confirmability of a study, a researcher is concerned with establishing the fact that the data and their interpretations are not figments of the researcher's imagination (Schwandt, 2001). Additionally, the researcher should track data to their sources and make explicit the logic used to interpret the data (Mertens, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that a confirmability audit be used to prove that data can be traced to original sources and confirm that a process has been used to synthesize data. This "chain of evidence" can be conducted with in conjunction with the dependability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 1994 as cited by Mertens, 1998). Given the preliminary nature of this dissertation research, a confirmability audit is not necessary. However, a confirmability trail was created so that an audit can be conducted as needed in the future.

Authenticity. As previously mentioned, trustworthiness criteria are useful as one attempts to judge the quality and integrity of qualitative inquiry. However, Guba and Lincoln (1989) caution that the trustworthiness criteria are not sufficient to judge the quality and integrity of qualitative inquiry because: 1) since they are criteria which are parallel to conventional

notions of reliability and validity, they are rooted in positivist assumptions, and 2) they are first and foremost methodological criteria that ensure that a researcher has carried out the research process correctly.

While method is important for ensuring that research results are trustworthy, it does not sufficiently guarantee that the intent of a research study has been achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As such, Lincoln and Guba (1986 as cited by Guba & Lincoln, 1989), addressed this oversight by devising "authenticity criteria." The five aspects of authenticity include: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity.

Fairness. This element of authenticity refers to the extent to which respondents' different constructions of concerns and issues and their underlying values are solicited and represented in a balanced manner by a researcher (Schwandt, 2001). One technique by which fairness can be achieved involves the open negotiation of recommendations and of the agenda for subsequent action (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Mertens, 1998). A researcher can achieve fairness by obtaining informed consent from research participants, not only prior to data collection but throughout the research process. This is essential because as the researcher interacts with research participants, the power relationships will likely shift. Thus, consent must be renegotiated (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1989) assert that fairness requires the constant use of the member-check process, not only for the purpose of commenting on whether constructions have been received as intended, but also to give the research participants ample opportunities to comment on the fairness of the overall research process.

Fairness and ethics are ideals for which one should strive when conducting research. Ethics are standards for conduct based on moral principles (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 70). Prior to initiating the data generation phase of this study, I submitted a written description of it,

along with copies of a proposed informed consent form (see Appendix B) and interview guide

(see Appendix D) to the School of Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC) at the

College of William and Mary. As I recruited study participants, I met with each potential

participant, either in person, telephone, or electronic communication, to explain the purpose of

the study and how the data generated and collected throughout the study would be used.

Each participant signed an informed consent form (See Appendices B and C),

acknowledging the voluntary nature of his/her participation in this study. To protect each

participant's right to confidentiality, I used pseudonyms as I presented interpretations of the data

as research findings. Finally, a copy of the study's findings will be available for each participant

to review.

Ontological authenticity. This element of authenticity refers to the extent to which

respondents' individual constructions are enhanced or made to be more informed and

sophisticated as a result of their having participated in the inquiry (Schwandt, 2001). Guba and

Lincoln (1989) offer two strategies for demonstrating the achievement of ontological

authenticity. The first involves the testimony of selected participants. Secondly, the audit trail for

the inquiry should have entries of individual constructions recorded at different point in the

research process. These entries should include those of the researcher as well in order to

document *progressive subjectivity*. I used progressive subjectivity as a strategy to ensure the

ontological authenticity of this dissertation research. Additionally, I documented the

dependability and confirmability trails of this dissertation research so that an audit may be

conducted as needed.

Catalytic authenticity. This element of authenticity refers to the extent to which action is

stimulated and facilitated by the inquiry process (Schwandt, 2001). Guba and Lincoln (1989)

present three techniques for assuring that catalytic authenticity has been established. First, the testimony of participants should be made available. Second, "when action is jointly negotiated, it should follow that action is 'owned' by the participants and therefore more willingly carried out" (p. 250). Finally, within a specified amount of time, systematic follow-up should occur to assess the extent to which action and change have taken place as result of the inquiry. To ensure the catalytic authenticity of this dissertation research, I will give each participant a copy of the final dissertation report for review and invite them to participate in a project debriefing.

Educative authenticity. This element of authenticity refers to the extent to which participants in an inquiry develop greater understanding and appreciation of the constructions of others (Schwandt, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1989) recommend two techniques for establishing whether or not educative authenticity has been achieved. Using the first technique, a researcher obtains the testimonies of selected participants to confirm that they have comprehended and understood the constructions of others different from themselves. The second technique involves ensuring that the audit trail contains entries related to the developing understanding as seen through exchanges throughout the research process. To ensure the educative authenticity of this dissertation research, I will give each participant a copy of the final dissertation report for review and invite them to participate in a project debriefing.

Tactical authenticity. This element of authenticity refers to the extent to which participants in the inquiry are empowered to act (Schwandt, 2001). As I analyzed the data obtained via interviews and record reviews, I developed an initial sense of how and if the participants are compelled to act. Additionally, I will give each participant a copy of the final dissertation report for review.

Emancipatory criteria. Mertens (1998) offers additional quality criteria for research designed within an emancipatory paradigm. Although this inquiry is not situated in an emancipatory paradigm per se, critical humanism holds that an individual's consciousness is the vehicle through which groups can be emancipated from dominating and imprisoning social processes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 46). The noted similarity between the emancipatory paradigm and critical humanism provides a rationale for my decision to apply these additional quality criteria to this study. The specific elements of the emancipatory criteria include: positionality, community, attention to voice, critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and sharing perquisites of privilege.

Positionality or standpoint. Lincoln (1995, as cited by Mertens, 1998) asserts that no researcher can claim to present all possible truths, because each research endeavor reflects the specific standpoint of its author. Therefore, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the implementation of this study (See Appendix E for excerpts.). As previously mentioned, a reflexive journal is a diary used by a researcher to record relevant information regarding the researcher herself and the methodological decisions made throughout the implementation of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, to further meet this criterion, I developed a written product in which I share with potential readers my worldview and past experiences directly related to the research focus (see Appendix A).

Community. Lincoln (1995, as cited by Mertens, 1998) notes that research taking place within a community impacts the community. As such, I should be familiar enough with the community within which this research is situated to link the results to positive action within that community. Although I am not a parent, I am a Black woman who identifies herself as a member of the middle class. Additionally, I am a speech-language pathologist who has been intimately

involved with the various stages of the special education process. Therefore, I possess familiarity with the community within which this research was situated and possessed the background knowledge necessary to link the research findings to positive action within the community.

Attention to voice. The researcher must be mindful of whose voice is reflected in her work. Additionally, she must seek out those who are silent and involve those who are marginalized (Mertens, 1998). Given the focus and intent of this dissertation research, I fulfilled this quality component.

Critical reflexivity. The researcher should have a heightened self-awareness of personal transformation and critical subjectivity (Mertens, 1998). Given the critical nature of this dissertation research, critical subjectivity will be incorporated. Additionally, critical reflexivity is evident as one considers the important role that reflexive journaling has played in surfacing the study's results.

Reciprocity. The researcher should demonstrate that the methods used throughout the study allowed her to develop a sense of trust and mutuality with the study's participants (Mertens, 1998). I carefully considered the importance of reciprocity and incorporated the following elements in the research design to satisfy this quality criterion: EDIRC approval of study, informed consent, member checking, and the use of pseudonyms to maintain participants' confidentiality. Additionally, each participant will be given a copy of the study's findings and will be invited to participate in a project debriefing.

Sharing perquisites of privilege. The researcher should be willing to share in the benefits that result from doing the research (Mertens, 1998). This dissertation study is an educational task that was completed to fulfill the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the College of William and Mary. As such, this criterion is not applicable to this study at this time.

I must carefully consider the quality criteria that have been discussed as they support the integrity of this dissertation study. Moreover, these quality criteria shaped the process of data generation.

Data Generation

Case data consists of all of the information collected about an entity or setting, for which a case study is to be written (Patton, 2002). The data generated from the participants through interviews are the raw data that serve as the basis for each case study that I present. Building on the accumulation of raw case data, I constructed four case records. A case record is a synopsis of the raw case data organized, classified, and edited into a manageable and accessible file (Patton, 2002). I wrote a final narrative for each case study organized by emerging themes. I used peer debriefing and member checking to ensure that each case study provided an easy-to-read, accurate and vivid description that facilitated the reader's thorough understanding of the case.

Data generation provides the qualitative researcher with the raw material needed to construct reality in a manner consistent and compatible with the constructions of the research participants (Erlandson et. al, 1993). It is through the participants' perspectives that a qualitative researcher is able to not only understand a phenomenon but critique and aim to change it (Patton, 2002, p. 131). As such, a researcher must carefully consider possible information sources in her aim to answer her research questions. Examining information-rich cases provides insights and in-depth understandings that are important to the qualitative researcher (Patton, 2002).

Sampling. Purposeful sampling is an approach that lends itself to my goals of recruiting participants whose insights and involvement are relevant to this dissertation research. Although Erlandson et al. (1993) identify the determination of sample size as an important part of purposeful sampling, Patton (2002) asserts that there are no rules for sample size. Since CRT

was used as a theoretical lens for this dissertation research, I acknowledged both the importance

and power associated with telling the stories of individuals who have been previously unheard.

To this end, I was obligated to go beyond merely collecting relevant details about the

lives of middle class Black parents involved in the special education process, and interpret the

circumstances, meaning, intentions and other nuances that characterize this phenomenon

(Schwandt, 2001).Considering the small-scale nature of this dissertation research and my focus

as a qualitative researcher on the quality, depth and richness of the information I generate over

the quantity of data, a reasonable sample size was four. Therefore, the parent participant group

consisted of the middle class Black parents of four Black students. The students about whom

they talked were elementary-aged children who had been identified as being individuals with

disabilities as outlined by the IDEA 2004.

The number of students who receive free and/or reduced lunch is used determine low

SES status in schools that receive Title I funding. Similarly, income is often used to define the

middle class (Lacy, 2007). However, income level alone does not sufficiently capture the nature

of middle class status within the Black community. The Black middle class is a heterogeneous

group whose members represent a broad range of income levels, occupations, educational levels,

and lifestyles (Coner-Edwards & Edwards, 1988). Additionally Lacy (2007) asserts that the

social identities used by individuals within the Black community should be a standard element in

the definition of the Black middle class. Simply stated, to develop a complete picture of the

Black middle class, it is important to explore how and why a Black individual considers himself

to be middle class. Therefore, each parent participant was a self-identified member of the middle

class. During my initial interviews, I asked the parent participants to explain why they consider

themselves to be members of the middle class. Research participants were recruited from three

public elementary schools within one urban school district in the southeastern region of the United States.

Snowball, or chain sampling was a process by which a qualitative researcher locates key informants by obtaining leads from "well situated" individuals (Patton, 2002). My former affiliation with two school districts, as well as my professional contacts within the fields of education and speech-language pathology, made my decision to use a snowball sampling strategy feasible and sound. I contacted the entities within each school district responsible for reviewing and approving research proposals. Once the research proposal was accepted by my dissertation committee and I applied for and received human subjects approval through the College of William and Mary, I applied to conduct research with each school district. In each application I explained the purpose of the study, the instrumentation used, how participant selection would occur, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. Additionally, I requested permission to contact principals and assistant principals within the school district.

Upon the granting of permission, I contacted (by telephone or e-mail) elementary school principals and/or assistant principals with whom I am acquainted. I explained the purpose of this research and other specifics in an aim to enlist their participation in this research. This strategy did not yield sufficient contact with potential parent participants who would be suitable for this study. Therefore, I received formal permission to solicit potential parent participants through the speech-language-hearing clinic to which I have a professional affiliation. Through this process, I identified four suitable parents who agreed to be study participants. From there, I contacted LEAs, special education teachers, general education teachers, and speech-language pathologists who worked in some capacity, either directly or indirectly, with the children of the parent participants. In addition to a verbal explanation of my research study, I gave each potential

participant a copy of a letter of solicitation, ask them to review it, and contact me with additional questions or concerns that they may have had (see Appendix B).

Description of the parent participants. Each of the parent participants met the following demographic criteria: (1) Black parents who have children receiving special education services, and (2) Individuals who are ineligible for free and/or reduced lunch. A more detailed description of the parent participants will be provided in Chapter 4.

The researcher as instrument. The primary instrument in qualitative research such as this is the researcher herself (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Therefore, it was important for me to be honest and forthcoming about any beliefs, attitudes, and personal experiences (past and present) that may impact my interpretations of the data generated in this study. To this end, I wrote a Researcher as An Instrument (RAI) statement (see Appendix A). I have shared this document with my dissertation committee members and referred to it throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of this study. By doing so I acknowledged that my worldview as a Black woman, and my perspective as a special educator who is pursuing a Ph.D. in special education administration, has impacted how I have interpreted the data and formed the results of the study.

According to the "Principles of Good Practice" as outlined by Rossman and Rallis (2003), researchers must display ethical sensitivity of potential consequences of the study to participants. Before participating in the study, I met with each participant (either in person or by phone) to answer any questions or address any concerns that they may have had regarding how the data I collected would be used and reported. Additionally, I gave each participant a detailed consent form, outlining their rights and responsibilities as participants in the research study (See Appendix E). After obtaining informed consent of each participant, I begin to generate data.

Data generation methods. Data generation is a systematic and deliberate process

(Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Schwandt, 2001). As a process of inquiry, data generation has purpose

and the quality of the data depends on asking appropriate questions to yield the answers one

seeks. Therefore, I generated data through the use of in-depth interviews.

Through interviews, the qualitative researcher is privy to participants' understandings of

the meanings in their lived world and their descriptions of their experiences and self-

understandings as they clarify and elaborate their own perspectives (Kvale, 1996). Thus, as

Rossman and Rallis (2003, p. 180) state, "interviewing takes you into the participants' worlds."

The individual interviews provided me with the data necessary to understand the perspective and

experiences related to the special education process that encompassed the participants' stories.

Moreover, the interviews allowed me to understand and present the multiple realities represented

by each case (Stake, 1995). Using an interview guide, I interviewed each parent participant at

least two times throughout the span that the dissertation study was implemented. I used a

previously prepared interview guide to conduct the first set of interviews (see Appendix D). I

used the first interviews to determine which topics I should be investigated more thoroughly and

the direction and tone that my subsequent conversations with the participants would take. Based

on the initial analysis of data obtained during the first interviews, I developed individualized

interview guides for the second (and if warranted, additional) interviews with each participant.

An interview guide is a document that establishes the topics to be covered in an interview

and the sequence in which the topics are presented (Kvale, 1996). An interview guide was

created to provide basic structure to the interviews. A semi-structured interview format was used.

For the purposes of this dissertation research, the semi-structured interview guide consisted of an

outline of topics to be addressed with possible questions accompanying each topic. This allowed

me to present open-ended questions to the participants, and based on the participants' responses, ask follow-up questions that were specific to the individual participant. Each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length.

I made this methodological decision with both myself and the participants in mind. Kvale (1996) suggests that a semi-structured format assists with later data analysis. Therefore, this methodological decision afforded me the structural benefit that was helpful to me as a novice researcher while simultaneously providing the participants with the latitude to freely share their thoughts. Moreover, the semi-structured format provided the flexibility necessary for me to make the "asymmetry of power" that traditionally characterizes the relationship between the interviewer and respondent more balanced.

The success of using the interview as a means of data collection is determined in part by the researcher's careful listening and recording of the data (Erlandson et al., 1993). The questions that the researcher poses also determine the type and specificity of the data obtained. I used the following six question types, offered by Patton (1980, as cited by Erlandson et al., 1993) to gather data during the interview process: (1) experience/behavior, (2) opinion/value, (3) feeling, (4) knowledge, (5) sensory, and (6) background/demographic.

I used experience/behavior questions to elicit the participants' descriptions of their experiences, behaviors, actions, and activities as they are involved in the special education process. Opinion/value questions allowed me to explore the participants' intentions, values and desire as they discuss what they think about the special education process in general and their involvement in it. I incorporated feeling questions to uncover the emotions that accompany the participants' involvement in the special education process. The use of sensory questions allowed me to uncover some of the tacit, unspoken information and observations that the participants

used to shape their understanding of the special education process and their involvement in it. Finally, knowledge and background/demographic questions provided me with both the factual and personal details needed for me to have a complete understanding of the information shared by the participants.

Interview questions and in turn, the interview process can be evaluated thematically and dynamically (Kvale, 1996). From a thematic standpoint, to ensure that the interviews I conducted were relevant to the topic of inquiry, I drew on the literature discussed in Chapter 2 to develop an outline of relevant topics to be covered, with suggested questions (see Appendix D). Similarly, to ensure that I established and maintained positive interpersonal relationships with the participants throughout the interview process, I allotted a sufficient amount of time before, during and after the interview process to establish positive rapport with the participants. An important component of this rapport building included obtaining informed consent and reviewing the confidentiality statement just before the beginning of each interview session. To this end, I also enhanced the interview guide by spontaneously including questions and/or comments that promoted positive interaction; kept the flow of the conversation going; and motivated the participants to freely and honestly discuss their feelings and experiences (Kvale, 1996). Given the sensitive nature of this research topic, the latter was particularly important when interviewing the professional participants.

The first interview focused on establishing the context or situation in which each parent participant experienced their involvement in the special education process, as well as the nature of each parent participant's personal and social interactions with professionals within the context. Additionally, I facilitated a process in which parent participants recalled their past experiences with the special education process, examined their current experiences as parents of

children who have been identified or suspected of having disabilities, and anticipated the future. I used the data obtained through the first parent interviews to identify topics and subtopics to be covered in the interview sessions with the professionals and develop an interview guide.

Once participants agreed to participate in the study, they chose pseudonyms that were used throughout the study. Prior to each interview, I reviewed an informed consent form with each parent participant (see Appendix B) and professional participant (see Appendix C). Through these documents, the study participants were provided with an overview of the study, ensured the confidentiality of the sensitive information that was shared, and requested permission for the interview to be audio-taped. The informed consent document was signed immediately before the interview began. Immediately after each interview, I made extensive notes to document everything that I remember and to capture my impressions of the collected data. Patton (2002, p. 383) suggests that this strategy is helpful in uncovering any area of uncertainty or ambiguity. To ensure that I collected interview data with fidelity, each interview was audio taped and transcribed in a timely manner. An assistant was hired to prepare the typewritten transcripts. To ensure the confidentiality, I took care to hire an individual who did not have an affiliation with the school district and was unfamiliar with subject matter. Furthermore, the assistant signed a confidentiality agreement. To ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, I reviewed them and prepared transcript summaries that I asked the participants to review.

Member checking, the most important technique in establishing credible study results, allows participants to verify information, interpretations, and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et. al, 1993). Given that member checking is an on-going necessity when a researcher aims to produce credible study results; I member checked throughout the interview

process. During both interviews, I verified the information and my interpretations of that information by providing an oral summary that served to close one topic of conversation and lead into the next topic. This approach also assisted with the flow of the conversation. During the second interview, I also verified the information gathered in the first interview, along with my interpretations. At the end of each interview, I summarized the information shared and gave the participant an opportunity to clarify or correct any misinformation or misinterpretations. Within a reasonable amount of time, each interview was transcribed and an official interview transcript and interview summary was prepared. Another level of member checking occurred when I provided the participants with interview summaries for correction, leading to final confirmation of accuracy and approval.

At the end of each interview, I asked each parent participant to share any documents that they had compiled throughout their navigation of the special education process on behalf of their children. I was interested in seeing documents such as: multidisciplinary team meeting minutes, child study team minutes, eligibility meeting minutes, individualized education plans (IEPs), progress reports, and any written correspondence between the participant and educational professionals. None of the parent participants opted to provide this additional documentation.

I also asked parent participants to provide written records of their experiences and insights through journals that they would maintain throughout their participation in the study. Specifically, I asked the parent participants to write an entry at least once a week during the span of this dissertation study and submit their journals at the end of the last interview. I planned to read each journal, develop initial impressions of the content, and prepare summaries of each journal that I would member check with the participants electronically or by phone. None of the parent participants opted to participate in this additional process of data generation.

My reason for asking parent participants to submit these documents and records was twofold. The triangulation of data from multiple sources (participants) lends itself to thick description. Schwandt (2001, p. 255) also contends that to thickly describe social action is to interpret it by recording the characteristics that encompass an event or phenomenon. Thus, using data of different types generated and collected through interviews, document reviews, and record reviews was a sound methodological decision. Furthermore, the journals were intended to facilitate, in part, the catalytic authenticity of this research, remaining true to the assumptions associated with critical humanism and the underlying purpose of critical race theory as a theoretical lens. Despite the unavailability of the supporting documents (i.e., special education paperwork) and records (i.e., journals), I believe that by virtue of their participation in this study, each participant obtained insights and information that sparked a process of enlightenment and emancipation. Ultimately, through my implementation of this dissertation study, I, too, was enlightened and have begun to be emancipated from the remnants of tacit racial injustice that persists in the field of special education, as well as educational and administrative practice.

As I worked to narrow the focus of this dissertation study, I created a reflexive journal (see Appendix E). I continued to use this reflexive journal to document my reflections and chronicle the methodological decisions that I made throughout this dissertation research. As I found the reflexive journal to be a safe place for me to brainstorm and examine how my personal beliefs, experiences, and bias undoubtedly colored my interpretation of subsequent research findings, the practice of journaling bolstered the trustworthiness (specifically, the credibility and confirmability) of this study's results.

As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the reflexive journal was divided into the following three areas of focus: (1) the daily schedule and logistics of the study; (2) a personal

diary; and (3) a methodological log. Consistent with the suggestions offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I journaled about my personal reflections on a daily basis and made entries in the methodological log as needed. Thus, I used reflexive journaling as a technique to ensure the quality of this study by recording my rationale for generating particular data, behaving in particular ways and developing particular conclusions (Schwandt, 2001).

Additionally, the reflexive journal became the product through which a dependability and confirmability audit will be possible. By including the reflexive journal as one component of the audit trail, I provided documentation and a running account of the research process. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is appropriate for the dependability and confirmability audits to be conducted simultaneously. However, given the preliminary nature of this dissertation research, dependability and confirmability audits are not necessary. An audit trail was documented so that an audit can be conducted as needed in the future.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 278). I constructed four case studies using the following steps offered by Patton (2002): (1) assemble the raw data, (2) construct a case record, and (3) write a final case study narrative.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) cautioned that data analysis is not a distinctive phase that occurs at a specific time in the qualitative research process. Instead, since data collection and analysis are intricately linked to one another, the beginning of data analysis must coincide with the beginning of data collection. As previously mentioned, I garnered an understanding of middle class Black parents' participation in special education decision-making by generating data from in-depth interviews. In the initial stage of data analysis, I used a constant comparative

method of analysis. Given my use of CRT as a research lens, I conduct a CRT analysis after I completed the process of constant comparative coding.

The procedures that I used to analyze the interviews were consistent with the constant comparative method first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further delineated by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Coding is one of the key processed included in the constant comparative method (Dey, 1999). Coding involves organizing a large amount of data, breaking it down into manageable units, and naming those units (Schwandt, 2001). My research question guided the coding process throughout this inquiry in that I systematically processed the raw data to make sense of middle class Black parents' participation in special education decision-making. Neuman (1997, p. 422) asserts that the coding process is actually two activities: mechanical data reduction and analytic categorization of data. These activities occur simultaneously, converting a large a body of raw data into "manageable piles" which facilitates the quick retrieval of relevant information. I used the following three coding procedures throughout data generation and analysis: 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding.

Open coding is the first phase in processing raw data. During open coding, I examined raw data generated through participant interviews and journals. While doing so I began to identify initial themes, key events, or terms in an attempt to organize the data into smaller, manageable chunks (Neuman, 1997). As I processed the data in this manner, I began to generate initial codes. A code is a label used to assign units of meaning to chunks of information (Miles & Hubermann, 1994, p. 56). Neuman (1997) notes that open coding helps illuminate initial themes that are at a low level of abstraction. Open coding encouraged me to immerse myself in the data as I coded the data in every conceivable way and organized the data so that it was included in as

many categories that appeared to fit (Dey, 1999). The discrete idea was used as the unit of analysis for the open coding process.

A researcher may code with varying levels of detail. The level of detail depends on the purpose of one's research, the research question, and the richness of the data (Neuman, 1997). The focus of this inquiry (i.e., middle class Black parents' participation in special education decision-making) is related to poor student achievement and disproportionality – two topics that have been of concern for some time in the educational arena. As such, I anticipated generating rich data from participants because the focus of this inquiry was both of great interest to the participants and was a process in which the participants were deeply immersed. Throughout the open coding process, I coded every distinct idea captured in the participant interview. By doing so, my initial codes sufficiently facilitated the next level of coding, axial coding.

Axial coding is the process of using inductive and deductive thinking to relate codes to one another (Borgatti, n.d.). During this phase of the coding process, I put the data back together in new ways by making connections between categories and labels that I identified through open coding (Dey, 1999). I started with an organized list of initial codes maintained in a codebook. In addition to reviewing initial codes, I refined them by exploring ways that broad categories could be divided into subdivisions (Neuman, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These refined categories were necessary for the last stage of coding.

Selective coding is the last phase of coding that involves integrating and refining categories into theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this phase, the researcher scans the data and examines previous codes to selectively identify cases that illustrate themes. Thus, the researcher integrates initial theories and earlier coding to illuminate major themes of inquiry (Neuman, 1997). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 146) note that the first step in integration is

deciding on a central category that represents the main theme of an inquiry. The central category

is key to data analysis because it enables the researcher to merge categories to form an

"exploratory whole." By delimiting the coding to only those variables that relate closely to core

categories, selective coding facilitates the emergence of theory (Dey, 1999). Diagrams and

memos, two techniques that I used throughout the coding process, facilitated the integration

process in selective coding.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) note that writing memos and creating diagrams, two important

aspects of data analysis, should begin in the initial stages of data analysis and be continued

throughout the research process. Memoing is an analytic procedure used to explain or elaborate

the coded categories that a researcher develops in her analysis of data (Dey, 1999). These written

records of analysis may vary in type and form (Schwandt, 2001). A memo is a short document

that a researcher writes to herself as she proceeds through the processes of data analysis

(Borgatti, n.d.). Neuman (1997, p. 425) notes that the analytic memo serves as the connection

between raw data and abstract theoretical thinking. As I engaged in each level of coding, I wrote

memos to myself about the codes that developed and enhanced the coding process in general.

Diagrams are visual devices that depict the relationships among concepts (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Diagrams both helped me organize my thoughts and ideas related to the data and

clearly identify connections within the data (Neuman, 1997). Simply stated, I used diagrams

throughout the coding process as visual representations of the data that enabled me to see the

whole phenomenon as well as its parts.

The practice of creating memos and diagrams is unique to the individual researcher and

Strauss and Corbin (1998) encourage researchers to develop their own procedures and strategies

that suit their specific needs. I set aside time after each interview to write memos and construct

diagrams in my attempt to synthesize, conceptualize and make sense of the data as I collected

them. These memos and diagrams were maintained in my reflexive journal. This methodological

decision was appropriate because memos and diagrams forced me to resist the temptation of

focusing primarily on the raw data and hone in on the conceptualization of the data (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998).

After I conduct the first set of interviews, I completed the first wave of data analysis

using a constant comparative method. Based on my analysis of the initial data, I conducted the

second set of interviews. Based on my analysis of the second wave of interviews, I conducted

subsequent interviews if needed. Finally, I continued to analyze the data until theoretical

saturation was reached. As explained earlier, theoretical saturation is the point at which new data

or concepts bolster existing codes and do not generate new theory (Dey, 1999). Once the process

of constant comparative coding was complete, I conducted a CRT analysis by using select CRT

tenets (i.e., the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the

critique of liberalism) to further clarify the primary findings of the study.

Intended Audience

This dissertation research is intended for middle class Black parents who have been or

will be involved in the special education process on behalf of their children, as well as

educational researchers. I hope that my work has legitimized the perceptions, feelings, and

experiences shared by middle class Black parents while demonstrating the heterogeneity that

exists even within this often-silenced subgroup of the Black parent population. I would like

Black parents to think about how what happens within the processes of educating their children

has not only lasting personal impact, but social impact as well.

It is my hope that the voices that helped me to illuminate this research focus serve to reinforce the fact that a "one size fits all" approach to interacting with Black parents throughout the special education process is inappropriate. Ultimately, I am hopeful that through this work I have added to the knowledge and skill base of educational practitioners, leaders, and researchers. I intended to show how myopic views of this parent subgroup minimize the value and positive impact that they can and do have and make in the lives of their children. I challenge the readers of my study's results to maintain open minds, conduct honest assessments of their views and current professional practices, and be brave enough to make changes that the results have inspired.

Chapter 4

Results

The methods of data generation and analysis that were detailed in Chapter 3 yielded study results that are the focus of this chapter. Critical race theory (CRT) tenets that establish the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism (Bell, 2008; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) created the research lens through which the collective experiences of the parent participants as they engaged in special education decision-making were seen and interpreted. The results converged around three patterns that will be presented as primary findings.

The first primary finding clarified the ways in which power shaped interactions between the parent participants and professionals. The second primary finding illuminated the structural issues that influenced the manner in which the parent participants were included in the process of special education decision-making. The third primary finding demonstrated that Black, middle-class parents' involvement in special education decision-making is influenced by how they perceive themselves and their professional decision-making partners. These findings will be detailed later in this chapter.

In order to appreciate the importance of the study's findings, readers should be able to situate the experiences of the parent participants within authentic contexts. To this end, the following sections will provide a brief description of the geographic area and school district within which this dissertation study was conducted; and introductory information about the study participants.

Site of Study

Sunnyside is a suburban city in a southeastern state with a population of approximately 165,000 citizens. The median household income is $55,000. Approximately 50% of the adult population (18 years old and older) is married. Approximately 48% of the population is White, while 48% is Black and 2% are classified as other to include Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American. Roughly 60% of the population aged 25 years and older have attained educational levels that surpass the high school diploma, with 25% of this group holding the bachelor's degree or higher. Sunnyside is home to one major university, one community college system, and a number of satellite locations for major universities outside of the area. Of the total Sunnyside population, 45,000 are preschool and school-aged children. The local public school district, Sunnyside Public Schools, serves more than 50% of the preschool and school-aged population.

The School District

I chose to situate this study in one school district, Sunnyside Public Schools, so that I could highlight the contextual variations that exist within one school district and how those variations result in marked differences in the experiences of Black, middle-class parents involved in special education decision-making. Sunnyside Public Schools is a midsize school district that is comprised of 22 facilities that serve elementary aged students. Students with disabilities as defined by IDEA 2004 comprise approximately 15% of the elementary student population. The racial composition of Sunnyside's student population mirrors that of the city's residents. Sunnyside Public Schools was a very suitable venue within which to conduct this study because it is situated in a community that is known for being home to a large population of upwardly mobile Black citizens.

Black parents who identified themselves as middle-class and whose children were involved in the special education process were recruited from schools throughout the Sunnyside School District. A group of participants who best reflected the range of the Black, middle-class parent subgroup were selected. It was through this selection process that the specific school sites were identified, since the children of the parent participants attended different schools. By conducting the study in multiple school sites within the same school district, I could observe the nuances and complexities inherent in multiple implementations of the same special education decision-making process in different locations within the same organization. Thus, the children of the parent participants attended three schools within the Sunnyside Public School district.

Daybreak Elementary is a neighborhood school with a Title I distinction that serves 388 elementary-aged students. Approximately 49% of the students at Daybreak Elementary are Black, with approximately 49% being White, and the remaining 1% being of Hispanic and Asian descent. Students with disabilities compromise approximately 10% of the student population.

Twilight Elementary is a neighborhood school with a Title I distinction that serves 550 elementary-aged students. Approximately 80% of the students at Twilight Elementary are Black, with approximately 15% being White, and the remaining 5% being of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American descent. Students with disabilities compromise approximately 27% of the student population.

Horizons Elementary is a neighborhood school without a Title I distinction that serves 614 elementary-aged students. Approximately 65% of its student population is Black, with approximately 25% being White, and the remaining 10% being of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American descent. Students with disabilities compromise approximately 18% of the student population.

Study Participants

The parents were the first group of participants who volunteered to take part in this study. Once the parent participants were identified, I contacted professionals from each school to recruit professional participants. Since the special education decision-making process was the focal point of this investigation, it was important that the professional participants represent the cadre of professionals who typically serve on multidisciplinary special education decision-making teams.

In addition to the parent(s), the multidisciplinary team is comprised of professionals who work either directly or indirectly with the student in question. Local educational agency representatives (LEAs) represent the professionals who are integral in the provision of services to students even though they do not have direct and regular contact with students. For example, the LEA possesses the authority to determine how school resources (i.e., equipment, personnel, etc.) are allocated on behalf of students. Additionally, the practitioners are those professionals who work directly with the student in question. Classroom teachers and speech-language pathologists are often valuable members of the multidisciplinary team because they provide specific descriptions and details of the academic and social behaviors that students display on a daily basis. The study's participants were selected to represent the multidisciplinary teams that would be involved in special education decision-making at each of the three participating school sites.

To this end, Daybreak Elementary is represented in this study by a parent (Jessica), an educational practitioner (Cheryl), and an LEA (Nan). Twilight Elementary is represented by a parent (Brenda), an educational practitioner (Lisa), and an LEA (Jean). Horizons Elementary is

represented by the parents (Sofia and Malcolm) of two students with disabilities, an educational

practitioner (Michelle), and a LEA (Deborah).

The Parents

The parent participants consist of three women and one man who parent children with

disabilities. They vary in age, marital status, and in the amount of time that they have been

involved in special education decision-making. The parent participants seem to reflect the

diversity that exists within the Black, middle class subset of parents with children who receive

special education services in the district. Moreover, as demonstrated by the biographical

summaries that follow, each parent possesses characteristics and insights that influence their

unique experiences as special education decision-makers. All names are pseudonymous.

Jessica: "My son needs help and either you are going to get it for him or I am going downtown!"

Jessica. Parent participant Jessica is a 39 year-old Black woman who has been divorced

for a number of years. While she holds a bachelor's degree in special education, she has a

lucrative career as a hair stylist and cosmetology instructor. She is a single parent of three

children. Jessica strives for her children to be independent and self-sufficient.

Jessica's oldest child, a daughter, is in high school. Jessica's middle child, a son, is in

middle school, while her youngest son is in elementary school. Jessica describes her children as

well-behaved and well-rounded young people in whom she has instilled the importance of

education. Her two oldest children appear to be successful academically with relative ease, while

her youngest, Anthony, struggles academically, despite his hard work. Perhaps because of her

training in special education, Jessica first noticed that Anthony presented with reading

difficulties and behaviors indicative of hyperactivity when he was in the first grade. After a long

period of collaboration and consultation with Anthony's classroom teachers and his pediatrician,

Jessica requested and eventually secured school-based special education services for Anthony.

Anthony is an eight-year-old who has a diagnosis of a specific learning disability (SLD)

and attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). As indicated by his current individualized

education plan (IEP), Anthony receives special education services under programming for

students with specific learning disabilities. He is currently educated in a modified self-contained,

cross-categorical special education classroom housed in Daybreak Elementary.

Views of parent involvement. Jessica believes that effective parent involvement in a

child's education does not entail a parent volunteering in the classroom or attending every

school-sponsored event. Instead, she believes that she demonstrates effective parent involvement

by being a strong advocate for Anthony, ensuring that he receives the services needed for his

academic and social growth.

Views of education. Jessica views education as the vehicle through which her children

can become independent and self-sufficient adults. Yet she also notes that society in general does

not place the same emphasis on the value of an education as it did in the past.

Views of special education. Jessica believes that special education was originally

intended to adapt general education curriculum so that the needs of students with learning

differences or emotional difficulties could be met. Additionally, she believes that because

eligibility criteria are often interpreted too broadly, students who are not in need of special

education services may be found eligible. As a child, Jessica was suspected of being in need of

special education services for students with emotional disturbance. She reported that the

problems that were considered to be consistent with a possible emotional disturbance were

actually related to her teacher's lack of effective classroom management. Jessica was ultimately

found to be academically advanced and ineligible for special education services. She acknowledges that her early personal experience with the special education process has shaped her experience as a parent navigating the process, causing her to be skeptical of education professionals and their levels of expertise.

Brenda: "There's not a lot of power in being a parent in the special education process."

Brenda. Parent participant Brenda is a Black woman in her early 30s who is a full-time homemaker. She holds an associate's degree in accounting and works occasionally as a freelance bookkeeper as her schedule permits. She served in the United States Navy until 2004. Brenda's husband, a White man, is a petty officer, first class in the United States Navy with aspirations to become a chief petty officer in the near future. Brenda is the mother of two sons.

Brenda's youngest son, a kindergarten student, is currently being considered for Sunnyside's program for gifted and talented children. Her oldest son, Nick, is a 10-year-old fifth grader who has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Nick has also been identified as being gifted and talented. While in hindsight Brenda noticed uneven development in Nick's language and social skills early in his life, his superior reading and pre-academic skills overshadowed any concerns that she had initially. As more social and language demands were placed on Nick, however, his areas of deficit became more apparent. Eventually, Nick was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome when he was preschool-aged.

Nick currently attends Twilight School. As indicated by his IEP, Nick receives special education services under programming for students with autism spectrum disorder. Though Nick is educated in a general education classroom setting, he receives consultative services from a special education teacher and direct speech-language therapy services.

Views of parent involvement. Brenda associates effective parent involvement with a parent's ability and willingness to regularly communicate with school personnel. Additionally, she believes that the better the communication is between the parent and school personnel, the higher the likelihood is that a student will excel academically.

Views of education. Brenda is a self-proclaimed "lifelong learner" who prides herself on instilling the love of education in her children. Moreover, she asserts that the attainment of education should enable people to achieve the heights of their potential, both academically and socially.

Views of special education. Brenda believes that special education comprises services that prepare students to function appropriately in a "regular" classroom and have access to the general education curriculum. Additionally, while she sees definite educational benefit associated with special education, Brenda also noted that people often believe that people with disabilities are unable to succeed academically or socially. Therefore, she views the tendency for educators to have low academic and social expectations for students with disabilities as a disadvantage that haunts recipients of special education services.

> Sofia: "I see myself as in charge. I see everybody as working for me...as executing part of my plan. I am in charge and your title doesn't mean much if you aren't doing what I want you to do."

Sofia. Parent participant Sofia is a 49-year-old Black woman who is a married mother of three and full-time homemaker. Sofia holds a bachelor's degree in education and has some teaching experience. Since her husband is an educator who commutes daily to another town, Sofia is primarily responsible for managing the children's educational needs. She consults with her husband about this work, however. Max, the youngest of Sofia's three sons, is a six-year-old

who has been diagnosed with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder. He currently attends Horizons Elementary. As indicated in his IEP, Max is educated on a full-time basis in a self-contained, cross-categorical classroom. He also receives consultative physical therapy and direct speech/language and occupational therapies as related services.

Views of parent involvement. Sofia considers effective parent involvement to be twofold. On one hand, she sees it as being an active and vocal participant in the decision-making processes that affect every facet of Max's educational career. On the other hand, she believes that parent involvement entails providing support for anything that the classroom teacher may be doing with Max.

Views of education. While Sofia does not have a working definition of education, she believes that it is closely related to the process of learning. Additionally, she believes that personal satisfaction, monetary benefits, and status are the benefits of having an education.

Views of special education. Sofia believes that special education is a legal requirement that varies based on the abilities of the population served, recognizing that individuals with learning differences have the right to receive the same high-quality education as typically developing individuals. Sofia believes that the bureaucracy involved in the implementation of special education programming, along with a teaching workforce lacking up-to-date training in these areas of professional knowledge, are marked disadvantages associated with special education programming.

> Malcolm: "With any trials and tribulations, you don't run from it. You don't avoid it. You deal with it with the strength that God gives you. You plan and constantly strive for improvements with diplomacy."

Malcolm. Parent participant Malcolm is a 38 year-old Black man who is the single parent of one son, Taylor. Having previously served in the United States Navy, Malcolm currently works as a healthcare professional. Additionally, he is pursuing an advanced degree in healthcare management. Taylor is a nine-year old boy who is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. As indicated by his IEP, he is educated full-time in a self-contained, cross-categorical classroom. Additionally, he receives direct speech/language therapy as a related service. Taylor's biological mother left the family when Taylor was two years old. Malcolm reported that she had a very difficult time accepting Taylor's learning difficulties; her departure coincided with his initial diagnosis. Taylor currently attends Horizons Elementary.

Views of parent involvement. Malcolm associates effective parent involvement with regular and positive interactions with school personnel. In his interactions, he places emphasis on reciprocity between himself as Taylor's parent and the professionals who work with Taylor on a daily basis. Additionally, Malcolm believes that effective parent involvement mandates that parents be present in the school building by attending meetings, making monthly visits to the classroom, and communicating with teachers on a weekly basis.

Views of education. Malcolm views education as a means of accessing opportunities. He said:

> I've learned over time that those who make the money are the ones who are highly educated. They get paid for being managers, directors, CEOs…leaders. That's where the true money is and not only that…when you get to that level you are able to give back of yourself. So when you hear the cliché, 'knowledge is power,' it truly is. You are empowered and you have the freedom to come and go and do as you please. When it

comes down to it, it's going to take some effort and time, but it pays off. I think that's the

one thing that you truly get what you put into it.

Views of special education. Malcolm defines special education as services beyond those

that are offered typically to students, which are designed to give students with disabilities the

chance to become productive members of society.

The Educational Practitioners

Educational practitioners comprise the first of two groups of professionals who

participated in this study. The practitioners consist of three Black women who provide direct

instruction to students with disabilities and who are involved in the special education decision-

making process as members of multidisciplinary teams. Two of the practitioners are speech-

language pathologists, and the other practitioner is a classroom teacher. They vary in age and

years of professional experience. As illustrated in the practitioners' comments and inferred from

the biographical summaries that follow, the specific discipline that a practitioner represents

likely influences her interactions with parents and other professionals during the process of

special education decision-making.

Cheryl: "It's important to believe in the best in people without going by who someone else may

say that person or child may be."

Cheryl. Professional participant Cheryl is a Black woman in her early 50s who serves

Daybreak Elementary as an American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)-certified

speech-language pathologist. She has more than 30 years of experience in the field of speech-

language pathology and has worked for the Sunnyside school district for 21 years. As an itinerant

therapist, Cheryl splits her time between Daybreak Elementary, her base school, and another

school within the district.

Views of parent involvement. Cheryl asserts that good parent involvement occurs when the parent meets with the teacher, understands what is expected of the child, and works with the child while supporting the teacher's instructional goals. She added that involved parents provide additional support of the educational process by participating in different school-based activities, and are willing to do what is necessary to make sure that the child's needs are met.

Views of education. Cheryl defines education as a process during which an individual achieves knowledge, learns, grows, and is able to take the knowledge acquired and use it in a practical manner in life.

Views of special education. Cheryl defines special education as a means of providing learning tools to children with special needs. She adds that instruction may be broken down in a manner in which students with special needs can achieve, experience success, and apply the acquired knowledge to their day-to-day lives.

> Lisa: "I always try to stand up for what is right and do what is right...to treat people with respect and treat them how I would want to be treated if I was in their position."

Lisa. Professional participant Lisa is a Black woman in her mid-20s and a speech-language pathologist who serves Twilight Elementary. She recently earned a master's degree in speech and language pathology and has two years of experience within the Sunnyside school district. Lisa is an itinerant educator who splits her time between Twilight Elementary and two other schools within the district.

Views of parent involvement. Lisa considers good parent involvement in the special education process to include a parent's willingness to receive feedback about the student's progress, as well as any concerns that educators may have. Lisa asserts that one of her major professional responsibilities involves scheduling and holding IEP meetings; and obtaining

parental signatures for the implementation of the IEP. As such, Lisa also believes that good parent involvement means that a parent attends the annual IEP meeting for his child and signs the IEP document in a timely manner.

Views of education. Lisa views education as the process of learning and applying knowledge. She adds that education is a never-ending process that occurs at every stage of life.

Views of special education. Lisa emphasized that while most people assume that special education is education at a slower rate, students who have been identified as gifted and talented are also receiving special education. Therefore, she views special education as a range of supports that are different from what is provided in a typical general education curriculum.

> Michelle: "When a teacher enters her classroom, she has to believe that her students can be successful. As an educator, I choose to do above and beyond. I treat my students the way that I want my children to be treated."

Michelle. Professional participant Michelle is a Black woman in her late 30s. As a classroom teacher at Horizons Elementary, she works closely with special educators to provide inclusion to students with disabilities. Michelle recently earned a master's degree in curriculum development and has 16 years of teaching experience.

Views of parent involvement. Michelle believes that good parent involvement is demonstrated by parents who assist their children with homework, maintain open lines of communication with their children's teachers, attend school-sponsored events, and regularly attend parent-teacher conferences.

Views of education. Michelle defines education as an interactive process through which teaching and learning takes place. She adds that education is more than just reading, writing, and math in that it is concerned with a child's academic and social growth.

Views of special education. Michelle defines special education as specialized instruction that is provided to students who have been formally identified as being in need of modifications to the general education curriculum.

The Local Educational Agency Representatives (LEAs)

The LEA group is the second set of professionals who participated in this study. The LEAs are two Black women and one White woman who are involved in the special education decision-making process as members of multidisciplinary teams. They vary in age, specific areas of expertise, and years of professional experience. As illustrated by the following biographical summaries, each LEA presents with characteristics and insights that likely influence the leadership that they display during the special education decision-making process.

Nan: "As an educator, I believe that everybody deserves to be treated with respect and I expect the same level of respect to be given to students, to parents, to teachers, and I expect it to be reciprocated."

Nan. Professional participant Nan is a White woman in her late 50s who is the principal of Daybreak Elementary. She has worked in the field of education for 37 years and has been a school principal for the last 20 years. Nan began her career as a classroom teacher in Sunnyside Public Schools, first as a third grade teacher and then as a gifted educator. As a principal, Nan has served schools in which the student populations have varied from predominantly low-SES to predominantly middle- to high-SES.

Views of parent involvement. Nan mentioned that earlier in her career, she considered involved parents to be those who regularly visited the school for conferences, PTA meetings, and volunteer work. In recent years, her thinking has changed. Nan now considers parents to be involved if they make sure that their children have completed homework, come to school with

supplies, and are clean and dressed appropriately. Nan's shift in her views of parent involvement stem from the changes that she has observed in parents' work schedules, and their reduced abilities to come to the school building during the day, as many more were able to do in the past.

Views of education. When asked to explain her views of education, Nan responded as follows:

> During a recent assembly, I told the parents that if our kids leave our school as excited about learning as they did when they entered our doors in September, then we've accomplished something. That, to me, is education - your thirst for knowledge. You are not stagnant. You are constantly looking for new opportunities. Having those basic skills is part of it too – to be able to read, write, and do some math.

Views of special education. Nan believes that special education involves recognizing the different ways that students learn, identifying their learning needs, and approaching each in unique ways, based upon their needs and learning preferences.

Jean: "As an LEA I have learned to be flexible and able to think on my feet. It's important that I adjust what I do to meet the needs of the family or child that's being served."

Jean. Professional participant Jean is a Black woman in her late 50s. She is a special education instructional leader who oversees the implementation of special education instruction at Twilight Elementary. Jean also serves Twilight Elementary as the principal designee and LEA for all special education meetings that occur in the building. Jean began her educational career as a high school biology teacher. After working for 10 years in that role, she returned to graduate school, where she earned a graduate degree in speech-language pathology. After working for seven years as a speech-language pathologist in a medical setting, Jean returned to the public

school setting as a speech-language pathologist. Jean has more than 30 years of experience in the field of education, and has spent the last 14 years working in the Sunnyside school district.

Views of parent involvement. Jean considers a parent to be involved if she takes a genuine interest in her child's academic performance and works along with educators to facilitate the child's educational growth. She added that open communication between educators and parents is a key component of good parent involvement.

Views of education. Jean believes that education is a process that entails the imparting of information to students that enables them to function adequately in the world. To Jean, education facilitates both academic and social growth.

Views of special education. Jean believes that special education is a service that is provided to students who have been identified as falling into one of several disability categories. While special education is beneficial in that it provides students with resources that enable them to catch up or stay in step with their developmentally matched peers, Jean identified the stigma that is often associated with special education as a marked disadvantage.

> Deborah: "Although I represent the school, I have also become an advocate for the parents as well as the teachers."

Deborah. Professional participant Deborah is a Black woman in her late 40s. She oversees the implementation of special education instruction at Horizons Elementary. Deborah also serves as the principal designee and LEA for all special education meetings that occur in the building. Prior to her current appointment as an instructional leader, Deborah was a special education teacher who worked with students with varying disabilities. She holds a graduate degree in educational supervision, and has more than 15 years of experience in the field of special education.

Views of parent involvement. Deborah believes that involved parents want to know how their children are performing in school, and when meetings at the school are scheduled, they attend those meetings. Additionally, she believes that involved parents are proactive in their approach to potential academic problems. Deborah explained, "they don't wait until they receive the retention paperwork to meet with teachers about their children's academic struggles, they contact the teachers early in the school year in efforts to address any problems before they get out of hand." Moreover, Deborah does not believe that parents have to make regular classroom visits to be actively involved in their children's academic progress.

Views of education. Deborah believes that all students are able to learn, regardless of their disabilities and home environments. Additionally, she believes that education involves students taking the knowledge that they obtain through their contact with educators and applying it successfully to various aspects of their lives.

Views of special education. Deborah believes that while special education services are necessary, a lot of students have been identified for services when they are not really in need of special education programming. She added:

> I think it's an injustice that even with the criteria, we have parents who just down right demand special education and even if the student doesn't meet the criteria, to keep from being sued, eligibility committees find a way to qualify them.

The preceding sections provided detailed descriptions of the settings in which the study was conducted and brief biographical sketches of the ten study participants. This contextual information creates a backdrop intended to inform readers as they consider the key findings that are detailed in the next section of this chapter.

Primary Findings

Given the complexities inherent in this line of inquiry, the study's findings vary in their

levels of transparency in that some are easier to discern than others. As a research lens, CRT

lends flexibility to this line of inquiry by serving as a tool useful in interpreting the esoteric

aspects of a phenomenon. In this study, those perplexing elements of Black, middle class

parents' experiences in special education decision-making were the findings based on

individuals' deeply held ideas and beliefs which can be more difficult to observe and

authenticate through traditional lens. Three key findings represent the collective experience of

the parent participants as they navigate the process of special education decision-making. These

findings are organized and presented from most transparent to least obvious.

Power in the Interactions between Parents and Professionals

Power differentials were noted in the interactions between the parent and professional

participants. Power is a complex construction that is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary

(2013) as possession or exertion of authority or influence. The public school system is an

institution that perpetuates the status quo, where the interests of the dominant culture are

protected, ultimately to the detriment of "others" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, as

one might expect, power differentials in favor of Sunnyside Public Schools and its agents were

noted as the study participants described the interactions between the parent participants and

educational professionals. For example, as I will present in more detail, all of the parent

participants mentioned how it appeared as if the system was set up so that the professionals, by

virtue of their formal positions, garnered more decision-making power than the parents. The

professionals' advantage was further strengthened by the composition of the multidisciplinary

teams because there were more school personnel on the multidisciplinary teams than parents and a practice of majority rule applied to the decision-making process.

Three CRT tenets: the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, and interest convergence, were most helpful in illuminating the complexity inherent in this finding. As I discussed in Chapter 3, racism dictates that members of the dominant culture are assigned the power and privilege that is withheld from their less dominant counterparts. Furthermore, the tenet that establishes racism as a permanent fixture in America holds that while we have been conditioned to look for overt and blatant manifestations of racial inequities, racism is so deeply ingrained into our society that we often overlook the more damaging tacit and unconscious acts that perpetuates the prevalence of racial inequities that impact the lives of less dominant individuals (Bell, 2008). The notion of interest convergence adds to the permanence of racism by establishing that members of the dominant culture will tolerate decisions, movements or initiatives that benefit their less dominant counterparts only when it is in their best interest to do so and their power is not in jeopardy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Whiteness as property is an idea that suggests that possessing the characteristics, behaviors, and cultural practices of the dominant culture is normal and advantageous while anything that deviates from this socially-constructed ideal is less desirable and synonymous with "the other" (Harris, 1993). In recent years, the property benefit traditionally associated with Whiteness has been reframed as educational advantage (Barlow & Dunbar, 2010; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Communication as a means for rapport building. Communication was one area of interaction in which the issue of power was documented. Specifically, through their manipulation of communication style and tone, it appeared that the educational professionals with whom the

parent participants interacted intended to both reinforce their authority, and influence the special education decision-making process.

Cheryl (practitioner) and Nan (LEA) are professionals who serve Daybreak Elementary. They emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining positive rapport with parents to ensure that the process of special education decision-making runs smoothly. In establishing positive rapport with parents, Cheryl acknowledged that communication style and tone is very important when she said, "It's not so much about what you say, it's how you say it. If that professional makes a special effort to make that parent feel embraced as part of the group, it's going to make a big difference." Further, Nan explained that while her approach varies based on the situation and parents that she is working with, she does whatever she can to establish a positive relationship with the parents early on.

In turn, Jessica applauded Nan for welcoming her participation in the decision-making process. Yet as Jessica's experience shows, at times professionals' attempt to connect with parents are successful and other times, they are ineffective, resulting in irrevocable damage. The progression of Jessica's early interactions with an LEA, Mrs. Thompson (an employee of Sunnyside Public Schools who was not a professional participant in this study), appears to exemplify the later. Jessica recalled that when she initiated contact with Mrs. Thompson to address Anthony's academic difficulties, she was met with the older woman's attempts to connect with her based on topics that she believed she could use to establish common ground with Jessica, namely fashion and hair. While it appears that Mrs. Thompson was trying to establish rapport with Jessica, her approach failed as Jessica was angered by the communicative behavior that she considered to be offensive. Jessica elaborated:

We were very much not on the same page. To get there and your conversation with me is about my occupation…telling me how you need to "get something done" to your hair. I was truly disappointed. Don't compliment me on my handbag because I'm not here for that. I'm here to take care of my son. I was hurt and then I became angry because I felt like she was trying to screw my child over.

Racism is "an indestructible phenomenon" that is most effectively advanced by the unconscious acts of those who function to promote the dominant culture and reinforce the status quo (Bell, 2008). Thus, Jessica's reaction to Mrs. Thompson's seemingly benign attempt to connect with her is understandable. Furthermore, the permanence of racism establishes that racism is so deeply ingrained into our way of being that even members of the non-dominant culture (e.g., Black professionals) accept notions that are rooted in racism, namely deficit thinking (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Jessica reacted so negatively to Mrs. Thompson's behavior because it suggested that perhaps Mrs. Thompson held an underlying belief that as a Black woman, Jessica was more motivated by her occupation and fashion sense than a desire to ensure Anthony's academic success. As such, Jessica felt that Mrs. Thompson's approach signified the professional's lack of respect for her as a concerned parent. Eventually, Jessica avoided contact with Mrs. Thompson by interacting exclusively with Ms. Johnson (an employee of Sunnyside Public Schools who was not a professional participant in this study), the assistant principal.

Ms. Johnson, a White woman, successfully established positive rapport with Jessica that she was able to maintain throughout the portions of the special education process that took place prior to Anthony's transfer to Daybreak Elementary. Similar to Nan's approach previously described, Ms. Johnson established and maintained a positive working relationship with Jessica

by serving as her advocate and approaching her with respect. Jessica recalled that during the evaluation and eligibility stages of the special education process, she was frustrated because some of the professionals had not completed their evaluations before the timelines for completion had expired. Ms. Johnson pressured those colleagues until they completed and submitted the evaluations. In an apparent attempt to show her empathy for Jessica, Ms. Johnson even undermined Mrs. Thompson at times by casually expressing her disagreement with Mrs. Thompson's approach, telling Jessica, "I wouldn't have handled it this way but my hands are tied."

Jessica was disillusioned with the special education process and contemplated filing a complaint with the district's special education director. Ms. Johnson was aware of Jessica's discontent, and did everything that she could to placate her, all the while ensuring that Jessica did not file the complaint with the special education director about obvious mistakes for which the school have could received serious sanctions. In this example, it is significant that Ms. Johnson, a White woman with less formal authority than the principal (a Black woman) was able to use her position of authority to advance the special education process when it was delayed. Additionally, it appears that Ms. Johnson skillfully used communication style and tone to control Jessica's participation in the decision-making process. Yet one could argue that by resolving to avoid Ms. Thompson and only interacting with Ms. Johnson, Jessica was unconsciously confirming the influence of racist hierarchical structures that resulted in Ms. Johnson's racial status giving her power over the special education process that superseded Ms. Thompson's formal role as LEA.

Malcolm discussed at length the differences he experienced between the special education process in Sunnyside Schools and the same process in a previous school system

located in the "deep South." He reported that the personnel with whom he has interacted at varying levels of Sunnyside Public Schools have been markedly more positive and helpful than the personnel of the previous school district. Malcolm shared:

> I was received very well. Everyone that I have interacted with has been friendly and helpful. Everything that I suggested was accepted, implemented, and agreed upon. When I was down South, it was adversarial. They felt like I was trying to take over or tell them what to do so I got a lot of opposition.

Malcolm went on to explain the differences that he saw between his treatment as a "Black man in the deep South" and the ways he was treated by Sunnyside School personnel as a "Black man in the North." He explained that while the Black man in the South is treated as "an underling, an errand boy," or someone who is less than, the Black man in the North is "appreciated for his talents and what he has to offer." Malcolm considered the poor treatment that he received as a parent of a child with a disability in the "deep South" to be the remnants of prejudice and racism that he believes still persists in that geographic region.

Interestingly, since Malcolm perceives Sunnyside to be situated in the North, he applauded the Sunnyside School personnel for treating him as an equal and agreeing with him regarding decisions that impact Taylor's education. Yet, later on, Malcolm expressed his displeasure over Taylor's full-time placement in a self-contained special education classroom. While school personnel asserted that Taylor's educational needs were being met in the least restrictive environment (LRE), Malcolm believed that he should be educated in a more inclusive setting. Yet Malcolm neither challenged nor rejected Taylor's educational placement.

Malcolm's first, and markedly contentious, experience with education professionals in the "deep South" illustrates how interest convergence operates to influence the dominant

professional's use of communicative style and tone to control Black parents' participation in the process of special education decision-making. Malcolm reported that shortly after Taylor received the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, the professional members of his IEP team presented a limited array of options for Taylor's education, based on what Malcolm perceived as their belief that Taylor did not possess the cognitive ability to learn anything beyond very basic functional skills. In response, Malcolm staunchly voiced his objections, questioning the validity and accuracy of their professional judgment. His attempts to assert himself as an active member of the decision-making team threatened the professionals' inherent position of dominance as defined by their formal, discipline-specific knowledge and expertise. Since it did not serve the best interests of the dominant professionals for the subordinate parent (Malcolm) to be an active partner in the collaborative decision-making process, the professionals used decidedly negative communicative styles and tones to dissuade Malcolm's participation.

Further, it appears that given this "adversarial" and unsuccessful attempt with collaborative special education decision-making, Malcolm learned that the only way that he will be embraced by the dominant professionals as an educational decision-maker is by presenting himself as a benign parent partner who poses no threat. Thus, it seems that Malcolm associates the positive communicative style and tone employed by Sunnyside personnel as a direct consequence of his efforts to be agreeable and his tendency to avoid challenging the educational decisions supported by the professional majority of the decision-making team. In fact, Malcolm reported that he cautions other parents against being demanding or disagreeable as they interact with professionals because if they do, the professionals "won't see you as a parent who is also a valuable member of the team."

Malcolm's advice to his counterparts demonstrates that as long as parents do not threaten to dismantle the power differential enjoyed by school personnel, parents will be accepted as "valuable" members of special education decision-making teams. Thus, interest convergence also shaped Malcolm's interactions with Sunnyside personnel. Specifically, the warm welcome that he received upon Taylor's transfer to Sunnyside Schools and the efforts that agents of Sunnyside School used to maintain a positive rapport with Malcolm were directly shaped by Malcolm's tendency to avoid confrontation and formally consent with decisions, even when he did not agree with the decisions as Taylor's parent and advocate.

While Malcolm considered his current experience with Sunnyside Schools to be vastly different from what he encountered in the previous school district, the two experiences were, in fact, similar because he was relegated to a less dominant role as a special education decision-maker in both. The obvious difference is that he was presented with communication styles and tones by Sunnyside school personnel that were much more positive than what he experienced in the previous school district. Moreover, when he was the "deep South," Malcolm had no control over his relegation to a subordinate. Conversely, in his current situation as a special education decision-maker in Sunnyside, it appears that he has made a conscious decision to embrace the subordinate role in an effort to ensure that he is afforded at least some influence in the educational decisions that impact Taylor's academic and social prospects.

Information shared. The sharing of information was another area of interaction in which the issue of power was noted. Specifically, educational professionals dispensed information to and withheld information from the parent participants as a means of maintaining their formal influence and control over the special education decision-making process. The permanence of

racism and interest convergence come together to create a frame through which this pattern was best observed.

Educational professionals reinforced their positions of power by the extent to which they shared information with parents. Specifically, each of the parent participants chronicled instances throughout their experiences in the special education decision-making process in which educational professionals served as purveyors of information that the parents needed or deemed necessary to have in their attempts to be meaningful decision-makers. The information in question varied from general information regarding how the special education process should proceed to very specific information regarding best instructional practices and services for individual students. This form of professional control works to reinforce the formal structure inherent in special education and general education. Consequently, the structure inherent in special education and general education casts the professional as the expert and sole proprietor of legitimate information and prudent judgment.

The professionals who interacted with the parent participants during the special education process appeared to wield the ability to control which parents received what information. It is through this inconspicuous clout that the professionals dictated which issues would be on the table for decision-making and greatly influenced which way certain issues would be decided. For example, Jessica recalled that in the beginning of her experience with the special education process, it took a long time for the evaluation phase to be initiated. She stated that she consistently voiced her concerns to Anthony's first grade teacher, his second grade teacher, and then the school principal. Yet the professionals never told her what she needed to do to initiate a child study meeting because in their professional opinion, Anthony's academic difficulties did not rise to the level of special education need. Jessica reported that it was through her discussions

with Anthony's pediatrician, not school personnel, that she learned that she had the right to ask for a special education evaluation and by law the school was required to formally consider her request.

Similarly, in hindsight, Brenda now believes that early on in her experience with the special education process, professionals withheld information from her as a way to guarantee that the decisions that they deemed most appropriate would advance. She recalled that shortly after Nick received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome from a medical professional, she initiated the process to secure school-based special education services for him. Based on the evaluations conducted by Sunnyside School professionals, it was determined that Nick was eligible for services under special education programming for children with developmental delay. Brenda recalled that the professionals asserted that Nick's deficits were not severe. An IEP was developed that only included a few goals and made provisions for special education services that were limited in nature. When she voiced her concerns that the IEP did not adequately address Nick's deficits, Brenda was reassured that, "...you want to work on small goals and when he reaches them, we will change them."

According to Brenda, despite her efforts to seek out the information from the professionals that she needed to make an informed decision, she did not know how large a scope could be addressed by an IEP and finally concluded that Nick could not have services for his social development even though she believed that he was in need of those services. She added, "there's a point when you can't keep questioning...when people keep telling you the same thing, it doesn't make sense to keep questioning it." Therefore, based on the information that professionals had provided up to that point, Brenda signed the IEP while harboring concern that the educational plan was inadequate for meeting Nick's academic and social needs.

Shortly after the IEP was in place and Nick's special education services began, Brenda felt misled when a professional who worked closely with Nick informed her of the actions that she could have taken instead of signing permission for services that she did not actually support:

But this is what upsets me…after the fact, people are telling me, "oh you could have done this" and "oh you could have done that." Why didn't you tell me then? I felt that they had already decided what they were going to do in the first place. I don't think they were concerned about involving me in the process. So I guess in a way, it was like betrayal.

Later when the language deficits associated with Nick's disability became more apparent, Brenda initiated a re-evaluation in an effort to secure additional special education services in the form of direct speech-language therapy. Although the evaluation results suggested that Nick did in fact have some language deficits, Brenda asserts that the speech-language pathologist who served on the eligibility committee told Brenda that she "doesn't really work with language." Brenda elaborated:

They told me that I was going to have to go outside of the school system to get that done and they were sure that I could find a great therapist. The speech pathologist said, "I would recommend it but we don't really do that in school because we do 30 minutes sessions and you really need a lot of time to work on language. So we only really work on speech and his speech sounds fine." They went through this whole spiel and I looked around the table and they were all nodding. And I knew that either they were lying to me or they were ashamed because they knew they should be providing the service. I wasn't sure what it was.

The collective experiences of Jessica and Brenda and their beliefs that they were not afforded access to complete and accurate information clearly exemplifies how professionals use

their roles as purveyors of information to manipulate the decision-making process and perpetuate the natural order that establishes the school district and its agents as the keepers of information. Perhaps the impact of the professionals' reported behavior is so noticeable because Jessica and Brenda entered into the decision-making process with the expectation that the professionals would equip them with the information that they needed to effectively participate in the process.

Unlike Jessica and Brenda, it appeared that neither Sofia nor Malcolm entered into the process of special education decision-making with the same expectations. Yet interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that the stage was set for the professionals to retain control over decision-making through their dissemination of information.

As Sofia's recollections of some of her experiences suggested, the extent to which professionals grant or deny parents access to information may be contingent upon the degree to which parents accept their agenda or recommendations regarding specific special education decisions. In fact, on the same day that I first interacted with Sofia, she participated in an IEP meeting that she found to be particularly difficult. Sofia reported that she initiated the IEP meeting to revisit Max's inclusion in a music class with his non-disabled peers. Prior to the IEP meeting, Sofia inquired about the specific skills that were addressed in the general education class. In response, the music teacher gave Sofia a copy of the music curriculum and state music standards for students on the kindergarten and first grade levels.

According to Sofia, there was tension between her and the music teacher during the IEP meeting because the music teacher did not believe that Max should be included in the general education music class. Sofia recalled that while the music teacher was unable to justify why Max needed to stay in the adaptive music class, her demeanor toward Sofia became negative when Sofia questioned the validity of her recommendation. Sofia elaborated, "...after I challenged her

recommendation and made it clear I wasn't going to sign the IEP unless Max was included in the regular music class, the music teacher asked me for the papers back."

Consistent with the understanding that members of a dominant group will only allow subordinates to advance when their power is not being jeopardized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), Sofia viewed this move by the music teacher as coercion of sorts – if you question my professional authority and reject my recommendations, you can no longer benefit from the valuable information that I can provide. Therefore, in this situation as explained by Sofia, it appears that the music teacher's action was intended to be a powerful message to Sofia that as a professional, the music teacher possessed power that enabled her to control Sofia's access to helpful information and the more Sofia agreed with and accepted the agenda advanced by the professional, the more access she would have to such information.

In comparison to his negative experience with a previous school system regarding his access to information, Malcolm was very pleased with Sunnyside Public Schools. In the previous school district, Malcolm got the sense that the less information he had as he attempted to participate in the decision-making process, the better. He elaborated:

> When I was down South, no one wanted to be blamed for giving me information so the decision-making process was very evasive. But here, I receive information about the process, how things work, and the appropriate forms that need to be filled out, what you are allowed to request and what you cannot request. And if I am at the wrong place for the information that I need, I am directed to where I need to be or who I need to talk to.

Malcolm's recollections of his experience in the previous school district illustrate how professionals, as purveyors of information, can limit the decision-making actions of parents. Malcolm regarded his experience with Sunnyside personnel as positive because the professionals

appeared eager to provide him with information that facilitated his participation in decision-making. Accordingly, it appears that Malcolm not only looked to the professionals as legitimate sources of information, but also accepted their version of information that was open to interpretation (e.g., what is appropriate for parents to request and what is inappropriate for parents to request). Thus, it appears that the information that the professionals provided to Malcolm and Malcolm's acceptance of such information as it was presented to him facilitated his participation as a decision-maker in a manner that did not threaten the professionals' collective position of power. Moreover, considering his status as a Black parent, Malcolm's tendency to regard Sunnyside's predominately White cadre of professionals as the legitimate source of information elucidate how victims of marginalization (i.e., Black parents), through their internalization of messages that tacitly reinforce the idea that their rightful position is that of inferior subordinate, solidify the permanence of racism (Bell, 2008).

Inclusion in and exclusion from decision-making. Active and meaningful parent participation was the final aspect of interaction in which the issue of power was observed. Interpretation of the study data show various ways in which educational professionals both included and excluded parents from the decision-making process, all the while maintaining their positions of power. Interest convergence offers the frame through which this aspect of the first primary finding is best observed.

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, IDEA 2004 promotes parents' active and meaningful involvement in special education decision-making. Parent participants, Brenda and Sofia, shared that they often went into special education meetings with the sense that the professionals had met ahead of time and had already decided the type of services, the level of support, and the goals that would or would not be appropriate for their children. To add

authentication to her belief, Sofia recalled that on several occasions in the beginning of her

participation in the special education process, the professionals came to the IEP meetings with

the paperwork already completed. Sofia reasoned that the professionals had to have come to

some common understanding prior to the scheduled meeting in order to come with completed

IEP paperwork in hand. Hence, this is one example of a decision-making activity within which a

parent should be actively and meaningful involved, yet through the actions of professionals,

parents are effectively excluded from the decision-making.

Professional participants, Lisa, Jean, Deborah, and Cheryl confirmed that professional

team members often decide such things as disability categories that the team will consider and

services that will be agreed upon prior to meeting with the parents. Jean and Deborah further

shared that as a service to parents they often explain some of the pre-determined decisions to the

parents as a way to help them come to terms with their children's "true" academic ability and

needs. It seems that the professional participants view these practices as them being responsible

professionals by ensuring that the process of special education decision-making runs smoothly

and that parents are well-equipped to participate on equal terms. However, in actuality, through

their actions they inadvertently reinforce the status quo. By usurping the parents' rights to have

active and meaningful involvement in rendering the educational decisions made on their

children's behalf, the professionals relegate the parent participants to less powerful roles.

Moreover, the professional participants' actions also reflect an aim to protect the power

differential that they enjoy by increasing the likelihood that their pre-determined decisions are

not challenged or countered by the parents.

Structural Issues

The second primary finding addresses the structural issues that influence Black parents' participation in special education decision-making. IDEA 2004 serves as the basis for the formal rules that support the implementation of every facet of the special education process, including decision-making. The interpretation and subsequent implementation of rules set forth in IDEA 2004 vary by region and school district. Therefore, to facilitate the reader's understanding of the second primary finding, I will briefly describe the formal policies and procedures that inform the implementation of the special education decision-making process in Sunnyside Public Schools.

As outlined in policies and procedures established by the State Department of Education (2012) and interpreted by the Sunnyside Public School District (2011), collaborative decision-making between parents and professionals occur throughout five phases that comprise the special education process: (1) identification and referral, (2) evaluation, (3) determination of eligibility, (4) development of an individualized education program (IEP) and determination of services, and (5) re-evaluation. At the beginning of each phase of the special education process, the LEA must provide the parents with a typewritten copy of their rights as a parent of a student who needs or is suspected of needing special education services as defined by IDEA 2004.

The identification and referral phase takes place when a student is suspected of having a disability and is referred to a multidisciplinary team, known as a child study committee, for evaluation. A referral may be initiated by a teacher, parent, student, or any agent of the state. Additionally, while parent permission is not required to initiate the child study process, parents are invited and encouraged to participate in the process.

The evaluation phase occurs when school personnel use nondiscriminatory assessment procedures to determine the nature and extent of a student's need for additional educational support. Parents must provide written permission for the evaluation phase to be initiated.

Additionally, the professional members of the multidisciplinary team are required to notify parents in writing, prior to requesting parental permission for the evaluation phase to occur, information detailing the nature of the evaluations that will be completed to assess the educational needs of the child. Furthermore, all assessments needed to determine eligibility must be completed within 45 administrative days of the initial child study meeting.

A meeting must be held within 65 administrative days of the initial child study meeting to determine eligibility. During this phase of the special education process, assessment reports are presented to the multidisciplinary team and the team reaches consensus, deciding whether or not a child is eligible to receive special education and related services. Parents and/or legal guardians are informed of the day, date, and time of the eligibility meeting and given an opportunity to attend. The LEA who oversees the eligibility meeting must provide parents with written documentation that summarizes the determination of eligibility. No changes can be made to a child's eligibility for special education and related services without written parental consent.

Once a student is found eligible to receive special education and related services, an IEP must be developed within 30 calendar days by an IEP committee. Placement decisions are made based on the documented educational needs of the student. School personnel must take steps to ensure that the parents are either present at each IEP meeting or afforded the opportunity to participate. Additionally, school personnel must provide the parent(s) with prior written notice of the IEP team's proposals and/or refusals regarding the student's educational placement and/or provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). Parents must receive a copy of the final IEP document and the special education and related services delineated in the IEP cannot be implemented without written parental consent.

IEPs are reviewed and updated on an annual basis, and students with disabilities are either formally or informally re-evaluated every three years to determine if they continue to benefit from the special education services provided. Parent participation is an integral element that must be included throughout the special education decision-making process when it is properly implemented (State Department of Education, 2012; Sunnyside Public Schools, 2011).

The second pattern of findings focuses on structural issues noted within Sunnyside Public Schools and their impact on the collective experience of the parent participants specific to parent participation, procedural safeguards, free and appropriate public education (FAPE), and least restrictive environment (LRE). The critique of liberalism provides a frame that best illuminates the details of this finding.

As a critical researcher, I agree with other CRT theorists who believe that liberalism, a position that establishes government as an entity designed to maximize liberty and whose laws should enforce equality, is inadequate in its ability to address problems with race and racism in the U.S. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Along this vein, three ideas that are central to liberal ideology are disputed: the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Thus, the critique of liberalism is the theoretical outcome of the rejection of these three liberal ideas.

By rejecting the notion of colorblindness, we explore the existence and impact of tacit and imbedded forms of racial injustice. Through a rebuff of incremental change, we assert that the idea that advances for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace is both palatable for and beneficial to those who possess power. Finally, we reject the neutrality of the law because it emphasizes equality, a position that merely focuses on ensuring that people have the same

opportunities and experiences, in favor of the more desirable ideal, equity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)..

I examined the special education processes within Daybreak Elementary, Twilight Elementary, and Horizons Elementary with a focus on how the rules were used to facilitate the ideal that parents be both active and meaningful participants in special education decision-making. Thus, through my interactions with the parent and professional participants, I gained insight specific to the parental permission requirement.

Parental permission requirement. When I inquired about their understanding of the special education process, each parent participant discussed how their permission was required in the form of a signature for all special education decisions to be implemented. Similarly, the professional participants discussed the parent permission requirement as an important aspect of the special education decision-making process. This common understanding was best articulated by Nan when she said, "All along the way a parent has to make a decision, whether testing is done, whether you are able to implement the IEP, and the level of service often times is a parental decision." It is interesting to note that all of the study participants reduced the parent participation requirement to all parents having an opportunity to "actively" participate in decision-making as evidenced by their signatures being necessary for all educational decisions to be implemented. Thus, consistent with the ideal that law should be neutral; the participants acknowledged that all parents were treated equally in that the parent permission requirement was applied to all parents who are involved in the special education process, without exception.

Yet based on her experiences with special education decision-making in Sunnyside, Sofia believed that to some of the professionals, the parental permission requirement meant little more than securing the necessary parent signatures on the paperwork that documented the various

stages of special education decision-making. She shared her experience in a recent IEP meeting that had been initiated by related service providers. Sofia recalled that the related service providers were taken aback when she initiated an in-depth discussion of the pros and cons associated with the proposed changes to Max's IEP instead of quickly signing permission for the changes (reductions to service delivery) to take effect. Sofia's experience demonstrates how the equal implementation of rules does not necessarily translate to the equitable implementation of those rules. Additionally, specific language found throughout the policy and procedures manual for managing special education, a document published in 2011 by Sunnyside's special education department, states that parents must be "invited" to attend the various meetings in which special education decision-making takes place and professionals are only required to ensure that parents "be afforded the opportunity to participate." Thus, Sofia's experience, coupled with the specific language included in Sunnyside's policies and procedures for effective management of the special education process confirm that the neutrality of the law is a flawed concept.

Brenda recalled the trepidation she felt during her first IEP meeting in which Nick's special education plan was developed. She shared:

> Based on the results of the testing that was conducted, Nick had some pretty significant weaknesses in his language despite his above average performance in other areas. In our discussion, the speech-language pathologist even said that Nick could benefit from language therapy. So I was surprised when it was decided that speech-language therapy services would not be written into his IEP. When I voiced my objections, I was told that his language deficits did not have an educational impact. I knew that wasn't right but everyone around the table tried to convince me that it was. Then I was told that if I didn't sign the IEP, Nick wouldn't get any of the services that he needed. So even though I

didn't agree, I signed to give permission for the IEP to go into effect. It had taken so long

for me to convince them that he needed services that I didn't want to jeopardize them.

Similarly, Malcolm mentioned that he had been promised that Taylor would be educated

using a full-inclusion model. Yet in a recent IEP meeting, it was decided that Taylor would

continue to spend the majority of his academic day in a cross-categorical, special education

classroom that houses severely disabled and low-functioning students. Malcolm did not agree

with Taylor's placement and doubted that the IEP team made provisions for Taylor to be

educated in the least restrictive environment or to receive the most appropriate education.

Nevertheless, he gave permission for the IEP to be implemented because he did not want to

interrupt Taylor's educational program.

Interpretation of rules governing procedural safeguards. Data analysis also revealed

that through their interpretation and enforcement of special education rules, professionals

dictated how meetings proceeded. This was noticeable in several encounters that Brenda and

Sofia shared. For instance, during the IEP meeting in which Brenda was trying to secure speech

and language therapy services for Nick, Brenda decided to audio-record the meeting because she

was so inundated with the details of the meeting. Brenda recalled that she wanted a recording

that she could refer back to as she and her husband engaged in private discussions to make the

most appropriate decisions for Nick. However, when she inquired about recording the meeting,

she was prohibited from doing so. Brenda further explained:

> They said that it was against the law for me to record the meeting. There were some
>
> things I thought I heard in a few of the reports that made me uncomfortable. I was
>
> thinking that they weren't going to give him the extra services that he needed. So when I
>
> asked to record the meeting, I wasn't even trying to gain a legal footing. I wanted to have

it so I could hear everything that everyone was saying for the purpose of my understanding. They said, "no, you can't record any meetings between any of us." They said that the rule was in the handbook and I guess it was. But I thought to myself, "Ok, this is not good."

In fact, it turned out that the "rule" that the professional committee enforced was an erroneous interpretation of one aspect of the procedural safeguards that govern parent participation in special education decision-making. As a parent, Brenda was within her rights to record the meeting because it involved her child's IEP.

Sofia was subjected to a similar misinterpretation of a rule governing special education when a person unfamiliar to the professional team members accompanied her to an IEP meeting. Sofia hires individuals who have experience working with children with special needs to assist her as she works with Max at home. Sofia brought one of her employees, Madison, along to take notes throughout the IEP meeting. Max's classroom teacher told Sofia that she was required to sign a release of information in order for Madison to stay in the meeting. Sofia detailed:

I have the right to bring who I want. They need me to sign a release of information if they invite someone. I told her [Max's classroom teacher] that I didn't have to sign for Madison to be there. I don't have to sign for people I bring but you have to get my permission ahead of time if you plan to bring additional people.

In hindsight, Sofia speculated that the teacher was trying to figure out who Madison was and what Sofia was trying to accomplish by having Madison with her.

Adapting to structure. As the parent participants became more familiar with the structure within which special education decision-making occurred in Sunnyside Public Schools, they adapted so as to be more effective decision-makers within that structure. Throughout her

participation in the special education decision-making process, there were a number of actions that Jessica took in the attempt to shift the power differential in her favor. One of the first and perhaps most beneficial strategies that she employed involved developing a positive relationship with the assistant principal (Ms. Johnson) at Anthony's first school. As she initiated the special education process on Anthony's behalf, she quickly learned that having a professional ally who held a certain amount of formal authority over the special education decision-making process served to her advantage. Whereas Jessica's counterproductive interactions with Mrs. Thompson did very little to stimulate the timely completion of testing and reporting during the evaluation stage of the special education process, it was through her alliance with the assistant principal that she was actively and meaningfully engaged in the decision-making process. Jessica continued to use this approach once Anthony's educational placement was determined and he was transferred to Daybreak Elementary where Nan serves as the LEA.

While reflecting upon her experience with the special education process, Jessica asserted that she tried very hard to work within the school district's established chain of command. Yet she discovered that in order to ensure that the best decisions were made for Anthony's academic growth, she had to go to the people who could best address her needs. This in turn meant that she often had to abandon the chain of command. Despite the assistant principal's efforts to complete the evaluation and eligibility phase of the special education process, they were unable to schedule the eligibility meeting because the psychologist had not completed the psychological testing. Jessica bypassed the usual chain of command and contacted Sunnyside's director of special education to voice her concern and demand action. She also used her personal connection with a friend who held an upper level position in the school district's finance department to put added pressure on the building level professionals. "I always have connections to the people that

can make things happen," she added. Finally, Jessica reported that she empowers herself as an

effective decision-maker by making impromptu visits to Anthony's classroom to ensure that his

IEP is being carried out as it was intended.

Through my interactions with Brenda, it was apparent that she was not as confident with

her role in the special education decision-making process as the other parent participants.

Therefore, Brenda was not as aggressive as the other parent participants in their attempts to

employ strategies to level to power differential between them and the professionals. However,

similar to Jessica, she bypassed the usual chain of command and complained to Sunnyside's

special education director about the committee's claim that Nick could not receive speech-

language therapy services to address his documented language deficits. Unfortunately, this

strategy did not result in a favorable outcome for Brenda as indicated by the following statement:

> They were saying that they didn't have the resources to work on his language. And I said,
>
> "But you said he needs help with that. Isn't that the whole purpose of this
>
> process...securing the services?" So, I went beyond the building level to central office. I
>
> got a chance to talk to the special education director on the phone. She said that she
>
> would look into the situation to see if there were any discrepancies, talk to the school
>
> personnel, and see what they say. Nothing happened. Nothing happened and I already
>
> knew from the way she was talking that she wasn't going to do anything about it.

Similarly, both Jessica and Brenda found it necessary to abandon the special education

chain of command in efforts to secure appropriate services for their children. While Jessica

experienced success with this strategic move several times, Brenda did not fare as well. Initially,

I thought the difference was a combined result of Jessica's persistence and Brenda's reaction to

the early defeat. However, upon further reflection, more compelling interpretations took form.

Unlike Brenda, Jessica developed an alliance with Ms. Johnson, a White assistant principal. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, Jessica used her affiliation with Ms. Johnson to initiate the evaluation process and to jumpstart it when it stalled. Through her affiliation with Ms. Johnson, Jessica was afforded power that she would not have ordinarily had given her status as a subordinate. Likewise, it was through her affiliation with Ms. Johnson that Jessica was able to successfully operate outside of the special education chain of command. Brenda's attempts at operating outside of the special education chain of command were unsuccessful because she did not have access to that particular form of White privilege.

Additionally, the vast differences noted in the degrees of success experienced by the two mothers as they attempted to operate outside the boundaries of the formal special education process further refutes liberal ideology that establishes neutrality of the law. Specifically, the policies and procedures that are informed by IDEA 2004 and used by Sunnyside Public Schools to dispense special education services promote an eligibility process in which students deemed to be in legitimate need of special education services present with poor academic performance in the classroom and/or below average performance on district- and state-wide tests. This aspect of the eligibility criteria was applied equally to each case examined in this study, as the professionals used it to verify each mother's claim of legitimate special education need. Jessica eventually experienced a higher degree of success in securing special education services for Anthony because his below-average reading and math abilities were interpreted as evidence sufficient to confirm that his learning disability had an adverse impact on his education. Conversely, Brenda's struggle to secure appropriate special education services for Nick continued, because despite the well-documented language deficits that were associated with his Asperger's syndrome and that greatly impacted his academic and social growth, as is often seen

in students with Asperger's and high-functioning autism, Nick's performance on district- and state-wide testing was superior to that of his typically developing peers. Thus, inequitable outcomes resulted when the policies and procedures governing Sunnyside's implementation of the eligibility phase of the special education decision-making process was applied equally to Brenda and Jessica.

Similar to Brenda, in her first instances of involvement in the special education process, Sofia also approached her role as decision-maker rather reluctantly. She explained, "...with the very first IEP you are signing it as an uninformed parent because you have never been through the process before and you don't know what's possible." It appeared that she drew on her desire to escape her earlier feelings of insecurity and uncertainty to harness her current drive to be an effective decision-maker for Max. Of all the parent participants, the strategies that Sofia used to dismantle the usual power structure were the most obvious and assertive. I found it particularly telling that Sofia compared the process of special education decision-making to a "tug-of-war," a complicated dance that she was compelled to be a part of because of her concern for her son. It was Sofia's experience that provided perhaps the clearest illustration of the actions and subsequent reactions that took place as the parents maneuvered for positions of influence and authority throughout the process of special education decision-making.

Sofia used her thorough understanding of the formal rules that govern the special education process to bolster her position as the first and most important decision-maker on behalf of Max and his educational needs. For example, she insisted on receiving all IEP drafts prior to the actual IEP meeting with the professionals allowing her enough time to review and revise the IEP goals as she saw fit. This strategy set the stage for her to enter the IEP meeting with more control than what parents typically have.

Sofia understood that the paperwork that documented the special education process became part of Max's permanent scholastic record. Consequently, she made a concerted effort to control what information or professional opinions were included in the official record. To that end, she described an instance in which she and an occupational therapist did not agree about what was a realistic expectation and goal for Max related to his fine motor skills. The occupational therapist did not agree with revisions that Sofia made to the fine motor goal. Sofia recalled:

> She said, "For the record, I want it to be documented that I don't agree with this goal as it is written. I said, "No, you don't get a 'for the record.' For the record, the goal stays." Then she said, "I just want it to be known..." Again, I said, "No." I didn't want anything she had to say as a part of the official IEP paperwork.

As previously discussed, professionals often control the information that they provide to the parents as a way to reinforce their collective position of power. Likewise, Sofia only shared information with the professionals with enough detail so that she could advance her agenda. She employed this strategy to discretely record during formal interactions with the professionals:

> I don't ask for permission to record our meetings because that puts them on notice. So I bring Madison with me and she can type. So while we are discussing, Madison is typing what is being said with my netbook. I'm not obligated to tell them that's why she is there. I have the right to bring who I want to my meetings. So when I hire a worker, I make sure I have a worker who can type. That way I don't have to ask for permission and that's just how we do it.

In another instance when Sofia was trying to secure a frequency modulation (FM) unit for Max, separate audiological evaluations were conducted by two professional entities – an

audiologist at a local children's hospital and an audiologist who worked in a private practice. The audiologist from the children's hospital concluded that Max could benefit from the FM unit. Conversely, the private audiologist concluded that Max was not a good candidate for the FM unit because his auditory processing was commensurate with his cognitive ability. When Sofia received and read the two evaluation reports, she only provided the school district with the report from the children's hospital for consideration because the audiologist believed that the FM unit would benefit Max. Ultimately, since the school district paid for the private audiologist to evaluate Max, they obtained a copy of her report and opted to give that report more consideration than the report from the children's hospital.

This situation illuminates the politics involved in special education decision-making. Similar to the professional behaviors noted in the other examples, Sofia attempted to vet the information that the professional team members received in an effort to dictate the outcome that she intended. Perhaps because of her educational background, Sofia skillfully operated as a politician. As such, she also paid attention to current trends and the political climate within the school district and determined whether or not it was strategically sound for her to work toward advancing certain agendas. For example, Sofia pushed for Max to be included in the regular education music and art classes at a time when the school district's new special education director mandated policies consistent with the full inclusion approach to special education instruction.

Finally, similar to Jessica, Sofia made impromptu visits to Max's classroom as a way to hold the professional accountable for implementing Max's educational program with fidelity. Sofia detailed the structured steps involved in her school visits:

> Once I get the IEP I want and the final paperwork comes back to support it, I go up there maybe two or three times. If everything is on target, I may not come back for a month. If I have a problem with something, I address it with the teacher. Once she has demonstrated the she has addressed my concern and made the changes, I don't bother her with that anymore. I move on to something else. Now if I go in there and something looks fishy, well then I'm coming morning, afternoon, and lunchtime. I'm going to keep coming until I figure it out.

The impromptu classroom visits served a dual purpose. On one hand, the parents were informally working within the formal structure of special education to enforce accountability. This practice also served as a means of parents easing their natural tendencies to mistrust the professionals.

While Sofia's approach was more assertive in nature, Malcolm used an approach that was more passive. He termed his approach, "creating emotional accountability" as he asserted:

> I have to constantly be in the education system's ear. I have to have them place a name to Taylor's face and place me with him. They need to know that he has someone who cares. That holds them more accountable for what they do with him and what happens to him. I think that once they understand that you are seeing the same things that they are seeing and that you are knowledgeable and aware, then they are going to be more accountable for what they are doing with your child.

Over the course of his involvement in special education decision-making, Malcolm developed patience as he reminded himself that "you have to give the system a chance to implement improvements because things do not happen overnight."

Similar to Jessica and Sofia, it was Malcolm's practice to make impromptu classroom visits. Malcolm made an unannounced visit approximately every three weeks to enforce the

professionals' accountability while "holding their feet to the fire." While he often observed things during his visits that he did not like, he let some things go because he was focused on his ultimate goal – to ensure that Taylor received an adequate education that enabled him to be a productive and self-sufficient adult. He added, "Does it bother me? Yes! But I can't let it infuriate me because in the grand scheme of things, how important is it to the end result?"

Malcolm further delineated his approach by comparing his actions as he navigated the special education process to Reverend Martin Luther King's efforts during the Civil Rights Movement. He said:

> You have to keep your eye on the prize. That analogy fits because that's how you have to be with this kind of journey. I'm sure that Martin Luther King didn't think he could end racism and discrimination in a month. He was optimistic. He changed and adapted as necessary. With each march, he moved in the right direction towards accomplishing his goal. I think that's how you've got to be. If you are willing to die in the first battle, you're of no use to your counterparts in the 9th or 10th battle. I think you need to be reserved so that you're constantly there...so you are able to influence the process.

This was a very telling comment because it reflects Malcolm's passive approach to asserting his influence during special education decision-making. Furthermore, it shows that he rejected the more confrontational approach that Sofia used for an approach that was more palatable for the professionals that he had to deal with on a regular basis. The CRT critique of the notion of incremental change is helpful to highlight the marked philosophical difference between the approaches employed by Sofia and Malcolm. Specifically, Malcolm's approach is reminiscent of the notion of incremental change - a position that gains for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace that is comfortable for those in power. Malcolm consistently expressed

feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction related to Taylor's restrictive placement in which he is neither afforded access to his general education peers nor afforded exposure to an academically rigorous curriculum. Yet Malcolm displayed patience in his willingness to give the school personnel "a chance to get their stuff together" as long as they are working, albeit at a painfully slow rate, toward Malcolm's ultimate goal of full inclusion for Taylor. Conversely, Sofia's approach is more consistent with the aggressive efforts that Delgado and Stefancic (2001) assert are the only way that inequities can truly be eradicated.

Perceptions of Self and Others

The way that individuals perceive themselves is directly related to how they regard their place in society based on their acceptance of dominant ideologies, values, and beliefs (Lutrell, Bird, Byrne, Carter, & Chakravarti, 2007). Additionally, an individual's acceptance of ideologies shapes his values and beliefs, and in turn, dictates his level of awareness and consciousness of issues and conflicts that arise during the decision-making process. Therefore, by carefully examining the words and actions of the participants, I was able to observe how the participants' worldviews worked to possibly shape the process of special education decision-making.

The third key finding involved the perceptions that the study participants had of themselves and others. The way that the parent participants viewed themselves and the professionals with whom they interacted, appeared to impact their interactions with professionals. In turn, the way that the professional participants viewed themselves, as well as their perceptions of parents with whom they interact, likely shaped their interactions with the parent participants. Whiteness as property, interest convergence, permanence of racism, and critique of liberalism are the CRT tenets that best clarify this pattern of results.

Parents as "others." The parent participants all identified in some way with status that is distinctly different from that of what is deemed "typical" (i.e. dominant culture parents of typically developing children). Specifically, the interview data revealed that the parents' status as "others" was based on the extent to which the following factors intersected: their racial/ethnic identification, disability status of their children, and their personal work and/or educational experiences.

While all of the parent participants identified themselves as Black, there were marked differences in their vantage points that likely impacted how they participated in the process of special education decision-making. For instance, Jessica strongly identified with the Black community, yet she made a clear distinction between the mindset of today's Black community and that of the Black community that she was a part of during her childhood. Jessica clarified her position with the following statement:

> I grew up in the school of thought where most of the Black adults that I came in contact with had very high expectations for Black children. It takes everybody that you come in contact with, that come in contact with you, that live around you to help each other make it...and I think that we as a whole have come to an 'I'm gonna do me and I'm gonna get mine' mentality. And that mindset saddens me in general.

Jessica provided a poignant example of this perceived shift in mindset as she discussed at length her negative experience with a Black LEA (Ms. Thompson) as she attempted to secure initial special education intervention for her son, Anthony. Jessica had several informal interactions with Ms. Thompson, during which she consistently voiced her concerns about Anthony's academic difficulties to no avail. Jessica recalled that she soon became frustrated and

angry as she began to question Ms. Thompson's commitment to the predominantly Black population of students that she was serving.

Jessica's counterproductive interactions with Ms. Thompson marked her earliest experience with the pre-referral/referral phase of the special education decision-making process as Anthony attended two additional schools since the start of the evaluation phase of the process. As she continued to delineate the differences between the mindset of the Black community of yesteryear and today's Black community, she admitted that her experience with Ms. Thompson offended her because she was treated as if she were incapable and inferior based on her status as a Black parent. Additionally, this negative experience disappointed her and made her have ambivalent feelings about working with other Black LEAs.

On one hand, by viewing Ms. Thompson's status through a racial lens, she was an "other" because she was a Black woman. Conversely, as an LEA, she was responsible for protecting and representing the interests of the school district, an institution designed to promote and preserve the status quo. Ms. Thompson's status as an "other" was trumped by her formal position as a school administrator. Therefore, in Ms. Thompson's interactions with Jessica where she was the dominant participant, Ms. Thompson relegated Jessica to a subservient, inferior role. Similar to others, Jessica's words suggested that she does not typically associate racism or other forms of oppression to persons who belong to historically oppressed groups. As such, it appears that Jessica was so troubled by Ms. Thompson's reported behavior because she expected a sense of allegiance based on the racial/ethnic identity that the two women shared.

Although to a lesser degree than Jessica's racial/ethnic identification, Anthony's disability status also contributed to Jessica's "other" status. This was particularly true during the pre-referral phase of the special education process when Jessica was convinced that Anthony was

in need of special education services and she was unable to initiate the referral process because neither the LEA nor the teachers that she voiced her concerns to agree with her. Jessica believed that her concerns about Anthony's reading, writing, and attention difficulties were not seen as a priority for the professionals because Anthony was not a behavior problem. Additionally, Anthony's academic difficulties did not jeopardize the school's adequate yearly progress (AYP) because the battery of standardized state testing was not administered to students on Anthony's grade level. So until the point when Jessica threatened to report the school to the superintendent if Anthony was not evaluated, she was the less dominant parent, an "other," who did not possess the power to effectively initiate the evaluation phase of the special education process because the professionals saw no benefit in accommodate Jessica and, were therefore unwilling to comply with her request.

It is through this example illustrates that members of the dominant culture tolerate advances on behalf of "others" only when it is in their best interest to do so (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). By her willingness to bypass the building level professionals and LEA on behalf of Anthony's interests, Jessica threatened the professionals' position of authority and power. Therefore, it was eventually deemed to be in the professionals' best interest to comply with Jessica's request for Anthony to be evaluated for special education services.

Similar to Jessica, Brenda fought during the pre-referral/referral phase of the special education process to initiate an evaluation for her son Nick. He came into the school district with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and was subsequently invited to the district's program for gifted and talented students. She noted that her fight to ensure that Nick continue to receive the services necessary for him to perform up to his academic ability was unending. During the pre-referral/referral, evaluation, and eligibility phases of the special education process, Brenda

struggled to convince the professionals that Nick was truly entitled to special education services in part because of his above-average performance on the district- and state-wide testing. Thus, one may consider Brenda's experience as yet another example of interest convergence. It appears that the professionals were unwilling to consider her position because the district's interest (i.e., individual student achievement as evidenced by high test scores) was already being met because of Nick's superior performance on the high-stakes testing.

Further, Brenda's identity as an "other" based on Nick's disability status was apparent as she discussed her feelings of isolation and being judged by others. Specifically, she shared that she did not feel truly accepted by other parents of children with disabilities because Nick's disability does not prevent him from being educated with his typically-developing peers. Additionally, she felt that to many, Nick's identification as a gifted and talented student negated the impact of his special education needs secondary to his Asperger's diagnosis. On the other hand, parents of typically-developing children, as well as family and friends who were unfamiliar with the characteristics associated with Asperger's, tended to view Nick's socially inappropriate behavior and make judgments about Brenda as a parent who did not offer proper discipline. Therefore, as the parent of a child who is twice exceptional, Brenda found herself in a purgatory of sorts because she felt neither completely embraced by parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities, nor accepted by the parents of Nick's typically-developing peers.

Without hesitation, Brenda described herself as a Black woman. However, her "other" status as defined by her racial/ethnic identity was uniquely shaped by her marriage to Nick's father, Nate who was White. While Brenda and Nate made a concerted effort to develop an appreciation of their multicultural background in Nick and his younger brother, the parents were

cognizant of the reality that society will solely regard their children as Black by virtue of their physical appearance.

Since she was a full-time homemaker and Nate had an intense work schedule, Brenda almost exclusively handled matters related to Nick's education. Similar to Jessica's experience, Brenda developed a sense that school personnel viewed her as less capable or unworthy of being allowed to participate in the special education decision-making based on her status as a Black parent. Brenda summed up the impact of such beliefs by saying, "As a Black parent, the idea that you are inferior due to your race creates turmoil within us." Brenda reported situations in which she felt that the school personnel treated her in a condescending manner in that her input was not valued or seriously acknowledged by multidisciplinary team members, and her participation was undermined and/or subtly discouraged. Yet she mentioned an obvious difference between how she was treated by school personnel when she participated in special education decision-making by herself versus how she was treated when Nate accompanied her. As Brenda explained in the following statement, both she and Nate noticed the differences in their treatment based on race:

When I interacted with them by myself, they treated me in a condescending way. They had already decided what they were going to do. So I could tell that they were kind of patting me on the head and trying to calm me down and directing the meeting and decisions the way that they wanted to direct it. When I brought Nate in, there was a bit of a different attitude. They weren't patting anyone on the head when he was there. They were trying to be more direct. They treated us more as equals in the process. We are both aware of situations of that.

Brenda's experience as an "other" as defined by her racial/ethnic identity exemplifies in several ways the benefits associated with Whiteness. The notion of Whiteness as property

establishes that it is advantageous to possess the characteristics, behaviors, and cultural practices that one perceives to be associated with White people because they are considered normal and desirable. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Additionally, any behaviors, characteristics, and cultural practices that fall outside of what is perceived to be normal are deviant, less desirable and associated with "other" status. The notion of Whiteness as property has been used to highlight how policies and practices implemented by school personnel reward Whiteness by resulting in those students being granted access to educational advantage while disrupting "other" students' access to the same (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995. Similarly, the principle of Whiteness as property can be applied to the policies, practices, and actions carried out by multidisciplinary team members that often serve as barriers to Black parents' participation in special education decision-making.

When Brenda engaged in the process of special education decision-making by herself, her participation was tacitly undermined by the school personnel and Brenda perceived the limitations to be based on her status as a Black parent. When Nate accompanied her, their participation was encouraged and accepted by school personnel. So through her association with Nate, Brenda was granted access to advantage that was manifested by the school personnel's willingness to empower her as a member of the decision-making team. Thus, Brenda's experience provides a very concrete example of Whiteness as property.

Additionally, Brenda shared her experience interacting with two Black, female professionals on the same IEP/Eligibility team. One was an LEA, Ms. Nichols, and the other was Nick's special education teacher, Mrs. Howard. Similar to Jessica, Brenda was surprised when her interactions with the Black professionals were worse than her interactions with the other members of the IEP team. Brenda described Ms. Nichols as "the person with the most power

who didn't consider any of my concerns because she felt like she knew everything." Brenda

recalled that Mrs. Howard "really bullied that Nick was ok" having decided that Nick did not

really have Asperger's and did not need special education services. As such, Mrs. Howard's

approach was "cut and dry" and certainly more "combative" than the less confrontational,

"double-talking" approach that the other committee members displayed. Brenda's experience

with the Black professionals is yet another illustration of the permanence of racism. The formal

positions that Ms. Nichols and Mrs. Howard hold as Sunnyside personnel trumped their status as

"others" (i.e. Black women). Although Brenda did not suggest this idea directly, I got the sense

that she believed the Black professionals' behavior and posture to be so overstated because they

had to prove to the other team members that they were not being influenced by the racial status

that they shared with Brenda.

While Sofia identified herself as a Black woman and regarded herself as a parent who

was different from the parent of a typically developing child, her racial identity had very little to

do with her status as an "other." Instead, as evidenced by the following statement, Sofia's

identity as an "other" was heavily based on the distinction of being a parent of a child with a

severe disability:

> I don't see communities as Black and White. I see them more as economic or educational
>
> because all of my friends do their IEPs the same. So all the people that I associate with,
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> Black or White, do their IEP's, or do things the same way I do them. Even though one of
>
> the ladies is Asian and she doesn't have command of the language and another lady
>
> probably doesn't have a college degree, they have the tenacity to figure things out. So I
>
> don't think in terms of Black, Chinese, or White. We all do it the same way.

Additionally, Sofia shared some definite views about the intersection between the Black community and education. She said:

> I guess it would kind of be like a tug-of-war thing where they know they need it [education], but they don't want to go through the system or play the game, or follow the rules. In some cases I would say they are not given the foundation at the beginning to get the desired result that other cultural groups get, or they get sidetracked by other goals or other materialistic things and they are not able to focus on the prize for the long 16 to 20 years it takes to be educated. Their parents didn't have educations and because their parents are working jobs that don't enable them to provide, they have to go out to work earlier. Then they made some poor societal choices and they are supporting their families, or children, and it becomes a cycle. I see it as a cultural trap that requires moderate discipline to overcome but it's not impossible.

It is by not what she said directly, but what can be inferred from what she shared regarding her thoughts on the Black community, that suggests that Sofia placed less emphasis on her racial status as a way of distancing herself from the negative perceptions that are perpetuated by dominant culture views regarding the Black community. For example, Sofia consistently referred to the Black community as "they" instead of "us." Furthermore, her statements were very reminiscent of the flawed mindset that views educational inequities as being more about the cultural deficiencies inherent in the afflicted group than any obvious or tacit instances of the group being wronged by dominant culture institutions or agents.

The rejection of the notion of colorblindness is one of the cornerstones of the critique of liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). While Sofia considers herself to be a proponent of the colorblind doctrine, her statements reflect the existence of status-race. The traditional frame,

status-race, establishes race as an indicator of social status. Although policies and practices informed by status-race are considered to be inappropriate because they imply that certain races are inferior (Gotanda, 1991), Sofia's statements suggest that the focus on eliminating intentional and overt forms of racism has done little to dismantle the mindset that leads to unconscious and subtle forms of racism.

Malcolm described himself as a Black man and similar to Jessica and Brenda, he identified strongly with the Black community. Malcolm made a clear distinction between his status as a Black man in the North as compared to being a Black man in the South with the following statement:

> There is a very distinct difference between being a Black man in the South and being a Black man in the North. It is still prevalent today that the Black man in the South is not considered a man. He is considered an underling, an errand boy, a butler or some kind of servant. In the North, I feel that he is appreciated for his intellect and the value that he brings to whatever situation he's a part of. So in the North, the Black man is valued as a good contributor and in the South, he is valued as a good servant.

Malcolm's journey with special education decision-making began in a school district in the deep Southern region of the United States when his son was first diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. As he discussed his experiences with various school personnel throughout the process of special education decision-making over the years, first in the deep South and currently in a geographical region further North, his everyday treatment as a Black man within the various communities was reproduced for good or bad as he interacted with various school personnel.

> I came up here primarily for the school system because in the Deep South, I think education still isn't a priority. It's not like they were trying to raise my child to be dumb

but their focus with education was preparing children to become productive laborers. The education system further north is focused on producing leaders or managers of some sort. When I was down South, I just felt that no one really cared about my son's education because my son has progressed two or threefold since we left that school system. They had him for maybe three years and I didn't see the progress that I've seen in a little more than one year here. I have been received very well up here. When I was down South, it was very adversarial. Here I feel like everyone is on the same team...everyone is an ally. Down there, we were just enemies...enemies in the same boat. I attribute a lot of that to the history and heritage of that area.

Malcolm's "other" status was also shaped by Taylor's disability. While the other parent participants accepted, to varying degrees, their identification as parents of children with disabilities, Malcolm seemed to be a reluctant member of that group. Malcolm was very candid about his internal struggles with Taylor's disabilities as he admitted, "I don't know what he'll amount to by society's standards." Malcolm discussed how he refused to apologize about Taylor's disability and did not hide his son's disability, a stance that he referred to as "being shameless." Yet, it was obvious that Malcolm took great pride in Taylor's ability to "act normal" by displaying behaviors characteristic of typically developing children (e.g., avoiding homework) and doing things that "other kids like Taylor don't often do," such as ride a bicycle. Essentially, it appeared that Malcolm was comfortable being the parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder who was the exception in that Taylor did not present with the same deficits as other children with the diagnosis.

Interpretations of interview data revealed that the identities of several parents as "other" were shaped by specific personal work and educational experiences. Jessica had personal

experience with the special education process prior to securing services for Anthony because she was tested as a child. Jessica was referred by one of her teachers because of the teacher's inability to manage her behavior. She recalled that while she was more than capable of doing the work, she did not do it in response to a poor working relationship between her and the teacher. Jessica reported that the teacher, who was White, demonstrated low expectations for her predominately Black class and made racially insensitive comments. Jessica responded by refusing to complete any class work or homework. Eventually, it was determined that Jessica was ineligible for special education programming as the testing revealed that she had above average academic ability and was not emotionally disturbed.

In retrospect, Jessica viewed herself as a victim whose entire educational career was threatened because of a culturally incompetent teacher who was unable to inspire and manage her students. As a result of this early experience with the special education process, Jessica initiated her recent participation on behalf of her son with the propensity to question the expertise and intentions of the professionals. In turn, when she experienced so much difficulty in earliest phases of special education decision-making for Anthony, her feelings of caution became feelings of anger and mistrust.

Similarly, Brenda's past experience, specifically her work experience, shaped how she approached the special education process and engaged in the process on Nick's behalf. As one branch of the armed forces, the United States Navy places emphasis on discipline, protocol, and order. Brenda, a former navy enlistee, is currently the wife of Nate, an aspiring naval officer. Brenda described the caste system that is perpetuated by the official and unofficial (but sanctioned) rules that govern naval life:

In navy life, officers don't associate with the enlisted. The wives of officers don't associate with the wives of enlisted. It's necessary to have this class structure. It makes sense. The officers and enlisted can't co-exist. If you are an enlisted and all the people you hang out with are enlisted and you decide to become an officer, you have to cut ties with them. The position an officer is in means that you can't have any allegiance with anyone who is enlisted because if you have made that tough decision, it's never going to work out. It's definitely necessary because it makes it where people are making decisions based on what is needed instead of emotions. When you are in those life-or-death situations, you don't someone making decisions based on emotions.

As Brenda discussed her reasons for viewing this "way that things are done in the navy" as necessary and appropriate, I was reminded of the idea that within the United States, traditions and institutions function to preserve the natural order of things, the status quo, by training individuals to play their predetermined roles (Bell, 2008). Brenda consistently shared her feelings of powerlessness and her belief that she was subjected to mistreatment as she navigated the process of special education decision-making within an institution (i.e., public education) that functions in much the same way as the armed forces. Interestingly, Brenda seemed to be unaware that through her acceptance of the caste system perpetuated in the navy, she may have also accepted her role as a less powerful "other" as she navigated the process of special education decision-making on Nick's behalf.

Class membership. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is no universally agreed upon definition of middle class status. One characteristic or a combination of characteristics such as educational attainment, income, occupation, or neighborhood may dictate a person's membership

in the middle class (Lacy, 2007). Furthermore, as illustrated by the parent participants in this study, middle class status is often a state-of-mind.

While all of the parent participants were self-identified members of the middle class, they had different reasons for their assertions. Brenda's self-identification as middle-class was based primarily on her family's income and the by-products of that income, namely homeownership and financial security. Similarly, Malcolm's self-proclamation as a member of middle-class was based on his income, homeownership, and the financial security that results from his income.

While acknowledging her attainment of an advanced degree, Sofia's middle-class status was complex. She based her middle-class status on being brought up in a family of professionals and the values instilled in her as well as the educational opportunities that she was afforded based on her family's income and status in the community. Additionally, she referred to her adult life and a household income that allowed her family's needs to be met without her working outside of the home.

Jessica identified herself as a member of the middle-class based on her educational attainment. While her career as a hair stylist allowed her to maintain a comfortable lifestyle for her family, she admitted that being a single parent and sole financial provider for her household had been a challenge. In her attempt to understand why she was treated so poorly by Ms. Thompson, Jessica wondered whether Ms. Thompson and other educational professionals made erroneous assumptions about her class membership based on the neighborhood within which she and her children resided, an apartment complex in a less affluent part of the city. She said, "I don't know whether it's because of the neighborhood that my address is in...but don't judge a book by its cover because my address is x, y, and z." Jessica also noticed that Mrs. Thompson's interactions with her changed when Mrs. Thompson noticed the vehicle that Jessica drove.

Jessica recalled, "…and then when she saw that we drive the same vehicle, [luxury sports utility vehicles], just two different model years, she was a little bit warmer toward me."

Through this statement, Jessica seemed to suggest that people often use tangible possessions (i.e., vehicles) as a means of quickly determining class membership. Thus, Jessica believed that her ownership of an older model of the same luxury vehicle that Ms. Thompson owned had the effect of Ms. Thompson seeing her more like a legitimate member of the middle class, and therefore resulted in her treating Jessica better than she had in the past.

It is important to note that Ms. Thompson was not a professional participant in this study. Despite this fact, Jessica's observations were particularly poignant as they foreshadowed the marked inconsistencies that I observed between the parent participants' perceptions of their own middle-class membership and the professional participants' perceptions of the characteristics of the middle-class parent.

Redefined rules of membership. Similar to parent participants, several of the professional participants viewed middle-class membership as a state of being based on a family living in a certain kind of neighborhood and the parents' ability to use their resources (i.e., income, time, education) to meet the varied needs of their children. Lisa, the neophyte of the professional participants and recent recipient of an advanced degree, asserted that the traditional ways that people have viewed middle-class status do not always apply given the current economic climate of the country. Therefore, she expanded the characteristics of middle-class status as people having access to financial resources other than their own, a safety net provided by family and friends that can be used in case of an emergency.

While all of the professional participants agreed that middle-class status is determined in part by household income, they all believed as Nan stated, "Income is probably the driver but

there's got to be more to it than just income." Nan based her views of the characteristics inherent in middle-class status on her experiences as a child as she shared:

I was raised within a middle class family and a middle class home. My parents were involved with us children. That meant us sitting down to dinner every evening, having conversations with us children, and making sure our homework was done. Those are the types of values I grew up with so I guess that's middle class to me.

Deborah directly asserted what Nan subtly suggested, that being their belief that middle class status is characterized by maintaining a traditional two parent household. Along the same vein, it appeared that Cheryl held similar expectations about the apparent relationship stability that she expected to see with members of the middle-class as she described the tumultuous relationships that low SES parents may be engaged in that exacerbate the difficulty that they have in adequately providing for their children.

All of the professional participants identified a perceived appreciation/value of education as one very important characteristic of middle-class status. Their collective position was best explained by Deborah as she elaborated on the characteristics of the middle-class parent:

To me, when you look at socioeconomic status from the educational perspective, a lot of your middle-class parents are highly involved. They are involved in the educational process to make sure that their children are being properly educated. Additionally, they appreciate the value of education, meaning that they understand that it plays a major part in their children's success.

Moreover, as the professionals described the parent behaviors that were indicative of a parent's perceived appreciation of education, it became apparent that they viewed specific parent behaviors as the manifestation of the extent to which the parents placed education in high regard.

For instance, Cheryl, an itinerant special educator, addressed this topic by comparing her perceptions of the parents at Daybreak Elementary with her perceptions of the parents at another non-Title 1 school that she served:

I have two neighborhood schools at this particular time. I can tell you about the areas as measured by parent participation. At the school in the more affluent community, the parents are highly involved. If there are PTA meetings, you make sure you have a parking space because the parents are definitely going to come and participate. At the other school, parents have an interest in their children but it is more of a pull to get them involved because there are so many different things going on in their lives it seems. You see a little more involvement with middle-class parents...them wanting to see what's going on. The parents at the one school where participation is very high, know what their children need, they asks questions, will do additional research and things of that nature. Many of them show up for various activities that are going on...after school things...not to say that those things represent the cream of the crop. But I tend to see greater parent involvement because some of them are able to say during these hours, I am going to come for a meeting where there may be another parent who says I don't know whether I'm going to be able to get food on the table this week. I need to work. I don't have phone. You might not be able to reach me because I might be with my boyfriend. So in terms of communication and participation, a lot of times I see an increase in that among middle class parents only because...well because they have the tools, the resources and seem to be more invested. It doesn't mean that those who aren't middle class aren't invested. But it's just that they are pulled in so many directions.

Similarly, Michelle noted that middle class parents "take more of a hands-on approach because they value education more" and take responsibility for their children's academic growth. She believed that middle-class parents demonstrate this mindset by complying with the teachers' requests to reinforce skills at home, by attending parent-teacher conferences, and by participating positively in other forms of teacher-initiated communication.

Interpretations of the data indicate that the parent participants' perceptions of their middle-class membership were not consistent with that of the professional participants. In simple terms, within the context of the public education system, a parent's self-identified membership in the middle-class mattered far less than how the educational professionals viewed the parent's socioeconomic class membership.

While each of the parent participants reported varied reasons for their self-identification as members of the middle-class, each of their operationalized definitions were consistent with definitions of middle-class status that have been reported in the literature (Lacy, 2007). Conversely, the professional participants equated parents' membership in the middle-class to a specific set of parent behaviors indicative of visible involvement in the educational process, as well as those behaviors that are often educator-directed and sanctioned. Thus, by focusing on these idealized parent behaviors in their discussions of middle-class status, the professional participants displayed their ability to augment/modify the definitions of middle-class status for the parents of children that they served.

Although Deborah was the only professional participant to directly state that she associated a traditional, two-parent household to middle-class status, it was evident that at least two of the other professional participants (Nan and Cheryl) held the same beliefs. While Jessica reported nothing but very positive interactions with Nan, her son's LEA, the rules for middle-

class membership that were redefined based on the professionals' beliefs associated with ideal family structure worked to threaten Jessica's role as equal participant in the process of special education decision-making. Since Jessica was a single mother, and therefore did not meet the redefined requirement of maintaining a two-parent household, Jessica's participation as a special education decision-maker was likely limited by her inability to be regarded by Nan as a more favorable middle-class parent.

As I consider Nan's definition of middle-class status and its potential impact on her interaction with the parents that she served, the privilege that she possessed based on her Whiteness was quite evident. Nan, the only White professional participant, readily admitted that her views of middle-class status were based on the traditional, dominant culture values and practices that she was exposed to as a child. In her role as LEA, a position of formal authority, she possessed the power to change the rules of class membership and likely relegated many parents to a less favorable position of low-SES membership because they did not display parent behaviors that she determined were indicative of middle-class status.

Similar to Nan, the other professional participants, all of which were Black women, likely relegated many parents to a less favorable position of low-SES membership because the parents did not display the behaviors or characteristics that they associated with middle-class membership. Yet given their racial identity, some may argue that the notion of Whiteness as property cannot be applied to gain better understanding of how they redefined middle-class status in a way that prevented many middle-class parents from meeting the official membership requirements. However, the notion of Whiteness as property is useful in that it allows me to highlight the complexity of the situation. The advantage associated with Whiteness can be transferred to those who are deemed worthy of possessing the advantage (Harris, 1995). In this

case, the advantage or privilege was the ability to augment or operationally redefine an existence that had been previously defined in the literature – middle-class status.

As agents of an institution (i.e. public education) that maintains the status quo and promotes the higher status of the dominant culture, the "other" status of Deborah, Cheryl, Michelle, Jean, and Lisa (as determined by their racial identity) was trumped by their formal affiliations as educational professionals. Therefore, through their professional affiliations, they were granted the authority that Nan already possessed as a result of her membership in the dominant culture.

Professionals' emerging perceptions of self. While the parents' perceptions of themselves and the professionals with whom they interact impacted the special education decision-making process, the professionals' perceptions of their position and roles further explain the dynamic that exists between parents and professionals.

Cheryl, Lisa, and Michelle agreed that they served important roles as team members who brought discipline-specific knowledge and insight to the decision-making process. Michelle explained that given her role as the representative of the general education curriculum, she helped parents and other team members understand which academic skills students should possess in order to be successful in a general education classroom. Similarly, as speech-language pathologists, Lisa and Cheryl explained that they provided the knowledge of how the students' speech and language strengths and weaknesses impact the students' ability to access the general education curriculum and if therapy services are warranted.

Additionally, the educational practitioners agreed that they, along with the other professional team members, were responsible for ensuring that parents were equipped with information that they needed to make sound decisions. Cheryl added that in order to effectively

fulfill this responsibility, it was important that they (the professionals) had an adequate understanding of the special education process themselves and were "...willing to answer parents' questions while letting them know that we are part of the team." According to Michelle, she and her professional counterparts were responsible for "doing everything we can to make parents active participants." Likewise, Cheryl believed that this responsibility was accomplished by "presenting all the information to the parents and giving them a change to provide input that will be used by the team to make the final decision." Lisa further clarified that her responsibility for facilitating the parents' active participation in the decision-making process required her to maintain regular communication and contact with parents so that they felt comfortable with their role as team members.

Nan, a principal and LEA, agreed that professionals are responsible for providing parents with information that allows them to make well-informed decisions. She explained that the manner in which she provided information often varies:

> So I think as an educator it is essential that we make sure that parents have all the information they need in order to make that decision. Sometimes it may be a conversation, sometimes it may be that the parent comes in and observes. I want to make sure that when you say that you want your child in this classroom for writing...I want you to see how that teacher teaches. I want you to see the interaction with the kids. I want you to see the number of kids in that classroom and then look at the self-contained class and see what the difference is.

As a special education instructional leader who also served as an LEA, Deborah considered herself to be responsible for "learning and knowing the laws, and being able to work within those laws to make sure student receive what they need within a least restrictive

environment." Moreover, she viewed her role as twofold because she represented the interests of the school district and its teachers while serving as an advocate for parents. Similarly, Jean, another special education instructional leader, believed that her formal role as LEA required her to facilitate the decision-making process by making sure that the parents were properly engaged while ensuring that what is best for the student was the focal point that guided effective decision-making. Finally, while Nan and her assistant principal split their coverage of the IEP meetings that took place at Daybreak Elementary, she felt that it was important that she attends all child study and eligibility meetings. She stated that she encouraged the parents' active participation in the decision-making process with her first interactions, by making a concerted effort to let them know that she is interested in their input because "they know their children better than any of the professionals sitting at the table."

The very deliberate efforts in which the professional participants engaged appear to reflect their best efforts to empower parents as decision-makers. Yet it is through their formal roles and their views of those roles' responsibilities that the professionals established themselves as dominant, assuming power in the forms of expert knowledge and formal position. Consistent with possession of such expert advantage, they were free to share their power with the parents as they saw fit. Thus, parents were dissuaded and even prevented from being engaged in the special education process in a manner consistent with the intent of IDEA 2004.

Through an in-depth examination of the experiences that Black, middle class parents encountered during the special education process, this study works to dispel the myth that Black parents are a one-dimensional, homogeneous group who are flawed in their ability or willingness to represent the best interest of their children with disabilities. By describing factors that are present throughout the special education process and using CRT as a tool to interpret such

factors, the study results show that these parents' efforts toward active and meaningful decision-making are thwarted by the subtle but powerful force of institutionalized racism. In the forthcoming discussion, I will place these results in the broader perspectives of parent-professional partnership in special education and identity development; and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Consistent with the belief that children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education, IDEA 2004 mandates that parents should be involved in decision-making and held accountable for how their children with disabilities are educated. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest a positive and direct correlation between students' academic outcomes and parent involvement (e.g., Shaver & Walls, 1998; Deslandes et al, 1999; and McNeal, 1999). Accordingly, special education law and what has been established as best practice in the planning and implementation of special education programming supports parent-professional partnerships, collaboration, and the notion of shared power between parents and professionals in special education decision-making.

Unfortunately, as I discussed in Chapter 2, parent-professional partnerships have not worked as well as intended, thus undermining outcomes for the most vulnerable subsets of the student population: culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students overall, and Black students in particular. Initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and calls for increased accountability have been promoted as attempts to address achievement gaps noted among CLD populations (namely Black students) and their dominant culture counterparts (primarily White students). Yet the achievement gap persists, as evidenced by continued disproportionate representation in special education programming and other negative outcomes for Black students who receive special education services (Ahram et al., 2011; Ford, 2012; Skiba et al., 2008).

At the same time that Black students involved in special education are not faring well academically and socially, it has been documented that partnerships between school professionals and Black parents are often unsuccessful. Such failures stem from cultural clashes

between parents and professionals (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Harry, 2008). Additionally, incongruent ideas between parents and professionals about what ideal parent participation entails often results in the tendency for CLD parents to play more passive roles in collaborative decision-making (Ayala & Dingle, 2003).

As educational researchers attempt to explain why this breakdown exists, a preponderance of literature presents Black parents as deficient beings who lack capital (i.e., education, knowledge, appreciation for the value of education, financial resources, etc.) and are therefore ill-equipped to serve as effective participants in the parent-professional decision-making dyad (Epstein, 2001; Trotman, 2002). This perspective erroneously presents Black parents as a homogeneous group; perpetuating the idea that low SES serves as an appropriate proxy for Black racial status and visa-versa. In turn, this research substantiates the deficit thinking that casts Black parents as culturally deficient, which causes the ineffective partnerships between Black parents and education professionals.

Furthermore, the claim that parents' low SES is the variable that best explains poor parent-professional partnership is erroneous (Harry, 1992c; Olivios, 2006). The fact that poor partnerships have been noted between professionals and parents of middle-class status (Epstein, 2002) suggest the existence of other influences. Delpit (2006) explains that while acting in the interest of their children, parents enter into a decision-making arena where the "natural order of things" ensures a power differential that favors the educational professionals from the beginning. Particularly for Black, middle class parents, this power differential is exacerbated by professionals and their deficit views of CLD families (Harry et al., 2005). By viewing Black, middle class parents through a deficit lens, professionals dissuade the parents' involvement by displaying behaviors based on stereotypical and unfair beliefs about Black parents' abilities and

motives as decision-makers. Ultimately, by accepting deficit views of CLD families, professionals reinforce their positions of dominance in the special education decision-making process. Therefore, this dissertation study aimed to investigate the collective experience of Black, middle class parents involved in the process of special education decision-making.

The insights uncovered in this study's results, when considered in light of the larger critical race theory (CRT) literature, demonstrate that, similar to their counterparts with low-SES status, middle class Black parents have counterproductive experiences as they attempt to partner with professionals during the process of special education decision-making. These negative experiences cannot be explained by parents' lack of social and financial capital, or their unfamiliarity with what Delpit (1988) describes as the "culture of power." Instead, the study's results denote that collaborative efforts between professionals and Black, middle class parents are influenced by the stereotypical beliefs that some professionals affix to Black parents. These stereotypical beliefs influence the unconstructive professional practices that are the observable indicators of institutionalized racism.

This study was situated in the critical humanism paradigm, which employs critical theory to examine reality. Working within this paradigm, I was charged to go a step beyond simply presenting rudimentary evidence to support the idea that the process of special education decision-making is often problematic for many Black parents, including those who possess middle-class status. It was also my duty to present examples of the factors that work in concert to dissuade Black middle class parents from engaging in active, meaningful, collaboration as equal participants in the special education decision-making process

Through this work, I was responsible for presenting the status quo with reference to my research focus, while also subjecting it to critique. Ultimately, it was my aim to facilitate the

empowerment and liberation of the parents and professionals involved in special education. This

is necessary as they are responsible for transforming special education into what it was originally

intended to be: a process in which parents and professionals interact, while sharing power

equally, to make the best educational decisions on behalf of children with disabilities. To that

end, by using elements of CRT as a research lens, I was able to uncover the complexities

inherent in the parent-professional relationships that I examined, hopefully presenting them in a

manner that is relevant to parents and professionals alike in chapter four of this document. In the

following discussion, I will situate the findings of this study within the larger landscape of

identity development, parent involvement, and special education.

The Multiple Dimensions of the Parent Identity

"One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled
strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being
torn asunder" (DuBois, 1903/2012, p. 9).

With the words that appear above, W.E.B. DuBois eloquently expressed the internal

schism that the Black Americans of his day experienced daily. Even today, it is still necessary for

Black Americans to find their way in at least two worlds. Thus, the idea of double consciousness

serves as an important foundation for a more contemporary understanding of identity – one that

portrays an individual's identity as multifaceted and complex. Identity was a central idea around

which many of this study's findings converged. The work of Harry (1992c; 2002b), Artiles

(2011) and others tell us that the identity of the Black parent of a child with a disability is forged

at the intersection of at least three realities: racial status, disability status, and class status. Before

I present how these multiple realities intersected for the parent participants, I will provide an

overview of each within the study's findings, addressing some of the complexities that were
noted.

Racial Status

While race is often defined in biological terms as a way to differentiate groups of people
by highlighting distinct physical characteristics, it lacks a genetic basis. No one characteristic or
gene distinguishes all members of one race from members of another (PBS, 2003). In addition,
the fact that ancient societies did not divide people according to their physical differences
suggests that race is a socially constructed reality (Tatum, 1997).

As a social construct, racial status can be best understood in a pragmatic sense as the
degree to which a given racial distinction has a current and historical link to oppression.
Reynolds and Pope (1991) note that oppression is a system that allows access to the services,
rewards, benefits, and privileges of society based on membership in a particular group. Given the
United States' long history of race-based oppression, the racial distinction of Whiteness has been
constructed as a prominent dimension of privileged status, while the racial distinction of
Blackness has been constructed as a prominent dimension of a deviant, oppressed status.

All of the parents who participated in this dissertation study (Jessica, Brenda, Sofia, and
Malcolm) identified themselves as Black. The manners in which the parent participants
described themselves during our first interactions were very telling. For example, while initially
identifying herself as a Black woman, Brenda eventually revealed the complexity inherent in her
racial status and that of her son Nick, given her marriage to Nate, a White man. Throughout our
conversations, Brenda appeared to be cognizant of how one's racial status impacts the
educational process. On one hand, Brenda mentioned that while she and Nate raise Nick as a
biracial child who embraces every aspect of his racial and ethnic background, she also

emphasized the need for her to prepare him for the realities associated with society viewing him as a Black person, based upon his physical appearance.

Additionally, as Brenda attempted to assert herself as an active participant in the process of special education decision-making, she observed that the professionals were more likely to encourage her active participation as a decision-maker when Nate was present. She attributed the observed changes in the professionals' behavior to her perception of the professionals' negative attitudes about working with a Black parent, as compared to more positive professional attitudes about working with a White parent and his Black spouse. Thus, for Brenda, belonging to the socially normalized racial status (i.e., White) through her association with her husband yielded decision-making benefits that she did not realize alone.

With the exception of Sofia, all of the parent participants described themselves, first and foremost, as Black. Sofia only referred to her racial designation in response to one interview question, which was surprising, given her Afrocentric hairstyle and dress. As we engaged in discussions referencing the Black community and education, Sofia's responses were reminiscent of those who blame their low-SES counterparts for all that ails them. She said:

> I guess it would kind of be like a tug of war thing where they know they need it, but they don't want to go through the system or play the game, or follow the rules, or in some cases I would say they are not given the foundation from the beginning to get the desired result that other cultural groups obtain, or they get sidetracked by other goals or other materialistic things and they are not able to focus on the prize for the long 16 to 20 years it takes to get it.

Such sentiments suggested that Sofia may subscribe to the liberalism critiqued by DeCuir and Dixson (2004): the meritocratic position that regardless of race, everyone is afforded equal

opportunity to achieve. Interestingly, Sofia's response to a question about how members of the Black community view education was indicative of her tendencies to discuss the Black community in deficient terms and to use low SES as a proxy for Black status. Additionally, she appeared as a Black woman who had internalized racist stereotypes that plague the Black community. Thus, my interactions with Sofia about race illustrated the complexity inherent in class status for some Black parents. Moreover, Sofia's resolute and negative beliefs about members of the Black community exemplified how by internalizing the negative racial stereotypes imposed on them as truth, some Black parents unwittingly contribute to their own race-based victimization by advancing and solidifying racism.

Class

The parents who participated in this study were self-identified members of the middle class, based on their incomes and educational levels. However, class status within the Black community is a complicated construct. Dyson (2005) asserts that in Black culture, class has never been viewed in solely economic terms. He adds that the Black definition of "middle class" is ambiguous in that it includes certain lifestyle and behavior patterns that may be arbitrarily used or disregarded. For example, speech patterns similar to standard American English or the possession of particular tangibles (e.g., luxury cars, designer clothing, homes in desirable areas, etc.) may or may not be regarded as characteristics of the Black middle class. Therefore, the definition of middle class is unclear and changing, as members of the Black community apply it differently from and to one another. Furthermore, since middle class status is often associated with positive parent involvement (Jeynes, 2005), the absence of a finite definition of middle class within the Black community may confound what Black parents experience as special education decision-makers.

Jessica's perception of her experience with Mrs. Thompson illustrates the impact that ambiguous definitions have on the interactions between Black, middle class parents and education professionals. While Jessica identified herself as middle class, she believed that Mrs. Thompson's condescending posture was the result of Mrs. Thompson's knowledge that Jessica was a single parent who lived in an apartment complex in a less desirable area of Sunnyside.

Similar erroneous assumptions were noted between Brenda and the professionals with whom she interacted. Consistent with the tacit forms of racism that are often the hallmark of institutionalized racism (Bell, 2008), Brenda recalled that professional team members were subtle in the condescending treatment toward her. She stated:

I am the kind of person who tries to wait and evaluate before I determine that someone is prejudice. But when you have repeatedly dealt with people being prejudice, you start to notice the subtleness of it. Plus I am from the North and subtle racism is what we do! So you know when it's happening because they don't treat you with respect or take your input seriously. It's like they're going to pat you on the head or pat you on the butt and send you on your way. You know there is just a way of it…in the conversation, the tone changes and everyone starts to talk to you in a certain way.

Brenda also speculated that the professionals were prejudice against her because of her race and what they perceived her socioeconomic status to be. She added:

We are a middle class family and we are homeowners. We live in a middle class neighborhood that happens to have a lot of apartment complexes. So there is an attitude at the school about the kids from our neighborhood, like they come from low SES families and you can just tell. So it's like we are guilty by zip code.

Thus, the middle class status of Black parents may be in question even before they enter the educational arena to partner with professionals to meet the special learning needs of their children.

Further complicating the issue of class within the Black community, Dyson (2005) asserts that a struggle exists between middle class Blacks and Blacks with limited financial resources. Within the Black community, the middle class group is akin to the dominant culture and the low-income group is the subordinate. The tension between the two groups results from a tendency of the members of the middle class to look down on the low-income subgroup, assuming their deviance and inferiority. Thus, Sofia's perceptions associated with "those" Blacks who "won't invest the time that it takes to get an education," and who "make poor social decisions" are consistent with beliefs held by middle class Blacks (about other perceived classes of Blacks), to whom Dyson (2005) refers to as "afristocracy."

Those who are classified as the "other," a subset that Dyson terms the "ghettocracy," include Blacks from low-SES backgrounds and those who are perceived to have retained the values and behaviors associated with low income, even when their financial resources are equal to that of middle class to high-SES Black populations. Such rule-changing regarding class membership was also what some of the professional participants did when describing the middle class Black parents with whom they interacted during the special education process. For example, Michelle stated that Black, middle class parents have an appreciation for education as evidenced by them assisting with homework and maintaining regular communication with the teacher by attending conferences and other school activities. Additionally, Deborah believed that in addition to a familial access to financial resources, Black, middle class children must reside within two-parent households.

These two Black professionals arbitrarily augmented the already convoluted definition of the Black middle class and used those expanded definitions to judge the SES status of the parents with whom they interacted. By applying their subjective definitions of Black middle class to the parent participants, it appears that the Black professionals possessed privilege, identical to Whiteness as property, that they could use to maintain their dominance in their interactions with the parent participants during special education decision making. Similar to class status, disability status is a mutable term that can inform the parent identity in different ways.

Disability

Since in generic terms *ability* refers to one's capability to perform particular activities, *disability* refers to one's inability to perform some or all of the tasks of daily life. The federal government describes disability in various ways, based upon the purposes for which the distinction is used. For example, for the purpose of providing specialized instruction for IDEA-eligible students, the federal government narrowly characterizes disability as 13 possible categories that adversely impact educational performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Conversely, in the effort to prohibit discrimination based on disability in programs or activities receiving federal funds, the federal government uses a broad definition to enforce Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Thus, it is apparent that similar to race and class, disability is also a socially constructed reality (Artiles, 2011).

The parent participants' identities related to disability were dependent on their children's IDEA-based disability diagnoses and their beliefs about the level of ability (or lack thereof) associated with the diagnoses. In general, the more severe the parents perceived their children's disabilities to be, the greater the extent to which disability was an integral part of their identities. For example, given her special education training, Jessica knew that students with specific

learning disabilities (SLD) have intellectual abilities that fall within the average range. Anthony's SLD status did not appear to be at the forefront of Jessica's identity as a parent. Conversely, Sofia discussed her understanding that given Max's limited cognitive ability, coupled with the severity of his multiple disabilities, he would not be able to live independently. In turn, Max's disability status was at the forefront of Sofia's identity as a parent —so much so that it overshadowed the racial dimension of her identity.

A similar pattern was noted with Brenda and Malcolm, the parents of sons on the autism spectrum. Brenda's son, who was labeled as twice exceptional with a diagnosis of autism and identification as gifted, was high functioning and excelled academically in a full-time general education classroom. On the other hand, Malcolm's son, who was also given a diagnosis of autism, was educated on a full-time basis in a self-contained special education classroom in which the curriculum focused more on functional skills than academic skills.

When comparing the expressed identities of the two parents, the child's disability status appeared to be a part of Brenda's identity to a lesser degree than what was noted with Malcolm. Considering himself to be a mentor to other parents who were fighting to change their children's educational placements to more inclusive classrooms in which academic skills were emphasized, Malcolm was a stable member of a local network of parents of children with severe disabilities. This membership bolstered Taylor's disability status as a part of Malcolm's identity while Brenda's involvement in a local network of parents is tenuous. Brenda explained that given Nick's gifted status, she did not feel accepted among other parents with disabled children because Nick was not excluded from the general education curriculum. Thus, Brenda's sense that she was not a part of the parent network, resulted in Nick's disability having minimal impact on Brenda's parent identity.

Additional Dimensions of Identity

Informed by their work that focused on the identity development of college students,

Jones and McEwen (2000) acknowledge that individuals may have other identity orientations in

addition to the dimensions commonly noted, such as race and gender. We saw this with Jessica,

Brenda and Malcolm. Marital status further shaped their identities in that Jessica and Malcolm

were single divorcees and Brenda was married to a White man. Jessica's identity was also

shaped by her personal experience as a child who was mistakenly evaluated for special education

services. Brenda's identity was further shaped by her current experience as a Navy wife.

Malcolm's identity was hewn by his experience navigating the special education process on his

son's behalf as a Black father interacting with racially prejudiced professionals in a school

system in the "Deep South."

The identities of the parent participants were shaped by their unique approaches to

multiple worlds to which they belonged (i.e., race, class, disability). This sense of existence that

DuBois referred to as "double consciousness" is particularly relevant for Black, middle class

parents who are involved in the special education decision-making process. As I will discuss in

the next section, the multiple dimensions of the parent's identity may clash, and in turn impact

how the parent engages in the special education decision-making process.

When Multiples Identities Clash: Intersections of Race, Class & Disability

As we examine the various facets of the parent participants' personal identities, a

complex portrait emerges. Reynolds and Pope (1991) assert that each dimension is subject to

varying levels of societal scrutiny or oppression. As such, each dimension is assigned value that

can be expressed as varying amounts of power or influence as the parents navigate the process of

special education decision-making. Consequently, those competing dimensions clash within the

individual. During this internal arbitration, which may be conscious or unconscious, the integration of the multiple dimensions of one's identity may be shaped by the particular context within which the individual is situated, as well as the role(s) that the individual plays within a particular context.

Dated identity development theories fall short of providing comprehensive images of the multiple identities and oppression that characterize culturally diverse groups (Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Reynolds and Pope (1991) note that authors of counseling literature have shifted their focus over time from the identifying characteristics of the dominant White, middle class to that of racially diverse groups (e.g., Black). For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, identity development models that emphasized Black and feminist identities emerged during the Civil Rights, Gay Rights, and Women's Rights movements. However, those models presented culturally diverse groups as one-dimensional because they did not acknowledge that one person could belong to multiple groups. This has certainly been the case for researchers and educators who strive to identify the characteristics of Black parents who involve themselves to varying degrees in their children's education, in that the complexities and variations inherent in the Black parent population in terms of SES and educational level are overlooked (Harry et al., 2005).

Based on the understanding that it may be difficult for a person to reconcile the various dimensions of her identity when she belongs to one or more oppressed group (e.g., Black and Hispanic) while also belonging to a dominant group (e.g., White), Root (1990) developed the Biracial Identity Model. This model provides a framework that holds that biracial individuals must be able to reach a resolution that allows the varied dimensions of their identity to coexist. To better understand the multiple dimensions of identity and how clashes among its different

dimensions are resolved, Reynolds and Pope (1991) added to Root's model and offered the Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM).

MIM presents four possibilities for the resolution of one's identity: (1) Passively accepted identification with one aspect of self that is society assigned; (2) Conscious identification with one aspect of self; (3) Identification with multiple aspects of self in a segmented fashion; and (4) Identification with combined aspects of self with identity intersection (Reynolds & Pope, 1990).

The first way that one may resolve his identity involves passively accepting as the dominant dimension of his identity the characteristics that society or one's community emphasizes to identify that person. The second way that a person may resolve his identity involves that person actively accepting one dimension of his identity, causing him to suppress other dimensions of his identity to feel more accepted by society or his community. The third way that a person may resolve her identity is to embrace all dimensions of her identity by living in separate and often unconnected worlds. Finally, the fourth way that a person may resolve his identity is by focusing on the intersection of all aspects of his identity; thus creating a new identity group (Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

Although the MIM model was designed to inform multicultural counseling, it provides a frame that is useful in elucidating how the various dimensions of the parents' identities are resolved. In the next section, I will reintroduce the parent participants to the reader while applying the MIM model to the discussion. This process of self-identification seems to have impacted how the parent participants approached special education decision-making. Finally, it is important to note that since a person may move among the different possibilities for identity resolution based on her personal needs or environment at a given time (Reynolds & Pope, 1991),

the process of identity resolution will likely change for the parent participants as their needs as special education decision-makers evolve .

Meet the Parents (again): Applying MIM to Parent Identities

The first two possibilities that are presented by the MIM indicate that individuals may identify with just one dimension of their identity, either passively or actively (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Malcolm will be reintroduced as the parent who passively identified with one dimension of his identity while Sofia will be reintroduced as the parent who actively identified with one dimension of her identity.

Malcolm

An individual's simplification of his identity to one prominent dimension involves an acceptance of the identity that is determined by society. Malcolm best exemplified this possibility when he discussed at length his involvement in the special education decision-making process within two school districts in two different geographic areas. He illustrated and compared the differences between his treatment as a "Black man in the north" and as a "Black man in the south." Although there are several dimensions to his identity, Malcolm focused on his status as a Black man. Therefore, it appears that he perceived that society views him as first and foremost as a Black man, and he passively accepted that as the dominant dimension of his identity. Additionally, as he considered his son Taylor's advancement through school and eventual adulthood, Malcolm was troubled by the possibility that even if Taylor lives up to his full potential, it may not be enough for society to deem him appropriate or acceptable. Thus, the manner in which Malcolm negotiated his own identity appeared to influence how he began to conceptually craft Taylor's identity.

Sofia

Reynolds & Pope (1991) explain that an individual's simplification of her identity to one overarching dimension involves making a conscious decision to emphasize one aspect of identity, while downplaying the others. Sofia best exemplified this simplification when she identified herself as a parent of a child with multiple disabilities, first and foremost. She emphasized her responsibilities as a mother of a child with a disability, without making any mention of her responsibilities as a Black parent. In fact, Sofia referred to members of the Black community as "they," while she mentioned that she did not look at communities in terms of Black and White. Moreover, she noted that she aligned herself with other parents of children with disabilities who navigated the special education process in a manner similar to her approach. Thus, based on Sofia's tendency throughout her participation in this dissertation study to distance herself from the Black community, it appears that she accepts negative stereotypes imposed on Black people that are rooted in racism as truth.

Additionally, throughout our interactions, Sofia downplayed her racial status with a stance that was consistent with the colorblind doctrine – a view that racism is not a problem because the law is applied to people equally (Gotanda, 1991). The unfair treatment that she reported was consistent with what other parent participants recognized as racial micro-aggressions that stemmed from educational professionals' low academic and social expectations of Black students and their parents. Yet Sofia summarized her negative experiences with professionals throughout the special education process as micro-aggressions rooted in "prejudice against Max – not because of our race but because of his disability."

The MIM also suggests that individuals may identify with multiple aspects of themselves in one of two ways: (1) embracing all dimensions of one's identity by living in separate and often unconnected worlds, or (2) creating a new identity group by focusing on the intersection of

all aspects of one's identity. Brenda will be reintroduced as the parent who incorporates all

dimensions of her identity in disjointed fashion while Jessica will be reintroduced as the parent

who focused on the intersection of all aspects of her identity.

Brenda

MIM theory explains that an individual may acknowledge all aspects of her identity, but

in a compartmentalized way. This proposition results in the individual living in separate and

somewhat unconnected worlds (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Brenda's comments best exemplified

this compartmentalization of identities. She acknowledged her multifaceted identity, discussing

how her son's disability, along with her racial status, middle class status, marital status, and

military ties defined who she is as a woman, mother, and wife. However, when she discussed her

varied experiences as a mother navigating the special education process, and then as a member of

the military community, it was clear that she considered those two facets of her identity to be

unrelated. Specially, Brenda viewed her involvement with special education decision-making as

a disempowered participant to be totally unrelated to her involvement in the U.S. Navy, once as

an enlistee and later as the wife of an aspiring naval officer.

Brenda noted power differentials between dominants and subordinates in both the U.S.

Navy and Sunnyside Public Schools. Moreover, as a subordinate (i.e., Black parent) in the

special education process, she expressed feelings of hurt, frustration and betrayal as she

described the power differential between parents and professionals as unfair. Brenda noticed and

described how the power differential shifted somewhat in her favor when Nate, Brenda's White

husband, accompanied her to special education meetings. Yet in the military realm, an

environment in which she viewed herself as a member of the dominant culture, she regarded the

differential that creates a separate and unequal distinction between naval officers and enlistees as necessary and the "ways that things have to be" for "the good of the whole."

Jessica

MIM theory holds that some individuals can acknowledge all dimensions of their identities, and are able to integrate multiple identities comparatively equally within the same setting (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Jessica best exemplified this integration of multiple identities. In her descriptions of her experiences navigating the special education process on behalf of her son Anthony, Jessica explained how the following facets of her identity converged to impact how she perceived, and how she was perceived, at various stages of the process: race, middle class status, child's disability status, and marital status.

As evidenced by her feelings of anger and resentment directed toward Mrs. Thompson, Jessica understood that some professionals have a very limited view of the Black parent. She asserted her participation in the special education process by engaging in ongoing communication with Anthony's teachers and being present in the school building. Jessica also discussed how her status as a member of the Black community, coupled with her marital status, and the realities of her SES status and her responsibilities as a parent of a child with a disability impacted her multifaceted identity. The various dimensions of her identity were integrated in such a way that no one dimension was dominant. Additionally, Jessica indicated that she wanted professionals to acknowledge her concern for her son's academic and social growth while displaying respect for her as a multidimensional parent. Thus, she aimed to challenge the one-dimensional view of Black parents by being unapologetic for who she was as a multidimensional Black parent of a child with identified disabilities.

The MIM is useful as a frame through which one can characterize the identities of the parent participants' identities. MIM theory is also helpful as we observe how identity informs and shapes parents' roles as they interact with professionals during the course of special education decision-making – a process that will be discussed shortly.

Emerging Dimensions of the Professional Identity

The primary intent of this study was to capture and characterize the experiences of some middle class Black parents as decision-makers in the special education process. Although the findings do not address professional identities comprehensively, the interpretation of data indicated that the professionals' participation in the special education process was shaped by how they managed the multiple dimensions of their identities. Therefore, I would like to discuss one aspect of the professional identity that was noted in an attempt to introduce the emerging dimensions of the professional identity, as this topic is worthy of investigation through future research.

Perhaps because I focused on the interactions between parents and professionals that occurred as part of decision-making processes within formal school spaces, the professional participants described themselves with their formal roles in mind. For example, when I asked the professional participants to share information about their backgrounds, they tended to focus on their roles and responsibilities in the special education process instead of providing information that could be used to determine who they were as women who happened to be professionals. This observation is consistent with what Harry (2002) mentions as the tendency for professionals to strongly identify with the culture of professionalism. Paternalistic behaviors, such as controlling the flow of information between parents and professionals and attempts to dominate decision-making, were clearly noted and are traditionally associated with the persona of the

educational professional. This was evident when Cheryl and Nan discussed their practice of explaining the committee's eligibility decision prior to the eligibility meeting being held. As professionals find it difficult to break away from this traditional mold, the "culture of professionalism" often serves as a barrier to parental participation, regardless of racial identity (Harry, 2002).

Additionally, Nan, who was an LEA and the only White professional to participate in this study, reportedly interacted with Black, middle class parents in a manner that was markedly different from the approach used by the Black professional participants. For example, one stage of the special education process in which very important decisions are made is the eligibility meeting. During the eligibility meeting, the multidisciplinary team, which includes professionals and the student's parent(s), reviews all evaluation data to determine whether or not a student is eligible to receive special education services under IDEA.

Jean, an LEA, and Cheryl, a practitioner, described their practice of facilitating a smoother eligibility process by meeting with the parents ahead of time to tell them what the committee will decide. This seemingly benevolent gesture threatened to diminish the parents' role as decision-makers, while casting the professionals as kind experts. Conversely, Nan reported that it was her practice to consistently reinforce the parent's position as the ultimate decision-maker. She accomplished this by ensuring that the professional explained test results in a way that the parents could easily understand, and provided opportunities throughout the eligibility meetings for the parents to share information that they saw as relevant to the decision. Additionally, Nan recounted that when parents were unsure of the committee's decision, she reminded them that by law the decision could be reviewed at any time. Thus, Nan discussed a

more contemporary, culturally sensitive approach to parent engagement that was less paternalistic in nature than what Jean and Cheryl described.

It was through this observation that I began to think about each professionals' affiliation with the dominant culture. Nan possesses "White privilege" (Tatum, 1997) in that she possessed more power than what was afforded her Black professional counterparts. Given her racial identity, Nan was a member of the dominant culture by birthright, and her professional role as school principal was a natural extension of her inherent right to membership.

Through the CRT tenet that establishes Whiteness as property, the property rights associated with Whiteness—in this case, professional authority—can be transferred to a person who would not otherwise have such privilege (Harris, 1993). Designation as gifted and talented is generally afforded to children who belong to the dominant culture (i.e., White, middle class students) (Barlow & Dunbar, 2010). Thus, when students from subordinate groups (e.g., Black students) receive the designation of gifted and talented, the benefits of that status ordinarily reserved for dominant groups are transferred to them. Similarly, the professional authority observed within Sunnyside Public Schools was a form of White privilege. When the Black professional participants were granted formal titles as LEAs and professional members of multidisciplinary teams, they were granted privileges that are associated with the dominant culture. Thus, the Black professional participants were granted privileges usually reserved for Whites because their professional identities required them to protect and act in the best interest of the institution, the status-quo. This was reflected in the Black professionals' tendencies to behave in a manner firmly consistent with the culture of professionalism that Harry (2002) acknowledges.

While Nan's membership in the dominant culture could not be revoked, the privileged memberships of the Black professionals were built on unstable ground. Nan's position of power was not jeopardized by her tendency to relinquish ultimate decision-making control to the parents throughout the special education process. As such, it is plausible that Nan had the freedom to diverge from the traditional behaviors of control and dominance that professionals typically display (Harry, 2002), because her membership in this dominant class was non-negotiable by virtue of her race.

On the other hand, the Black professionals' racial identity did not carry the same benefit. They had to work hard and be very careful to carry themselves in a manner that ensured that their honorary membership in the professional cadre was not revoked. I encountered the impact of this precarious existence first-hand during my interviews with the Black participants. All of the Black professional participants—even the ones with whom I was familiar with through our professional connections as speech-language pathologists—were guarded and hesitant in their comments when I broached issues that they perceived to be racially controversial. For example, Lisa, a practitioner, asserted that the focus of this study was important as she discussed the racial inequities that she observed during the 1990s as a child in her hometown—an area with a difficult history related to Jim Crow laws and the racial integration of public schools. As she began to draw parallels to her early observations as a Black student and her more recent observations as a Black educational professional, she seemed concerned that I would interpret her words to mean that her colleagues were racist. As such, she quickly changed the subject.

This exchange is a clear example of the precarious situation that many Black professionals face and the same uncomfortable position that marked many of my professional experiences as a Black woman who was also a special education professional. Perhaps given her

experiences as a Black woman, Lisa appeared to be cognizant that the beliefs and actions of some of her colleagues became tacit forms of racism that impacted the experience of Black parents. However, as an honorary proprietor of White privilege, she understood that highlighting such racial inequities could – and likely would – jeopardize her professional status.

The results of this study demonstrated the potential impact that the multifaceted parent identity has on the Black, middle class parent's process of special education decision-making. Yet the findings also suggest that while multiple dimensions of *professional* identity may also influence the special education process, the degree of impact is unknown. Thus, future research could explore multifaceted professional identities in light of critical race theory, relating the identities to the interactions between Black school-based professionals and Black middle class parents throughout the special education decision-making process.

Identity, Roles, and Typecasting in Special Education Decision-Making

The process of identity development, during which a person emphasizes or retires particular identity dimensions to create a consistent persona (Reynolds & Pope, 1991), is crucial to understanding how roles emerge as individuals interact in different contexts. Since Jones and McEwen (2000) note that identity can be expressed uniquely at different points in time, one may logically conclude that throughout the special education decision-making process, roles of parent and professional participants are subject to change.

In this study, data analysis yielded a process in which a parent's perception of her own identity prompted her to form perceptions of the professionals with whom she interacted. It was through this process (that presumably occurred within the professional participants as well) that it was ultimately determined which role-based actions were appropriate, and which roles parents and school professionals should assume within the special education decision-making process.

For example, Sofia considered herself to be the person who was ultimately responsible for

ensuring that appropriate educational decisions were made on Max's behalf. As such, she

unapologetically asserted herself as a decision-maker within the formal special education

process, often to the chagrin of the professionals with whom she partnered. To this end, Jones

and McEwen (2000) would recommend that education professionals strive to see parents as they

see themselves, interacting with parents based on such interpersonal observation, rather than the

professional's presumptions of the parent's identity.

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self
>
> through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in
>
> amused contempt and pity" (DuBois, 1903/2012, p. 9).

As DuBois stated so poignantly, while the manner in which a subordinate individual

regards her self-identification is important, the image of that individual that is perceived and

defined by dominant others determines which roles the subordinate play when interacting with

those dominant others. Thus, the professionals' perceptions of the parents in this study shaped

how they regarded and ultimately engaged with the parents at the decision-making table. This

finding is consistent with results of research conducted by DeGangi, Wietlisbach, Poisson,

Stein, and Royeen (1994) which showed that the wide range of perceptions held by professionals

regarding parent roles in special education are rooted in insufficient understanding of how low

socioeconomic status intersects with cultural differences and disability status. More recently, in

her examination of trends that impact how children with disabilities and their CLD families are

served, Harry (2002) affirms that the greater the stigma that is attached to an ethnic group (e.g.,

Blacks, Hispanics), the more difficult it is for mainstream professionals (i.e., White

professionals) to recognize cultural strengths that are different from their own.

While substantiating and extending the work of DeGangi and colleagues, this study's results suggest that Black parents continue to be marginalized as they participate in the process of special education decision making. In fact, the findings of this study provide evidence that educational professionals continue to believe that parents with low socioeconomic status and Black parents are one and the same. Specifically, when asked about the involvement of middle class Black parents in special education decision-making, it was not uncommon for the professional participants to speak in hypotheticals, as if the term "middle class Black parents" was a misnomer. For example, when I asked Michelle to describe the characteristics that the middle class parents with whom she worked with exhibited, she began her response with, "I would expect a middle class parent to..."while lamenting that none of the parents with whom she worked actually displayed the desired behaviors that she described. Additionally, the mention of Black parents by professional participants was often situated in comments that emphasized what the parents were *not* doing to contribute to their children's educational progress. For example, during the same discussion, Michelle added:

> This is what upsets me more than anything. I try to establish a line of regular communication with the parents with the daily agenda but you send your child back to school with it unsigned which tells me that you didn't bother to read my daily progress note. I send home activities with directions explaining how important it is for you to help your child practice his reading skills and math facts at home but you don't follow through. I schedule parent-teacher conferences to discuss your child's difficulties and you are a no-show. But as soon as we start talking retention, you're all up in the principal's office raising hell. You don't understand why this is the first you've heard of Johnny's academic problems. Really? Now you expect us to perform miracles.

Through other negatively framed comments, some of the professional participants expressed their suspicions that parents often secured special education services for their children to accomplish ulterior motives. In fact, all of the Black professional participants provided examples of instances in which they believed that Black parents pursued special education services for the sole purpose of supplementing their disposable income via social security disability insurance (SSI). Thus, the viewpoints shared by the Black professional participants reflect the extent to which racism is a perpetual, albeit implicit, fixture in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In this particular situation, racism was the silent reality that was so powerful that Black professionals espoused negative messages about the parents with whom they shared racial distinction.

An experience with Nan further illustrated the permanence of racism and how deeply deficit views of Black parents are ingrained into the professional psyche; even that of a professional who considered herself to be more culturally competent than many of her peers. During my time with Nan, our conversation drifted to the issue of the overrepresentation of Black students in special education programming. She asserted that despite her years of experience, she still did not understand why the overrepresentation of Black students in special education persists. Despite this expressed awareness, Nan also echoed the overtly negative sentiments that the Black professionals in the study voiced directly, saying:

> I have seen, regardless of the ethnicity, some parents will do anything to qualify for SSI. Anything! It doesn't matter what their ethnic background is and that is a shame. I think it is funny when you get a referral for a child study and a week later you turn around and get the application for SSI. You know what is going on.

As one might expect, this professional stance did not go unnoticed by the parent participants, whose decision-making power had been impacted negatively by the education professionals' biased assumptions. For example, Brenda shared that after lamenting her special education woes to a close teacher-friend, she came to the conclusion that the difficulties she had experienced in securing speech-language therapy services for her son were due in part to the professionals' belief that she was trying to obtain a social security insurance (SSI) check. As a professional insider, Brenda's teacher-friend explained that parents of students with disabilities are often eligible to receive SSI checks. She further explained that the professionals on special education teams often encounter Black parents who initiate the special education process for the purpose of supplementing their incomes in that manner. Brenda recalled first being stunned and then angry by what her friend shared. She stated: "I didn't know that you could get a check for that. I was just trying to get the services that my son needed."

Similar instances of poor treatment resulted in Jessica and Brenda being reluctant to work closely with Black professionals in the future. Jessica, who was very pleased with her working relationship with Nan, even said, "I don't know if I will ever put my son in another school with...I hate to say it...a Black administrator." Brenda characterized previous interactions she had with Black professionals as "far worse and more negative" than any interactions that she had experienced with White professionals. Through the ambivalence that these parents expressed about partnering with Black professionals in future decision-making situations, they infer that decision-making partnerships with White professionals are most ideal; hence reinforcing the esteem associated with Whiteness as a property right. Furthermore, as illustrated here, the perceptions, identities and assumptions of both parents and professionals weighed heavily upon interactions between the two groups throughout the special education decision-making process.

Given evidence provided by Harry (2002a) and others (e.g., Boyd & Correa, 2005; Harry et al., 1995; Harry et al., 1999; Lea, 2006) that documents the persistence of educational professionals lacking cultural familiarity and sensitivity toward the Black parents whose children they serve, comments by professionals in this study that reflected low expectations and negative regard toward Black parents—without distinguishing by SES—can be expected. However, the fact that the majority of the professional participants with these beliefs and attitudes were Black, make those comments particularly troubling. They suggest that Black professionals can, and probably do also harbor racist views. They have internalized — and act upon — the same negative cultural messages that they have applied to their Black partners in the special education process. Thus, similar to the parent participants, they too reinforce the esteem associated with Whiteness by casting the White, middle class parent as the ideal decision-making partner.

Interactions between Parents and Professionals During Decision-Making

Parent involvement in their children's education (i.e. parental engagement) involves a negotiation between space and capital by parents and those working in school settings (Barton, et al., 2004, p. 6). Barton and her colleagues presented the case of Miranda, a Black, low-SES parent whose two children attended a public school in an urban setting. Miranda relied initially on formal spaces in the school calendar that were created by school personnel (such as Family Night) to become engaged in the process of educating her children. Over time, however, she realized that while those school-created spaces were helpful in facilitating her understanding of the educational process in general, they did not provide her with the tools or know-how that she could use to advocate for her children. Over time, she questioned "the limits of this kind of participation when many of her concerns remained unanswered" (p. 7). Yet by participating in school-created functions, Miranda became equipped with a traditional form of capital—that is,

knowledge of the educational process. She used that knowledge to create new spaces for her participation in her child's education.

In some ways, Miranda, a low-SES Black parent who navigated the general education process successfully in an urban setting, differed from my study's parent participants, who were middle class Black parents navigating the special education process within a suburban setting. Yet my findings confirm Barton et al.'s theory that "parental engagement is the mediation between space and capital by parents in relation to others in school settings" (p. 6). Moreover, the findings of this dissertation study suggest that a parent's perceptions of her own identity will influence how she negotiates space and capital as she participates in the process of special education decision-making. An examination of Sofia's navigation of the special education process provides the clearest example of this theory at work.

Sofia

At the beginning of the educational decision-making process, Sofia had very little knowledge about the rules, procedures, and the range of instructional practices that comprised special education that she could use to be an informed and active decision-maker. She described Max's first IEP as an artifact that reflected her lack of knowledge, because she accepted and agreed to everything that the professionals proposed. Over time, the more she attended the meetings that were held to adjust Max's special education program to his demonstrated needs, the more knowledge Sofia gained. Ultimately, it was that knowledge, along with her desire to have more control over Max's education that served as the impetus for Sofia to explore additional avenues to acquire more capital that she could channel to shift the power differential in her favor. One of these avenues included networking with other parents who had more experience navigating the special education process and/or whose children possessed disabilities

and special education needs similar to her son's. Sofia also attended parent workshops created by entities independent of the school system that were designed to train parents to assume more power and to be more actively engaged in the decision-making process. Sofia sought out information to ensure that she understood special education regulations.

Therefore, by the time Sofia agreed to be a participant in this study, she was, in her words, "a force to be reckoned with." She was assertive as she participated in all aspects of the special education process. She openly and unapologetically challenged school personnel in their attempts to retain control over content covered in meetings and the outcomes of those meeting that ultimately shaped the delivery of services to Max. It seemed as if Sofia's perhaps unconscious decision to forefront her role as a parent of a child with a severe disability in sense of her identity bolstered her ability to assert her presence at the decision-making table. For parents of color, this table is situated within educational contexts that have historically supported inequities based on racial and ability differences (Artiles, 2011).

My interactions with Sofia showed her to be the most politically astute of the parent participants in the study. She also seemed to have what DuBois (1903/2012) described as "the gift of second sight;" she understood that in the eyes of the professionals with whom she interacted, she came to the decision-making table as a subordinate. Sofia believed that professionals viewed her as a subordinate not because of her racial status but because of the severity of her son's disability. As she described the attitudes of one of the service providers with whom she interacted at an IEP meeting, the professional was "prejudiced against us…not because of our race but because of Max's disability." This insight confirms the ideas expressed in disability studies literature (e.g., Artiles, 2011; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Harry et al., 2005)

that disability is a social construct through which children of color and their families are oppressed.

My interactions with Sofia helped to clarify the role that identity played in how she approached the special education process and navigated decision-making on Max's behalf. Yet I was also left with questions. Did Sofia believe that an identity based primarily upon her status as a parent of a child with a severe disability garnered more leverage (or greater power) than a primarily racial identity? In her view, was it more advantageous to be a parent of a disabled child who just happened to be Black, or a Black woman who was also the mother of a child with a severe disability? I wonder if by embracing the idea, consistent with White culture's colorblind doctrine that race does not matter (Gotanda, 1991), that Sofia developed a strategy that helped her to cope with confounded oppression that she felt. As she interacted within the context of special education decision-making, perhaps she made an unconscious choice so that she only had to focus her attention upon one type of marginalization: the pain and frustration associated with public education's history of excluding students with disabilities.

Malcolm

Conversely, Malcolm's racial and gender statuses converged at the forefront of his identity when he referred to himself first and foremost as a Black man. Similar to Sofia, Malcolm used his early experiences within the special education process, albeit "negative and adversarial," to motivate himself to acquire more knowledge (capital) when he and his son relocated to Sunnyside. Malcolm's account of his role in special education decision-making in the "deep South" before moving to Sunnyside characterized school personnel as blatant in their collective agenda, which was designed to prevent his involvement by keeping him uninformed. Therefore, when Malcolm relocated to Sunnyside and school personnel were kind and welcoming, he used

his participation in the invited spaces (e.g., IEP meetings, eligibility meetings, parent-teacher conferences) to gain capital in the form of knowledge. Like Sofia, he ultimately used this newfound knowledge of special education laws and regulations to bolster his participation as an active and more powerful decision-maker on behalf of his son.

Unlike Sofia, Malcolm's approach was not aggressive; he employed a more subtle and conciliatory approach to communication with the educational professionals with whom he met. He, too, expressed insight—perhaps strongly informed by his experience as a Black father in the "deep South"—that through the eyes of the professionals, he came to the decision-making table as a subordinate. But unlike Sofia, in his previous experience as a Black man in the "deep South" trying to navigate the special education process on behalf of Taylor, Malcolm experienced very little success, because his attempts to insert himself actively as a viable decision-maker by providing input were misconstrued by the professionals in the previous school district as attempting to exert unwarranted control as a threatening Black man. As such, with an opportunity to start the special education process anew in Sunnyside, he was particularly concerned with how he was perceived through the eyes of his new professional partners. Not wanting to be mistaken again for being stereotypically forceful and aggressive, Malcolm adopted a markedly conciliatory persona during decision-making interactions with school professionals.

Whereas Sofia could be viewed as abrasive and confrontational at times in her interactions with her professional partners, Malcolm did not want to be viewed as the "dangerous Black man," because he believed that would undermine his ability to be heard at the decision-making table. Furthermore, consistent with interest convergence, Malcolm seemed to possess an understanding of the nature order of interactions between subordinate parents and dominant professional within educational organizations that are tainted by institutional racism.

Specifically, he understood that the professionals would interact with him as a viable decision-making partner only if their collective position of dominance and power was not threatened. Therefore, he behaved as an understanding and diplomatic parent partner, even when he disagreed with the decisions that resulted in Taylor being educated in a very restrictive classroom setting with little to no interaction with and exposure to his general education peers and the general education curriculum.

Clashes between Parents and Professionals

Study results also offered a glimpse into what Harry and her colleagues (1995) described as the clash that often occurs between Black parents and education professionals. Malcolm and Sophia had similar experiences as they as they worked through the decision-making process to grant their children appropriate access to the general education curriculum in least restrictive environments. Their experiences exemplified how the special education services that parents initially view as a means to ensure equity between students with disabilities and their typically-developing peers become the vehicle through which physical and academic segregation is established and maintained.

During the special education decision-making process, the identity that society imposes on the parent participants —individuals who are ill-equipped and/or unwilling to effectively act on behalf of their children— was reinforced and reproduced by school personnel. The extent to which the parents in this study accepted the identity imposed upon them determined how they reacted to their clashes with school personnel. Thus, differing views on how FAPE and LRE would be defined for the students in question emerged. On one hand, Malcolm and Sophia navigated the special education process to ensure that their children were afforded FAPE while increasing their inclusion with their typically-developing peers. Yet on the other hand, Brenda

and Jessica attempted to assert themselves as decision-makers to ensure that their children's educational experiences were being properly supported through the specialized instruction that they needed.

Given the cognitive and behavioral characteristics that accompanied Max's diagnosis of multiple disabilities and Taylor's diagnosis of autism, the socially constructed definition of "normal" did not apply to Max and Taylor. Therefore, the school personnel involved in special education decision-making determined that it was necessary for Max and Taylor to be educated in classrooms that excluded them from their typically-developing peers to ensure that they received appropriate instructional services. Sofia and Malcolm did not accept that socially-constructed view and fought for their children to be included with their typically-developing peers to the greatest extent possible.

Conversely, Anthony was diagnosed with a specific learning disability while Nick was considered twice exceptional with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and designation as a gifted and talented student. Given the cognitive and behavioral markers that characterized Anthony's and Nick's difference, it appears that society (and school personnel) identified Jessica and Brenda as parents of children who could learn with their typically-developing peers, even though the children were not "normal" by society's standards.

Jessica speculated that her concerns about Anthony's academic limitations where not pressing concerns for school personnel because Anthony was not perceived to have behavior problems, and his academic challenges did not adversely impact the school's performance, since he was too young to participate in statewide testing. Similarly, Brenda suggested that school personnel did not view Nick's social and academic deficits as issues that needed to be addressed because he excelled academically and demonstrated above-average performance on district- and

state-wide testing. Additionally, both Jessica and Brenda suggested that the decision to exclude their children from intense special education services was based on school personnel's attempts to save money.

The CRT tenet of interest convergence is useful in clarifying the differences noted between Sofia's and Malcolm's struggles, versus that of Jessica and Brenda. Members of the dominant culture will only support the advancement of subordinates when it is in the dominant culture's best interests to do so (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Following this logic, Max and Taylor were segregated from their typically-developing peers because Sunnyside Public Schools (the dominant entity) would not benefit from their inclusion in general education instructional settings. Along the same vein, Sunnyside school personnel worked to limit the type and amount of special education services received by Nick and Anthony because it was advantageous to the school district to do so. Both Jessica and Brenda reported that it was only after they complained to central office administrators and threatened to report the school district to the state department of education that their children were afforded the special education services that they needed. In this situation, interest convergence establishes that as dominants, the professionals tolerate advances that benefit the parent participants – the subordinates – only when it is in their best interest to do so (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As such, it appears that through their advocacy efforts, Jessica and Brenda compelled the school personnel to provide the special education services because by withholding the services, the district would face scrutiny from the state department of education.

Thus, while this study has provided more clarity regarding the experiences of Black, middle class parents who find it necessary to navigate the special education decision-making process, it also raises queries that can be best addressed through future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

The overarching goal of this dissertation study was to support advances in educational policy and practice by producing results that both answer questions and stimulate new questions about Black, middle class parents who participate in the process of special education decision making. This study was successful in this regard because it provides an impetus for additional lines of inquiry that promise to produce more successful interactions between professionals and parent subgroups (namely Black, middle class parents) as they engage in special education decision making. Thus, future research should examine: (1) professional identity development and its impact on the special education process; (2) the process of reconciling multiple dimensions of the Black professional identity; (3) interracial parent dyads and White privilege in the special education process; and (4) the social construction of autism spectrum disorder in the Black, middle class student population.

Professional Identity Development and Its Impact on the Special Education Process

It was through a critical analysis of the study data that the complexities of the Black, middle class parent participants' identities emerged. While we caught glimpses of the complexities inherent in the professionals' identities relative to special education decision-making, in many of their interactions with the parent participants, professionals shaped the nature and tone of the parents' participation.

By generating data detailing each parent participant's background and experience within the educational process, special education, and society, marked dimensions of their identities emerged. Race, socioeconomic status, and the distinction of parenting children with exceptionalities were the identity dimensions that were commonly observed across the parent participants. Several parents displayed unique features that added to the intricacy of their

identities, to include gender and marital status. For example, as the only parent participant who was male, Malcolm strongly linked his gender status to his racial status as he made distinctions between his experiences as a "Black man in the North" and a "Black man in the South."

Sofia's status as a married woman appeared to have little to no discernible impact on her identity as a parent who was involved in the special education process. While both Malcolm and Jessica were single parents, differences were noted in the extent to which they incorporated their marital status into who they perceived themselves to be within the special education process. Similar to Sofia, Malcolm's single-parent identity appeared to have little to no impact on how he perceived himself as a participant in special education decision-making. Conversely, Jessica's marital status was more prominent in her perception of herself as a parent of a child with a disability. She emphatically discussed the difficulty inherent in her efforts to be a meaningful participant in the special education process without the support of a spouse in that process.

The study provided evidence that parents must reconcile the various dimensions of their identities to participate in special education decision-making. While all of the parent participants belonged to the same parent subgroup (i.e., Black, middle class parents of children with disabilities), each parent reconciled their multiple identities uniquely. Thus, this study added credence to the idea that there is heterogeneity in the Black parent population that school personnel must consider to ensure effective parent-professional partnerships during special education decision-making. Future research might encourage reflection by educational practitioners and administrators to explore how their backgrounds and past professional experiences dictate their paths of identity development, exploring how those paths predict how they approach special education decision-making.

Reconciling Multiple Dimensions of the Black Professional Identity

It is often assumed that Black professionals are better equipped to engage Black parents effectively in the educational process (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). However, as the results of this dissertation study indicate, interactions between Black parents and Black professionals are fraught with difficulties that originate within socially formed power differentials. Specifically, this parent-professional partnership is perturbed by racist messages that are tacitly imposed on each at the same time they internalize and act upon their internalization during their interactions with one another. Future research could focus upon how Black educational professionals reconcile the various dimensions of her identities with the cultures of professionalism and power within school contexts, and how that reconciliation (or lack of it) shapes parent-professional decision-making during the special education process.

Interracial Parent Dyads and White Privilege in Special Education

With this study, I aimed to present the stories of a segment of the Black population that is often overlooked in special education research: middle class parents. Although it was my intention to include parents who were exclusively Black, I decided to include Brenda—a Black woman married to a White man—in the study. Given the elements of CRT that served as my research lens, this adaptation of the sample's parameters proved to be fortuitous. Brenda's participation in the study revealed another aspect of the heterogeneity of the Black, middle class parent population that I had not considered.

The distinction of being a Black woman who was married to a White man further shaped Brenda's perceptions of who she was as a parent who navigated the special education process. This was best expressed in her reports that school personnel displayed a more positive stance toward her active participation when her husband accompanied her to the decision-making table. Brenda speculated that as a Black woman—a member of a subordinate group by birthright—her

association with her White husband—a member of the dominant group by birthright—garnered her more prestige and decision-making power than what she had on her own. Brenda's marital status gave her tangential association with White privilege. It was only when the professionals identified her as a subordinate who was united with a dominant by marriage, that they transferred property rights in the form of sanctioned decision-making power to Brenda. Thus, it was Brenda's experiences in particular that clearly exemplified how Whiteness as property shapes the process of special education decision-making for Black parents.

As the incidence of interracial relationships increase (United States Census Bureau, 2011), the number of biracial/multiracial students receiving general education and special education services through public education has also increased (Williams, 2009). In turn, this subgroup of the Black parent population – those who are parenting with mates from different ethnic/racial backgrounds – is growing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Future research could use a CRT frame to examine this phenomenon. In this study, the more that school professionals associated Brenda with her husband, the more favorable her active participation in the decision-making process was perceived to be. What happens when the mother is White and the father is Black? When one parent is Black and the other belongs to another racial group that has been historically disenfranchised?

Black, Middle Class Students and the Social Construction of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Finally, this dissertation study focused on parents whose children represented a number of disability categories. Jessica's son (Anthony) represented the high-incidence disability of specific learning disability, while the others represented low-incidence disabilities of autism spectrum and related disorders. Artiles (2011) asserts that disability, similar to race, is a social construction that can take on multiple meanings when race is involved. Additionally, at the same

time that data presented in the 31st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA

(U.S. Department of Education, 2012) demonstrate that the number of children diagnosed with

autism spectrum disorder is increasing, recent empirical evidence indicates that Black students

are disproportionally underrepresented in special education programming for students with

autism spectrum disorder (Tincani et al., 2009; Travers et al., 2011). As such, future research

should examine the roles that race and class play in the social construction of autism spectrum

disorder in the Black, middle-class population.

Conclusion

The results of this study confirm, in part, what has already been reported regarding

factors that impede Black parents' participation in special education decision-making.

Additionally, by focusing on the experiences of four middle class Black parents who were

involved in various stages of the special education decision-making process, this study

demonstrated that ineffective parent-professional collaborations cannot be sufficiently explained

by theories that cast Black parents as a homogenous group who are culturally deficient and

lacking the social capital and resources necessary to be successful educational decision-makers

on behalf of their children with disabilities (Barton et al, 2004; Harry et al., 2005).

This study's results did more than simply confirm that regardless of their socioeconomic

status, middle class Black parents are prevented from being actively and meaningfully involved

in the special education decision-making process, due in large part to the institutionalized racism

that continues to plague public education. The results illustrate that in order to truly understand

the extent to which Black parents are engaged in the special education decision-making process,

one must acknowledge that parent and professional participants approach the decision-making

arena within multiple and often conflicting dimensions of their own socially imposed identities,

and compromised assumptions about power differentials that are rooted in perceived identities of others. The results of this study also confirm that, as DuBois (1903/2012) posited, the internal process of reconciling the multiple dimensions of one's identity, which may contradict, is complex, often muddled, and profoundly sociopolitically determined. All of the parent participants demonstrated this complexity and its oppressive antecedents.

Moreover, this study's results contribute to our understanding of Black, middle class parents by showing how the perceptions of others influence how parents and professionals interact throughout the special education decision-making process. The most compelling exemplar of this influence referenced the parents' middle-class status. Not only did the parents perceive themselves to be middle class, with the exception of Sofia; it did not appear that they considered middle-class membership within the Black community to be abnormal. Conversely, the professional participants in this study appeared to view middle-class membership within the Black community to be an anomaly. To this misunderstanding, the professional participants augmented commonly accepted definitions of middle class (e.g., income levels, and level of educational attainment), making it impossible for Black, middle class parents to fit within these newly framed definitions. It is probable that these narrow and inaccurate perceptions of who Black parents are inform the professionals' tendency to discourage Black parents' active and meaningful participation in special education decision-making.

By using a critical lens to examine how race, disability, and class converge to shape Black middle class parents' participation in special education decision-making, this study addresses gaps in both parent involvement and special education literature. The better we understand how to facilitate effective collaborative decision-making between professionals and

all subsets of the Black parent population, the better prepared we will be to ensure more positive

and equitable academic and social outcomes for Blacks students with disabilities.

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Appendix A

Researcher as Instrument Statement

As I begin this research it is important that I am candid about who I am, as well as my beliefs, values, and bias. My name is Tamara Freeman and I am 38-years-old. I am an aspiring special education administrator. I hope to be an accomplished researcher and professor one day. I am a doctoral student. I am an American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) certified speech and language pathologist. I am the only child of two phenomenal parents who instilled in me an unwavering sense of cultural pride. I am a Black woman, living in a world of multiple realities. The realities that comprise my world are constantly evolving. At times their boundaries are so distinct that they create stirring of inner conflict. Other times, their boundaries are so nebulous that they merge resulting in the complexities that I am all too familiar with as a Black professional woman from a middle-class background. So I am a being with multiple personas. While I honor all of the characteristics that make me who I am, I am first and foremost a proud Black woman.

The importance of education was instilled in me at an early age. My parents, both educators, came from large families in the Deep South. Both of my parents were the first in their immediate families to attend and graduate from college. My mother, the fourth of 12 children, was a strong student who aspired to attend college during a time when higher education was an often unattainable dream for Blacks in her rural central Louisiana community. She recalled that when she announced that she would be attending college, my grandfather asked, "How are you going to go?" Always the hard-workers, my mother worked two jobs while putting herself through Paul Quinn College in Waco, Texas.

My father, the eldest of eight children was afforded a college education because of his superior athletic ability. He received a full scholarship to Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena, Mississippi. My father was in college during the time that Blacks were being harassed, assaulted, and murdered in Mississippi and other southern states simply because of their skin color. He was drafted by the National Football League (NFL) and played with the New York Giants for two years until a knee injury ended his professional football career. Fortunately, he opted to complete his bachelor's degree before his stint with the NFL. He began his second career as a teacher and coach. My parents soon met, married, and successfully completed their master's degrees together.

I grew up comfortably as an only child in a series of middle-class environments. I attended private schools until my sixth grade year and my parents made sure that I was exposed to varied activities and experiences. My parents also instilled in me an unwavering pride in my Black heritage and my deep complexion. For the majority of my formative years, my father worked at Howard University, Bowie State University, and Hampton University, all historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Therefore, my earliest images of Blacks in education were positive. Being in environments that produce leaders, scholars and otherwise productive citizens added credence to my view that I could be whatever I aspired to be. Growing up on college campuses gave me a perspective that can serve as a benefit to every Black child.

My parents skillfully turned everyday situations in to history lessons. I remember my parents telling me that Maryland was one of the states at the heart of the slave trade. As we traveled down the then winding, tree-lined roads heading toward Bowie State University, I could envision the plantations that likely existed way back when. I would look through the dense foliage to see if I could make out any remnants of the Underground Railroad. When my father

worked at Hampton University, we lived in a house on campus that had been a hospital during the Civil War. I spent many hours wondering if any of the famous Black Americans that I had about ever walked on the very floors that I walked on throughout much of my childhood.

Up until our move to Hampton, Virginia in 1982, my mother worked as a special education teacher at a private school founded specifically for students for disabilities in Washington, D.C. Her students ranged by disability type and severity level. I remember going to work with my mother and going on fieldtrips with her class. Interacting with these students, many of who had severe physical and cognitive disabilities became second nature to me. I believe that my early exposure to students with disabilities developed my empathy and tolerance toward differences. In hindsight I know that it is no coincidence that I have pursued a career in special education.

When I first begin thinking about Black parent involvement in the special education process, I did not really see the connection between my interest in this topic and various facets of my life experience. My professional experience in K-12 education sparked my interest. Being involved in the special education process, often from pre-referral to IEP implementation offered me a perfect vantage point to access the process as an insider. I remember the subtle air in the conference rooms that validated the knowledge and input from my colleagues and I as the keepers of the "right" knowledge while the information and perspectives offered by the parents were merely tangential. In many cases, we the professionals would informally decide what course of action we were going to take prior to meeting with parents.

I was often struck by the number of Black children who were identified as having disabilities. As I began my doctoral work, I became more aware of issues related to the disproportionate representation of students of color in special and gifted education programming.

Early on in my career, I remember feeling unspoken resentment towards parents who in my eyes did not take the time to attend the IEP meetings that I had scheduled weeks in advance, promptly sign the IEPs that I drafted, provide a speech folder for their children, or take a few minutes to reinforce my clients' good speech and language skills by practicing at home. I would say to myself, "If I had a child with special needs, I would do everything I could to assist in their learning." Yet when I heard my colleagues, usually White women from middle-class backgrounds, openly voice the views that I kept to myself, I did not feel comfortable. I attribute this to the fact that over 90% of my caseload consisted of Black children. From that point on, I decided that I could no longer assume that every child of color receives the type of parenting that I received. As I transformed myself into an "advocate" for my clients and their parents, I began purchasing speech folder for my clients, giving them other school supplies if they were in need, and making home visits to review IEPs with parents with rigid and unpredictable work schedules. I became more vocal during the parent bashing sessions in the teacher's lounge, usually defending the parents of color by saying, "We can't take for granted that these parents automatically have the knowledge and skills necessary for effective parenting. We have to assist them with this and as professionals we have to do everything that we can so that the children do not suffer in the process." I was proud that I had experienced this epiphany that resulted in me no longer blaming the victim. Unlike many of my colleagues, I no longer subjected my clients and their parents to lower expectations. However, in just a few short years, I would come to see that I merely shifted my once blatant prejudice and bias views to a hybrid that was more benign but just as destructive.

Although my professional words and actions promoted a more positive regard for parents in general and Black parents in particular, the unspoken theme that Black parents were somehow

less than still informed my practice. I remember a particularly difficult situation that I faced early on in my professional career. I had been providing speech/language therapy to John, an eight-year-old Black boy who was not progressing academically. I initiated a re-evaluation because I suspected that his academic problems were related to an underlying learning disability that was exacerbated by his speech and language deficits. As we delved deeper into his medical history, we suspected that some of John's fine motor deficits were medically based. While his parents insisted that the school was not providing their son with the services that he needed, they were opposed to giving John an additional label. Despite their reservations, John's parents agreed to a complete re-evaluation. Based on the re-evaluation results, the eligibility team agreed that John met the disability criteria of Other Health Impaired with Speech and Language as a related service and an IEP was drafted. His parent refused to sign the initial IEP and enlisted the help of a local advocate. John's parents were both well-spoken, well-educated professionals. I could not understand why they were being so difficult. They insisted that we did not include them as equal participants in the process. They asserted that the committee had made its decision before each official meeting. They accused us of having low expectations for their son. I thought that their position was absurd. Sure, we (the professionals) discussed our test results and collaborated before the IEP meeting to develop appropriate goals. But that is what professionals do! Couldn't they see that we know what is best for their son in terms of his education? They should be happy that we are willing to provide their son with the services that he needs. Since both sides of the table (i.e., John's parents and the IEP team lead by the school principal) were unwillingly to compromise, it took nearly an entire academic year for a mutually suitable IEP to be drafted and for John to receive all of the services that he needed.

At the same school I worked with a nine-year-old White client, Toby. Toby and his family were no strangers to the special education department as his mother had developed the reputation of being a strong advocate for her child. Every professional working with Toby figured out very quickly that we had better be sharp while working with this child. Toby's mother, an articulate, college-educated woman, quit her professional job to be a stay-at-home mom. As such, she often made impromptu visits throughout the day to "check on things." She would call an IEP meeting at a moment's notice. She demanded that the meeting be held later in the afternoon to accommodate her busy schedule. Toby's mother was very concerned that despite all of the additional academic support that her son received on a daily basis at school, he still fell at least two years behind his same-aged peers. She demanded that Toby's teachers and related service providers do more to bring her son's skills up to par. Yet she refused to assist Toby with his homework, often sending notes to school stating that Toby's extracurricular activities (i.e., boy scouts, baseball, and karate) were more important than assignments that the teachers should have completed with Toby during the school day. The school principal appeared to have the most positive regard for Toby's mother and always accommodated her demands. The principal's behavior baffled me because it completed contradicted the "our way or the highway" stance that she typically took when Black parents made requests that were far more reasonable and much less demanding. This situation was one that first opened my eyes to the racial disparities that I had heard Black parents whisper about. In his blunt discussion of racism in America, controversial comedian Paul Mooney insists that White people have the "complexion for the protection." Does his theory aptly apply to the field of education?

Although I would not have been able to admit it back then, I fell into the groupthink that often plagues parents of color and renders them unable to participate as equal participants in their

children's education. This groupthink was reinforced by the relationships that I developed with seasoned professionals that I interacted with on a daily basis. I became close with one mentor-friend, Rachel. During our lengthy conversations, she would quote Ruby Payne's work as she explained the actions of our students and their parents as typifying the "culture of poverty." If a parent questioned a decision that the child study or eligibility team made, he/she did not know any better. If a parent did not assist with his/her child's education by exhibiting behaviors that we deemed appropriate, he/she did not have the wherewithal to do so because education is not a top priority when dealing with the "culture of poverty." We were the wise, all-knowing educational professionals who had to enlighten the parents. It was our moral obligation to save our students and their parents from themselves. The "culture of poverty" theory simply justified this unsaid position of power. As I became more enthralled in my doctoral studies and began to reflect on my professional experiences up to that point, I questioned the validity of this position. Is every member of the "culture of poverty" a person of color? But more importantly, does the term, "culture of poverty" automatically refer to people of color? Although I know that the answer to both questions is "no," I do not think that everyone shares my position.

I took a leap of faith and quit my job to pursue my doctoral degree on a full-time basis. The whole time, the idea of Black parent involvement in the special education process was churning in my head. The overrepresentation of Black students in special education, coupled with the statistics documenting markedly less positive social and academic outcomes for Black students (when compared to their White counterparts) motivated me to make my idea the focus of my dissertation research. Anticipating that simple question that every doctoral candidate dreads when discussing her dissertation ideas (i.e., "So what?"), I considered a variety of ways that I could narrow my focus. While reviewing the research that I had already compiled, "low

expectations" was the theme that reverberated in my mind. Not sure exactly what I was looking for, my confidence was shaken. Around the same time, I had several encounters that I can best described as divine intervention. For example, one of my hair stylists, a college-educated, articulate, middle class Black mother started sharing her frustration with the process of obtaining services for her developmentally delayed preschooler. I began informally talking to some of my William and Mary colleagues, Blacks administrators who worked with students from middle to high socioeconomic status (SES) families. Many of them shared that they knew of parents who would have a lot to say about their participation in the various facets of the special education process.

Then one evening I had an interesting conversation over dinner at my mentor-friend Cathy's house. Cathy's son, a server at a popular restaurant, complained that he did not look forward to going to work later that evening because he did not want to deal with certain difficult customers. Based on his description of this particular subset of customers, I knew he was not so subtly speaking about the Black patrons with whom he had interacted. When I called him on his comments rooted in negative stereotypes, he assured me that I was not "like those Black people." When I pressed the issue further, Rachel interjected by saying, "Tamara, you have to admit that you aren't like the typical Black woman." When I asked her to explain herself she listed several reasons (e.g., my strong command of written and spoken English, my conservative manner of dress, and my appreciation of diverse cuisine) and punctuated her position by saying, "C'mon, Tamara…you're getting your Ph.D. for God's sake!"

I explained to Cathy and her son why their comments were offensive to me as a Black woman and they explained that they were complimenting me. We agreed to disagree and continued with dinner. As I drove home that evening, I could not stop thinking about our

exchange. I have always admired Cathy as a White educator whose love and concern for all students but particularly low SES students of color is genuine. Yet she obviously subscribes to the idea that being an "other" is somehow less than being White. How could this be? Unfortunately, I know that Cathy's mindset is not unusual and as I consider her involvement in the various stages of the special education process, I wonder how her worldview impacts Black students who are currently receiving or being considered for special education programming.

I began to notice that the majority of the literature that I read on the lack of involvement of parents of color in general education and special education explicitly focused on parents from low SES backgrounds who possessed limited formal education. Yet my informal field research suggested that well-educated, middle class parents of Black students experienced barriers that made it difficult for them to navigate the special education process. When I consider this apparent gap in the literature, I ask myself, "What do you we actually know about the experience of the middle class Black parent as he/she navigates the special education process?" Could it be that some of occurrences that I had witnessed throughout my years were indeed examples of the low expectations that shape how middle class Black parents participate in the special education process? If so, could it be that these low expectations are manifestations of the racism that continues to persist in the field of education? If so, does the current literature base reinforce this form of racism? These are the underlying questions that I plan to answer by conducting this dissertation research.

Appendix B

Solicitation Letter to Parent Participants

(Date)

Dear_____

My name is Tamara Freeman and I am a doctoral (Ph.D.) candidate in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership Program in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. I am conducting a research study in your school district regarding the participation of middle class Black parents in the special education process. I have permission from your school district to conduct this important research study and am asking for your participation. Your building administrator suggested that you may be interested in participating in this study due to your involvement in the special education process on behalf of your child. Your participation will help to shed light on the experiences of middle class Black parents as they navigate the special education process.

I will be conducting three to five sets of interviews during this research study. Each interview will be conducted off school district property at a date, time, and location of your convenience. The total time required for each interview session should not exceed 90 minutes. The interviews will be the primary means of obtaining data for this study. Therefore, tape-recording will be necessary in order for me to adequately analyze the data obtained from the interviews.

At the conclusion of each interview, I would like to review copies of any documents associated with your participation in the special education process. Such documents include, but are not limited to, the following: multidisciplinary team meeting minutes, child study team minutes, eligibility meeting minutes, individualized education plans (IEPs), progress reports, and any written correspondence between you and educational professionals at your child's school. Additionally, I will ask participants to provide written records of their experiences and insights by making one weekly entry into a written journal throughout their participation in this research study. I will provide the journals to participants and collect them at the end of the last interview.

All responses, information provided, and identities will be held confidentially, including names of school districts, school buildings, school personnel, children, and research participants. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time, refuse to answer any questions, or refuse to participate in any aspect of the research without personal or professional repercussions. Please contact me as soon as possible if you choose to discontinue your participation in one or all portions of this research.

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please indicate this below and return the bottom portion of this form to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope enclosed. Please indicate your preference as to date, time, and location of the initial interview.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact my advisor, Dr. Judith Harris at the College of William and Mary (jbharr@wm.edu / (757) 221-2334). You may contact me as well (tLfree@wm.edu / (757) 329-0602). If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or Dr. Michael Deschenes at 757-221-2778 (PHSC-L@wm.edu), chairs of the two William & Mary committees that supervise the treatment of study participants.

I look forward to meeting you. Thank you in advance for your participation in this important research.

Sincerely,

Tamara Freeman
Doctoral Candidate
The College of William and Mary

_____ I am not interested in participating in this research study at this time.

_____ I am interested in participating in this research study. My preference for the date and time of Interview #1 is _____/_____/2010 at ____:____ a.m. / p.m.

I would like Interview #1 to be conducted at

_____ My Home. My address is _____

_____ Other Location. The specific location and address is_____

_____

Name_____ Phone Number_____ E-mail_____

I have been informed of the conditions of my participation in the proposed research study and agree to participate. Specifically, I agree to the following (*please mark all that apply*):

❑ I will participate in three (3) to five (5) audio-taped interviews

❑ I will provide copies of related documents that will be reviewed by Tamara Freeman at the end of each audio-taped interview.

❑ I will maintain a record of my personal experiences and insights throughout the research project in the form of a written journal. I agree to make at least one entry in the journal weekly and will submit it to Tamara Freeman at the end of the second audio-taped interview.

❑ I will be available by phone and/or e-mail to discuss preliminary results and confirm the accuracy of the information I have provided through interviews, journals, and documents.

❑ I will allow Tamara Freeman to quote me directly in the report of study results with the understanding that pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name   Signature   Date

Appendix C

Solicitation Letter to Education Professionals

(Date)

Dear_____

My name is Tamara Freeman and I am a doctoral (Ph.D.) candidate in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership Program in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. I am conducting a research study in your school district regarding the participation of middle class Black parents in the special education process. I have permission from your school district to conduct this important research study and am asking for your participation. One of your colleagues suggested that you may be interested in participating in this study due to your involvement in the special education process at your school. Your participation will held shed light on the experiences of middle class Black parents as they navigate the special education process.

I will be conducting two to three sets of interviews throughout the span of this research study. Each interview will be conducted off school district property at a date, time, and location of your convenience. The total time required for each interview session should not exceed 90 minutes. The interviews will be the primary means of obtaining data for this research study. Therefore, tape-recording will be necessary in order for me to adequately analyze the data obtained from the interviews.

All responses and information provided will be anonymous and identities held confidential, including names of school districts, school buildings, school personnel, children, and research participants. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time, refuse to answer any questions, or refuse to participate in any aspect of the research without personal or professional repercussions. Please contact me as soon as possible if you choose to discontinue your participation in one or all portions of this research.

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please indicate below and return the bottom portion of this form to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope enclosed. Please indicate your preference as to date, time, and location of the initial interview.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact my advisor, Dr. Judith Harris at the College of William and Mary (jbharr@wm.edu / (757) 221-2334). You may contact me as well (tlfree@wm.edu / (757) 329-0602). If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or Dr. Michael Deschenes at 757-221-2778 (PHSC-L@wm.edu), chairs of the two William & Mary committees that supervise the treatment of study participants.

I look forward to working with you. Thank you in advance for your participation in this important research.

Sincerely,

Tamara Freeman

Doctoral Candidate

The College of William and Mary

_____ I am not interested in participating in this research study at this time.

_____ I am interested in participating in this research study. My preference for the date and time of Interview #1 is _____/_____/2010 at ____:____ a.m. / p.m.

I would like Interview #1 to be conducted at

_____ My Home. My address is _____

_____ Other Location. The specific location and address is_____

_____

Name_____ Phone Number_____ E-mail_____

I have been informed of the conditions of my participation in the proposed research study and agree to participate. Specifically, I agree to the following (*please mark all that apply*):

☐ I will participate in three (3) to five (5) audio-taped interviews

☐   I will provide copies of related documents that will be reviewed by Tamara Freeman at the end of each audio-taped interview.

☐   I will be available by phone and/or e-mail to discuss preliminary results and confirm the accuracy of the information I have provided through interviews, journals, and documents

☐   I will allow Tamara Freeman to quote me directly in the report of study results with the understanding that pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality.

_____   _____   _____

Printed Name   Signature   Date

Appendix D

Interview Guide

<u>Breaking the Ice</u> *(This is not a script that should be read verbatim.)*
- My name is Tamara Freeman and I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Policy, Planning and Leadership with an emphasis in special education. I am an ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist and licensed by the Virginia Board of Health Professions as well as the Virginia Department of Education. I have professional experience as a speech-language pathologist in two local school districts. I currently work as an instructor and program coordinator at a local university.
- To fulfill requirements for my doctoral degree I am conducting dissertation research that focuses on the participation of middle class Black parents in decision-making throughout the special education process. When I use the term "special education process," I am referring to referral, evaluation, placement, and service delivery. I understand that you have been involved in one or more phases of the special education process.
- I am interested in hearing about the special education process from your perspective. But before we begin that part of the interview, would you like to ask me any questions? I would like to begin by having you tell me a little about yourself.

I. Background/Demographic Information

    a. Family Background

    b. Work History / Current Occupation

    c. Educational Background

    d. Perception of Self

        i. Core Values and Beliefs

        ii. Ethnic/Racial Identity

        iii. Explanation of Why Participant Identifies Self as Member of Middle Class

    e. Community Within Family Currently Resides

    f. School District Within Which Child is Currently Educated

    g. School Child Currently Attends

    h. Classroom Within Which Child is Currently Assigned

II.   Attitudes/Beliefs/Experiences Associated with Education

    a. Definition of Education

    b. Benefits/Disadvantages Associated with Education

    c. Education and the Black Community

    d. Education and the Middle Class Community

    e. Education and the Middle Class, Black Community

    f. Education within the School District

    g. Education within the Child's School

    h. Education within the Child's Classroom(s)

III.   Attitudes/Beliefs/Experiences Associated with Special Education

    a. Definition of Special Education

    b. Benefits/Disadvantages Associated with Special Education

    c. Special Education and the Black Community

    d. Special Education and the Middle Class Community

    e. Special Education and the Middle Class, Black Community

    f. Special Education within the School District

    g. Special Education within the Child's School

    h. Special Education within the Child's Classroom

IV.   Perceptions of Parent Involvement/Participation

    a. General Definition and Associated Behaviors

    b. Relationship between Parent Involvement/Participation and Education in General

    c. Relationship between Parent Involvement/Participation and Special Education

    d. Relationship between Parent Involvement/Participation and Student Outcomes

    e. Parent Involvement/Participation as a Parent/Professional Partnership

    f. Factors that impact (positively and negatively) Parent Involvement/Participation

    g. Parent Involvement/Participation at Your Child's School

V.   Decision-Making as One Aspect of Parent Involvement/Participation

    a. Definition

    b. The Role of Parental Decision Making in Education in General

    c. The Role of Parental Decision Making in Special Education

    d. Factors that impact (positively and negatively) Parental Decision Making

    e. Parental Decision Making at Your Child's School

VI.   Past Experience(s) as a Decision-maker within the Special Education Process

VII.   Current Experience(s) as a Decision-maker within the Special Education Process

VIII. Anticipations and Hopes for Future Experience(s) as a Decision-maker within the Special Education Process

As appropriate, the researcher should use the following types of questions to elicit information throughout the interview process (Patton, 2002):

<u>Experience and Behavior Questions</u>
- Questions about what a person does or has done
- Questions aimed to eliciting behaviors, experiences, actions, and activities that would have been observable had the observer been present
- Example: "If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing?"

<u>Opinion and Values Questions</u>
- Questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people ask about opinions, judgments, and values as opposed to actions and behaviors
- Answers tell what people think about some experience or issue; people's goals, intentions, desires, and expectations.
- Example: "What do you think about...?" "What would you like to see happen?"

<u>Feeling Questions</u>
- Questions aimed at eliciting emotions or feeling responses of people to their experiences and thoughts; tap affective dimensions of human life

- Researcher looking for adjective responses
- Example: "How do you feel about that?"

<u>Knowledge Questions</u>

- Inquire about the respondent's factual information; what the respondent knows.

<u>Sensory Questions</u>

- Questions that allow the researcher to enter the sensory apparatus of the participant
- Asks about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled.
- Example: "When you walk through the doors of the school, what do you see?"

<u>Background/Demographic Questions</u>

- Age, education, occupation, and the like are standard background questions that identify characteristics of the people being interviewed.
- Ask these questions in an open-ended manner to elicit respondent's own categorical worldview.

Appendix E

Excerpt from Reflexive Journal

8/9/07

Last Friday I ran into S.A., the mother of a private school student that I worked with at W.E.S. I was pleased to hear that K.A. is a seventh grader in an inclusive setting and took the SOL. Although he didn't pass them, due, I suspect, to his language deficits, I am so pleased that K.A.'s mother insists that he "be treated like a normal kid." We talked at length outside of the grocery store and S.A. brought up an incident that had occurred when K.A. was a third grader. After all of these years, it is obvious that talk of her experiences with the special education process at W.E.S. conjure up painful memories about this incident. I remember the incident as one that made me realize how naïve back then, despite being an experienced speech-language pathologist in the school system. It was a wake-up call that showed me that no matter how accomplished we are (Black people), some people will always look at us as less than.

I had worked with K.A. for close to a year and realized that he was in need of more intensive services. After learning that his parents had similar concerns, I referred him to the school's multidisciplinary team for a re-evaluation. At the meeting, S.A. was very articulate and well-dressed. She clearly presented her concerns about K.A.'s lack of focus and explained in detail all of the things that she and her husband did to support his educational progress (i.e., purchasing expensive resources from the parent-teacher store to use at home, bringing him to speech/language therapy in the middle of the day, etc.).

I was always impressed by S.A.'s level of commitment to her son. A city planner in a local city, she left work in the middle of the day every Monday and Wednesday, picked K.A. up from his school, brought him to my school for therapy, and took him back (across town) to his

school. I don't know many parents, regardless of race or SES background who would go to such lengths. We (the multidisciplinary team) agreed to conduct a full reevaluation.

Suzy, our culturally inept social worker insisted on conducting all sociocultural evaluations at the students' homes. This situation was no exception. Suzy approached S.A. at the end of the meeting to set up an appointment for the evaluation. Suzy asked S.A. for her address and S.A. gave it to her. Suzy (looking quite annoyed) said, "I need your complete address...what is your apartment number." S.A. assured Suzy that she had given her the complete address. Suzy attempted to act as if her behavior was an acceptable and benign mistake. While I was enraged, I kept it to myself and tried as I might to control my facial expressions. In complete denial, I attempted to rationalize what I had just witnessed. Maybe I was reading too much in to the exchange. Why would Suzy automatically think that S.A., a Black woman, lived in an apartment?

A few days later S.A. approached me after K.A. therapy session and said, "I know you were bothered by what the social worker said." I didn't have to respond and she didn't have to elaborate. We both knew the deal. That moment changed our relationship. Although we always maintained a professional distance, we have an unspoken understanding. While we were members within the system, she as a parent and I as a professional, we intuitively understood that we were also outsiders by virtue of our race. It didn't matter that we both possessed advanced degrees, and were well-dressed, well-spoken professionals. It didn't matter that we possessed all of the observable qualities and tangibles that are associated with being a part of the mainstream. Unlike our dominant peers, even those from low SES backgrounds, our membership in the mainstream is unstable and conditional. We are constantly challenged to prove that we are supposed to be there and at the same time, we are expected to abandon our Blackness. It is no

wonder that some Black parents choose to limit their participation in the special education

process. Are they really welcome?

Vita

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