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# Black Mothers' Counter-Narratives of Agency: A Pulse on Racism and Parent Involvement Strategies in Twenty First Century Schools

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Black Mothers' Counter-Narratives of Agency: A Pulse on Racism and Parent Involvement  
Strategies in Twenty First Century Schools

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES  
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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study examined African American mothers' perceptions of their children's schools (public, charter, and private) within the context of institutional, structural, and individual racism. Employing qualitative techniques, interviews and focus groups of middle to lower working class Black mothers were conducted to explore their lived experiences with individual, institutional, and structural racism within American schools. The goal of this study was to learn how these mothers make meaning of the educational institutions that serve their children, the racial barriers they encountered and the strategies of contestation they employed in order to address these perceived barriers.

The results of the study show that participants with children across all school types affirmatively perceived forms of systematic racial barriers in their children's schools that impeded their children's social and academic progress. Overall, mothers felt there is a decline in education for Black students in the 21st century due to existing racial barriers. Mothers' views on racism in 21st century schools ranged from schools being unaffirming to hostile, exclusionary, and culturally disconnected institutions, which sometimes left Black children and families feeling distant, invisible, or emotionally unsafe. Teachers and school officials were seen as perpetrators of 21st century racial barriers across residential districts and SES. Lastly, in response to racial barriers, African American mothers employed a variety of specific and reusable parent involvement strategies to contest racism.

*Keywords: Black parent involvement strategies, racism in schools, Black moms, agency*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

African Americans whose ancestors were descendants from Africa and were enslaved in America have been embattled by a long history of disenfranchisement, unequal access to rights, and discrimination in employment, housing, and other areas (Baptiste, 2015; Moses, 1978; Stevenson, 1996). The American legacy of slavery evolved into a unique American system of oppression that continues to structure opportunity and assign value for interpersonal exchange based on someone's perceived race (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Harrell, 2000; Jones, 2000). This system manifested itself in all areas of life but also took center stage in the educational arena. First through de jure segregation of schools and now through de facto segregation, African Americans or "involuntary minorities" (Ogbu, 1998) have long been restricted to attend schools that have significantly fewer resources and more limited learning opportunities than schools for Whites (Mahoney, 2013). Due to the legacy of slavery and vestiges of racism that persisted before and after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, many African American parents have been dissatisfied with the still limited options of where to send their children to get educated (Pedroni, 2005). This dissatisfaction has stemmed largely from states' historically limited provision of educational options for Blacks through overtly racist practices such as segregation via Jim Crow laws or the covert racist practices of redlining, steering, and racial and land-use zoning (Mandell, 2008).

In the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954, Oliver L. Brown and 13 parents, with the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), challenged the school district in Topeka, Kansas and contested the

options of segregated schools their children were mandated to attend based on the premise that the segregated schools were too far away. This case was an expression of African American parents' disaffection with the district, with segregation laws, and with the limited educational choices made available to their children. It also memorialized in the annals of case law two other glaring realities for Blacks: (a) Black parents in America send their children to schools while knowing that sending them there make their children vulnerable to inequities and (b) in some instances, the parents contest those racial inequities to see progress, even if it is incremental progress. However, the outcome of the case was unprecedented because it ruled in favor of the Black parents stating that segregating schools for Blacks was indeed unconstitutional. While the ruling could have been a harbinger of hope for Blacks in an era with pervasive racial segregation, 62 years after the court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* to integrate schools, intensive de facto school segregation persists, racial gaps in educational access and achievement remain, and racism in schools is pervasive.

School segregation or re-segregation has reemerged as one of the most pressing issues in education today. Despite the promise of the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, African Americans still experience some forms of structural exclusion. Black students are, on average, in schools that are 48% Black, whereas White students are, on average, in schools that are 9% Black (Kena, 2015). Although the struggle for integration was clear cut—the right to racially share public spaces, that is, using the same water fountain, sitting at the same lunch counter, or attending the same schools—new forms of segregation are evident such as Black students in schools that are segregated by race, income, and academic levels (Allen, 2015). Specifically, the plaintiffs of *Brown v. Board of Education* argued that the “separate but equal” concept from

*Plessy v. Ferguson* did not create the optimum learning environment since it did not allow Black students to learn with and from their White peers. Hence, the plaintiffs argued that a more racially differentiated space (classroom or school) was more beneficial for Black students and a sign of White Americans' progress on the issue of racial equity. However, recent statistics categorically show that African Americans are more likely to attend schools that are still undifferentiated spaces: (a) schools and classrooms with high concentrations of their own race, (b) schools with high concentrations of poverty, and (c) schools or classrooms with high concentrations of students with low academic levels (Kuscera & Orfield, 2014).

According to the most recent data available through the National Center for Education Statistics, 84% of White students attended a predominantly White school (a school where at least 50% or more of the students were White), and 46% of Black students attended a predominantly Black school (a school where at least 50% or more of the students were Black) (Kena et al., 2015). In essence, in a post Jim Crow society, African American students are still spatially segregated from White students in schools. More recently, Kucsera and Orfield (2014) found in a study done in New York that charter schools were highly segregated being labeled as "apartheid schools" (less than 1% White students) and also as intensely segregated with 73% to 91% of the schools primarily minority. Traditional public schools came in second, while magnet schools were most likely to have the greatest multiracial make-up. Being educated in these racially undifferentiated spaces with high levels of racial segregation and high concentrations of low-income students have other implications for Black students. Statistics show that Black students in these racially and socioeconomically undifferentiated settings are more likely to be taught by less qualified and less experienced teachers, be in classes with less academically

successful peers, and be in schools with inadequate facilities and resources, all of which hinder Blacks students' academic development (Borman & Dowling, 2010; Frankenberg, Garces, & Hopkins, 2016).

Statistics show that being in racially segregated schools with a predominately Black school population is not the only source of inequity. Black students are more likely to attend schools with higher concentrations of inexperienced teachers: 11% of Black students attend schools where 20% of the teachers are in their first year of teaching (U.S. Department of Education [US DOE], 2016). Furthermore, school course offerings in schools with high numbers of Blacks (more than 75%) are systematically incommensurate to other schools that have a high density of Whites (more than 75%). According to a report from the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR), whereas nationally 48% of high schools offer calculus, 60% offer physics, 72% offer chemistry, and 78% offer algebra II, only 33% of high schools with high Black and Latino student enrollment (more than 75%) offer calculus compared to 56% of high schools with low Black and Latino student enrollment (under 25%) (Kena et al., 2016). These disparities extend to other courses within schools with Black and White student populations. Black and Latino students represent 38% of students in schools that offer AP courses but comprise only 29% of students enrolled in at least one AP course (US DOE, 2016).

Beyond concentrations of same-race students, Blacks contend with being in schools with high concentrations of low-income peers. Black students comprise the largest population of students who live in poverty in America (34.1%), and Blacks are also more likely to attend high-poverty schools (schools with 75% or more students who qualify for free and reduced lunch)

than any other race (Kena et al., 2016). To compound the issues of racial and class segregation, a recent study showed that high-poverty schools have their own challenges. Analysis of data on school expenditures from 2008-09 shows that many high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than schools serving wealthier students, thereby leaving economically disadvantaged students attending lower resourced schools (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2011).

Data also show that 58% of Black students drop out of high-poverty high schools according to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (Synder & Dillow, 2012). In a study (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal Ramani, 2011), the event drop-out rate of poor students (the lower 20% of all family incomes) was at 5.9% in high school, and high-income (top 20% of all family incomes) students were at 1.3%. According to a recent study by National Center for Education Statistics, low-income students are five times more likely to drop out than middle-income families and six times more likely to drop out than that of higher income youth, (Synder & Dillow, 2012).

A preponderance of national school data also reveal the persistent gap in academic outcomes between Black and White students in academics, graduation rates, and drop-out rates. While the gaps are narrowing and academic outcomes are improving overall, Blacks are still lagging in academic performance compared to their White counterparts. From 1998 through 2013, the average reading scores for White fourth and eighth graders were higher than those of their Black and Hispanic peers, although the gap has diminished. Specifically, at Grade 4, the White-Black “gap narrowed from 32 points in 1992 to 26 points” in 2013 (Kena et al., 2016, p. 144). Average reading scores were higher in 2008 for White students at all three ages (9, 13, &



17) than for Black students. For example, at ages 9 and 13, the gap between White and Black students ranged from 21 to 29 points (Synder & Dillow, 2013). In that same study, mathematics results for 2008 continued to show score gaps between White and Black students ranging from 26 to 28 points (Synder & Dillow, 2013). In the diploma attainment category, the national dropout rate is decreasing; however, reports show the dropout rate for Blacks in 2011 remained higher than the rate for Whites (7.3 to 5.0% respectively) (Synder & Dillow, 2013).

The challenges faced by schools that are racially, economically, and academically undifferentiated test the theory of the *Brown v. Board of Education* plaintiffs issuing a call for racially differentiated spaces. Beyond just examining the Black–White achievement gaps, a recent analysis of scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) focused on questions about the relationship between schools with high densities of Blacks and student achievement, and two relationships were identified (Kena et al, 2015). Both Black and White students who attended schools with high density (60% to 100%) of Black students) had lower average scores on NAEP than students who attended schools with the lowest racial density (0% to 20%) of Black students, even when controlling for background characteristics such as mothers’ and fathers’ highest level of education and students’ eligibility for participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Secondly, the Black–White student achievement gaps among schools with the higher density (60% to 100%) of Black students did not differ significantly from the achievement gap among the lowest density schools (Kena et al., 2015). Both White and Black students who attended schools with high density of Black students on average, were 10 points lower than their peers who attended schools with low density of Black students, even when controlling for socioeconomic status and other relevant background.

These results are meaningful for students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and for the issue of educational equity more generally. Racially undifferentiated spaces and schools with high concentrations of Blacks achieve less than their peers in more differentiated spaces. These figures show how deeply inequitable educational opportunities are in United States for Whites and Blacks. Further, it shows how deeply ingrained disadvantages exist at all levels for Black students and schools with predominately Black students.

Beyond inequities related to school access, Black students also experience race-related challenges inside of schools regardless of their socioeconomic status or academic proficiency. Middle-class African American parents who may ostensibly have more school options to choose from also report contending with ongoing forms of inequity such as tracking (Modica, 2015), opportunity hoarding (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), higher out-of-school suspension rates (Gibson, Wilson, & Haight, Kayama & Marshall, 2014), allochronic discourse (blaming Black students for inferior school conditions), and dysconscious racism (acceptance of White norms and privilege; Blaisdell, 2016). More specifically, the recent growing body of research on racial inequities in education point to the troubling reality for Black students: classrooms as “racial spaces,” (Blaisdell, 2016). Although schools and classes that are physically desegregated, segregation is recreated in new ways within the classroom. Also, the hyper-penalizing of Black students, which is correlated to the school to prison pipeline endemic, is widely practiced (Gibson et al., 2014).

Since racial inequality in American schools is a day-to-day reality for African American children, racial inequalities are realities for African American children in American schools across socioeconomic levels, school types and ostensible levels of racial integration. African

Americans parents are at a conundrum: Where do they send their children, and how do they contest the racial inequities their children will face? Due to the deep-seated nature of racism in American culture, African American parents face the challenge of reconciling the act of sending their children to American schools where racial inequities clearly exist and developing strategies to respond to racism in schools (Thompson, 2003).

### **Problem Statement**

Sixty-two years after the Supreme Court ruled to desegregate schools on the grounds that segregation violated the 14th Amendment, American schools today remain largely segregated. According to the Kena et al. (2015) statistics, on average, White students attend schools that are 9% Black, while Black students attend schools that were 48% Black, indicating a large difference in average Black student density nationally. While the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case fundamentally shifted the law, the 20 parents that brought the case were emblematic of the need for African American parents to contest racism faced by their children in school. When African American parent involvement in schools is historically and racially contextualized, it becomes clear that there may be many parent involvement strategies that may be brought to light. Due to the persistence of American racism and the complexity of structural racism to perpetuate racial hierarchy, African American parent involvement must extend beyond traditional forms of school-sanctioned parent involvement strategies to include advocacy work and different types of agency to combat racism. Recently, other acts of Black parents' advocacy and activism to combat racial educational inequities have received attention from the mainstream media and have challenged the deficit master narrative of African American parents' lack of involvement in their children's education. These events contest the master narrative that African

American parents are involved more at home than at school, mistrust schools, do not know how to appropriately interface with teachers or school officials, or passively remain “stuck” at schools (Ogbu, 2003). For example, African American parents in Chicago went on a hunger strike for 10 days to contest the proposed closing of 49 schools in Black and Latino areas (Corley, 2015). In Anaheim, California, parents enacted parent trigger laws, which forced Palm Lane Elementary School to be turned into a charter in 2016 (Feuerstein, 2015). These examples show that many African American parents are engaged in a continuous crusade to secure educational rights for their children and are champions for their children to receive an education as a weapon against racism (Robinson & Werblow, 2012).

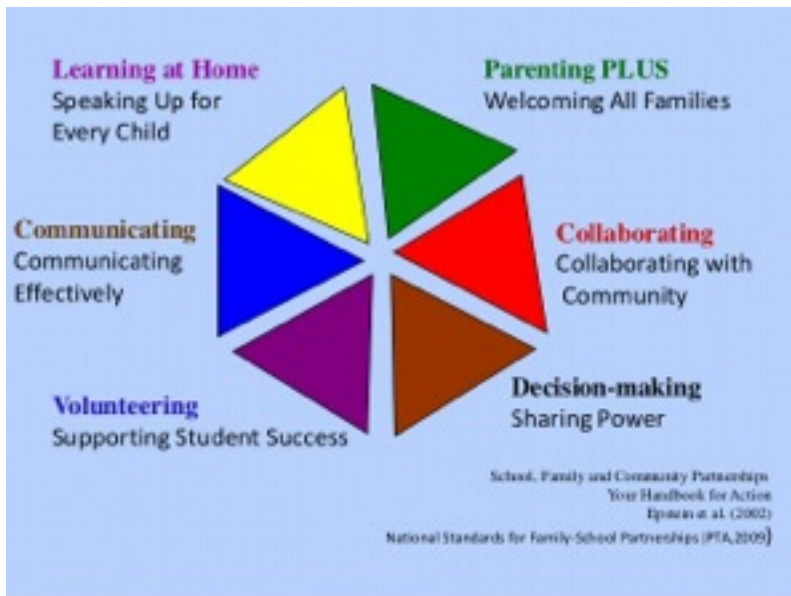
African American parents’ racial socialization of their children to prepare to combat and reject the internalization of racism constitutes another important, yet understudied, expression of parental agency in the face of racism and racist systems. Racial socialization can be described as a cultural practice used in minority families to promote positive youth development in children of color by providing them with strategies to navigate racism (Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Hughes et al., 2006). Racial socialization is a type of preparation for and a resistance to racism due to one having an ethnic–racial consciousness of “how historically people have been classified into ethnic and racial groups based on creed, phenotype, and cultural markers, which then serve to maintain social hierarchy that benefits some groups over others” (Aldana & Byrd, 2015, p. 565). These strategies taught by African American parents to their children are demonstrations of parental involvement at home, in school, and in the political arena to ensure the academic, emotional, and social progress of their children within a racially charged context.

Growing efforts on the part of African American parents to advocate for their children's educational rights have received limited attention in the educational research literature. The current literature measures African American parents' involvement by traditional conventions (Ishimaru et al., 2016), such as parent-teacher association [PTA] meetings, school open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and other events) that represent limited and constrained avenues for parent participation as passive listeners, clients, or fundraisers (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). It does not often consider those barriers that may impact African Americans' parental involvement. Due to legacies of current and past discrimination and mistreatment, African American parents often feel unwelcome in schools, sometimes lack access to school resources and sometimes feel they do not receive fair treatment for their youth (Cross, 2011; Wang, Hill, and Hofkens, 2014). Other factors may contribute to the reasons why African American parent involvement strategies are overlooked are that African American parental involvement may not align with the White, middle-class norms of the school. Moreover, if White, middle-class norms are used exclusively to define and interpret parental involvement, African American and Latino parents are seen as less involved than White parents (Simoni & Adelman, 1993).

Currently the existing literature regarding parental involvement falls short of providing real insight into African American parental agency and the African American parents' strategies they use to contest racism and ensure their children's progress in schools that perpetuate structuring the context of racial inequities. Literature centered around using agency to combat racism in American schools largely focuses on the teachers (Allen, 2015; Blaisdell, 2016) and students (Ani, 2013; Tucker, Dixon & Griddine, 2010) while omitting any discussion of parental

agency. The majority of this literature relies on traditional measures of parental involvement based largely on the Epstein model. The Epstein model identifies types of family involvement behaviors needed in order to impact student achievement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein et al., 2009). Although the model works to empower parents (Epstein et al., 2009), this model—like the majority of literature— does not address the reality or context of structural racism in which African American families struggle in the context of structural racism. It also fails to recognize that schools may not be readily responsive or even acknowledge the racial or socioeconomic barriers that exist.

Figure 1. Epstein framework for parent involvement



Source: Epstein (2002)

Relying on schools to inform parents of school-sanctioned ways to be involved may not meet the needs of parents who see the schools as barriers to their children's educational progress. Roger and Brefield (2015) have called for additional research on parental involvement that extends beyond school-sanctioned definitions or traditionally accepted behaviors to include the kinds of advocacy work in which parents are engaged to help their students navigate their school experience. Research on African American parent and family involvement could benefit from the inclusion of a perspective on parent involvement that acknowledges the racial barriers they face and the advocacy required to navigate racist educational institutions. Therefore, the principal investigator of this qualitative study asks African American parents to describe the racial barriers they perceive or experience in their interactions with their children's schools. If they have experienced racism, parents were asked to provide details about the strategies they used or use to navigate those racial barriers.

## **Context of the Study**

Recent research on parental involvement indicates that schools may need to redefine parental involvement and develop broader frameworks that can define involvement more inclusively for families of color (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Griffin, 2011). The current literature on parental involvement among people of color often exclude questions explicitly focused on racism; consequently, it may also exclude discussions of those the forms of advocacy in which African American families and their communities and churches engage (Fields-Smith, 2007). However, community-based advocacy is a primary form of community partnerships and alliances among African Americans (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Forms of advocacy that deal specifically with racism tend to be overlooked as examples of African American parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011). In Roger and Brefield's (2015) study on parent advocacy work to improve their children's literary development, those investigations discovered that parents' counter-narratives can make educators aware of the barriers that parents face and teach them about the kinds of advocacy work in which these parents are engaged. According to critical race theorists such as Delgado and Stephanic (2012), counter-narratives are necessary in order to give voice to the perspectives and insights of the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized and silenced, in this case within educational institutions (Rogers & Brefeld, 2015). The concept of the counter-narrative is interdisciplinary and comes from narrative research (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004), law (Delgado, 1995), critical race theory (Fernandez, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), critical psychology (Fine & Weis, 2003), and post-modern theory (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1995). Parents' alternate visions for how educational practices might be structured



provide theorists with fresh groundwork needed for effective educational reform. Parents then become partners in developing strategies to move alternate visions into action.

This study was a qualitative study of African American mothers' experiences with individual, institutional, and structural racism within the schools their children attend. The study exclusively focused on African American mothers' experiences with racism during child-rearing. According to the National Vital Statistics Report, in 2010, 40.2% births were to unmarried mothers. Single parent homes are on the rise nationally, and African American mothers have the highest rates (Martin et al., 2012). Research also shows that, across all racial groups and family compositions, the responsibility of educating a child and making educational decisions largely falls to the mother (Kazura, 2000; Nihat & Gurbuzturk, 2013; Prins & Toso, 2008). Since African American women have culturally and historically shared the responsibility for mothering their children (Collins, 2009; Troester, 1984), participation in this study was open to biological, African American mothers of any marital status, and to even the "othermothers," women like grandmothers who assist (or replace) biological mothers in educating their children (Collins, 2000, p. 178).

As aforementioned, there is robust empirical evidence pointing to the ways in which schools perpetuate structural racism and how classes themselves can be racial spaces (Blaisdell, 2016; Echols, Solomon, Graham, 2014; Edwards, Tracy, & Jordan, 2011; Gulson & Symes 2007; Wyse et al., 2012). Thus, this study included African American mothers whose children attend various educational settings (public, charter, and private schools) excluding homeschooling and online schooling. In addition, the sample included mothers from two socioeconomic backgrounds (SES) and different marital statuses (married/unmarried) to explore whether the

mothers' experiences or responses to those experiences differ by class, background, and/or school type. The sampling frame intentionally included a broad range of African American mothers with diverse characteristics: mothers of students who are deemed academically struggling, mothers of academically successful students, mothers of students within special education programs, and students who are not classified. To be eligible for participation in this study, mothers must self-identify as Black or African American and meet the following criteria: having been born in the United States, having ancestors who were enslaved in this country, were involuntary immigrants, and have a male or female child attending a New Jersey school (public, charter, private) in grades 3–12. Eligible participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus group to discuss the strategies they use to assist their children navigate school and to address individual, structural, and institutional racism. A Pew Research formula, which calculates one's income, household size, and the cost of living in an area, was used to determine parents' classification of socioeconomic status (Fry & Kochhar, 2016).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine African American mothers' perspectives on racial barriers that exist within their children's schools and examine the strategies they use to address or overcome those racial barriers. This research aimed to develop grounded theories and practical evidence regarding advocacy strategies that could be included as part of the repertoire of African American parental involvement, enabling parents to respond successfully to manifestations of structural racism in American schools.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do African American mothers whose ancestors were descendants from Africa and were enslaved in America perceive and address racism in their children's educational institutions?
2. What experiences with racism or racially motivated challenges have African American mothers experienced through their children's public, private, or charter schools?
3. How do African American mothers respond to, contest, and/or overcome manifestations of ongoing structural racism within their children's schools and outside school?
4. How do African American mothers interpret the impact of school-based structural racism on their children's education?
5. How do African American mothers' experiences with, responses to, and perceptions of the influence of racism in their children's school differ based on their socioeconomic status or type of school (public, private, charter) their child attends?

### **Overview of Methods**

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 16 Black mothers whose children attend school in Normal County in New Jersey. Up to 16 mothers (or until saturation) from two socioeconomic groups (middle class and lower working class) will be involved in semi-structured interviews. I explored how these mothers make meaning of the schools that their children attend, their perceptions of the issue of racism, racial inequalities, or barriers in schools and their responses to them. During the interviews, mothers were asked to share their personal experiences, if any, with individual, structural, or institutional racism at their children's schools. If they have experiences, they were asked to share some of the strategies they used to respond to racist incidents, policies, and/or behaviors. After the interviews were

completed, interviewees were invited to participate in a focus group on the status of racism in America and schools overall. The focus groups were grouped according to residential district, which impacted class (middle class or lower working class) and school type: public, public charter, or private.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to Lewis and Diamond (2015), in United States, race was the fundamental organizing principle of social institutions since the country's founding leading to complex hierarchies based on race and differential treatment socially, legally, politically, and economically. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argued that these complex hierarchies and the differential treatment are also inherently ingrained in the institution of education in United States. Thus, when examining types of African American parent involvement in schools, it is necessary to use racially and culturally sensitive methodologies and frameworks that acknowledge the racial context in which African American families live. Such research must also allow for the inclusion of parental involvement strategies that include advocacy and ways to navigate structural racism in schools. Theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist theory are useful to analyze Black mothers' narratives of their experiences with race and racism in American schools.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is a theoretical framework within the social sciences that emerged in the 1990s as a tool to examine the interrelatedness of law, race, and power and their impact on behaviors. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), racism is made up of three important

points: (a) one group deems itself superior to all others; (b) the group that is superior has the power to carry out racist behavior; and (c) racism benefits the superior group, while negatively affecting other racial and/or ethnic groups. According to the premise behind CRT, in this country, people of color have never had access to systematic forms of power and are on the margins of power.

Delgado (2001) argued that there are two basic truths of American society. First, racism is an ordinary and normal occurrence and is a common everyday experience of most people of color. Secondly, the systematic practice of this White privilege and White supremacy that benefits the dominant group and marginalizes people of color is so inherent and integral that it is embedded in many aspects of life and cannot easily be eradicated (Delgado, 2001). Although the influence and impact of racism can be examined in all aspect of existence for people of color, it is especially crucial when examining the historical and present educational system in America as it relates to African Americans. Specifically, the ideal that America promotes and achieves a fair and equitable education for all its children has been historically contested by various groups in courts, discussions, in protest, and with laws due to the reality of lived, observed, or experienced injustices of Black children. Thus, when examining the educational system and how it serves Black children, the critical race theory lens will facilitate an analytic frame that is not derived from the dominant's group perspective but reflects the realities of America's historical confluence of race, law, and power.

In this study, I used a critical race theory (CRT) framework for the analysis of the voices of Black parents who describe how they navigate racism and achieve agency when making choices relating to where, how, and who educates their children. Critical race theorists legitimize

the everyday experiences and perspectives of historically underrepresented and disadvantaged populations to come to a better understanding of how Americans see race (Delgado, 1989). In the same spirit of slave narratives written by Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano, which were autobiographical accounts or auto-ethnographies written by African Americans who were enslaved and whose voices were marginalized from literature, counter-storytelling or counter-narratives are written accounts from oppressed people. They are encouraged to share and document their own perspectives on, experiences with, and perceptions of their oppression and racism. Due to the uniqueness of their experiences and suppression of their voices, in CRT the everyday experiences of ordinary people who may be normally marginalized from these conversations are pushed to the forefront.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist thought theory encompasses the premise that institutional racism is not some distant phenomenon, but impacts Black women every day, encountered in everyday situations (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). It also addresses the realities that Black women have been oppressed because of race, as well as gender, class, and sexuality. The twin purposes of Black feminist thought theory are to empower Black women and to promote social justice (Collins, 2000, p. x.).

According to Patricia Collins (2000), the author of *Black Feminist Thought*, the conditions in the wider political economy simultaneously “shape Black women’s subordination and foster activism” (Collins, 2000, p. 8). Black Feminist Thought is a collection of literature about African American womanhood and their collective responses to oppression that describe and explain different expressions of common themes. It is borne out of the premise that Black women must insist on self-definition, self-valuation, self-determination, and the need to create a Black

female-centered analysis of the current state of racism (Collins, 2000). According to Collins (1990), when one embraces a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought (BFT) can help to redefine these social relations of domination and resistance (Collins, 1990, p. 221).

One of the basic tenets of BFT is that Black women's collective practice of redefining their oppression and understanding these controlling labels is important. Due to the deep entrenchment of racism and the status and images being defined by the White men and women who have enslaved and oppressed them, Black women need to define themselves so they are not defined comparatively as the "other" to White maleness. As a consequence of the uniqueness of their oppression, Black women must be the ones to understand and analyze the oppressive inequalities (racism, classism, and sexism) they must endure in order to survive. Black feminist thought is part of a larger "critical" social theory that works in pursuit of justice, both for U.S. Black women and for other similarly oppressed groups (Collins, 2000, p. 9). Black feminist thought includes three dimensions of oppression: economics, rights and privileges, and ideology. As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in this nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will be needed.

### **Delimitations**

In order to understand mothers' perceptions of American structural and institutional racism in schools or educational institutions, I limited interview participants to African American parents whose children currently attend public schools, public charters, non-secular private schools, and faith-based schools. Homeschooling and online schooling were not included in the

study due to the students' limited face-to-face interactions with their teachers and with external educational providers.

Although the term African American may cover a broad range of people who currently live in America whose descendants are from the African Diaspora, for the purposes of this study, the sample only included African Americans whose ancestors were victims of the African slave trade and were involuntarily transmigrated to America. Specifically, the African Americans within this study are considered "involuntary minorities" because their ancestors were enslaved through the oppressive American system called chattel slavery (Ogbu, 1998, p. 165). African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved have a different perspective of race relations than "voluntary minorities" (groups of immigrants who chose to come to the United States and their descendants) and other minority ethnic groups (Ogbu, 1998).

In order to garner a wide range of experiences from African American mothers and female caregivers the study participants included women who are single, married, and divorced.

### **Limitations**

Interview participants were limited to a small sample size of Blacks mothers from Normal County. Hence, this may limit the transferability of the experiences of families living in Normal County. Because of the unique variables (politics, racial climate, educational landscape, etc.) that impact a county, parents from other counties and states may have different experiences that may not be similar to those parents that were sampled. Also, since the sample population is limited to women, the women's experiences should not be expected to be transferable to the father's experiences and with other minority groups.

### **Summary**



Research demonstrates that parental involvement can be a significant factor ensuring student achievement (Barnard, 2004; Desimone, 1999; Hill & Craft, 2003; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). However, a review of literature presents African American parent involvement from a cultural deficit perspective (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Valencia (2010) defined deficit thinking by viewing minority children and their parents from a critical lens that includes “genetic pathology as well as cultural and accumulated environmental deficits and ‘children at risk’ models” (White, 2014, p. 157). This view posits the middle class or in some cases “Whiteness” as exhibiting the epitome of “family values” and discipline, and they become exemplars of parenting (White, 2014, p. 156). African Americans are viewed as having two deficits: (a) how to appropriately interface with schools and (b) having limited strategies that promote their children’s academic success (Cooper, 2003, 2007, 2009). On the other hand, African American parents report more experiences with discrimination than other ethnic and racial groups, and these experiences are positively associated with the use of race-based socialization messages (Hughes, 2003; Hughes et al., 2006; White-Johnson et al., 2010). African American parents have been found to report more preparation for bias messages than other ethnic and racial groups, including Puerto Rican and Dominican parents (Hughes, 2006). While this may be true, it is important to note that African American mothers’ voices are not well represented in the literature. This study fills the gap in the literature by allowing African American mothers to tell their stories of their encounters with racism in schools and enabling them to disclose strategies they use to combat racism in order to help their children navigate these structurally unequal systems.

In Chapter 2, I will review the literature to discuss the impact of racist laws on the social institution of education and how those laws have created a long history of inequities in

educational access for Africans who were enslaved in America and their descendants. The study explored the distinction between the explicit racism of the past and the implicitness of 21st century racism in schools. Lastly, I will discuss the literature, its gaps regarding parental agency, and its relevance for parental involvement of African American parents. In Chapter 3, I will introduce my qualitative study and intended methodology to create a study centered around African American mothers.

## Definitions of Terms

***African American or Black***, According to McPherson and Selby (2004), the term *African American* or *Black* will refer to a person who embodies five interrelated dimensions of the modes of “Blackness.” For the sake of this study, only three of the five interrelated dimensions of the modes of Blackness will be used: racial and physical characteristics, shared ethnic culture or commonalities, and national territorial origins and ancestral homeland in Africa. These titles normally include African Americans who were the descendants of slaves during the U.S. slave trade and immigrants of the African Diaspora. However, within this study, the group being targeted are African Americans who were “involuntary immigrants” due to their ancestors being victims of chattel slavery within America.

***Agency*** is the capacity for a person to act, make choices, and exercise self-determination in order to promote his/her own growth, progress, or position.

***Allochronic discourse*** refers to language used to associate a person or community with another time or to blame them for inequitable conditions in a school or community (Blaisdell, 2016).

According to Blaisdell (2016), “Allochronic discourse normalizes the inequitable conditions in racially segregated schools, hiding the fact that those conditions are the effects of specific policies and making them appear to be unquestioned and taken-for-granted facts of life” (p.252).

***Black feminist thought (BFT)*** is a theoretical framework within the social sciences that consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women (Collins, 2000). Developed by the sociology professor, Patricia Hill Collins, BFT is a collection of literature where Black women possess and express their unique standpoints on and perspectives

of their experiences. Since interpretations and observations differ, no one Black feminist platform could exist.

***Black centered research*** is a theory that views Blacks as victims of historical and continued systematic racism. In order to counter racist narratives and stereotypes that are promulgated due to racism, Blacks as a form of resistance and agency.

***Color blind racism*** is a racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in “raceless” explanations for all sorts of race-related affairs.

***Critical race theory*** is a theoretical framework within the social sciences that asserts racism, White-skin privilege, and White supremacy are integral and inherent aspects of America. It also examines the confluence of law, race, and power and its impact on behaviors.

***Districts with High Number of Persistent Failing Public Schools (DHNPFPS)***. This study included four types of schools. The state defines public schools that are failing on the “persistently” failing list as the following: priority schools and focus schools.

***Dysconscious racism*** is an impaired consciousness or pattern of thinking in which people accept White norms and privileges and the culture of segregation by positing people from a deficient perspective. Viewing people as inferior and deserving of less because of their neighborhoods, higher crime rates, lower health outcomes, and lack of academic success in those communities. The imposed conditions or the lack of resources can all be used as justifications of deficit viewpoints (Blaisdell, 2016).

***High-poverty school*** is a public school where more than 75.0% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), and ***low-poverty schools*** are defined as public schools where 25.0% or less of the students are eligible for FRPL.

***Institutional racism*** is a pattern of social institutions — such as governmental organizations, schools, banks, and courts of law — perpetuating negative treatment to a group of people based on their race.

***Structural racism*** is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage Whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by White supremacy.

***White supremacy*** is the maintenance and the promotion of preferential treatment, privilege, and power for White people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004).

***Oppression*** describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society.

## **CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will begin with a brief historical background on the foundation and evolution of American racism and its impact on one particular ancestral group, Africans who were enslaved in America. This chapter will discuss the impact of racist laws on the social institution of education and how those laws laid the foundation of a long history of inequities in access to education for Africans who were enslaved in America. The chapter will also provide a similar historical overview of post-slavery or post-Civil War racist practices that contributed to schools perpetuating racial segregation and other types of racial discrimination. Evidence of African Americans contestation of racism throughout the centuries will be included in the brief history of racial oppression in America.

This chapter also discusses the evolution of racist practices in schools and society from explicit racism of the first three centuries to more implicit practices of 21st century racism (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). The literature will be discussed and analyzed through the frameworks of critical race theory and Black feminist thought. The review of literature will start with studies conducted on 21st century racism in schools, studies that highlight the tendency to view African American parent involvement through the “cultural deficit model” and the role of agency when combatting racism in schools. Lastly, this chapter will culminate with a discussion of what is missing from the literature and what this study hopes

to contribute to existing literature: African American parental agency and advocacy as a form of parental involvement as a means to contest individual, institutional, and structural racism.

To identify research to include in this literature review, I searched for research in the field of education focusing on the agency, advocacy, school barriers, African American parents' participation, in their children's schools, and evidence of 21st century racism in schools. I researched using ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Academic Search Premier, and EBSCO host databases. The main search terms I used included *minority, disadvantaged, agency, racism in school, parental involvement, parental advocacy and schools, racial socialization, African American mothers, racial discrimination, school involvement, teacher discrimination, school friendliness, and school barriers*.

### **Historical Perspective**

The foundation of American racism against people of African descent was inextricably tied to the foundations of American capitalism. The evolution of this racism evolved from individual, to institutional, to ultimately being structural racism. Over 150 years prior to the foundation of American society in 1776, the first group of Africans (as servants who worked alongside of Native American and Irish indentured servants) were brought to a North American colony in Virginia in 1619 to work the land to grow tobacco product (Horton & Horton, 1997). The system now referenced as "chattel slavery" had not yet been formalized. Over time, indentured servitude evolved into a more restricted system for Africans due to the implementation of laws. Other groups of indentured servants were able to escape. While "escaping slavery and blending in" became a recurring pattern of agency for the three races of people from three continents that were indentured servants (indigenous people from what is now labeled North America, Euro-

peans, and Africans), it became more difficult for Blacks to continue to do so due to their unique physical traits that were characteristic of those who were from African descent (Baptist, 2015).

African indentured servants who no longer wanted to work on a particular plantation, like the other indentured servants, would run away, marry one another, rebel together, abdicate their contract and live a life as a free man (Rose, 1999). Some Virginia statutes confirm this reality and show the origins of the intersection of race, law, and power:

Bee itt enacted That in case any English servant shall run away in company with any negroes who are incapable of making satisfaction by addition of time, Bee it enacted that the English so running away in company with them shall serve for the time of the said negroes absence as they are to do for their owns by a former act. (as cited in Rose, 1999, p. 18).

Conjointly, in the late 1600s, other new laws began to surface in some places that began to restrict Africans more specifically, and by the early 1700s, all 13 colonies practiced some forms of what has evolved into what is now known as American chattel slavery, no longer indentured servitude (Tsesis, 2010). In essence, since the inception of America as a new country, slavery had already been a widely used system to grow the lucrative agrarian industry for a budding country much in need of wealth in the South. Despite common misconception, the North also participated in the slave trade. For instance, Massachusetts created the first law in 1641, and slaves built the supplies and slave trade in the North (Stevenson, 1996). Although, not all states enacted the same laws and not all Whites agreed with or practiced slavery, the widespread practice of slavery in pre-colonial America and the enactment of many racist laws across the country transmogrified the image of African people into a perpetual non-human, slave force. Consequently, people of African descent were relegated to a caste system based on race from which they would be unable to escape for the next three centuries. Even in the North, where there were



tendencies for more anti-slavery sentiments, Whites still struggled with the slavery question (Horton & Horton, 1997).

Despite the oppressiveness of the institution of slavery, Blacks sought opportunities to contest these systems, whether in extreme measures—suicide or armed rebellion— or subtle ones: intentionally slowing down work production or through “self-development,” developing skills that made them indispensable (Dusinberre, 2011, p. 142). Even the songs that the enslaved African Americans sang during forced labor took on dual messages of freedom. These songs helped forge a Black consciousness and a community bond based on the collective desire for freedom and sent coded messages of planned escapes (Levine, 1977). Despite Africans’ ongoing contestations of this racial system of oppression, the move from ubiquitous individual racist practices to becoming more formalized through the enactment of many racist laws caused a shift. This shift is important because it illustrates how the practice of slavery evolved from isolated discrimination (that was widely practiced) to a more formalized structural racism through the enactment of racist laws in various states. For instance, Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of South Carolina, Passed December 1835, chapter 5 read:

If any person shall hereafter teach any slave to read or write, or shall aide or assist in teaching a slave to read or write, such person, if a free White person, upon conviction thereof, shall for each and every offense against this Act, be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars, and imprisoned not more than six months...if any free person of color or slave shall keep any school, or other place of instruction, for teaching any slave or free person of color to read or write, such free person of color or slave shall be liable to the same fine, imprisonment and corporal punishment (as cited in Hoose, 2001, p. 95)

This particular statute is important because it shows the foundation of America’s use of laws to restrict Africans who were enslaved access to a fair and equitable education in order to maintain the racial and economic hierarchical structures. Prior to the Civil War, perpetrators of

Southern plantocracy (ruling class, political order or government composed of or dominated by plantation owners)—through legalizing their system of chattel slavery—attempted to ensure there were little to no rights including any formal public, state provision of education for Africans (who were captured, brought, and sold in the United States under the slave trade). The Southern plantocracy had dominated the federal government and national policy (Robinson, 1997). This practice of denying enslaved Africans access to education served as the beginning of the foundations of institutionalized racism. Thus, the racialization of the social institution of education achieved through the passage of laws restricting access to education on the basis of race helped to establish and perpetuate the structural dynamics of racism, causing the personhood of the African to be restricted and perceived as non-human.

Formalizing individual racist beliefs and practices through laws made racism transcend the individual level to the institutional level. These laws and other laws such as the Slave codes (in Virginia during 1705) and then the Black codes (1865) are examples of race being explicitly articulated, and restrictions based on race reinforced the principles of human chattel slavery. Vestiges of structural racism can still be seen today in the policing, criminalization, and restriction of Black life and Black movement in America. However, in the 18th century, to be Black meant to be enslaved and controlled; to be White meant to be something in society and in charge of Black life (Stevenson, 1996, p. 7). By 1790, to be White afforded one citizenship and access to rights and property, hence the language of the first citizenship law. To be Black meant to be deprived of human rights, to be non-citizens, and to be lower than that of Whites (Lopez, 2006, p. 1).

As institutional, legalized slavery became standard practice across the country, Black people were denied all fundamental rights; racism rose to a higher rung on the continuum of racism to structural racism. Powell (2008) described structural racism as:

...a product of reciprocal and mutual interaction within and between institutions. Institutional racism shifts our focus from the motives of individual people to practices and procedures within an institution. Structural racism shifts our attention from the single, intra-institutional setting to inter-institutional arrangements and interactions. Efforts to identify causation at a particular moment of decision within a specific domain understate the cumulative effects of discrimination. (p. 796)

This is an important shift because Africans' enslavement and the denial of their humanity impacted all levels of racism (individual, structural, and institutional) and deeply ingrained in all forms of life in America.

### **Schools as a Form of Institutionalized Racism**

The historical nexus between the institution of law and the institution of education are crucial to understanding the current status of structural racism in schools. The systematic enactment of federal and state laws (such as the Fugitive Slave Act, 1793) and the practice of racist laws restricting Black life transmuted into a complex hierarchical system that impeded Blacks' progress in society and in the educational system. For example, the Fugitive Slave Act, specifically, required states to participate in labeling escaped slaves as fugitives and lawbreakers who needed to be captured and returned to their masters. Legalized institutional racial segregation and/or relegating Blacks to attend separate schools that lacked resources became methods to perpetuate White supremacy and further marginalized Blacks. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 served as a litmus test of racial progress 33 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The state of Louisiana ruled in favor of maintaining "separate" but "equal" public

establishments (including schools) for Blacks and Whites based on the argument that the arrest of Homer A. Plessy, a biracial man exercising agency by sitting in an all-White railroad car, did not violate his Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Moreover, the Supreme Court cited and documented the reality that White sensibility was not yet willing to embrace the concept of racial integration (33 years after Africans in America were freed from slavery by the federal executive order called the Emancipation Proclamation) as justification for continuing the separation of public spaces. Thus, public spaces were to remain separate, and racism would perpetuate racial spatiality.

It took 64 years to overturn the Plessy decision with the ruling in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The plaintiffs, who were in alliance with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), opposed the racial segregation of schools, on two of three premises: first, that all-White schools were closer to their homes. Next, Blacks suffered negative psychological impacts of racial segregation. The plaintiffs in the Brown case had access to a popularized experiment done by Dr. Kenneth B. Clark and Dr. Mamie Phipps-Clark that showed the impact of racism on the psyche of Black children who attended segregated school through a “doll test.” In the experiment, which was done 4 years prior to the Brown case, Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark did a qualitative study of 250 Black children to study “the development of racial identification and as a function of ego development and self-awareness” (Clark, 1947, p. 169). In the experiment with Black children, 10 of 16 children in Clarendon County preferred the White doll, and 11 said the brown doll was “bad.” Clark concluded that Black child accepted the negative stereotypes and assumptions about of his/her

race. The result also showed the impact of internalized racism and the depth of self-hatred and low self-esteem in Black children who were experiencing racism (Clark & Clark, 1947).

The Supreme Court decided in favor of Oliver L. Brown, one of the fathers of schoolchildren denied access to the nearby segregated school. The case was essential in establishing that Blacks suffer emotional and psychological effects of racism. The Clarks' research would precede a long line of studies that would advance the notion that Blacks have emotional and even health-related outcomes as a result of experiencing or witnessing others experience racism (Kwate & Goodman, 2015; McNeil, Harris-McKoy, Brantley, Fincham, & Beach, 2014; Priest, Perry, Ferdinand, Paradies, Kelahe, 2014).

Inequities in educational access, achievement, and the treatment of Blacks by educational institutions and other bureaucracies that persist today are evidence of and the by-product of vestiges of formalized structural racism. The achievement gap between Blacks and their White counterparts (Kena et al., 2014), high numbers of racially segregated schools (Synder and Dillow, 2012), disproportionate numbers of out-of-school suspension for Black children in comparison to other ethnic groups (Noguera, 2003), the high numbers of Blacks attending impoverished public schools (Kena et al., 2016), and the likelihood that Black students will have teachers with low expectations of Black students' academic progress (Drew, 1996; Oakes, 1999; Kelly, 2009) provide support to claims that although sometimes subtle and implicit in some cases, racism is still prevalent in American society and in schools.

### **Twenty-First Century Racism in Schools**

Racism in American schools within the last two decades manifests in various ways that are unique to the 21st century. Unlike the explicitness of racism in the past, such as the legal

prohibition of Blacks to be educated (Hoose, 2001) or the legal mandate that public places such as schools remain segregated in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the majority of 21st century racism is not as overt. However, the literature shows evidence of the three levels of racism (structural, institutional, and individual) still existing, and in some places, thriving in American schools.

### **Structural Forms of 21st Century Racism**

The review of the literature exposes the structural manifestations of racism in American schools through the systemic patterns of spatial segregation. There is a long history of racial segregation that has been fought; however, American schools in many states have not been able to achieve true racial and socioeconomic integration and equity.

Racism and segregation not only exist at the school level but are also found at a broader scale: within districts, counties, and states. The reality in America is that one's access to quality schools is linked to one's residential choices. According to Chakrabarti and Roy (2015), access to a quality education in America is linked to parental income and educational attainment, and thus, "the demand for and one's affordability of residential properties that give access to quality schools leads to economic and demographic segregation across school districts within a state" (Chakrabarti & Roy, 2015, p. 110). Reardon and Yun (2005) report that school district boundaries and municipality lines separate students by race and socioeconomic status. Eight years later, in continuation of the research of Reardon and Yun (2005), Frankenberg (2009) conducted an in-depth case study of the reciprocal relationship between housing and school segregation in metropolitan areas. The study revealed that metropolitan area school segregation remained high due to between-district segregation not within-district segregation. These factors are important to impact policy for equity in housing, which has implications for decreasing

school segregation. Also, as aforementioned, students in schools that are racially desegregated schools have implications for the future of the students as well. Graduates of integrated schools are more likely to live in more diverse neighborhoods than their peers who attend segregated schools (Phillips, Rodosky, Monoz, & Larsen, 2009). According to Goldsmith, fully integrated schools and universities would influence the next generations of young adult composition in a neighborhood by reducing the next generations' segregation by 31% (as cited in Frankenberg, 2013, p. 551).

According to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, school choice is being called the new “civil rights issue of the 21st century” (Jaffe, 2014). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) introduced by President George W. Bush brought about high levels of accountability and emphasis on testing but also broadened the scope for school choice policies. Specifically Title V of NCLB Part A and Part B promoted parental choice, and charter schools gave parents more options so they are not stuck at designated schools that are persistently failing schools and perpetuating other inequities such as less resources and racial/socioeconomic segregation. However, a study on school choice in New York City revealed that on the issue of alleviating racial and social economic segregation, school choice has not been entirely effective. According to Kuscera and Orfield (2014), “for middle and high schools, recent school choice policies tend to perpetuate racial segregation across the city” (p. 23). School choice had not alleviated socioeconomic segregation; for example, in the New York City study, Manhattan and Staten Island, a greater proportion of charter schools than public schools was majority poor: those with 50% or greater poor students (p. 90). The Kuscera and Orfield research on New York City also shows that charter schools have higher rates of racial and socioeconomic concentrations of

students than that of public school in the post-school choice era and have not been successful at alleviating these inequities, racial isolation, or alleviating existing social stratifications.

While there are proponents of school choice that tout it as the response to the racial and economic conundrum of having access to only poor school quality, poor academic standards, and racial and economic segregation (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coulson, 1999; Hill & Celio, 1998; Moe, 2002), several studies revealed how school choice has not ameliorated segregation but actually perpetuates racial isolation (Goldhaber, 1999; Henig, 1994; Levin, 1998; Smith & Meier, 1995). Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang's study (2011) revealed higher percentages of charter school students attend predominantly minority schools (50 to 100% minority students) or racially isolated minority schools (90 to 100% minority students) than do their same-race peers in traditional public schools and Black students, who are overwhelmingly the most likely to attend racially isolated minority charter schools. Research revealed some barriers minority families faced when trying to navigate access to the educational marketplace. The process of implementing school choice actually maintained some of the racial and social economic hierarchal structures. For example, the manner in which information regarding school quality is distributed, parents' language barriers, one's socioeconomic status, the child's academic background, and the inability of some parents to arrange transportation for their schoolchildren to fairs or to school (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014) were all variables that further marginalized families. Other studies have explored this dynamic even further. For instance, in one long-term ethnographic study of community responses to school reform, more than 25 semi-structured interviews with African American educational stakeholders gave insight through their counter-narratives on school choice and the charter school movement in New Orleans post- Katrina. The



consensus was that charter schools through the authorization process reproduce racial inequalities and White dominance (Henry & Dixon, 2016).

In another quantitative study done on a segregated district in Charlotte, North Carolina, (Goodwin, Baxter, Leland, and Southward, 2006) found that although school choice reform advocates attested that open enrollment and mandatory choice would create “race-neutral” integrated schools for already highly segregated the schools and improve academic outcomes, the researchers ran a regression analysis and found the opposite. Results showed students who received their first choice differed by ethnicity and income. Higher income families and Caucasian students were more likely to receive their first choice than were African Americans and low-income families. After the mandatory choice process, low-income African Americans still were the dominant group in the same poor quality and grossly under-resourced schools. While the authors reported that leaders in the African American community were upset by this reality, the study lacked implications for solving the issue. Absent from the review of literature on topics about inequities for African American children is how African American parents contend with or parry the reality that their children are inescapably relegated to schools that are less resourced and consistently undifferentiated spaces. My study may add some nuance to understanding the role of school choice as a strategy for African American mothers’ resistance to racism or reveal if school choice perpetuates structural, institutional, or individual racism.

### **Individual Forms of 21st Century Racism**

While challenging systematic racial oppression seems complex, individual racism is similarly pervasive. Research still points to individual forms of racism existing on a daily basis in schools. While individual racism can be both explicit and implicit, 21st century racism tends

to be more implicit. Implicit bias is defined as bias in judgment, attitude, or behavior that results from “subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control” (Casey, Warren, Cheesman & Elek, 2012, p.1). Common forms of implicit bias can manifest in more explicit or more subtle ways and are evident in racial microaggressions and allochronic discourse, which could lead to dysconscious racism (Blaisdell, 2016; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). More recent examination of the literature on 21st century racism revealed the over-criminalization of Black boy behavior manifests in Black boys receiving more stringent penalties (such as out-of-school suspensions) than their peers (Allen, 2015; Gibson et al., 2014).

Microaggressions, colorblind racism, or aversive racism are other forms of implicit racism found to be widely practiced in U.S. educational institutions today. Microaggressions are described as “brief, common-place, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward Black Americans [or other minorities], often automatically and unintentionally” (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holderp, 2008, p. 329). Far different from the past explicit racism African Americans endured for two centuries, microaggressions are subtle reminders to people of color that hierarchy, privilege, inequity, and degradation still exist within the American psyche and that the nation is not in a post-racism era. Research shows that regardless of how subtle, microaggressions are, just like explicit racism, the impact of microaggressions in schools exists and is harmful. Several studies on microaggressions in educational settings were done on the higher education level. Three college campuses in New York were observed and studied for microaggressions; the results showed that of 60 classrooms, 17 of those classrooms exhibited microaggressions (Suárez-Orozco, Cassanova, Martin, Katsiaficas, Cuellar, Smith & Dias,

2015). Of the four types of microaggressions (intelligence, cultural/racial, gendered, and intersectional) shown, students' intelligence and gender were under attack most by microaggressive comments (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Another study by Orelus (2013) showed that not only do students experience microaggressions, but professors of color in higher education have to contend with that as well. In essence, the study revealed that despite being a professor or a person of authority, faculty of color have received poor treatment, experienced microaggressions, and experience a phenomenon of invisibility because of their race. For faculty of color, their race eclipsed their social class status as university professors.

Another study done by Boysen (2012) was crucial to understanding the need for agency and strategies to address microaggressions that students experience in college classrooms. In this study, 222 teachers (59 teachers of diversity courses and 163 non-diversity teachers) and 166 students were surveyed about microaggressions in the classroom. The hypotheses were that diversity teachers would perceive microaggressions more negatively, and students wanted teachers to respond to microaggressions. The results showed that microaggressions should be addressed with a moderate directness and intensity response (Boysen, 2012). An example of moderate directness was provided. If a student openly made an insult, then it was necessary to immediately and directly ask the student to stop the behavior. This study put a lot of responsibility on teachers who were more sophisticated and knowledgeable of the sensitivity of race and diversity. Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) conducted interviews and focus groups with 10 self-identifying Black Americans in New York on their experiences with microaggressions in their everyday lives, and the results showed common themes of subtle messages interpreted: "You do not belong," "You are abnormal," "You are intellectually

inferior,” “You are untrustworthy,” and “You are all the same.” Results also provided several approaches that sufferers used to combat the negative impacts of constant microaggressions: developing a healthy paranoia, conducting sanity checks, empowering and validating self, and rescuing offenders. While the study affirmed the reality of microaggressions and how Blacks coped, the authors did not provide methods for students or parents to challenge the systematic barriers to prevent or decrease these occurrences, while teachers were empowered to address microaggressions.

### **Hyper-policing of Black Skin**

One manifestation of implicit bias or racism—which has structural implications—is the over-criminalization or the vilification of the Black skin, which in schools translates into more exacerbated penalties and consequences for African Americans than for Whites. This phenomenon can be seen in various aspects of Black life: school penalties, mass incarcerations, and fatalities with police encounters. In essence, due to historical perceptions of Blackness, a growing body of research confirms that Black children are also often perceived to be older, less innocent inside and outside of the educational setting (Dancy, 2014; Ferguson, 2001; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Goff, Jackson, & Di Leone, 2014) and dehumanized (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). These perceptions or implicit biases are important, especially if those who hold those opinions have power. The implicitness of this type of racism is that the Black students are pathologized, treated differently, seen as “deficits,” and victims of discriminatory policies and practices (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007; Shields, 2004). In essence, the implicit bias of those with power manifest into impositions of concrete measurable consequences that Black students have to endure.

For example, nationally, the likelihood of an African American child receiving an out-of-school suspension are “1.8 times that of a White child, with Black boys being 3.5 times more likely to be suspended” (Gibson et al, 2015, p. 274 ). The disproportionality of Black students receiving suspensions and other harsh penalties for school discipline than any other race has become a well-documented issue of racial bias in schools during the 21st century. The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection for 2011-12 Report (2014) reported that although Blacks made up only 16% of enrollment, they represented 33% of students who had out-of-school suspensions. While Whites made up 51% of the enrollment, they made up 36% of those who received out-of-school suspensions. While boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys.

Several scholars refer to this culture of unfair school discipline practices as the “criminalization of school discipline” (Hirschfield, 2008). Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, and Marshall (2015) conducted a qualitative study with 31 youth, 28 caregivers and 9 educators in in-depth, semi-structured audio recorded interviews on their narratives on suspensions in their schools. The results showed that the majority of informants (68%) when asked if race played a role in suspensions answered affirmatively (55% of students, 75% of caregivers, and 79% of educators), and when they described how race impacts suspensions, many youth, caregivers, and educators emphasized racial bias and pathologizing Black students and their families as the causes for higher suspensions (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 276). Based on their findings, researchers encouraged social workers to act as facilitators of interrelations between parents and teachers and to implement more restorative measures using the ally model of social justice. While parents in

the study vocalized their frustration with educators and identified the cause as racial discrimination, the study did not allow parents to provide feedback as to how to ameliorate the issue. While these studies provided a lens into the more implicit types of racism that exist, none of the studies acknowledge ways that African American parents were engaged in and contested these racialized structures.

### **Institutional Forms of 21st Century Racism**

The review of literature on 21st century racism in schools also shows manifestations of institutionalized racism, which is evidenced by schools' perpetuating racial tracking, opportunity hoarding, colorblind curriculum, and Whiteness as property (Chapman, 2013; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Even in settings where the differentiated spaces are achieved, research shows that African American students still have to contend with addressing reinvented forms of internal segregation and racism in those integrated institutions. Beyond the mere racial and socioeconomic integration in a school, which still benefits African American students, forms of institutional racism emerge that present barriers to African American students.

Institutional racism—first named and conceptualized by a Black political activist from the Black Panther Party, a Black nationalistic movement, Stokely Carmichael—is “deeply embedded in established conventions in U.S. society” promoted and sustained racial hierarchical structures inter- and intra-institutions (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1968). In schools, people of color are still marginalized from equitable access due to institutional racism on the college level and K to 12 school level (Anderson, et al., 2015; Kelley, 2016; Saleem & Lambert, 2016). One study in a racially mixed suburban charter school gives insight to the some of the barriers African Americans still face even in a more favorable racially mixed and higher socioeconomic envi-

ronment. According to Modica (2015), a 5-month participant observation study of a teacher's classes in what some may consider an "ideal" differentiated space (mixed-race, varied socioeconomic status, charter school in suburbia) revealed evidence of the following: academic tracking, which continued to marginalize African American students. Due to the higher numbers of the dominant group, the minority students expressed having restricted identities. In essence, minority students admitted to suppressing expressions of their culture or their true ideologies especially in high-level classes, due to students of color being outnumbered and "Whiteness" as the default/dominant culture. The researcher described the limitation of this and described the environment as remaining an un-diversified educational experience for all students because White students are not exposed to diverse perspectives due to minorities being guarded and reticent in spaces that are dominated by "Whiteness" (mainstream culture, curriculum, and ideologies). The results of the study presented some trends that were consistent with the literature. Prior to the school attempting to de-track the school, some trends were seen that were racial barriers and were consistent with the literature. There were teachers and administrators who were not following their own criteria, which caused opportunity hoarding that discouraged African American students from honors courses (Michelson, 2003a, 2003b). Some administrators made curricular and policy decisions due to them making assumptions about African American parents based on race and class. For example, through the admission of one administrator, she would not let a teacher read *The Bluest Eye* with an on-level class because she thought the parents were too immature to handle it.

Due to the legacy of tracking, when African American students got into the honors classes, a culture of segregation still existed (Modica, 2015). "Whiteness" remained the default

culture or the dominant ideology in classrooms (Calmore, 1995; Mandell, 2008). The school engaged in temporary superficial de-tracking in their literacy classes only and read more multicultural literature, which revealed many implications for policy making. When the English classes were temporarily de-tracked, all students benefitted from the diverse dialogue and openness from on-level students about their perceptions of racism and honor students' deep analysis of the material. It also revealed how simply de-tracking classes is not enough. If schools are considering de-tracking classes, teachers need professional development and time in order to effectively differentiate instruction, and schools must find ways to change the culture of an institution so that all stakeholders can look beyond the stigma and feelings of hostility students from differing tracks may feel toward each other (Modica, 2015, p. 88).

Lewis and Diamond (2015) conducted a 5-year mixed-method study of interviews and surveys in an affluent, diverse high school, Riverview. The survey revealed many layers that contributed to the racial inequalities. The Riverview surveys of Black students debunked the "oppositional culture theory" as the reason for the achievement gap, and results found that Blacks are hindered by their pro achievement orientations due the vast amount of social inequalities they face (2015). Results also showed the Black students reported showing slightly lower levels of happiness with the school environment but showed higher levels of enjoying doing math problems than White counterparts.

On the other hand, although Riverview is "diverse," it is described as not being integrated, due to opportunity hoarding, a racialized stratified hierarchical system and a sentiment from White parents to protect these differences. According to Lewis and Diamond (2015), White parents are not passive beneficiaries of structural advantages, but whether



individual or collectively, the parents ensure rules, policies, and arrangements that are serving their children well do not change. While they appreciate the diversity, they look at the disparity of resources and the gap between races as something that is the result of a meritocracy or the manifestation of cultural beliefs or the result of their socioeconomic status.

Other forms or methods of perpetuating institutional racism have traditionally been used to maintain unequal access. Evidence shows that African Americans are disproportionately over-represented in special education (La Paro, Olsen, & Pianta, 2002; Mann, McCartney, & Park, 2007; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2011). Overreferring African American students to special education could have lasting impact on students' trajectory, educational outcome, and socio-emotional wellbeing (McLoughlin & Noltemeyer, 2012; Buckrop & LoCasale-Crouch 2016)). An overwhelming number of Black students lacking access to the general curriculum in the early grades and misidentified as special education students by being tracked with students who need a slower pace could have broader implications on the achievement gap, suspension rates, and other data that report African Americans lagging behind their peers.

Harry, Klinger and Hart (2005), conducted 3-year ethnographic research study in a multiethnic, multilingual urban school district, which is one of the largest in the nation. The criteria for the selection of 12 elementary schools included race and ethnicity of students, socioeconomic levels aligned with the frequency of free and reduced lunch (FRL), and the schools' rates of special education placement. Of the 12 schools, 4 served predominantly Black students, 4 predominantly Hispanic students, and 4 mixed populations of Black, Hispanic, and White students. The study was to examine the special education referral process.

The results revealed negativity and stereotyping of African Americans by school personnel that impact referrals. The results were aligned to those found in Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin's research (1995), the dominant master narrative drive school personnel's behavior and due to the we–they mentality, in which class, education, and status school personnel, regardless of ethnicity, seemed to view and treat African American families living in poverty as “outsiders.” Despite the cultural diverse environment of the district, as in the view of several critical race theorists, “racist thinking is almost inescapable in the context of a society as racialized as the United States” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Tatum, 1992). Harry, Klinger and Hart's research agreed with Brantlinger (2001) that the “stigmatizing isolation of children through exclusionary programs works hand in hand with exclusionary attitudes toward families” (2005). Despite school personnel's opinion, the case study of three African American families revealed the families' strengths that countered the school beliefs. According to Klinger and Hart, this showed a disconnect between what schools' perceptions of social cultural capital and the actual capital that families possess.

Structural, institutional, and individual racism all work interdependently to foster the same outcome, which is to maintain one's power and privilege while simultaneously systematically working in harmony to circumscribe other groups' opportunities to have access to power. Horace Mann, an American educational reformer and a proponent for free public education, once asserted, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” If this premise is true, then, consistent evidence of systematic racism towards African American and other minority students is important to investigate, expose and eradicate in order to ensure that the

American constitution, specifically the 5th and 14th Amendments is actualized. Moreover, educational outcomes and achievement gaps data must reflect not only the disparities but must also reveal the root causes of some of the reasons for the racial disparities. Research on education concerning African Americans should reflect this well-known and documented reality that systematic racism still exists on several levels and still impacts the education of African Americans, the descendants of Africans who were once enslaved and denied an education in this country.

### **The Deficit Perspective of Parent Involvement & Agency and Contestations of Racism**

Currently, research on how African American parents could enact agency in schools is limited. There are studies examining the different types of racial barriers and inequalities that exist in school during the 21st century, but how parents contend with racism is missing. According to Tyson (2011), in essence, the literature often discusses how parents address the symptoms of racism (underperforming students of color, lack of cultural or social capital, students with externalizing behaviors) but fails to consider responses to the disease (the practices that sustain structural racism).

Even in studies on parental involvement and ways parents help their children navigate these institutions, African American parents tend to be described and understood from a cultural deficit perspective. Family ethnic culture plays a prominent role in understanding parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005) and requires teachers and administrators to value diversity and have cultural competence (Reynolds, Creal, Medina, Degnan & McRoy, 2015). Administrators and teachers who identify with dominant groups and are of a different social class than the

parents may look at parent involvement from a different lens. Research confirms that many schools define traditional parental involvement strategies largely based on school cultures from middle-class, European American cultural norms (Fields-Smith, 2007; Freeman, 2010; Hill & Craft, 2003; Kroeger, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Hence, non-dominant groups, such as low-income, immigrant/refugee, and other communities of color, who have been marginalized by dominant institutions, policies, and practices (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) are often dismissed and mischaracterized by administrators, educators, and researchers using a deficit lens (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Olivos, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

For instance, studies tend to connect the measure of parental involvement strictly to its impact on student achievement. This approach may not always allow for other ways that parents are involved, impact, or influence their children in school. Studies from the vantage point of administrators and teachers may not include how parents may view their own involvement. In a study by Stacer and Perrucci (2013), the researchers conducted a national survey of 12,426 parents and guardians of students in kindergarten through 12th grade who were recruited through random-digit dialing between the months of January 2003 and April 2003. Through parent reporting, the researchers were able to explore how parents viewed their own involvement and allowed for the possible inclusion of other types of parental involvement that are not normally considered. The results were consistent with trends in the literature and showed the following: White parents were more involved at school than Black parents or Latino parents. Following traditional school-sanctioned definitions of parent involvement, increased school outreach was associated with increased parental involvement at school for all three groups. This variable increased Black parents' involvement more so than White parents and Latino parents. Single

parent families had higher levels of involvement with children in the community than two-parent families in White families, but there was no significant difference in Black or Latino parents. Parents' education was not a statistically significant predictor for parental involvement for Black parents. White and Black parents who were less satisfied with their child's school were more likely to be involved with children in the community. Since parent reporting confirmed lesser involvement from minority parents, the implications for further study suggested were to probe deeper into minority parents to examine ways in which to encourage more involvement within the school context. While the study mentioned racial and ethnic differences in parents' perceptions and experiences with their child's school existed and how those perceptions influenced the amount of in-school involvement, the study did not address how school barriers could decrease involvement and how those barriers could be products of systematic racism.

Most research on parent involvement in education has been gender neutral, although it is primarily mothers who undertake such work (Reay, 1998; West & Noden, 1998). For example, multiple studies have documented mothers are the dominant parent, over fathers, involved in educational decision-making (Kazura, 2000; Nihat & Gurbuzturk, 2013; Prins & Toso, 2008). Regardless of a general acceptance that positive student outcomes are associated with parental or mothers' involvement (Im, Hughes, & West, 2016; Kriegbaum, Villareal, Wu & Heckhausen, 2016), research shows that many educators have negative assumptions of African American mothers and view them as uninvolved, adversarial, dysfunctional, or uncaring (Powell, Hecimovic, & Christensen, 1992; as cited in Spann et al., 2003; Salisbury & Dunst, 1997).

On the other hand, history shows that the "motherwork" of African Americans has a legacy of deep involvement, support and care despite the dysfunctional system of racism that

creates barriers for African American families. Contrary to mainstream opinion, African American parents' and mothers' anti-racist efforts and activist involvement are rarely acknowledged by educators and mainstream scholarship; yet, their activist tradition has been evident since the founding of public schools (Cooper, 2009).

In critical race theory, theorists position racism as a systemic condition that is pervasively and permanently rooted in the ideology of the masses (Bell, 1987, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). While the literature acknowledges racism, African American parents or mothers are not seen as empowered agents of change against these injustices. Conversely, the literature on agency against racism depicts teachers as being empowered more to tackle racism and shows how they operate as agents to decrease incidents of structural racism against African American students. An autoethnographic study at South Elementary during the 2006-2007 school year by Blaisdell (2016) addressed the issue of racism and the need for agency directly by interviewing and conducting observations on four teachers. Her study revealed the isolation of students of color through labeling students academically, inequity in the quality of resources, and a culture of segregation through allochronic discourse from the teachers, which pathologized students of color. In this work, it was racial literacy that helped teachers practice agency by helping them resist dysconscious racism and engage in “resistant spacing in order to create classrooms that recentered on students of color” (Blaisdell, 2016, p. 269).

Studies that address the realities of racial barriers rarely consider the power of the parents to contest or reduce racial injustices; however, the power is seen as resting solely with school leaders and teachers who are more likely the perpetrators of racism. In another qualitative study

by Allen (2015), which addressed the issue of race disparities and teacher agency, teachers acknowledged the impact race and gender play in Black maleness in the school setting and acknowledged Black boys' lack of access to cultural capital and the structural impediments that restrict them (p. 75). Specifically, both White and Black teachers who were interviewed mentioned the stereotyping of hyper-disruptive Black males, which is the reason for the sensitization and the overregulation of the Black "male body" (Allen, 2015). Teachers practiced agency in this study by intentionally suspending judgment about their Black male students, acting as advocates for their students, interceding when race was seen as a matter of contention, maintaining high academic expectations, keeping students accountable for their actions, and challenging self-defeating resistance of their Black students (Allen, 2015, p. 76). Yet, the researchers also saw teachers as perpetrators of structural racism in schools. Teachers play an important role in the education of Black males (Howard, 2003; Milner, 2007) and act as agents of a state apparatus and may perpetuate dominant ideology of Black students in many ways (Allen, 2015, p. 72).

While in another study, the reality of racial injustice and the barriers to parental involvement are acknowledged, school leaders are challenged to make a difference, while parents are the passive victims of the barriers. According to Kim (2009), the leading cause of barriers to parent involvement are the following: perception of teachers towards minority parents, teacher efficacy in instruction, school friendliness and positive communication, lack of diversity of parental involvement programs, and existing policies and school leadership. The second research question focused on whether parents' involvement would change if school policies changed. This study does hold the school accountable for imposing barriers that reduce

more engaged parent involvement. The researcher puts the onus of the accountability on the schools to address these barriers. The limitation of the study is that parents are passive and reliant on the schools to bring about change, while the parent involvement is limited to traditional forms of parent involvement. Again, parents are not considered agents of change to address the barriers they face and are beholden to school leaders to change policies or acknowledge their forms of parental involvement.

Youth agency is another form of agency—within and outside of schools—that has been studied as a response to racist practices that were acknowledged in education. Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) conducted a qualitative study that sought to respond to Noguera's (2001) conclusion that “without intentional efforts to alter their underachievement, African American males are likely to underperform or drop out of school” (p. 136). In this study, Tucker et al. (2010) interviewed nine Black students, and they reported that mattering to others at school built self-efficacy. Furthermore, the youth emphasized the importance of having confidence and being supported by family members, and experiencing a personal drive to do well academically and professionally in their academic success. In a similar qualitative study, Ani (2013) interviewed successful Black students to investigate how they were successful in racialized and monocultural contexts. Based on the students' responses, the researchers constructed the “African hope theory” as being goal-driven action for scholastic achievement produced by conscientious thoughts and feelings of cultural pride and understanding of the American system. From the narratives of six high-achieving African American junior high school students, Ani (2013) learned how these students succeed despite racism, inequality and school failure. The results yielded the following: (a) results from 3 questions showed Black youth value their racial/ethnic identity and knowledge



of Black history; (b) their self-awareness and acceptance meant also realizing their sense of responsibility toward advancing despite the pale conditions; (c) instruction that implements levels of self-cultural education for higher achievement; and (d) receive an education that encompasses intracultural awareness alongside the Western-approved fundamentals of reading, writing, arithmetic, and European history, which will help them discuss and navigate.

Despite positive agency aforementioned, youth may have other types of resistance that make them “complicit to their own failure” (Noguera, 2003, p. 431). Research on student agency and student resistance in school has also focused on students’ behaviors, both productive and potentially destructive, for their individual and collective success. Youth agency could manifest in ways including the development of an oppositional identity that totally rejects the values and norms of the majority group (Ogbu, 2004; Tatum, 2003), and these behaviors can occur in response to exclusion, prejudice, and perceived unfair treatment (Castells, 2010; Rios, 2011). Gibson et al. (2014) identified the agency behind behaviors that are normally pathologized by educators. However, Coffey (2014) cautions researchers studying the legitimacy of youth agency

for celebrating actions that resist existing power relationships as manifestations of agency. To do so results in conceptual frameworks that portray young people who do not resist as lacking active subjectivity, erases the efforts that these young people are making to build lives in conditions not of their own choosing, and imposes preexisting normative commitments on young people to whom they may not be relevant. (p. 473)

While one may challenge Coffey’s argument that youth are not aware of their behaviors nor are they always mindful of the power structures working against them, Noguera (2003) wrote that often Black youth, males in particular, are sometimes “complicit” to the failure and exhibit the same behaviors that dyconscious racists stereotype them or pathologize them for having

(Blaisdell, 2016). In almost a self-fulfilling prophecy, students may exhibit behaviors that confirm negative beliefs about Black children.

## **Parental Agency to Combat 21st Century Racism**

Since racism still exists in American schools during the 21st century, missing from the literature is how those who have been historically vulnerable to racism in schools mitigate power in that context. Since teachers may perpetuate structural racism and youth agency presents challenges, then literature on parental agency is necessary to combat racism within schools. However, literature on parental agency against institutional racism is limited due to cultural-deficit thinking that postures Black parents as lacking tools to support their children. The history of America reveals the dichotomy of racism: the struggle for continued social and structural dominance by one group met with action to resist or to combat such dominance by the other group. The reality is that the dominant group controls the master narrative. Hence, attention on the resistance of social dominance of one group could be suppressed or re-authored by the dominant group. According to Bierra (associate director of the Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley) (2014) informs that “racist authoring of Black agentic action evacuates Black agents’ self-generated explanation from their actions, replacing it with intentions and explanations constructed through the living archive” of tropes that are sanctioned by institutional racism (p.134). One case study of parental involvement in an urban high school serving minority students revealed important barriers to effective parent involvement: (a) gap between teacher/administrator perceptions of effective parental involvement and parent perceptions of effective parent involvement and (b) minority parents may lack social and cultural capital, which causes barriers to effective parent involvement (Reynolds et al., 2015). Another study by Comer and Poussaint (1992) discussed the importance of parent involvement of African American parents on

student success in schools and described effective parent involvement strategies African American parents can use to improve their relations with teachers and administrators. Evident in the literature is a recurring theme of looking at cultural differences as deficiencies and not factoring in racism as the culprit for externalizing stressors as responsible for the conditions that exist.

The literature on how other Black groups can overcome these barriers that are caused by systemic racism is comparatively sparse. While research lauds White middle-class parents for sacrificing careers to monitor their children, for being skilled using social capital to their advantage (Landeros, 2010), parents that lack social and cultural capital have different approaches that may not align with the flexibility that comes with White middle-class privileges.

While advocacy literature on Black parents exercising agency to combat racism is missing from the literature, advocacy work around providing their children with disabilities support to navigate barriers and Black parents pursuing educational options for their children are present. Roger and Brefeld (2015) interviewed African American parents whose children had literacy issues and were struggling in the school systems. Roger and Brefeld suggest that hearing parents' counter-narratives are powerful for educators to become aware of barriers and to hear the kinds of advocacy work these parents are engaged in (2015, p. 56). While this study reveals the need for advocacy, the issues were centered around getting their children help for their disabilities but did not focus on barriers based on race or racism.

New debates about school reform, school choice, and parental engagement around school closings have included the concept of race and challenged some of the assumptions about Black parent involvement. Liza Pappas conducted an ethnographic study on school closings, the fight

for equity, and community engagement by people of color through conducting interviews, document analysis, and observations of public hearings and meetings in NYC, which provided a context of parental agency against education policy and school reform and Black parental involvement. According to Pappas (2012), Black parents and other parents of color are heavily involved in community organizing for school reform. However, they are in competition with “democratic efforts of local neighborhood leaders to identify school problems, strategize actions, and implement solutions” they may or may not align with parental aspirations (pp. 166–167). The results of the study found evidence of political tactics such as astroturf organizing that undermined true parental agency. According to Pappas, astroturf organizing was described as the practice of organizations and other political factions from outside the community who actually decide on an agenda and recruit local actors, including parents, to voice their own political agenda in order to give their movement credibility (pp. 170). Astroturf organizing contrasts with work by grassroots organizations that develop and facilitate parent, community, and youth leaders’ knowledge and agendas (Pappas, 2012). While agency in this study was discussed, Black parents were portrayed more as pawns in a political chess game that they were not truly equipped to navigate. A more recent study by Pappas (2016) used the theoretical framework of Jurgen Habermas to measure school closing hearings held in New York City by the criteria of the Habermas definition of “public sphere.” Habermas argued that “public sphere is defined as made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (as cited in Pappas, 2016, p. 6). The results of the study revealed while public testimony represented a wide range a rational arguments and the public hearing allowed an opportunity for various voices, the results showed that the hearing was not enough to contest dominant narratives

of school closing. Also, it was surmised that school closing public hearings were “more of an opportunity for the state to defend its legitimacy and insist that school closings proposals were not a done deal, than a genuine invitation for public deliberation” (Pappas, 2016, p. 23). Both studies show that while school choice reform processes have challenged parents in different ways to be involved in the socio-political realm, some studies show the true voice and agency may not be achieved due to the persistent dominant narratives or due to institutional powers and agendas that eclipse parental input or impact.

While some studies acknowledge parental agency, parents’ freedom to exercise their own approaches to parenting, and how they assist their children navigate hostile environments, studies still fall short in discussing how racism causes some of the conditions and externalizing factors. While studies tend to discuss minorities’ lack of social and cultural capital in parental involvement, they fall short of thoroughly discussing how those barriers that minorities face are perpetuated by systemic racism. In Anton, Jones, and Youngstrom’s (2015) study, through a person-oriented approach, researchers looked at African American single mothers, their socioeconomic status and their individual parenting styles in relation to the children’s externalizing behaviors. The results showed how parenting styles of both warmth and control decreased the children’s externalizing behaviors, and the increased levels of parental education increased the likelihood that parents had the warmth parenting style approach. While the study focused on the race of these single parents and explored how SES and parenting styles correlated to externalizing problems, the study does not address the impact of racism in creating some of the external stressors that impact children’s externalizing behaviors, nor did the study discuss ways in which parents advocated for or supported their children beyond the home.

Parental involvement does not happen in a vacuum. When looking at parental involvement, one has to acknowledge the context in which the school and the society exist. In their article about a quantitative study, Stacer and Perrucci analyzed parent involvement from the Parent and Family Involvement Survey, a part of the National Household Education Survey, 2002–2003. Stacer and Perrucci (2013) stated, “Parental actions are a product of both the desire to act and the ability to act; that is, a product of individual agency shaped by culture and experience and structural constraints shaped by social and economic resources” (p. 342). In literature on parental involvement, Black parents are portrayed as not being equipped, and the literature does not thoroughly address the issue of racism. Some studies do acknowledge parents for one strategy, racial socialization. Racial socialization studies have done more to discuss racism and agency.

Racial socialization can be described as the messages and practices that communicate race status pertinent to personal and group identity, intergroup and inter-individual relationships, and position in the social hierarchy (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). In a mixed-method study, 114 minority parents (60 mothers 54 fathers) were asked to discuss racial socialization and its relation to school readiness in focus groups, and they were surveyed. The objective of the study was to gauge how minority parents navigate issues of race in schools during early childhood. The results yielded that over half of the parents surveyed had spoken to their children already about “egalitarianism” and how to combat unfair treatment due to race (Anderson et al., 2015). While all different ethnic groups (African American, Latino, and Korean) differed in which aspect of the racial socialization method to push (racial awareness, race dynamics, coping practices and racial socialization, and school readiness), all groups promoted the necessity of

instructing their children for preparation for bias. Cooper, Smalls-Glover, Nesblett & Banks (2015) surveyed African American fathers of diverse demographics: 64% residential fathers, 56% married, 36% single or separated, 8% cohabiting, 82% employed full-time, 39% high school diploma or GED, 27.8% vocational/associate's degree, 25.4% bachelor's degree, and 12.1% had a graduate degree. The fathers were surveyed to explore racial socialization patterns of fathers. Despite differences across demographics, the study revealed that of the five racial socialization profiles, fathers overall scored higher in mostly conveying "positive racial socialization messages." This positive racial socialization category comprised five of the six dimensions of racial socialization: race pride, barrier, egalitarian, behavioral, and self-development. While racial socialization is addressed in the research literature, there are two limitations across the studies: the context in which it is discussed is put in the context of a societal burden, but not due to systemic racism, and racial socialization is more often discussed as a specific strategy to help minority children navigate identity in diverse society as opposed to overcoming specific racial barriers within schools.

While studies acknowledge parents' sense of agency in navigating school systems and racial differences in parental involvement, parent perception, and parent experiences are examined, some of the historical and systemic factors such as racism, classism, and gender that impact the manner in which these families interact with the school system has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Consistent with the review of literature, as in the Stacer and Perrucci study (2013), the discussion of the race of the parents is referenced often, and parental behaviors are associated to one's race. Yet the impact of racism, which is heavily reliant on race to perpetuate racial hierarchal structures and sustain structural racism in American institutions, is



not addressed. This trend in literature—to emphasize race when describing parenting behaviors and describing their lack of social and cultural capital—however, fails to discuss racism and its impact, skewing the credibility of the research. By failing to highlight the social dynamics that produce these racial differences or that contribute to racial disparities, scholars who omit the discussion of racism help reinforce the racial order (Dunn Griggs & Price, 1993).

Research consistently attributes patterns of inequality to African American parents' lack of social capital or lack of parent involvement, but scholars frequently fail to discuss the racism or racial barriers or inequities in schools. However, researchers who engage the CRT lens to look at minority parental involvement in schools allow for a more comprehensive examination of school practices and the impact of structural racism on the progress of African American students in American schools. CRT scholars in education moved the research on race in education from the racial deficit perspective to exposing and identifying the prevalence and persistence of racism within society as reproduced in education and schools (Capper, 2015; Tate, 1997). Early CRT theorists, such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), were explicit in their contention that “race continues to be significant in explaining inequity in the United States” and furthered the claim that race is under-researched and under-theorized as the cause of the continuance of racial inequities in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 51). Twenty years later, CRT theorists still implore the researcher, practitioner, and policy community to play an active role in identifying, analyzing, and pursuing of racially inclusive and sensitive learning environments because race still is a prominent variable in discussions around educational inequity (Capper, 2015). Despite important strides to desegregate U.S. society since 1970, racial segregation remains deeply entrenched in housing, schooling, and employment (Massey & Denton, 1993).

For many African American women, racism is not something that exists in the distance. Instead, it is encountered in everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). Forms of agency are continuously being employed to contest and resist these occurrences. Dominant literature may fail to convey this daily negotiation of power. A mother can foster her child's oppression if she teaches them to believe in their own inferiority. On the other hand, the "relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned" (as cited in Collins, 2000, p.51). As opposed to looking at African American parents from a deficit model, this study explored how African American mothers make meaning of their experiences and their perspectives on racism in the context of their children's schools. If racial inequities or structural racism exists in their schools, parents shared their responses and any strategies used to navigate those barriers and enact agency. Those strategies may contribute to the literature as forms of parental involvement strategies and the types of agency/advocacy in which African American mothers are engaged daily to contest individual, institutional, and structural racism.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study examined African American mothers' perceptions of their children's schools (public and private) within the context of institutional racism. Employing a qualitative research design, I used interviews and focus groups to gather narrative data from middle to lower working class Black mothers about their lived experiences with individual, institutional, and structural racism in American schools. The goal of this study was to learn how these mothers make meaning of the educational institutions that serve their children and how they have responded to racism in their children's schooling, focusing specifically on strategies of contestation and agency.

#### **Research Questions**

In the historical and social context in which African American mothers are frequently described as lacking social capital and agency, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What experiences with racism or racially motivated challenges, if any, have African American mothers had within their children's public, private, or charter schools?
2. How do African American mothers respond to, contest, or overcome the barriers associated with ongoing structural racism within their children's schools and outside school?
3. How do African American mothers understand the influence of racism in their children's schools on their children's education?

4. How do African American mothers' experiences with, responses to and perceptions of the influence of racism within their children's school differ, if at all, based on their socio-economic status or the type of school (public, private, charter) their child attends?

### **The Qualitative Research Design Paradigm**

Qualitative research includes a range of methodologies designed to explore and try to understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). One major feature of qualitative research is researchers' focus on natural occurrences and ordinary events in natural settings, so that they have a concept of what "real life" is like for the informant (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 11). Qualitative researchers may continually ask questions of the people they are learning from to discover "what they are experiencing, how do they interpret their experiences and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live" (Psathas, 1973, as cited in Eberle, 2012, p. 140). Qualitative researchers know that the human perceptions of the informants are subjective and believe that "there are people out there in the world who say and do things that the qualitative researcher can record and use as data" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 26). A good qualitative researcher is like a good investigator who can immerse him or herself in the everyday life setting. He/she enters the informant's world and seeks the perspectives and the meanings of the informant (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

This study is a qualitative study but was inspired by a phenomenological research design. The intent is to explore the reality of life and living, and it is seen as a study of peoples' lived experiences (Dowling, 2007). Similarly, qualitative researchers do not assume they know what things mean to people they are studying (Douglas, 1976), and they value the "silence of the

researcher” to attempt to grasp the ideas that the informant conveys (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25).

This qualitative study was more closely aligned to Husserl’s approach (in-depth semi-structured interviewing), but it also used focus groups and one participant observation to capture how African American mothers made meaning of their lived experiences. In other words, I employed strategies to identify and, then, bracket my own assumptions and biases in order to avoid influencing the data that I collected and how I analyzed the data.

### **Bounding the Study: Setting**

I recruited individual mothers from across multiple schools within Northern New Jersey from Normal County. According to the 2014 Census, New Jersey has the 14th largest Black population (1,427,225) in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau report (2015), New Jersey’s population is 56.2% White, 19.7% Hispanic, and 14.8% Black. It is also the fourth richest state. Of the population, 10.9% makes \$200,000 or more annually, in contrast to 10.8% of the population in poverty. The average median salary is \$72,222. Of the overall population, 37.6% has earned a bachelor’s degree, which is above the state average of 30.6%. The percentage of the population in Normal County (41.8 %) that is Black is above the state average. The 2010 census data showed that the majority of the Blacks in New Jersey lived in all but six municipalities, Normal County.

The purpose was to get participants from two distinct socioeconomic (SES) status groupings (middle and low-working class) and from three school settings (public, public charter, and private). Normal County offers parents a vast array of school types: 113 private (98 elementary and 32 high schools) and 248 public schools (public and charter). School

demographics in New Jersey can range from highly racially segregated schools (80% or more Black population) to being more racially and socioeconomically diverse (Ethnic Diversity Index [EDI] of 76). Since the premise of critical race theory (CRT) is that schools are places where structural racism is perpetuated (Blaisdell, 2016), then having perspectives from a variety of school settings provided an interpretive study that will engage in relativist ontology. The number of Blacks living in Normal County provides rich opportunity to assess how the 41% of Blacks who have vast experiences view racism in their schools.

Normal County schools in particular have been a hotbed of polarization around school reform, political tension, and occasional evidences of racial tension. Due to the uniqueness of each school, three school types added different lenses on the issue of 21st century racism in schools. Since the issue of school choice is a relevant issue and has been touted by some as a strategy used by parents to avoid poor failing schools and to exercise a sense of agency by accessing better quality schools, these different school types would be a lens to see if parents who selected these schools escape educational inequities or if students or parents perceive racism in all school types. One school selected is an all-boys majority Black parochial private school in an urban neighborhood with a successful record of educating students of color.

Another selected school, which represented a different school type, may have scored higher on the Ethnic Diversity Index (EDI) for increased student diversity (60% minority, 40% White) and a mix of socioeconomic status (26% free and reduced lunch). However, this particular suburban public school was selected because although there is diversity in student enrollment and ranked in the top 100 for STEM schools and for college readiness, there have

been documented incidences of disparity in student enrollment in high-level math classes and other higher level courses and racism.

Other schools represented in this study are private schools that have a minority of Blacks but were pursued by parents due to the schools' academic rigor and prestige.

### **Sample**

Qualitative studies take on issues of importance and seek individuals with what is called "representativeness." This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Since having a particular lived experience is necessary, then a more purposeful sampling method is needed. Patton (2015) provides the following description of purposeful sampling: "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 264). The purpose is to avoid generalizations but to get firsthand knowledge from those who experience it. One type of purposeful sampling method that is effective for qualitative studies is criterion sampling. According to Creswell (2012), "It is essential that all participants have experience with what is being studied,... [and] criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced" (p. 128).

Using the criterion sampling method of selecting the participants, the criteria established for recruiting this sampling were the following: 16 self-identified African American (14 involuntary immigrants who were descendants of Africans who were enslaved in America and two Trinidadian women) mothers. Their children were currently enrolled in elementary and high

school in Grades 3 through 12, attending public or private suburban and urban schools in Northern New Jersey. This study focused on the mothers' perspective only. Eleven mothers were married. One mother was recently separated, and four participants were single mothers. According to the National Vital Statistics, the births to unmarried women declined for the last six consecutive years, which brings it down to 40.2 (down from 40.8 in 2010 and down from 40.6 in Martin et al., 2012). Of the 40.2% of the births born to unwed mother, 70.9% of those births were to Black mothers (Martin et al., 2012). Despite the statistics of African American births, the marital status of the mother can change throughout the child's life. Regardless of one's marital status, the responsibility of educating the child is largely a mother's responsibility whether she is single, married, or divorced (Griffith & Smith, 2005).

While research shows that implicit racism towards Black students is evident as early as Pre-K (McNeal, 2016), this study only included students in 3rd through 12th grade. While pre-third grade data are important, the attention on the third grade is important. Some research on contemporary achievement gaps and racial disparities are linked to the implementation of No Child Left Behind and the advent of standardized testing (Brun-Bevel & Byrd, 2015), which starts in the third grade. This research is also connected to the premise of modern school reform, which admonishes or reforms schools for not meeting yearly Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Campbell, Haveman, Wildhagen & Wolfe., 2008; Vidgor & Ludwig, 2008). Thus, the third grade is crucial because it is the first testing year.

The socioeconomic status of the mothers ranged from working class socioeconomic status to upper middle class. The Pew Research Center is nonpartisan fact tank that researches and reports to the public issues, attitudes, and trends impacting the world. According to Fry and



Kochar (2016), using the Pew Research formula, peoples' income, residential locations, the number of household members, and one's socioeconomic status can be calculated to gauge if they are middle class. The mothers entered their demographic information in the online calculator, and their SES results were shared with the interviewer. The mothers' marital status included married, divorced, single, or in any other form of relationship. Research confirms that whether married or single, mothers are primarily responsible for their children's education (Landeros, 2010). Hence, these interviews were from the mother's perspective. The point of criterion sampling was to ensure cases were information rich; hence, the mother's perspectives and stories revealed major system weaknesses, which can be used as opportunities for program or system improvements.

Table 2. Participants' Demographic Chart

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Ancestors' Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>SR/BR</b>	<b>Highest Level of Schooling</b>	<b>Highest Level of Schooling</b>	<b>Town of Residency</b>	<b># of children</b>	<b>GE or SE or 504 PRC</b>	<b>SCHOOL TYPES</b>
Mary Laurel	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Law Degree	middle class	RDA	2 boy girl	504 PRC audio GE	public
India Themes	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Bachelors	middle class	RDA	3 two boys one girl	ADHD 504	public private
Carol Rivers	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Law Degree	upper middle class	RDA	2 two boys	Autistic GE	public
Whitley Moore	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	BR	Bachelors	middle	RDA	2 one boy one girl	dyslexia	public
Kimberly Jennings	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	BR	Bachelors	upper	RDA	2 two boys	GE	public

Table 2. Participants' Demographic Chart

Pam Bruce	1st generation American/ immigrant NEIA	M	SR	Bachelors	middle	RDA	2 one boy one girl		public
Tasha Richards	Non-Immigrant EIA	S	SR	Bachelors Masters	middle	RDA	1 one boy	IEP	public
Nicole Brown	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Bachelors	upper middle	RDB	2 one boy one girl	GE	public public private
Star Johns	1st generation American/ immigrant NEIA	M	SR	PHD	upper middle	RDB	2 one boy one girl	GE	private public
Sugar Boro	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Law Degree	middle class	RDB	2 one boy one girl	ADHD	private public
Wanda Howard	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	SR	Masters	upper middle	RDB	1 one boy	GE	private
Lora Jones	Non-Immigrant EIA	D	BR	Masters	middle class	RDB	2 one boy one girl	GE	public
Rhonda James	Non-Immigrant EIA	S	SR	Bachelors		RDC	1 one girl		charter
Carla Lenny	Non-Immigrant EIA	S	SR	Masters	middle class	RDC	2 one boy one girl	GE	Catholic public (magnet) Charter private
Shirley Jefferson	Non-Immigrant EIA	M	BR	Bachelors	middle	RDC	5 two boys three girls	GE	Catholic Public Charter Private
Haleemah Rogers	Non-Immigrant EIA	S	SR	High School/ Beauty School	working class	RDC	3 three boys		public Charter Private

Key:

EIA - enslaved in America  
SR - Single Race Marriage  
BR - Biracial Marriage

GE - general education student  
IEP - special needs student  
ADHD - Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

504 PRC - A 504 Plan is a plan developed to ensure that a child, with a disability pursuant to Section 504

The mothers of three different socioeconomic groups (lower working class, middle-class, and upper middle class) who participated in this study are from three areas within Normal County that represent four districts: (a) residential district A (RDA), (b) residential district B

(RDB), and (c) residential district C (RDC). Each district and school descriptions are introduced along with the demographic context that surrounds each area. These descriptions include a district demography and significant history, key information, or school types in each locality. In June 2017, I went to three school sites to recruit. I emailed an introduction letter, flyers, and sample approval letters to the principals and headmaster of three schools in order to recruit participants to the study. As a follow-up, I visited each site to make contact with the principals and to drop off hardcopies of the aforementioned papers and posters to several schools. The flyer contained a Tiny URL linked to a criteria survey in Google and a gmail account created for this study. All three schools submitted approval letters from their principals for IRB approval; one school submitted the letter but was pending board approval. During the 6-month window, there were 27 respondents (4 via email and 23 via Google link) who affirmatively stated they wanted to participate in the study. Seven of the respondents did not fit the criteria due to being male and voluntary immigrants. However, during the course of the study, I modified my criteria and allowed two respondents who were first-generation descendants of “voluntary immigrants” to participate in the study. According to McPherson and Selby (2004), the two Trinidadians met two of the three dimensions of “social identity” of Blackness: racial (similar phenotypes) and national (shared ancestral homeland of Africa). Three eligible respondents had time constraints that hindered their ability to participate, and one respondent’s child had already graduated.

The largest number of positive respondents (9) were from Residential District A (RDA): a shared school district made up of two middle-class towns with approximately 7000 students (50% White and 35% Black, Hispanic 6.6%, Asian 3.6%, other 4.8%). While the population was

the most diverse of all the districts in this study, this district has had some highly publicized racist incidents that appeared in the local newspaper. Some of the incidents involved police brutality of Black teens after a major holiday event, racist online posts about Black students and parents from students, staff, and other parents, and racially insensitive representations of slavery in the curriculum. The Black parents of RDA were more heavily involved in district politics and organized in addressing these incidents by attending board meetings and rallies initiated by local parent advocacy organizations and alliances cultivated online. On August 1, 2017, I attended a march and rally that culminated at a council meeting to address the police brutality that was aforementioned. The reason for the high response rate is due to a flyer being publicized on one of these parental advocacy websites and passed around at the rally. I followed-up to the responses to the survey with a call made to all the interested respondents individually to coordinate times for personal interviews. Of the nine, seven of the respondents from this area participated.

The next set of respondents came from Residential District B (RDB): two neighboring suburban districts merged for the sake of this research study. One is an elite public school district with 5,960 students (White 65.4%, Asian 25.8%, Hispanic 3.8%, Black 2.9%). The other neighboring district was more diverse. This district is made up of 21.4% White, 38.9% Black, 30% Hispanic, 5.7% Asian, 3.8% Multiracial, and 1% Native American. Out of six respondents, five mothers committed to the study. One mother recruited three of the mothers through snowball sampling.

The final set of respondents (4) came from Residential District C (RDC): a large urban district of about 36,000 predominately Black and Hispanic student population with 81% free and reduced lunch. The unique district situations and the varied student population figures provided a

diversity of settings for cases in this study. This chapter includes three district reports. These descriptions examine district demography, significant history, and key issues in each locality.

The study included 16 Black mothers ranging from lower working class to upper middle class mothers with children who range from the third to the twelfth grade living within the Normal County area in New Jersey. They shared their narratives and counter-narratives on the status of racism within American schools in the 21st century. They participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews and three focus groups. The study was intended for mothers who self-identify as Black, were non-immigrant, and whose ancestors were enslaved in America (see Table 2).

While 14 of the mothers fit the criteria for the study (were born in America, had ancestors enslaved within America, had children in Grades 3 to 12 in school in Normal County, and self-identified as Black), due to the complexity of the “social identity” called “Blackness,” one mother self-identified as Black and had ancestors enslaved in America in the survey, but during the course of the interview, she revealed that she was of Caribbean descent, a first-generation American whose ancestors were born in Trinidad. The second Black mother did self-identify as Black over the phone; however, during the interview and on the survey, she revealed that she was a first-generation Black woman of Trinidadian descent. The criteria for eligibility for the study was modified in order to include these two mothers who were descendants of “voluntary immigrants” since they fit two of the three dimensions of Blackness (McPherson & Selby, 2004).

All of the mothers have unique experiences but adopted a shared heritage of consciousness of oppression based on race and economics within America. The mothers input data into Pew Research Center’s calculator and their socioeconomic statuses ranged from one

working class, 13 middle class, and two upper middle class Black parents. Eleven of the Black mothers were married. One was recently separated. Two of the mothers were single. One was living with the father of the children but not married. Four mothers were in interracial marriages; however, the mothers identified their children as being Black. All children, except two, attended their local public school they were zoned for at least once during their educational career. Four of the parents' children attended a public charter school at least once in their educational career. Only one resident district, RDC, had charter schools. Eight of the parents' children attended suburban private school during their educational careers. Five parents had children attending private schools; one parent had three of her children in a Catholic high school.

### **Methodology**

Using qualitative research methodology, the focus of the study was for African American mothers to share their perceptions of the schools their children attend. According to Black feminist thought theory, Black women have a unique experience with oppression and offer insightful analysis of racism. Thus, the percipience of Black mothers on the topic of American racism or on inequities based on race that exist in schools was shared in the interviews. When the interview participants described instances of racism or inequities that existed, they were asked to talk about how they responded to such incidents. Participants' descriptions of their experiences with racism in schools led to insights that can help add to the repertoire of strategies Black mothers use to contest racial barriers in schools.

During a period of 6 months, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 African American mothers who have children attending elementary or secondary schools. According to

Galletta (2012), there is a uniqueness of the semi-structured interview method, “[c]haracteristic of its unique flexibility, the semi-structured interview is sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of [one’s] research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study” (p. 2). Using Black feminist thought (BFT) as a lens and a guide to understanding the everyday experiences of Black women as they navigate racism, Collins (2000) asserted that their voices provide rich insight, and “[a]ssuming that only a few exceptional Black women have been able to do theory, homogenizes African American women and silences the majority” (viii). In contrast, she proposed “that theory and intellectual creativity are not the province of a select few but instead emanate from a range of people” (p. viii). In the spirit of BFT, this study aimed to reach a range of Black women so they could tell their stories of encountering racism in schools and the strategies they used to combat it.

The interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews conducted in neutral private locations convenient for participants including homes, offices, restaurants, or the library at the university. Interviews lasted from 38–94 minutes. For each school, I made contact with teachers and with parents from that area of the targeted school who assisted with recruiting other parents. They assisted by soliciting and contacting people that could be recruited, posting flyers internally and sending email blasts in Facebook educational groups and websites to attract participants. Respondents completed a brief survey to see if they met the criteria. I monitored the Google spreadsheet and identified eligible candidates. I invited the respondents who met the criteria to participate in the interview. The participants were audiotaped and video recorded. Each mother or caregiver provided a description of their children, the schools they chose and the reason, narratives of their experiences with racism, and the strategies they used to address the

incident(s). All participants who participated in the interviews and other mothers who had not interviewed but met the criteria were invited to participate in the focus group with participants within the same residential district and similar socioeconomic status.



Table 3. Focus Group Chart

School Type	elementary	high school	focus groups
suburban public		7	F1
suburban public	4		F2
suburban private	1		F2
urban public		1	F3
urban private		1	F3
urban charter	1		F3
suburban private		1	F3

Focus groups were the second method of data collection. The focus group is a particular type of group interview where the researcher asks a set of targeted questions designed to elicit collective views about a specific topic (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Merton & Kendall, 1946). Focus groups provide vertical and horizontal interactions among researchers and group participants (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). I conducted three separate focus groups with participants grouped based on similar residential districts, similar socioeconomic (upper middle to middle class/lower working class), and similar school type groups (suburban public schools/urban public/urban charter/private; see Table 1). Each focus group was a single session, 1.5 hours long, audiotaped and videotaped, with 5, 4, or 3 parents from similar residential districts, socioeconomic status, and school types and the researcher. According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick (2008), “[p]re-existing groups may be easier to recruit, have shared experiences and enjoy a comfort and familiarity which facilitates discussion or the ability to challenge each other comfortably” (p. 291). The focus groups discussed five central themes: personal experiences with racism, the

status of racism in America, the status of the racism in schools, what strategies could Black parents implement, and what policies could be enacted by the school to improve schools for Black students locally or nationally.

Each focus group took place after all the interviews were completed from a specific residential district in order for participants not to influence others' perceptions or alter their interpretations of their experiences. During the recruitment process, interview participants were informed of the two-part participation format: interview and the focus group component. They had the option of participating in just the interviews; however, they were encouraged to participate in the focus group in order for different questions to be addressed. Focus groups took place at the local libraries in a secure location or at the local college/universities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers need to protect the research informants, develop a rapport with them, promote integrity of research, and guard against misconduct and impropriety (Isreal & Hay, 2006). In order to ensure this, I provided the following safeguards for the participants. Each participant reviewed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study. After, reviewing IRB approval, each participant voluntarily signed a written consent form before the study began. I then ensured that the research objectives were articulated both verbally and in writing so the participant was fully aware of the content of the study. Then, I reinforced the notion that anonymity of the informant was of the upmost importance and reiterated how the data would be used. I transcribed the first eight interviews. Due to the breadth of the content, the remaining interviews and the focus groups were transcribed using an online serviced called rev.com. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I used a technique called member

checking. I emailed each participant a copy of her transcripts available for review, if preferred. Lastly, I also sent themes that emerged from the interviews and allowed them to give feedback on whether or not the themes embodied their interpretations and perceptions.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The interviews and the focus groups were audiotaped or videotaped (based on the informants' preferences) and transcribed. During the coding, participants' name or any other identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms. Prior to coding, I wrote memos and conducted three video memos to document my thoughts, biases, and reflections on the data collection and analysis. For the first level of open coding for my data analysis, I used an analysis approach that is usually used by grounded theorists. According to Holton (2010), a line-by-line open coding allows the researcher to verify and saturate categories and ensures relevance by generating codes that emerge. The steps were as follows: (a) collected raw data, (b) organized and prepared data by printing out transcripts and putting them in a binder for analysis, (c) read through each interview using a line-by-line open coding strategy mentioned above to allow for emergent themes, (d) conducted open coding by hand using color coded post-its and alpha numeric labels to manage themes, and (e) developed a code key with themes and descriptions in Pages. After the first level of open coding, I uploaded all interviews and focus groups in Nvivo for MAC for the second level of coding. The second phase of coding I used the Colaizzi approach, which is one of multiple methods used to by phenomenologists to analyze data. This method describes the meaning of an experience through emergent themes (Reiners, 2012) to analyze the data. I analyzed the data again using the following steps from the Colaizzi's process for data analysis. Each transcript was re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole

content. Using Nvivo nodes, I formulated meaning of topics and began to cluster nodes into theme categories. When the themes and categories became exhaustive, I reduced themes to align them with research questions. In Nvivo, I also developed a case matrix and was able to capture the information in several ways: individual, socioeconomic, and even district case studies. I used case matrices to develop a cross-residential district case analysis approach. Overall, the matrix was a tabular format that collected and arranged data for organization and data reduction by putting it in one place, which permitted a detailed analysis and assisted with cross-case analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This is the best method in order to identify similarities and differences by residential districts, school types, and SES. This method is also important for data reduction. Visually using a matrix for sorting and reducing large data for this research helped to organize it into a conceptually clustered matrix to be able to compare and contrast data from four schools by SES and school type. For instance, each informant (i.e., the 16 African American mothers involved in the study) received a horizontal row. Then, SES and school type was assigned to each. Each extracted quote was associated with relevant thematic codes in the vertical columns in the matrix. The matrix format allowed me to see visual similarities and contrasts within individual mothers' responses and between mothers. It also facilitated comparisons based on school type and SES, helped to organize clusters of ideas, and to count the number of mothers who reference similar themes, strategies, and points (Miles et al., 2014). After extracting the data, color-coding data for major themes, patterns, or points that reach across or within SES and school types, after reviewing thoroughly, overall findings were identified. Major themes/findings that are aligned with the research questions were revisited, and relevant data were clustered to support the overall thematic findings from the data.

Finally, validation of the findings was shared with all participants in order to compare the my descriptive results with their experiences (cited in Sanders, 2003; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). I shared all my findings and results of my interviews with each informant to ensure that I captured the essence of their statements. Robinson (2006) believes that of the three data analysis methods, Colaizzi's data analysis method is the most user-friendly due to the validity process of going back to the participant. Another feature is this method could be employed by a novice or experienced researcher to provide a clear description of the processes (Mapp, 2008).

### **Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness & Creditability of Data and Findings**

The goal of the qualitative researcher should also be to "hit the bull's eye" by maintaining and authentically representing the informants' voices. To ensure internal validity, the following procedures were taken. Prior to the research study, I pilot tested the interview protocol on individual mothers with characteristics similar to those who I recruited for the study in order to ensure reliability. Due to their participation and feedback of the protocol, one question was added to the interview schedule: Question 1. Tell me about your children. This question increased comfortability of the mothers early during the interview and developed trust between them and the researcher.

Secondly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314) in a study. It consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account. Due to the limited literature that both addresses the reality of systematic racism in schools and examines parental involvement strategies to address it, the purpose of this study was to have parents give insight on racial barriers that exist in schools and

what strategies they use to contest these barriers. The insights given will be added to the emerging literature of parental involvement strategies used to contest racial barriers in schools. To prevent researcher bias, I continuously produced memos to be conscious and deliberate about researcher bias. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the effect that their own subjectivity may have on the data they produce (LeCompte, 1987). As a method of staying transparent and maintaining the authenticity of the informant's voice, researchers share transcripts with informants in order to encourage "member checking to ensure accurate interpretations, explanations and interpretations, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 63). As the Colaizzi method suggests, throughout this process, the researchers will ask participants if the themes or categories make sense (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and whether the overall account is authentic and accurate.

As a follow-up, I emailed the participants a copy of the transcripts and some themes that were extracted from their interview transcriptions. If the participant offered corrections, then, according to Colaizzi, those corrections must be accepted (Gorgi, 2008). Interviewees had the flexibility to have information extracted, retracted, or redacted. Participants who disagreed with the findings, then could have contested their contribution to the findings. However, much consideration was given to the validity of the themes when saturation was reached. When saturation confirmed the themes, those findings remained. Although this did not happen, the participant would have been able to extract their contribution and the results would have been changed and then findings would have to been reconsidered. Lastly, I established an internal auditing system of documenting through memos and journaling every process to ensure external accountability through an external audit by other researchers.

The last technique used ensured reliability, easy implementation in the future, and internal validity. According to Yin, qualitative researchers should document, in detail, the procedures of their study (2003). In order to ensure reliability and external validity of this study, Shenton (2004) suggested processes “should be recorded in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work” and possibly to gain the same results (p. 71). During the data analysis, Miles et al. (2014) felt that some of the data presented in the analysis should be well linked to categories of prior or emerging theory (2014). I ensured that I detailed the process. In order to increase reliability and for other researchers to simulate the research, the primary strategy was to provide a detailed account so that another researcher could use this research as a prototype model. During the analysis of the data, I also aligned themes on systemic racism in schools that emerged with prior literature on the subject. However, due to the nature of the study, data that emerged that filled the gap in literature was accepted as new findings.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

Unlike quantitative research, in qualitative research, the role of the researcher is as the “primary data collection instrument” (Creswell, 2009, p. 196). It is therefore essential for the researcher to honestly confront his/her perceptions, biases, and assumptions in order to not obstruct fairness and to gain credibility as the researcher. Thus, I had to confront my own perceptions, biases, and assumptions as I analyzed my connectedness to the topic of my dissertation. My perceptions of education and racism have been shaped by my personal experiences.

My consciousness and awareness of the African American experience in America and globally as it relates to racism was nurtured at a young age. My awareness of my Blackness and

African Americans' will to challenge injustices came through my exposure to the arts by my mother. My mother took her two daughters to see shows like Sweet Honey in the Rock and Alvin Ailey. We even participated in plays at Essex County College, one entitled, *Cry of the People*, which was a social commentary on being poor and Black in urban ghettos in America. Due to the reality of my family's lack of income, my siblings and I attended public schools in an urban part of New Jersey. We did not have the financial options to attend private school, nor did we really express desire to attend private schools. My sister and I did apply to the magnet school. We did not get accepted; however, I did not see or experience any deep-seated resentment in not getting accepted. Actually, as a tradition, we attended our neighborhood school to which we were assigned due to our residential feeder patterns. The high school I attended was that same high school my mother had gone to and my sister was currently attending. It was a high Black density urban public school. The student population, school administrators, and the teachers were majority Black (80% or more).

In high school, my awareness of racism in America and globally was expanded, not because I experienced racism, but because I read about it or connected with the arts. Although I do not see things the same way now, when I was younger, I felt sheltered from racism and felt loved and embraced by my teachers and school family. While the administrators were majority male, my teachers were majority women, conscientious, self-confident, great role models, and brilliant. I definitely felt my school was a family, and there was a great deal of school pride and Black pride. I became exposed to the reality and harshness of racism when I took a philosophy class, and my teacher, Mrs. Floyd, made us read works such as *Kaffir Boy*, which depicted the struggle of Black Africans in South Africa under the weight of apartheid. We also read Richard



Wright's *Native Son*, which is a novel that exposes the weight of racism on the psyche of Blacks through the journey of a Black chauffeur who murders a White girl due to fear. Due to the prevalence of social programs that existed in the 70s and 80s, the students were exposed to the arts for free. Thus, I went to see *Serafina* on Broadway, which was a play that depicted the student-led Soweto Riots of 1976 in rebellion to the Afrikaans curriculum. I also saw Alvin Ailey, which is a Black dance troupe started by Alvin Ailey, a choreographer and activist, whose works often depict the African Americans' struggle with racism and oppression through the use of ballet, modern dance, jazz, and tap. While passive in intervening with school affairs, my mother, who was a singer, encouraged this type of exposure to cultural arts and awareness of Black oppression in America and beyond. She often included us in her shows, which always had themes of overcoming poverty and becoming. One memory I have is a show where my sister and I were pretending to play a hand game (Hands Up in 85') on stage. We sat on stage in the akimbo position, playing a hand game where we had to name Black leaders. "*Hands up in 85. Gonna get. Names of. Black Leaders. One a piece. No repeat. No hesitation. No demonstration. Ready. Lets go!*" We named all the Black leaders we could, and then my mother interrupted us by asking what did we want to become. After we answered, my mother affirmed us by saying, we could become anything we wanted to be if we just believed. Then, on cue she would turn to the audience and sing "If You Believe," which was originally sung by Lena Horne in the play *The Wiz* (which is a Black urban reimagining and musical based on the classic, *The Wizard of Oz*).

This consciousness and awareness of African Americans' will to contest injustices moved from theory and exposure and manifested into action when I got to college. During my freshman

year at Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) at Teaneck, I participated in my first protest to racial injustice. During my first year, about two miles away from my school, on April 10, 1990, a 16-year-old African American child named Philip Pannell was shot in the back by police. This ignited a day of rioting and fierce anger by Black students on campus and community people in response to the shooting. The community's response to this issue was racially polarized. For me, this reality that Black youth could be racially profiled and have fatal encounters with police reawakened my desire to fight racial injustices. My activism manifested in starting organizations on campus that dealt with issues related to Blacks' struggle on campus and in America.

To compound my awareness and consciousness of racial disparities, as a college student, for the first time, I was starkly aware of racial and economic disparities. I was raised in a majority Black urban poor neighborhood and was now thrust in an environment to witness White privilege up close. Although I had done extremely well in school academically and was a very focused student with good educational outcomes, when I had gone to college, I was confronted with peers who were exposed to a far more rigorous curriculum in high school than I had experienced. I also was able to witness White students from high-income families who were exposed to literary works that the professor just introduced, and they (White peers) were able to engage in dialogues about these works with relative accuracy and a familiarity that I had not ever experienced. I then realized a disparity of exposure, social capital, and privilege. Although I worked hard and received good grades in college, I also felt there was a vast difference between how I was treated by a few of my White professors and how they graded my papers in comparison to other White students. I often left some one-on-one interactions with my professors feeling unwelcomed, while I perceived the professor's interactions with my White

counterparts to be jovial, free, and an exchange between two equals. It was the manner of impatience, intolerance, and/or the invisibility, which I sensed from some of my White professors as they interacted with me that made me more cognizant of how they interacted with others. This manner of interaction was starkly contrasted to the positive, engaging, and validating interactions I experienced with my Black teachers in my urban high school experience. Also, when I received my papers back from some White professors, I often questioned my competence or my self-worth.

The reality of the unequal access to quality education spurred my commitment to work in and return to urban school systems and achieve excellence and equity. From January 1994 to September 2006 I served as a teacher in various urban high schools with similar demographics: majority Black schools (80% or more Black populations), high population of students with low socioeconomic status (80% or more), public schools with population of students ranging from 800 to 1200. Most recently (2006–present), I served in various capacities as an administrator: English department chair, academic vice principal, and principal. As a principal, I oversee curricular implementation, instruction, policy, school climate, student discipline decisions, and work closely with the faculty, parents, stakeholders, assistant superintendents, and the board. In addition to serving as principal, I mediate and troubleshoot conferences with parents, faculty, and other stakeholders around school decisions, policies, and daily interactions. Throughout my career, I have witnessed teachers and administrators hyper-punishing and suspending Black boys, had to supervise teachers with low expectations of children of color, had to mediate conferences with parents and teachers where teachers had made racially charged remarks, had to advocate for Advanced Placement courses and programs within a school, and have had to manage a school

were the district cut resources for public schools with high density of Black students by three fourths of a million dollars.

On a larger front, despite the belief that administrators have wielding power to impact change in their buildings, most recently the polarized political climate has challenged that theory. The district has been torn since the advent of charter openings, multiple school closures, open-enrollment, and a fight for local control. I have experienced first hand how impactful school reform, policies, and competing political agendas have on the school climate, budgeting, and learning outcomes. I believe this experience, feedback, and understanding of the context and role of racism enhances my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to the many challenges that educators face in serving African American populations.

Due to being an educator, an African American woman, an “other mother” to so many of my former students and my previous experiences working closely and guiding so many African American students, I bring certain biases to this study. I believe that as far as education goes, we are still in a “tale of two cities.” The fight for racial equality and equal access to education is just as relevant today as it was in the 1960s. Although every effort will be made to write memos on my biases and to ensure objectivity when analyzing the data, these biases may shape the way I see issues, views, and understand the data I collect and interpret the informants’ experiences.

I entered this study with two true perspectives, the duality of being a Black woman who has experienced racism and as an educator who has reflected on unfair practices that I may have overseen or created. The role of a principal is important, and his/her responsibility is great. I always reflect on how much power the principal has to initiate change, reflect on unfair practices, provide leadership and vision to an organization, and try to actively deal with

systematic injustices or barriers. The reflection processes of a principal who wants to combat injustices will not be effective without the feedback and honesty of parents and other stakeholders who are willing to challenge belief systems, expose barriers, and more important, see the unimpeded success of their children.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

This qualitative study explored African American mothers' perspectives on racial barriers within their children's schools (public, charter, or private) within the context of individual, institutional, or structural racism and examined the strategies they use to address or overcome those barriers. Drawing on data collected through individual, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, this chapter shows how upper middle to lower working class Black mothers make meaning of the educational institutions that serve their children and how they have responded to racism or racial barriers in their children's schooling. The results revealed existing racial barriers in the 21st century and advocacy strategies that Black mothers use that can be added to the

repertoire of African American parental involvement strategies to respond to manifestations of racism in American schools.

This chapter presents the key findings gathered from 16 mothers who participated in in-depth interviews and three focus groups. The results of the study show that participants with children across school types affirmatively perceived forms of systematic racial barriers in their children's schools that impeded their children's social and academic progress. Overall, mothers felt there is a decline in education for Black students in the 21st century due to existing racial barriers compared to their own experiences and the expectations they had when initially choosing a school for their children. Mothers' views on racism in 21st century schools ranged from unaffirming to hostile, exclusionary, and culturally disconnected institutions, which sometimes left children and families feeling distant, invisible, or emotionally unsafe. Teachers and school officials were seen as perpetrators of 21st century racial barriers across RDs and SES. They were seen as perpetrators of exclusionary practices (honors programs, leveling), perpetrators of negative assumptions or harmful pathologies (Black boy threat, sassy Black girl, and angry mother), unwillingness or insensitivity to reconcile past (approach to teaching slavery, curriculum omits Blacks contributions), and culturally disconnected and distant (invisibility, not affirming or nurturing sense of self in Black children, unloved). Lastly, in response to racial barriers, African American mothers employed a variety of specific and reusable parent involvement strategies that took place at home, sometimes minimally engaged the school, or sometimes required increased or escalated school engagement to contest racism.

The chapter will begin with a brief description of background information on the study participants. Next, the chapter will provide an analysis of several recurring themes and

subthemes that emerged throughout the study: the evidence of racism and racial barriers existing in 21st century schools and the strategies parents used to combat those racial barriers.

### **Demographics**

This study included 16 Black mothers ranging from lower working class to upper middle class mothers with children who range from the third to the twelfth grade living within the Normal County area in New Jersey. They shared their counter-narratives on the status of racism within American schools in the 21st century. Mothers who self-identify as Black, were non-immigrant and whose ancestors were enslaved in America (see Table 1) participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews and three focus groups. While 14 of the mothers fit the criteria for the study: were born in America, had ancestors enslaved within America, had children in Grades 3 to 12 grade in school in Normal County and self-identified as Black, due to the complexity of the “social identity” called “Blackness,” two mothers self-identified as Black and had ancestors enslaved in America in the survey. However, during the course of the interview, they both revealed that they were first-generation Black woman of Trinidadian descent. I modified the criteria of the eligibility to allow for the Caribbean mothers to be included. According to McPherson and Selby (2004), the two mothers met the two of the three dimensions of Blackness: racial and national. Their counter-narratives were included in the study and offered comparative analysis on similarities and differences of African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in American and first-generation Blacks of Caribbean descent. All of the mothers have unique experiences but share levels of consciousness of the historical context of oppression based on race and economics within America.

To establish a clearer process for identifying their socioeconomic status, the mothers input data into Pew Research Center's online calculator and their socioeconomic statuses ranged from one lower working class, 13 middle class, and two upper middle class Black parents. Eleven of the Black mothers were married, while three were single, and one was living with the father of the children but not married. One mother was recently separated. Although four mothers were in interracial marriages, they all identified their children as Black. All children, with the exception of two, attended the local public school for which they were zoned for at least once during their educational career. Four of the parents' children attend or attended a public charter school at least once in their educational career; only RDC residents ever attended charters. Eight of the children attended suburban private schools during their educational career. Five parents had children attending secular private schools; one parent had three children in a parochial high school.

In this chapter, I review mothers' perceptions of racism in America and how racism manifests in school. Then, I present their perceptions that racial barriers in school are worsening due to existing racial barriers compared to when they were in school and the expectations they had when they initially chose the school. Then, I discuss the four most common racial barriers. Lastly, I present the strategies Black mothers use in schools within the last two decades to combat racial barriers that exist in the schools.

### **Black Mothers' Colloquy on Racism**

All participants affirmatively perceived there were still forms of systematic racism or racial barriers evident in their children's school types (public, private, and charter) and all



districts. During the focus group, questions were designed to prompt discourse on racism and racial barriers in order to have an understanding of how Black mothers perceived racism and the racial barriers in their children's schools (see Appendix A). Participants were first asked to define racism in order to establish a baseline understanding. The participants articulated clear definitions of racism as a purely social construct designed for racial deprivation, to systematically exclude groups from opportunity based on skin color, and to promulgate damaging biases that result in discrimination or mistreatment.

Carol, an upper middle class married mother of two boys living in RDA, which is a more racially and socioeconomically diverse district, led the discussion in the focus group characterizing racism as the following: "I'd say... it is a system or presence of systemic constructs that are designed to deprive people of opportunity based on skin color, based on race." Another mother, Shirley, a married middle class mom of four children living in RDC, an urban district with a high Black density, gave a more extended definition of racism by describing it in the following terms:

Racism is when you have a group of people based on their ethnicity that is in charge or in control of a situation, and they choose to exert a certain amount of power against a group of people... that power structure in turn uses its authority to make decisions over another group of people based on limited information, or based on the color of their skin.

According to Carol, is not just about a group receiving discrimination and mistreatment, it is more about one ethnic/racial group with access to power who systematically exerts that power over another group. In essence, the oppressive group must systematically have access to power in

order make this racism ongoing. Lastly, another mother named Rhonda, a single middle class mother of one living in RDC described racism as

a social construct. It's something that has been created by our society that says that one group of people is better than another group of people, but it is a falsity. It's not a tangible, real thing, but as long as people give it power, it has power in our society.

Rhonda's use of the term *social construct* helps to understand that the principles and the practices of racism are based on perceptions and not facts. Also, her statement that "people give it power" suggest that it has to be a shared agreement between all participants.

While all the definitions varied, an underlying motif emerged in their definitions: racism being defined as one group systematically having the ability to hinder the progress of another group. All mothers agreed with racism defined as a created social construct created by one group to assert power over another group based on skin color as a means to deprive one group and to empower another.

## **Black Mothers' Discourse on How Racism Manifests in 21st Century Schools**

Just as the mothers had well-developed definitions of racism as a persistent problem and the product of intentional exclusion and efforts to control, they also clearly identified its manifestations in 21st century schooling and in the schools their children attend. According to the mothers, the tenors of racism (the deprivation of Black progress and preservation of White advantage) were highly visible in school structures and behaviors. They asserted their views that through access to wealth, access to resources, implementation of laws, and systematic leniency towards Whites, White people maintain advantages in schools (and in society), while Blacks are deprived. The mothers described staff engaging in opportunity hoarding. Opportunity hoarding, originally coined by Charles Tilley, is when dominant groups have control of goods and “regulate its circulation, thus preventing out-groups from having full access to it” (as cited in Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 155). Other racial barriers included teachers profiling Black students, suppressing African American history and having negative perceptions that hinder Black students socially and emotionally. Black mothers also described schools lacking diversity in faculty and staff.

Many mothers shared similar views on the tangible ways racism is evident in school. Kimberly, a married middle class mother of two boys living in RDA whose boys attend their local racially diverse, prestigious suburban public elementary school, described the manifestations of racism in this manner: “Lack of opportunities made available, based upon your skin color...the process of not allowing certain students access to certain programs.” Mary, a middle class mother of two children living in the RDA whose children also attend the diverse

local elementary school, described racism as: “being perceived or profiled, labeled, by the color of your skin, by your gender.” Pam, a mother of two children, who opted to put her children in the most diverse public middle school and elementary school in in the RDA, illustrated racism in schools two ways: though systematically hiring of a population of teachers that do not reflect that of the student body and the intentionality of not presenting an inclusive history the represents true America:

Racism also shows itself in the curriculum, in the teaching body, the staff. You said with regard to this district, there is a lack of diversity amongst the teachers. They’re predominately White young women. That is problematic. When I know more than your social studies teacher, all of them, that’s a problem, because my studies expertise is not in social studies. So that’s problematic.

According to Pam, the issue of schools lacking diversity was evident in the faculty and curriculum. In essence, students of color are not seeing themselves represented in the curriculum that they are engaged in everyday nor are they being taught by same-race teachers.

When discussing the manifestations of racism, one parent classified racist practices in schools as inequity in systematically assigning Black students to lower level classes, systematically not recommending Black students to honor classes, and inequities when disciplining Black students. Carla, a middle class mother living in the RDC (an urban neighborhood with a high density Black population) of two children whose youngest daughter used to attend charter but now goes to a private school out of district stated,

I think that [racism] might be labeling children as difficult, pushing them into programs or even classifying them with a disability... Taking an infraction where in one scenario, one case, a child may have just a tap on the wrist or be talked to, this child may be escalated and pushed out or suspended. So, that’s what it looks like in schools. And demeaning a child or ignoring a child.

Carla expressed having to contend with racial barriers such as differential treatment in school officials meting out discipline outcomes for Black students. Also, she introduced a phenomenon that is mentioned often in this study that Black students feel ignored or invisible. Another mother within the same focus group, Rhonda from RDC, echoed the sentiment of the aforementioned parent:

Yes, I agree. Basically, like she said, demeaning a child or children within the school, and then pushing them in a specific category because they may act out in a certain way. And you really don't know why, but you have this perception in your head of why, what they are already. So, it's just like, "Okay, I'm gonna push them in this," or pull them out of school because of this or that, and send them to some other type of school because you want to classify them.

All mothers gave very specific ways in which racism manifested in educational settings. They gave examples of the different forms of systematic racial barriers that sometimes were subtle and were individual to individual. Other times, issues of racism were described in terms of systematic racial barriers that reduced the likelihood or the probability that some groups would gain access to equal progress at the same time.

### **Black Mothers' Thoughts on Status of Racism in the Twenty First Century**

One consistent subtheme about the status of racism is that American society is far from being a post-racial one. In fact, many mothers were disconsolate about the prospect of racism ending or progressing in America and thought that overall the state of racism was worsening. Black mothers gave specific indicators to measure the pullulation of racism such as increased racial segregation, overt racist remarks, a polarized political climate, and continued inequitable treatment of Blacks compared to Whites as reasons why they believe racism in America was worsening within the last two decades.

Many mothers discussed the inception of racist practices in America and how this current decade looked bleak. During a focus group discussion, Nicole, an upper middle class mother of two, a girl and a boy, living in RDB, discussed racism in school within the highly racialized context of this country's history. She shared how she believed the status of racism was regressing:

It [racism] is alive and well. I think that it has existed since the founding of this country, and I think people found a way to act as if it didn't really. It's always existed, but people have found a way to downplay it. Now in our society, it has become more obvious, and people are going back to their obvious overt racism as opposed to covert...

In the same focus group discussion, Sugar, a middle class mother living in RDB whose two children went from private to public, concurred and added more specifics to the idea that race issues in American institutions are worsening:

Now with the rollback of so many opportunities for Black people, we see our kids are now in a fight that we didn't necessarily have to have because it's more blatant now than when we were kids. It's as the parent of a Black child, a Black son in particular, we have to be even more hyper vigilant that they understand and know how to conduct themselves. It's basically, they can go outside, and somebody could call them boy. They could look at somebody the wrong way. Like who thought? I never would have thought that I would ever have to deal with that or have those types of conversations but I do, and it's very upsetting. It's unnerving to have a Black child, son.

Sugar's sentiments were the mothers anticipated that this generation would have it better than hers; however, there are issues with racism that she did not expect her children to have to experience. Two parents linked the present status of racism to the political climate of the day and the use of laws to impose racism. During the focus group discussion, Pam a married mother of two, a boy and a girl who lives in RDA stated,

... it [American racism] goes in a circle. Whenever you see Black excellence and Black achievement, you're going to get a backlash of White resentment and White anger. I think

we're right in the middle right now of White resentment and White anger because of the excellence that came before.

In the focus group, Carol followed up by using the election of America's first Black president as a symbol of progress and the backlash as an example:

I don't think there's ever been a time in American history where Black people have made progress and White people haven't answered with a slap and with laws...to further restrict Blacks and make sure they don't excel. I think this is just how America functions.

Parents also specifically pointed to increased racial segregation in schools and greater educational inequality as evidence of racism worsening and a regression of racism within the last two decades. For example, Shirley claimed:

With all of that historical context, you have today in society segregated school systems that are now more segregated than they were...Brown versus the Board of Education. So schools are more segregated now, and even more divided in terms of class. Because the segregation is so disparaging at this point. Yeah, you can go from that, that's where the systematic part of it comes in.

The overall tenor on racism from all the parents debunked the idea that America is a post-racial society that has evolved from past racism, but they present an America where racism is deeply engrained. This idea of racism regressing also emerges when the mothers compare their children's current schools to their own educational experiences.

### **Racial Barriers in 21st Century Schools: Mothers' own Educational Experiences**

The majority of parents expressed a sound understanding of how racism manifested itself in their children's schools or districts. Many expressed a decline in race relations or in the quality of the schools offered to Blacks students in comparison to their past experiences due to 21st century racial barriers. One subtheme that emerged was that parents recalled having favorable

educational experiences in all school types (public, parochial, or private) and remembered being nurtured in environments where teachers and school officials (in suburbia or urban schools) made them feel loved and affirmed. Parents spoke of mattering, and some mothers even discussed teachers who engaged in cultural relevant teaching and progressive racial healing practices.

Several mothers expressed that in their past school spaces, they felt loved by their teachers and school officials. Nicole, a married upper middle class mother of two in the RDB district, grew up in two poor urban public school districts that were predominantly Black and reminisced about feeling affirmed by her teachers and feeling a sense of belonging:

As a kid I thought I had the best educational experience because I definitely felt loved ... probably not the best as far as academics as far as putting me on the right track... But my teachers loved me. They treated me well. There was never—I never went home feeling like my teacher didn't like me.

Similar to Nicole's experiences, Pam from the RDA district also had fond memories of being loved by her urban parochial school teachers. "It mattered to her. She was a Black teacher. It mattered to her that I learned...I felt that she loved us." Carla described teachers who developed a good rapport with their students and felt that teachers and students were surrogate families:

I went to a Catholic school from K through 8th grade on Clinton Avenue...[parochial school]. And I had good experiences. Even though—you know— all of those nuns were older White women, They had been entrenched in that community for years and that—their homes were open to us. We went over there after school. They feed us; we cooked together. We did all kind of things together with those nuns. And it was like a family.

Black mothers reminisced of their own educational experiences where teachers of different races and different socioeconomic statuses and Black students who ranged from (poor to middle class) in various school types had sincere healthy relationships where students felt affirmed and loved.



Beyond students feeling loved and mattering, some Black mothers recounted being nurtured in schools where teachers and school officials were intentional about developing a healthy sense of self for Black students through culturally relevant teaching or engaging their school communities in progressive work to dismantle racial barriers. Shirley, a middle class mom of five from RDC, described how she attended a Black independent private school in her predominantly Black urban community. She specifically pointed to how the school's curriculum was culturally relevant, taught from an African-centric worldview, and how it nurtured a strong identity and sense of pride among its Black students:

When I went to [the school], we had a geology class. And the way my teacher taught geology. It was seven of us and we had a table like this and a table was a world map. And whatever he wanted to talk about in the world, like if we were talking about agriculture, we looked at it from a worldview and the map that he had was correctly proportioned so Africa was the largest part of the map. So how empowering is that! You're in a classroom the teacher looks like you, understands where you are coming from and is telling you that your world is the largest part of this planet. Like everything in this world can fit into this one space and this is where your family comes from originally. So that was like my learning experience as a child. It was like, yeah I want my kids to have that. Why wouldn't I want them to have that when they are getting ready to go into the world.

Shirley introduced two aspects of her learning that she found favorable: (a) being taught by a same-race teacher and (b) the curriculum being taught in a more transformative multicultural approach. According to Banks (1989), transformative multiculturalism is when students are allowed to learn concepts, issues, themes, and problems through the perspectives of ethnic groups and not the typical assumptions from dominant culture.

Similar to Shirley, another mother experienced educators using progressive approaches to address issues and concepts about race during her childhood years. Carol, a middle class mother in the RDA, had favorable school experiences, not because racism did not exist, but because in

middle school and high school a Jewish woman, who was a school official, engaged students in the work of confronting racial barriers and dismantling racism:

She was like we have to do something about race relations. Why starting sixth and seventh grade there is this big divide? Why the White kids are sitting over here in the cafeteria and the Black kids... Why? What happened? What happened? She is the one who actually started this group, and my sister who is three years older than I am was in the first pilot group of high school students who would go into the elementary schools who would have discussions on race with the kids to find out what's going on and what's creating this separation.

Carol revealed the reality of racism during her school year, but also emphasized school officials' acknowledgment of racism barriers and agency in addressing and abating those racial barriers. Both mothers admired the teachers for their efforts to confront the realities of racism, their intentionality about affirming their Black students, and their competence in engaging in racially reconciliatory practices.

Three parents from starkly different economic backgrounds, all attending vastly different schools (suburban public, elite private or predominately White to moderately diverse school) discussed having access to quality schools and having access to honors courses and rigorous academics. Kimberly describes living in Talbot County, where Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were born. But despite the county's legacy of slavery and segregation, she had access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes

So I have a lot of history of slavery and with being of a southern culture in Maryland. My school system as I mentioned was predominantly White. There were two people or two types of ethnicity in my county, either you were White or you were Black... all the teachers were White, but they... if they were racist, I wouldn't know... My high school experience was very different from what I would think my children would have here. It was very academically focused. I was in the AP track. I elected to take AP classes and because of that I was the only Black person in those classes.

Kimberly experienced her educators being White and her ability to select her own college preparatory track. Mary, despite growing up poor and raised by a disabled single mother, recalled her mother making sure they lived in White rich neighborhoods to ensure that her children were given access to a quality education:

So my mother. I was raised by a single parent. My mom had four kids and she made sure that she actually went blind when I was like six. But she always made sure that we lived in—although we were very poor—in a rich neighborhood, the best school district...She always told us that education is the key to get yourself out of poverty. Right? So I did. So I went to college, and then I went to law school.

Mary recounted she and her family living in an apartment over a store in order for her mother to afford to stay in this rich neighborhood so her children could have access to the same quality schools as rich White students in order for them to break the cycle of racism. Similar to the sentiment of some mothers, Blacks associate being educated to living in rich or predominantly White neighborhoods. Wanda, an upper middle class married mom of one boy from RDB, attended the same elite private school from first grade to twelfth grade with her brothers and cousins. She described her favorable school experiences in this manner:

So my time, I went there from first grade to 12th grade, was pretty great. I don't feel like I had really any issues. I don't feel like I was held back from anything. I had cousins that had gone there as well, so they knew our family.

These mothers described having access to quality schools, rigorous academic programming and AP courses and did not discuss racial barriers that impeded that access. While one mother did mention that she was the only Black person in her honors class, she discussed that it was her own volition to be in that class and did not mention any gatekeeping or denied access to the AP track. The majority of their own educational experiences could be characterized by the absence of

explicit racial barriers. Rather, they emphatically recalled teachers and school officials with cultural competency, who developed good rapport with students, confronted racial barriers in schools, and made students feel loved and affirmed.

### **Mothers' Educational Expectations**

Some Black parents' educational expectations for their children were rooted in their own positive lived experiences as Black students living in America. However, as lower working to upper middle class parents with middle class values and aspirations, some of the educational decisions they made for their children were based on intergenerational beliefs of Blacks that get a "good education" can somehow transcend racism. Also they believed that economic mobility affords access to a "good education." However, despite conventional beliefs, the majority of the mothers' efforts did not yield the desired results. Star, an upper middle class mother living in RDB said it best: "You sometimes assume as an African American professional who's acquired some level of wealth that you put your child in a certain place, that the money then becomes the factor, but the reality was race was still a factor, if not more." Despite these Black families' financial mobility and the efforts made to get their children into certain schools, the majority of Black mothers found a gap between their expectations based on the school choices they made for their children and the realities of the racial barriers that still exist in 21st century schools. The mothers gave a number of reasons for their educational decisions and the work that had to be done to get them there.

Some parents' educational decisions were driven by the desire for their children to have access to rigorous academic programs and curriculum. In their estimation, the way to achieve

this was to move into predominantly White neighborhoods or neighborhoods that were more diverse or to attend predominantly White schools. Nicole sought a predominantly White, affluent public school with access to rigor and resources:

RDB is a place where most people move for the school systems. Great school system. Because I am a teacher, and I really don't make a lot of money. I was just trying to figure out where can I go and educate my kids on my income and still be able to eat and survive and save for them to go to college. RDB was my choice for them in Normal County. I thought that Normal County was relatively safe, and it will be good for diversity. So we moved there. The teachers, you know, young, smart. I can appreciate that.

Wanda, on the other hand, who also lived in RDB, forfeited her right to send her son to the neighborhood public school even though it was in a middle class suburban neighborhood and instead sent him to an elite, predominantly White private school. According to Wanda due to their upper middle class status, she and her husband, who is a physician, were able to finance his tuition at an elite school. Wanda stated:

So, I was concerned about the type of rigor that he would receive, and attention that he would receive in the public school system. So, once we got through preschool, we looked at several independent schools. My husband is an alum of [this private school]. [This private school] was very open to us, and seemed to be, of the schools in the area, more closely aligned to the things that were important to us, which included diversity, small environments, support and development of each individual student.

These parents benefitted from financial mobility and subscribed to the unspoken code that "Whiteness" means access to capital, resources, and a good education in America. Blaisdell (2016) explained how Whiteness functions as access to property, resources, and quality schools; however, people or communities who are non-White lack access and privileges Whiteness provides, which include equal access to social and material goods (Shapiro, 2004). For instance, Wanda, another parent felt academic rigor and a better teaching environment could be sought by opting out of the traditional public school setting and seeking either private schools or charters.

Mary, an upper middle class lawyer, discussed how her child's teacher actually gave her the impetus to transfer out to the public school and into the private elite school she now attends because she thought her daughter was too smart to remain in the public school:

And she has always been just—school comes easy to her. When she was in preschool, not preschool, but when she was four turning five about to be eligible for public school, one of her teachers told me that she was extremely bright and gifted and recommended that she go to a private school and that we apply.

Mary's access to financial resources capacitated her to move her daughter into an elite private school. Similarly, Shirley, chose an elite private school as an alternative since she was hesitant about sending her children to the neighbor public school in RDC (due to her perception that public schools in her neighborhood are unsafe and have low expectations) and since her alma mater, a Black independent private school had closed. Shirley stated she had put some of her girls in this "predominantly White, predominately wealthy, all girls school" where "tuition is \$35,000 a year" because her husband felt it was a "really good school," and it was her alma mater. These parents' legacies with their former private schools and their mistrust of their neighborhood public school (perceptions of schools' low expectations and unsafeness) to meet their children's educational needs were the reasons why these parents sought private schools outside of their district schools.

Some parents who were looking for academically sound schools— without sending their children to private schools— were attracted to charter schools. Haleemah, a single mother of three boys, who lives in the RDC, discussed how she took her child out of her neighborhood public school and moved to the RDC to be eligible to attend the neighborhood charter school due to its reputation and promise of academic rigor. After watching a debate on television and seeing

the students from this charter school present well compared to other schools, she was convinced that it was better than the public high school they were attending, which she described as “not bringing out the best in” her son. Thus, Haleemah stated, “I moved to North to put them [in this charter school].” Another parent, Carla, a middle class educator, also believed that charter schools would be more beneficial for her daughter than the neighborhood public school. Carla stated,

My child has been in a charter school in RDC since kindergarten. There were not many options for me. I had just moved into a new neighborhood. I didn’t know how my neighborhood schools were and didn’t want to chance it. So I put her in a lottery and she went to the charter school.

These two mothers opted out of the neighborhood public schools and sought charter schools as an option to gain access to “better schools” and ensure a more rigorous academic experience.

One mother made the sacrifice to move into another city, while another mother did not send her daughter to public schools and stated that “there were not many options” for her. When she moved into the neighborhood, she did know much about her new neighborhood. Also, she “didn’t want to chance it.” Thus, she got into a lottery to make a concerted effort to get her daughter in a school that she “thought was good.”

The majority of parents made sacrifices in order to ensure their children had access to what the parents perceived at the time were “better schools” for their children to attend.

However, while some of the expectations were met, in some ways, 21st century schools have racial barriers that created gaps between the mothers’ expectations that once drove the educational decisions they made for their children and the reality of the racial barriers that exist at these schools. After their children attended these schools, some expectations such as academic

rigor were met, while other expectations such as emotional safety and diversity were not all met. After disillusionment, some parents sought after other institutions (similar to their past experiences) that could produce similar feelings such as a sense of belonging for their children, teachers more invested in unleashing their children's potential, and environments where children feel loved and emotionally safe.

### **Four Consistent Racial Barriers in Schools**

Unlike their past experiences or their educational expectations for their children's schools, Black mothers reported various types of racial barriers existing in their children's schools. Black mothers in this study found 21st century schools ranged from unaffirming to hostile, exclusionary and culturally disconnected institutions, which sometimes left children and families feeling distant, invisible, or emotionally unsafe. The parents saw teachers and school officials being the perpetrators of 21st century racial barriers across RDs and SES. Four major themes that emerged from the data were the following: teachers and school officials were responsible for being the perpetrators of exclusionary practices (denying honors programs, leveling), perpetrators of negative assumptions or harmful pathologies (Black boy threat, sassy Black girl and Black mother), unwilling or insensitive about reconciling America's racist past (unsympathetic approaches to teaching slavery, curriculum omits Blacks contributions), and culturally disconnected and distant to Black children (promoting invisibility, not affirming or nurturing sense of self in Black children, making them feel unloved).

### **Perpetuators of Exclusionary Practices**

Black mothers described frustration with teachers and school officials functioning as the perpetrators of exclusionary practices. The mothers talked about Black students' lack of access



to honors courses and tracking systems that keep Black students relegated to lower level courses. Nicole from RDB was baffled trying to ascertain her son's teacher's reasoning for not recommending Derrick for honors math despite him having an A average, one of the highest NJASK scores, and receiving the presidential award. Nicole recalled:

The teacher actually said to me, "Well I figured if he went into that program he wouldn't be the highest. If I put in a regular math class, he would be the highest, and I thought he would like that." That's what the teacher told me. [laughter] I get it. Wow. Yeah. She said that. She said, "I wanted him to be comfortable."

Due to the school's criteria for recommending students to honors courses, teacher subjectivity and discretion determine if students get into a higher track. In this particular case, Nicole felt the teachers were able to deny Black students from being in academically rigorous classes that would benefit them later. Despite the student's grades, the teacher had low expectations about him persisting and enduring in the future. When 5 years later, her daughter who also had an A average was denied, Nicole decided to do research to see if the problem that she had faced was systematic or widespread throughout the predominately White school district.

I called parents from other schools. Black parents. And I said, "I just want to know what happened to your kid." And not one of our children were placed because of the teacher. We all had our girls placed in honors, but it was not until we appealed and fought. I'm going to say fought to have them placed there. In three different schools. There was one RDB elementary school, little Black girl in another RDB elementary school, and a little Black girl in a third RDB elementary school. The little Black girl from the third RDB elementary school got a perfect score on her math. That's how we placed our kids. We had to have these conversations.

Since a similar incident took place with Nicole's son 5 years ago, Nicole recalled the teacher stating that she did not put Derrick in honors class because she thought he would feel "more comfortable." According to Nicole perceptions, she believed that the teacher was biased.

Along with Nicole, other mothers felt that teacher biases and stereotypes of Black students (academic endurance, commitment to their academics, and their ability to persevere or persist academically) could preclude Black students systematically and prevent them from getting recommended for honors classes and could have an adverse affect on their confidence or skill development. Tasha, a mom from RDA, talked about a conversation she overheard, which prompted her to follow up with her sister about what level courses to which her niece was assigned. Apparently, in RDA, a disproportionate number of Black students are assigned to the lower level courses. Tasha recalled the conversation she had to inform her sister of the inequities of keeping Blacks in lower level math classes in her district:

It a shame the Black kids are getting stiffed out of the level four and five classes, and how it's disgusting. And I'm like, "Wait, hold on. What do you mean the high schools have different levels?" And they broke it down to me and I remember going to my sister saying, "Hey, you know what, do you know that there are levels to this school? You need to talk to your daughter and find out what levels she is in." She was like, "What do you mean?" I was like, "You need to find out what level because that apparently matters with the growth." Like you can get educated but you can stay here [motioned her hand to represent a low level] as opposed of [*sic*] getting educated and progressing...it turned out that she was in level three. I'm like, "Wait a minute. With her scores and stuff? Why is she in level three?"

Much like Nicole of RDB, who researched and discovered what she perceived as teachers or school officials restricting Blacks from honors and higher level courses, Mary from RDA, also perceived teachers or school officials relegated Black students to the lower level courses as a widespread district practice. Mary perceived that despite the complaints of Black parents and the

continued reality that Black students are assigned to lower level courses, the district did not make any changes with the district math supervisor and has continued to maintain the same legacy of exclusionary practices of denying Black students access to higher level math classes in the district. According to Mary's account,

Blacks have been at the bottom in math in this district since my son started kindergarten. He's in 8th grade now. The worksheets are still the same. It doesn't matter if we have an equity and access problem, I mean program. The system is still the same. The worksheets are still the same that they had 8 years ago. The teachers are still the same. So unless they change it at the top, institutional racism, our kids, Black kids, will always be at the bottom.

Mary introduced a belief here that is in tandem with other comments mothers had made in this study. According to Mary, part of the systematic problem of continued leveling and teacher bias when recommending Black students to honors and high level courses in RDB is due to the lack of diversity of teachers and the intentionality of maintaining the status quo of racialized tracking. Other parents from RDA and RDB expressed knowledge of the systematically denying Black students from honors or AP courses as well. Parents were frustrated because in many cases the Black students showed indicators of high achievement and met the criteria to fit in some of those classes. However, due to school practices, such as teachers being responsible for recommending students for these courses, according to the parents' accounts, teachers have become the maintainers or perpetuators of the legacy of denying Black students access to higher level courses. Studies have shown the practice of teachers and school officials maintaining the status quo of racialized tracking as a crucial element to maintaining White privilege, racialized academic tracking, and inequitable grading while exacerbating achievement gaps (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

One mother perceived that teachers have low expectations of Black students' abilities and achievements. While her daughter was not excluded from honors, she perceived that her daughter would be impacted academically due to the teachers' low expectations. Star from RDB, whose daughter was attending an elite private school, was frustrated when the teachers exhibited low expectations of her daughter's academic abilities. Star described,

One of the other instances was, they were talking about Jada's reading ... this was when she was at [a private school] ... her writing, and the teacher was just so shocked that she was such a great writer, and how when she would read her stories, and they would have other parents come to listen, all the other parents were just so surprised. They were like, "Oh my gosh, she's such a good writer," and we knew she was a good writer, but we didn't think it warranted that kind of surprise. I was like, "Okay." It almost felt like they were surprised because she was Black and could write like that, as opposed to just being, "Wow, she's an exceptional writer."

From Star's perspective, the school officials and the parents were shocked at Jada's writing ability due to an assumption about Black students' low academic abilities, and the compliments were signs of microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as "environmental cues as well as verbal and nonverbal hidden messages that serve to invalidate one's experiential reality and perpetuate feelings of inferiority" (Allen, 2012, p. 175).

Nicole's experience with the teachers who wanted her son to be "comfortable" and stated that "he would not be the highest" introduced a familiar theme that emerged. According to their perceptions, the exclusionary practices of Black students by teachers may have been fueled by low expectations or negative assumptions about Black students' abilities or prejudices they held of the Black students academically. This section showed the impact of teacher assumptions and implicit bias and how it could influence students' academic trajectory. Teachers who

systematically deny Black students honors courses marginalize them from rigorous curricula, could impact academic outcomes (since some honors course are weighted), college preparedness, and from specific career paths. In this next section, Black mothers discuss their perceptions of the pejorative images teachers and school officials imposed on Black families and the adverse impact these assumptions caused.

### **Perpetuators of Negative Assumptions or Harmful Pathologies**

The second racial barrier that emerged from the data from Black mothers was their perception of teachers and school officials as perpetrators of negative assumptions of the Black families. These harmful views impeded Black students' academic, social, and emotional progress in their estimation. This next theme was evident in every RD and expressed by mothers across socioeconomic classifications. Black mothers described majority White teachers as perpetrators of negative assumptions or popular tropes such as “the angry Black mom,” the “Black boy as a threat,” and the “hyper sassy, rude Black girl.” These pathologies resulted in students receiving harsher penalties, diminished self-esteem, lack of access to higher level courses, and guarded interactions with school officials. Mary talked about how the math supervisor publicized her negative assumptions about Black mothers because they challenged her to revamp the racial barriers of leveling in math classes, a practice that parents believed keeps Black students on the lower track. Mary recounted the harmful trope of the angry Black mother that the math supervisor posted online with other parents, teachers, and school officials:

I think the person that in the math curriculum in the district ...did something racist. She sent an inappropriate message on Facebook. And a lot of Black parents complained about it. But the district has a lot of problems with leveling. Some parents want their kids at a higher level... But she wrote on Facebook, “Bring it on Black bears.” or some

thing or whatever “I’m ready for you...” But it referred to Black bears like we are angry Black mothers.

The math supervisor’s stereotypical assumptions about Black mothers expressed on a website were barriers that Mary perceived affected how teachers and school officials interface with Black mothers. Racist remarks and a legacy of these master narratives may impact how Black mothers must navigate these school terrains and may be the reasons for teachers and school officials being guarded. For instance, another mother, India from RDA, discussed how she perceived the “angry Black mother trope” impacted how the school nurse interacted with her when she challenged a decision the nurse had made. She discussed how she scheduled an appointment with her in order to discuss with the nurse her decision to not clear her son to return from medical leave. When she arrived to the school, the nurse had added the principal, the vice principal, and another school official to sit in on this conference. India perceived that the nurses responded that way because they assumed that she would need assistance when interfacing with this “angry Black mother” because the mother disagreed with her approach. Both parents discussed how they perceived school officials had negative assumptions that negatively impacted their decision making. Mary’s account of how a school official used social media to reinforce negative assumptions about Black mothers and India’s account of how she felt when the nurse had called the principal and other officials into a meeting because she challenged her reinforced another mother’s perception of how Black mothers are perceived as angry or threatening. Haleemah discussed how her son’s charter school made her feel and how she perceived they treated Black mothers overall. Haleemah described an incident where she challenged school officials’ decision to suspend her son, and the school officials misconstrued her remarks and

maligned her as angry or threatening. She stated, “They suspended me from coming in the school!” She recalled the incident,

I said, “That’s not right. What if one of your peers said it looked like he wanted to do something behind the principal’s back but you really didn’t do it? You wouldn’t feel right.” What they had to say was, you’re suspended from the school because you threatened the welfare of the child, because I said these students have to live with each other once they walk outside.

Haleemah perceived that her responses were demonized, and since it was a charter, the school officials had unrestricted authority to exclude her from the school premises based on those negative assumptions. According to Haleemah, in charter schools the “parents have no rights... Privatization is actually not the greatest thing.” These mothers perceived that teachers and school officials with negative assumptions of the Black family, in these cases, of mothers, have the power to impede Black children’s and parents’ social and academic progress. Critical research has shown that the “angry Black woman” stereotype has impacted Black women and led them to experience ostracism, resentment, sadness and/or to take action (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015).

The negative assumptions from school officials were not just targeted towards Black mothers, but the children were also victims, which impacted their self-esteem and confidence. Pam from RDA perceived that the image of the “over-sassy and social inept Black girl” was imposed on her daughter started in the younger grades, which led to trivial matters being sensationalized and impacting Takiyah’s (her daughter’s) self-esteem. Pam stated:

I had a major meeting with her teachers, the principal and the vice principal because it was her birthday, and she did not share brownies. I even kept the emails with her fourth grade teacher. She did not share brownies with the fourth grade teacher. She shared with all of the teachers in the school, but not her fourth grade teacher. Therefore, she even make [*sic*] comments about how Takiyah’s behavior is rude because “she never shared her brownies with me.”

Pam perceived that this trivial incident should not have warranted this type of attention and involvement of the school officials. She felt since the topic was so trivial that the teacher sensationalized it and labeled her daughter rude. Pam attributed the targeting of her daughter with negative assumptions was due to the overwhelming number of “White women teachers” that work with children of color who lack “cultural sensitivity.” According to Pam, their lack of sensitivity makes them sensationalize incidents and sometimes led to harsher penalties. Pam stated:

I can’t believe we [Black parents] are prepared, and we hear all the time about little Black boys and how they push them into all these different behavioral and discipline problems, but they [teachers] are affecting the self-esteem of little Black girls.

According to Pam, she made a lot of accommodations for her son in an attempt to shield him from racial barriers, microaggressions or assumptions; however, she was unprepared to address teachers’ negative assumptions about her daughter who had to follow her brother each time he went to another school to avoid racial barriers.

A popular master narrative that Black boys have to deal with daily is the over-criminalized Black boy or what I coined as the “Black boy as a threat.” Mary became livid as she recounted a story in which all of the “brown” boys were taken off the school bus and reprimanded on the bench because a White female student alleged that someone kicked her. Mary narrated the event:

So, my son comes home, and he is in the third grade, and it is in the beginning of the school year because that is when a lot of things happen because they make assumptions about who you are, this little Black boy. So, he came home, and he said that he had been pulled off the bus with other boys, other brown boys. Other brown boys and taken to the



side of the school to a bench. And a girl came up to them, and it was a White girl and said, “No, it wasn’t him.” “No, it wasn’t him.” “No, it wasn’t him.” “No it wasn’t him.” “No it wasn’t him.” I’m like, what?! Outside? I am a lawyer, and I studied law from a prosecutorial background. So, I was like to my husband, “that was a little line up.”

Mary’s criticism of the bus driver was that all the other students who witnessed this on bus may vilify Black boys or stereotype them as trouble makers because of the “little line up.” Mary’s account of the criminalization of Black boys aligns with other parents’ accounts of how their Black male children are treated. Assumptions that Black boys are troubled, menacing, and criminalized emerged in all RDs and school types. Five other parents’ sons (Pam, Tasha, Haleemah, Star, and Kimberly,) were entangled in situations due to the assumption of which I coined the for this study “Black boy threat.” While all incidents were resolved after the mother’s intervention, initially the teachers and the school officials assumed the boys were the aggressors and were menacing the girls. The allegations of “the Black boy threat” ranged from the boys staring too much, hitting girls, and attempting to throw something at the teachers. All incidents were going to result in out-of-school suspension; however after the mothers’ interventions, all allegations were dropped. An incident with Pam’s son, Gavin happened when Gavin was only in second grade. She recounted:

We got to second grade where his teacher accused him of staring at a little White girl. Gavin came home that day and told me that he felt like a monster, and he spelled the word M-O-N-S-T-E-R. And I am like, “What did you say?” “I feel like a M-O-N-S-T-E-R,” and he was crying. And I said, “Ummm, Gavin why?” And he said, ... “the second grade teacher told me that I was staring at this girl and that that could be considered bullying.” And I said, “Excuse me?” And of course I said, “Well, you are not a monster.” And I said, “What happened with you and the little girl.” “Well, I was looking at her and she was looking at me. And I just wanted to be her friend.”

As Mary and Pam's examples show, negative assumptions applied to Black boys can have an adverse impact their children emotionally, socially, and academically. In this case, Gavin internalized this incident, and it negatively impacted his self-image. Haleemah described her son's "decline in spirit," which led her to take them out of the well-known charter school in RDC. Kimberly's son was the victim of bullying; however, he was referred to a program in the RDA for troubled boys who had problems acclimating in the suburban public school. Also from RDA, allegations against Tasha's son were unfounded due to the young lady recanting her story. From RDB, Star's young son identified that he and his friends were targeted and harassed at lunchtime by the lunch attendant, despite exhibiting behaviors that were similar to other children of other races in the cafeteria. According to the Black mothers' perceptions in this study, negative assumptions held by teachers and school officials impacted the children and in some cases led to the following outcomes: hyper-monitoring, hyper-sensationalizing, and hyper-restricting Black children's behavior and to the children feeling diminished self-esteem, low self-worth and even self-loathing. Similar to mothers in this study, some caregivers described that educators "target Black youth for disciplinary infractions" and "attributed this close scrutiny to prejudicial beliefs and assumptions" (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 277). Parents in this study were aware that without parental intervention of involvement, these negative assumptions have the capacity to hurt their children emotionally, socially, and academically.

### **Unwillingness or Insensitivity about Reconciling America's racist past**

Black mothers exhibited frustration at teachers' approaches to the teaching of history, the topic of slavery, and exclusive curricula. These mothers emphatically held the expectation that school systems or teachers are responsible for acknowledging Blacks' contribution to America and teaching American history (and sensitive topics like slavery) in a manner that leans towards the racial reconciliation of the legacy of oppression in America. Most of the mothers across school types and across residential districts A, B, and C expressed frustration with teachers and district officials for failing this generation through its monocultural curriculum. The majority of Black mothers agreed that systematically, Blacks are intentionally omitted from history, and their Black children are systemically denied access to a curriculum that validates Black American achievement and acknowledges their complex role in this country. Pam, from RDB, described how her daughter came home in sixth grade and expressly showed objection to how the history of slavery in America was being delivered in the classroom. Pam explained that in her daughter's middle school, there was a strong attempt to trivialize or minimize the harrowing and tortuous reality of chattel slavery in America:

It was how slavery was introduced as a slavery game... my daughter comes home on Wednesday to tell me, "Mom, I think I am going to mess up, I think I'm going to do bad in social studies." "What are you talking about?" "Well because were playing a slavery game, and I decide to burn down the barn." [laughter] I said, "Takiya, what are you talking about?" "The slavery game. We were told that in order to succeed, we have to follow what the overseer says, and I didn't want to do that because it was slavery. So I decided to burn down the barn." And I said to her, "That's a good thing."

The game was a part of the district-wide middle school curriculum, which attempted to engage students in a simulative experience of chattel slavery in America. Pam and other mothers across the district criticized the district at board meetings for not presenting American history in a true vein and thus understating the genocide, mutilation, and harsh oppression Blacks endured under

the weight of White supremacy for hundreds of years. Whitley, a teacher by trade but now a stay-at-home married mom with two children in the RDA, also spoke about the same issue of teachers and district administrators intentionally ignoring the historical truths of Black history. According to Whitley, she was aware of some of the other presentations of Black history in her school district that she deemed racist and insensitive. During her interview, Whitley revealed how one class had done a mock slave auction, and the White students feigned the purchase of the only Black student in the class. Whitley admonished,

They can do a lot better with regards to teaching African American kids. And even in the towns like where I live in. Where I look at our school as a gem, but I look at other schools and you're doing a slave auction. Like really? That's all you can? Like really, how is that going to build up a kid's, like you know?... New Jersey has a curriculum in place like the Amistad, where you can teach it [American history] differently without it being a negative but a positive. People are still not choosing to do that?

Whitley recounted an incident that took place in her district where the teacher condoned students engaging in a mock slave auction where some of the students of color were sold. Another school in her district hung “WANTED” drawings of Black people in the hallways to depict fugitive slaves. Whitley discussed how she was a teacher who taught the NJAmistad curriculum in another district, and it is New Jersey law. The NJAmistad Bill was passed in 2002 and mandates schools from K–12 to implement a more infused approach to teaching United States and world history by presenting African Americans as agents and major contributors to the American experience rather than only passive victims of slavery (<http://njamistadcurriculum.net>). Other mothers shared the same sentiment that teachers and district supervisors should be more intentional about affirming African Americans in history but thought they were unwilling to be sensitive or reconciliatory.

Pam juxtaposed what she perceived as a minimized and inconsequential presentation of slavery with the game in contrast to how teachers vividly and empathetically teach the Jewish Holocaust in social studies. Pam discussed her frustration with the teacher's reasoning for not showing some actual pictures that were taken of Blacks getting lynched in America:

I always juxtapose the Holocaust. They [the teachers] have no problems with showing imagery with regard to that. I have a vivid image from my kids work with bodies laying in a pit. Very vile. And I understand that. But the same idea that you can't show a person hanging from a tree and describe that along the same lines, to me, it's problematic. There seems to be a bias, and there seems to be a pushing forward of a very, very Jewish agenda in this district, but not a full explanation of slavery, the impact, and how it continues into present day, in this year, of slavery. How we're still suffering because of certain things put in place.

Pam's criticism of the district or school seemed to be that the teachers or the district were unwilling to present Black history accurately or to acknowledge the atrocities that Blacks faced in this country. The majority of the mothers discussed specifically teachers' mistreatment of subject of slavery. They criticized them for not addressing the ideology of White supremacy, not showing the severity of the cruelty, and not being mindful to Black students' sensitivity around the subject. Nicole, a teacher by trade from the RDB, depicted a time when her daughter's White friend informed her that her daughter Simone had a bad day at school because of the lesson that the teacher taught. Nicole discussed her frustration with the teacher for delivering the lesson in such a way that disregarded her daughter's feelings, especially where there were so few Black students in the class:

She came home and thought I guess Black people were born slaves. I was like, "No. You know. You were enslaved, right. You come from people who were kings and queens." But I remember her coming home and her girlfriend across the street. "Simone's very sad today." I said, "But why?" "Because today we were talking about slavery and Simone just

felt really bad. She just put her head down.” You know and I am just thinking. You can imagine what I was thinking. There I go with the teacher. You mean to tell me when you teach this lesson with the only Black kid in the class and you are going to make it seem like it's her fault. You didn't talk about how people enslaved people just because...my daughter came home feeling really really bad.

The insensitivity of teachers in their treatment of slavery is emblematic of teachers at these schools not being sensitive to the feelings of their Black students overall. During her parent interview, Pam from RDA intimated her impression of the reasons teachers are unwilling to be transparent about slavery: their desire to protect “Whiteness.” Pam recounted the discussion she had with her daughter's teacher about an inappropriate response she gave to a White student during a lesson discussing slavery:

A White kid is going to ask, “Were there any good owners?” And the teacher went on to say Phillis Wheatley. I said, “That's a stretch.” I said, “Why is it so difficult for you to say no?” I said, “You could have explained that given the context of what slavery was and how they dehumanized a group of people, you can't call anybody good in that sense...You would rather protect the self-esteem of the White student from saying that it was not good as opposed to saying a statement that makes sense. That given the nature of slavery, the people who were running this institution, it was not good. You would never consider saying that about the Jewish Holocaust. Why are you feeling comfortable about doing this about slavery?”

Pam's sentiments expressed in her personal interview were aligned to another mother's sentiments. In a focus group with other mothers from residential district A, which was the most racially diverse suburban public school district in the study, Carol also iterated what she perceived was the reason for the invisibility or the exclusivity of Blacks in the curriculum, which she also felt was a global issue. She believed that it is an unwillingness to present the truth and to ignore the history of Blacks in order to not offend “Whiteness.” Carol insisted,

I think we definitely have an issue, obviously, in the country, but it's certainly in our

district as well in terms of the desire to keep White people comfortable... I actually think they know very well what they're doing, because they're trying to balance teaching this subject because it has to be taught, with doing it in a way that doesn't make Johnny [White students] feel bad when he goes home... We get this very watered-down version of our history. If you look at the Holocaust, there's a common enemy... people can kind of rally around that because they don't perceive themselves to be participants in that.

Both Carol and Pam perceived that teachers' reticence or unwillingness to present American history and the experience of African Americans in this country accurately is possibly tied to Whites' discomfort with presenting atrocities in America. They perceived that since the Holocaust did not happen in America, Americans would be more willing to "rally around" that issue because Americans were not negative "participants" but considered allies in its eradication.

Black mothers in this study seemed aware of the progress and the struggle to move this country's consciousness and the mandates (such as the NJAmistad curriculum, the Martin Luther King holiday, and the hiring of diversity coordinators) put in place to be more racially inclusive. The mothers discussed their frustration with their children's schools who still are not being intentional, strategic, or willing to reconcile America's past of oppression, their omission or misrepresentation of African American achievements and contributions to this country, or the reality of Blacks' oppression during slavery. Another parent, Wanda, an educator who lives in RDB, chose to put her son, Michael, in a prestigious academically respected private school since first grade instead of the local public school because of the following reasons she provided: smaller sizes, diversity coordinator, and the high quality of the education. Despite the many advantages of the private school, Wanda also felt that the private school did not do a good job being culturally and historically inclusive to Black students. Wanda stated:

I hadn't felt that they have really dived deep into African American history, and consistently stumbled on what to do for Martin Luther King from a school perspective

versus a parent perspective. And integrating what we've contributed into the curriculum at a level that I think is appropriate for a school that's teaching future leaders.

While the school has a diversity coordinator and the Black student population does exist, she felt the school has not been intentional in being historically and culturally inclusive. Wanda confessed her disappointment:

They also haven't really been committed to having a faculty mix that, at least, reflects the students, let alone being more reflective of the greater community. And so I just don't feel that they are committed to affirming my son for who he is as a young Black man, affirming who we are as African Americans and our contributions.

Wanda's sentiments summarized the overall feelings that Black mothers have. Teachers and school officials have the responsibility to teach history in a racially reconciliatory manner or to be culturally relevant when teaching the curriculum. However, according to the Black mothers' perceptions, the schools their children attend lack diversity or intentionality about being reconciliatory or affirming African Americans specifically through culturally responsive teaching or implementing a curriculum that is inclusive of African Americans' complex role in the history of America.

### **Culturally Disconnected and Distant Towards Black Children**

On top of the multiple challenges with the curriculum and schools' exclusionary practices that Black mothers identified earlier, they also described a sense of cultural disconnectedness and invisibility that they and their children experienced in schools today. Across all school types, SES, and RDs, mothers described teachers and school officials who have not made Black families feel included, loved, welcomed, and affirmed. For example, Nicole gave an account of the school giving a parade for Halloween, and the school or residents were not sensitive, empathetic,



or even oblivious to the Blacks' interpretation or pain associated to symbolic representations of the legacy of oppression they and their ancestors experienced. Nicole told of a time she arrived at the parade; she realized that one student held a 6-foot pole with the Confederate flag waving. She talked about how she was offended and accosted the principal to get the flag removed. While the principal acquiesced, the White principal and other neighbors were oblivious to the flag's offensiveness. She attributed this to the school community's disconnectedness from the Black experience. She describes the event as follows: "...Disconnected. When they talk about slavery, it's like, when did that happen? That happened a thousand years ago. Like, everybody's fine now...I always find myself having to have this lesson on the block." Nicole regretted thinking her children could remain in a district that ignored them spatially, culturally, and in history:

Twenty years ago I thought, as long as he's [her son] smart. They'll like him, and he will do well. You know I had to learn. I just had to go through it. And now I reflect back and say, "OK, if I can do it all again, I will pick that environment that was emotionally safe for my children."

She deemed a predominantly White school, with little to no intentionality of diversity in staff or students, an environment where her children are invisible or ignored and/or schools where curricula omit Blacks' contributions to America from history as an environment that is "emotionally" unsafe for her children. Star from RDB who took her daughter out of the predominantly White private school with little to no diversity in staff and students and put both of her children in a more diverse neighborhood public school was concerned about her son's connection with his teachers and school officials. Star confessed,

I think for my son it's different, and I really do believe it's different for Black boys. I think that's my concern and my worry for my son because there isn't anybody that he connects

with. He had one teacher in the third grade who he now has as one of his teacher in the fifth grade, which is great because she is a Black woman. She loves education. And so, I knew from the door given my profession, that she was going to be a person that connects with her students, but it's still, for me, not enough... The connection that Black males need they're not getting, and that's my biggest concern.

Parents showed deep concern with how their Black male children fared in these schools. Some mothers were intentionally seeking teachers or mentors that would affirm their children, especially their boys; instead they felt that the adults were disconnected and sometimes distant. During the personal interviews, a RDA mother named Mary, who is a lawyer and has a son attending a diverse (schools with more than 20% but less than 60% or more non-White students) middle school in a middle class neighborhood, shared a similar concern and gave one account of her and her son feeling invisible at a school meeting:

They [White teachers hosting the meeting] did not make eye contact. My son and I were the only Black people there. They did not make eye contact with us. They did not make eye contact with my son. I was just so offended by it all. When they talked to the people, they talked to all the White people. They didn't even look in our direction... But they did not even look in his direction during the presentation. And I think that is a problem. And you want my son to go away with you for a week when you can't even look him or me in the eye.

This type of microaggression, micro-invalidating, of being ignored or overlooked, communicated to the parent that she and her son were not welcomed, or they did not belong in that space.

While she attributed their treatment of them to the teachers making assumptions about him, she also felt led to resist that microaggression by making her presence felt in the room. She intimated that her son had grown accustomed to the invisibility and that while he may have been "used to it," she was offended: "I think that is a problem." One mother, Star from RDB, felt similarly after attending an open house for her daughter at her predominantly White private school. Although there were only two Black students, Star described her evening:

For example, one parent-back-to-school night, they had the pictures of all the kids on the wall in the first grade, and there was only one other African American student in the class, a little girl, and they had their names switched. It was two little Black girls, but they didn't know which one was who, so my daughter had the other girl's name, and the other young lady had my daughter's name under her picture. And we had to explain... Yeah, and this was by October, so we were a little disappointed because we felt like, at this point, you should've known which child was which, so that was just one incident. There were a couple others, so by the time she hit the second grade, we decided for the amount of money that we were paying, we didn't necessarily feel that it was significantly better...I think for us it was a disconnect in race and understanding.

This oversight on the part of the staff translated to the parents as a type of micro-invalidating.

When experiencing a micro-invalidating, people of color feel that their contributions or in this case their presence is deemed less valuable and visible than a White person's (Sue et al., 2008).

In addition to being ignored or feeling invisible in White spaces, Black mothers' feelings of invisibility go beyond that. A deeper theme emerged of teachers not being vigilant or even mindful to the realities that Black students face. Another mom, Lora, a recently separated middle class mom of two from the town in RDB, talked about the her male child's feeling of invisibility and the teachers' cultural disconnectedness, which prevents them from understanding the dynamics of a Black boy living in the predominantly White town (White 65.4%, Asian 25.8%, Hispanic 3.8%, Black 2.9%). Lora's son Thomas attended the public school in RDB for his entire school career; however, since his seventh grade year, there were three incidents where his White peers yelled racial slurs. Lora stated:

I guess, I don't like the fact that until recently, they [teachers] seemed kind of disconnected from what's going on in terms of bullying. Because we've gone through certain situations, and you can tell, they're not aware of certain things in terms of the African American experience. And I guess that speaks to the fact that we're, our numbers, they're [the White population] growing but we're [Blacks] not....We [the Black student body] don't have high numbers here, so they've never had to be aware of the African American child's experience in the school where no one looks like them.

To Lora's point, the teachers did not acknowledge the possible racial tension that could exist for a Black boy living in predominantly White spaces. This also served as a micro-invalidating when the reality of racial barriers are negated or diminished (Sue et al., 2008). Nicole and Lora's sentiments were similar. Lora's point that this town's lack of diversity or the unchanged number of Black families in the district was purposeful. However, even in cities where there is a high density of Black students, teachers' classroom or school norms could distance Black students. Haleemah, a beautician and a single working class mother in the RBC, sought out good schools to educate her three boys. While she thought her educational choices were going to empower her children, she felt the opposite when her boys were in the well-known highly regarded charter school within an urban neighborhood with a high density Black student population. She recounted her experience of how the teachers were culturally disconnected and how it impacted Black boys the most. Haleemah shared:

It was very, very, very, very restrictive on a young male, Black male...They [the school officials] just have a move about them and even though the school emulates African culture with the drumming and stuff, that's all a shell. Stop. They don't understand Black boys. These teachers-I mean, I'm not in their shoes. I don't know what their love is or whatever, but they have no idea. They're not even from this area. They made a whole teachers' village downtown to house teachers that come from different areas and social backgrounds, and economic backgrounds, to deal with our kids. They're calling us all day because they don't know how to deal with the energy of this child.

She talked about how her children were "overlooked," demeaned, labeled, and misunderstood. She felt that the teachers she described as being from "different areas and social backgrounds, and economic backgrounds" did not understand how Black boys learned culturally and the repression of the boys resulted in them experiencing what she called a "decline in their spirit."

She blamed the school for “stripping them [her sons] of their entire dignity” due to them feeling culturally and emotionally ignored. According to Sue et al. (2008), in schools, Black students report microaggressive behaviors by teachers that invalidate their contributions, send a message of low expectations, and restrict their movements, leaving students Black students with feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem.

According to these mothers, teachers, school officials, and sometimes other parents intentionally create distance, disconnectedness, and invisibility. Overall, Black mothers put a lot of onus on the teachers and school officials for creating environments where Black children feel welcomed. Despite these mothers’ perceptions of racial tension, they choose these schools for their children and were actively engaged in their children schools in order to help their children navigate these spaces. They even spoke of different strategies they have used to navigate and contest these racial barriers in order for their children to be emotionally, socially, and academically successful.

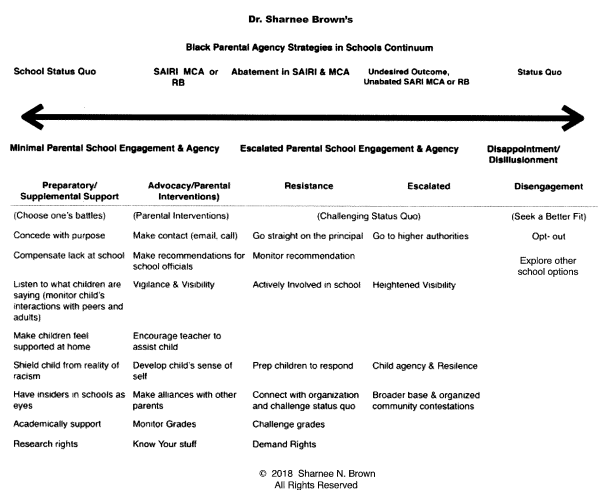
### **Parent Involvement Strategies of Agency**

All of the Black mothers who participated in the study revealed that individual, institutional, and structural racism exists at the schools their children currently attend. The third overall theme that emerged from the data was the various ways that Black mothers attempted to combat these racial barriers (RB), subtle almost intangible “racialized” incidents (SAIRI) or microaggressions (MCA) daily. Their strategies ranged from at-home strategies, to minimal school engagement, to more escalated forms of school engagement. While methods differed, all mothers from all residential districts used the methods exhibited in Table 4. Of all the strategies that were

used, some subthemes or strategies were more often used against all forms of RB, SAIRI, and MCA of them all across all RDs: racial socialization, developing kids' sense of self, being hyper-involved or hyper-visible, child agency, and exploring other options looking for the right fit.

Based on the data from this study only, I developed a continuum, Black Parental Agency Strategies in Schools Continuum (see Appendix for Figure 4), in order to visualize the patterns of parental involvement that emerged across all SES and RDs. The first stage of the continuum is preparatory stage/supplemental stage, in which the parent is in a continual state of anticipation for the expectation of an RB, SAIRI, or MCA to occur. While parents in this stage are not physically engaged in the school, it is a preparatory or anticipatory state until their children or themselves were confronted with an RB, SAIRI, or MCA. Once one of the three types of barriers emerge, parental engagement advanced up the continuum to a minimally active parental engagement stage with the hopes of abating or resolving the RB, SAIRI, or MCA. If the parents received an undesired outcome or if the RBs, SAIRIs or MCA continued, the parents were willing and many times resorted to more escalated parental school engagement strategies. In many cases, parents ultimately opted to disengage in the school if there were no abatements or if the parents believed efforts were futile to change the outcome or environment for their child.

*Figure 4.* Black parental agency strategies in schools continuum (See Appendix B).



### **Preparation Stage: Racial Socialization Advances to Development of a Sense of Self**

The lowest stage on the continuum is not one of passivity but is classified as a hovering stage for parents in anticipation of a need to prepare one's child or oneself for a RB, SAIRI, MCA encounter. Due to the fact that all mothers see America as a place where racism is ingrained and inherent in society, all parents across RDs believed that although they had made sound educational choices for their children, they anticipated or soon realized they needed to combat racism in the schools that their children attend. The preparatory stage remains in use until a barrier arises, which will cause one to advance up the continuum and then return back to that stage, if the RB is abated for the duration of his or her schooling. According to the parents, the majority of the work done in the preparatory stage happens at home or outside of the school. The preparatory stage is where mothers shielded their children from the reality of racism.

In this study, many mothers practiced racial socialization, and they did so using a range of approaches. The manner in which the mothers in this study practiced racial socialization and the messages they imparted were dependent upon the child's maturity level, the school's demographics, and the specific child's readiness to exercise voice. Hughes et al. (2006) differentiated socialization messages and divided them among cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism. Of the four types, cultural socialization and preparation for bias were most commonly referenced by participants. One theme or strategy that these mothers revealed that had not appeared in the research literature on racial socialization is the need for parents to remain silent or protective about race until the child had developed a healthy sense of self.

## **Incubate From Racism & Insulate With Racial Pride**

The parents in this study were committed to their children's positive self-development, and they were intentional about helping their children thrive in a world where they will experience RB, SAIRI, and MCA. While that was the reality, the parents believed that their children needed a period in which they could flourish without knowing that racism existed. While the length of time a parent kept their children in this stage varied, it was an opportunity for the children to be unhampered by the negative impact of racism. The majority of parents felt that it was their responsibility to incubate their children from the harm of racism and then insulate their children with messages of racial pride. Pam stated,

I am not going to lie. I made them believe that there was no racism. Just so that they could grow. You know and when they were old enough, and it's usually on the Sabbath, on a day like this, that we would actually sit down and have discussions and examples about what it means. I started having to talk with them when they are old enough to understand.

Another parent talked about how she and her husband made intentional decisions to quietly resolve matters at school and re-message incident so their children would not perceive racism.

Nicole recounted:

My husband and I were like. I think we were quiet because we were embarrassed. You know what I mean. Or we felt guilty. You know. So we would just look at each other and talk. But we would whisper. "What do you think? What are you going to do? Are you going to call tomorrow? I'm going to call tomorrow." But we never wanted those kids to hear it because I didn't want them to be like, "my teacher don't like me." We didn't want to go there the next day like that. Even though I was mad. You didn't want him [her son] to think that the teacher didn't like him or just didn't know how to teach him. I'm not even going to say didn't like him. Maybe they just really don't know how to teach Black boys. I don't really know. Because you look at these people and they look nice. They sound nice. They look decent.



Although mothers anticipated their children would be confronted with racial barriers, this shielding was necessary temporarily to protect their children's self-esteem and to help them feel secure in these spaces. Although parents were silent about racism, they were not silent about race. A sense of security is also created by the parents proactively insulating their children with positive messages of racial pride before they are exposed to alternative racial messages about "Blackness." Parents begin cultural socialization in order to combat racism. According to Friend, Hunter, and Fletcher (2011), racial socialization is "a culturally-specific parenting practice by which African American parents indoctrinate their children with the attitudes, perceptions, values, and behaviors that parents deem appropriate for their ethnic group" (p. 41). In this stage, mothers prepare their children prior to encountering racial barriers themselves first hand. Nicole prepared Simone each morning before she went into her predominantly White school:

With the barriers, I just remember always kissing my daughter in the morning and just making sure she was proud to be Black... I would just point something out positive to her about being Black before I sent her out the door so she can go and deal with what ever she was dealing with during the day...I used to tell my husband I got to give them their medicine before they leave.

In addition to the in-home efforts, some of the parents sought outside resources or supplemental means to incubate and insulate their children from the potential harms of racism.

Star sent her daughter to a camp for Black girls. She stated:

[Sister Foundation] is an organization that promotes the wholeness and the wellness of little Black girls, and so Jada participated in a summer camp...where every summer they had experiences just learning about themselves, appreciating themselves, exploring the

experience of Black women and Black girls, but more so building confidence, and that's what she got from that experience, the confidence.

This first part of the stage is actually to protect the child from the onslaught of racism they might face so they can develop a healthy "sense of self," untainted by the negative impact of racism. As they mature and as the sense of self developed, more information regarding race, racial pride, and the reality of racism is introduced.

The parent remained in this stage either until a RB, SAIRI, or MCA emerges. However, it is up to the parents' discretion as to what strategy she moves to or whether she stays in this phase. While in elementary school, Pam's son was the target of negative assumptions, "the Black boy threat." Due to his young age and his inability to navigate the situation, Pam decided to respond in this manner to the school officials:

They accused him of basically being this bully and this girl was some how afraid, the first thing that I said to the counselor, "I'm having flash backs of Emmett Till," I said, so I left my house and I went to that school and this is when we got into it. I said, "You will not even address my son. Okay if this is the approach that you are taking with me and those are the commentaries you are making in regard to is behavior, I don't want you talking to him. Because I don't want what you say to affect how he feels about him self. Do not—you do not have my permission to speak to my child without me there. Because I need to basically control that information before it hits him."

Pam, in this situation, gave insight to her discernment process, almost as if asking the question: Would my child be able to sustain a healthy perspective or sense of self if he understood the negative assumption that is being imposed? In this case, the mother thought it would be better to shield him from the message and be able to discuss the situation with her son instead of the teacher. Although the parent is a first generation Trinidadian, her reference to Emmitt Till, a Black American boy who was beaten and thrown in the river for whistling at a White woman by

White men in the South, spoke of the “fear” for their Black male children that many Black mothers discussed in this study. Pam’s demand that the teacher not address her son was to shield him from the common negative assumptions of Black boys, “the Black boy threat.” The mother attempted to protect his sense of self, and to intervene before the enforcement of harsh penalties and hyper-restriction. Her instincts were to incubate and insulate him from racial messages until he is able to resist and persist on his own.

### **Develop a Sense of Self**

This incubation from racism and insulation of racial pride are parental attempts for children to develop a healthy sense of self. One interracial couple struggled with this concept. The White father wanted his children to attend the private school that was his wife’s alma mater. Although she agreed and she liked what the school had to offer, she was reluctant to send her kids so early in their childhood. Instead, Shirley wanted to wait until high school because it was a predominantly White elite environment. She gave these reasons:

They do not need to be there until high school. At the time, he really couldn’t understand it. He was like, ‘It is a really great school’...They don’t need to be there that long. And then he started to understand why because they still will be Black women in America, and I need them to have a certain sense of self before they present themselves to the rest of the world.

Shirley presented a concept that Black children need time to be free from the impact of racism in order to “develop a sense of self.” In this case, sense of self means comfort in one’s own identity without any imposed prejudices or beliefs. Pam, although she is a first-generation Trinidadian Black woman, understood the racial context in which she lives with her Black, American-born children. Moreover, her husband, who is African American, born in a large predominantly Black,

poor urban city, had experiences with race that she never had growing up in Trinidad. Despite their differences, Pam asserted that she is cognizant of what it means to be Black in America and has been intentional in protecting her children's identity until they were ready. She described being invested in the African American tradition of racial consciousness. Pam's strategy is as follows:

I tried to get them to really see individuals. I tried to keep them children and naive—I'm going to be real— for a long time. Just so they could grow without any kind of scars to their race. I wanted them to get old enough to believe that all of this was designed for them. I didn't want them to know the reality that we experienced. And what we had to struggle with with regard to race and racism. I didn't want them to know that at such a young age. Because I felt it would make them angry, young. I didn't want them to feel that they couldn't do something because of race.

Mothers in this study expressed the desire for their children to discover themselves before the influence or weight of racism. Wanda pitched it differently in her interview. She described her son as "aware of his environment" and having the need to "compare himself" to others from his school. Thus, she felt the summers were opportunities to give her son, Michael, "a break" from being in his elite, predominantly White private school. That break was an opportunity for him to build his sense of self. Wanda mentioned,

We haven't tried to just extend school for another three months. Give him a break. Do some sports, do some academics, and try to find harmony ... As they develop, as their interests change, you want to protect their sense of self and what their abilities are. You don't want to feel like everything is, "I must be doing this because I'm not that good at it," type of a thing. So try to mix it up.

In this case, the summer was to act as temporary relief for her son to engage differently. It was to provide him a break from the normal school environment and allow him to be himself.

During the development of their children's sense-of-self period, parents begin to also develop their children's cultural socialization. Cultural socialization is described as the period

where parents give their children messages of racial pride and belonging to a racial identity.

Four of the mothers from two different RDs used the organization Sister Foundation to help build their Black girls' sense of self, to build their sense of racial pride and confidence. One of the four mothers, Nicole, informed,

My daughter, I got her involved in a program where she can be around young Black girls and she felt a different type of love during the summertime. And I think that she was awakened... So when I had her in this program during the summer, she just blossomed. And I believe that it was because for the first time she feel safe. She felt loved, validated.

Another mother, Star, who sends her daughter to this program, discussed how the program is a strategy to building their girls' sense of self:

We talk to them about the Black experience, education, take 'em to the museum, because that's the kind of family I came from, but the reality is, when they get into the experiences, they need to have something to draw upon other than our words. So what Sister Foundation did was, it gave her physical, tangible experiences where she could exercise her confidence, so that when she went into other environments, she had something to draw upon in those experiences, as opposed to just her father and I saying, "Being Black is amazing. You're powerful."

According to Shirley, other races that have a history of oppression develop it too to ensure their children's wellbeing. She stated,

I want to educate my own child, so that my child will have a sense of self, a sense of understanding of their [sic] own history, and a sense of ... that they develop a certain amount of strength, a personal strength, personal understanding, from having been taught their own history by people who look like them. Nobody punishes the Jewish community for that. You have Jewish schools all over the place, you got Hebrew schools. In this stage, the goal is to shield and build the Black youth in order for them to develop a sense of themselves before they are in contact of with an RB, SAIRI, or MCA. Also, parents begin to shoulder up their children with positive messages of racial identity in preparation for the pejorative messaging their children will receive from the onslaught of racial barriers.

## Hyper-listening for RBs, SAIRIs, & MCAs

Another consistent finding or subtheme that emerged within all interviews was a form of agency, which I label *hyper-listening*. This strategy to contest racist manifestations consisted of mothers having conversations with their children, intently listening specifically for signs of RBs, SAIRI, or MCA or staying informed. This pattern is more of an active defense as opposed to being passive and reactionary. This pattern of “listening to stay on top of things” was necessary to ensure their children received the benefit of their parents’ advocacy. In the Black Parental Agency Continuum, “listening” for RB, SAIRI, or MCA could range from the minimally engaged behaviors of listening for occurrences of racial barriers or microaggressions to a more increased and assertive state of visibility or involvement.

Regardless of level of parental engagement on the continuum, parents had to be constantly on alert and aware of daily experiences to reduce the manifestations of racism or microaggressive behaviors. Carla cautioned African American mothers:

Make sure that you listen to your child because everything they are telling you is not wrong. Don’t always assume the teacher is right. Get the full story. Listen to the teacher, listen to the child but do not just dismiss the child. You need to hear everything and all the variables. Talk to the people in the school as well because you will be surprised with what people know.

This strategy of listening goes beyond just listening to students but also to anyone in the educational setting that gives parents insight to the environment in which their children are immersed. Haleemah stated,

Some of the parents that were wet behind the ears didn’t understand, like me. I was real [pro charter]... ready to put the sticker on my car. But, then, you have some veteran parents there that’s like, just one more year, just one more year. Then you listen and you’re like, wow. We really needed to commune together.

Haleemah revealed that listening to the veteran parents really gave her a sense of what the school was like, which contrasted with her initial impression of the school. For India, listening to other parents was a way to be attentive to any indications of RB, SAIRI and MCA: “I knew everyone, but I heard some negative things about [this middle school] and how it’s changed with not necessarily paying attention to minorities, not focusing on especially minority males. I went. I listened.”

While sharing some incidents of racism, Lora shared a story of how the administrators at her children’s school mishandled a racial incident because they made assumptions and did not allow a Black female student explain her story. In this case, because the parent listened and heard the full story, she was able to advocate for her daughter. Lora related the occurrence:

They didn’t ask, they were getting ready to suspend the Black girl. They didn’t know her mom was a lawyer. So, she called her mother, explained what happened and the mother came in. Well, the mother let it be known that this little girl, on social media, said some thing very racist, and then had the nerve to say it to those kids, like their face...And I guess they [the administrators] saw that the other girl [Black student] was upset, so they thought she was getting ready to fight her [the White student].

In essence, not listening, or not allowing the child to be heard, would have prevented the child from the benefit of the parent’s advocacy that is needed to resolve the instance.

Another mom, Nicole, discussed how listening to her normally timid son who was 10, brought forth an issue, which later revealed a pattern of discrimination. The teachers within this predominantly White public school were systematically blocking Black students from taking honors courses. Nicole from RDB told the account of her son speaking up for himself in this situation:

He said, “Mommy, you know, they didn’t place me in honors?” I was like, “Oh really. Why not?” He said, “I don’t know.” I’m thinking that maybe he didn’t get into honors be

cause everybody else's scores were much higher. He said, "But mommy. They put me in a class with the kids that were making like Cs and Bs." I was just like, "Oh really." He had to come to bring—he's ten—he had to bring that to my attention. He was in fifth grade. He had to bring that to my attention. I think that that was the first time he felt like he wasn't being treated fairly. Like he was cheated.

Listening for racial barriers kept the parents informed. The children were parents' eyes and ears of the school. Parents needed to build a pattern of listening and discussing the daily happenings in the school in order for parents to decipher where racial barriers were occurring in the schools. Depending on the mother's temperament and the number of times her child/children faced an RB, she could advance to any level of the continuum. In this last instance the mother moved to "emailing the teacher" in order to resolve or approach the teacher with this issue. It was ultimately escalated to her making contact with the principal.

### **Hyper-listening Advances to Visibility**

Most parents in the study moved from "listening" to another method of "visibility" and "involvement" or volunteering in the school in order to be watchful of teachers' or administrators' behavior. According to the narratives of many parents, if racial barriers persist at the school, a parent may opt to get involved at the school. The majority of the mothers, especially from RDA, were involved in "traditional" or "school-sanctioned" activities such as "class mom," PTA and attending open houses. The presence of the mother was specifically to challenge the status quo, relieve the specific child of the threat of RB, SAIRI, or MCA or to get a bird's eye view of the happenings in a school to make a judgment about the child's safety and wellbeing in the school.

The mothers took on traditional roles and more school-sanctioned activities such as PTA, class mom, or volunteering in various locations during the school day. However, mothers in the



study mentioned that they are involved or intentionally visible in their child's school to abate RB, SAIRI, or MCAs especially. Kimberly, from RDA, stated that she heard that message during her son's first year in the district that prompted her visible involvement:

I've found that as an African American mom at least in New Jersey or in this county, that you have to be known, both to the teacher and the faculty to make sure that they are aware that you're watching and that actively involved in your child's education. And that is something that I have to say, a mother when I first volunteered for the school PTA one night and one of the African American moms pulled me aside and she said, "If you're is going to attend this school district, you have to be actively involved." If you do not, then they may try to label, or stigmatize your child, especially as a boy. There seems to have been a period of time where boys especially in RDA elementary school or the district, I don't know, who had a zest for learning, lost that and they didn't understand why. And so she pulled me aside and said, "Look, you need to watch for that. And you have to make sure that you are involved actively both in the school system, in the community and you are aware of what's happening with your son." So because of that advice, that's what I've been doing.

Kimberly helped to understand that these mothers were participating in these school-sanctioned activities in order to "watch," prevent, or abate the racial barriers their children may face. She was informed of this strategy by another parent whose child was graduating when her son was in kindergarten. Carol also spoke to how her intentional visibility becomes a form of access where normally there would have been barriers. Carol recounted:

I have later been involved in the PTAs since they've been in preschool. Though, I think one year I wasn't the class mom in at least one of their classes. I think a couple of years I did the same time for both of them. So my strategy has been to be involved in the school through the Parent Teacher Association or in middle school they called it the Home School Association, the HSA. Because I thought it was critical to have a foot in the door and have access to the administrators and the teachers. So that has been my strategy that I have used and will continue to use because it has worked. So I was able to develop or at least see the teachers a lot more than some parents that weren't as active or involved in the school

Pam resorted to visibility when she felt as if her son was not talking enough about what was going on in the school but he exhibited low self-esteem or low confidence after school. She chose the method of being involved so that she would be able to see things for herself. She said,

But with this school being—I would say 50/50 White/Black, I was very disappointed in the teachers' approach. I had to correct her on many things. I felt that there were times when he came home, and I encourage him to do a lot of talking, feeling as if he was not important in that classroom. As if she never noticed him. Which encouraged me to become very active. So I volunteered a lot. I was the kindergarten monitor during recess and all these different things. I changed my schedule to accommodate his schedule so I can be more involved in what he was being exposed to, which would make him feel the way he was feeling when he came home. Some of my observations were very tarnished. I was very disappointed. Because my thing, I was in an environment that was mixed and balanced and so called "liberal." I expected a little bit more. You know the teachers were pretty much still old school. Pretty much like the teachers that I had encountered. They saw a little Black boy and they automatically assumed that he was going to be a problem although he was doing nothing. They already assumed that he didn't know the work.

After a conversation with the teacher who showed signs of low expectations, Shirley tried to use visibility in order to combat the systematic low expectations and lack of resources of the public school to which she was initially skeptical about sending her son. She recalled the end of the conversation with her son's teacher:

So I am glad you think my son is good at self-teaching himself, but that is not why I send him to school. I was like ok, he needs to be in a different environment, and being the parent that I am, I try. I am very active in all the kids' schools. I volunteer. I try to do things. I was a member of the PTA, while he was there.

Although he was not at the school long, she understood that her visibility would impact the experience that he had. Carol surmised,

It's something that they have learned how to do and have been able to do for years. I just look at it as a necessity in terms of just making sure my kids are taken care of and that they're getting the things that they need, when they need them. Just having that open-door access has been worth the headache and nausea of being in those meetings.

Thus these Black mothers used visibility to combat racial barriers like low expectations, negative assumptions about Black students, and low self-esteem. Also, visibility sent a message to the faculty and the staff of the school that these parents were watching and aware.

### **Child Agency**

After the incubation and the insulation period, parents actually inform their children about the reality of racism so that they could become their own advocates and establish voice. Parents felt this strategy was necessary in order to develop in their child a respectful sense of riposte to combat racism and then a quick recovery or resilience after the RB was addressed. The data showed that many parents intentionally try to give their children voice and agency to be able to navigate these situations on their own. The children become partners in this fight against RB, SAIRI, and MCA. India from RDB described her son with glee as she discussed his activism in the local high school that had a lot of publicized incidents of racism. She spoke of her son's ability to navigate racial barriers and issues at his diverse public high school, a school with many racial issues during his time at the school. India explained proudly,

Socially, he's also one that's very in tuned with what's happening in society, and he relates it back to his environment. There were things that he wasn't happy with from a race standpoint, but he was vocal. He would go to the board meetings, and he would get involved, and he would ... whether it be exercising his thoughts on paper in classes, or discussions in classes, and/or participating in groups that were aiming to help change that, he was involved.

According to India, his activism and having teachers that nurtured his sense of voice were contributors to his overall "success" at the school. Other mothers were full of pride at their children exercising voice to combat racism on their own initially.

For Shirley, Harriet's ability to combat her teacher's microaggressions towards her and her insensitivity towards people of color when teaching a noninclusive curriculum changed Harriet's perception about school. According to Shirley, her daughter grew frustrated with the social studies teacher because of how people of color were being excluded when she taught. Harriet decided to challenge this by writing an essay confronting her teacher on these issues. The daughter's advocacy led to a barrage of microaggressions and escalated insults from the teacher that were witnessed by other students, which eventually led to the student judiciary committee intervening and calling a conference. The parents of Harriet attended the meeting and "stood by" their daughter. According to her mother, it was as if after she stood up for herself, she liked school more. The mother read the essay her daughter wrote to the teacher and saw her daughter's resistance to racism as a rite of passage. When reading the essay, Shirley gestured with elation:

Cause when I read her paper I was sitting there, and I didn't quite realize I did it at the time. I was like, "Yessss!" [laugh] Cause, it's like. you do these things because even though we go through the trouble of putting our kids in these environment, I knew what I was putting my kids into when I put them in a predominantly White elitist kind of environment.

She felt that her husband and her daughter came to the realization that Blacks in America have to be prepared to combat racism. She stated,

It was always a running thing between me and [Harriet]. She is like, "You are such a radical. Like its Black power everywhere." There was always a thing that they say but now she gets it. And I said, "One day you'll see it." I said, "I don't try to make everything about race, but this county does."

According to Shirley, her methods of preparing her children for bias was misunderstood by her children and her husband, who was White. However, after this incident, both had a more clear understanding. Harriet's incident helped to understand that child agency is deemed as a necessary transition to the next stage of the continuum. Once children are able to show voice, advocacy, and resistance, mothers took on a less assertive role to a more supportive role of their children's development in their skill of resistance.

Pam was also excited when her son was able to articulate his issues with his middle school teacher at a meeting with the principal, the teacher, and his parents about the racial insensitivity he witnessed in the classroom:

And I had him [her son] speak to her [the teacher] and let him tell her exactly how he felt. And he told her that 'the first quarter you taught well, and I learned and I did well in Spanish. I got an A. He said, "The second quarter, you stopped teaching and no matter what I was asking, you wouldn't answer any of my questions. And you just started yelling at all the Black boys in the class for doing the same thing that the White boys were doing." He started, he named all the kids in the class, Black boys in the class that she was picking at and treating poorly. And he said, "and when I would ask you something. You said ask an other kid and that kid would be White, and I didn't like that. And I got a B. In the third quarter, right, you didn't teach anything, and you were just treating the Black boys badly." The principal said, "Well, Gavin, was any of this directed towards you." He said, "No, but you treating the boys that look like me badly, and I'm observing it And it's bothering me." And he said to the teacher, "Whenever, I would ask you anything, you would be dismissive'. Those were his words.... I am sitting there amazed and happy that he is able to say, "what you did was dismissive." I didn't even know that he knew the word so I was really moved by that.

The mothers felt that self-advocacy and agency are necessary for their children's wellbeing or survival in America, especially their schools. Nicole expressed deep concern for keeping her son in an elite public school that was predominantly White for too long and not developing his sense

of voice. She felt that she might have nurtured a young man whom she did not know if he developed his own voice. Nicole confessed:

Because I feel like my son is not as confident as he should be. So I'm just wondering if that would ever come. Will he ever be comfortable with his identity, First of all, being Black. Is he confident? Is he strong? Is he capable of getting out there in the real world having a voice and, and preach the truth. I don't know if my son has ever raised his hand and challenged somebody in class. I don't know if he has ever done it. And I worry. People like, "You worried about that?" Yeah. I really am. I am wondering if my son ever challenged something that he thought wasn't right or fair.

She went on to express how agency had to be nurtured and taught in order for a child to exercise it. When asked whether she thought it was necessary, she responded:

I believe so. Just think about now the climate. I don't want my son to go around thinking that it is okay to be treated a certain way. I don't want him to believe that it's okay. But I don't know if he's ever stood up for himself when he was mistreated or if he ever will. So I don't know, because I think that its something that you have to learn...Its okay to advocate for yourself.

As a form of independence, Black mothers rewarded and encouraged their children at a certain age to be able to resist racism, RBs, SAIRI, and MCA in a way that a parent would teach a child to resist bullies.

### **“Explore other options” and the “Right Fit”**

The last strategy in the continuum was also the one most frequently used by the parents in this study. The majority of the mothers across residential districts and school types had multiple school changes due to their exercise of the strategy to “explore other options” to seek out the “right fit” in response to various RBs, SAIRIs, or MCAs. Wanda's statement embodied the sentiment that was expressed by many parents:

It's not just about being at a school that's supposed to be the top school. If it means that that's going to tear down who your child is, or that's not going to build up who your child is. We don't stand still.

Wanda from RDB has decided to not keep her son in the current private high school program due to RBs (being culturally ignored and race being historically invisible in the curriculum) and go to another private school that is more diverse for his high school. Black parents disengaging from a school and seeking a right fit for their children in the 21st century could be compared to the historical occurrence of Blacks during Reconstruction who disengaged from public schools and sought alternative schooling or school choices “to raise academic achievement for black children, to dramatize the inadequacy of the existing schools, and to develop racial pride by teaching subjects that organizers believed the traditional curriculum ignored” (Forman, 2005, p. 1296).

While parents enter schools with an expectation to better meet the Black child's need, the mothers are aware of how pervasive racism is and how the right fit may be a temporary solution or an improvement but not a panacea or utopia. One participant helped unmask an important theme that reverberated throughout the majority of the interviews. While Carla from RDC brought forth the pattern of exiting when she mentioned “pulling her daughter out” of three institutions (public and charter) because they were not “good fits” for her daughter, it was Haleemah's interview that reversed the concept of leaving a school from being a sign of hopelessness, but leaving is elevated to being one of the highest forms of action or resistance and thus an escalated engagement strategy on the continuum: disengagement. According to Haleemah, “When you see your own child declining, you're like, ‘no, I got to do something.’” In this study, all mothers exercised a form of parental choice. In essence, all the schools that the

children attended were intentional and strategic decisions made by the parents. When RBs, SAIRI and MCA were unabated, parents' ultimate strategy was to leave the institution to look for a better fit for their child. Eleven mothers of the 16 used this strategy, "explore other options" seeking the "right fit" for their children. These 11 parents' schools had a substantial number of school changes. The data showed that in response to racism, RB, SAIRI and MCA many parents experienced four or more school changes (see Table 5).

Pam's son attended five schools in the RDA before he reached high school. She opted out of one elementary while her child was in kindergarten because of what she perceived as low expectations and assumptions about her son's intellectual ability. After perceiving that because her son was Black the teachers were not seeing his intelligence, she opted out of her neighborhood elementary school seeking another one that would engage her son in a full-day class and with more rigor. Once at the other elementary school, another RB emerged. In second grade, she took her son out of another elementary school because of experiences associated with to the racial barrier I coined as "the Black boy threat." After being blamed for being a threat to a girl student, Pam decided to "explore other options" seeking the "right fit for the child." Once in the other school, Pam decided to explore other options by taking her son out of his middle school choice because she perceived her son was a victim of his teacher's microaggression:

So he had this math teacher in the accelerated program. I think he was among two other Black kids in the class. Two Black kids, boys in that program. That teacher saw him interacting with some of his Black peers, and she made a comment to him in the hallway in the presence of his friends, which sort of got his attention. She said to him, "I don't want you associating with those boys. You do well in school. They don't do well in school." She didn't even know those boys.



After the son reported the incident to his mother and after the mother addressed the teacher, she decided that this school was not a good fit for her son. The constant moving of her son revealed the reality that Black mothers are willing to risk transition and disengage from a school to seek out an environment that would benefit the child more in search for a school with less racial barriers.

Nicole from RDB used the strategy “explore other options” seeking the “right fit” after she realized her daughter, Simone, experienced the same RB that her son had experienced five years ago, which was not being recommended for honors classes. Nicole reported,

The whole time she was in fifth grade in the back of mind I kept saying, “I hope they don’t treat her the way they treated Derrick. Because every day she would come home, you know, ‘I’m winning, mommy. I’m winning.’ It was always an A. ‘Yahh!’” ... Because I think she always wanted to place in honors without a problem. You know. And so again, just like Derrick, she place really high on her NJ—not her NJASK—she place really high on, I think that was the PARCC. That was the first year of PARCC. She placed really high. I think it was the 847. I’m not sure. I can’t really think right now. I’m sorry. And she had an A average. Maybe not a 97 but I think it was about a 94, and she did not place for honors as well. And so I had to go to the same channels that I – you know – I did before. I had to have a conversation with the principal. Then have a conversation with the supervisor in order to have my child placed in an honors class.

Reminiscent of the past experience she had with her son Derrick, she decided to consult other parents to see if this was a pattern. Her investigation confirmed that it was, in fact, a pattern in the school. However after unabated racial barriers and her daughter’s feelings of being culturally ignored and disconnected, the daughter exercised agency and convinced her mother to disengage from the predominantly White local public middle school. Nicole recounted how her daughter implored her to disengage from the school. According to the Nicole, Simone stated,

“Mommy, I don’t want to go back.” I’m like, “Well, why not? You’re a straight A student. Why wouldn’t you be able to go back to school?” And she couldn’t articulate it. I think she understood what it was but she knew that when she was there she didn’t feel good... so I started paying attention more and more to what she was saying, and I started observing her behavior. And then I realized—my husband and I was like, “We need to change.”

Again, the strategy of listening to her child for RBs and realizing her daughter’s continued sense of disconnection, she explored other options sought out a “right fit” for Simone at a private school with more diversity and creativity. The change resulted in her taking her daughter from the affluent predominantly White public school and paying for a more diverse private school.

Wanda from RDB who put her son, Michael, in a prestigious private school confessed that he would not be attending the school next year due to her feeling that Blacks are culturally and historically ignored. Wanda stated,

Well, I’m actually in the process of looking at another school for him. I don’t feel that, in my time, that they have pursued broadening the scope of the number of kids of color that are there. They kind of are just sitting at 10%, ... And that’s not real diversity to me. Also, the mix of the ... Right now there are seven boys and two girls, and I don’t think that that really does justice to the girls or the boys.

She sought out a “right fit.” She chose a nearby private school with more diversity, the integration of God, a “greater sense of community,” and “just the sheer numbers of being around African American men” as her reasons for switching schools.

Nicole summed up the process of searching for a “safe” place for Black children to be educated with the following trepidation and uncertainty:

It was no where to run so I don’t know what advice I could give to a parent because I realize that none of us really know, have the right answers. But if I could reset, I would make sure that I was raising my child in an environment where I felt safe. That’s the only clue that I would have, advice that I would give them because I really don’t know. Where can we go as Black parents? Where can we go move where our children can get a really

good education and not lose themselves their culture? Like where is that place in America. There's no place.

In essence, all school types in all RDs have exhibited some form of RBs, SAIRIs, and MCAs, which have caused parents to disengage using this strategy.

These three major overarching themes and various subthemes are interrelated and help to understand the lived experiences of 16 Black mothers who live in Normal County and whose children attend private, public, and charter schools. We learn their perceptions of racism or racial barriers that exist in their children's schools and the strategies they use daily to combat them.

These findings add a new layer to African American parental involvement strategies by adding to the repertoire of parental involvement strategies, strategies specifically used to contest racism or racial barriers.

<b>Mother's Name</b>	<b>Residential District</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b># of school changes</b>	<b>Racial Barriers</b>
<b>Shirley</b>	RDC	3 out of 4 children	3 elementary 3 elementary 6 elementary	closing of quality schools (independent & Catholic) low expectations differential treatment of Black boys
<b>Pam</b>	RDA	son	3 elementary 2 middle schools 3 school changes	low expectations Black boy threat MCA of Black friends
<b>Nicole</b>	RDB	daughter	opted not to continue in the district school	lack of access to honors culturally disconnected exclusive curriculum
<b>Star</b>	RDB	daughter	2 elementary	low expectations disconnectedness
<b>Haleemah</b>	RDA	2 sons		lack of access to quality schools negative culturally ignored assumptions about Black boys and mother hyper-policing and hyper-restrictive of Black boy behavior
<b>Carla</b>	RDA	daughter	2 elementary	Black children learn differently, negative assumptions hyper-policing and hyper-restriction
<b>Wanda</b>	RDB	boy	opting to not keep her son in the current private high school program	culturally ignored and historically ignored in the curriculum

*Figure 5.* “Explore other options” to seek the “right fit.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND SYNTHESIS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will expand upon the findings explored in chapter four and discuss the further implications. The purpose of this study was to explore African American mothers' lived experiences and their perspectives on the barriers within their children's schools (public, charter, or private) within the context of individual, institutional, or structural racism. I also sought to identify and understand the strategies these mothers used to address or overcome those barriers. A qualitative approach to this study presented the opportunity to gather rich descriptions of the Black mothers' lived experiences to accurately describe the phenomenon of racism and how it impacts their children's education. All 16 mothers self-identified as Black, lived in three residential districts in Normal County, and were descendants of Africans that were enslaved in America (except two mothers who were of Trinidadian descent). Data were collected through in-depth, video- and audio-recorded interviews of 15 mothers and focus groups with 11 mothers. The following research questions guided data collection in the study:

1. How do African American mothers whose ancestors were descendants from Africa and were enslaved in America perceive and address racism in their children's educational institutions?
2. What experiences with racism or racially motivated challenges have African American mothers had experienced through their children's public, private, or charter schools?
3. How do African American mothers respond to, contest, and/or overcome manifestations of ongoing structural racism within their children's schools and outside school?

4. How do African American mothers interpret the impact of school-based structural racism on their children's education?
5. How do African American mothers' experiences with, responses to, and perceptions of the influence of racism in their children's schools differ based on their socioeconomic status or type of school (public, private, charter) their child attends?

### **Implications for Literature**

These results contribute to the current literature in a number of ways: reinserting the context of racism as a contributing factor to the racial barriers that parents and students face in 21st century schools, presenting a continuum of strategies that Black mothers use to contest these barriers, identifying the specific sources of racism/racial practices being used in schools, and revisiting curricular failures or racial exclusion. The results from the study demonstrated that Black mothers strongly perceive racism and racial barriers have a significant impact on their children's education in the 21st century. Black mothers also perceived teachers and school officials as being the perpetrators of exclusionary practices that deny Black students of educational opportunities (honors programs, advanced placement classes), perpetrators of negative assumptions or harmful pathologies (Black boy threat, sassy Black girl, and angry mother) and unwilling to actively engage with Black and American history in ways that accurately address the trauma and oppression Blacks endured and the contributions Blacks made. Moreover, mothers viewed their children's schooling experiences as sometimes culturally disconnected and distant, with schools being places in which Black children suffer with feelings of invisibility, not being affirmed, or not having their sense of self nurtured.

Delgado posited four reasons why narratives, stories, or voices chronicling the experiences of people of color are important: “(a) reality is socially constructed, (b) stories are a powerful means for destroying and changing mind-sets, (c) stories have a community-building function, and (d) stories provide members of out-groups mental self-preservation” (as cited in Nguyen, 2012, p. 659). The Black mothers gave voice to their perceptions through counter-narratives and affirmed that racism exists in America, in their district, if not specifically in their children’s schools. The overall perception was that this “mistreatment” or “discrimination” in America is so pervasive that it is not easily eradicated and exists in all school types (private, public, and charter) and manifests similarly in some instances but differently in each town. The Black mothers viewed racism in 21st century schools as ranging from unaffirming to hostile, exclusionary, and culturally disconnected institutions, which sometimes left children and families feeling distant, invisible, or emotionally unsafe. In the main, mothers attributed the teachers and the school officials as the perpetrators of racial barriers, SAIRIs, or MCA. According to Allen (2012), there is a plethora of research shows that Black students on high school and college campuses are made to feel invisible, experience “differential treatment” by their professors or teachers, and are impacted by negative stereotypes due to their teachers’ “pejorative perceptions of Black identity” (p. 175). This study illuminated parents’ perceptions of the notion of teachers acting as “institutional agents” (Tyson, 2003) and “gatekeepers” (Allen, 2015; Allen & White-Smith, 2017) of school exclusionary practices (Allen, 2017). While studies have shown teacher agency against structural barriers (Allen, 2015; Blaisdell, 2016), this study revealed how mothers make sense of, experience, and respond to what they see as teachers acting as the perpetrators of

structural barriers and types of exclusion across school types and residential districts. Though much of the research literature has characterized Black mothers as lacking the social capital to advocate for their children's education and respond to hostile acts by people in positions of power (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013), the findings from this study show just the opposite. Moreover, presenting mothers' perspectives and experiences in their own words challenge the "master narrative" of Black mothers as less concerned and detached (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Fine, 1993), less involved (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Kohl, Lenqua, McMahon, 2000), and passive and marginalized outsiders or victims of structural barriers (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Olivos, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Rather, this study's data posit Black mothers as involved agentic mediators with similar aspirational values for their children (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Hubbard, 1999, 2005; Jackson, 2018) that are actively navigating their children through racial barriers (Carter, 2005; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Yosso, 2006) at their children's schools of choice on their own terms. Shifting the power dynamic from teachers to mothers, this study introduced a non-prototypical representation of the White teacher/Black mother binary school dynamic by showing the teachers and school officials as the perpetrators of the barriers but Black mothers as active resisters of those barriers and decision makers for their children as they navigate these spaces.

#### **Four Prevalent Barriers in Schools Within the Last Two Decades**

This study captured the pulse of racism within the last two decades and documented Black mothers' perceptions of how schools in America have (and have not) progressed on the



issue of racism within the last two decades. The findings of this study revealed three conundrums around racial relations in education in America in the last two decades. First, the participants emphasized that there has been a dramatic retrogressive shift in race relations in education within a short time in the areas inclusiveness, cultural connectedness and equity. Simultaneously, they described a continuation of a long legacy of racialized tracking and exclusion that has been systematically used to maintain racialized academic stratification at schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Finally, the data provide new insights on the impact of racism on children and their families (Allen, 2017; Blaisdell, 2016; Priest, Ferdinand, Paradies & Kelaher, 2014).

This study reveals that Black mothers have high educational expectations for their children's educational futures and have similar aspirations for their children as White families (Allen, 2017; Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Lareau, 1987; MacLeod, 1987). The majority of Black parents in this study benefited from financial mobility and intentionally sought out predominantly White neighbors or more diverse schools in order for their Black children to have the same access to resources and rigorous curricula they perceived they were marginalized from in their own educational experiences (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Despite the close proximity of Black and White students in these shared spaces, Black families, as they had gotten closer to this access, exclusionary practices such as opportunity hoarding, racialized leveling, and denying students access to honors class were perpetuated. Due to school practices such as being sleeked for classes by teacher recommendations, systematic exclusion has maintained continuous cycles of racial hierarchy. As has already been documented by prior studies, in situations where Blacks and Whites share the same school spaces, White students and few

students of color are able to access the rigorous curricular opportunities, and the majority of Blacks or students of color are further marginalized from the college preparatory track (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Research also shows that schools are effective institutions for preserving racial and class hierarchical stratification through continued racial and class segregation, racialized academic and ability tracking, and differential learning expectations (Allen, 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

According to research, schools also were complex and sometimes contradictory. They exposed a veneer of diversity while still inequitably distributing resources amongst races (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), and teachers were found to have espoused both cultural deficit explanations while acknowledging cultural and racial barriers for Black students (Allen, 2015). Bonilla-Silva's framework stated Black students are disadvantaged because they are "institutionally... being positioned systematically in the least advantaged locations for learning inside schools" (as cited in Diamond, 2006, p. 496). The findings from this study illuminated not White parents, but teachers, as agents to positioning Black students in less advantaged learning spaces based on the school practice of empowering teachers only to recommend students for these courses.

Exclusionary practices is a popular topic for scholarly examination (Allen, 2017; Sue et al., 2008). The findings in this study illuminate schools' superficial commitment to diversity and racial equity. Upon closer examination, school criteria and practices showed teachers empowered to act as institutional agents who make decisions as to whom gets put into and whom gets excluded from rigorous programs and curriculum. Tyson's (2011) research resonates with the evidence in RDA and RDB that desegregated schools are not really integrated, due to

racialized tracking, which “maintains a set of conditions in which academic success is linked with Whiteness” (p. 6). Leveling in RDA becomes a method of racial stratification because it systematically marginalizes Black students from rigorous curricula. This prevents access to weighted courses and college preparation. Mothers’ lived experiences in this study were consistent with the literature. While exposing exclusionary practices such as racialized leveling or restricting Black students’ access to honors curricular and these exclusionary practices’ impact on Black students’ academic outcomes (Oakes, 2005), this study’s contribution is the frank discussion of the social and emotional toil these barriers had on their children’s confidence or self-esteem. This investigation showed Black mothers’ contestation strategies (such as persistently going up the chain of command to demand their students are in these classes or exiting the schools due to teacher low expectations) used to navigate and resist these barriers.

Black mothers within this study attributed many of the racial barriers their children experienced at their school to the large number of White women teachers who teach in these schools who lack cultural competency. Research shows Black children who are taught by same- race teachers have more favorable outcomes in discipline or academic reporting. According to research, Black students who had same-race teachers had fewer discipline referrals (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) and more favorable reading and literacy reporting by their teachers (Downer, Goble, Myers & Pianta, 2016, 2016; Egalite, Kisidia & Winters, 2015). Research also shows that African American teachers have higher expectations and have more favorable opinions of African American children than Caucasian teachers (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008). The discussion of the impact of teacher subjectivity and teacher assumptions are

crucial to understanding their impact of implicit bias on teacher reporting and their perceptions of Black students' academic and behavioral performance. Contrastingly, the Black mothers in this study add to the existing literature the negative implications of not having same-race teachers or schools that are not intentional about teacher diversity. This study reinforced popularized master narratives of how Black families are viewed. According to parents, educators imposed stereotypical tropes ("the Black boy threat," "the sassy rude Black girl," and "the angry Black mother") onto the Black families and caused negative (judgments, sensationalized interpretations), which led to hyper-punish, hyper-scrutinize or further marginalize them. These findings are consistent with the literature: the vilification of Black boy behavior (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Noguera, 2001, 2003, 2008); the angry mother (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999); officials' assumptions of their children left them in emotional "unsafe" spaces, leaving families to feel misunderstood, feared, and even isolated.

While the plight of Black boys has begun to get much needed attention in policy circles as well as by educators and researchers, the experiences of Black girls remained underexplored and undertheorized. In this study, I found that Black girls faced similar challenges in schools as Black boys, such as low expectations, being seen as threatening, and behavioral. Thus, according to the mothers, the girls also received hyper-monitoring, hyper-punishment, and hyperbolized scrutiny from their teachers and school officials. Consistent with the literature, Black girls in this study were seen as initiators of resistance, resilient (Neal-Jackson, 2018; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Yosso, 2006), and exercising agency due to them questioning teacher practices, speaking out against barriers, sabotaging efforts to misrepresent history, and initiating school disengagement. However, there are limitations in generalizations about girls being

resilient that may underestimate the impact racial barriers may have on girls academically and socially. Salient questions could be raised about the impact racial barriers are having on Black girls socially, emotionally, and academically.

There is a need for more teachers of color and the identification of barriers that may hinder recruiting or retaining teachers of color for certain districts. The consequences of students not being exposed to same-race teachers may lead to higher referrals. Many educators rely on their own understandings of students of color (Allen, 2015), which in many cases may reflect dominant stereotypical and deficit views of culture (Delpit, 1995; Solorzano, 1997). By not challenging ideas about racism and without intentional focused effort, educators may perpetuate assumptions, which can have an adverse impact on the students. Roger and Brefield (2015) cautioned school officials to hear the input of mothers to identify barriers and to give meaningful input to remedy barriers. In this study, the mothers called for more diversity in staffing and sometimes asked counselors to reschedule their students to same-race teachers' classes to ensure their children felt a "sense of community" and "emotionally connected."

In this study, Black mothers illuminated how teachers and school officials were not intentional about addressing accurate historical accounts, acknowledging Blacks' complex role in this country, or their contributions. The mothers revealed a national conundrum of how history is being taught in classrooms. Black mothers were especially disappointed in teachers' lack of emphasis on including Black history or teachers' insensitive treatment of the topic of slavery. Black mothers felt that teachers and school officials have the responsibility to be culturally relevant, inclusive, and racially reconciliatory when teaching the curricula and students of color. The findings are consistent with a Teaching Tolerance Report (Turner, 2018). Southern Poverty

and Law Center (SPLC) surveyed high school seniors and teachers and found seven problems of practice of how slavery was taught that is consistent (Turner, 2018). Four of the seven problems detailed in the report were consistent with the issue the Black mothers in this study saw racism as a southern problem only, do not deal with White supremacy, focused on positive as opposed to harsh realities, and engaged in traumatic simulations that could be offensive (Turner, 2018). Curriculum that omits people of color, marginalizes their perspectives as peripheral, or totally excludes them, places “Whiteness” as the default race at the center. Across all RDs (A, B, & C), Black mothers spoke of the specific treatment of the topic of slavery as a symbolic indicator of a teacher’s cultural competence. The mothers saw the treatment of slavery as a gauge of teachers’ level of empathy, connectedness and understanding of the Black experience, and acknowledgement of the history of oppression Blacks faced in this country.

Beyond the topic of slavery, mothers perceived a lack of emphasis on teaching a curriculum that is inclusive and multicultural. According to Blaisdell (2016), the concept of “Whiteness” functions as property in that it “bestows the right to use and enjoy or, alternatively, to deny access to resources” (p. 250). In essence, Whiteness as property can be identified in the curriculum a school ascribes to, how resources are allocated to students, what norms are celebrated or punished, and the race reflected in the curriculum (Blaisdell, 2016). Nieto (1994) describes a monocultural education as one where the “school structures, policies, curricula, instructional materials and even pedagogical strategies are primarily representative of only the dominant culture” (p. 10). Nieto’s work approaches implementation of a multicultural model that sees where schools are and how to move them beyond tolerance to other levels: acceptance, respect to affirming, solidarity, and critique. According to the parents participating in this study,

schools, district curriculum, or teachers who were not intentional about these practices were deemed emotionally unsafe places for Black students, and in many cases, mothers decided to respond to these barriers by challenging these practices or disengaging from the school. Davis (2007) described the importance of teachers honestly discussing racial identity to achieve multicultural democracy. As opposed to being perpetrators or unwilling to reconcile America's racist past, according to Davis (2007), teachers can help students achieve a positive racial identity by implementing a classroom intervention strategy or framework called Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education framework, which teachers are empowered to improve racial identity and not perpetuate cultural disconnected and racial invisibility in the curriculum: "(1) understanding students' racial and cultural backgrounds, (2) providing students with a more diverse, multicultural curriculum, and (3) generating cooperative learning between students" (p. 209). In comparison to some of the past practices that parents experienced during their own educational experiences where their teachers confronted racism and had honest conversations of what their Black students were facing, the mothers participating in this study found an unwillingness of teachers to confront racism honestly, to deal with history with cultural sensitivity, or to be reconciliatory in their approach to teaching.

The school environment is a microcosm of the broad experiences, socioeconomic statuses, and competing histories of varied individuals. Teachers and school officials have power to embrace those differences or marginalize values, histories, or cultures that do not subscribe to theirs. The findings in this study add to the literature a dramatic retrogressive shift in race relations in schools, where educators are either unwilling or ill-equipped to engage in the work of acknowledging, confronting, and dismantling racism. Instead of sincere efforts to confront and

dismantle, overwhelmingly educators exhibit an unwillingness or a lack of competence to do the hard work that eradicating or abating racism would require. According to the parents, students in schools within the last two decades are experiencing invisibility, lack of openness and a disconnectedness from their teachers. Black mothers show that even if a school has a rigorous academic program, was a part of the family legacy, was populated by a predominantly affluent people, and was prestigious, Black mothers are willing to disengage from school due to staff unwillingness to make their children feel welcomed, loved and affirmed culturally. This study shows that Black parents place a high value on school connectedness and affirmation of their children. While they seek out schools with superior academics and physically safe, they are intentionally looking for institutions that are emotionally safe for their children. According to the parents, teachers and school officials that lack embracing other cultures and lack intentionality in racial reconciliation or making a connection with Black children, these schools are set up to fail their children.

The majority of the Black mothers placed a high value on teacher and student connectedness. According to Valenzuela (1999), students' sense of connectedness, being loved, and affirmed by the adults in the school building is tied to their continued motivation to learn. Seven out of 16 parents held their children being culturally, emotionally ignored and their children being denied their true history as a priority, which resulted in the parents deciding to change the school that their children attended. Schools adopt a dominant culture and expect students to accept subtractive assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest students of color of their culture and language (Valenzuela, 1999).



## **Parent Involvement Strategies to Contest Racism**

Despite the deficit model that is often described in past research studies, several African American scholars (Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1971) have countered these assumptions with giving voice to African American families and revealing stories of “adaptability in response to centuries of oppression” (Harry, Klinger & Hart, 2005, p.102). Black feminist theory explained how Black women have found ways to “escape from, survive in and oppose social, economic and political injustices” (Collins, 2000, p. 9). Thus, in the discussion of American institutions, it is important to add the strategies Black women use to combat or resist these racial barriers that have been systematically imposed on Blacks into the repertoire of strategies of Black parental involvement in schools of the 21st century in response to racism (Collins, 2000). Black mothers have learned to navigate these spaces and become an advocate for their children. According to Tate (1995), the CRT allows “stories by people of color [show how they] counter the stories of the oppressor” and “help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious way many scholars view and construct the world” (p.220). Through the counter-narratives of 16 Black mothers, we learn the parental involvement strategies that mothers use from their RD to combat racism in school.

While contemporary literature within the last 3 years is starting to study and reinsert the discussion of racism when discussing Blacks in 21st century schools, it does not sufficiently explore the various tangible ways in which Black parents contest racial barriers in schools. Using the lens of CRT, Yosso (2006), introduced the concept of wealth to highlight the skills, abilities, and knowledge that marginalized groups employ that go unrecognized. Of the six forms of capital (aspirational, linguistic, navigational, resistance, familial, cultural) two of the categories can be applied to this study: navigational capital and resistant capital (Yosso, 2006). This study adds

to the literature a myriad of concrete parental involvement strategies Black mothers use to contest racism and RBs in schools through the elaboration of a continuum of *Black Mothers' Parental Agency Strategies in Schools Continuum*. Within the continuum, one may see school-sanctioned strategies; however, what is new to the literature is parents' forthright discussion on what is their motivations for engaging in these behaviors and those motivations being directly tied to contesting racial barriers their children face in their schools. While the existing literature does focus on some strategies such as racial socialization and child agency as forms of agency, the Black Mothers' Parental Agency Strategies in Schools Continuum that I developed based on the data collected, introduces a variety of specific and reusable parent involvement strategies Black mothers use to contest racial barriers that take place at home, minimally engage the school, or sometimes require increased or escalated school engagement.

### **Racial Socialization**

A large body of literature focuses on the proactive and reactive use of racial socialization by African American parents as a strategy to prepare children and to help them contest ongoing racism (Hughes & Chen, 1999; Hughes et al. 2006; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor & Allen, 1990). Similar to a qualitative study by Waters (2016), Black mothers felt responsible for child development and having conversations with their children carrying intergenerational messages. According to Waters, this racial socialization was their placing value on their children understanding the journey these Black children will face while existing in a discriminating (2016). The majority of the parents felt that the child's level of maturation, the school demographics, and the child's ability to resist and persist in this situation were factors to instill varying messages at different stages. The Black mothers in this study believed in the use

of racial socialization as a foundational fundamental strategy to promote their children's ethnic-racial consciousness and prepare them for racial barriers in schools and in the United States (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Peters 2002; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990). This study aligned with racial socialization practices with other studies. Mothers in this study engaged in "preparation for bias," racism awareness training (Stevenson, 1994, 1995), racial barrier awareness (Bowman & Howard, 1985) and cautious/defensive socialization (Demo & Hughes, 1990). Black mothers added to the literature an important stage of racial socialization, what I coined as the first stage of the continuum (incubation stage), where the parents are trying to block or shield in order to build the child's identity, unharmed and untainted by racism in order for them to develop a sense of self.

### **Listening for Racial Barriers**

Within this study, the mothers revealed how important and invaluable the strategy of listening to their children as an "active" strategy against racial barriers. The mothers discussed the importance of "listening" as a resistance tool and being prepared to resolve the RB or to abate the number of times they are committed. Graybar and Leonard (2005) explained how psychotherapists rely on the method of empathic listening to clients. According to Graybar and Leonard, "to listen empathically involves suspending one's own assumptions, beliefs, and biases in order to enter the emotional world of another person...how they feel is an intellectualized intervention that elicits an intellectualized response" (p. 2). Consistent with this type of listening, the mothers of this study are able to be enter into their children's experiences and learn their per-

spectives. According to Graybar and Leonard (2005), listening strengthens relationships and “a sense of coherence, safety, belonging, and value” (p. 3).

By constantly listening to their children, Black mothers in this study revealed that they are forming healthy alliances with their children and developing their sense of voice. This is an important stage to prepare them for actively resisting and to make them able to heal emotionally. In the Pachter, Bernstein, Szalacha, and Garcia-Coll (2010) study ( $N = 277$ ), one third to one half of the respondents perceived racial discrimination at school (for example, being accused of something they did not do; being treated badly or unfairly by a teacher because of race, ethnicity, color of skin, language, or accent), which shows how children perceive racism and discrimination. This shows that students perceive discrimination even if they are not always able to articulate. Listening to children is a way to unpack student accounts so that mothers can actively respond. However, this newly discovered strategy describes the value of mothers listening to their children to create open spaces for them to freely share the “daily going on” in school. The better the line of communication between the mother and the child and the sooner the mother receives the awareness that a RB, SAIRI, and MCA has been committed, the faster the RB can be addressed or resisted. Listening is an attempt for the mothers to get first-hand evidence of racial barriers that are taking place, but it also a safe place for children to develop “voice,” positioning their children as “partners” in this work of agency. Pachter et al. made a point to the “primacy of listening” to Black children paying attention to their views, feelings, and what they tell us (pp. 248–249) in order to work as partners to prevent, intervene and service Black children.

### **Visibility to Decrease Racial Barriers**

While research presents Black parents and families from “non-dominant communities” often portrayed as feeling “unwelcome, powerless, and marginalized” in their children’s schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), the mothers in this study revealed a more emboldened and involved mothering narrative. The Black mothers’ understanding that racism is still a reality in America and the inevitability that their children will encounter racism in schools, makes mothers hyper-vigilant about hearing their children’s happenings during the day and listening for RBs as a defensive and protective posture. If signs of racial barriers are seen or heard, the Black mothers of this study felt driven to infiltrate school campuses possibly engaging in school-sanctioned activities and traditional roles as an opportunity to get closer, watch from the sideline, or to intervene to prevent racial barriers. The strategy of being visible serves three purposes. Visibility allowed for the mothers to develop relationships and associations with other mothers, teachers, and school officials; allow them access, so the child will not be ignored; and to get first-hand observations of the school culture, the teachers, the climate of the school, and how teachers and school officials interface with their children. Research on the current parent involvement inform of Black parents involvement in tradition school-supported parental practices, such as volunteering, participating in parent groups like the PTA and engaging in other educational activities (Abel, 2012; Clark, 1983; Thompson, 2003). While the activities that the mothers are engaging in are considered school-sanctioned activities, these mothers participating in this study reveal an additional motivation that these school sanctioned strategies are used strategically as a means to make Black mothers visible in schools in order to reduce the number of racial barriers their children face.

## **Promotion of Child Agency**

Existing literature focuses on the child agency of Black students against racism, but their agency is a phenomenon separate from parental involvement and is sometimes seen as counterproductive or as oppositional defiant (Ani, 2013; Noguera, 2001, 2003; Ogbu, 2004; Tucker et al., 2010). This study revealed an alternative narrative where Black mothers promoted child agency as necessary in order to ensure their children knew how to combat racism and was resilient after the RB was combatted. According to Yosso (2006), resistance capital refers to the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. In this study, child agency posits the students as partners with parents in countering the onslaught of racial barriers and equips them with the tools and the resilience to combat them. At this level, students and parents are not satisfied with navigating a space but want to disrupt status quo. In Ward's study (1996), Black mothers cultivated in their daughters resistance. In preparation to combat a work that devalues Black women, these daughters were trained to assert themselves, be strong, demand respect and be astute (Ward, 1996). Similarly, the Black mothers in this study promoted and celebrated child agency almost as a rite of passage. Consistent with Yosso's beliefs, this study added to the literature how Black children are groomed to be resistors and challengers with their own experiences with racism. Mothers responded to signs or incidents where children exercised child agency favorably and treated it as a defining moment in their education career where parents take a more subsidiary role as a supporter, while the children were encouraged, celebrated, and rewarded for taking a more dominant or assertive responsive role by responding to racial barriers and defending one's self.

## **Explore Other Options/Right Fit**

The Black mothers of this study exercised their sense of agency by determining what school their children should attend, when to engage the school, and even when to withdraw from schools. Of all the strategies, the majority of the mothers across residential districts and school types have had excessive school changes due to their exercise of the strategy to “explore other options” to seek out the “right fit” in response to various RBs, SAIRIs or MCAs. Disengaging from a school and seeking a right fit for these Black mothers to contest racial barriers in schools is consistent with a long history of racism and resistance that dates back to Reconstruction (Forman Jr., 2005). According to Hirschman (1970), exiting is an “active” response to organizational failure. Other studies such as Lyons and Lowery (1986, 1989) and Cox and Witko (2010) have used the framework to explain why people disengage from politics or government and schools. School choice research refers to this Hirschman model to explain parent disengagement from failing public schools (Pappas, 2012). In this study, 11 of the 16 mothers across residential districts and school types had excessive school changes due to their exercise of the strategy to “explore other options” to seek out the “right fit” in response to various RBs, SAIRIs or MCAs. While parents enter schools with an expectation to better meet the Black child’s need, the mothers are aware of how pervasive racism is and how the “right fit” may be a temporary solution or an improvement but not a panacea or utopia. While proponents of school choice propose that school choice empowers poor disadvantaged mothers that are normally “stuck” in failing schools (Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000), this study brings to light another angle. Black mothers in this study disengaged in schools across school types (private, charter, and public) and SES around their dissatisfaction with the

school treatment of racial barriers specifically. Parents' dissatisfaction with racial barriers reverses typical school choice movement from public to charter or public to private. In this study due to racial barriers, parents left private schools to go to public, public school to go to private, and charter schools to go to private. This study adds to the literature the concept of advantaged parents contesting schools and actively disengaging all school types (not just public schools) due to the school's racial barriers in search of any school type that creates an emotional safe place as they seek to educate their children.

### **Limitations of the study**

Interview participants are limited to a small sample size of Black mothers from Normal County. Hence, this may limit the transferability of the experiences of families living outside of Normal County. Because of the unique variables (politics, racial climate, educational landscape, etc.) that impact a county, parents from other counties and states may have different experiences that may not be similar to those parents that were sampled. Also, since the sample population is limited to women, the women's experiences should not be expected to be transferable to the father's experiences and with other minority groups. Lastly, there were only select districts involved. Other district may offer different insights on the issues of racism discussed.



### **Implications for Current Practice**

Harmful pathologies and pejorative assumptions held by school officials and teachers impact objectivity and judgment and have the ability to impact students' academic outcomes (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), mental health (Sue et al., 2008), and discipline outcomes (Noguera, 2001, 2003, 2008). Teachers' and school officials' deficit thinking must be addressed in order to prevent what parents perceive in this study as one cause of the perpetuation of exclusion and hierarchy. School administrators must continuously and actively explore their own biases and their teachers' perceptions of Black students through engaging teaching staff with ongoing discussions, surveys, and professional development to expose teachers' implicit bias of Blacks and other students of color and explore how those perceptions may impact decision making (Howard, 2003; Jackson, 2018). Black mothers from this study revealed the necessity of schools not pretending that society and the school exist in "post racial" or color blind society. Parents had more positive perceptions of teachers or school officials who honestly confronted these racial realities and actively engaged in action to address biases and deficit thinking. School administrators must examine school practices to identify disparities in access to rigorous curricula and examine teacher practices on confronting issues of race and the complexity of structural racism in America. In areas where the subjectivity and possible assumptions of teachers and school officials can impede outcomes for Black students, schools must be proactive by offering teachers training and implement more inclusive measures to prevent bias. School leaders can subscribe to Teaching Tolerance for professional development, webinars, publications, and self-assessments. Also, in the monitoring of discipline outcomes, social

workers, parents, students, teachers, and school officials should collaboratively employ restorative practices when addressing discipline in order to open lines of communication and to address implicit bias and assumptions (Gibson et al., 2014; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Levinson, 2007). Schools should also monitor school practices or revamp school criteria for access to honors classes and rigorous classes to prevent gatekeeping. Student selection for honors and rigorous curriculum should not be based solely on teacher recommendations but other criteria in order to prevent exclusionary measures that may be subjective. Lastly, on the school level, schools should be intentional to prioritize research, which shows the significant impact of same-race teachers. Schools that parents label as struggling with the superficiality of diversity should actively recruit teachers in order to ensure more instances of teacher-to-student race matching (Downer et al, 2016; Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

This qualitative study's findings are helpful to improving the practice of helping schools reduce instances of RB, SAIRI, and MCA in the 21st century. School officials can benefit by holding focus groups with Blacks and other people of color to gauge some of the racial barriers that parents perceive. Helping schools understand the perceptions of Black parents and how they perceive the schools that their children attend could help them remove barriers and begin to provide teachers and school officials with insight to the expectations of Black mothers have of the school that their children attend. Sharing feedback with teachers in school and using the continuum to shed insight on the various ways Black mothers support their children navigate spaces may help to address deficit thinking and negative assumptions about Black families. Examine school resources and develop healthy practices to prevent gatekeeping and opportunity hoarding to ensure all students have access to resources to remove barriers.

### **Implications for Future Policy**

This study revealed Black students being exposed to monocultural curriculum that lacked inclusive representation of Blacks. A national report called *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, by Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), revealed that “the nation needs an intervention” (Turner, 2018). Aligned with the data within this study, according to the SPLC report, schools across the nation had patterns in issues with how slavery was taught: too much focus on the positive, only a Southern problem, omit the discourse on the role of White supremacist ideology, and enslaved African’ lived experiences were neglected. In order to reconcile the past, SPLC is promoting the implementation of A Framework for Teaching American Slavery, which includes recommendations from the *Teaching Tolerance Report* of the infusion of key concepts to guide better instruction of American slavery in the curriculum (Turner, 2018). While slavery is just part of the broader issue of teachers teaching an exclusive curriculum, the broader effort is to ensure that curriculum moves from the omission of people of color to what Banks (1989) described as the lower forms of additive curriculum to the highest forms of multicultural teaching, which is transformative or social action approach. Federal and state policy makers must confront curricular gaps in history, literature, and other subjects that marginalize Blacks and other minority groups in order to address issues of invisibility and to reconcile past racist practices and forge a new area of inclusiveness (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Also, understanding the expectation of implementing this type of curriculum would require to build teacher capacity and to provide them with layered support and training to ensure competency due to a vast amount of teachers who have not been schooled nor trained to teach an infused or multicultural curriculum (Young, Shwu-Meei, Chen-Ni & Fusako, 2017).

On a state level, New Jersey has made strides through the implementation of the NJAmistad Law of 2002, which is a law where schools are supposed to implement an infused curriculum in social studies to show the integral part African Americans have played at every turn in this nation's history, on a local level. For implementation, parents and local constituents should pressure the school boards to ensure implementation of the law. It is important for all districts to teach an infused curriculum in social studies in order to reconcile America's past and to raise the consciousness of all groups on the African American contributions. School boards could be pressured to create codes that require the NJAmistad mandate or the curriculum to be adopted or persuade the superintendent to enforce that the curriculum is infused. Parents with concerns of diversity and how social studies is being taught have the power to put pressure on the board to get schools to implement this curriculum.

Beyond the local level, pressure legislators or lobbyists to author a bill to go through the general assembly that will require African American history course(s) become a requirement for certification for teachers in the state of New Jersey. This is to address the concern that Black mothers raised about teachers' competency or knowledge in this area. The reality is that they are people who are disconnected with the Black population because they have not had exposure to African American history or African Americans. This bill will begin to systematically expose and prepare teachers of every race on how to teach the role of African Americans throughout American history, give insight on how to work with Black populations, and to develop a cultural competency or a sensitivity when teaching social studies. Mandating teachers to take these courses could arm teachers with the knowledge and foundational competency necessary to teach

subjects sensitively as opposed to social studies being taught in a way that marginalizes Black students.

In order to address issues of Black students feeling culturally disconnected, invisible, and unwelcome in school spaces, federal initiatives such as mentor groups as My Brother's Keeper and My Sister's Keeper in order to develop intentionality, diversity, and connect it with Black boys and girls in schools (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

### **Implications for Future Research**

Further studies on how mothers of other lower socioeconomic groups engage in agency and what types of structural racism, SAIRI, or MCS they contend with in the schools that their children attend are necessary. Future quantitative and qualitative research within these neighborhoods should examine Black boys' and Black girls' perspectives on their teachers, how their teachers engage with and perceive them, and their schools' cultural responsiveness. Additional investigations of students' feelings of disconnectedness and their impact on their social and emotional well-being are needed to fully capture the phenomenon, its origins, and potential remedies. This research would provide more insight from the students' perspective of how to address these barriers (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Future qualitative research from the students and the parents of schools that are successfully educating, affirming, and embracing Black students and teaching the history and culture in engaging ways. Some of the methods that parents named that made the school successful were the following: school intentionality around empowering their Black male students with student agency and empowerment, infusing an African worldview in their curriculum, and nurturing a sense of belonging and inclusiveness with the boys and the parents.

Reproducing some of the practices schools use that are effective at educating Black students would give insight on best practices that could be reproduced and implemented in other schools.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

- 1) Tell me about your child(ren)
- 2) Tell me about your child's current school

Follow up:

-How did he/she end up at this school?

-Has he/she always been there or did you switch to this school?

Follow up: If you switched the school, why?

- 2) What have your child's experiences been like so far in [if public school ask public education system if private/religious ask about that]?

\*\* If not in public school: Are there particular reasons why your child is not in the public school system in your area?

- 3) What have your experiences been like so far with your child's school?

Follow Up:

- What do you like about your child's school?
- What don't you like?

- 4) How do you address those aspects of the school that you dislike?

Follow up:

If something specific happens at school that you are not pleased with, how do you respond? [do you call the teacher? Speak with the principal?] Why/why not?

- 5) What are some of the challenges your child has faced in school ?

- 6) What are some of the challenges you have faced as a parent in school?
- 7) Can you tell me about a time or times when you experienced racism in school?

Possible Follow up: To what would you attribute these barriers?

- a) In what ways do you support your child academically?
  - b) Were you ever in a situation where you disagreed with the school's assessment of your son/daughter's abilities or behavior? How was the conflict resolved?
- 8) What were your own educational experiences like? Follow up: Where did you go to elementary/middle/high school? [public/private]
  - 9) What are your thoughts overall about how education systems in the United States educate African American children?
  - 10) What strategies would you offer other African American mothers help address these United States school systems their children are attend?
  - 11) What advice would you give other African American parents who attend your child's school?

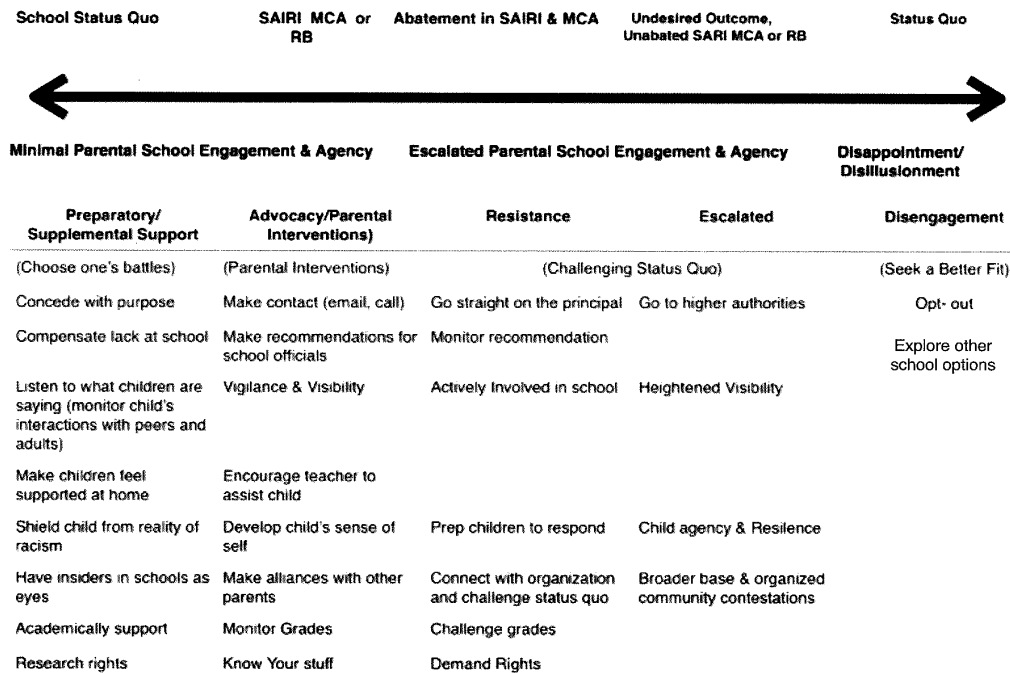
### **Focus Group Protocol**

- 1) How would you define racism? What does it look like?
- 2) Do you think racism still exist in America?
- 3) Have you had any personal experiences with racism?
- 4) What is the status of the racism in schools?
- 5) What strategies could African American parents implement to combat racism in schools?
- 6) What policies could be enacted by the school to improve schools for Black students locally or nationally.

## Appendix B: Black Parental Agency Strategies in Schools Continuum

Dr. Sharnee Brown's

### Black Parental Agency Strategies in Schools Continuum



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## Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter



June 14, 2017

Dear Ms. Brown,

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the information you have submitted addressing the concerns for your proposal entitled "Black Mothers' Counter-Narratives of Agency: A Pulse on American Racism in Schools in the 21st Century". Your research protocol is hereby approved as revised through expedited review. The IRB reserves the right to recall the proposal at any time for full review.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval form, the stamped Recruitment Flyer, and the stamped original Consent Form. Make copies only of these stamped forms.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

*In harmony with federal regulations, none of the investigators or research staff involved in the study took part in the final decision.*

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Dr. Carolyn Satlin-Bajaj

Office of Institutional Review Board  
Presidents Hall • 400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079 • Tel: 973.313.6314 • Fax: 973.225.2260 • [www.ohu.edu](http://www.ohu.edu)

A HOME FOR THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT

## Appendix D: Agreement to Participate in a Research Study

Seton Hall University  
Institutional Review Board

JUN 14 2017

Approval Date



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
AND HUMAN SERVICES

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

Expiration Date

JUN 14 2018

### **Agreement to Participate in a Research Study** ***Black Mothers Counter-Narratives on Agency***

Shamee Brown, a Seton Hall University doctoral student of education, is doing a study of African American mothers' experience with their children's education. The researcher is looking for 18 African American mothers of children in grades 3 - 12 who are attending public and private schools in Essex County, New Jersey. The information below provides more details about the study and what parents will be asked to do.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study is to learn about how African American mothers and female primary caregiver feel about the schools their children attend and the educational decisions they make. The main goal of this project is to understand how African American help their students succeed.

#### **What People Will be Asked to Do:**

##### Interviews

People who agree to be in this study will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews during the months of June - August during the 2017 - 2018 school year. The interviews will be casual conversations about the schools that their children attend and what decisions they make. Interviews will also address questions about racism. The women will be asked to do one interviews over the course of 3 months. Each interview should last between 25 and 45 minutes. Interviews will be at a time and place that works for everyone. Participants will receive a gift card as a thank you after each interview has been conducted. If participant agrees, interviews will be recorded using an audio recorder. Participants may always skip questions they do not wish to answer. People who do not wish to be recorded may still participate in interviews.

##### Focus Groups

Mothers recruited for this study will also be asked to participate in a focus group with other mothers. Mothers who agree to be in this study will be asked to participate in a one focus group during the months of June - August during the 2017 - 2018 school year. The interviews will be casual conversations about problems-including racism in schools—they face and what can be done to fix those problems. Each focus group should last between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. If everyone agrees, interviews will be recorded using an audio and/or video recorder. Participants may always skip questions they do not wish to answer. People who do not wish to be recorded may still participate in interviews.

Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy  
Jubilee Hall • 400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, NJ 07079 • Tel: 973.761.9397 • Fax: 973.275.2847 • [www.shu.edu](http://www.shu.edu)

Seton Hall University  
Institutional Review Board

JUN 14 2017

Approval Date



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
AND HUMAN SERVICES  
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

Expiration Date

JUN 14 2018

**Choice:**

People may choose if they do or do not want to participate in this study. There is no negative results for parents or children who choose not to participate. Mothers who do participate may stop at any time. There are no known risks in this study. There are also no known direct benefits to people who to participate.

**Privacy**

Interview responses and notes will be kept private. All participants will be given a fake name so no one except the researchers will know who was involved in the study. Only the researcher and her faculty advisor, Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, will be able to listen to interviews and read any notes. All information will be stored on a USB memory key.

**Contact Information**

All questions about the study or anything else should be directed to Sharnee Brown at [sharnee.brown@student.shu.edu](mailto:sharnee.brown@student.shu.edu) or (908) 414-0565. Questions about participants' rights in human subjects research should be directed to Dr. Mary Ruzicka, Director of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research at (973) 313-6314 or [irb@shu.edu](mailto:irb@shu.edu).

**Agreement**

Signing below means that the person who signs agrees to be in this study. Everyone should read and make sure he/she understands all of the information above. Participants will receive a signed copy of this form to keep, along with any other important printed information.

I agree to participate in interviews and observations as part of this project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign Name Here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to have my interviews recorded.

☐ ☐

Yes    No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign Name Here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Write Name Here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date