Examining Parent Involvement in Reversing the Underachievement of African American Students in Middle-Class Schools

By Tyrone C. Howard & Rema Reynolds

Tyrone C. Howard is an associate professor and Rema Reynolds is a doctoral student, both with the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Introduced in 2001, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was hailed as the most significant education legislation since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The legislation purported to be a "landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 1). Shortly after the enactment, the bill was scrutinized by school officials and policy makers and later criticized for multiple reasons, such as a lack of funding, an overemphasis on testing, and inconsistency in standards at the federal, state and local levels (Dingerson, Beam, & Brown, 2004). Despite the criticism that NCLB has received over the past five years, there are some promising features of the legislation that seek to involve various historically excluded stakeholders in the educational process (Fege & Smith, 2002) and empower parents with decision-making power

(Rogers, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Central to its mission was the assurance of academic success for all students through authentic partnerships between schools, parents and communities. Parent involvement is specifically addressed by the authors of NCLB and loosely described in the legislation as a partnership that envisions parents with governance power within a democratic process (Rogers, 2006).

While the provision seeks to mandate parent engagement in schools, what remains unclear under NCLB's parent involvement mandate is the extent to which parents are actually engaged in schools. One consistent critique of NCLB posits that it falls short in providing enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance at the state and local levels (Davis, 2004). School systems cannot be sure that schools are actually complying with the federal mandate. Moreover, school officials cannot determine the roles race and class play when parents do make efforts to assume leadership roles in schools. Therefore, we, the researchers, seek to gain insight into these issues through this work.

As the authors of this study, we examined the school experiences of middle-class African American parents and students, because they are largely overlooked in the professional literature when it comes to underachievement and parent involvement. Although NCLB highlights parent involvement and school accountability through the use of test data, we posit that non-White and non-Asian students in middle-class schools are frequently overlooked in the reporting and investigation of school achievement, particularly as it relates to parental involvement and engagement. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Bilings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1998) as a conceptual framework to examine parent involvement as it pertains to African Americans in middle-class[1] schools, we attempt to account for an explicit intersection of race and class to be used in our analysis. CRT allows for the incorporation of counterstorytelling as a methodological tool so that parent voice can be a focus of this study.

Because NCLB's emphasis on providing equal access to quality instruction to students of color, low income populations, and students with disabilities, it is clear that schools must be in compliance with this mandate. Further, educators must provide focused attention and additional resources to subgroups who fail to reach established performance benchmarks (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). To this end, schools are required to show evidence of "continuous progress" towards academic goals by meeting an annual benchmark for all subgroups within the school and demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP). The AYP benchmarks can include standardized test scores, graduation rates, attendance and other indicators determined by the state. Schools that fail to meet AYP targets for any subgroup or other school-wide benchmarks are designated as "in need of improvement." As a result, high achieving schools are unable to laud the overall success or high academic scores without a full accountability of the academic performance of all its subgroups (e.g., according to race and ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status, or language proficiency) who may make up a smaller population of the school, but whose academic success is equally important as their majority peers.

An analysis of school performance of sub-groups of students, such as African American students in middle-class schools, becomes most imperative and telling. Despite years of educational exclusion and disenfranchisement (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002), increasing numbers of African American families are finding their way to more affluent neighborhoods with higher-ranked schools. Yet, the academic performance of these African American students still leads to questions that warrant a closer examination into the roles, if any, that parents play in these schools.

An examination of most academic indices across subgroups reveal that African American students under perform in comparison to their peers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds For example, data revealed that African American students scored lower on reading, writing, and math proficiency indices at grades 4, 8, and 12 than their White, Asian American, and Latino counterparts (Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997; Jenks & Phillips, 1998; NCES, 2003). One of the common reasons offered for the persistent underachievement of African American students is the disproportionate numbers who live in poverty (Anyon, 2005; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 2005). African American students—who attend schools in impoverished areas—even face a litany of challenges in their quest for academic success, such as under qualified teachers, deteriorating and overcrowded schools, inadequate learning materials, high administrator and teacher turnover, and a host of other "savage inequalities" that have become far too commonplace in many urban and rural schools (Kozol, 1991; 2005).

Over the past two decades, a number of scholars have documented the salient role that social class plays in schooling (Anyon, 1981; Knapp & Wolverton, 2005). As issues associated with poverty in schools dissipate, one would expect achievement levels to improve and the performance gap between students in similar social classes to decrease. However, when social class is held constant, an analysis of school achievement data still reveals a disturbing picture for African American students. For example, African American students attending more affluent, middle-class schools still lag behind their White peers (Jenks & Phillips, 1998; NCES, 2003). The reasons behind these disparities remain unclear. One prevailing argument contends that issues of race and racism remain viable explanations in understanding this reality.

Low teacher expectations, lack of access to more rigorous courses, and disproportionate referral to special education all have racial implications within our school system as a whole (Oakes, 1985). At least one scholar contends that middle-class African American students do not possess the same desire to be academically successful as their majority peers. John Ogbu (2003) found that the middle-class African American students in his study gravitated toward hip-hop culture and counter-cultural values and norms more than pursuing academic success, even though most of their parents were working professionals in prestigious occupations. Further, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data does reveal that African American students from middle-class backgrounds outperform African American students from lower-income backgrounds (U.S. Department of

Education, 2001). Nevertheless, according to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, African American students attending middle-class schools perform at levels that still elicit cause for concern because they still trail their White and Asian counterparts. This performance discrepancy highlights the achievement gap that is frequently cited as one of the most pressing concerns in education today (Carter, 2005; Conchas, 2006). To this end, one of the reasons frequently cited as a contributing factor in the success of students from middle class-backgrounds is the involvement of parents in their education

A plethora of theories offer insights about the cultural codes, norms, and values of the dominant society that are frequently associated with higher economic status, which Bordieu (1986) refers to as "cultural capital." Thus, parents who are best able to assist their children acquire the cultural capital that is most valued in society and in doing so, position themselves to provide important advantages for their children in their quest for academic success. In light of increased access to the desired cultural capital that middle-class African American parents have and continued underperformance of their students this article examines the following research questions: "How do middle-class African American parents conceptualize parent involvement?" and "How do African American middle-class parents define and describe 'parent involvement'?"

The purpose of this research was to analyze the role of parent involvement in the education of middle-class African American students. There will be three primary goals of this article. First, we examined the research literature on parent involvement and African American parent involvement specifically. Second, building from ongoing research that we conducted with middle-class African American parents, we share findings which examined critical questions around parent involvement. such as "What role do middle- class African American parents play in their children's schooling?" and "How do African American middle-class parents define and describe 'parent involvement'?" In the final section of this article, building from the findings from the data, we offered considerations for what we term "models of engagement" for African American parents; a veritable set of recommendations and guiding principles that may provide greater clarity regarding the manner in which parent involvement can be demonstrated in an attempt to improve school performance for African American students in middle-class schools.

Literature Review

Parent Involvement: A Review of the Literature

There is a voluminous body of literature that concerns itself with parent involvement and the manner in which parents act as agents and advocates on behalf of their children in schools (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; McNeal, 1999; McWayne et al. 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The existing literature helps to inform this work, because it offers critical insights into the manner in which parents and schools have attempted to develop a symbiotic relationship that seeks to offer

the best education possible to school age children. While there are a number of studies concerning the benefits of parent involvement in the professional literature, the definition of what it is remains mixed. More importantly, most of the general parent involvement literature fails to problematize the roles of race and class in parenting practices with schools. Also, when race and class are considered as part of the analysis, rarely are upper-class families of color used as the units of analysis.

In an attempt to offer some clarity to the term, Clark (1983) contended that parent involvement was comprised of "distinctive parent-child interactions," namely helping students with homework, expressing their expectations of school performance and creating emotionally supportive learning environments at home. McNeal's (1999) work on parent involvement defined it as parent-teacher organization involvement, monitoring and educational support measures. Lee and Bowen (2006) assert that parent involvement can be situated in home contexts, which can include helping "with homework, discussing the child's school work and experiences at school and structuring home activities" (p. 194), as well as schooling situations which entail attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school and being involved in school sponsored activities.

Research has shown that parent involvement has a significant influence on student achievement (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). Becher's (1986) literature review on parent involvement found that there was "substantial evidence" which shows that students whose parents are involved in their children's schooling have increased academic performance and overall cognitive development. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has found that parent levels of education and parent involvement in schools have a significant influence on student performance. The NAEP data report a 30 scale point differential on standardized achievement tests between students with involved parents compared to those students whose parents were not (Dietel, 2006).

Researchers have also found that parent involvement is associated with a greater likelihood of aspiring to attend college and actually enrolling (Cabrera & Steven, 2000; Horn, 1998), as well as with higher grades (Lee, 1993; Muller & Kerbow, 1993), higher eighth grade mathematics and reading achievement (Lee, 1993; Sui-Chu & Douglass, 1996), lower rates of behavioral problems (Lee, 1993), and lower likelihood of high school dropout and truancy (McNeal, 1999). Sanders and Harvey (2002) conducted a case study of school-community partnerships and found that when schools were willing to structure authentic two-way communication with parents, levels of parent involvement increased considerably. In light of this research, legislation has been passed to create more meaningful ways for parents to play a concerted, more active role in their children's education (National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1987).

While there are a number of studies concerning the benefits of parent involvement, the Ecologies of Parent Engagement (EPE) framework considers the hows and whys of parent engagement, and how the process of engagement relates more broadly to parents' experiences and actions both in and out of the school commu-

nity (Barton, Drake, Gustavo, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Moreover, EPE uses the term *engagement* rather than *involvement* in an attempt to reflect a more authentic relationship between parents and schools. In explaining an EPE framework, parent engagement is situated as a relational phenomenon that relies on activity networks and the crucial importance that both space and capital play in the relative success parents have in engaging in the academic setting of schools. Barton, et al., (2004) make the argument that parent engagement ought to be thought of as the mediation between *space*, which they define as areas "constituted by underlying structures and resources, . . . and are sites of contestation within which culture is produced" (p.5) and *capital*, which they define as "human, social, and material resources one has access to and can activate for their own desired purposes" (p.5).

EPE assumes that one of the reasons parents do not engage at the school site can be attributed to the perception of differences in practices and beliefs held by the parents and the school. They define 'parent engagement' as a dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools and among school actors. Based on this definition of parent roles comes power to impact decisions made on behalf of their children. This conceptualization is important to note when variables such as race and class are introduced to the discourse. For many working class parents of color, much of their perceptions of school and the roles parents play in them are rooted in experiences that have been less than favorable. These experiences and subsequent beliefs may have an indelible influence on how they define their own terms of involvement or engagement as parents.

Currently, parents' roles and involvement in schools have been understood in terms of "what they do" and how that fits or does not fit with the goals of the school. Frequently, this approach to understanding parent involvement has relied upon the deficit model, especially in discussions of parent involvement in high-poverty communities (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). From a deficit standpoint, parents are assumed to have little knowledge or capital to advocate on behalf of their children. Parents may also be viewed as the primary reason why children are not better prepared academically, and are viewed overall as a significant part of the problem with school underachievement. From this deficit viewpoint, either parents participate in school-sanctioned activities or the educational process for the child could be minimized and their academic and social growth may be stunted. The difference in an analysis of middle class parents is that the deficits presumed to be in place for lower income families are assumed to be fewer because of economic mobility.

While a number of studies have examined factors that motivate parents to participate in schools (Aronson, 1996; Benson & Nelson, 2003; Epstein, 1991; Harris, L. et al., 1987), few studies, if any, report on initiatives that have included parents as equal partners and decision makers (Peressini, 1996). This is ironic, as NCLB distinctively calls for this relationship yet, again, has no accountability measures in place to guarantee its adherence. Parent involvement has been confined to school sanctioned invitations to special events like classroom parties, field

trips, PTA membership, conferences and homework tracking (Jacobi, Wittreich, & Hogue, 2003). When parents do participate in school sanctioned activities, they are often positioned as *receivers* of information (Lightfoot, 2004). Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that when minority parents voiced concerns about the education of their children, their claims were discounted. These findings echo Olsen's (1994) who found that involvement was restricted to a prescriptive kind in which schools determine the roles parents are to assume. When parents went from passive receivers of knowledge to advocates for their children, their involvement was no longer welcomed (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

In many instances, working parents are not offered powerful decision-making positions such as school site council seats, and other governance related opportunities. Campus volunteering is often encouraged, yet the levels of engagement are tightly constrained to teachers' and administrators' discretion. Most frequently, volunteer involvement is manifested in passive acceptance of what is taking place in the classroom, or superficial levels of involvement, often tied to clerical assistance for teachers (e.g. copying papers, organizing student work, stapling work packets, and the like). It is quite rare for parents, particularly those who are informed about educational processes of teaching and learning, to offer recommendations, strategies, or interventions critical to the learning of students. Typically, the most extensive academic support may include working with individual students or facilitating a learning activity with small groups of students.

African American Students, Middle-Class Schools and Parent Involvement

Over the last twenty-five years, an increasing number of African American families have transitioned from lower to middle class status (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Along with this transition in socio-economic status has been the opportunity for larger numbers of African American students to attend middle class and suburban schools (Ogbu, 2003). In many ways, these efforts have been made by African American families who were disgruntled with the failed desegregation efforts which were intended to provide African American parents the opportunities to send their children to more selective and presumably better schools. As a result, the entrée into the middle-class has provided many African American parents access to educational opportunities that were professed to become a reality with desegregation, but frequently resulted in dreams deferred (Massey & Denton, 1985).

The examination of academic performance of African American students in middle class, suburban schools suggests that the type of educational equity that many African American parents believed existed in more affluent schools still remains elusive. For example, Ferguson (2002) examined the racial disparities of high achieving suburban schools and found that African American students had lower test scores, grade point averages, and lagged behind their White peers in measures of self reported knowledge and skill.

Additional works have documented the manner in which African American students from suburban schools underachieve in comparison to their White coun-

terparts. For example, Ogbu (2003) discovered that the African American students from his study in the middle-class neighborhood of Shaker Heights, Ohio had lower proficiency test scores, SAT scores, AP course enrollment, and grade point average, and college attendance than their White peers, even though these students had parents who were working professionals and were more likely to provide their children with the type of social capital that is conducive for academic success. Diamond and Gomez (2004) found, after detailed case studies of approximately 18 students and their families, that working-class parents tended to see school and home as distinct realms, with educators—the experts—in charge at school. This work found that working class parents did not deem it appropriate to make demands on the school or to engage in explicitly educational activities at home.

Sanders' (1997) research with African American parent involvement found that parents were successful in promoting their children's racial and ethnic socialization helped to promote their academic success. Datnow and Cooper (1996) examined the levels of parent involvement of African American parents in a predominately White school setting, and found that the usage of peer networks and consistent identity affirmation were vital in helping their children succeed academically, but that they still trailed their White peers on most academic indices.

Much of the current literature fails to adequately differentiate between the involvement patterns in schools of African American middle class parents and those of White middle class parents. There are clear differences between White middle-class experiences and those of African American middle-class families, and the complexities of these differences have been well documented in the professional literature (Conley, 1999; Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Wilson, 1987; 1996). Social class differences in how African American parents approach educational participation result from the interchange between the educational environments to which they are exposed and prior race and social class-rooted family and schooling experiences.

The confluence of race and social class provide an interesting analysis in the examination of parent involvement for African American parents. Yan (1999) used social capital theory to investigate the levels of involvement of African American parents compared to Whites. Using four constructs of social capital (e.g., parent-teen interaction, parent-school interactions, interactions with other parents, and family norms) to measure involvement, Yan found that African American parents demonstrated higher or equivalent levels of parent involvement when compared to White parents. Part of the complexity of conceptualizing parent involvement through a social capital lens is the idea that the social capital utilized by middle class parents is frequently congruous with values and norms of White families and communities. Moreover, parents and families employing different forms of capital to advocate on behalf of their children are viewed through a deficit lens and in need of transformation or acculturation.

Diamond, Wang and Gomez (2004) examined parent involvement between African American and Chinese American middle-class parents. Their findings revealed that, although both groups of parents shared similar aspirations for their

children, their involvement strategies were different. African American families tended to demonstrate involvement through home and school based involvement and intervened more in their children's school, which the authors term "front stage/ activist involvement," conversely the Chinese American families were less likely to be active in schools, but manifested their involvement through home based activities which Diamond et. al define as "back stage/behind the scene" involvement. They conclude that non-dominant/ethnic cultural capital can be equally as useful a form of parent involvement as those used in dominant families and communities.

Methodology

In order to gain a more keen insight into the manner in which parent involvement is played out for middle-class African American students, we engaged in research with African American parents whose children attend middle-class schools in southern California. As stated previously, our goal with this work was to examine how African American parents—who sent their children to middle-class schools—conceptualize notions of parent involvement, and if these types of involvement have any influence on academic performance. The qualitative data reported in this article were collected from a series of individual and focus group interviews with African Americans parents whose children attended schools in a predominately White, suburban community that we call Richland. The interviews and focus group meetings all took place at a school site in Richland. All of the interviews were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim. There were individual interviews with six parents (three men, three women). Each of the individual interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, while the focus group sessions lasted 60-90 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted by each of the researchers, who both have extensive work in doing qualitative research. Richland has a population of approximately 151,000 residents according to the latest census data. The median income for Richland residents during 2005 was approximately $70,171 according to the city's bureau of statistics. Whites (69%) are the largest ethnic group in the city, followed by Latinos (20%), and African Americans (3.1%).

The focus group consisted of approximately 30 African American parents, most of whom were working professionals, and by their own admission, were concerned about the viability of the local schools to provide high quality education for their children. The focus group meetings took place across three different gatherings. Each of the focus groups was made up of three groups of 10, and each parent participated in only one session. There were a total of 20 mothers, and 10 fathers who participated in the study. We did not question the participants about whether or not they were in two parent or single parent households. The age range of the parents' children spanned from 3 to 18. A total of 73 students were represented by the 30 parents, with 40 of the students being female and 33 being male. All of the parents who participated in the study resided in the city of Richland. These parents were selected for the study based on an invitation to discuss the quality of education delivered to all students in the city of Richland. All of the data from

the interviews were transcribed and codes and themes were identified through an iterative process. Outside member checks were done by research assistants to assess the accuracy of the identified codes and themes. Moreover, each of the participants who were involved in individual interviews reviewed transcripts of the interviews to ensure their accuracy, and were able to provide any additional information that they felt was necessary. A grounded theory approach was used to make meaning of central concepts and strands that emerged from the data. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical Framework:
Critical Race Theory and Counterstorytelling

In our research, we use Critical Race Theory as the conceptual framework for examining parent involvement for African American middle-class parents. This theory offered an analysis of educational achievement in a more probing manner than critical theory or other frameworks concerned with race and ethnicity by centering the discussion of inequality within the context of race and racism (Sleeter & Delgado-Bernal, 2003). Critical race theory also served as a conceptual framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). Typically, critical race theorists in education examine racial inequities through an interrogation of racism by theorizing about race along with other forms of subordination and the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism and other forms of oppression in school curriculum and by offering counterstorytelling as a methodological tool in examining racial oppression.

Counterstorytelling has a long and rich history in communities of color that has utilized oral means of conveying stories and struggles that are often overlooked by those in position of power, and it draws explicitly on experiential knowledge. As a conceptual framework, it allowed us to examine parent involvement from the perspectives of African American middle class parents with their children's education in a manner that recognizes the complex terrain where class and race intersect. In this particular case, the nexus is African American parents and their children who live in more affluent and mostly predominately White communities. Frequently cited as one of the inherent advantages of economic and social upward mobility in the Unites States is the increased access to better quality neighborhoods, schools and social opportunities. However, absent from this analysis is the continued role that race plays in the every day experiences of non-White individuals, as they seek to gain access and acceptance into mainstream communities.

One of the first questions posed, during each focus group session intended to determine a working definition of parent involvement. It was clear that the parents had different notions of how they defined parent involvement. One parent noted:

> Parent involvement is about going to back-to-school nights, open house. It means being involved in PTA (Parent Teacher Association) or School Site Council. That

88

is where the decisions are made and we (African American parents) are usually not involved in those areas.

Another parent offered this sentiment stating that parent involvement is more situated within home environments:

I think it (parent involvement) means sitting down with your kids and doing homework together. Checking their homework, and making sure that they are on top of their studies, reading with them, and creating a good learning environment at home.

At least one parent made an analysis between the ways that African American parents can be involved given many of their new statuses as middle class families:

I hear many of the (White) parents who say that they spend all this time in classes, volunteering and everything else. But. . .what about people who work, and have jobs? We are still involved even though we are not in the school.

One parent, who was a teacher and a resident in Richland, provided a more critical analysis of how parent involvement is used as capital:

We need to hold teachers accountable yes, but parents also have a role to play. Principals always respond to the parents who are asking questions, raising concerns, voicing their frustrations. It's the saying. . . the squeaky wheel gets the grease. . . and sometimes we are not squeaking enough.

It should be noted that not all of the parents who participated in the focus groups felt the need to be involved in schools. There were several parents across the group who questioned the need to be as involved as others were. One father offered a more "hands off" approach to being involved in the schools where his children attend:

I think things are going well (at the school). I have been really happy with it. When I think about the schools where my kids used to go, I think it's day and night. So I don't get too involved because the schools are so good. So unless, something goes wrong, I stay out of it.

One mother expressed her forms of involvement as an advocate for her son who has special needs:

I have to be very involved, because my son has high functioning autism. So I am constantly at the school talking with the special resource teacher, meeting with the speech pathologist, discussing arrangements with my son's regular teacher. There is a lot of coordinating that needs to be done in order for my son to get all the services he requires. . . and the school has been great. Now I am fortunate given the district our kids attend. I hear parents from other (less affluent) schools and they say their kids get nothing. So part of it (parent involvement) is resources the school has, and the other part is you demanding that you child have certain services that the school and district are required to provide.

Another parent offered a more pointed assessment of what is required for parents to be involved:

Many people don't think we (African Americans) belong here (in suburban communities), so we need to be on top of our kids to do right, and then to make sure we have cultural events for our kids. Make sure that they have access to Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), AP classes, college curriculum. That's what we need to do.

While the parents were able to articulate diverse ways of defining involvement, a number of them spoke about the absence and apathy of many parents at important events at the schools their children attended, which some believe have a significant influence on how teachers view students and their parents. The one teacher, who participated in the focus groups, mentioned how "disappointed" she is that many of the African American parents that she sees bring children to school are not present during back-to-school nights, Open House meet the teacher nights, PTA meetings, and other school events. Another parent mentioned that a neighbor of hers who is African American stated that she did not expect to go to the school "unless there was a problem" and elected to "trust the experts," meaning her child's teacher with her child's education. At least half the parents present stated that they had African American friends or colleagues, who had little to no involvement with their children's school. A parent of a high schooler noted:

I go to the football and basketball games and I see a lot more Black parents there, compared to when I go to "Back-to-school night" or "open house". . . I ask myself, "where did all these Black folks come from?"

The general sentiment that seemed to emerge from the focus groups was that parent involvement typically meant being involved at the school and at home. Yet, a number of the participants believe that many parents were not as committed to either of these areas, and they believed that it is imperative to develop a sense of involvement that incorporates both in school and out of school activities, in addition to a more nuanced relationships between parents and school personnel.

Models of Engagement

The findings from our ongoing work with middle-class African American parents provide a number of ways to reconsider the manner in which parent involvement is conceptualized. These findings also highlight the intersection of race and class to create a complicated, complex picture of African American parents' beliefs regarding schools and the manner in which they should provide optimal learning environments for their children, and the supporting roles that they, as parents, believe that they should play in that process. The data from our work revealed that most of the parents believed in the importance of their involvement in their children's education. However, they seemed to have diverging viewpoints about how that involvement should be manifested. Some parents seemed to have a belief that the quality of the schools that their children attended required less of their involvement; therefore, they took a more distant approach with in-school involvement activities. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the data revealed that

the middle class African American parents are not monolithic in their views of involvement. Their notions of involvement would appear to be consistent with the professional literature which documents that parent involvement can include in-school and out-of-school activities (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Extracted from the data were essential factors and recommendations that can inform the discussion on parent agency, engagement and overall involvement.

The Importance of Being Informed

Parents who were most involved with their children's schools stressed the importance of being informed and remaining inquisitive about the happenings of school life. A number of the parents stressed that the more information they had access to; the more they were able to advocate on their children's behalf. One parent from the focus group stated:

> In many ways, when educators know that you are informed, they make sure that they do right by your children. So that would be my number one issue, get involved, and make sure they (school personnel) know who you are.

This parent recognized the fact that the mediation of space and capital involves the individuals' ability to articulate what it is they know and want on behalf of their children and it requires school officials to listen and be responsive to the articulation. If parents were made privy to the information necessary for effective engagement, if equipped with knowledge of the 'traditional' capital schools operate within, parents can engage in their children's educational journey by authoring spaces within schools and classrooms in which they are able to use interactive capital (i.e., home and school) and frame their involvement and its results.

Several parents mentioned the use of school-sanctioned activities such as Back-to-School Night as opportunities to learn the inner-workings of schools and familiarize themselves with the established networks. Learning how school systems work is about positioning between control and uncertainty, two themes prevalent in the literature on communities and schooling (Valdes, 1996). Knowledge of the inner-workings of the school site is helpful when advocating for students. When parents lack this familiarity, they can more easily be intimidated and have their social capital diminished in light of 'traditional' forms of capital, which in many cases are diametrically opposed to their own forms of social, cultural and intellectual capital. Armed with the knowledge of the traditional form of capital under which schools operate parents can better question the school system, confront the actors with valid concerns and advocate for their children.

Parents in our work have acknowledged that attending various school functions was an important start in this process, but they stressed going beyond traditional school events to taking positions of engagement in which parents can have a powerful voice in the day-to-day operations of their schools. Active membership in Parent Teacher Association/Organizations, School Site Councils, as well as active participation at local school board meetings give power to parents and grant access to decision-making authority needed to negotiate the educational experiences of

children. Parents mentioned attending community forums addressing various issues involving school levies, budgetary concerns and the election of school board members as other means of involvement. Only within these types of spaces can parents inform decision making processes, act on the environment, engage school personnel and produce desired results and artifacts.

The Need to Question, Critique, and Challenge

According to several participants in the study, most parents are not engaged with their children's schools. For those who are engaged, they find themselves in positions in which the individuals with decision making ability orchestrated the space, set the rules and expectations and produced the artifacts to which the student and parent would be held accountable. Linda, one of the participants in the study, stated that she found herself in a role of subordination as she began an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting for her son with special needs. She described the space in which the IEP was held as "cold, sterile and intimidating." She believed that the very structure of the space was designed to create an adversarial atmosphere. As she described it, the District personnel were sitting on one side of the table in plush, decorative seats, dressed in suits and she was on the other side with "regular" clothes, and a "crappy" chair. The District personnel established themselves as the authority, the experts, those setting the rules and expectations and who would dictate the process and produce the artifact, the IEP. They controlled the space. Her social capital was not recognized or valued though they were meeting to determine how best to meet the needs of *her* son. After that meeting, Linda very intentionally educated herself regarding the precepts of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When she returned to the next meeting scheduled by the school district, she was armed with arsenal of knowledge regarding her rights. She began to question the practices of the district, their self-proclaimed limitations and their suggestions and remedies for her and her son. She challenged them and demanded a free and appropriate education for her son. In short, she became a presence at the district. After intense negotiations, and without the use of legal services, the district responded to her interactive agency with a classroom erected just for her son. Using Linda as an example, we see that parents are *able* to embrace their power and use conflict that comes with that power and reform schools.

We recognize that advocacy and challenge can bring about conflict. Nonetheless, the parents who do not question, challenge, and critique their schools and their practices and fail to advocate for their children are entrusting the fate of their children to the schools. We discovered that a number of parents received desired outcomes from schools when they exercised their power as informed parents and demanded greater accountability. A number of parents stated that school personnel "seemed shocked and surprised" when they could express appropriate protocols and specific legislation that schools needed to be in line with when educating students. Parents need to welcome and invite conflict as a means to mediation. Linda concluded, "Conflict's good because it brings out change."

The Importance of Collaboration

Political power to change how and when parents get involved with schools really rest with parents. Several of the parents from our work stated adamantly that they have an unrealized powerful collective voice in the educational process of their children. For a multitude of reasons, parents have not met together to identify and agree on key concerns that impact schools. Getting parents together on one accord is difficult because of diverse schedules of families, the absence of a forum in which to collaborate, and little articulation between home and school. The lack of a collective voice has made it easy for schools to frequently overlook parents as a resource for educational change. Structures have not been created or maintained to increase African American parent involvement because no pressure has come from the makers of parent involvement policy or the constituents they sought to serve.

One of the themes that emerged from the focus group discussion was the need for a space to network with other African American parents. Several of the participants stated that parents needed a consistent place to meet, network and share information about various resources available to their children. The importance of collaboration seemed to be based on a common set of experiences that many of the parents believe their children face in what are supposed to be better school climates. A number of the parents spoke of what they believed to be unfair disciplinary practices their children experienced, while others spoke to the lack of cultural and ethnic diversity in the curriculum, some discussed the need for more African American teachers and administrators in the district.

Discussion

All parents are rich with resources and information. In the case of middle-class parents, particularly those equipped with cultural capital valued most by the dominant society, they can be an even richer asset for their children. However, the critical race theory analysis in this work enabled us to examine the complexity of the intersection of race and class. This work allowed us to assess, to what degree if any, middle class African American parents experience schools in different ways than their less affluent counterparts. These data offered varying accounts of the complexity of race and class when in comes to parent involvement. Some parents stated that they still felt the sting of race and racism as they seek to advocate on behalf of their children despite their middle class status. Other parents believed that there was little need to "rock the boat" in predominately White school settings, and thus were more removed from the process of being involved in schools. Several parents stated the need to be involved to show their counterparts from other ethnic and racial backgrounds that their children had just as much access to a high quality education as any other group of students. What seemed to emerge from some of the parents in this work suggests that they dynamics of economic upward mobility remain in a state of flux for African Americans.

Attempts to better understand the behaviors of African American middle class

93

citizens have been extensive in the professional literature for several decades. Dating back to the work of E. Franklin Frazier (1957) who examined the social life of middle-class African Americans and their attempts to assimilate into, and model the dominant culture, to Sampson and Milam (1975) who contended that African Americans fully embraced their racial identity, to recent works which assert that African Americans do not enjoy middle class status as much as Whites due to the constraints of latent racism and discrimination (Hochschild, 1995), African American life and middle class status has been multi-faceted, and far from monolithic. Therefore, any attempt to capture the behaviors of middle class African American parents and their involvement in the children's education must recognize the variability across individuals, school settings and communities.

We would argue for future research concerned with parent involvement to move toward the ecology approach that Barton et.al. (2004) call for, wherein "parents are both authors and agents in schools" (p. 3). The findings from this study centered primarily on descriptions of parents' involvement; however, we need to continue to move into more complex understanding of what the relationships between parents, school personnel, space, and capital look like over time as parents seek to influence what happens in schools for their children. A needs assessment of parent involvement might be an effective way to determine the activities parents' value in their role as educational partners, what is manageable considering their outside demands, and how to best include them in the learning process for their children.

The incorporation of critical race theory into parent involvement is important because it enables parents to discuss the methods in which they believe racial dynamics influence the manner of the relationships that they attempt to set up with school capital and space, particularly in school communities where their children are in the minority. While much has been written about the lack of involvement of African American parents in low income communities; incorporating the voices, experiences and roles of more affluent African American families and their children's education may highlight the fact that race does not dissipate as individuals move up the socio-economic ladder. Further articulation of the challenges African American parents face informs the discussion of how to better understand some of the factors that are integral to the academic performance of African American students, particularly those who attend middle class schools, which are purported to offer the opportunity for improved educational quality. Finally, invoking the accounts of middle class African American parents and involvement also enables further inspection of the all too familiar issues of race and class in the pursuit of educational equity.

Conclusion

In short, we are hopeful that this work will add to the voluminous work on parent involvement in schools, and contribute to an area that is largely overlooked, but is gaining increased attention in the professional literature. As researchers, we have a responsibility to examine African American middle-class parent involvement and offer proactive means of advocating for students whose academic prospects

can be improved. We are especially hopeful that these findings may provide useful insights for educators who are truly concerned about the disparities in academic performance they are witnessing with African American students. The voices of the parents they serve should act as an informative tool with which to guide their deliberative actions in inviting African American parents to participate in authentic, mutually democratic relationships with shared decision-making power.

This article is also motivated by the experiences of each of the authors, who are African American parents with children who attend middle class schools. Each of us have had experiences within such institutions that call into question the trust and often blind faith that many African American middle class parents place in schools to provide a better educational experience for African American students. Frequently, the thinking among many of these parents is that the mere quality alone of the schools ensures their child's access to a rigorous, affirming curriculum, equitable learning opportunities, adequate educational support to reach academic goals, high teacher expectations, and a positive social environment in which to thrive. Public schools across all socio-economic levels remain politically charged sites, where parents position themselves and their children to ensure that they receive the best resources, unfettered access to vital information, and overall educational quality. Any analysis which examines this relationship between parents and schools, without explicit attention to race and class miss two of the primary factors which complicate the roles parents play and the degrees to which they become involved.

The manner in which schools construct avenues of access for parents remains crucial for all families regardless of their socioeconomic status. Specifically, with regard to African American parents, the decision to engage schools on their children's behalf and the manner in which they structure this involvement cannot occur by invitation only. While schools have a federally mandated responsibility to involve parents, it is ultimately up to parents themselves to author this involvement by assuming leadership positions that can influence school practices. It is our hope that families, parents and schools engage in dialogue and collaboration, with each entity hearing and learning about the other's perspectives and needs as they attempt to create optimum educational conditions for all students.

Note

¹ The term "middle class" has numerous interpretations according to social-scientific, sociological, and behavioral categories. Citing the work of Pattillo-McCoy (1997) the economic determination of middle class is derived based on an income-to-needs ratio, which is based on income that is twice the federal poverty level, which for 2004 was designated at $18,850 for a family of four. Sociological conceptions of middle class are equated with occupation and income (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Poulantzas, 1974) and stipulated that individuals with white collar jobs and some college constitute middle class. Behavioral classifications of middle class cite people who own property, vote, marry, and attend church as middle class. For purposes of this work, middle class is defined as individuals whose household income ranged from $40,000-$95,000, which according to the U.S. Census Bureau is considered the income range for the middle 20% of all U.S. residents.

References

Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry, 11*, 3-42.

Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities*. New York: Routledge.

Artiles, A.J., & Zamora-Durán, G. (1997). Disproportionate representation: A contentious and unresolved predicament. In A.J. Artiles & G. Zamora-Durán (Eds.), *Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special and gifted education* (pp. 1-6). Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.

Aronson, J. (1996). How schools can recruit hard-to-reach parents. *Educational Leadership, 53*(7), 58-61

Barton, A. C., Drake, C., Perez, J.G., St. Louis, K., & George, M. (2004). Ecologies of parental engagement in urban education. *Educational Researcher, 33*, 3-12.

Barnard, W. M. (2004). Parent involvement in elementary school and educational attainment. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26,* 39-62.

Becher, R. (1986). *Parents and schools.* ED269137. ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-924/parents.htm

Benson, F. & Nelson, B. (2003). *Research based parent involvement that works. Presentation to the Community Resource Teams*. Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Public Schools.

Bordieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In. J.G. Richardson (Ed.). *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp. 241-258)* New York: Greenwood Press.

Cabrera, A. F., & Steven, M. (2000). Overcoming the tasks on the path to college for America's disadvantaged. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 27*, 31-43

Carter, P. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond African American and White.* London, UK: Oxford University Press.

Clark, R. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: Why poor African American children succeed or fail*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Conley, D. (1999). *Being African American, living in red: Race, wealth, and social policy in America.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Conchas, G.Q. (2006). *The color of success: Race and high achieving urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Datnow, A., & Cooper, R. (1996). Peer networks of African American students in independent schools: Affirming success and racial identity. *Journal of Negro Education*, *65*, 56-72.

Davis, M.R. (2004, March 24). Federal study examining singe-sex public schools. *Education Week, 23*, 24-28.

Diamond, J.B., Wang. L, & Gomez, K. (2004). African American and Chinese-American parent involvement. The importance of race, class, and culture. *Harvard Family Research Project.* http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/race.html

Dietel, R. (2006). *Get smart: Nine ways to help your child succeed in school*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Dingerson, L., Beam, J., & Brown, C. (2004). *26 Conversations about organizing, school reform, and No Child Left Behind.* Washington, DC: The Center for Community Change.

Delgado, R. (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Epstein, J. L. (1991). Effects on student achievement of teacher practices of parent involvement. In S. Sukverb (Ed.) *Advances in reading/language research, Vol. 5. Literacy through Family, Community and School Interaction.* Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Fan, X. T., & Chen, M. (2001). Parent involvement and students' academic achievement: A

growth modeling analysis. *Journal of Experimental Education, 70*, 27-61.

Fege, A., & Smith, A. (2002). *Using NCLB to improve student achievement: An action guide for community and parent leaders*. Washington, DC: Public Education Network.

Ferguson, R. F. (2002, December). *Addressing racial disparities in high achieving suburban schools.* North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Policy Issues #13.

Frazier, E.F. (1939). *The Negro family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Gutman, L. M., & McLoyd, V. C. (2000). Parents' management of their children's education within the home, at school, and in the community: An examination of African-American families living in poverty. *The Urban Review*, *32*, 1-24.

Harris, L. et al. (1987). *The American teacher 1987: Strengthening links between home and school.* New York: Louis Harris and Associates.

Horn, J. G. (1998). Stakeholders' evaluation of rural/small schools. *Rural Educator, 20*, 5-11.

Hoschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing up to the American dream: Race, class, and the soul of the natio*n. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jacobi, E., Witteich, Y., & Hogue, I. (2003). Parent involvement for a new century. *The New England Reading Association Journal*, *39*, 11-16.

Jenks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). *The African American-White test score gap.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions Press.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities*. New York: Crown Books.

Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of a nation*. New York: Crown Books.

Knapp, M. & Wolverton, S. (2005). Social class and schooling. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 656-681). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W.F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory. *Teachers College Record*, *97*(1), 47-68.

Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage: Social class and parent intervention in elementary education.* New York: Falmer.

Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. (1999). Moments of social inclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family school relationships. *Sociology of Education, 71,* 39-56.

Lee, C. D., & Slaughter-Dafoe, D.T. (2005). Historical and sociocultural influences on African American Education. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 462-490). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Lee, J. & Bowen, N.K. (2006). Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the achievement gap among elementary school children. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*, 193-218.

Lightfoot, D. (2004). "Some parents just don't care": Decoding the meanings of parent involvement in urban schools. *Urban Education, 39*, 91-107.

Massey, D. & Denton, N. (1985). Spatial assimilation as a socioeconomic as a socioeconomic outcome. *American Sociological Review, 50*, 94-106.

McNeal, R. B. (1999). Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out. *Social Forces*, *78,* 117-144.

Muller, C., & Kerbow, D. (1993). Parent involvement in the home, school and community. In B. Schneider & J. Coleman (Eds.), *Parents, their children and schools* (pp. 13-42). Boulder, CO: Westview.

National Center for Education Statistics (2003). *Status and trends in the education of Blacks.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences.

National Committee for Citizens in Education (1987). Helping parents help their kids: Parent involvement improves student performance. In the National School Public Relations

Association [NSPRA] (Ed.), *The evidence continues to grow...Parent involvement improves student achievement*. Arlington, VA: NSPRA.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Olsen, L. (1994). *The unfinished journey: Restructuring schools in a diverse society.* A California tomorrow research and policy report from the education for a diverse society project. Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow.

Ogbu, J. U. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic engagement.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Orfield, G., & Eaton, S. E. (1996) Harvard Project on School Desegregation. *Dismantling desegregation: The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: New Press.

Parker, L., Deyhle, D., & Villenas, S. (Eds.) (1999). *Race is…race isn't: Critical race theory and qualitative studies in education.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Pattillo-McCoy, M. (1999). *Black picket fences: Privilege and peril among the Black middle class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Peressini, D. (1996). Parents, power, and the reform of mathematics education. *Urban Education*, *31*, 3-28.

Sampson, W. A., & Milam, W. (1975). The interracial attitudes of the Black middle class: Have they changed? *Social Problems, 23*, 153-165.

Sanders, M. (1997). Overcoming obstacles: Academic achievement as a response to racism and discrimination. *Journal of Negro Education, 66*, 83-93.

Sanders, M.G., & Harvey, A. (2002). Beyond the school walls: A case study of principal leadership for school-community collaboration. *Teachers College Record, 104*, 1345-1368.

Solorzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *11*(1), 121-136.

Solorzano, D. G., & Ornelas, A. (2002). A critical race analysis of advanced placement classes: A case of educational inequality. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *1*, 215-229.

Sleeter, C.E., & Delgado Bernal, D. (2003). Critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and anti-racist education: Implications for multicultural education. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), (p. 240-260) The *handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd. Ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sui-Chu, E. H., &. Douglas, W. J.. (1996). Effects of parental involvement on Eighth-grade achievement. *Sociology of Education, 69*, 126-141.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2001). *Educational achievement and Black-White inequality,* NCES 2001-061. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

United States Department of Education, Office of the Secretary. Office of Public Affairs. (2003). *No Child Left Behind: A parent's guide*. Washington, DC: Author.

United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2005*. Washington, DC: Author.

Valdes, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass and social policy.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor.* New York: Knopf.

Yan, W. (1999). Successful African American students: The role of parental involvement. *Journal of Negro Education, 68*, 5-22.