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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:
PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICE, AND PLACEMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Pamela W. Thompson

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2014

The Dissertation of Pamela W. Thompson is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

California State University San Marcos

2014

DEDICATION

I would like to give thanks to God for giving me the strength, endurance and guidance needed to complete this dissertation journey. I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Oliver J. Thompson, who sacrificed so much the past couple of years so that I could shine. You have always put my dreams ahead of yours. I also dedicate this to my two handsome African American boys, Joshua and Noah, for their words of encouragement and prayers. You are the main reason that I chose to do this project and to let the world know that as a parent I would lay down my life for you. I am so blessed to have you in my life and I am proud to be your mother.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:
PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICE AND PLACEMENT

by

Pamela W. Thompson

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego, 2014
California State University San Marcos, 2014

Professor Amanda Datnow, Chair

The disproportional representation of Black students in special education has been an issue of concern for many years in the United States. A review of the literature illustrates the struggle of African American children in the American educational system: from the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation to the re-segregation of these same children into special day classrooms. What the literature fails to report is how parental involvement might help educators address the problem of overrepresentation and the

perceptions of the families who are affected by their children being placed in special educational settings.

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools. Critical race theory was utilized as a framework to examine and challenge the manner in which race and racism impacts practices and procedures by school personnel dealing with African American parents. As such, qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to bring to light African American parents' experiences with the special education system servicing their male children.

Many of the parents in this study stated that they had experienced obstacles that prevented them from meaningful participation in the educational planning for their children as members of the IEP process. The perceived obstacles that limited their parental involvement in special education were the following: communication between parents and the IEP team members; knowledge of special education laws; parental rights and roles in the process; African American academic success and placement; and school staff understanding of African American students culture and the need for diversity.

The findings of this study yield important implications for policy and practice. These changes require a paradigm shift towards inclusive educational practices that support all students in the general education setting and a renewed commitment to improving parental involvement among African American parents at both the site and district levels. Educational leaders can support this shift through providing professional development and trainings to parents and site administrators on the legal guidelines established by Public Law 94-142 (IDEA). Future research include studies

which could provide the field with more information as to why inequities in special

education continue to plague African American males and their families.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start, which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be. -W.E.B Dubois (1949)

African Americans in the United States have had to fight continually for equality in education for their children (Brandon, Higgins, Pierce, Tandy & Sileo, 2010; Field-Smith, 2005; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005). One landmark case in the fight for equality was the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, which addressed the physical inequalities faced by Black students, challenged discriminatory practices, ended segregation and ruled that separate was not equal, and did "irreversible" harm to Black students (Orfield, 2009). However, the fight for equality in education for Black students and their parents persists.

Sixty years after the historic *Brown* decision, thousands of students with disabilities, African American students, other students of color, and poor students in urban schools are still not receiving the equitable education that was promised to them (Blanchett, Brantlinger & Shealey, 2005; Orfield, 2009). Dunn (1968) in his seminal article, "Much of It Justifiable?" called attention to the large number of African Americans and students from impoverished economic backgrounds in special education. Black students are the unfortunate victims of a system where factors such as poverty and family circumstances, teacher skills, testing bias and racism add to the problem of over-representation in special education.

There is more data on the educational failure of African American males than there is on their success (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008; Townsend, 2002). The disparity in educational outcomes for Black males parallels the anxiety of many African American families who consider their male children an endangered species (Hill, 2001). In addition, Sciraldi and Ziedenberg (2002) found that there are one-third more Black men in prison than in college. The researchers, however, failed to report the parallel educational failure of Black females in the United States. According to Madigan (2002) and the American Association of University Women AAUW (1992), female students of color, particularly Black girls in special education are at risk of failure and dropping out of school due in part to lack of academic support. Many suffer the same fate as Black boys with equally high rates of academic failure. Based on these data, the outlook for African American students with special needs is bleak. These students continue to attend schools where they face racism, discrimination and a system that seems to systematically prepare them for a life sentence in prison rather than life as educated Black men and women who are contributing members of our society.

Because racism advances the interest of both the white elite (materially) and working-class people (psychologically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. Critical Race Theory (CRT) seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The theory begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society and is useful in understanding educational inequity. Rooted in legal theory, CRT critiques the civil rights era's legal victories and educational reform movements, which claim to directly benefit people of color (Ladson-Billings,

1998; Bell, 1992). CRT also challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to the law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT names race as the issue that underlies our laws and public policy and uses the principle of interest convergence to critique key elements of the civil rights movement. CRT would suggest that the laws were passed not in the interest of black equality, but rather in the self-interest of the elite whites (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

As a result, one could reason that the disproportionality in special education programs continues among Black children because reform efforts such as inclusive educational practices have not appropriately addressed a history of racism and the social injustices faced by minority children and their parents in the United States. In a study of parents' perceptions of the disproportionality of their African American male children in special education, a critical lens can be used to examine the current status of inclusive educational practices. It is important to consider who has benefited from the segregating of Black students in special education and most importantly, why African American parents' voices advocating against the social injustices faced by their children have been missing in the research and seemingly ignored in the debates on how to appropriately educate African American children.

Unfortunately, existing research on parent satisfaction of special education rarely reports the ethnic background of their sample; those studies that have reported this information have been conducted primarily with Caucasians participants (Zionts, Zionts, Harrison & Bellinger, 2003). Williams and Baber (2007) warn that the lack of input from minority parents in research run the risk of "limited relevance" when policymakers are

attempting to examine policies and practices that affect African American parents or learners.

In sum, to fully understand African American parents' views or understandings of inclusive educational practices, a critical lens, supported by the framework of CRT must be applied. This will help determine if educators are doing whatever it takes to remove barriers that prevent African American parents from obtaining an equitable education for their children in a general educational setting.

The Local Policy Context

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) educates over 15,000 students with disabilities in a variety of special education programs. This represents about 12 percent of the students in the district (San Diego Unified District, 2011). Before 2007, students with disabilities were placed at various school sites depending on their disability classification. Despite the school location, students with disabilities rarely had access to their general education peers or standards-based curriculum. As a result, students with disabilities in SDUSD were performing considerably lower on the California Standards Test (CST) compared to students in general education (San Diego School District, 2007). Evidence of poor performance is found in the 2010-2011 CST scores for San Diego. While general education students' scores showed 60.9 percent were scoring in the proficient or advanced categories in language arts, only 37.1 percent of the special education population scored proficient or advanced in language arts. The percentage was only slightly higher in mathematics (San Diego School District, n.d).

The district is making slight progress with 37.8 percent of the special education students scoring proficient and/or advanced in English language arts and 39.0 percent

scoring proficient and/or advance in math as of 2012 (California Department of Education). Underlying these results is a persistent achievement gap between ethnic, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and special education students. The goal of special education services is to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. However, data showed just the opposite to be evident. Poor performance alongside parent concerns compounded the issues the district was facing concerning its special education program.

A major complaint from parents was that San Diego City Schools did not implement inclusive practices for students with disabilities especially students with cognitive disabilities or mental retardation, and that previous efforts to integrate students that started in the 1990's have been reduced (San Diego Unified School District, 2007). Parents also expressed frustration at the district practice of sending central office staff to IEP meetings considered "contentious" by school staff. Parents felt that this practice violated the individual decision making process guaranteed to them by law.

San Diego Unified School District had additional concerns about the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Data showed that Latino students who were English Language Learners were placed in special education at a rate that was 70 percent higher than native English speakers and African American students were three times more likely than White students to be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed (San Diego Unified School District, 2007).

In order to address the need to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as well as the imperative of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to promote integration, the San Diego Unified

School District sought the help of an outside researcher to audit special education programs (San Diego Unified School District, 2007). The goal was to determine if the district was in compliance with state and federal laws governing special educational programs. The focus of the audit was to determine areas of strengths and address potential concerns that might affect student rights and achievement. The resulting report, referred to as the Hehir Report, named after the lead researcher Thomas Hehir, was the result of an internal examination of the system. The findings confirmed that SDUSD inordinately segregated too many students with certain disabilities and disproportionately placed African American and Latino students in programs for students identified as emotionally disturbed and learning disabled. In addition, the audit found that students with disabilities in SDUSD were performing considerable lower the California Standards Test (CST) compared to students in general education (San Diego School District, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

African Americans have a long history of fighting for educational equality for their children (Field-Smith, 2005; Thompson, 2003). Advocacy needs to continue and parents need to engage in their children's education if the problem of special education disproportionality is to be solved. Yet, 60 years after the *Brown* decision, poor communication between professionals and Black parents persists. Research indicates that educators often show a lack of respect for minority parents resulting in parents feeling alienated from their children's education (Brandon et al., 2010; Thompson, 2003; Zionts et al., 2003). African American parents of children with disabilities have expressed frustration and anger at school professionals whom they believe prevents them from participating in their children's education (Williams & Baber, 2007). The lack of parent

participation and collaboration with school professionals has had detrimental consequences for African American children and their parents. The disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs reverberates for a lifespan starting with the achievement gap and possibly resulting in higher incarceration rates, lower college attendance, and few employment opportunities (Hill, 2001; Oswald, Coutinho & Best, 2006).

Research shows that parents' involvement in their children's education is closely related to the students' overall academic success. Students with involved parents experience fewer behavioral problems, have better academic performance, and are more likely to complete high school when compared to students whose parents are not involved (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Thompson, 2003). Consequently, federal, state, and local policies have mandated that schools implement goals related to parental involvement in their programs. Parental involvement in special education is federally mandated and the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) emphasizes the role of parents in designing and implementing special education services for their children. As a result, schools are required to make parents "active" participants in establishing educational goals for student success. Yet, despite the benefits of parental involvement to both teachers and parents, research indicates that African American parents' involvement in their children's school is relatively low in both general and special education (Smith, Krohn, Chu, & Best, 2005). Equally disturbing is the fact that when African American parents are engaged and involved in their children's education they are met with negative reactions from school officials (Harry et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, the achievement gap for Black children in public schools continues to widen, and reform efforts do little to address the problem. If school boards and educators are serious about improving the educational outcomes for Black children placed in special education, they will need to address the characteristics of African American parent involvement, parent perceptions concerning special education, and the factors that contribute to low levels of participation (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

Furthermore, it is important that school leaders examine how race and disability have contributed to the quality of education for students of color (Shealey & Lue, 2006). Failure to place issues of race, class, culture, and language at the center supports the assumption that the American educational system and special education programs are race, class, culture, and language neutral. According to Howard (2008), issues such as class, gender, parental involvement, disability, language, ethnicity and culture all play an important role in minority students having access to educational opportunities in America. Societies' failure to honestly and critically examine issues of racism has only led to further tension, discrimination, and hostility along racial lines and possibly prevents us from hearing and empathizing with those who are traditionally marginalized in public school settings (p. 960). This failure also sends a powerful message to many in America that the issues of race and racism experienced my minority students are unimportant. Increasingly, research is showing that such is not the case (Blanchett, Klingner & Harry, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of African American parents on the subject of inclusive education and the desegregating of

black male students from special day classrooms in a large urban district. This study also explored parents' understanding of inclusive education. The overarching research question and sub-questions guiding this study are as follows:

How do Black parents of male special education students perceive their interactions with the school?

- To what extent is race or racism seen as a factor?

- To what extent have they been involved in the decision- making process of their child's placement either in general education or special education?

- To what extent are they involved or knowledgeable of the inclusion process?

- What is their level of parental involvement at their child's school? What factors fosters that involvement or hinder their presences at school?

This research study used a critical race theory perspective to explore the reactions and perceptions of Black parents as they navigated the special education system to determine if their child's classroom placement is appropriate and if that placement provides the educational opportunities and equity their children deserve under NCLB and IDEA regulations. This study also explored factors that have continued to plague Black parents, special educators, and districts as they negotiate implementation of IDEA and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) to ensure equity for Black children regardless of ability or disability (Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klinger, & Sturges, 2010).

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to use inductive research strategies. Inductive reasoning builds

abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than employing existing theory (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 1998). The theories are formed from observations and intuitive understanding gained in the field. Using a qualitative approach allows me to capture the voices and perspectives of African American parents. I interviewed parents, observed IEP meetings and, gathered material documents pertaining to the students' placement in order to get an accurate picture of inclusive educational processes and actual practice at schools in San Diego County. As I analyzed this qualitative data and brought it into dialogue with theory and existing research, a set of themes emerged in the findings. These findings are discussed in chapter 4.

Significance of the Study

Research on disproportionality of Black students in special education shows that these students have been overrepresented and placed in alternative learning environments at an alarming rate in the American educational system (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Dunn, 1968). In order to comply with laws protecting the civil rights of students with disabilities, districts have implemented reform efforts to directly address the problem. One such reform effort is inclusive education, in which special needs students spend most of their time learning in classrooms with non-disabled peers.

This study is significant because current research on Black disabled students show that they seldom return to a general education setting once identified and placed in special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Administrators and program managers in special education could use the results of this study to identify the barriers Black parents face when negotiating special education policies and practices. An understanding of the institutional barriers to inclusive educational practices may counter myths of low parent

involvement among Black parents and highlight the deep divide between schools and African American families that continue to marginalize Black children.

Definition of Key Terms

Education of All Handicapped Children Act.

(Sometimes referred to using the acronyms EAHCA or EHA, or Public Law (PL) 94-142), the law was enacted by the United States Congress in 1975. This law required all public schools accepting federal funds to provide equal access to education and one free meal a day for children with physical and mental disabilities. Public schools are required to evaluate children to determine if they have an identified disability and create an educational plan with parent input that would emulate as closely as possible the educational experience of non-disabled students. Since the 1997 reauthorization of the act, it has been renamed to remove the term handicapped, which is considered offensive to persons with disabilities due to its origin of meaning, "hand in cap" or being someone who must beg. The act now is termed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Disproportionality

Disproportionality is the over or under-representation of certain groups (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, age, jurisdiction, etc.) in a public child welfare agency relative to the group's proportion in the general population. With regard to special education, Black children are over-represented in behavioral categories and under-represented in gifted education.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Plan.

The IEP plan is a special education term outlined by IDEA to define the written document that describes the program of specially designed instruction and support that a student found eligible for special education will receive. It includes the student's goals and services to be provided for students receiving special education.

Inclusion

The term represents a concept that the placement of first choice for students with disabilities is in general education classrooms with appropriate support and services. It is not a term used or defined in federal law, but a principle of equal access. Student may receive instruction from both a general education teacher and a special education teacher.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The LRE refers to the placement of a special needs student in a manner promoting the maximum possible interaction with the general school population. Placement options are offered on a continuum including regular classroom with no support services, regular classroom with support services, designated instruction services, special day classes, and private special education programs.

Special Day Class (SDC)

A special day class is an intensive educational program designed for children with special needs who are determined to need specially designed instruction for greater than 50% of the day. A child may be eligible for this program if he or she experiences significant cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or learning needs. These challenges generally must be severe enough to cause a child difficulty in performing in a regular

school setting or in alternative less-intensive special education programs, or to be at risk

for harming himself and/or other classmates.

Response To Intervention (RTI), or Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

RTI is a method of academic intervention used to provide early, systematic

assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. RTI seeks to prevent academic

failure through early intervention, frequent progress measurement, and increasingly

intensive research-based instructional interventions for children who continue to have

difficulty. RTI is a multileveled approach for aiding students that is adjusted and

modified as needed.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the study including the local policy

context or background, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, the theoretical

framework, significant of the study, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 is a review of the

literature on overrepresentation and gender in special education identification and

placement. Secondly, the legal and professional aspects of special education are

discussed, including actions taken by the federal government that led to establishing

special education programs. Thirdly, chapter 2 examines studies on the importance of

parental involvement, parent/professional relationships, and prevalent issues often related

to conflicts in special education. Finally, the tenets of Critical Race Theory and practices

within the school system that are of concern to the academic, social, and behavioral

success of African American male and their families are examined. Chapter 3 describes

the design of this qualitative study, data collection and analysis, limitations of the study,

and the ethical considerations needed in order to minimize risk to the participants of this

study. In Chapter 4, I analyzed the data and discussed findings. Chapter 5 contains

connections to prior research, implications of the study, suggestions for further research,

and conclusions. The bibliography and appendixes are included at the end of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society's well. Even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us. Surely, they must know that their deliverance depends on letting down their ropes. Only by working together is escape possible. Over time, many reach out, but most simply watch, mesmerized into maintaining their unspoken commitment to keeping us where we are, at whatever cost to them or to us. Derrick Bell (1992)

There is a considerable amount of research on the disproportionate representation of Black males in special education, the outcomes related to children with disabilities, and the professionals who work with these children. This chapter begins with a review of the literature on overrepresentation and an examination of gender in special education identification and placement. Second, the legal and professional aspects of special education are discussed, including actions taken by the federal government that led to establishing special education programs, civil rights for students with disabilities and services.

In addition, studies on the importance of parental involvement, parent-professional relationships, and prevalent issues often related to conflicts in special education are reviewed. "Culturally connected practices" with minority parents is discussed as a reform model to enhance educational practices that affect children of color. This set of practices is intended to aid in the establishment of positive relationships between parents and professionals, which in part contribute to parental satisfaction with special education meetings and processes. Finally, the tenets of Critical Race Theory and practices within the school system that are of concern to the academic, social, and behavioral success of African American males and their families are examined. Critical

Race Theory provides the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Taken together, these bodies of literature help inform this study of inclusive educational practices from the perspective of African American parents.

Overrepresentation of Students of Color in Special Education

Research on Black students in special education focuses primarily on the disproportionate representation of minority students in the system. *Disproportionate placement* generally refers to the representation, over or under, of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population. In particular, Black students continue to be identified for special education at disproportionately higher rates than their white peers (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent & Ortiz, 2010; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Disproportionate representation of students of color is not a new issue of concern in special education. Based on data collected in 2005, Black students 6 through 21 years of age were 1.5 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA than the same-age students in all other racial or ethnic groups combined. In addition, *The 29th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2007*, estimated that while African Americans were 2.86 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA for mental retardation, and 2.28 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than students of all other racial or ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As a result, students of color are 82 percent more likely to be served in a more restrictive environment, which further confounds their opportunity for equal access to the general education curriculum (Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009). These recent data shows that the disproportional

representation of students of color in special education continues to rise, making the issue

a priority in the 1997 and 2004 reauthorization of the Individual with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) that requires states to address and monitor the educational needs

of over-identified students. The reauthorization was based on data collected in the 1998-

1999 school years, where African American children represented just 14.8 percent of the

population aged 6 to 21, but comprised 20.2 percent of all children with disabilities

(Beratan, 2008). The reauthorization was an attempt by the federal government to

address disproportionality by requiring each state education agency (SEA) to determine if

disproportionality based on race and ethnicity from inappropriate identification is

occurring in the state and within local school districts. Further, if such disproportionality

were found, the SEA must notify the affected school districts and support them in

carrying out improvement activities (IDEA 1997; Public Law No. 105-17; IDEA, 2004).

"African American students have become the beneficiaries of the 'double-edged

sword' of special educational placement. The term is used because despite the costly and

specialized services that this arm of the educational system offers, stigmatization and

separation occasioned by disability labels and the debatable quality of educational

outcome of such placements continue to be of concern" (Hart et al., 2010, p. 1). Kearns,

Ford, and Linney (2005) agreed, stating that the effectiveness of the special education

system, especially concerning assessment and treatment approaches used by education

specialists and professionals, are in need of further research because of the unusually high

number of African Americans in the system. The high level of referrals and placements

in special education has led to it becoming another form of segregation from the

mainstream. Consequently, special education has become a mechanism for keeping

many African American boys from receiving an equitable education in the general education environment (Losen & Orfield, 2002). As a result, some scholars have referred to special education as a new, legalized form of structural segregation and racism (Losen & Orfield, 2002, as cited in Blanchett, 2006).

There is evidence that the problem of overrepresentation in special education is a result of racial bias against ethnic and minority children (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Hart et al., 2010). Overrepresentation of a particular group does not mean that the system does not work; however it does raise serious questions as to the causes of persistent overrepresentation of children of color being admitted to special education programs (Gaviria-Soto & Morera, 2005; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Harry & Anderson, 1994). Researchers who have examined the practices that lead to disproportionate and overrepresentation of Black students in special education suggest that it occurs for three major reasons. These are cultural variables, assessment procedures, and the quality of instruction and intervention services (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

These reasons or themes, contribute to the ongoing problem of overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs. General education teachers play a major role in the referral of students to special education. Shealey and Lue (2006) write that many teachers of minority students are white middle class women who are not prepared to work with diverse populations. As a result, the decision to refer a child is often subjective and based on the teachers' tolerance of disruptive behaviors or teachers' inability to understand students from cultures different from their own (Egyed & Short, 2006; Hart et al., 2010). These factors may lead to students being inappropriately placed

into special education. Unfortunately, teachers may perceive special education as a support for students who are struggling and the only option for providing interventions and academic support for students (Vasquez et al., 2011).

The school personnel making placement decisions generally exercise wide latitude in deciding which students qualify for special education through a process that is often subjective. This is especially true in disability categories such as Learning Disabilities (LD) or disabilities that do not require a medical diagnosis (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994; Howard, 2008; Vasquez et al., 2011). Typically, overrepresentation does not exist in disability categories that are less subjective such as visual, auditory, or orthopedic impairments (Vasquez et al., 2011).

Critical Race Theory scholars such as Derrick Bell would point out that the practice of sorting minority students according to disability categories would be an example of a social and societal phenomena that was intentionally designed to prevent the integration of black and white students in public schools. Bell (1992) argued that civil rights obtained by Blacks always coincided with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Sleeter's (1987) research on the category of learning disabled, and the reason the label was created, seems to substantiate Bell's argument. Sleeter (1987) argued that the category of Learning disability (LD) was created to fulfill political and economic purposes during the Cold War threats to U.S. supremacy (as stated in Blanchett, 2010). This label differentiated white middle class children from poor and low-achieving minorities during a time when schools were implementing higher standards for economic and military purposes. According to Sleeter (1987) it also protected white children from the consequences of

low achievement suffered by minority children and upheld their intellectual normalcy while suggesting hope for a cure and for their ability to attain higher status occupations than low achievers (Sleeter, 1987). This disability label also gave these children the privilege of being serviced in a general educational setting instead of segregated classrooms reserved for students with more severe labeling such as emotional and behavioral disabilities (Blanchett, 2010).

Disproportionality and Gender

One of the prevailing facts in the research on overrepresentation is that Black males are overwhelmingly being identified for special education services. Studies suggest the reason for this is because boys exhibit behavior patterns that make them more likely to be referred by teachers to special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 200l). Determining the degree to which behaviors contribute to inappropriate placement is difficult but the number of students referred and placed in special education under the category of Attention Deficit Hypertension Disorder (ADHD) is higher than any other disability category. Research indicates that referral under the disability category of ADHD is highly subjective and may be based on teacher bias; it may also explain the high number of students placed using this disability (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Both race and gender influence the overrepresentation of Black males in special education (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Oswald, Best, & Coutinho, 2006; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Evidence of racial and gender bias was found by Harry and Anderson (1994) when they examined the historical facts associated with disproportional representation and segregation of students from cases such as *Brown v. Board of Topeka,*

Kansas (1954) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979). The case of Larry P. restricted the rights of

school districts to give African American children Intelligence Quotient Tests for the

placement purpose of special education in classifications such as Educable Mental

Retardation (EMR). As result, data collected throughout the study of disproportionate

placement supports the fact that African American males are referred to this classification

at an alarming rate, alongside classifications such as Serious Emotional Disturbance

(SED) and Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Furthermore, research shows that

placement in special education programs did not prepare African American students to be

productive and responsible members of society (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Gaviria-Soto

& Morera, 2005; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Unfortunately, missing from the statistical research and the history of disproportionate

representation is the educational experience of the Black female and the role gender plays

in the referral process.

Disproportionality and the Law

In 1965, Congress enacted Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act (ESEA) of 1965, thus creating a Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. The

bureau is now called the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). ESEA, coupled

with court decisions such as PARC v. Pennsylvania (1972) and Mills v. D.C. Board of

Education (1972), gave children with disabilities equal rights or access to education along

with their non-disabled peers (Peterson, 2007). These cases provide students with

disabilities equal rights or access to an education but do not specify where the access to

that education will take place. Special education is a service, not a place, which means

that educators have allowed students with disabilities to be housed in separate classrooms away from general or mainstreamed students.

The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs is a relatively new branch of educational segregation and discrimination that has grown from the tree of desegregation reforms (Skiba et al., 2008). Racial segregation continues in education 60 years after the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that segregation was unconstitutional and 30 years after the passing of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These reforms were passed to insure that marginalized groups of students would not continue to be in segregated schools or classrooms. Both asserted that segregation was inherently harmful and unequal (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008). The civil rights won by students of color through the passage of the *Brown* legislation unfortunately have been dismantled (Bell, 1995; Orfield, 2009). Special education identification has often led to segregated placements for Black students who have historically been denied an opportunity by institutionalized segregationist polices (Artiles et al., 2010). Dunn's (1968) early research reached a similar conclusion, noting that the system is simply transferring minority children from one segregated setting to another. As a result, Black students in special education continue to experience educational inequities and are not given the opportunity for a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, which is in a mainstream general education classroom (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; Orfield, 2001).

Before Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), nearly half of the nation's four million children with disabilities were not receiving an equitable public education. Disabled children who were being educated in

public schools were regularly relegated to ghetto-like existences in isolated and run-down classrooms located in the least desirable buildings of the school or sent to entirely separate facilities (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Passage of EHA now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) sought to remedy the denial of access to schools and the unjustified segregation of students with disabilities (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002). However, just like the *Brown* decision, the efforts made by congress were not enough to dismantle years of racism, hostility, and suspicion that segregated schools had fostered (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). As a result, almost 30 years of research data continues to indicate that African American male children (Harry & Anderson, 1994) are disproportionately (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009) and inappropriately placed in special education and segregated away from their general education peers (Eitle, 2002; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Hart et al., 2010).

The 1997 and 2004 reauthorization of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act renamed the act Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reported the over 20 years of research that had occurred since the law's initial passage in 1973. Congress examined research on the profile and academic performance of students with disabilities and found special education students were likely to come from families of low socioeconomic status and families whose parents were not well educated. In response to the data, Congress called for greater efforts to ensure that minority students were classified accurately and appropriately placed. Districts are also required to gather data to determine if significant disproportionality based on race is occurring with respect

to identification of children with disabilities and their placement in a particular

educational setting (Artiles et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2008; Townsend, 2002).

Unfortunately, the research on the effects of the overrepresentation of Black boys in

special education on the families of these children is very limited. The voices and the

perceptions of these parents seem to have been largely ignored (Williams, 2007).

Special Education and African American Parents Involvement

An understanding of the perceptions held by African American parents

concerning special education may provide answers to how educators can increase parent

involvement (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Parent involvement in special education is

federally mandated and is a critical part of the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, which

contains the strongest language to date, emphasizing the role of parents in designing and

implementing special educational goals in collaboration with school professionals

(Brandon et al., 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). Unfortunately, while IDEA requires districts

to report the number of minority students being identified and placed in special

education, data on the involvement of their parents in the process is sorely limited and not

a focus of the provision.

Numerous research studies have collected data showing that there is a direct

correlation between parent involvement and students' academic success. However,

according to Zionts, Zionts, Harrison and Bellinger (2003) research on parent

involvement generally focuses on white parents and existing studies on the subject rarely

report the ethnic background of their sample. Hence, we have limited information

determining the impact of African American parent involvement on overrepresentation of

Black boys in special education. Studies that have focused on African American parent

involvement show that districts and school officials are not addressing the needs of culturally diverse parents (Brandon et al., 2009; Thompson, 2003; Zionts et al., 2003). These studies indicate a strong need for change in the area of parent – professional relationships in order to implement "informed" reform measures that will change the fate of special education and the dismal outlook for African American boys in education (Thompson, 2003). The lack of involvement by African American parents has many causes from poor communication between parents and school personnel to parents feeling that their views and participation in their children's education are unwanted and unwelcomed (Blanchett et al., 2009; Epstein, 2001; Williams, 2009).

Zionts and colleagues (2003) studied urban African American families in order to understand their perceptions of cultural sensitivity within special education. The study consisted of 24 families with children with severe emotional or cognitive disabilities. The participants consisted of parents from a broad range of income levels who self identified as being African American. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews on the following topics of interest: (a) parents' perceptions of the impact of their ethnicity on special education services (planning and delivery), (b) their overall satisfaction with the special education system, and (c) the extent to which they believed the first two factors were related.

The data show that parents of urban, African American special needs children in special education share many common issues and struggles with other parents in the special education system. A major theme that emerged in this study was the issue of respect. Sixty-four percent of the parents who participated in the study reported that they did not feel respected by teachers and other school staff members. They reported that

teachers and staff often blamed them or their children for behavioral problems, which

resulted in their children's loss of self-esteem or they themselves feeling worthless.

Parents also expressed a need for teachers to understand the difference between

"culture" and "disability." They felt that teachers were unaware of the differences which

led to their children be unfairly stereotyped or blamed for not being what Caucasian

teachers considered as "normal." Such beliefs by parents over time led them to believe

that school personnel were culturally insensitive. Parents felt that the relationship

between cultural differences and satisfaction with special education was inextricably tied

to the issues of respect and level of comfort. Parents felt that cultural sensitivity training

for teachers would foster positive relationships between them and teachers.

This research, according to the authors, sheds light on the complex and marginally

documented area of importance in the federally mandated parent-as-team-member

portion of IDEA (Zionts et al., 2003). Research on African American parent involvement

would provide insight on the issues they face in their attempts to become involved in

their children's education. Further research on African American parent-teacher

relationships could be used as a starting point to improve relations between educators and

Black parents. Working together to develop strong partnerships between parents and

educators would be beneficial to African American students' academic achievement and

could improve the educational outcomes for special needs students.

Special Education: Parents' Educational Rights

Parents are required to be an integral part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP)

team. The function of an IEP meeting is to develop an educational plan based on the

student's needs and to determine educational placement based on the most effective

delivery of instruction in the least restrictive environment (Fish, 2008). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) also requires school personnel to maintain meaningful parental involvement during the IEP process. Unfortunately, research examining school personnel and African American parents in the IEP process tend to show just the opposite is happening. Williams and Baber (2007) examined African American parents' perceptions on the efficacy of schools in meeting the needs of their children in a North Carolina Community. A case study design was used to give voice to a group of actively engaged parents who were involved in an Office of Civil Rights district visit. This group of parents complained to their school board and the government about disproportionate representation. During the time of the study, African Americans student representation consisted of more than half of the student population in special education under the disability categories of behaviorally and emotionally disabled. What was particularly disturbing to parents was that during the year of the study the percentage of African American students in special education doubled. While the authors did not give a specific reason for the increase, one might speculate that it could have been due to discriminatory district practices that led to an investigation by the Office of Civil Rights.

The participants of the study were four African American parents who had children in the school district. These parents were well educated and either owned their own businesses or worked in professional settings. The study resulted in four overarching themes: The absence of culturally competent teachers of color, inappropriate identification and placement of African American children in special education systems, disenfranchisement of African American parents, and distrust of the system (Williams & Baber, 2007). The results of the study indicated that parents believe that the school

system operated from a white middle-class orientation and didn't address issues related to African American children. Consequently, they felt the schools were not to be trusted and could not educate their children appropriately. Second, they felt that school personnel did not respect minority parents. When conflict arose, the parents felt that district personnel ignored their wishes and moved forward with their own agenda during IEP meetings.

Fish (2008) investigated the perceptions of 51 parents; the majority were white and from middle to upper middle-class socioeconomic families. The students were being serviced primarily in resource classes or in self-contained classroom settings. The areas of concern in this study were: a) IEP meeting experiences b) Parents' knowledge of the IEP process and special education law, and c) IEP meeting outcomes and relationship between staff and parents.

In contrast to the African American parents in Williams and Baber's (2007) study, the data showed that these white parents were satisfied with the level of service in each area of concern identified. The study found that it was important for educators to build relationships with parents during the IEP meeting. By treating parents as partners during meetings, educators create fewer adversarial and intimidating experiences for parents (Fish, 2008). It appears that the white middle class parents' experiences with special education are starkly different from those of African American parents.

It appears that parental dissatisfaction with special education services is a nationwide problem. Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) researched two districts that underwent system-wide changes to address the issue of parental dissatisfaction in the schools that were dealing with children with disabilities. The study took place during the

2003-2004 school years over a period of five months and included two California school districts that had reduced the due process hearing rates for parents who were dissatisfied with their level of service. One of the districts was located in a rural area and served 403 special education students. The second district was located in northern California and served approximately 356 special education students. Parents who were dissatisfied with the system were selected to take part in the research. Administrators and teachers from both districts also participated in the study. Data analysis found similar issues in both districts. Three themes were (a) lack of leadership, (b) not keeping up with the law and (c) parents being excluded from the IEP process. These findings were similar to the ones found in the majority of studies on parental dissatisfaction among African American families (Brandon et al., 2009; Baber & Williams, 2007; Thompson, 2003; Zionts et al., 2003).

In order to support families with children needing special education services, both districts implemented new leadership and partnerships, updated educational practices and resources, worked on building relationships, and strengthened teacher and parental supports. Furthermore, they implemented an alternative dispute resolution process in order to help parents with issues of concern. The changes implemented by the districts indicated a need for holistic change in the system rather than a piecemeal approach to solving the issues faced by districts battling parent dissatisfaction. The school districts in this study served families with medium to high socioeconomic status and represented mainstream culture. Hence, the perceived status of parents by school officials seems to be the determining factor as to when districts improvements are made to the system (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008). Historically, much of the advancement implemented

to support children with disabilities was done at the insistence of white parents who held school districts responsible for educating their disabled children in public school settings. Most notably, four mothers in the state of Washington wrote the first civil rights legislation supporting disabled students in 1971. This was the Education for All Handicapped Children. As a result, equal educational opportunity for all students, including those with disabilities, is now part of our national culture (Keogh, 2007). In addition, this law clearly defines and protects parents' rights while holding districts providing services to disabled children legally and ethically responsible for implementing equitable special educational practices. Unfortunately, parents and educators often have a difference of opinion as to what is equitable or appropriate when implementing services for children with disabilities (Baber & Williams, 2007).

Both schools and parents have high expectations of their roles in the education of students. The community expects schools to accommodate and understand their families' values and cultural beliefs (William & Baber, 2007) and sometime believe that the expectations schools have of parents is unreasonable (such as providing medication for behavioral problems or agreeing with segregated placements). These expectations and beliefs, in turn, may leave parents feeling victimized by a system that professes to help their children (Losen & Orfield, 2002). On the other hand, schools expect families to become involved and are held to this standard by the federal government. Studies show that districts that have implemented programs to support teacher-parents relationships were more successful in their efforts to satisfy parents of special needs children (Fish, 2008; Mueller et al., 2008).

However, many times schools assume that parents will automatically be involved

in their children's education. If they are not, parents risk being judged by teachers who would label them as "bad" or "uncaring" parents (Zionts et al., 2003). The perceived negative perceptions of teachers concerning parent practices can further distance parents from the participating in their children's education. African American parents perceive their negative interaction with school staff to be racially motivated because of a lack of cultural understanding by teachers (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Williams, 2007). Parents in one study expressed frustration with the lack of experience the school system's predominantly White teachers seemed to have regarding the social, cultural, and economic differences between themselves and the families they served (Zionts et al., 2003). Blanchett (2006) suggest that one solution to the problems faced by parents might be solved if teacher preparation programs did a better job preparing new teachers to address the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students. Yet, despite the fact that many institutions are required to meet diversity standards, Blanchett (2006) writes that teacher preparation programs continue to graduate and credential teachers who are not prepared to teach African American students.

Special Education Reforms and Race

The intersection of race, culture and disability provides considerable challenges for the educational system to obtain effective school reform. Unfortunately, these factors also contribute to the level of disproportionate representation. Researchers have found that there is still much to be done in addressing issues of equity and social justice as they apply to student learning (Harry et al., 2005; Hart et al., 2010; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Howard (2008) states that it is imperative for educational leaders to recognize and explicitly acknowledge race and racism in educational theory and practice in order to

obtain a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the educational challenges

facing African America boys. This examination of the system will give educators a

better understanding of the cultural and structural forms of oppression that are present in

every social, economic and political institution that hinders the academic success of black

male children (p. 962). School reform efforts that fail to consider the racial oppression

and inequities experienced by African American males will continue to limit their

educational and life chances for success. More importantly, the failure of researchers to

critically examine the role that race plays in the obtainment of an equitable education

may also reveal why reform measures have not been successful in implementing

structural supports that would address and eliminate the dismal educational outcomes for

black males (Howard, 2008). In addition, school reform initiatives often failed to

consider the impact of contextual variables such as poverty, racial identity development,

and the misperceptions of the teaching and learning process (Blanchett, 2006; Losen &

Orfield, 2002). This failure results in districts not providing teachers with resources and

supports to better meet the needs of their ethnically diverse students and families

(Shealey & Lue, 2006).

It seems that culturally responsive school reform is needed in order to show

substantial change in educational practices. Some reforms have made important gains in

these areas. For example, in an attempt to help educators understand the

overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. West-Olatunji, Baker, and

Brooks (2006) investigated the educational experiences of African American adolescent

males in an after-school Rites of Passage program. The purpose of the research project

was to determine African American adolescent males' attitudes regarding their schooling

experiences. The Rites of Passage program included the following components: culture and manhood, arts and crafts, drama, educational enrichment, and dance. The researchers utilized the Readers Theater format to illustrate their findings. Students reported in their own words that they experienced a lack of respect from their teachers, boredom during classroom instruction, and an awareness of educational inequalities. However, students preferred the Rites of Passage program they were currently involved in rather than going to back to the regular school setting. The researchers speculated that the reason for this was the shared cultural experiences that they received in the Rites of Passage program.

In another study, Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) investigated the impact of implementing Instructional Consultation Team (ICT). The primary goal of the ICT model is to create and maintain student success within the general education environment by supporting the classroom teacher. The study focused on three overarching themes: cultural variables that affect the initial referral of minority students for special education; bias in the assessment procedures used in determining the eligibility of minority students for special education; and effectiveness of instruction and intervention in addressing the academic and behavioral needs of at-risk students prior to consideration for specialized services.

The study was conducted at 22 schools located in five districts. The results of the study showed that after two years of implementing the ICT model, there was a significant reduction in the number of minority students being referred compared to schools that did not implement instructional consultation teams. The ICT model's explicit goal was to help teachers develop more effective teaching strategies to work with diverse student populations.

While these studies provide some promising avenues for reform, research studies documenting the perceptions of the students and their parents in special education are limited. Future research that documents the voices of students and parents could provide insight into an area of study that might help educators and parents come closer to solving the problem of overrepresentation of students of color in special education. Critical race theory can provide a useful theoretical framework for future studies in this area.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theorists are a group of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT begins with the notion that racism is common in American society and is useful in understanding educational inequity. CRT requires a critique of some of the civil rights era's legal victories and educational reform movements (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT also challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to the law (Tate, 1997). The task of CRT is to identify values and norms that have been disguised and subordinated in the law.

This section of the literature review expounds on CRT as a theoretical framework for examining racial inequalities in education experienced by African American boys in special education and their families. Critical Race Theory is appropriate for this study because the CRT movement is rooted in the social missions and the civil rights struggles of the 1960's that sought justice, liberation, and economic empowerment (Tate, 1997).

Legal scholars and activists introduced the movement in the mid-1970s. They were concerned that advances made during the civil right era of the 1960's had been stalled or dismantled (Zamudio et al., 2011). Known as one of the founding fathers of

CRT, Derrick Bell's writings challenged the dominant liberal and conservative positions on civil rights, race, and law (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Bell argued that civil rights advances for Blacks always coincided with the negative economic conditions facing elite whites. His stunning critique of *Brown v. Board of Education* had Americans questioning why the legal system suddenly in 1954 ruled that separate was not equal and mandated desegregation in public schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Despite the fact that CRT began as a movement in law it has quickly spread to other disciplines. Today, many in education use CRT ideas to understand issues of school discipline, tracking, curriculum, and achievement testing (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theorists also use CRT to focus on the ongoing negative impact of racism and how institutional racism privileges Whites in education and lead to minority children being marginalized by the system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical Race Theory in education was derived from the work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and is grounded in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a movement that challenged traditional legal scholarship. Researchers using CLS were committed to shaping society based on a vision of human personality devoid of hidden interests and class domination perceived in existing legal institutions (Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Zamudio et al., 2011). Today, educational theorists use CRT principals to examine educational inequities and to critique some of the civil rights era's most notable legal victories and education reform movements (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In order to understand the ideas and principles of CRT, it is important to examine the Basic Tenets of Critical Race Theory.

Basic Tenets of CRT

Critical Race Theory is an analytical framework used to theorize, examine, and challenge how issues of race and racism impact the way society does business and the common everyday experiences of most people of color in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theorists in education examine racial inequity in schools within a historical context. They see contemporary racial inequality as an outgrowth of a history of oppression (Zamudio et al., 2011). The CRT movement in education builds its scholarship upon five theoretical pillars. They include: (a) ordinariness, (b) interest convergence (c) social construction, (d) differential racialization, and (e) legal storytelling.

Ordinariness. The basic premise of CRT is the assumption that racism is a salient and permanent feature of American Society (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Zamudio et al., 2011). According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), the idea of the "permanence of racism" involves adopting a "realist view" of the American societal structure. This view requires that we realize the dominant role that racism has played and continues to play in society. The permanence of racism notion suggests that racist hierarchical structures control all political, economic, and social domains. These structures are responsible for allocating privileges to whites and the subsequent "othering" of people of color in education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In the context of race in America, "othering" operates to exclude and marginalize people who are not white. Ordinariness acknowledges that this type of racism is deeply embedded in our society and is difficult to cure or address (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Interest convergence. Interest convergence or material determinism explains why racial reform has moved cyclically rather than forward in a linear fashion (Zamudio et al., 2011). According to interest convergence, because racism advances the interest of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eliminate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Bell (1995) agreed and stated that the civil rights gains achieved as a result of the *Brown v Board of Education* legislation were only possible because the interests of both white and blacks converged. The United States was attempting to uphold its image as a supporter of human rights during the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. The Supreme Courts ruling that "separate was not equal" cemented the U.S image. Thus, the ruling in Brown was possible because of foreign policy (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Social construction. This theme holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Social constructionists propose that the concept of race, the belief that a classification based on physique, skin color, and hair type are meaningful and biological (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Machery & Faucher, 2005). This concept has been used in America to justify and rationalize the unequal treatment of groups of people (Machery & Faucher, 2005). Critical race theorists are interested in this concept because it might explain why society chooses to ignore scientific facts, creates races, and give them pseudo-biological characteristics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Differential racialization. This theme holds that the various racial groups in the United States have been racialized (the idea that each race has its own origins and evolving history) in different ways in response to the needs of the majority group

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Moreover, the laws and legal structures society devises for each group, such as Jim Crow laws for Blacks, operate differently in the case of the different racial groups. Various groups feature different histories and struggles. Yet each has had to contend with different sets of discriminatory laws and practices as a result of their race and the dominant culture's shifting needs in the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As a result, social stereotypes of the various groups changed over time to facilitate society's obtaining what it wanted from the group in question (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Legal storytelling and narrative analysis. The goal of legal storytelling is to present an oppositional voice to the master's narrative or dominate racial group, as an effective tool that make structures, processes and practices that contribute to racial inequality visible (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Zamudio et al., 2011). Minority perspectives in the form of narratives, testimonies, or storytelling challenge the dominant group's accepted truths (Zamudio et al., 2011). Storytelling aims at increasing empathy and allowing the readers a glimpse into what life is like for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). On the other hand, "counter-storytelling aims to expose myths and stereotypes that white people believe and that enable them to be comfortable in a system in which they enjoy a disproportionate share of the benefits and privileges" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.42-43).

Critical Race Theory and Education

Critical Race Theory was introduced to the field of education as a theoretical and analytical framework by educational scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) and called for greater theorizing around issues of race and education. Ladson-

Billings and Tate were discouraged with the educational literature that presented race as either an ideological construct or an objective condition (Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman, 2011). According to Zamudio et al. (2011), race presented as an ideological construct promotes a set of beliefs about a group of people, such as the notion that Blacks are lazy. On the other hand, race as an objective condition falsely generalizes and stereotypes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Neither of these understanding of race describes the nature of society where race has been historically constructed and institutionalized in policies and practices (Harris, 1993; Zamudio et al., 2011).

Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995, p. 48) challenged educational scholars to "theorize race and to use it as an analytic tool for understanding school inequality." They felt educational scholars gave inadequate attention to race and the racialization process as a basis for educational inequality (Zamudio et al., 2011). The call by Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995) encouraged scholars to use the field of law to form a deeper understanding of racialization and how it is related to social inequalities.

Educators have used CRT concepts to critique meritocracy in society. Meritocracy assumes that the playing field between whites and minorities are equal and that everyone has the same educational opportunities. Meritocracy also assumes that good work ethics and values will lead to a person's success or failure in life. Critical race theorists in education reject meritocracy because it provides justification and legitimacy to the way schools are currently structured (Zamudio et al., 2001). Thus, meritocracy says that natural ability and hard work are the keys to success and those who fail can only blame themselves or their families. Hence, "despite the existing inequalities in society, it is believed that universal education in a free society provides everyone with the equal

opportunity to achieve" (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 12). To dispel what CRT scholars consider the *myth* of the meritocracy narrative, critical race theorists have used the principles and ideas of CRT to confront legal claims of objectivity and neutrality to argue that under the meritocratic principles of equality and equal opportunity, racism has methodically infused every facet of daily life (Bell, 1992). In addition to meritocracy, CRT educational scholars also critiques liberalism, which equates individual political rights with equality and colorblindness, and which professes that today everybody enjoys equal treatment without regard to race (Zamudio et al., 2011). For this study, CRT provides the conceptual space to explore the educational history of African American boys in special education from the perspective of their parents who voices and lived experiences have yet to be documented fully in educational research.

Summary

This review of the literature presented three overarching themes. The first theme provided a historical and legal perspective into the overrepresentation of African American boys in special education. The second theme provided an overview of parental involvement in special education and reform measures implemented to address the parent-professional relationship. The last theme consisted of an explanation of Critical Race Theory as the conceptual framework for examining the issue of disproportionality in special education from the perspective of African American parents.

The research reviewed in this chapter reveals that the disproportionality of African American males in special education is a significant problem in United States public schools. This disproportionality continues despite legal actions that would guarantee a student's civil rights to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive

environment. Black males have experienced a system of testing bias, gender bias, racism, and classism that prevents them from being successful in a general education classroom. Unfortunately, the research does not offer easy answers as to how to eliminate disproportionality, but it does provide some limited examples of districts that have tried strategies to work with parents as part of IEP team meetings in order to help build collaborative relationships between parents and district staff.

The reality, according to the literature, is that African American parents are *still* fighting for the rights guaranteed to their children under the law. The *Brown vs. The Board of Education* case determined that separate was not equal. However, there is evidence that classism and racism are factors influencing the placement of special education students by professionals. "Disproportionality in special education placements occurs through a process of social construction by which decision about disability and its treatments are negotiated according to official and unofficial beliefs and practices" (Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002, p. 71). In order to change African American parents perception of special education, school and district leadership must ensure that ethical, responsible, and culturally compatible practices (i.e., due process, communication, and involvement) are the standard and not the exception. "Educators must also discover what lies behind disproportionality, and use rigorous research to document the social processes that lead to it "(Harry, et al., 2002, p. 72). Harry, Klingner, Sturges and Moore (2002) assert:

> Statistical analysis can be used to provide a powerful teasing out of the variables that are associated with disproportionality, as can be seen in the research of Oswald, Coutinho, Best and Singh (1999). That research displays the complex interplay among numerous key variables, such as size of group in a district and various aspect of socioeconomic status.

> What we still need to learn is why these pattern occur: what is the chain of events that sets students from certain kinds of backgrounds, in certain kinds of school districts, on the road to special education placement? What is the thinking of those making the decisions that lead to these patterns: what are the students actually like? Why are these students referred while others are not? What is the role of the parents in the process and how do they perceive it? (p. 73).

This research used the theoretical framework of critical race theory to address some of the questions posed by Harry et al. (2002). CRT can assist with unmasking assumptions premised on physical appearance or race that has systematically denied African American boys in particular, equitable learning opportunities in public schools.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools in San Diego County. Critical race theory was utilized as a framework to examine and challenge the manner in which race and racism impacts practices and procedures by school personnel dealing with African American parents. As such, qualitative data was gathered to bring to light African American parents' experiences with and "counter stories" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) of the special education system servicing their boys.

The overarching research question and sub-questions that guided this study include:

How do Black parents of male special education students perceive their interactions with the school? (main question)

- To what extent is race or racism seen as a factor?

- To what extent have they been involved in the decision making process of their child's placement either in general education or special education?

- To what extent are they involved or knowledgeable of the inclusion process?

- What is their level of parental involvement at their child's school? What factors fosters that involvement or hinders their presences at school?

Design of the Study

Qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is known (Creswell, 2005). It can also be used to gain new perspective on what is already known about an area of research, or to gain more in-depth information. For example, research on the overrepresentation of African American children in special

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education has been studied extensively over the years. The focus of these studies showed that overrepresentation usually occurs among poor disadvantage families who lack knowledge of their parental rights. However, less is known about how racism and bias in special education practices affect parents' ability to be participating members of the IEP process.

The goal of qualitative researchers is to observe human nature. Qualitative researchers attempt to understand the meanings of social events for the people involved in them (Esterberg, 2002). The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the "human" side of an issue – that is, the often-contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals (Merriam, 1998).

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study on disproportionality of African American children in special education because I was seeking ultimately to learn how understanding the experiences and perspectives of African American parents can help eliminate overrepresentation of Black boys in special education programs. I wanted to learn about their experiences with their boys' placement in special education and about their experiences interacting with the school, and I wanted to capture this information via their own voices. The participants of the study were individual parents from across multiple schools within San Diego County who are not a part of an existing "group or community."

Qualitative research allows the researcher to use inductive research strategies. Inductive reasoning builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than testing existing theory (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 1998). The theories are formed from

observations and intuitive understanding gained in the field. In order to explore issues of race, discrimination, and oppression thoroughly, I employed the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory. CRT discussed in Chapter Two, is an analytical framework used to theorize, examine, and challenge how issues of race and racism impact the way that society operates and the common everyday experiences of most people of color in America (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT methodology offers a space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color by providing a tool to "counter" deficit storytelling. These stories can be use as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and to work toward social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 23-44).

Population

The population of this study consisted of eight parents of African American male students in grades K-8, who were receiving special education services in San Diego County schools. San Diego County was chosen due to the convenience of location to the researcher as well as the fact that schools in this county have implemented the full inclusion model of special education students into general education classrooms.

The researcher used both convenience and snowball sampling in this study to identify parents or guardians within the population who met specific criteria. "In convenience sampling the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied and in snowball sampling, the researcher asks participants to identify others to become members of the sample" (Creswell, 2005, p.149). Parent

participants, grades K – 8, who were verified as having boys enrolled in special education by my personal and professional networks, needed to meet the following criteria:

- Parents of African American male students receiving services from special education in San Diego County in grades K-8[1].

- Parents and guardians willing to participate in the study.

Recruitment

Recruitment for participants for this study came from a number of my personal and professional networks within the Black community. I publicized the study in the community newsletter given out monthly at my church and send emails via the Internet to members of my professional network. I felt this was the best course of action because many in the Black community are skeptical of researchers who want to use their children for personal gain. Abuse of human subjects involved in research is well documented. In particular, African Americans have suffered greatly in the name of research. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study has emerged in research as the most frequently cited event to justify African Americans' distrust of institutions of medicine and public health (Gamble, 1997). Similarly, the scholarly literature has not been positive in its depiction of African Americans. Some of the representations of them are riddled with images of difference, intellectual inadequacy, hostility, and aggressiveness (Fordham, 1996). As a result, studies show that among African Americans, distrust of researchers poses a substantial barrier to recruitment (Freimuth et al., 2001).

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[1] One of the participants in this study indicated that her grandchildren were not receiving services from special education but a review of the documents showed that they were qualified for services but the IEP process was incomplete. Yet findings were indeed pertinent as they spoke to the parents' involvement in special education placement.

Data Collection Procedures

This study involved interviews, observations, and document reviews. Drawing from these three sources allowed for triangulation. First, I used semi-structured interviews with parents (Appendix A). The goal of semi-structured interviews was to give parents an opportunity to express their opinion and feelings in their own words. This is important in this study because parents' voices are rarely present in research. I wanted to create a space for parents to express their frustration as well as to describe the successes for their children in special education.

Data collection began on June 17, 2013, and was completed by September 30, 2013. Once qualified participants were identified and agreed to participate in the study, they were invited to a one-to-two hour interview, consisting of 17 open-ended questions regarding their parental involvement in special education and the obstacles they face as a members of the IEP team. Parents were selected based on their willingness to participate in this study and having met the criteria. I assured the participants that their identity would be kept confidential and participation in the study was voluntary. I conducted interviews at locations and times that were convenient for participants and in which they had privacy. Interviews took place in a range of locations including the participants' homes, in a quiet spot in a café, and one requested to be interviewed in her car.

After I completed the initial interviews, I asked parents if I could observe their next teacher/parent meeting, Individual Education Plan meeting, or student study team meeting. During the course of this study, 4 of the 8 participants allowed me to observe and participate in either a parent meeting with their child's general education teacher or an annual IEP meeting. In addition, to parent meetings, this group of parents also

allowed me to observe their children in both the general education and special education

environment. The purpose of the observations was to gather information on the

participants, the physical setting, events, and the personal interactions between parents

and educators. In addition, I requested that the parents allow me to record the meetings

as another source of data to be used later in the research if needed. Merriam (1998) list

three reasons why researchers choose to gather data via observations:

1. As an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine
   to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding
   the context.
2. Observations provide some knowledge of the context or to provide
   specific incidents, behaviors and so on that can be used as reference
   points
3. Observations are helpful if people do not want to discuss certain
   topics.

Finally, parents were asked to provide their child's school records for the

purpose of analysis. School records are a good source of data in that they usually tell a

story about the child's yearly progress. For example, the files will contain notes from

teachers, report cards, discipline records, and notes to parents. These documents

provided a source to further triangulate the data.

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the data collection activities with each

participant. The participants will be described in more detail in Chapter 4.

Table 1.1 Overview of Participants and Data Collection Activities

Pseudonym	Student's Name	Disability	Relationship to student	# Of Interviews	# Of Observations	# Of Parent meetings attended
Mr. Denver	Jack	Autism	Father	One: 60 minutes	Two: general Ed/resource Rm.	Parent declined
Mr. Shaw	Allen	Speech and Language (SLP)	Father	30 minute interview and a follow-up phone call	Two: general Ed/resource Rm.	Parent declined
Mr. Miller	Raymond	Speech and Language	Father and Administrator	Two interviews and follow-up phone calls	None of student	Parent declined
Ms. Jones	Jason/David	SLI/OHI	Grandmother	Two: general Ed/resource Rm.	None of students	Parent declined
Mrs. Johnson	Kevin/ Keith	SLI	Mother and Special Education teacher	Multiple interviews and phone calls were conducted (at least 3)	Once in general education setting	Parent declined
Ms. Leland	John	Deaf and Hard of Hearing	Mother	One interview	Two: general Ed/resource Rm.	Parent Meeting via phone
Mrs. Benson	Richard/Al	Incomplete IEP process	Grandmother	Two Interviews	None of these students	Parent declined
Mrs. Green	Robert	OHI (ADHD)	Mother	One: 60 minutes and follow-up call	Observed student during parent Meeting	Attended an IEP Meeting

Data Analysis

The first step in data analysis begins with the researcher developing a general sense of the data. The transcribed interviews, field notes (observations), and documents were organized according to dates, setting and individuals. I listened to tapes to determine it parents were spoken to respectfully, if their opinion and ideas were acknowledged, and if professionals were being open and honest with parents about their parental rights. The observational notes from the IEP meetings were examined, as were documents.

I then engaged in a systematic process of coding the data in order to find themes. Coding is the process of identifying themes in accounts and attaching labels and codes

(Appendix D) to index them (Creswell, 2005). Themes are features of the participants'

accounts characterizing their perception and/or experiences that the researcher sees as

relevant to the research question (Creswell, 2005). I used open coding, allowing codes to

emerge from the data (Estherberg, 2002), and also had a set of codes I began with based

on the research questions and protocols. I used data management software called

HyperResearch to aid in this process. After the data were coded, I re-read the data and

formulated questions needing to be answered by participants at a second interview. This

information was added to the data to help formulate additional themes or eliminate

categories that were no longer relevant to the study. I coded the second interview in a

similar way, now drawing on the list of codes I had developed through the initial

analysis.

Limitations

The study was conducted in schools located in San Diego County with the

majority of participants coming from one district. This is a limitation because some of

the parents who volunteered voiced concern, fearing that their perspectives would be

shared with district officials, even though I assured them this would not be the case. This

concern was also clearly noted when parents were asked if I could attend one of their

parent meetings. Many declined this offer but did give me access to their children's

records. Another limitation is that the participants are representative of those parents

who wished to participate in the study. This is a limitation because the sample of

participants represent only the population that wanted to participate in the study, not

necessarily representing all parents of African American males in grades K-8, receiving

services from special education in San Diego County.

Ethical Considerations

As an African American researcher who grew up learning about the injustices that were done to Black people and others in the name of research, I am uniquely aware that working with human subjects requires me to abide by the standards set forth in the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics (Warren & Karner, 2005), and those of the UCSD Institutional Review Board. This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). After IRB approval, consent forms were sent to participants who volunteered for this study.

Minimizing risk to the participants of my study was of great importance to me. Two issues that are particularly important according Esterberg (2002) are to maintain confidentiality and obtain informed consent. In order to accomplish these goals, I explained in great detail the purpose of my study to potential parents and answered any questions or concerns they posed. Data collected during the interview process was coded with pseudonyms for both their names and their school sites or districts. Meetings with parents happened in a place of their choosing and my notes were kept in a secure location or on my locked computer.

Finally, I had parents sign a consent form (Appendix C) that outlined potential risks to the volunteers. Parents were allowed a week to consider participating in the study. Afterwards, I contacted them in person to discuss their choice. It was my hope that parents would feel secure with the safeguards I implemented and would consent to this important study on African American parent involvement in special education.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools in San Diego County. Eight parents/guardians of African American males in Special Education, grades K-8th, were interviewed about their perceived parental involvement and participation in the IEP process. Parent involvement in special education is federally mandated and is a critical part of the reauthorization of IDEA 1997 which contains the strongest language to date, emphasizing the role of parents in designing and implementing special educational goals in collaboration with school professionals (Brandon et al., 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). This chapter, therefore, presents the findings and the method used to obtain and record those findings. In summary, this chapter describes the group of parents of African American male students, grades K-8 and introduces each participant in the study. This chapter also discusses the emergent themes found in the research study.

The participants consisted of the parents/guardians of eight African American male students, ages 5 through 13, attending schools in San Diego County. In order to maintain their confidentiality pseudonyms have been used to describe them and their children. The following participants represent the students in the primary grades K-5. Mr. Denver, student age 7; Mr. Shaw, student age 9; Mr. Miller, student age 5; Mrs. Jones, students ages 6 and 8; and Mrs. Johnson students ages 6 (twins). The following represent students who are currently attending middle schools in San Diego County: Mrs. Greene, students age 14; Ms. Leland student age 13; and Mrs. Benson students age 14 and 15.

The audiotaped interviews with the eight participants were analyzed and reviewed to identify the perceived experiences the parents encountered as members of their children's IEP team meetings. The participants also shared the obstacles that prevented them from being active participants during IEP meetings and their understanding of special education laws and their parental rights. Before I discuss the themes in African American parents' perceptions and experience, I will first provide a profile of the participants.

Participants Profiles

The profile of each of the participants is described below. The participants are all African American parents or guardians of boys; however; they differ in terms of their children's special education designation, income levels and access to resources outside of the school district.

Mr. Denver, parent of Jack Denver. Mr. Denver is the parent of Jack Denver, an 8-year-old boy diagnosed with autism. The parents share custody of Jack and both want the best for their son. However, Mr. Denver described their relationship with each other as "hostile" and since he volunteered to do the interview, we agreed that I wouldn't interview Jack's mother unless she contacted me and stated she was interested in participating in the study.

Mr. Denver was excited to share his thoughts and feeling concerning his son because he felt he rarely got a chance to voice his feelings or opinions to anyone who would truly listen. For example, Mr. Denver stated that he has gone to district meetings to voice his concerns regarding special education as they related to his son but was usually told that they wouldn't answer personal questions that didn't apply to the greater

audience. Not surprisingly, he never attended another meeting and is often frustrated with the system because he feels he needs more support for his son and there are limited resources or persons willing to take the time to direct him to the resources that are available for children with autism.

Unfortunately, Mr. Denver seems to blames himself for Jack's disability stating that they (he and the mother) were "to old" to have children and should have been more careful. He feels that his age had something to do with his son being autistic. The parents have adult half-siblings on both side of the family. Jack's maternal half-brother lives at home with the mother and was diagnosed with adult onset schizophrenia 7 years ago. In addition, Mr. Denver has two adult daughters.

Jack was born at 37 weeks gestation via an emergency cesarean section due to fetal distress during labor. According to the father, Jack attained all of his motor developmental milestones within normal limits and began walking at 12 months of age. However, his speech did not progress and he continued to drool until 2.5 years of age. In addition to speech delays, Jack was a picky eater and his parents struggled to provide him with the proper nutrition. The parents took Jack for evaluation of his cognitive, social/adaptive, speech and language and motor abilities. Jack was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and at the time of this interview was currently in a third grade general education classroom receiving services from an education specialist and speech teacher.

Mr. Shaw, parent of Allen Shaw. Mr. Shaw is the father of Allen Shaw, a 4th grader receiving special education services that include speech and occupational therapy support. Mr. Shaw is an ex-marine and carries himself like a drill sergeant. Mr. Shaw and the mother of his son are separated but maintain an amicable relationship in which

they share custody of Allen. Mr. Shaw felt it was about time he started to understand the

IEP process in order to begin participating in the educational planning for his son. Mr.

Shaw confessed that he did not attend his son's IEP meeting and usually looked to the

mother for information concerning Allen's progress in school. However, Mr. Shaw does

interact with Allen's teachers when he picks him up from school.

Five years ago, Allen's kindergarten teacher requested that he be tested. He was

diagnosed with a speech and language impairment (SLI) and required support from the

occupational therapist to assist him with his social/emotional behaviors and penmanship.

Allen reportedly has difficulty emotionally regulating in order to initiate and complete

work when he is bothered by something (e.g. negative interaction with peers or forgetting

to bring something to school, etc.). This behavior often leads to him refusing to complete

assignments or whining that he cannot do the assigned task.

Mr. Miller, parent of Raymond Miller. Mr. Miller parent of Raymond Miller

agreed to interview for this study out of frustration with a system he regarded as

detrimental to African American children. This statement was strange coming from Mr.

Miller who himself is a school site principal. When he and his wife were faced with

dealing with the special education system to help their child, he was doubtful that

anything of value would occur. As a result, he was more than interested in sharing his

experience with the special education system and participating in this study. Mr. Miller

did the interview without his wife being present because he was the one who usually

attended all school meetings concerning their son.

Raymond Miller was born healthy with no noticeable defects and progressed

normally until the age of 3 when his parents began to notice that he was developing a

speech and language problem. Mr. Miller and his wife went to their family doctor to determine the problem and found that their son had Ankyloglossia, also known as being tongue-tied. Ankyloglossia decreases the mobility of the tip of the tongue. As a result, Raymond required surgery and intensive speech therapy to correct his abnormal articulation problem associated with being tongue-tied. As an additional support, the hospital referred the parents to the special education department located within their school of residence. The district performed assessments in all areas of suspected disability and determined that Raymond qualified for speech services and he was admitted to the early childhood program in his neighborhood school. Currently, Raymond is in the first grade and receiving speech services.

Ms. Jones, grandmother of Jason and David Brown. Ms. Jones is the grandmother and primary caregiver for Jason and David and three additional siblings. The mother lives in the home but according to the grandmother she is unwilling to care for her children due to a lifestyle that is inappropriate. The mother is currently pregnant with her sixth child and the education specialist who referred the grandmother to this study assumed that Ms. Jones would also be responsible for this one too. The children all have different fathers.

Ms. Jones is a strong willed but fragile lady who would do anything possible to support her grandchildren. Despite her health situation, she gets up everyday and personally drops them off at school even though she is unable to physically walk them into the building. Ms. Jones usually stays in her van within eyesight until she sees a responsible adult to watch the children before leaving the parking lot. It is in the parked van where the interview took place. Ms. Jones spoke fondly of her grandsons Jason and

David and her experience with special education and was excited to participate in the study.

Jason is a 6-year-old student who began receiving special education services in August of 2008 with a primary disability of Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) and a secondary disability of Other Health Impairment (OHI). Jason has been diagnosed with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which in the past required him to be hospitalized frequently throughout the year. Jason underwent surgery on his skull in order to provide more room for his brain before he started school and a second surgery has been planned.

Jason's younger brother David is also receiving special education services. David was the product of a pregnancy complicated by premature labor at 6 months gestation. He was delivered by an emergency cesarean section. His birth weight was 2 pounds, 3 ounces and he was place on a ventilator and remained in the hospital for 3 months. David was diagnosed with chronic lung disease, which is treated with medication twice daily. David also has a suspected hearing loss in his right ear but his mother has yet to have him tested. According the grandmother, she sought out help for her grandchildren by taking them to be evaluated for a suspected disability. The mother of the children went to the appointment but refused to get out of the car claiming that she was ill. Jason and David are currently placed in general education classrooms. Jason is in second grade and David is in the first grade, both are receiving services from the resource teacher and speech therapist.

Mrs. Johnson, parent of Kevin and Keith Johnson. Mrs. Johnson, parent of Kevin and Keith Johnson, who are in second grade and receive speech and language

support. She agreed to participate in this research study by sharing her perspective as both a parent and educator in the special education system. Mrs. Johnson works as a special education resource teacher in San Diego County.

Mrs. Johnson asked that I not record her interview because of the number of perceived problems she has encountered with teachers concerning her role as an educational specialist. Mrs. Johnson has been a member of the staff for six years and during that time she has encountered issues that range from racism towards her and minority students to teachers who punished students daily for behaviors associated with their disability. Mrs. Johnson spoke of times when students were not allowed to join extra curricula activities or go on field trips due to incidences as simple as forgetting their homework or for times the teacher felt that the student was disrespectful. According to her, incidents involving African American boys being sent to the office were so rampant at one time that the principal and the school psychologist started a leadership club for them. The purpose of the "club" was to teach the students appropriate social skills in order to be successful in the classroom. However, the club presented a problem when teachers felt the students were being rewarded instead of punished for their behavior and they (the teachers) refused to send them to club meetings. Mrs. Johnson stated that she was always amazed at how some children were treated and despite her objections many of the teachers continued to treat minority children as second-class citizens.

Mrs. Johnson and her husband had their children evaluated for a suspected disability after she noticed that their speech was not developing properly. The evaluation found that the boys had a speech and language impairment (SLI) that required intensive speech theory in order to help the boys communicate effectively. Kevin and Keith started

pre-school in the SEEC program in the same district in which Mrs. Johnson teaches.

However, Mrs. Johnson's experience with staff in her district has led her to take her

children to a nearby district in order to avoid further possible conflict with her collogues.

The boy's speech services continued through first grade until the majority of IEP team

members determined that based on their findings, the children were no longer eligible for

services. The Johnson's disagreed with the findings and had their children evaluated

using their health insurance. The findings of the independent evaluation were that the

children qualified for intensive speech services.

Mrs. Johnson stated that she lost faith in her son's IEP team members and felt that

they were not honest with her about the assessments regarding her children's disability. I

asked her why she did not insist that the district give her children the services they

deserved and she stated that she didn't feel it was worth the fight because she has already

voiced her disapproval and concerns at the last meeting and nothing was done to support

her children. She felt fortunate, that she could obtain speech services from another

source outside of the school district. Mrs. Johnson's children are in the second grade and

attend a charter school that specializes in language immersion.

Ms. Leland, parent of John Leland. Ms. Leland is the parent of John Leland.

John is a Deaf and Hard of Hearing student in the 7th grade receiving services in a general

educational setting. A Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher who was once the case manager

for Ms. Leland's son when he was in elementary school referred Ms. Leland to the study.

The case manager described Ms. Leland mother who called the school every time she

was upset about something yet she never attended IEP meetings. The case manager

admitted that she has called Child Protective Services on the mother a number of times

because she felt John was neglected. The mom has also been in jail a number of times and just last year had a severe heart attack and was in the hospital for months. The case manager also stated that John was a sweet and caring little boy who truly loved his mother and was always afraid of what was happening to her when she was away from home. During these times John stayed with his older brothers and their grandmother. Sadly, when mom was rushed to the hospital following the attack, John's family had no way of getting to the hospital to see her leaving the child to worry constantly as to whether she was going to survive.

Ms. Leland explained that John was found to be deaf at an early age and that deafness ran in the family on his father's side of the family. On the day of the interview, I noticed John was not wearing his hearing aides. I asked the mother why and she stated that they had been broken all summer and that she didn't have transportation to get them repaired.

Ms. Leland spoke lovingly of her son John and his struggles in the special education system. Her main concern was what was happening to her son during the school day. She stated that she would call the case manage if John came home complaining of issues with students or teachers. Her only means of handling a situation was to call teachers on the phone because she did not have transportation. She admitted that the only time she had participated in an IEP meeting was when the teacher came and picked her up or by phone.

Mrs. Benson, grandmother of Richard and Al Benson. Mrs. Benson agreed to participate in this research study in an effort to get support for her grandsons, Richard and Al who were ages 13 and 14. According to school documents both boys are eligible for

special education services but are not currently receiving them. Mrs. Benson had just

found out from her son that both her grandsons were failing and needed to go to summer

school in order to be promoted to the next grade. She felt the reason they were struggling

was because both had an undiagnosed disability. During our interview, she stated that

she was constantly on her son to go down to the school and find out why her

grandchildren were failing. She stated that she thought one of her grandsons was autistic

and needed support from the school district. When I asked if her son had been to the

school she said he had but that he and the children's mother were constantly fighting each

other over custody.

I spoke to Mrs. Benson's son about the situation and he gave me a copy of an old

IEP. After researching the case, I found that the students did qualify for services but the

IEP process was never completed. The father of the children stated that he thought the

mother was "just too lazy" to follow through. I can only assume that the district and the

parent agreed to stop the process and that the mother of the children is unable or

unwilling to seek help for the children using the special education system. Unfortunately,

during the time of this research, the grandmother informed me that her son had given up

on trying to help the kids after an incident involving police. However, during the

interview with the grandmother she stated she was upset that her son and the system were

letting her grandsons fail and truly believed that this would not be happening if these

children were not African American boys.

Ms. Green, parent of Robert Green. Ms. Green, mother of Robert Green, age

14, agreed to interview and speak on behalf of her experiences as a parent of three

children receiving services from special education. Ms. Green requested to be

interviewed at her daughter's school and then allowed me to participate in the IEP meeting she had scheduled after our meeting. However, there was a change in plans. After waiting with the IEP team for about 30 minutes and worrying that the mother was not going to show up, the case manager called the mother and found that she was still at home. The case manager was anxious to have the meeting because the mother had contacted the district's superintendent complaining that they were not responding to her request for services. The case manager asked the mother if she would allow us to conduct the meeting at her home. Ms. Green agreed to let us hold the IEP meeting and the interview at her home. In order to make this happen the whole IEP team left the school site and drove to Ms. Green home where she acted as if this was a perfectly normal occurrence.

Ms. Green's son, Robert was present during the IEP meeting working on the computer. Ms. Green stated she wanted her children present at these meeting so they would know their rights. Robert is an 8th grader receiving special education services that include both resource and counseling support. Robert was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and qualifies for services under the disability label of Other Health Impaired (OHI). Ms. Green stated that he was referred for services starting in kindergarten due to behavioral problems brought to her attention by his teacher. As a concerned parent who also noticed these behaviors, Ms. Green worked with the teachers to provide her son with the academic support he needed, but refused to allow them to test him until he was in the 3rd grade. Since being identified for special education services, Ms. Green says she has been heavily involved in her children's education and a participating member of each IEP team meeting. She states that if she is

not happy with the results of an IEP meeting she simply calls district officials and insist they support her children. Ms. Green also stated that she and Robert's case manager work as a team and as a result he is achieving academically. However, this is not true of all her children especially her daughter who she feels is not getting the services outlined in her IEP and is being bullied in school.

As these profiles make clear, the participants in this study represent a broad range in terms of the special education designation of their children and their histories. The profiles give some insight into their interactions with the school system and the various factors that came into play. In the next section, I address the research questions for the study in detail.

Themes in Parent Interactions with the Special Education Process

The themes that follow result from the analysis of the participants' participation in the special education process as parents with children in schools in San Diego County. The African American parents and guardians in this study pointed out *obstacles* in several key thematic areas:

- Communication between Parents and the IEP Team Members

- Knowledge of Special Education Laws

- Parent Involvement in Special Education

- African American Student Success and Placement

- Parents Perceptions of Race, Culture, and Disability

Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

Communication between Parents and IEP Team

One of the major themes that consistently came up in every interview was the lack of clear communication between parents and IEP team members. Participants often felt that staff members usually did not tell them the truth about their children's academic progress or the actual hours of services their children were receiving during school on a daily basis. For example, parents would state that during IEP meetings the case mangers would tell them that their children were making progress with their IEP goals while at the same time the general education teacher would state that the child was below grade –level and failing in class. Parents stated this information was confusing and that the team members could not clearly articulate for them what this information meant in relationship to their children's achievement. Mrs. Jones stated:

> While I understand that my grandsons have a disability and may never be on the same grade-level as the other children, what I don't understand is how the IEP goals and the grade-level standards are aligned and how one teachers can state they are making progress while the other one is saying they are failing!

Ms. Jones wasn't the only participant who voiced this concern. Ms. Benson felt schools didn't do enough to help parents help their children stating, "We didn't even know the boys were failing until we found out they had to go to summer school." Ms. Benson felt if the boys were misbehaving they would have been notified, yet not letting them know they were failing seems to be acceptable. She also felt this was because they were African American boys because in her opinion, "this wouldn't be happening to white children." Here we see one example of how race played into parents' perceptions of their children's treatment in schools.

Mr. Denver felt that the key to developing good communication between himself and school staff was to reach out to teachers at the beginning of the year in order to build a strong relationship with them. He explained: "I'm right in their faces from day one, so they do get to know me. I joke with them." However, Mr. Denver also spoke about an incident in which he asked the teacher why his son's work was not posted on the bulletin board alongside the other children's completed work samples. He said that the teacher gave him an excuse blaming the case manager for not making sure Jack had finished the assignment. Mr. Denver said he didn't believe the teacher and that the incident broke his heart. He said that it was at this point that he realized that there was no way the general education teacher could help his son achieve because she didn't believe his son could do as well as the children without disabilities. Finally, he confessed that his efforts to work with the teachers had failed and he didn't really know how to build a lasting and productive relationship with them that focused on making his son successful in school.

Mr. Shaw stated that he didn't feel comfortable going to IEP meetings but made sure to talk to the general education teacher when he picked up Allen from school. The only problem he found with this arrangement was that teachers usually just told him about Allen's refusal to complete work assignments during class or his behavior problems. When asked why he did not attend IEP meeting Mr. Shaw stated: "I really don't think I have a voice in what happens concerning my son's IEP. I think it's so planned, and they say, "hey, this is what's happening, and that's what's happening. I don't feel I have as big of an input as I probably could". He also stated that his schedule prevented him from attending meetings.

The issue of communication was a major concern with the remainder of the participants as well. Mr. Miller was the most critical in discussing his experience with his son's IEP team concerning communication. Mr. Miller felt that being an employee in his son's school district limited his ability to advocate for his son. When asked if he felt punished for advocating for his son he stated: "Yes! They didn't treat me as a child, they treat me as an employee and in turn used that against me by going to the district superintendent if I questioned or challenged them." I asked Mr. Miller if his boss, the superintendent, actually spoke with him concerning issues he was having with his son's IEP team members. Mr. Miller said:

> This is a small school district and I am one of only a few African Americans working here, which mean people are intimidated by me according to my boss. The ladies on the IEP team felt that I was attacking them professionally. So eventually, I didn't push at meetings because I didn't want it to adversely affect me.

Ms. Leland felt that communication was a problem due to her lack of transportation and health issues. The only communication she received concerning her son usually came in the form of a phone call about his behavior from the principal or from the case manager who were trying to set up IEP meetings. Since she was physically unable to go to the school and a problem occurred, she waited until her son got home and questioned him as to what happened at school. Once she had his perspective, she called the school and spoke to the principal. Ms. Leland usually attended IEP meetings via the phone. I asked her if she felt this arrangement was effective in letting her know her child's progress. Ms. Leland explained:

> By the time they arrange the meetings they are usually very upset with me because it has taken them so long to get in touch with me. The problem is that my phone is not always working, and I've been sick. You should hear

how they talk to me, I can tell they don't respect me. They are always asking me questions that are none of their dam business! But all that matters is that they are treating my son right, if I feel they are not treating him fairly, *then,* I got a problem! I don't really care what they think about me. I think my son is doing fine in school because he is a good kid.

An illuminating perspective on communication came from Mrs. Johnson. She felt as a case manager in the district she couldn't always be honest with parents due to things beyond her control. When I asked her what she meant by this statement she gave the following examples;

First of all, the districts used to cluster many of the Moderate to Severe students on one campus. For example, all the emotionally disturbed children went to ABC Elementary and so did all the resources needed to support those children. However, now the district has allowed students to go to their neighborhood school to receive special education services but there is a serious lack of qualified personnel to support so many schools. Many of the students at this school are receiving services from subs or from education specialists who are working outside of their credential.

Mrs. Johnson went on to state:

In addition, the district has closed a majority of the special day classes in the district and put the students on general education rosters. However, they are still on one person's caseload. It is almost impossible to service them all when they are spread among multiple classrooms and grade-levels. When the school complains and requests additional personnel someone from the district's special education departments comes out and helps us create a schedule that "should" help us address the service hours. Needless to say, they don't work because it's an impossible situation.

Mrs. Johnson stated that if parents asked her questions about their children's service hours she would tell them the truth but she never fully disclosed all the problems going on at the site as to who or how those hours were met. For example, many times she had to pull students in larger groups instead of giving student the one-on-one attention they need. She confessed that the system was broken in her opinion but she

didn't know how else to address her caseload of needy students without extra support

from the district.

All the participants in this study stated in one way or another that communication

between school staff and parents was essential and needed to be improved. They

suggested that school officials develop ways of reaching out to parents in a positive

manner all year long, not just communicating with parents when IEP meetings were due

or to inform them about negative behaviors. Mr. Miller stated, "Wouldn't it be great if

teachers would call parents and shock them by telling them that their child is doing great

in school? Many parents never receive calls like that. I think that one effort made my

staff would go a long way in improving parent teacher relationships."

In sum, all the participants felt that communication between home and school was

difficult. Many also felt that the lack of clear communication between parents and staff

only added to their frustration with the special education system. The following section

describes participation in the IEP process as it is related to participants' knowledge of

special education Laws.

Knowledge of Special Education Laws

Participation by parents is crucial in all IEP meetings in which decisions are being

made regarding their child's education. It is also crucial that parents make informed

decisions and know their parental rights. Special education laws (i.e. IDEA) require that

parents' receive a copy of *The Notice of Procedural Safeguards* (Appendix B) prior to/or

before starting an IEP meeting. The Notice of Procedural Safeguards provides parents

with notice of all pertinent IDEA and State procedural safeguards requirements. Yet,

despite the fact that parents are given information regarding their rights in the IEP

process, only three of the eight participants in this study felt that they had a good working

knowledge of the laws governing special education. The other five participants stated

that they really didn't know the laws governing special education or their parental rights.

They also stated that the IEP team members didn't explain their rights during meetings.

However, most of the participants in this study confessed that they told team members

they understood their rights when asked by members of the team. Parents didn't want the

team members to perceived them as ignorant and thought the information in these

meeting was already so overwhelming that they did not want to add to the confusion.

Ms. Greene said she learned about special education law and policy from her

experiences with her four children. Currently, all her children except one have an IEP.

According to her, she started getting calls from teachers concerning her son's behavior in

kindergarten. She said, "the teachers said my son was just all over the place, disrupting

the class, violating the other children's space and really antsy, just all over the place."

Ms. Green stated, "the teachers were pushing me towards having him tested for ADHD

and putting him on medication." It was at this point that she decided to educate herself

on special education laws. "I needed to know my rights! Because I was not going to put

my child on medication at five. I know *they* think all Black children are ADHD!" As

this reveals, she saw race as affecting her son's referral for special education. Ms.

Greene eventually agreed to have her son evaluated in the third grade because she saw for

herself that he was struggling in school and needed additional support.

Mrs. Johnson learned about special education laws in college as part of her

educational program and from working in the position of case manager. However, she

felt that the program she went through didn't really prepare her for the reality of actually

working within a district that is limited due to budgets and changing procedures and

policies associated with special education. When asked how she keeps on top of current

policies she said, "the school psychologists are a great resource and usually know more

than the program managers at the district offices." I asked Mrs. Johnson why she didn't

use her knowledge of special education laws to insist that the district maintains her sons

speech IEP. She said, "I have an issue with trust, if they would lied to me once, what else

are they not telling me?" I wanted my children with someone who will protect their

interests and if not, I am there while they receive services." Mrs. Johnson went on to

state, "just because you know the laws and you are involved in the process doesn't mean

that your children will receive a quality program or get the services as outlined in the

IEP."

Mr. Miller is an educator who admitted he only has a basic understanding of

special education laws and learned a bit more by attending district trainings. His

knowledge was improved as the vice principal in charge of attending and supervising

special education. He learned the most when one of his parents filed a complaint against

his school with the Office of Civil Rights Department. The parent complaint was

thoroughly investigated by the Office of Civil Rights and required the district to prove

that his staff had acted in good faith concerning a disabled African American student.

Mr. Miller said this experience really showed him what happens when parents know their

rights. Before the complaint he had only dealt with parents who could afford costly

advocates. I asked him what he thought was the difference between the two and he said,

"You talk about inequalities in education! Poor children seem to get the minimum

resources while parents who can afford advocates get premium services regardless of whether their children need them or not."

Five of the participants had little to no knowledge of special education laws. Mrs. Benson stated that she didn't know anything about the laws governing special education but thought the school system should "monitor" students who are failing instead of socially promoting them until they drop out of school. Ms. Leland stated she knew a little about the laws but was really just concerned with her son being treated fairly at school. Ms. Leland stated, "If Jason comes home and tell me there's a problem, I'm on that phone to them teachers and they better tell me why he's upset! My son is a good boy and I don't want him being scared to go to school." She felt that her phone calls were effective when there was a problem at school. In spite of her concerns about her sons' fair treatment at school, she appeared to trust educators' decisions within the context of the IEP meeting. Mrs. Jones had the following to say:

> I don't really know nothing about the laws but when I go to the IEP
> meetings. They explain everything to me, and they also tell me where he is
> at and what is the goal to get him there. Pretty much he's getting there. I
> don't have any problems with them.

Mr. Denver stated that he didn't have a good working knowledge of special education laws but thought he could educate himself by going to district meetings. Mr. Denver thought that a special education committee at the district level would help him with his son but was disappointed when he asked questions about his son and was redirected back to his son's school site staff to address his concerns. Mr. Denver had the following to say:

> I know these people who work in the district have more concerns than my
> child, but they don't understand how frustrating it is for parents

sometimes. We need help at the point of impact. I thought going to these meetings would give me the help I needed to support my child.

Mr. Denver said that this experience left him feeling like the school's teachers and district staff couldn't possibly help his child and that he should be happy with the fact that his son seems to be making progress. This was also the feeling of Mr. Shaw who felt that his presence at IEP meeting really wouldn't change anything for his son. However, Mr. Shaw felt guilty for not knowing more about special education laws or how he could get his son better support at school.

In sum, this study found that three of the eight participants felt they had a working knowledge of special education laws. However, those with knowledge of the special education laws felt just as powerless to change their children's educational outcomes as the participants who didn't possess knowledge of the system. The following section describes the participants' perceived understanding of parent involvement in their children's education and the Individual Education Program (IEP) planning and implementation process.

Parental Involvement in Special Education

All eight participants felt that they were heavily involved in their children's education. However, parental involvement was interpreted as more than just attending IEP meetings. While many felt it was their obligation to attend these meeting and answer the questions asked by staff, beyond that, they didn't feel that these meeting really gave them any power in what happened to their children once the meetings were over. Even Mr. Miller and Mrs. Johnson, who are educators, didn't feel that the IEP team members valued parents' opinions. Mr. Miller stated:

> I think that they know that they have the power to input or not. I think they
> know what to say in those meetings; perhaps to shut down a parent, to
> make them feel like someone is going to follow through, but the whole
> issue is the fact that the follow through is not necessarily there. A lot of it
> is lip service without action.

To these parents, parent involvement meant that they couldn't depend on the school

district or the IEP process to support their children needs. They both felt that if their

children were going to be successful they would have to educate their children

themselves and find other resources to support their kids outside of the IEP process.

Four of the participants who didn't regularly attend IEP meetings due work

schedules or illness felt their voices or concerns were rarely addressed especially

concerning placement and services. These parents felt that being involved in the children

education was not limited to school meetings. Mr. Denver stated that he repeatedly asked

the team to put his son in a special day classroom because his child was not getting the

help he needed in a general education setting with 27 children but he felt his plea fell on

deaf ears. When asked if he was satisfied with the services he stated:

> Its kind of disheartening when I go the IEP meetings and the occupational
> therapist is there, the speech pathologist is there, the principal, the
> teachers, and everybody's gathered around, and they say wonderful things
> about Jack. He's making progress. He's doing good. And they highlight
> all the good things he's done, which is okay. But in my heart, I know they
> can't help my son because when I see his report card he's getting D's and
> F's. He's going to third grade, so as soon as he steps in the classroom,
> he's already going to be over on the side of the room in the D and F
> section because of who he is, he's tossed aside. They can't help him.
> There are just too many kids in the classroom for them to help my son.

Mr. Denver was in tears at this point of the interview and restated that it was "selfish" of

him to have a kid at such an old age. As a parent, Mr. Denver shares custody of his son

but makes sure he is there every night to tuck his son into to bed and assure him he is

smart in school and loved. He stated, "this is the best thing I can do for my son as a parent. My son is starting to notice that he is not as smart as the other kids but every night I tell him he is just a good as they are…I just want my child to be happy."

Ms. Green was the only participant in the study who felt she was truly a valued and participating member of her children's IEP team meetings. Ms. Green stated that as a parent she was always at the school and involved in her children's education. However, she also stated that this relationship didn't develop over night. When I asked her what she meant, she stated:

> I've cc;ed the deputy superintendent of academics. I cc: our area superintendent. If I feel as though they are not listening…after I speak with my son's teachers, if I feel like they're willing to meet my child's needs, his area of struggle, then it's okay. If I see otherwise or my spirit tells me otherwise, that's when I'll resort to my emails.

Overall, participants generally felt they were involved in their children's education regardless of whether or not they attended IEP meetings. The majority of parents felt the meetings were not something they could control and many didn't trust that school officials would follow through with decisions made during these meetings. The parents' definition of parent involvement with their special needs children went beyond meetings to what happened before and after school. Mr. Shaw spoke of taking his son to karate class and being there to pick his son up from school every afternoon. When asked why he wasn't more involved in IEP meetings he stated:

> I'm pretty involved in my son's life but I will say that I don't attend IEP meeting as I should, but I check with his teacher periodically to see how things are going. I'm trying to see if there's anything I can do for him on my end.

Mr. Shaw stated further:

> I can't say that I was very interested in attending the meetings because I didn't think that…maybe me going would change a lot of things. That's why I felt like well, it ain't that important.

Ms. Leland's role as a grandmother goes beyond the traditional definition of parental involvement. She has had to act as her grandchildren's legal guardian out of necessity because her daughter "can not or will not" parent them appropriately, as she described. Ms. Leland stated that she attended IEP meetings for all the children. When asked what obstacles or problems she encountered as a grandparent at IEP meetings she stated; "not really nothing because when I go to the IEP meeting, they explain everything to me, and they also tell me where he is at and what is the goal to get him there. Pretty much he's getting there." Mrs. Benson on the other hand, stated that she felt school officials were not interested in having parents involved in their children education, "how else can you explain to me the reason my grandsons are failing?" she said. When I asked her if she had tried to be more involved in her grandson's education, she said, no, but that the children's father has tried and been turned away because of the children's mother getting a restraining order.

Overall, all participants in this study regarded parent involvement as a priority in supporting their special needs children. However, the majority of participants didn't feel that their presence and participation in IEP meetings impacted their ability to collaborate with school official on the educational planning for their children. The following section addresses the concerns of parents who have obtained services from special education as they are related to their African American children's academic success and placement special education.

African American Children's Academic Success and Placement

One of the issues that consistently concerned the participants of this study was the academic achievement of their children. Parents felt that their children were not receiving the attention needed to help their children learn from teachers in general education classrooms. While they also did not want their children segregated, many questioned the amount of one on-one-time teachers could give their children in classrooms with 24 to 30 children. When asked about her grandson's placement in general education and the quality of services he received as a result, Mrs. Jones stated:

> What they need to do, they need to put lesser kids in the classrooms when
> they come to a special education kid because when they put them in a
> regular class, around a lot of kids, they tend not to focus on what they
> need to focus on. With my grandson's situation, that's what holds kids
> back because they be in the classroom with a whole lot of kids, and
> they're trying to focus on what the teacher's saying but he can't and that
> teacher don't have time to focus on just him. That's why he's behind.

Mr. Denver was also concerned about his son's ability to achieve in a general education classroom, stating, 'he can't learn in that type of environment, not in a regular, normal environment. He's always going to be behind." When I asked him why he felt that way, he stated, "My son has autism. The truth of the matter is that the teacher does not have time to address his needs with so many other students in the room." Mr. Shaw thought that the number of children in the classroom limited the teacher's ability to address the multiple ways in which children learn. He stated:

> Academically, I don't think there's enough one-on-one attention from the
> teacher or the staff. I know there is a lot of other children in the class but I
> think…it's different ways that kids learn, and I don't think that all the
> needs are being met for each kid, because this kid might learn
> kinesthetically, and this one might learn another way. I think teachers are
> trying to put it all together instead of individualizing their instruction to
> help kids like mine.

While the majority of the parents in this study felt that their children wouldn't be successful in a general education classroom due to large class size, they didn't want their children's placement changed to special day classrooms. Unfortunately, parents felt their children were just as segregated in general education, as they would be in a special day classroom. Regardless of the placement, these parents felt that the system was failing to address their children's academic needs resulting in most being below grade level if not failing. However, many of the parents in this study were satisfied with the progress their children made in other areas. For example, Mr. Denver was ecstatic when his son finally started talking and learning to read in the first grade. He said he had to learn to focus on this son's successes no matter how small.

Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Miller felt that the problems they encountered with the special education system were due to the fact that their IEP team members didn't think their children were low achievers, hence, not needing special education services beyond consulting with the child's classroom teacher. They both felt they had to fight school officials in order for their children to receive their speech services as outlined in the IEP. As a result, they both eventually took their children out of special education and sought resources for their children outside of the public school system. Only Ms. Greene felt that the special educational services her children received benefited them academically. She stated that her sons were receiving academic rewards in school and she credited her son's special education teacher for helping him to achieve.

In sum, parents were generally disappointed with the level of academic support for their children. The believed structural issues, such as class size, prevented teachers from meeting their children's special needs. The following section describes the

participants' perceived obstacles to meaningful participation in the special education

process as it relates to school staff members understanding African American students

and their culture.

Parents Perceptions of Race, Culture and Disability

Drawing on the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a critical lens was used in

this study to theorize, examine, and challenge how issues of race and racism impact the

way society does business and the common everyday experiences of most people of color

in America (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings &

Tate, 1995). General education teachers play a major role in the referral of students to

special education. As noted earlier, Shealey and Lue (2006) write that many teachers of

minority students are White middle class women who are not prepared to work with

diverse populations. Study participants, Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Miller both described

incidences in which race was a factor that negatively impacted their children or the

students they served. As a result, Mr. Miller stated that he would like to see more

diversity in his district and on IEP teams. He felt strongly that the lack of diversity adds

to the problems faced by African American children in the educational system because

the students don't really have anyone fighting for them in the system. When asked why,

he stated:

> I don't think "they" know the nuances of people of color, particularly in
> my district where my son is the only… actually that's not true. There are
> only two black students in that classroom. I don't think they understand
> the nuances of the color. I don't think that they care for that. They just see
> him as a face. There are some things that do bother me that they think is a
> positive thing for my son, which is actually to me not positive. For
> example, in an IEP meeting they will say that he's a fun, jovial, comedic
> type of student, when in fact that too is demeaning in a very stereotypical
> way of trying to put virtually all people of color as just being seen as that

black faced clown, instead they should view my son as an academically thriving student.

Mr. Miller also stated:

> They should be talking about his educational progress. If the child is of good character, then they can say he's of good character. He is doing things in this proper way. This is where we are seeing progress. This is where we see he is thriving. They should not comment necessarily on things that are stereotypically or historically in reference as areas in which we, people of color, have been noted as only achieving, in those areas of comedic or things like that. That is not something that says they're educationally sound. It just says that their fate is somewhat set to be only serving the purpose of entertaining.

Mrs. Johnson who works with a prominently white staff felt that it wouldn't hurt to have IEP team members that reflected the students in which they served. However, she stated that simply being of the same race of a family would not guarantee equity or that the children would receive better services. Mrs. Johnson stated:

> To be honest, the system really needs a paradigm shift from what we've always done historically to what is morally right for students no matter the color of their skin. Until then, special education will remain the same, status quo.

Similarly, other participants in this study felt it was important to have an African American teacher/case manager on the IEP team. According to participants, having an African American teacher on the IEP team would make them feel more trusting of the process and give them someone who might relate to their struggles with the school system. The parents also felt it was important for their children to have teachers and staff members who could relate to them and serve as role models for their children.

Mrs. Benson felt that her grandsons would be doing considerably better if there was an African American teacher looking out for them. She thought that this teacher would be effective in reaching out the their mother and encouraging her to continue

seeking help for them. She stated; "I think the boy's mother would trust an African American teacher who wanted to help her. Currently, the system is just letting them fail. It's a shame!" Mrs. Leland stated, "It would be nice if my son had an African American male teacher to help him. My son would benefit from that and the teacher could be a role model for him." Mr. Shaw stated that his son has never had an African American teacher and is often teased at school by children because he is black. He said, "Kids call my son little brown boy or something like that. The school is predominantly Hispanic." Mr. Shaw explained that his son doesn't really have anyone to relate to at the school and when racial situations happens there is no one there to support him. He also stated that he did not feel comfortable talking to his son's teachers when he picks him up from school. This concerned him because they would tell him about his son's "bad" behavior.

Interestingly, some of the participants stated that having an African American person on their IEP team was not a concern. Like Mrs. Johnson, they felt that having a person of color on the team did not guarantee them that their legal rights and the rights of their children would be enforced. They felt that it was their responsibility to advocate for their children's rights regardless of the color of the IEP team members. These parents stated that if they felt their children were being treated unfairly and the IEP team was unwilling to support them or their children, they would seek support from the district's special education department or the area superintendent.

As this section reveals, some of the participants felt that having a person of color on the IEP team would improve the relationship among themselves and team members. These parents thought that an African American team member would be better able to relate to them and the challenges they face as parents raising Black male children while

also acting as an advocate and role model for them. However, some of the parents stated that not having an African American teacher on the team did not prevent them from participating in the IEP process. Yet, all agreed that there was a need for more diversity representation in the special educational system and that this might help with the problem of parental involvement and the overrepresentation of African American boys in special education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools in San Diego County. Many of the parents in this study stated that they had experienced obstacles that prevented them from meaningful participation in the educational planning for their children as members of the IEP process. The perceived obstacles that limited their parental involvement in special education were the following: communication between parents and the IEP team members; knowledge of special education laws; parental rights and roles in the process; African American academic success and placement; and school staff understanding of African American students culture and the need for diversity.

The parents and guardians in the study articulated that they felt that parental involvement in special education was essential for their children's success in school. However, parental involvement was interpreted as more than just attending IEP meetings. While many felt obligated to attend IEP meetings and answer the questions asked by staff, beyond that, they didn't feel that these meeting really gave them any power in what happened to their children once the meetings were over. Parents discussed other ways in

which they supported their children both academically and socially. Parents stated that their involvement in their children's lives included helping with homework, making sure their children were at school on time and prepared to learn, seeking support from their children's teachers early in the year to ensure their children are treated respectfully and ensuring their children has access to extra curricular activities. Finally, issues of race played into parents' and students' experiences, as some parents' perceived their children would be better served if the special education system had more diversity among the educators.

Chapter 5: Discussion And Conclusion

This chapter presents an overview of this study; a discussion of the research findings presented in chapter four relative to existing literature; and the final sections offers recommendations for future research and a concluding statement.

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools in San Diego County. The participants of this study consisted of eight parents of African American male students in grades K-8, who were receiving special education services in San Diego County Schools. San Diego County was chosen due to the convenience of location to the researcher as well as the fact that schools in this county have implemented a full inclusion special education delivery model where special education students are put into general education classrooms instead of segregated special day classrooms. The semi-structured interviews were accomplished over a four-month period. The goal was to give African American parents an opportunity to express their opinions and feeling in their own words. This was important to this study because existing research on parent involvement in special education rarely reports the ethnic background of their sample; those studies that have reported this information have been conducted primarily with Caucasians participants (Zionts et al., 2003).

After gathering and collecting data, several themes were identified. The themes addressed the research questions presented in this study along with sub questions. The sub questions focused on issues that might prevent African American parents from being active members of the IEP team and involved in the educational planning for their children. The data gathered adds to the research on African American parent

involvement and provides an understanding of the issues faced by African American parents as they participated in the special education system seeking support for their children. To reiterate, the study addresses the following research question and sub-questions:

1. How do Black parents of male special education students perceive their interactions with the school? (main question)

2. To what extent is race or racism seen as a factor?

3. To what extent have they been involved in the decision-making process of their child's placement either in general education or special education

4. To what extent are they involved or knowledgeable of the inclusion process? What factors fosters that involvement or hinders their presences at school?

The following is a brief summary of the findings with a view to answering these four research questions. I also connect the findings from this study to prior research in the field.

Findings for Research Question One

The main research question asks: "How do Black parents of male special education students perceive their interactions with the school?" The study revealed that collaboration between African American parents and school officials is an issue of serious concern and is viewed by parents as a barrier to their "active" participation in the educational planning for their children. Seven of the eight participants in this study expressed frustration with teachers poor communication skills and the fact that when teacher did contact them, many times it was to complain about their children's behavioral

problems or for them to respond to meeting notices. Parents also complained that teachers did not clearly articulate information regarding their child's academic performance as it was related to their IEP goals. Parents stated that these negative interactions often left them feeling that they could not trust professionals to be honest with them regarding their children's education. Only one parent in this study indicated that school personnel had established a strong collaborative relationship with her.

A study by Williams and Baber (2007) found similar findings. These researchers used a case study design to give voice to a group of actively engaged African American parents who were involved in an Office of Civil Rights district visit in South Carolina. The authors asserted that parents believed that the school system operated from a white middle-class orientation and didn't address issues related to African American children. As result, they felt the schools were not to be trusted and could not educate their children appropriately.

The findings of this study substantiated pervious studies, which indicated that the parents of urban African American special needs children in special education share many common issues and struggles with other parents in the special education system (Brandon et al., 2010; Brandon & Brown, 2009). However, a major theme that emerged in the research focused on the parents of African Americans was that they didn't feel respected by teachers and other school staff members. African American parents overwhelmingly reported that teachers and staff often blamed them or their children for behavioral problems, which resulted in their children's loss of self-esteem or they themselves feeling worthless. In addition, parents felt that when conflicts arose district personnel ignored their wishes and moved forward with their own agenda during IEP

meetings (Brandon et al., 2009; Thompson, 2003; Zionts et al., 2003). A case in point was when Mr. Miller, an interviewee in this study, stated that he was reprimanded by his supervisor for advocating for his son at an IEP meeting. Mr. Miller felt as if he was not allowed to be apart of the IEP process if his concerns interfered or conflicted with other district staff members. In any case, research finding show that it is important for educators to build relationships with parents during the IEP meeting. By treating parents as partners during meetings, educators create fewer adversarial and intimating experiences for parents (Fish, 2008).

Findings for Research Question Two

The second question asks: "To what extent is race or racism seen as a factor?" The intersection of race, culture and disability provides challenges for the educational system to implement effective school reform. Unfortunately, these factors also contribute to the level of disproportionate representation. Researchers have found that there is still much to be done in addressing issues of equity and social justice as they apply to student learning (Harry et al., 2005; Hart et al., 2010; Losen & Orfield, 2002). With that in mind, Critical Race Theory was used in this study as a framework to examine and challenge the ongoing negative impact of racism and how institutional racism privileges Whites in education and lead to minority children being marginalized by the system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a result, we must asseverate that reform efforts in special education have failed because racism advances the interest of both white elites and working-class people giving them little incentive to eliminate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Bell (1995) asserted that the civil rights gains achieved as a result of the *Brown v Board of Education legislation* were only possible because the interest of both white and blacks converged. Research shows that parents' involvement in their children's education is closely related to the students overall academic success and parent involvement in special education is federally mandated (Brandon et al., 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). Yet school districts across the country have failed to implement structures that would facilitate strong parent teacher relationship building that would ensure student success among minority parents. One can apposite that the reason African American families continue to struggle for educational equity is because leveling the field would not benefit white Americans therefore little effort is put into eradicating the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American males in the system.

However, culturally responsive school reform is needed in order to show substantial change in educational practices. West-Olatunji et al. (2006) investigated the educational experiences of African American adolescent males in an after-school Rites of Passage program. The purpose of the research project was to determine African American adolescent males' attitudes regarding their schooling experiences. Students reported in their own words that they experienced a lack of respect from their teachers, boredom during classroom instruction, and an awareness of educational inequalities. The findings indicated that students in this study preferred the Rites of Passage program over the regular general education school setting. The researchers speculated that the reason the children were successful in the Rites of Passage Program resulted from the shared cultural experiences that they received from mentors of whom they could relate to culturally. In contrast, participants in this study indicated that the presence of diversity

on the IEP team did not automatically guarantee that they would be "welcomed" as

participating members of their children's IEP team or that their children would receive an

equitable education. What many expressed, was that the most that they could hope for,

was someone who could related to their struggles as African American parents or having

this person act as a positive role model for their children.

The perceived negative perceptions of teachers concerning parent practices can

further distance parents from the participating in their children's education. African

American parents perceive their negative interaction with school staff to be racially

motivated because of a lack of cultural understanding by teachers (Brandon & Brown,

2009; Williams, 2007). Two participants who described in detail their interactions with

school staff made this point painfully clear. Mr. Miller who spoke of being reprimanded

by his district superintendent who thought his son's all white IEP team felt threatened

when he challenged them on the educational decisions they made for his son. Mr.

Denver also spoke of being upset after making efforts to build a working relationship

with his son's teacher only to have her think it was appropriate to use that relationship to

make a racial joke.

Mr. Denver and Mr. Miller, both, assert to the fact that their children live in a

society where racism is historically embedded in the American culture. Moreover,

according to (Blanchett et al., 2005) students of color labeled with a disability historically

have experienced inequities that are inherent in the special education system, including

segregated classroom and limited access to the general education curriculum. However,

the participants in this study are not unique because they share the same level

dissatisfaction with the special education system as other parents of color. Research

shows that minority parents have express frustration with the lack of experience the school system's predominantly White teachers seemed to have regarding the social, cultural and economic differences between themselves and the families they serve (Zionts et al., 2003).

Overall, the participants' experiences are an illustration of the prominence of race and racism in education. Although their narratives involve their experiences with the special education system, their stories demonstrate the subtlety and pervasiveness of racism and how it manifests in a variety of educational contexts. More importantly, these counter-stories explain how race and racism personally affected them as people of color.

Findings for Research Question Three

The third question asks: "To what extent have they been involved in the decision-making process of their child's placement either in general education or special education?" The high level of referrals and placements in special education has led to it becoming another form of segregation from the mainstream. Consequently, special education has become a mechanism for keeping many African American boys from receiving an equitable education in the general education environment (Losen & Orfield, 2002). As a result, some scholars have referred to special education as a new, legalized form of structural segregation and racism (Losen & Orfield, 2002, as cited in Blanchett, 2006). However, in this study, the concern from participants was not that their children were being placed in special day classrooms away from the general education setting but that they are experiencing segregation and racism in general education classrooms.

African American students are being enrolled in and assigned to general education classrooms, unfortunately, their presence in those classes provide little

assurance of educational equity. In addition, Black students are often subjected to low

expectations concerning their academic capabilities by school personnel and often

tracked into low-ability groups (Townsend, 2002). Participants in this study had the

same concerns as found by researchers. Parents and guardians spoke about classroom

teachers who didn't have time to work with special needs children due to increased class

sizes and their lack of experience with disabled children. Parents also voiced concerns

about the academic progress reporting from teachers concerning their children.

Participants stated that they were often confused when their child's special education case

manager told them their children were performing well and meeting IEP goals only to

find out later from the general education teacher that their children were failing. Mr.

Miller stated that situations in which general education teachers and case managers are

not on the same page concerning a child's academic progress indicated to him that they

are not collaborating or planning for his son educational success. Overall, participants

felt a lack of support from their child's general education teacher. Mr. Denver was

devastated when his son's teacher neglected to put his son's completed work on the

bulletin board alongside the other children's work. According to him, the teacher blamed

the case manager for the oversight but she really didn't understand the impact of her

actions from the viewpoint of the parent.

Mrs. Johnson stated that at her school site it was often difficult if not impossible

to get some general education teachers to implement IEP support recommendations such

as modifying the students' work or behavioral support plans that would help her students

achievement. Mrs. Johnson stated that general education teachers should be provided

with ongoing training by the district in order to improve the level of services given to

students with disabilities in the general educational setting. In addition, she felt that

teachers needed to implement academic or behavioral interventions that would support

struggling students. Similar findings were reported in the research done by Gravois and

Rosenfield. These researchers investigated how implementing Instructional Consultation

Team (ICT) at school sites might reduce the number of students referred to special

education testing by general education teachers. The finding indicated that solutions to

reducing disproportionate placement of minority students may be found in the

implementation of early intervention support to teachers that focuses on improving the

instructional delivery in the general education classroom (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

Findings for Question Four

The fourth question asks: "To what extent are they involved or knowledgeable of

the inclusion process? What factors fosters that involvement or hinder their presences at

school?" Research shows that parents' involvement in their children's education is

closely related to the students overall academic success. Students with involved parents

experience fewer behavioral problems, better academic performance and are more likely

to complete high school when compared to students whose parents are not involved

(Brandon & Brown, 2009; Thompson, 2003). Parent involvement in special education is

federally mandated and is a critical part of the reauthorization of IDEA 1997 (Brandon et

al., 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). However, districts seem undeterred by the legal

implications added to IDEA as evident by research that continues to report that parent

involvement among African American families continue to decline (Brandon et al., 2010;

Thompson, 2003; Zionts et al., 2003).

All the participants in this study felt that they were heavily involved in their children's education. Yet, four of the eight participants stated that they did not regularly attend IEP meetings. African American parents of children with disabilities have express frustration and anger at school professional they believe prevents them from participating in their children education (Williams & Baber, 2007). Participants in this study reiterated similar findings, indicating that even when give a chance to participate, they questioned what the word "participate" really meant to school officials. In their opinion, participating meant just showing up for meetings and signing documents. Mr. Miller said he felt that his job at an IEP meeting was to "shut up and listen or be punished." Only one of the eight participants in this study felt she was a valued member of her children's IEP team meetings. In this study, 50 percent of the participants reported that they felt that their concerns were not addressed at IEP meetings. Mrs. Johnson actually reported that the team members at her son's school refused to reinstate her son's speech services stating that their assessments showed that they no longer qualified when just the opposite was true according to an independent evaluation. Mrs. Johnson felt her children were not given due process with regards to their rights for services from special education but chose not to fight the system because she works in the district.

All the participants in this study felt it was important for parents to know special education laws and their parental rights. Yet, despite the fact that parents are given information regarding their rights in the during or before IEP meetings, only three of the eight participants in this study felt that they had a good working knowledge of the laws governing special education. The other five participants stated that they really didn't know the laws governing special education or their parental rights. They also stated that

the IEP team members didn't explain their rights in detail during meetings. Mrs.

Johnson, a case manager and participant also stated that she never fully explained the

Notice of Procedural Safeguards to parents because she thought that the meetings were

already long and confusing for parents. She stated she tried to explain their rights in what

she called "parent friendly language." What was most revealing in the study was the fact

that the participants usually did not admit to school professionals that they didn't know or

understand their parental rights. These parents stated that they didn't want school

professionals to perceive them as ignorant of the IEP process. Unfortunately, parents

who feel ill equipped in making educational decisions regarding their children allow

educators to convince them that the decision-making process should be left to them (Fish,

2008). Hence, unless African American parents obtain the knowledge they need to

advocate and fight for their children rights concerning special education, the research

data related to Black boys in special education will continue to show that they are

overrepresented and poorly educated in the system. Historically, much of the

advancement implemented to support children with disabilities was done at the insistence

of white parents who held school districts responsible for educating their disabled

children in public school settings.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study yield important implications for policy and practice.

These implications lead to suggestions for improving parental involvement among

African American parents with male children receiving services from special education

programs. This research can contribute to the national, state, district and school-wide

knowledge of how race and racism, low expectations, lack of "active" parental

involvement and cultural differences can contribute to the overrepresentation and low academic performance of African American males in special education programs.

Recommendations for School Districts. The following recommendations are for school districts planning to address low achievement and the overrepresentation of African American males student in special education by building collaborative parent/teacher relationships.

1. *Develop a committee of educators and parents who are focused on addressing the overrepresentation of African American males in special education and the lack of parental involvement among their parents.*

The achievement gap for Black children in public schools continues to widen, and reform efforts do little to address the problem. If school boards and educators are serious about improving the educational outcomes for Black children placed in special education, they will need to address the characteristics of African American parent involvement, parent perceptions concerning special education, and the factors that contribute to low levels of participation (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Furthermore, it is important that school leaders examine how race and disability have contributed to the quality of education for students of color (Shealey & Lue, 2006).

2. *Districts need to align budgets and resources to support inclusive educational practices at all school sites.*

In order to provide students with disabilities access to their general education peers, some districts closed special day classrooms and put those children in general education classrooms. This was done to address IDEA that requires districts to promote integration of all students with disabilities. The goal of integration is to give special

needs students the opportunity to develop social relationships with nondisabled children. However, participants in this study felt that the district did not have the resources available to support their children in general education classroom with large class sizes. Parents also complained that general education teachers were not trained to support special needs children appropriately and that education specialist were spread to thin and couldn't provide a quality program for their children.

3. *Prepare principals for leadership in special education.*

District and state leaders must recognize the need for campus administrators to have an active role in reducing the overrepresentation of African American males in special education. The leadership role of principals is vital for improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities, yet in recent years districts have not provided the necessary ongoing training needed for site administrators to learn special education policy, procedures, laws and practice. Understanding the importance of special educational programs is vital to a school site principal. It is essential that principals know and enforce the legal guidelines established by Public Law 94-142 (IDEA). Principals or their designee are present at each IEP meeting, therefore, it is their responsibility to ensure that the laws governing special education are being carried out within their buildings and that every student is given fair treatment based upon their IEP.

4. *Provide parents with resources and trainings (at the district and site level) that support and encourage parental involvement at IEP meetings.*

IDEA mandates that children with disabilities and their parents receive training and information on their rights, responsibilities, and protections under this title, in order to develop the skills necessary to cooperatively and effectively participate in planning

and decision making relating to early intervention, educational, and transitional services for their children. Training parents at both district and site level would provide parents with the knowledge required for them to participate in their children's IEP meetings.

Recommendations for Site Administrators. This section provides recommendations for school administrators planning to increase parental involvement among African American parents who have students receiving services from special education programs. School administrators should:

1. *Principals must provide on-going professional development to increase capacity and teacher knowledge.*

   Principals are responsible for the instructional program at their sites. As a result, they are recognized as a key component in the successful implementation of professional development needed to support teaching and learning. In order to address the issues facing African American children and their families, it is critical that both special and general education teachers are trained and willing to assist parents with any problem, struggles, or questions that may arise in a respectable manner. It is also critical that these teachers learn how to implement supportive structures in their classrooms that would effectively address the needs of all their students. Finally, professional development for teachers needs to also focus on implementing culturally relevant practices. There is also a need for teachers to have cultural sensitivity training in order to help develop positive relationships between them and parents.

2. *Establishing a school policy addressing the overrepresentation to African American student in special education by implementing Response to Intervention strategies.*

Response to Intervention (RTI), now known as Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), is an approach used to increase the opportunity for all students to meet grade-level standards through early identification of students whose academic and/or behavioral needs place them at-risk. The RTI approach encourages schools to ensure that students receive a high level of instructional support in the general educational setting followed by close monitoring of students' academic progress. These strategies are beneficial in delivering instruction needed to close learning gaps in a timely manner.

3. *Ensure that IEP goals are aligned with grade-level standards. Provide training and support to both general and special education teachers on co-teaching and how to provide classroom supports to special needs students.*

Grade level standards are the basic framework of the general curriculum and the criteria used to define accountability. In order to ensure that students have the opportunity to access the general curriculum and to participate in the statewide assessments, essential content standards should be used to develop IEP goals and objectives to coordinate instruction, learning and assessment. Standards provide a common language and help bridge the gap between special and general education.

4. *Principals must implement a monitoring system that requires teachers to target special needs student for academic success.*

Assessing student performance on a regular and frequent basis can be an essential part of an inclusive standards-based assessment and accountability system. In order to meet the higher expectations of the newly implemented Common Core Standards, educators need information that can be used to project how students are doing throughout

the year so they can determine what needs to be done to accelerate students towards the proficiency of grade-level standards.

5. *Establish a mission statement that embraces differences and finds ways to honor the cultural diversity of the students enrolled at the school site.*

Today's schools are becoming more culturally diverse. As a result, it is important that teachers learn about and celebrate the differences. Schools provide the perfect setting for students to investigate their cultural history and learn about others. Teachers need to encourage tolerance and understanding by celebrating cultural diversity with students and their families.

6. *Open a parent room and encourage parents to come and be involved in their children's education: provide opportunities for them to learn their parental rights and the IEP process in a safe and welcoming environment.*

Research shows that one of the best tools for student success depends on family and community involvement in their education. Every child benefits from a strong partnership between home, community and school. For this reason, school sites should provide training and resources that encourage parental involvement on their sites.

Recommendations for Parents. This section provides recommendations for parents of African American male students who are seeking educational equity for their children. Parents should:

1. *Become actively involved in the IEP planning and implementation process*

Its imperative that African American parents develop a strong understanding of the IEP planning and implementation process and work with teachers to ensure that academic and behavioral (if necessary) interventions have been implemented before their

children are referred for testing for special education programs. If their children are already receiving services parents must insist that educators are monitoring their children success and are able to articulate clearly their academic progress as it is related to state standards.

2. *Get a representative that understands special education law and language.*

Parents should develop a strong understanding of special education policies and practices. However, if parents feel that the district is not acting in the best interest of their child they can ask district personnel to provide a neutral third party to help with conflict resolution. Many districts have an Office of Ombudsperson, which was created to facilitate resolution of special education issues. Ombudspersons are not parent advocates or district decision-makers, but work impartially with all parties to assist in the resolution of concerns related to students' special needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order for this study to have greater value to educator, districts and policymakers, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted on a larger scale across multiple schools or districts. Likewise, it would be beneficial to include the perspectives of African American and Latino parents who have female children in special education. This would provide researchers with information pertaining to both genders and English Language Learners receiving services in special education.

A study using Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies would be useful to researchers and provide possible answers as to why inequities in special education continue to plague African American males and their families. Marks, Lemley, & Wood (2010) assert that the issue of disproportionality has not gone away because society

continues to construct disability as an individual impairment. The persistent problem in teachers' assumptions and practices that continue to name disability as an individual impairment without recognizing the ways in which schooling and societal issues contexts disable students. As a result, educators continue to fail to consider how race and racism are embedded within the identification, labeling and placements decisions, which continue to segregate minority students in schools (Ferri & Connor, 2006). With this in mind, researchers might also investigate the role of teacher preparation programs focusing on the degree to which these programs are preparing teachers to address the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students. Improving teachers' ability to provide culturally responsive teaching to minority students might help reduce the number of students who are referred to special education.

Finally, a study could be focused on the IEP meeting, with particular attention on meetings with African American parents. It would be interesting to explore the school administrator's knowledge of special education law. This study could identify obstacles to participation for parents and the administrator's role in ensuring that special education policies, procedures, and laws are implemented. Understanding the importance of special educational programs is vital to a school site principal. It is essential that principals know and enforce the legal guidelines of IDEA established by Public Law 94-142 and updated in each subsequent reauthorization of the law.

Conclusions

Regrettably, the segregating or "sorting" of African American males continues in special education programs where they are disproportionately overrepresented in the special education system. In this study, we have an opportunity to understand the

struggles of African American parents in their own words. Their narratives offered a different view of the special education system and gave us insights as to why they feel less than welcomed at our schools. Their voices are testimonies to the pain and sense of powerlessness they feel when they think about the negative educational outcomes their children face in a system that traditionally has not benefited black boys.

As a mother, teacher and administrator raising two African American boys, I am painfully aware of the heartbreak and pain that the participants in this study have expressed. I have a similar story concerning my eldest son. My son was struggling in one of his classes and only needed one assignment to pass the class and graduate from high school. Unfortunately, his teacher refused to give him the necessary help he needed to complete the assigned task. This went on for months. Finally, I requested a meeting with the school's principal in hopes of resolving the issue.

Unfortunately, the principal was not willing to assist my husband and me in any way and took the side of the teacher. I can still remember the question she asked me during our meeting when I requested that school personnel address my sons needs according to his documented disability of ADHD. The principal asked me was my son "slow or on drugs" as an answer to why he was not being successful in school. Needless to say, I was shocked and appalled that a fellow educator would say such a thing to a parent. I managed to leave that meeting without losing my temper but I cried all day. I felt as helpless as the participants in this study who found themselves confronted with injustices practiced at the hand of insensitive school officials who refused to do what was *morally and legally* right concerning a student with a disability.

Like many in this study, I found out that I had a limited knowledge of special educational laws and didn't know how to approach the situation in a manner that would produce results that would help my son graduate from high school. However, I knew from my experience as an administrator that my son's rights had been violated. I immediately started contacting district officials including the superintendent asking for assistance but none was given. Desperately, I sought help from educational specialist and parent advocates in my district. They armed me with the knowledge that I needed to fight the system. It was only after filing a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights against the school and the principal that my son's rights were acknowledged and the school was forced to change their policies or be fined by the Federal Government for violating my son's civil rights. Thankfully, we won this battle, but I must say it was not easy watching my son struggle. My heart ached for him everyday and as a parent I felt like I couldn't protect him. I think this is the worst feeling in the world for a parent.

However, I am aware that many parents of African American boys in the public educational system don't have access to the same resources. This fact and the refusal of some district officials' failure to comply with IDEA and the laws governing special education continue to subject minority children to be overrepresented and under educated in the special education system.

The findings of this study, coupled with my own experiences, has taught me that Derrick Bell (1992) was perhaps correct in his assertion that Black people, regardless of income, status or position will never fully obtain equality in this country despite the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Bell (1992) and his theory of racial realism, people see race first. This being the case, one can understand why educational

changes that would benefit African American boys in special education will only occur

when the self-interest of white America converge with that of black America.

Appendix A

<u>Parent Interview Questions</u>

1. What are yours and your child's racial, ethnic, and religious background?

2. Tell me about your child's educational background (grade-level, retained ect.)

3. How did you first learn that the school felt you child might qualify for special education services?

4. For what reason was your child identified as needing special education services?

5. Why did you agree to have your child assessed for special education? (Sub-question 2) What is your child's diagnosed disability?

6. When your child was tested for placement in special education did the psychologists explain the testing to you in detail? (Sub-question 2)

7. Describe your experience and understanding of special education and your role as a parent in IEP process?

8. What is your child's current placement and how much time does he spend with his peers? What programs does he participant in during school? (General education, SEEC, special day class, speech etc.)

9. Are you satisfied with the services and supports you receive from your child's school? (Sub-questions 2 and 3)

10. What problems (obstacles) if any have you experienced in the IEP process?

11. Special education laws are designed to view parents as partners in the education of their children. How has being involved in the IEP process helped your child? (Sub-questions 2 and 4)

12. Does the ethnic makeup of the IEP team have any influence over your participation in the IEP process?

13. How are you involved in your child's education? How are you involved at the school? (Sub-questions 2 and 4)

14. How can the school site better support your child in his education? (Sub-questions 2 and 4)

15. Name some major things that school officials should not do or say to parents from your perspective (cultural, ethnic, or racial)? (Sub-question 1)

16. What can schools change or modify to encourage more parents to participate in the IEP process? (Sub-questions 1 and 4)

17. How is your child doing academically?

Probes:
Why or why not?
Can you tell me more about that?
Can you think of an example of when that has happened?
You mentioned____. Could you be more specific?

Appendix B

San Diego Unified School District

Notice of Procedural Safeguards

You have a right to inspect and review education records regarding the identification, evaluation, and education placement of your child or the provision of a FAPE to your child, and to receive an explanation and interpretation of those records before any meeting about your child's IEP or before any due process hearing. The school district must provide you access to records, without unnecessary delay, and copies if requested, within 5 business days of receipt of an oral or written request. The school district may charge no more than the actual cost of reproducing the records, but if the cost effectively prevents you from exercising this right, then you are entitled to receive a copy or copies at no cost. These rights transfer to a nonconserved pupil who is eighteen years old or attending of institution of post-secondary education.

"Education **record"** means those records that are directly related to a pupil and maintained by an educational agency or a party acting for the agency or institutions, and may include (1) the name of the child, the child's parent or other family member(s); (2) the address of the child; (3) a personal identifier such as the child's social security number, student number, or court file number; (4) a list of personal characteristics or other information that would make it possible to identify the child with a reasonable certainty. Both federal and state laws further define a pupil record as any item of information directly related to an identifiable pupil, other than directory information, which is maintained by a school district or required to be maintained by an employee in the performance of his duties whether recorded by handwriting, print, tapes, film, microfilm, and computer or by other means. Pupil records do not include informal personal notes prepared and kept by a school employee for his/her own use or the use of a substitute. If records contain information about more than one student, you can have access only to that portion of the record pertaining to his/her child.

Pupil records may be kept at the school site or district office, but a written request for records at either site will be treated as a request for records from all sites. The school district shall provide you with a list of the types and locations of the pupil records, if requested. The school district shall limit access to those persons authorized to review the pupil record, which includes parents of the pupil, a pupil who is at least sixteen years old, individuals who have been authorized by the parent to inspect the records, school employees who have a legitimate educational interest in the records including outside contractors, consultants and agencies outsourced to provide institutional services under district control, post secondary institutions designated by the pupil, and employees of federal, state and local education agencies. Unauthorized access will be denied unless you have provided written consent to release the records or the records are released pursuant to a subpoena or court order. The school district shall keep a log indicating the time, name and purpose for access of those individuals who are not employed by the school district.

Parents who believe that information in the education records collected, maintained or used by the school district is (among other things) inaccurate, misleading or violates the privacy or other rights of the pupil may request in writing that the school district amend the information. If the school district concurs, the record will be amended and you will be informed. Should the school district refuse to make the amendment requested, the school district shall notify you of the right to a hearing, if required, to determine whether the challenged information is inaccurate, misleading, or otherwise in violation of the privacy or other rights of the pupil. If the governing board decides after the hearing that a record will not be amended, you shall have the right to provide what you believe is a corrective written statement to be permanently attached to the record. The school district has policies and procedures governing retention and destruction of records. Parents wishing to request the destruction of records, which are no longer necessary to the school district, may contact the school district. However, the school district is required to maintain certain information in perpetuity.

Parent Consent Form

University of California, San Diego
Consent to Act as a Research Subject

**AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:
PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICE AND PLACEMENT**

Pamela W. Thompson, under the supervision of Dr. Amanda Datnow, Professor in the Department of Education Studies at UCSD, with the approval of the San Diego Unified School District, is conducting a research study to find out more about African American parents perceptions of special education. Mrs. Thompson is conducting this research for her doctoral dissertation in the UCSD-CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are the parent of an African American male student receiving special educational services in the San Diego Unified School District. There will be approximately 5 to 10 parent participants in this study. The purpose of the study is to understand how African American parents and teacher interactions affect the way these parents perceive the system's treatment of their children. The goal is to inform future research and catalyze change in policy, procedure, and instruction for African American boys with disabilities. You will be informed of any significant new findings.

If you agree to be in this study, the following activities will take place:
The researcher will make an audio recording of an interview with you concerning your experiences and the experience or your child receiving special education services. The interview will last between 1 to 2 hours. The interview will be transcribed and analyzed. If necessary, the researcher may request a follow-up interview to clarify or expand their knowledge on the subject. You can decline to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. Simply tell the researcher that you do not wish to continue. If at any point in the interview you feel uncomfortable the interview session will terminate.

Your identity will be held confidential. Your name will not appear in the transcript of the interview nor will it appear in the analysis. Participants and interview notes will be coded numerically to ensure anonymity. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. The UCSD Institutional Review Board may review records.

Because this is a research study, there may also be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable. There is however a small risk of a potential breach of confidentiality.

There will not be any direct benefit to you from participating in this study and you will receive no compensation.

Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw

from the study at any time without penalty. There will be no cost to you for participating.

The researcher named above has explained this study to you and answered you questions. If you have other questions or research- related problems you may reach Pamela Thompson at (619) 454-XXXX. You may call the Human Research Protections Office at (858) 657-5100 to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems.

You have received a copy of this consent document.

You agree to participate.

_____   _____
Subject's signature   Date

Appendix D

Codes Use for Qualitative Analysis

Code   Type   Reference
Academic achievement   TEXT 12639,13119
Academic achievement   TEXT 13507,13594
Academic achievement   TEXT 9117,9707

___

Code   Type   Reference
Academic assessment TEXT 3512,4263
Academic assessment TEXT 11168,11198

___

Code   Type   Reference
Background   TEXT 15160,15558
Background   TEXT 17325,17530
Background   TEXT 30232,30648

___

Code   Type   Reference
Conflicting information   TEXT 28513,28796
Conflicting information   TEXT 28920,28955
Conflicting information   TEXT 13010,13344
Conflicting information   TEXT 2687,2883
Conflicting information   TEXT 12570,13082

___

Code   Type   Reference
Inappropriate behavior   TEXT 29419,29590
Inappropriate behavior   TEXT 3181,3446

___

Code   Type   Reference
Incompliance to IEP   TEXT 10894,11353
Incompliance to IEP   TEXT 2687,2883
Incompliance to IEP   TEXT 3181,3446

___

Code   Type   Reference
Lack of involvement IEP process   TEXT 5730,5747
Lack of involvement IEP process   TEXT 5858,6034

___

Code   Type   Reference
Lack of parent satisfaction   TEXT 18337,18598
Lack of parent satisfaction   TEXT 27945,28332
Lack of parent satisfaction   TEXT 2687,2883

___

Code   Type   Reference
Low achievement   TEXT 10504,10538

Low achievement   TEXT 4891,5033
Low achievement   TEXT 12764,12996
Low achievement   TEXT 28853,29040

Code Type Reference
Low expectations   TEXT 10504,10538
Low expectations   TEXT 13018,13138
Low expectations   TEXT 9117,9707

Code Type Reference
No Cases contained the code 'misdiagnoses'!

Code Type Reference
Parent concerns   TEXT 9200,9686
Parent concerns   TEXT 9824,10490
Parent concerns   TEXT 1678,1771
Parent concerns   TEXT 5264,5877
Parent concerns   TEXT 26579,26883
Parent concerns   TEXT 31492,31681
Parent concerns   TEXT 4890,5522
Parent concerns   TEXT 449,990
Parent concerns   TEXT 2193,2580
Parent concerns   TEXT 5232,5552

Code Type Reference
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 5008,5200
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 9340,9351
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 985,1369
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 10936,11307
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 2686,3167
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 3268,3446
Parent concerns not addressed   TEXT 4460,4734

Code Type Reference
Parent Knowledge of IEP lawTEXT 3218,3949
Parent Knowledge of IEP lawTEXT 7897,7967
Parent Knowledge of IEP lawTEXT 10536,10880
Parent Knowledge of IEP lawTEXT 1551,1620
Parent Knowledge of IEP lawTEXT 2015,2151

Code Type Reference
Parental rights given TEXT 1347,1399
Parental rights given TEXT 33788,33979

Code Type Reference

Pattern of failure   TEXT 8853,8991
Pattern of failure   TEXT 10894,11353
Pattern of failure   TEXT 4053,4529
Pattern of failure   TEXT 12570,13082

Code	Type	Reference
Placement	TEXT	3216,3358
Placement	TEXT	10970,11202
Placement	TEXT	11240,11428
Placement	TEXT	2838,2964
Placement	TEXT	3218,3949
Placement	TEXT	5681,5904
Placement	TEXT	1371,1660
Placement	TEXT	2707,2821
Placement	TEXT	16344,16517
Placement	TEXT	17305,17604
Placement	TEXT	449,990

Code	Type	Reference
Professionals Reports results	TEXT	2437,3413

Code	Type	Reference
Question 12	TEXT	10636,10944
Question 12	TEXT	6926,7479

Code	Type	Reference
Question 13	TEXT	8644,9189
Question 13	TEXT	7904,8375
Question 13	TEXT	11929,12590

Code	Type	Reference
Question 14	TEXT	10046,10489
Question 14	TEXT	10436,11008
Question 14	TEXT	11644,12202

Code	Type	Reference
Question 15	TEXT	6830,6997
Question 15	TEXT	7298,7497
Question 15	TEXT	7658,7794
Question 15	TEXT	7847,8451
Question 15	TEXT	11929,12590
Question 15	TEXT	8263,8481
Question 15	TEXT	8526,8883

Code	Type	Reference

Question 3	TEXT	891,1262
Question 3	TEXT	1254,1504
Question 3	TEXT	2197,2510
Question 3	TEXT	35746,36077
Question 3	TEXT	6288,6400

Code	Type	Reference
Question 8	TEXT	5783,5900
Question 8	TEXT	7332,7893

Code	Type	Reference
Question eleven	TEXT	5008,5200
Question eleven	TEXT	4032,4396

Code	Type	Reference
Question five	TEXT	1768,2151
Question five	TEXT	2470,2530

Code	Type	Reference
Question four	TEXT	1317,1385
Question four	TEXT	449,990

Code	Type	Reference
Question nine	TEXT	3456,3519
Question nine	TEXT	3576,3656
Question nine	TEXT	7976,8665
Question nine	TEXT	6324,6909
Question nine	TEXT	7982,8260
Question nine	TEXT	605,857
Question nine	TEXT	4053,4529
Question nine	TEXT	6567,6749
Question nine	TEXT	8502,8639
Question nine	TEXT	10636,10944
Question nine	TEXT	11507,11928
Question nine	TEXT	2020,2884

Code	Type	Reference
Question one	TEXT	593,602
Question one	TEXT	1011,1204

Code	Type	Reference
Question seven	TEXT	3456,3519
Question seven	TEXT	8790,9212
Question seven	TEXT	9626,10350
Question seven	TEXT	10391,10424

Question seven   TEXT 8252,8387
Question seven   TEXT 8388,8430
Question seven   TEXT 11507,11928
Question seven   TEXT 1563,1999

Code	Type	Reference
Question six	TEXT	2905,2945
Question six	TEXT	5189,5315
Question six	TEXT	2523,2984
Question six	TEXT	1349,1549

Code	Type	Reference
Question ten	TEXT	6525,6631
Question ten	TEXT	5013,5200
Question ten	TEXT	9340,9351
Question ten	TEXT	9824,10490
Question ten	TEXT	7332,7893
Question ten	TEXT	10936,11307
Question ten	TEXT	9381,9685
Question ten	TEXT	11929,12590
Question ten	TEXT	3599,4011
Question ten	TEXT	11168,11198

Code	Type	Reference
Racial issues	TEXT	3762,3828
Racial issues	TEXT	3893,4008

Code	Type	Reference
Retaliation	TEXT	2946,3167

Code	Type	Reference
Social promotion	TEXT	16314,16330

Code	Type	Reference
Teacher parent collaboration	TEXT	9200,9686
Teacher parent collaboration	TEXT	12639,13119
Teacher parent collaboration	TEXT	9698,9928
Teacher parent collaboration	TEXT	5893,6325
Teacher parent collaboration	TEXT	12259,125

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