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Opportunity, but at what cost? African-American parents' experiences in a predominantly white school

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Abstract

National measures of student achievement, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), provide evidence of the gap in success between African-American and white students. Despite national calls for increased school accountability and focus on achievement gaps, many African-American children continue to struggle in school academically, as compared to their white peers. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that a deeper understanding of the legacy of disparity in funding for schools serving primarily African-American students, shutting out African-American parents from civic participation, and unfair treatment of African-Americans despite their contributions to the United States is necessary to complicate the discourse about African-American student performance. The deficit model that uses student snapshots of achievement such as the NAEP and other national assessments to explain the achievement gap suggests that there is something wrong with African-American children. As Cowen Pitre (2104) explains, however, "the deficit model theory blames the victim without acknowledging the unequal educational and social structures that deny African-American students access to a quality education (2014, pg. 212). To reframe the deficit discourse, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) identifies key factors contributing to an opportunity gap including, unequal access to qualified teachers and a lack of access to high-quality curriculum. This dissertation examined the opportunity gap at a particular predominantly white school. Specifically, I explored the experiences of African-American parents as they navigated and negotiated the institutional challenges and everyday racism they faced in a suburban environment.

Four African-American parents from one suburban school district took part in this study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and observations, and was informed by

theoretical work around race, racism, systemic racism theory, whiteness, racial microaggressions, and the unconscious habits of racial privilege. Results of this study revealed that African-American parents experienced various manifestations of institutional racism and everyday occurrences of microaggressions that required them to navigate and negotiate this suburban environment. Institutional racism and everyday instances of microaggressions restricted parents' ability to fully access the educational opportunities that were available for their children.

OPPORTUNITY, BUT AT WHAT COST?
AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS' EXPERIENCES IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
SCHOOL

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Dissertation

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Traditionally, public schools in the United States are espoused as a great equalizer; where

students are given the chance to become anything they desire. Indeed, the major function of

public schools in America is to socialize young people into the cultural values of the society,

introduce them to the principles of democracy, prepare them for the world of work, and facilitate

their upward mobility (Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson, 2001; Tyack, 1974). Access to quality

education is a route to enjoyment of the fruits of the nation. It is a means to provide access to

societal resources and is a way to reduce social disparities by compensating for past injustices

(Hallinan, 2001; Anderson, 1994). The premise behind this ideology is that schools are fair and

meritocratic, offering the same education to all, regardless of socio-economic status, race,

gender, or other identification. The ideology of meritocracy as practiced in our public schools,

however, ignores the structural and practical barriers that face many of our students and their

families (Hallinan, 2001). I say this because the African-American and white[1] achievement

difference remains a defining mark of racial inequality in public education (Hallinan, 2001) and

numerous studies have been conducted to identify the effects of race, social stratification, school

characteristics, and organization processes to explain the disparity in educational outcomes

(Feagin & Barnett, 2005; Hallinan, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller,

2007).

Statement of the problem

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[1] In this dissertation, I use the term African-American and Black interchangeably. I do this because the African-American parents that I interviewed used these terms in this way. In addition, I capitalize these terms because "African-American" and "Black" are not only racial designations, but they are political locations. Whereas, I use the term "white" as a descriptor and it is not capitalized. I do this to disrupt the relations of power within the binary construction of Black and white (Grinner, 2004).

In recent years, the achievement of African-American students has garnered substantial attention. National measures of student achievement, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), provide evidence of the gap in success between African-American and white students. NAEP results show evidence that the white-Black achievement gap has narrowed substantially since the 1970s in all grades and in both math and reading. The gaps narrowed sharply in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, but since that time progress has stalled. In fact, some of the achievement gaps grew larger in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Since the 1990s, however, achievement gaps in every grade and subject have been declining. Though the nationwide gaps in 2007 were narrower than in previous assessments, at both grades four and eight in mathematics and at grade four in reading white students had average scores at least 26 points higher than African-American students in each subject, on a 0-500 scale (Vanneman, Hamilton, & Anderson, 2009).

The Federal government has outlined a number of educational plans to address this persistent challenge for public schools. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published *A Nation at Risk*. This report generated a call for reform by proclaiming the "rising tide of mediocrity threatens our very future as a Nation" (1983, p.1). This report called for increased accountability as the means to improve outcomes for all children. Subsequently, the United States Department of Education (1991) published *America 2000: An Educational Strategy*. Again, increased accountability was the centerpiece of this report, but a market-based approach using school choice and vouchers was also suggested to be part of the strategy to attain excellence for all children in public schools. The goals outlined in *America 2000* were incorporated in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994). This plan called for all children to achieve excellence by the year 2000. Finally, in 2001 President George W. Bush signed the *No*

Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Building on previous reports and legislation, No Child Left Behind called for "every child to be educated to his or her full potential" (2001). To achieve this goal and to narrow the achievement gap, schools were held accountable for the performance of student sub-groups identified through extensive testing. Despite these national calls for increased accountability and focus on achievement gaps, many African-American children continue to struggle in school academically, as compared to their white peers. These persistent challenges illustrate the need to reframe the notion of the achievement gap and complicate the understanding of African-Americans' student performance in schools.

Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other assessments provide a snapshot in time of student performance. This snapshot, however, does not provide a deep understanding of why the achievement gap exists and persists. Ladson-Billings (2006) identifies the need for educational research to reframe the achievement gap and "move away from short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem" (2006, pg. 4). Ladson-Billings suggests that "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (2006, pg. 5). Cowan Pitre (2014) explains that "the education debt reframes the discourse by removing the blame and share of underachievement on standardized tests from students and families" (2014, p. 212).

The education debt is comprised of three factors, (1.) Economic debt, (2.) Sociopolitical debt, and (3.) Moral debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The first factor, economic debt, has two parts. The first part of the economic debt owed to African-American students originates with the current and historical funding disparity between schools serving white students and those serving African-American students. A second part of economic debt is the difference in earnings ratio

related to years of schooling between whites and African-Americans. The disparity in funding to schools serving whites and those serving predominantly African-American students has resulted in increased drop-out rates and under-education of African-American students. Ladson-Billings cites empirical data suggesting that more schooling is associated with higher earnings; that is, high school graduates earn more money than high school dropouts, and college graduates earn more than high school graduates. The legacy of funding disparity and the resulting negative impact on quality of education for African-Americans is one factor that helps to explain the achievement gap.

A second factor that has created this education debt is identified as sociopolitical debt. Sociopolitical debt reflects the degree that African-American parents have been restricted from participation in civic life. Ladson-Billings states that "as a result of the sociopolitical component of the education debt, families of color have regularly been excluded from the decision making mechanisms that should ensure that their children receive quality education" (2006, pg. 7). The inability to significantly influence or participate in the education process and in the decision making bodies of their children's schools, in particular, is a second factor that contributes to the achievement gap.

Moral debt is the third factor that comprises the education debt. Moral debt is "the disparity in knowing what is actually right and what is done" (2006, pg. 8). Ladson-Billings calls attention to the importance of social responsibility to go hand-in-hand with the calls for increased personal responsibility. Historically, she argues, African-Americans, along with other people of color, have made significant contributions to United States society and have not been rewarded equally as compared to whites. This moral debt has accrued over time and contributes to the achievement gap, also.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that a deeper understanding of the legacy of disparity in funding for schools serving primarily African-American students, shutting out African-American parents from civic participation, and unfair treatment of African-Americans despite their contributions to the United States is necessary to complicate the discourse about African-American student performance. The deficit model that uses student snapshots of achievement such as the NAEP and other national assessments to explain the achievement gap suggests that there is something wrong with African-American children. As Cowen Pitre (2104) explains, however, "the deficit model theory blames the victim without acknowledging the unequal educational and social structures that deny African-American students access to a quality education (2014, pg. 212). To reframe the deficit discourse, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) identifies key factors contributing to an opportunity gap.

Unequal access to qualified teachers and a lack of access to high-quality curriculum are examples of the opportunity gap. They illustrate the unequal schooling practices in the United States that consistently deny African-American students equal opportunities to receive a high quality education (Cowen Pitre, 2014). With respect to various measures of quality such as certification, subject matter expertise, pedagogical training, and experience, less-qualified teachers are disproportionately found in schools with greater numbers of ethnic minority, low-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In their research on schools where race and class are strong predictors of achievement, Boykin and Noguera (2011) found that very few African-American students are enrolled in advanced courses, but they are overrepresented in special education and remedial courses. Teachers' negative beliefs and attitudes about the abilities of African-American students led to complacency and lack of effort toward the goal of raising achievement for these students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The issues that have created the

education debt and the opportunity gap need to be addressed to make immediate educational progress and to reframe our varying notions of success for African-American students. Educational research should start not from the perspective of an achievement gap, but from an understanding of the education debt and the opportunity gap.

Trends in recent research

A goal of research on African-American and white inequality in schools has sought to identify the causes and consequences of social inequalities and to describe the social processes that continue them (Anderson, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Farley, 2000; Ferguson, 2007; Hallinan, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis, 2001; Noguera & Wing, 2006; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). The research has resulted in several theories to explain the disparity in African-American and white student achievement. These theories can generally be located in three categories, biological differences, family and cultural differences, and the effects of social stratification, school characteristics, and organizational processes (Anderson, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Farley, 2000; Ferguson, 2007; Hallinan, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis, 2001; Noguera & Wing, 2006; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). Biological determinism asserts that genetic differences separate whites and African-Americans and whites have superior cognitive abilities (Hallinan, 2001). Critics of studies that attempted to use biological determinism as an explanation for lower academic achievement have been largely successful in containing this argument through the use of empirical studies (Gardner, 1983; Hallinan, 2001; Scarr & Weinberg, 1976; Stodlosky & Lesser, 1967). Other researchers claim that characteristics of African-American families can be used to explain racial disparities. The research on the African-American family's contribution to racial disparity often focuses on family background or cultural effects (Hallinan, 2001). Studies in this vein are often challenged because they reify

race as a stable and objective category underestimating the dynamic meanings of race and the impact of racial discrimination (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). Another body of research focuses on the effects of social structure, school characteristics, and organizational processes on racial inequality. These studies often seek to better describe the role school plays in the transmission of status and privilege (Hallinan, 2001). Two studies in particular that influenced my thinking on this topic sought to describe school structures and characteristics by using data collected through interviewing participants in programs aimed at desegregating schools. These research studies looked at the schooling experiences of African-American parents and children from the perspective of the participants.

The Gautreaux housing relocation program and the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program were put in place to desegregate schools in Chicago and Boston, respectively. The work of Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum (2000) and Eaton (2001) complicate what appears on the surface to be a wonderful educational opportunity for African-American students. For many participants, the Gautreaux housing relocation program provided the chance for families to move from an urban setting to a suburban setting and to enroll their children in suburban schools. The METCO project in Boston offered inner city youth the chance to be bused to suburban schools. Each of these research projects provides an in-depth look at the social structure, school characteristics, and organizational structures of predominantly white schools through the eyes of African-American parents and students. The studies provide a complex picture of the benefits and the costs associated with the challenges of moving African-American children to predominantly white schools.

Following the United States Supreme Court decision in Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority (1976), a voluntary housing relocation program was established that allowed families

receiving section 8 housing vouchers to move to the suburbs. One of the primary motivations for families to relocate was to gain access to suburban schools, as these participants believed their families would benefit in schools that have more resources and higher performance outcomes. Much of the data collected about the participating families' experiences is organized around themes of schooling, safety, social interactions in the neighborhood, and the long-term education and employment outcomes available as a result of moving to the suburbs (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000) collected data using surveys and interviews of the mothers that chose to take advantage of this program. These data show that families who elected to move to the suburbs were satisfied that their new schools had more resources, curricular and extracurricular programs, smaller class sizes, more discipline and safety, and higher educational standards (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). At the same time, however, mothers were often critical of the propensity of suburban school officials to place their children in special education or other remedial classes. Also, there were a number of mothers concerned with teachers' racial bias against their children. Though the mothers that were interviewed expressed general satisfaction with the education in suburban schools, their excitement was tempered by the perception that students of color were subjected to serious forms of racial discrimination (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

Eaton (2001) documents the experiences of students who participated in a voluntary busing program in Boston. Students in the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program were bused from Boston City to suburban schools with the goals of increasing educational opportunities and integration for participants. In her study, Eaton asked participants to evaluate the program by discussing what they gained and what they lost. She

asked them to talk about the displacement and inconvenience the program required and she sought to probe the human processes benefiting from integration programs and the meanings people attach to their own experiences. She asked open-ended questions that gave people the opportunity to reflect, qualify, and fully explain themselves, their opinions, and their perceptions of the gains, the losses, and the complexities found in the kind of experiences that METCO offered. Similar to Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum, Eaton troubles the notion that suburban schools offer a better educational experience for all children with her accounts of African-American students having to work harder than their white peers for academic recognition, the pain of bouncing between two worlds, the development of negative attitudes about participants own neighborhoods, and students' feelings that they were missing something while being schooled away from their neighborhood (Eaton, 2001). Her study is unique in that it includes the personal experiences of the students that relocated to new schools. The research on these two social programs, Gautreaux and METCO, complicate our understanding of the African-American and white achievement gap by illustrating the challenges African-American families and students face in suburban schools. These studies show the need for research that pays attention to the ways race is a product of educational settings, the everyday interactions and practices in schools that affect educational outcomes, and how African-American parents and students make sense of their racialized social locations with regards to their experience in school (O'Connor, Lewis, Mueller, 2007).

This study, using qualitative research methods in one public school district and in one particular middle school is influenced by and adds to the body of educational research on institutional racism and the experiences of African-American parents and their children in predominantly white schools. This literature has looked at, among other things, institutional

challenges facing urban schools systems in the United States. These challenges include persistent low student achievement, quality of teaching in urban schools, low expectations for students, and a lack of cultural responsiveness on the part of teachers and administrators working in urban environments (Ferguson, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Lee, 2004; Lareau, 2011; Noguera, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004). These challenges have motivated many African-American families to move out of city schools to enroll their children in suburban schools. There has been much written about the experiences of African-American students and their parents in predominantly white schools. This literature has looked at the effects of school characteristics such as, racial and ethnic composition and academic climate, and school organization such as, differentiation of students for instruction and teachers' expectations impact on students' motivation, effort, and achievement (Belluck, 1999; Carter, 2010; Feagin, 2005; Oakes, 1995; Orfield & Gordon, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Thompson & Schultz, 2003). The literature on African-American parents' experiences in schools has looked at parents' values, aspirations, and expectations, avenues for parents to be involved in school, customization of school experiences, and the approach parents use when engaging with school officials (Calabrese, 1990; Delpit, 1995; Fields-Smith, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lareau, 2003; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000; Noguera & Wing, 2006). All of this is occurring in the segregated society that is the United States. Despite gains made following the Civil Rights movement, our society remains segregated. Housing segregation makes school integration especially difficult (Orfield, 2007).

With these studies in mind, I have endeavored to conduct a research project that provides further information and analysis to the question of why African-American parents choose to move from urban to suburban schools and what expectations they have about suburban schools.

Additionally, in this research project I have explored the experiences of parents as they negotiated the institutional challenges and everyday racism they faced in this suburban environment. My conjecture, in undertaking this research, was that African-American parents and their children benefit from resources which are available in suburban schools but not available in urban environments, yet these opportunities come at a cost. Costs come in the form of unequal treatment of white and African-American parents and white and African-American students and unequal access to educational resources for African-American parents and students compared to their white peers. My conjecture stems from reading and class work completed while enrolled in two different seminars at Syracuse University *Slums and Suburbs and Equal Educational Opportunity* and *Can Urban Schools be Fixed?* These seminars offered me the opportunity to explore the literature on how schools function to reproduce racial inequality. Specifically, in *Slums and Suburbs and Equal Educational Opportunity* I was challenged to develop my understanding of how patterns of metropolitan growth in the twentieth century United States affected the provision of equal educational opportunity. Racial desegregation and social networks were studied to determine their impact on equal opportunity. The seminar, *Can Urban Schools be Fixed* enabled me to better understand how in-school reforms and issues external to the schools affected educational opportunities. The deep structures of schools and the ability of school structures to frustrate reform efforts were studied.

Another goal of this study is to better understand how students and parents negotiate the ideologies at the suburban school to show how interpretations and responses of individual actors shape black students' experiences in schools in ways that systematically deny them privilege and educational access (O'Conner et al., 2007). One dominant ideology at this institution creates an image of a school where any student can enjoy success if they work hard and follow the rules.

Other ideologies circulate that help to explain why some students are not successful. To understand these ideologies I listened and analyzed how African-American parents talk about and make sense of the everyday interactions and practices at this educational setting.   I sought to understand how children and adults make sense of, and talk about the familiar and what is taken for granted (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). This research study centered on answering two research questions, (1.) What are the educational opportunities that African-American parents are looking for when choosing to move to the suburbs and to suburban schools, (2.) How do African-American parents experience the institutional practices and cultural norms within a particular suburban school?

Context

Eastside Middle School is the only middle school in the Lexington School District. Information from the State Department of Education (SED) shows that the school enrolls approximately 893 students in grades 5-8. In 2007-08, eighty percent of the students were white, eleven percent were African-American, six percent were American Indian or Asian and three percent were Hispanic. Fourteen percent of the students were on free or reduced lunch. The staff at Eastside included 83 teachers, 5 counselors, 1 nurse, 10 paraprofessionals, and three administrators. Ninety six percent of the staff at Eastside was white.

The school is located in the Town of Lexington. The local Association of Realtors and the Chamber of Commerce report that the average sale price of a house in the Lexington area in 2007 was $210,500. This number is 1.5 times the average sale price of a house in the county. In addition, there are five mobile home parks located predominantly in the southern part of the school district. In the northwestern corner of the district, where the Town of Lexington meets the city, there is a large apartment complex called the Rosewood Gardens. Many residents of

Rosewood Gardens receive Section 8 vouchers. Though data on religious affiliation are not available, Lexington is one of only two school districts in the county that close school to recognize Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A number of families with ties to local institutions of higher education live in the district. It is a school district that prides itself on the diversity of the student body as evidenced by the mission statement:

> The Lexington Central School District has an uncompromising commitment to excellence in preparing students to achieve and succeed, to respect themselves and others and to practice life-long learning in an ever-changing, richly diverse environment. We dedicate ourselves to the academic, artistic, social, emotional and physical development of each student.

Students at Eastside Middle School have typically performed very well on State Intermediate level assessments. In 2007-2008, 77% of eighth grade students met or exceeded the standard on the English Language Arts assessment and 89% of the students met or exceeded the standard on the Math assessment. In addition, 16% of the students in English Language Arts and 33% of the students in math scored at the highest level. This success rate ranks among the highest performing middle schools in the area.

The numbers, however, can be deceiving. A closer look at the data reveals a stark contrast between the performance of African-American and white students. Only thirty-eight percent of African-American students scored at the proficient level (level 3) or higher on the English Language Arts exam and none of those students scored at the highest level (level 4). In math, 76% of African-American students scored at the proficient level or higher and only 12% scored at the highest level. Clearly, an achievement gap exists between white and African-American students.

Eastside Middle School: NYS Middle Level Results

	ELA	ELA	Math	Math
Results by race/ethnicity	Scored 3-4	Scored 4	Scored 3-4	Scored 4
White	83%	19%	91%	35%
African-American	38%	0%	76%	12%

The No Child Left Behind legislation passed by the federal government set a goal of 100% proficiency in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Progress toward those targets is measured using a formula that identifies a school's annual yearly progress (AYP). In New York State, a school is deemed to be making AYP if student achievement on yearly tests meets goals set forth by the New York State Education Department. The AYP of a school is dependent on the success of all students and students in NCLB defined student sub-groups including, African-American and special education students and students living in poverty. Creating measuring sticks such as AYP has put a spotlight on the performance of particular students marked by their inclusion in these sub-groups. Schools are challenged to meet these goals or risk the punishments imposed by the State Education Department. For a typically high performing suburban school such as Eastside, the NCLB legislation has heightened awareness of groups of students not successful within the system, such as African-American students. I put forth this information, not as a commentary on the federal legislation, rather to show the need to complicate the story of Eastside Middle School.

The Lexington School District enjoys a very good reputation in the region in part due to the overall academic success of the students. When people talk positively about Lexington, they often refer to the academic performance of the students. One must dig deeper, however, to gain a better understanding of life in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School in

particular for African-American parents and their children. The combination of a long-standing tradition of academic success and a relatively diverse student population make the district attractive for prospective African-American parents. After interviewing African-American parents, however, it became evident that, although the school is attractive, these parents often talk differently about life at Eastside. Their words help paint a more complicated portrait of a school that is challenged to meet the needs of African-American students. Despite the strong academic program and the other resources the district enjoys, many African-American students and their parents feel marginalized and unable to access the academic and social advantages enjoyed by the majority of the students. I believe the dominant ideologies circulating within Eastside Middle School created ways to justify this inequality.

I have been an administrator in the Lexington School District for twelve years and during that time I served as a Curriculum Coordinator, Assistant to the Principal, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Elementary School Principal. In December 2008, I was hired as the Principal at Eastside Middle School. Prior to becoming an administrator I worked as a middle level social studies teacher for eleven years in two different districts. For five of those years, I taught at Eastside Middle School. My research began when I was an administrative intern working in the Lexington School District office. My interest in this study and the research questions stem, in part, from my subject position as a white parent and school administrator in the District. As a parent and administrator in the District, my experiences impact the collection, analysis, and writing about the data. I am going to present more about my positionality as a white, school administrator in Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

I begin this dissertation with a survey of the current theoretical literature and research on the experiences of African-American families and students in schools. Chapter two begins with a brief overview of the residential segregation patterns that continued in the latter half of the 20th century and the impact these patterns had on suburbanization of urban areas and the continuation of segregated neighborhoods and schools. Chapter two also addresses institutional challenges facing urban schools, the experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools, and the experiences of African-American parents in schools and in predominantly white schools, in particular. My theoretical perspective is explained in chapter two, also. This includes my understanding of race and racism as socially constructed and an explanation of how systemic racism theory, critical whiteness theory, and the unconscious habits of racial privilege and racial microaggressions help me to analyze my data.

Chapter three discusses qualitative research methodology and methods. I explain the rationale for using qualitative research methods in this study and how symbolic interactionism informs my theoretical and methodological approach. I explain the use of interviewing as a research method, as well as my subjectivity given my professional and personal experiences and relationship to this research setting.

Chapter four of this dissertation focuses on research question #1: What are the educational opportunities that African-American parents are looking for when choosing to move to the suburbs? In investigating this question, I explore how parents made sense of the school and school district that they chose to leave before moving to the suburbs. I also analyze the factors that led them to leave their original school. The notion of a geography of opportunity, which attracted parents to this particular school and school district is investigated.

Chapter five of this dissertation focuses on research question #2: How do African-American parents experience the institutional practices and cultural norms at Eastside Middle School? In investigating this question, I explore how parents made sense of their level involvement with the school, the enrollment of their children in remedial and enriched classes, and the curriculum and educational resources used in classrooms.

In chapter six I explore African-American parents' talk about their everyday experiences and the institutional practices in this predominantly white educational environment. This chapter extends the analysis begun in chapter five around institutional racism by looking at the organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate that occur in everyday interactions between African-Americans and whites. My analysis of the habits of staff in this predominantly white school illustrates how the white racial frame privileges white members of the school community while marginalizing African-American parents and children.

The conclusion of this dissertation begins with a discussion of relevant findings from the research. Limitations of this study and next steps for research are explained, as well. I conclude with recommendations for white educators and for those white educators working with African-American students, in particular, to engage in professional development that will help school staff complicate the notion of white privilege, recognize the various ideologies and strategies used to maintain and enforce power and privilege, and make a commitment to take a stand against oppression.

Summary

Despite attention from the Federal government and an extensive body of research, barriers to success for African-American children in public schools persist. Though results on national assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress show some

progress, the achievement gap between white and African-American students remains frustratingly wide. This dissertation aims to contribute to critical theories of race by exploring the institutional structures and everyday interactions that frame the experiences of African-American parents and students in public school. Specifically, I seek to understand how African-American parents understand the opportunities this predominantly white suburban school presents and how these parents negotiate the racial realities within which these opportunities exist. In this way, teachers, administrators, and other school staff may better understand the need to critically examine and challenge systems of power in an effort to disrupt institutional racism in schools. The research literature in this area, which is presented in chapter two, discusses three topics, (1.) the challenges African-American parents face in urban schools and why these parents choose to move their children to the suburbs, (2.) the experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools, and (3.) African-American parents' experiences in schools and in predominantly white schools.

Chapter 2:

Literature review

This chapter is a survey of the current theoretical literature and research on the experiences of African-American families and students in schools. To begin, I present a brief overview of the residential segregation patterns that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and the impact these patterns had on suburbanization and the reemergence of segregated neighborhoods and schools. Next, I present a review of the research on why African-American parents choose to move their children to suburban schools. A review of the current literature on the experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools follows. Finally, current literature on the experiences of African-American parents in schools and in predominantly white schools, in particular, is presented. Following this review of the current literature, I explain the theoretical perspectives that help me to understand my data. This includes my understanding of race and racism as socially constructed and an explanation of systemic racism theory, critical whiteness theory, and the unconscious habits of racial privilege and racial microaggressions.

A brief overview of residential segregation patterns in the 20th century

The 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision ended legal segregation in public education; however, this decision did not solve segregation in public schools that resulted from segregated residential patterns. Residential segregation patterns emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) played a significant role in the legalization and institutionalization of racism and segregation through an overt practice of denying mortgages based upon race and ethnicity (The Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston). FHA insurance often was isolated to new residential developments on the edges of metropolitan

areas that were considered safer investments, not to inner city neighborhoods. This practice

stripped the inner city of many of their middle class inhabitants, thus hastening the decay of

inner city neighborhoods. White parents fled urban areas and moved to the growing suburban

rings being built around cities. Loans for the repair of existing structures were small and for

short duration, which meant that families could more easily purchase a new home than

modernize an old one, leading to the abandonment of many older, inner city properties. The

FHA also explicitly practiced a policy of redlining when making determinations about in which

neighborhoods to approve mortgages. As defined by the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston,

redlining is the practice of denying or limiting financial services to certain neighborhoods based

on racial or ethnic composition without regard to the residents' qualifications or

creditworthiness. The term redlining refers to the practice of using a red line on a map to

delineate an area where financial institutions would not invest. The FHA allowed personal and

agency bias in favor of white suburban subdivisions to affect the kinds of loans it guaranteed, as

applicants in these subdivisions were generally considered better credit risks (The Fair Housing

Center of Greater Boston; Wells & Crain, 1994). Some reports confirm that many of the

discriminatory banking, mortgage, and realty practices were still in effect in the late 1990s

(Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Redlining and other discriminatory residential practices contributed to the

growth of the suburbs and the reemergence of segregated neighborhoods and schools in the last

half of the 20th century, as white families fled urban areas and African-American families were

denied the opportunity to even consider a move.

Why African-American parents choose to move their children to suburban schools

One result of these discriminatory residential practices is that African-American students

are more likely than white children to grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods (poverty rates of

20% and above) and hyper-poverty neighborhoods (40% and above poverty rates). Disparities

persist across racial and social lines. Just under 19% of African-Americans in 2000 resided in

neighborhoods with 40% and above poverty rates versus 6% of whites (Jargowsky, 2003). This

is relevant because research shows that attending a predominantly African-American, segregated

school continues to have a negative influence on achievement (Roscigno, 1998; Noguera, 2006).

Segregation and poverty underlie larger issues in urban education systems (Orfield,

2004). The concentration of poverty and racial isolation matters in that it is directly related to

school processes that significantly influence student achievement trends (Ferguson, 2001;

Noguera, 2006). For example, teachers in schools with high concentrations of poverty may feel

overwhelmed with the challenges facing their students. This may result in teachers feeling that

their students are unable to succeed given their challenging life circumstances. This may result

in lower expectations for students rather than putting into place supports necessary to help

students succeed. Additionally, the challenges facing urban school systems include school

policies and practices that impede student success or fail to adequately address students' needs.

These challenges are exacerbated by sets of beliefs that contribute to negative perceptions of

students' intellectual abilities (Noguera, 2006).

This review of the research on reasons why parents choose to move their children to

suburban schools is organized in two sections. The literature on institutional challenges facing

urban schools is presented first. These challenges include persistently low student achievement,

quality of teaching and learning, low expectations for African-American students, and the lack of

cultural responsiveness within schools. Motivation to move out of urban schools follows the

identification of institutional challenges. The review of literature on reasons to move out of

urban schools focuses on educational opportunities such as material resources, unique educational experiences, and the future value of obtaining an education.

Institutional challenges facing urban schools

Although there are examples of success in many urban schools, these school systems tend to have specific institutional challenges that impede their ability to effectively educate all students. Creative strategies to increase parent involvement and resourceful approaches to teaching and learning are just two examples of ways that particular urban schools have worked to achieve success, but institutional challenges are perhaps most powerful in urban settings (Honigsfeld & Cohan, 2010). Institutional challenges facing these systems include persistently low student achievement, inexperienced teaching staff, and low expectations of students (Kincheloe, 2004, 2010; Noguera, 2006).

One goal of the Federal No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, was that all students would achieve high academic standards by attaining proficiency or better in reading and mathematics by the 2013-2014 school year (United States Department of Education: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). To achieve this objective, school districts are held accountable for making demonstrable improvement in the achievement of defined subgroups such as African-American students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Congress significantly increased federal spending on education and gave states greater flexibility to use funds to benefit individual school districts. Despite this level of political attention, low student achievement for African-American students in urban settings endures (Nogura, 2006). Low student achievement is demonstrated by large number of students performing poorly on achievement tests and not performing at grade level, as well as high rates of high school non-completion and special education classification. The vast majority of students want to succeed in

school and view school as important to being successful in life, but structural barriers both inside and outside school often stand in the way of this goal (Noguera, 2006). Moreover, negative stereotypes about families often misinform educators and lead to negative views about students (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2016; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005).

Teacher effectiveness matters for student achievement. Quality teachers are considered central to reduce performance gaps in achievement between African-American students and their white peers (Ferguson, 2001). It is unfortunate then that low-poverty, low-minority schools generally have a greater percentage of certified teachers than do high-poverty, high-minority schools (Lee, 2004). Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2005) showed that highly qualified teachers are more likely to transfer or quit when teaching lower-achieving students because they are drawn to schools with low concentrations of poverty, low minority populations, and high levels of student achievement. As well, teachers who perform better on general knowledge certification exams are significantly more likely to leave schools having the lowest achieving students, leading to high teacher turnover rates in lower performing schools. This high turnover rate makes it harder for low-performing schools to build an experienced teaching core. Schools with high teacher turnover rates have difficulty planning and implementing a coherent curriculum and sustaining positive working relationships among teachers. The reality of these organizational challenges is particularly alarming, given that high turnover schools are more likely to serve low-income and minority students (Guin, 2004).

Urban schools often fail to provide environments of high academic expectations (Lareau, 2011; Noguera, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004). While also a persistent cultural challenge, urban school districts have structural challenges that either produce or perpetuate low expectations of students. Teachers in urban school districts can feel overwhelmed by what they

consider to be the high needs of their students, and thus lower their own expectations for student performance. Structurally, this is exemplified in the absence of demanding and high level courses and programs such as advanced placement courses and gifted and talented programs, as well as school systems that council students out of school (Fine, 1994; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015).

Culture is central to learning and pivotal not only in communicating and receiving information but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals (Ladson-Billings, 1995). A pedagogy that acknowledges learning is influenced by cultural differences and the context in which it occurs and that it is socially mediated between teacher and student is more likely to result in student achievement (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999). Too often, schools make policy, curricular, and pedagogical decisions without careful consideration of the racial, ethnic, and cultural realities of the students and communities they serve. Students may interpret the school environment as unwelcoming making their academic achievement less likely. Faced with this environment, students may respond with behaviors that are oppositional to the norms and values of the school (Delpit 2005, 2012; Ferguson, 2001). Culturally responsive practices, however, build student trust in the school setting (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Institutional challenges negatively impact the ability of urban school systems to meet students' needs. Challenges such as low student achievement as identified by state and federal measures, turnover and quality of teachers, low expectations for student academic performance and behavior, and an overall lack of cultural responsiveness are likely to be most evident in urban settings. When faced with these conditions some African-American parents choose to move to suburban schools for new opportunities.

Motivation to move out of the city

Surveys of parents that participated in social programs that resulted in racial integration of schools, such as the METCO program in Boston and the Gautreaux program in Chicago, showed that they were motivated to move for their families' safety and their children's schooling and social relations (Orfield, 2004; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). According to Eaton (2001), parents' goal of a better education for their children came down to two distinctive goals, equal educational opportunity and diversity. Equal educational opportunity implies that resources are being distributed that previously had not been made available. The goal of diversity speaks to the need for all children to interact in learning environments with other students from varied racial, ethnic, economic, and geographic backgrounds.

Information from participants in programs aimed at racial integration of schools, such as METCO and Gautreaux, suggest that equal educational opportunity means two different things. First, there is the immediate educational experience and academic preparation a suburban education might provide. Second, there is the potential future value of obtaining the type of education that American society's gatekeepers, such as college admission officers, employers, and potential colleagues and clients perceive to be better. African-American parents who chose to move to suburban schools wanted their children prepared to live and work in a predominantly white society. This preparation, parents identified, would more likely occur in educational environments that were most likely to be found in the suburbs (Eaton, 2001; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

It is understood that suburban schools are more likely to provide better access to educational resources, including books, supplies, libraries, smaller class sizes, more updated and better kept facilities, and a learning environment that is more conducive to learning than would exist in an urban school. Perceptions are that suburban schools offer more orderly classrooms,

fewer interruptions to learning due to discipline problems, and an overall safer environment in terms of physical safety (Eaton, 2001; Wells & Crain, 1994).

In addition to the educational resources available in suburban schools, parents moving their children to the suburbs expect to find more serious attitudes towards learning. This means that course work is more rigorous and challenging than in urban schools and teachers would have higher expectations and demand more from students. Lastly, it was understood that more children who attended suburban schools graduate high school and go on to college. These opportunities are complemented by lifelong opportunities that may result from bringing African-American children into contact with affluent whites who are generally better-connected to job and economic opportunities. Such information is generally common in white middle- and upper middle-class settings, and it is suggested that tying African-Americans into those networks via integrated schools may level the playing field (Eaton, 2001; Wells & Crain, 1994).

This study adds to the current literature by bringing forth the words and experiences of African-American parents that chose to uproot their families and move from the city to the suburbs. They talked about the characteristics of the schools their children attended and why they chose to move to the suburbs.

The experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools

Much has been written about the experiences of African-American students in school and several theories have been developed to explain the achievement gap that exists between white and African-American students. It is necessary to complicate the discourse about the achievement gap by investigating the opportunity gap that faces African-American children in schools throughout the United States. This section of the review of current literature focuses on the experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools and is divided into

three sections. The first section reviews the research on school characteristics such as racial and ethnic composition of schools. The second and third sections look at the research on the effects of school organization such as the ways schools divide students for learning and the ways teachers' expectations affect motivation, effort, and achievement.

Researchers and critics of efforts to desegregate schools since the *Brown* decision have questioned whether predominantly white schools sufficiently improve the academic well-being of racially marginalized students. The consequences of intergroup experiences are very much dependent on the structure of the learning environment. Research informs us that variation in experiences exists even within schools with similar social racial and ethnic compositions (Carter, 2010).

Effects of school characteristics: racial and ethnic composition

The emergence of data suggesting that public schools are becoming more segregated (Orfield & Gordon, 2001) has led researchers to investigate the impact racial and ethnic composition of the student population has on the achievement gap, identity, and cultural flexibility. Despite the re-segregation of schools, surveys have shown that Americans are fairly committed to diversity (Hallinan, 2001). A diverse student population is not sufficient to ensure equal educational opportunity between African-American and white students in suburban, middle class schools (Belluck, 1999). In addition to academic challenges, African-American students in majority white schools are challenged with social loneliness, racial visibility and social invisibility, class and cultural discomfort among white parents and administrators, the burden of explaining oneself to white people, completing studies at a demanding school with minimal parent participation, and the burden of having to feel grateful all the time (Thompson & Schultz, 2003). These social challenges and the risk of confirming a negative stereotype about

one's group may impact students' self-esteem, which may jeopardize chances for academic success (Steele and Aronson, 1995).

Self-esteem is a significant and positive predictor of cultural flexibility for African-American students. African-American students enrolled in majority-minority schools demonstrated higher self-esteem than their racial counterparts in majority-white schools (Carter, 2010). African-American students attending majority-white schools had significantly lower self-esteem than their African-American peers attending a majority-minority school (Carter, 2010). A possible explanation for this finding of lower self-esteem for African-American students in majority white schools may be a result of organizational practices of schools that limit African-American students' access to educational resources. The findings on self-esteem suggest that further research is necessary to better understand the differences in experiences of African-American students in majority-white schools and in majority-minority schools.

Effects of school organization: organizational differentiation of students for instruction

The opportunity gap facing African-American students compared to white students is in part a result of instructional processes that occur within schools such as tracking and ability grouping (Hallinan, 2001). Internal re-segregation as a result of educational tracking is a form of segregation not usually thought of as such. In desegregated schools, however, most children of color learn in segregated classroom tracks with fewer resources and less rigorous teaching than tracks for allegedly more talented students, most of whom are white because of bias in the selection process (Milner, 2012; Feagin, 2005). Middle-class African-American students who are enrolled in predominantly white, suburban schools with more material resources still may find themselves in substantially segregated classrooms owing to patterns of within school ability grouping and tracking (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Oakes, 1995).

African-American students often get placed in tracks lower than their measured abilities indicate, even as measured by the racially biased conventional tests. Students in higher tracks typically get more attention and better resources, often including more experienced teachers and more rigorous instruction (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Feagin, 2005).

Oakes (1985) found that exposure to Advanced Placement and honors classes, which are both proxies for a certain type of classroom experience, are positively associated with cultural flexibility, yet constituted an organizational structure highly correlated with race and inequity in many schools. African-American students are underrepresented in higher level classes at majority-white schools, which results in social and cultural distance (Carter, 2010). African-American students in majority-white schools were underrepresented in higher level classes and more likely to hold significantly lower academic statuses than their peers in majority-minority schools (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter, 2010).

Effects of school organization: Teachers' expectations affect motivation, effort, and achievement

Researchers have found that the opportunity gap as manifested in racial bias in white teachers' expectations affects student performance; this discrimination takes the form of teachers not expecting the same performance from African-American and white children or from African-American and white children with comparable test scores (Ferguson, 2001; Hallinan, 2001; Pitre, 2014). Some teachers are perceived to demonstrate racism, not egregious forms of discrimination, but rather a more subtle form of racism. This type of subtle racism appears in the form of low expectations for African-Americans and hyper-enforced school rules for these same students (Zerega, Piro, Delcourt, Jenkins, 2016). Low expectations refers to the beliefs of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and policymakers that African-American students cannot achieve at levels equal to or better than their Euro-American peers. Too often, white

school leaders talk about their belief in educating all children but practice the art of educating only a few (CampbellJones & CampbellJones, 2002; Pitre, 2014).

Although many educators believe they can provide quality schooling for African-American children, subtle forms of discrimination continue, often unbeknownst to those performing the actions (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; CampbellJones & CampbellJones, 2002). Claude Steele (1992) in his research on stereotype vulnerability maintained that African-American students face a constant devaluing assault while they attend school. In school, more than any other place in society, African-American children are socialized to believe that their cultural currency is low relative to their Euro-American counterparts.

The interpersonal relationship that exists between teacher and student has the ability to affect school success beyond objective considerations of test scores and grade point average. African-American students, especially African-American males, have difficulty forming positive relationships with most school personnel, and more generally are seen as displaying problem behaviors at a rate far exceeding that of their white peers (Delpit, 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Gosa & Alexander, 2007, Wells, Fox & Cordova-Cobo, 2016).   Teachers are less supportive of African-American students than white students in situations where they are matched for ability or randomly assigned (Ferguson, 2001). Teachers' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand the black-white test score gap and introduce self-doubt and lowered academic expectations for African-American children (Ferguson, 2001; Ogbu, 2003).

African-American students want their teachers and schools to be nourishing, supportive, protective, and encouraging and they want their teachers held accountable to demonstrate the skills necessary to ensure that each student has the opportunity to learn (Ogbu, 2003; Roybal,

Thorton, & Usinger, 2014; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). The literature suggests (Wells, Fox, &

Cordova-Cobo, 2016) teachers were found to have negative views about African-American

students' potential to learn and to abide by school rules. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the

ability of African-American students to succeed are inconsistent. Despite teachers'

pronouncements to treat all children equally, differential treatment was the norm (Wells, Fox, &

Cordova-Cobo, 2016).

This study adds to the current literature with a focus on the opportunity gap including the

institutional characteristics and their impact on African-American students in a predominantly

white school. This study will contribute to this scholarship by exploring how African-American

parents understand their children's experiences as African-American students in a predominantly

white school.

African-American parents in schools and in predominantly white schools

Educational researchers agree on the broad ideals for promoting educational development

in children through proper parenting. These standards include the importance of talking with

children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling.

These guidelines form a dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised

(Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lareau, 2003; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). The discourse on

parental involvement in schooling tends to favor the perspectives of white, middle-class families

while parents of African-American students, on the other hand, are frequently cited as the cause

of disparity between white and African-American students' academic success. Many of these

perceptions are held by school staff about African-American parents and are based on notions

that they are not adequately involved in school, not good role models, do not provide guidance,

and do not encourage, support, and set high expectations for their children (Noguera & Wing,

2006). As a result of these negative perceptions of African-American parents, white children and their parents accrue benefits that are often invisible to them and to others (Lareau, 2003). This review of the current literature on the experiences of African-American parents in schools and in predominantly white schools is divided into four sections. The first section is a discussion of the research on parents' values, aspirations, and expectations as they relate to education broadly and school, in particular. Next is a review of the research on parent involvement regarding education taking place at home versus school-based parent involvement. The third section discusses the literature on the means parents use to customize school experiences for their children. Parents' supportive or confrontational stance towards school concludes this review of the research on African-American parents' experiences in schools.

Parents' values, aspirations, and expectations

Teachers and administrators often attribute African-American children's low performance to a lack of interest and involvement on the part of their parents. Calabrese (1990) found that it is inappropriate, however, for school officials to assume that African-American parents want to be passive participants, and their children passive recipients, in the educational process. In the era of desegregation, schools and school systems have attempted to meet the educational needs of African-American students through various means of integration such as bussing, hiring more minority teachers, hiring more minority administrators, eliminating tracking systems, and initiating programs designed to raise reading levels and to induce students to remain in school (Calabrese, 1990). Although well-intentioned, these attempts at integration may not realize their potential because African-American parents continue to believe that the schools and middle-class, white school officials maintain discriminatory attitudes which reflect cultural biases against African-Americans. Suspicion of institutions such as public schools is a result of

African-American parents seldom being included in conversations about what is good for their children (Delpit, 1995). African-American parents are frustrated with school policies and procedures they were not involved in making and which are based on white, middle-class culture (Calabrese, 1990). Attempts to mask discriminatory attitudes from African-American parents have not been successful, and as a result many African-American parents have developed a passive attitude to help their children survive in the public school environment (Calabrese, 1990). Racial biases within schools have dissuaded many African-American parents from fully participating in their children's academic experiences (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008).

The views of teachers and other school staff regarding African-American parental involvement tend to be negative, potentially harmful, and based on powerful assumptions about schooling and the role of the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The strategies of African-American and working-class or poor parents are generally seen as unhelpful or even harmful to children's life chances (Lareau, 2003). Teachers often perceive African-American parents as uninvolved and disinterested in their children's education. Such negative perceptions disregard historical portraits of African-American parents (Fields-Smith, 2005).

Research on African-American parent involvement in schools has expanded beyond looking at race as a determining factor and now includes studies that differentiate between social classes. African-American parents' educational aspirations and levels of investment in education are relatively consistent across social class (Lareau, 2003). Yet, when their children report being discriminated against and treated unfairly at school, both poor, working class African-American parents and middle class African-American parents are challenged with acknowledging the

legitimacy of their children's observations while still trying to preserve hope for a racially integrated society where people are treated equally (Lareau, 2003).

The research is fairly clear that African-American parents value the education of their children and make it a priority in their lives (Fields-Smith, 2005; Xu, 2006) and, despite difficult challenges with school staff, African-American parents willingly support the needs of the school (Fields-Smith, 2005).

Home versus school based involvement

Studies point to race and class differences in parents' preference for and practice of home-versus school-based educational participation (Lareau, 2003). Prior work suggests that middle class white parents are likely to be actively involved in school-based activities (Lareau, 2003) and that they believe in interconnectedness between the home and the school. Some African-American parents resist teachers' and school officials' efforts to get them more involved in their children's education because they believe such involvement is inappropriate (Brown & Beckett, 2007). African-American parents place the responsibility to make their children learn and perform successfully on schools and on their teachers. African-American parents hold teachers accountable for their children's academic success or failure and do not feel that their involvement is appropriate (Ogbu, 2003; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

When African-American parents do not feel the school is doing all it should for their children they feel responsible to engage in learning activities at home and to improve the education that their children receive at school (Fields-Smith, 2005). The rationale African-American parents provide to explain their level of involvement in their children's education varies across social class and is unique to the educational context. Studies suggest that more research in this area is necessary (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Customization of school experiences

Customization refers to parents' interventions that are designed to strategically influence the educational experiences of their children (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Middle class white parents are likely to select children's schools (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996), influence course placement (Lareau, 2003), manage important educational transitions (Stevenson & Baker, 1987), and seek to compensate for perceived weaknesses in teacher expertise and the quality of schools' educational programs (Lareau, 2003). African-American parents, however, report the need to customize their children's schooling by maneuvering to gain quality educational experiences, especially in predominantly white schools (Brown & Beckett, 2007). African-American parents in predominantly white schools report the need to carefully monitor the class placements made by school officials to avoid having their children placed in lower level track classes and programs (Xu, 2006). In predominantly white schools, African-American parents report the need to advocate on behalf of their children at the classroom level to address issues of racial bias (Fields-Smith, 2005). The overall racial composition of the student body impacts the level and type of customization African-American parents engage to influence the educational experience for their children (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Supportive or confrontational stances towards school

Race appears to influence the level of support for teachers demonstrated by parents. White parents feel comfortable intervening and challenging schools and teachers on behalf of their children. African-American parents, however, are perceived by teachers to be more likely to intervene with a more confrontational stance (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). White families are engaged in a pattern of concerted cultivation with a close monitoring of their children's educational experiences (Lareau, 2003). African-American parents have to be attuned to issues

of racial exclusion and insensitivity and must be alert to the possibility that white teachers might have low expectations for their children (Lareau, 2003, Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). Given the history of racial discrimination in schools, African-American parents feel the need to watch over teacher-child interactions (Fields-Smith, 2005).

When African-American parents approach school staff to discuss goals and objectives with regard to their children's teachers, responses resemble apathy and distrust. Thus, when African-American parents do try to become involved, teachers reject their effort, which further widens the divide between African-American parents and the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). White teachers appear to be unfriendly, uncaring, and interact with African-American parents in negative, confrontational ways. As a result, parents respond by withdrawing from participating in the school and adopting a commitment to help their children navigate what they perceive to be a hostile environment (Calabrese, 1990). African-American parents believe that if there is to be the existence of a home-school partnership it would depend on their initiation and management of the relationship (Fields-Smith, 2005). Unfortunately, increased levels of African-American parent involvement have been viewed by many teachers as undermining rather than supporting the work they are trying to do in schools (Brown & Beckett, 2007).

Calabrese (1990) found that African-American parents in white schools felt more alienated than white parents because they were not invited to school often and were contacted only to deal with problems their children encountered. African-American parents' distrust of teachers and school officials is a result of school officials only making contact to report negative occurrences or to enlist their cooperation in applying sanctions. As a result, African-American parents rightfully view with suspicion any other invitations to participate in school affairs (Calabrese, 1990). African-American parents feel the need to intervene with white teachers,

administrators, and other school officials to ensure that their children's interests are protected (Brown & Beckett, 2007). As a result, African-American parents feel the need to watch over child-teacher relationships, initiate and manage parent-teacher partnerships, and form networks of support with other African-American parents (Brown & Beckett, 2007).

Researchers have focused on the presumed incongruence between African-American parents and white peers. Although such studies shed light on factors that have influenced parental involvement among varying racial and ethnic groups, researchers have rarely explored the perceptions of African-American parents. This study fills a gap in the scholarship by helping to understand how African-American parents navigated the treacherous waters of a predominantly white school and school district. This study explores African-American parents' understanding of what they had to give up to provide what they hoped would be a better education for their children.

Theoretical considerations

This research is a qualitative study of the experiences of African-American parents and their children in a predominantly white school. This work draws on literature that addresses race and racism as social concepts and those that endorse a critical examination of the systemic racism that results from the construction of race and racism in America. This section examines the literature with regard to the construction of race, which stems from racism.

Race

The concept of race is a contested term. There are various definitions for the term race. These definitions have evolved over time and are influenced by the historical, social, and political context in which they originated. Themes in research commonly examine the concept of race as culture and race as variable (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). The concept of race

as culture has developed as researchers worked to be more specific in their understanding. O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller (2007) show that early studies of African-American culture worked to identify the norms and beliefs of African-Americans as contrasted to the white, middle-class. Studies looked at the use of language, parenting, and attitudes of parents towards education, which resulted in conclusions that African-American culture was somehow deficient and therefore explained why African-American students performed poorly when compared to their white peers.

In response to this "white normative referent" (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller 2007, p. 541) studies were launched to re-center African-American culture in terms of competencies, not deficiencies. These studies led to schools being identified as unfairly institutionalizing norms and practices that failed to build on the abilities that African-American children brought to school. More recent studies have built on this tradition by examining how African-Americans make sense of symbols and experiences to develop a more refined concept of culture. Regardless of how refined the definition of African-American culture, when race is understood as culture "we overlook the extent to which Blackness is reflected not only in the meanings students bring with them to school but also in the meanings that are imposed on them by school structures. In the process, we underestimate the emergent and dynamic meanings of race and the impact of racial discrimination" (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller 2007, p. 542).

Race can also be understood as variable. When the achievement gap between white and African-American students is studied statistically, researchers attempt to control for variables, such as race, social class, resources, or parent education. To control for variables and complete statistical analyses, researchers doing this work collapse concepts into a single attribute. When race is collapsed into a single attribute it is treated as if it is stable across time, space, and

location. It is woefully simple to understand race as a unified and stable social category that influences the achievement of African-American students. Similar to the argument against understanding race as culture, race as variable is faulty in that to do so homogenizes the African-American experience and underestimates the effects of racial discrimination (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). Framing race as culture or race as variable minimizes how race is produced institutionally. It is necessary to explore how conceptions of race are produced institutionally to uncover the impact of how policies and practices operating in schools work to enforce and maintain inequality (Tatum, 2007).

Analyses of racial structures, such as school districts and schools, will help uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for racial privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This study rejects the notion of race as culture and race as variable to explain the often-publicized academic achievement gap between African-American students and their white peers. These concepts, however, help me to better understand the history of negative stereotypes of African-Americans and location of blame on African-American families.

Singleton and Linton (2006) assert that race is the socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical attributes including but not limited to skin and eye color, hair texture, and bone structures. This notion suggests race is a result of historical, economic, and social processes that shape beliefs, perceptions, and practices along lines of color. Racial meanings have changed throughout the history of the United States and have been socially constructed to further specific agendas (Omi & Winant, 1994). This study does not attempt to address the complexity of race as a personal identity. This study attempts to show the ways that people are raced and race one another within a particular institutional structure (Vaught, 2011). Using a

social construct approach to the definition of race allows me to examine and challenge the policies and everyday practices that are enacted in a predominantly white institution and serve to privilege whites and enact costs on African-Americans.

Racism

In essence, then, this study addresses racism, in particular systemic and institutional racism. Racism will be defined as "the conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional enactment of racial power, grounded in racial prejudice, by an individual or group against another individual or group perceived to have lower racial status" (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 40). Racism manifested in institutions such as public schools will be referred to as systemic or institutional racism. I use the terms systemic racism and institutional racism interchangeably, but technically, according to Feagin & Elias (2013), systemic racism refers to the foundational, large-scale and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression devised and maintained by whites and directed at people of color. Systemic racism is a material, social, and ideological reality that is well embedded in major US institutions. Institutional racism manifests as the laws, rules, policies, and processes that act as power to protect the interests of a dominant racial group at the expense of others (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Systemic racism theory is a social science theory of race and racism that elucidates the foundational, enveloping and persisting structures, mechanisms and operations of racial oppression that have fundamentally shaped the US past and present (Feagin & Elias, 2003).

Systemic racism theory

Systemic racism theory was created to provide an alternative to another theory about racism, racial formation theory. According to Omi and Winant (1994) racial formation theory is used to explain the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited,

transformed, and destroyed. Racial formation theory occurs through a linkage between structure and representation. These links occur through racial projects. Racial projects mediate the representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional forms in which it is standardized on the other (Omi & Winant, 1994). Racial formation theory explains that racial categories and meanings play an important role and are central to "organizing social inequalities of various sorts, in shaping the very geography of American life, in framing political initiatives and state action (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. vii). Racial formation theory asserts the centrality of racial matters and helps to explain certain aspects of racial oppression in the US (Feagin & Elias, 2013). Feagin (2006) explains that systemic racism theory was created in response to racial formation theory because the latter theory neglected to address the ongoing, past-like institutional component of racism. Feagin and Elias (2013, p. 935) explain that racial formation theory claims, "the centuries-old, heavy legacy of an extraordinary racist past is significantly declining and now is much less important in contemporary societal impacts on African-Americans."

Again, the concept of systemic racism "refers to the foundational, large-scale and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression devised and maintained by whites and directed at people of color (Feagin, 2006, p. 2). Fundamentally, systemic racism theory differs from racial formation theory in that the former "identifies the past and present racial hierarchy and perpetuation of unequal socio-economic power relations among different racial groups that are viewed as endemic to a race-based social system involving much more than conceptual meanings, ideologies and biased actions. In the case of US society, systemic racism is foundational to and engineered into its major institutions and organizations" (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 936).

Systemic racism theory identifies a powerful worldview that has developed over centuries called the white racial frame. The white racial frame "is materially and ideationally embodied and was created to rationalize and buttress the oppressive hierarchy and related societal structures of systemic racism (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 937). The white racial frame affects individuals, groups, and institutions and positions whites at the forefront of racial oppression. The white racial frame is used to maintain and expand power through the legitimization of the racial divide, which is so prevalent in the US (Feagin, 2006; Feagin & Elias, 2013). The frame is consciously or unconsciously expressed in the everyday actions and interactions in society.

I will explain the five sub-categories of systemic racism theory. First, researchers and analysts clearly identify the racial rulers and the ruled. In the case of the US, the racial rulers are typically elite whites and the ruled are most African-Americans and other minorities. Over the course of US history, powerful whites have shaped the meanings of race and race relations. Whites have created, maintained, and enforced laws, rules, policies, and processes that act as power to protect the interests of a dominant group at the expense of others through their control over most social institutions (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Second, the control of social institutions has been perpetuated by a "broad societal reproduction process that generates recurring patterns of oppression" (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 942). This societal reproduction works to position whites as privileged and leaves African-Americans to negotiate and resist various forms of oppression. Whites as a racial group continue to generate and shape unequal and unfair relationships between whites and African-Americans. Third, systemic racism theorists work to name the everyday practices and experiences of racial inequality and oppression. This work explores the interrelationships among racial practices, racial hierarchy,

and racial power networks that are created and maintained by whites (Feagin, 2006).

Researchers place at the forefront the institutions and structures used by whites to constantly

generate, reproduce, and utilize racial meanings and understandings that are central to the white

racial frame. Fourth, systemic racism theorists contend that racial group relations are understood

by studying the state and politics as well as the everyday conflict and contested meanings around

family, sports and entertainment, educational systems and the media (Feagin & Elias 2013, p.

946). These social level experiences or microaggressions experienced by people of color provide

deep understanding of the subtle ways power is maintained by dominant groups. Fifth, systemic

racism theory differs from racial formation theory in the understanding of hierarchical ordering

in the US. Whereas racial formation theorists position contemporary socio-racial group

relationships as moving toward a more egalitarian vision of racial democracy, systemic racism

theory argues that racial oppression is still "very much alive." This racial oppression will remain

alive and well as this system benefits most white Americans (Feagin, 2006).

Oppression and inequality remain central to race relations in the US. Systemic racism

theory helps to guide and inform the discussion on inequality in schools and schooling. For the

purpose of this work, systemic racism is operationalized as behaviors, policies, structures, and

practices that create and maintain disadvantage for African-Americans and advantage for whites.

Whiteness

Critical whiteness theory helps me better understand the privilege that white students and

their parents have and utilize to ensure success in institutions such as public schools. My

observations and interviews clearly illustrate the importance of race and demonstrate how

schools are racialized spaces (Lewis, 2001).   Whiteness is a political, economic, and cultural

system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and

unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutional and social settings (Ansley, 1997, as referenced in Applebaum, 2012). Whiteness continues to exist within the socially and existentially lived sphere of our experiences (Yancy, 2008).

Critical whiteness theory is useful for data analyses. When African-American parents share their experiences and interactions and the experiences and interactions of their children with school staff it is imperative for me to explore the ways whiteness in the form of colorblind ideology is operationalized.   Colorblind race-talk is used by whites to mask an underlying reality of racialized practices and color conscious understandings (Lewis, 2001). Such colorblindness can make it difficult for white administrators, teachers, and parents to see how their subtle and not so subtle practices and microaggressions make African-American parents feel like second class citizens in the school. Events are analyzed to understand how white administrators, teachers, and parents are blinded by their need to be good liberal anti-racists which prevents them from hearing what African-American parents and students are saying (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This colorblindness perpetuates white ignorance and rationalizes it for white school staff and parents.

Racist ideas about African-American students have a dramatically negative impact on educational access for these students. Too often, the blame for lack of achievement falls on students and their families without a critical examination of the structural arrangement of schools and interpersonal relationships within classrooms that may negatively impact the learning environment. The pervasive and unquestioned attitude that an African-American student is more difficult to teach because his or her behavior in the classroom is inappropriate, parental support is lacking, or his or her educational ability is inadequate are part of a white narrative that provides a

framework to understand the African-American body. White teachers and other staff see the African-American body through the medium of historically structured forms of knowledge that regard it an object of suspicion. In other words, whiteness comes replete with its assumptions of what to expect of an African-American body, how dangerous and unruly it is, how unlawful, criminal, and hypersexual it is (Yancy, 2008).

In addition to the day-to-day racist interactions that occur in the classrooms, behind the backs of students and parents, and in other public spheres such as the cafeteria and hallways, whiteness is evident in curriculum and resources used in schools. Leonardo (2004) explains that "white students can open up any textbook and discover their racial identity affirmed in history, literature, and science. The hidden curriculum of whiteness saturates everyday school life and one of the first steps to articulating its features is coming to terms with its specific modes of discourse. Like their non-white counterparts, white students are not taught anti-racist understandings in schools; but unlike non-whites, whites invest in practices that obscure racial processes." Typically, curricula fail to encourage students of all racial backgrounds to critique white domination. In other words, schools may teach white students to naturalize their unearned privileges, but they also willingly participate in such discourse, which maintains their sense of humanity (Leonardo, 2004). Leonardo (2004) describes "white humanity is just that: humanity of whites. So it is not only the case that whites are taught to normalize their dominant position in society; they are susceptible to these forms of teachings because they benefit from them." Whites need not deliberately invest in whiteness to reap the benefits of being white. As Tatum (2007) argues, "all white people, intentionally or unintentionally, do benefit from racism." Hence, whiteness is not just a question of deliberative investments in whiteness, but has to do

with how one is positioned by a white racist social structure that provides one with certain privileges (Yancy, 2008).

Critical whiteness theory is used to help me analyze my data to show that racism is embedded within the interactions of the adults working in institutions such as schools. It is weaved within the unconscious, impacting everyday transactions with deleterious effects on students (Yancy, 2008). White privilege confers dominance and gives permission to control. White privilege gives license to some people to be, at best, thoughtless and at worst, allows unequal access to educational resources. The effects of race continue to be profoundly devastating, to which the history of racism attests and the reality of race is indexed to the fabric of the lived experiences of African-American parents and their children (McIntosh, 1997). The tools of whiteness theory help to shine a light on the ways that whiteness maintains its power and goes unquestioned, uncritiqued, and unchallenged (McIntosh, 1988).

Racial microaggressions and the unconscious habits of racial privilege

As mentioned above, racism is defined as "the conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional enactment of racial power, grounded in racial prejudice, by an individual or group against another individual or group perceived to have lower racial status" (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 40). Racism manifested in institutions such as public schools will be referred to as systemic or institutional racism. In this study, the racist actions noted are not incidents of overt racial hatred and bigotry, but rather are more covert and disguised. These incidents of racism take a more nebulous and ambiguous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin, 2007). Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin (2007) identify this form of racism as racial microaggressions. They define racial microaggressions as brief and commonplace daily verbal,

behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate

hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.

Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive

looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily

conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent

(Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007).

The concepts of white privilege as unconscious habit and racial microaggressions help to

inform the discussion of the everyday actions and interactions that perpetuate institutional racism

in this study. As mentioned above, white privilege confers dominance. A strategy to identify

white privilege enacted through racial microaggressions is to analyze unconscious habits.

Sullivan (2006) defines habits, whether those of race or of other characteristics of contemporary

human existence, not as veneer lacquered onto a neutral human core. Rather, they are

dispositions for transacting with the world, and they make up the very beings that humans are.

These are not objects of conscious awareness; they are enacted without thinking. In this study,

Sullivan's notion of habit is a useful tool to help analyze parents' talk about their experiences

and interactions with white administrators, teachers, and parents. Analyzing the habits of the

white staff illustrates how white racial privilege marginalizes African-American students and

parents. The everydayness of these forms of racial microaggressions and the ability to dismiss or

gloss over them as innocent is a manifestation of white privilege.

Racial microaggressions are typically identified as one of three forms: microassault,

microinsult, and microinvalidation. As defined by Sue, Bucceri, et al (2007) a microassault is an

explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt

the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory

action. A microassault is most like overt racism conducted on an individual level that sounds like referring to someone as "colored" or using racial epithets. It is the African-American person deliberately being left on the curb by the cab driver.

A second form of racial microaggression is microinsult. A microinsult is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity (Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007). These are subtle snubs or hidden insulting messages. This may look like the white Assistant Principal dismissing the African-American parent's suggestion to improve a current practice. Though the words may not necessarily be offensive, it is important to consider the context. In this example, the white Assistant Principal may regularly dismiss suggestions from African-American parents but frequently considers the suggestions of white parents.

Microinvalidation is a third type of microaggression. Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color (Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007). This may look like the white student asking the teacher to validate a fact or experience presented by an African-American classmate. In this instance, the white student negates the experience and knowledge of his or her classmate.

Racial microaggressions may occur anytime there are interracial encounters. This notion is important to consider as racial microaggressions "(a) often reflect an invisible worldview of white supremacy in otherwise well-intentioned individuals; (b) are manifested in individual, institutions, and the US culture at large; (c) induce enormous psychological distress in people of color; and (d) create disparities in education for the target group" (Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, Rivera, 2008).

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the current theoretical literature and research on the experiences of African-American families and students in schools. To set the study within an historical context, I present a brief overview of the residential segregation patterns that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and the impact these patterns had on suburbanization of urban areas and the reemergence of segregated neighborhoods and schools. Following this brief history, I present current research on why African-American parents choose to move their children to suburban schools, the experiences of African-American students in predominantly white schools, and the experiences of African-American parents in schools and in predominantly white schools, in particular. This study adds to the current literature by presenting the words and experiences of African-American parents that chose to move out of an urban school district to pursue what they perceived to be new opportunities in the suburbs. This study will add to the literature because parents talk about the reasons why they chose to leave a particular school district and the aspirations they had for moving to the suburbs. African-American parents' talk about their experiences in a predominantly white school will add to the literature, also.

Following this review of the literature, I explained the theoretical perspectives that help me to understand my data. This includes my understanding of race and racism as socially constructed and an explanation of systemic racism theory, critical whiteness theory, and the unconscious habits of racial privilege and racial microaggressions. The existence of systemic racism in our institutions fosters a culture of privilege for whites and saddles African-American parents and children with hidden costs that perpetuate inequality. Within the institution of education, systemic racism is enacted through the beliefs and actions that occur within and between white school staff and African-American parents and their children. Enduring systemic

racism and microaggressions are the hidden costs African-American parents pay to take

advantage of educational opportunities at schools such as Eastside Middle School.

Chapter 3:

Methods and Procedures

This chapter explains the methods and procedures used to complete this study. I begin this chapter with an explanation of how I became interested in doing research on the experiences of African-American parents in predominantly white schools. The rationale to use qualitative research methodology to complete this study is provided followed by an explanation of the qualitative research methods employed to collect, code, analyze, and present these data. A discussion of the selection of participants and their background is included. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations as well as the impact of my social location on this study.

Background

While enrolled in a class on the history of American education, I learned about the impact of the rise of the educational bureaucracy around the turn of the twentieth century. The Committee of Ten was a prominent educational leadership group at the turn of the 20th century. These ten men were educational leaders, some were prominent in university circles and others were scientists, who were interested in standardizing and improving the quality of secondary school curriculum to assure that there was a sufficient number of prepared students for higher education (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The power of the Committee of Ten was challenged by a number of groups early in the 20th century. One such group was a committee of curriculum specialists, sociologists, and administrators who prepared a report, The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918). This report called for the vocationalizing of the American high school through the doctrine of social efficiency (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). In comparing the efforts of the Committee of Ten and the group that produced the Cardinal Principles of

Secondary Education (1918) within the context of post-World War I America, it was explained

that there was a great deal of pressure to educate students to be good citizens (Tyack, 1974). I

believe that most of this was probably in response to the strong antiwar activities of those that

protested the United States' involvement in WW I. It is interesting to me those educators' efforts

to teach civic education resulted in curriculum reform and classroom strategies that promoted the

"one best way" for students to become better citizens (Tyack, 1974). This design rarely allowed

for the open discussion of ideas, but rather aimed to have students clearly understand that in

order to be good citizens they would follow a prescribed path as defined by professional

educators and implemented at the local level by school leaders and teachers. At the time that I

took this class, I was teaching social studies in a suburban public school. This course got me

thinking about power relations in the classroom and the role of the teacher to define *good*

citizenship and the role of the teacher in moral education.

At about this same time, I subscribed to a listserv called H-High-S, which was a forum

for teachers of social studies at the secondary level to discuss many different issues in the

teaching of social studies. In this forum teachers shared teaching strategies, including ways to

teach civic education and stories of success and challenge. I became interested in the notion of

how social studies teachers come to believe that they are empowered to teach civic and moral

education in the classroom, and whose morals were being taught.

My awareness of existing unequal educational opportunity in the United States grew

while enrolled in a class entitled, *Sociology of Education: Slums and Suburbs and Equal*

Educational Opportunity. In this seminar, students developed research interests as well as

competence in critiquing published research. This is when I became more aware of the littered

landscape of educational reform and the many attempts by educational policymakers across

generations to use schools and schooling to define acceptable moral character and achievement. I became more aware of the history of unequal treatment of students of color and their parents and how schools function to reproduce racial inequality despite a pronouncement of an ideology of meritocracy. These practices resulted in a general distrust of institutions such as schools by students of color and their parents, (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

While enrolled in a qualitative research methods class, I pursued these interests by working on a project that I hoped would help me better understand the struggle teachers face when forced to choose to either teach for the test or to teach moral or character education. The result was that interviews with teachers, participant observations in classrooms, and conversations with peers and the professor complicated my thinking about power in the classroom, reproductive mechanisms at work in the classroom, and the debate around moral education. One of the most important lessons I learned while completing this project was to be open to ideas different from my own and to shift frameworks or understandings when I saw that my assumptions were overstated and perhaps inaccurate.

While enrolled in a seminar entitled, *Can Urban Schools be Fixed*? I began to think about the disparity of resources availed to urban and suburban schools. I became interested in the reasons why parents take advantage of opportunities to relocate from urban settings to suburban schools and their experiences after moving. This resulted in my interest to do a case study that explored the experiences of African-American students and their parents in a predominantly white suburban school.

Another impetus for this study begins with the story of Kareem. Kareem was a student in my seventh grade social studies class at Eastside Middle School. Kareem came to Eastside Middle School at the beginning of seventh grade. His mother had died the previous spring and

as a result, Kareem and his younger brother Cory moved in with their older brother Shawn and his wife Kristen. During the summer Kristen and the guidance counselor at Eastside determined that Kareem should repeat the seventh grade. Kareem's grades at his previous school were not good and Kristen and the counselor believed that to repeat the year would help make the transition smoother for Kareem.

All new students to Eastside Middle School undergo a series of placement tests to determine their need for academic intervention. As well, teachers are made aware of new students in their classes so that they may assist in the transition. Kareem's teachers first learned the circumstances surrounding his move at a meeting to disseminate this preliminary academic performance data. Kareem's teachers identified some skill deficits and suggested he would benefit from remediation and outside academic support. When it was discovered that Kareem's family did not have the resources to provide a tutor, many of the teachers organized sessions to provide Kareem with the extra help he needed.

At this time, Eastside Middle School had a Homebase program for all students in the sixth through eighth grade. The program matched small groups of students with one adult in the building to meet four days a week for twenty minutes at the beginning of each day. One of the goals of the program was to provide students with an adult in the building with whom to make a connection and who could act as a resource or support. At the same time the program brought together students who may not otherwise find each other to share stories, perspectives, and life as an adolescent. It just so happens that Kareem's Homebase consisted of six other students who were new to the district and their Homebase advisor was the school Principal. This group helped Kareem enormously throughout his first year at the school by providing connections with other

students and by providing a supportive adult to help with the social and emotional challenges that students face entering a new school.

Throughout his first year at Eastside, Kareem achieved good grades, participated on scholastic sports teams, and seemed to develop a strong, positive network of peers. On the surface, it appeared that Eastside provided resources and opportunities for Kareem to succeed. Through my coursework, readings, discussions in classes, and in preliminary research, however, I was developing a deeper understanding of the history of unequal treatment of African-American students and their families in schools and this led me to believe that there was more to Kareem's story and to the stories of other African-American students and their families that enrolled in this school.

I was struggling because I had the memory of Kareem and what seemed to be a positive experience entering Eastside Middle School, but I was reading about how schools reproduce inequality. I read about African-American parents choosing to move to the suburbs in search of educational opportunities for their children, despite the challenges of being African-American in predominantly white schools (Eaton, 2001; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). All of this made me want to learn more about the experiences of African-American parents and students after they moved into predominantly white schools, such as Eastside Middle School.

This dissertation began with interviews of African-American students and parents at Eastside Middle School. Though I found the emerging ideas from student interview data interesting and worthy of further exploration, it was the descriptions of parents' experiences that captivated my attention and compelled me to deepen my understanding of their perspectives. I say this because parents' experiences at Eastside Middle School challenged my understanding of the way parents thought about the School. Therefore, I chose to primarily use data from parent

interviews in this study. I believe that Eastside Middle School, a predominantly white suburban school is an appropriate setting in which to conduct a research study aimed at investigating the experiences of African-American parents and children.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I use qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of African-American parents and children in a predominantly white suburban school district and in the predominantly white middle school in that school district. I chose to use qualitative research methods because of the nature of my research questions and my desire to obtain the intricate details about the experiences, feelings, emotions, and thought processes of my informants (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). As Bogdan and Biklen (1998) asserted, qualitative research methods expect that the researcher will "produce a rich description of people, places, and conversations" (p. 2). Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to consider experiences from the informants' perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Hearing, analyzing, and presenting a rich description of the experiences of African-American parents would not be possible without attention to the culturally specific knowledge that these parents bring to these experiences (Roegman, Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2016).

Tillman's (2002) theoretical framework of Culturally Sensitive Research for African-Americans informs my approach to this research. This framework is helpful as I engage in research with participants that are different from me (Roegman, Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2014). Our differences are in relation to background, race, and positionality, but may include class and other differences as well. The culturally sensitive research framework forces me to recognize that my culture works as a lens through which I experience the world, and how I envision and conduct research (Roegman, Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2014). Culturally sensitive

research begins with the assumption that participants bring their own culturally specific

knowledge to the research and this knowledge may be different from my knowledge (Roegman,

Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2014; Tillman, 2002). The Culturally Sensitive Research approach

was used here to "reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations that may minimize,

marginalize, subjugate, or exclude the multiple realities and knowledge bases of African-

Americans" (Tillman, 2002, p. 6).

Qualitative research methods and the culturally sensitive research approach allow me to

recast the narrative around schools and schooling. In particular, it is necessary to disrupt the

narrative that I identify as the Eastside mystique. These are the dominant ideologies, which

create an image of a school where any student can enjoy success if they work hard and follow the

rules. These are the ideologies used to explain why some students are not successful. Because

the perspectives of African-American parents need to be engaged and represented to complicate

and challenge these ideologies, I chose this particular methodology. A rich description of my

informants' experiences in this predominantly white school hopefully will build on the tradition

of qualitative research to address injustice by helping professionals better understand the need to

create schools that reject the reproduction of racial inequality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Why qualitative methods

A qualitative and culturally sensitive research approach is used in this study to discover

how African-American parents and children interpret their social world in regards to attaining an

education in a predominantly white school district. In hearing the words of African-American

parents as they negotiated white dominated educational spaces, I began to see structures,

representations, and practices of domination. As Tillman (2002) explains, these research

methods "are used to investigate and capture holistic contextualized pictures of the social,

political, economic, and educational factors that affect the everyday existence of African-Americans, particularly in educational settings" (2002, p. 6). The African-American parents' words generated this knowledge, which I hope will inspire professionals to work to create schools that reject these manifestations of institutional racism (Biklen, 2004; Fine, 2000).

Qualitative research methods are attractive in this case because, historically, this methodology attends to the perspectives of those not traditionally included in mainstream research studies and because of the strength of this approach to describe the complexity of social conflicts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Too often, the blame for lack of academic achievement of African-American students falls on the shoulders of these students and their parents without a critical examination of the structural arrangement of schools and interpersonal interactions between school staff and African-American parents and children that may negatively affect the learning environment for these youngsters. One of my goals in this study is to contribute to an understanding of the dynamic relationship between historical structures or processes and the everyday experiences of individual actors (Roegman, Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2014; Tillman, 2002; Brayboy, 2004). That is, I am interested in showing the challenges facing African-American parents and children as they encounter structural and personal barriers to access educational resources in a predominantly white school.

To accomplish this goal it is important that I show how African-American parents and students negotiate the everyday world of school. It is important to show how, too often, the everyday world of school makes some students (in)visible, and at what cost (Brayboy, 2004; Wardale, Cameron, & Li, 2015). The local culture and climate of a school often reflects the values and traditions of the dominant culture of the community in which it is located (Perry, 2002; Ferguson, 2001). Parents and students who do not reflect the values or appearance of the

larger community, be it through differences in ethnicity, race, or style, may be marginalized. One

example of a study that used qualitative research methods to explore similar ideas includes

Brayboy's (2004) study of Native American students at Ivy League institutions. Brayboy (2004)

used participant observation and in-depth interviews to uncover the everyday activity of life on

campus and in the classroom that leads to the construction and maintenance of power and

identity. Qualitative research methods, participant observations, and interviews are used in this

study to bring forth the words and experiences of my informants to show how they negotiate the

everyday practices of a school that employs a predominantly white staff and which educates a

primarily white student population.

In order to illuminate how African-American parents made sense of their children's

experience in predominantly white schools requires an understanding that people create their

own realities, that reality is socially constructed (Tillman, 2002; Berger & Luckmann, 1996).

The challenge for me and for any researcher using qualitative methods is to understand the

subjects from their perspectives. As Tillman (2002) explains,

> "Culturally sensitive research approaches use the particular and unique self-
> defined experiences of African-Americans. The researcher is committed to and
> accepts the responsibility for maintaining the cultural integrity of the participants
> and other members of the community. Researchers carefully consider the extent
> of their own cultural knowledge, cross-race and same-race perspectives, and
> insider and outsider issues related to the research process" (2002, p. 6).

Implicit in the goal to use culturally sensitive research is the recognition that in trying to

understand the point of view of the participant, the researcher inserts himself or herself into the

life of the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Tillman, 2002). It is important that I understand

the data collected in this study, my participants' words and actions, not as truth, but as a means

to better understand the human condition in this particular space and time (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Symbolic Interactionism

I approached this research from a symbolic interactionism perspective because I believe that meanings do not exist without a context and that meanings emerge from interactions between human beings and symbols. Blumer (1969) articulated four central concepts of symbolic interactionism including, (1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of the objects that comprise their world; (2) the association of people is necessarily in the form of a process in which they are making indications to one another and interpreting each other's indication; (3) social acts, whether individually or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them; and (4) the complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organization, institutions, division of labor, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs (Blumer, 1969). To identify the objects that comprise the world of an individual requires the ability to place oneself in the position of that individual through the record of descriptive accounts from informants of how they see objects, how they have acted toward objects in a variety of different situations, and how they refer to objects in conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As well, it is necessary to view the sphere of life under study as a moving process in which the participants are defining and interpreting each other's acts (Blumer, 1969).   For this study, it is imperative to understand how my informants understand and talk about those things they associate with school including, but not limited to teachers, administrators, other parents, other students, curriculum, instructional resources, and other objects within this environment as well as understand their actions and interactions within this environment.

Understanding these actions and interactions requires knowledge that social acts are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Blumer, 1969). Actions and interactions form through a process of noting, interpreting, and assessing things and then making decisions based on that understanding (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, because meaning is constructed through the processing of information, and recognizing that organizations such as schools are arrangements of people interlinked in their actions, it becomes necessary to understand how African-American parents and children interact with teachers, students, administrators, other parents, and other students and how these actions and interactions shape the meanings they made and are making about this sphere of life (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Blumer, 1969).

This study is premised on understanding how African-American parents make sense of their experiences in a predominantly white school. Symbolic interaction theory lends a theoretical framework, in which to analyze the meanings and actions of my informants (Blumer, 1969). Because the words and experiences of African-American parents and students are largely absent in the discourse of schools and schooling, this approach and this study affords me the opportunity to explore and explain these meanings and actions with the goal of stimulating questions about United States educational institutions including, relationships, instruction, and curriculum in schools today. Moreover, this project has offered me the invaluable opportunity to explore the dominant ideologies and discourses that exists in this particular location. An example of a dominant ideology enacted by many school staff is the common understanding that African-American children come from one particular geographic location within the school district and that these children are likely to be a challenge to educate and to manage in the classroom. Using symbolic interactionism as a qualitative methodology allows me to better understand the

meanings, actions, and responses my informants make and to understand the process of

negotiation they enact in their everyday lives.

Methods and Data Collection

Why Interviewing?

I used semi-structured interviews and participant observations as my primary data

collection strategies for this project. A goal of qualitative research is to provide a rich

description of the words and actions of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Interviews,

however, provided me with the best opportunity to gather descriptive data in my subjects' own

words so that I could develop insights on how they interpreted and understood their own

experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Interviews allowed me to ask about and hear the

language used by participants to describe their experiences. The conversations I had with

participants allowed me to hear their stories, the metaphors they chose to describe and make

sense of their interactions with school staff, and to hear how they made sense of their

experiences.

In this study, African-American parents are the experts and are best suited to describe

their experiences in this research setting (Strauss, 1987). Interviews provide the opportunity to

describe their experiences and to help me learn from the informants. Approaching each

interview with the intent to listen and learn about each person's experience allowed me to hear

and begin to, at least, empathize with their perspective. In this study, African-American parents

shared a variety of anecdotes, stories, and narratives to illustrate their hopes, dreams, challenges,

frustrations, and successes about schools and schooling in general and in particular, at this

research site.

Though interviews allowed me to locate my informants as experts, there are limitations with using interviews to collect data. An informant's willingness to share information about himself or herself or to share his or her experiences is partially dependent on the rapport that exists between him or her and the interviewer (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Interviewees may be reluctant to discuss certain things, to distort their experiences, or to know but be incapable of sharing (Biklen, 2004). The parents and students that I interviewed were strangers to me. To guard against these limitations, it was important for me to build rapport over time with them.

My participant observations flowed from meetings with parents, other administrators, and teachers, as well as from classroom visits and from being present in common areas such as the faculty room, team meeting rooms, hallways, and the cafeteria. Many of these observations were formal in nature, in that I set out to observe particular spaces or interactions and wrote memos to record these moments. For example, I chose to observe a particular teacher's classroom on two occasions following interviews with some of the African-American parents after they identified this particular teacher as one who seemed to go out of her way to work closely with and meet the needs of all children. Other observations occurred as a result of being in the school as part of my job. In one case, I was participating in a meeting with a team of teachers and an African-American parent whose child was struggling academically. In this case I did not complete a memo, but I was able to observe interactions that some of the African-American parents I interviewed had described in which they felt teachers approached African-American parents with all the answers, rather than looking to find common ground as well as to build a working relationship on which to build support for the child. Though interviews were the primary source of my data, I used participant observations as a means to help me better understand the experiences of my informants.

Data Collection

In order to determine the ways African-American parents and students experience a predominantly white educational setting, I primarily used semi-structured interviews because my informants are the experts and their words needed to be at the center of my data. I interviewed each parent twice over the course of an eight month period. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I paid to have the tapes transcribed, but it was always necessary to review the tapes and transcripts to fill in where the transcriber was unable to decipher the conversation on the tape. I chose to pay for a transcriber because I was working full-time and unable to meet the time demands necessary to do this part of the work. All of the informants signed a consent form. Parents of students interviewed signed a consent form, as well. Each person was assured that pseudonyms would be used and that they would not be able to be identified, nor the school district or school.

In my initial interviews with parents I used a semi-structured interview protocol. I began by explaining that the goal of my research was to seek a better understanding of their experiences and the experiences of their children at Eastside Middle School. In addition, I explained that their stories and experiences might be able to inform the administration and teachers about how to improve the school for all families and students. I had a list of questions that I wanted to ask of each of the parents, but I was not wed to these questions. Semi-structured interviewing is premised with going off script to get clarification or to probe for deeper understanding.

Initial questions for each parent were aimed at building an understanding of the factors that led them to leave their previous school and the factors that drew them to the Lexington School District. As well, I wanted to hear about their experiences at Eastside Middle School. For example, some of the questions I asked in the first interview included, but was not limited to:

1. Where did your child(ren) attend school prior to moving to Lexington?

2. Describe your experience and the experience of your child(ren) at their previous school.

3. Describe your level of involvement at the previous school.

4. Describe the factors that led you to think about moving to another school.

5. Why did you choose to move to Lexington?

6. What did you know about Lexington prior to choosing to move here?

7. Describe your experience at school since coming to Eastside Middle School.

As the initial interviews with parents were completed, I noticed a number of patterns as I read over the transcripts. For example, parents generally had pleasant feelings about their previous school but concerns that their children would not meet with future success in that school district. When asked about their experiences at Eastside Middle School, parents juxtaposed their satisfaction with a heavy dose of criticism. Each parent had experienced challenges in one form or another with Eastside. Once the first round of interviews was completed, I formulated subsequent questions around these patterns. I began the second round of interviews with the intention of asking my informants about these patterns. I continued to use a semi-structured interview strategy and asked questions that included, but not limited to:

1. Describe parent involvement at Eastside Middle School.

2. Describe your understanding of the academic expectations at Eastside Middle School.

3. Describe your understanding of the behavioral expectations at Eastside Middle School.

4. Describe your understanding of the School District's level of comfort with diversity.

5. Describe your interactions with teachers at Eastside Middle School.

6. Describe your interaction with other parents at Eastside.

These interviews, too, were recorded and I paid to have them transcribed. Again, I noticed patterns in these parents' experiences. Parents shared many of the same key issues with everyday interactions occurring at Eastside.

Data Coding and Analysis

I used a constant-comparative approach as a means of collecting and analyzing data because this analytical approach insists that I construct themes and use subsequent interviews to gain informants' thoughts and perspectives on those themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss, 1987). I began with the research goal of better understanding the experiences of African-American parents and children in a predominantly white school. After the first interviews, I generated eight key issues (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998): (1.) Staff is not as caring, (2.) Looking for better educational opportunities, (3.) Dissatisfied with aspects of the suburban school, (4.) It was a difficult adjustment, (5.) Staff is quick to label African-American children as academically challenged, (6.) Staff is quick to label African-American children as having challenging behaviors, (7.) Staff is not comfortable with diversity, and (8.) African-American students bring the District's test scores down. Because some informants said different things, I worked to check to see if other parents had these key issues, by asking them questions about these ideas in the second interviews. It was not until all data were collected and I reviewed the entirety of my transcripts, field notes, and memos that was I able to generate a list of codes.

I generated thirty-nine codes after working with the data to bring together key issues. Finding commonality across these codes helped me to generate sub-themes. Some of the key ideas became sub-themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1988). For example, the parents talked about school staff being unable and unwilling to meet the needs of students with academic challenges,

to partner with African-American parents to benefit students, and to listen to the opinions of African-American parents about their children's academic, social, or emotional needs. In this case, these codes were grouped together and labeled as a sub-theme, which is *Unwilling to create partnerships*. I was unable to group some of the codes into sub-themes. Three examples of codes that were not grouped into a sub-theme include (1.) The role of the guidance counselor, (2.) The high school, and (3.) Activities outside of school. I chose not to include these categories because they were not compelling. All of the codes that had some commonalities were grouped together and then I chose a sub-theme to label or identify why these codes belonged together. The thirty-nine codes were grouped into thirteen different sub-themes (Appendix A). Some of the sub-themes I generated were: (1.) Not feeling welcome, (2.) Unwilling to create a partnership with parents, (3.) Academic placements, (4.) Unfair discipline, and (5.) Curriculum was not representative.

Then, these sub-themes were grouped by similarity and I chose a title for each of these new groups. These groups, with multiple examples from the parents' language, became the themes that anchor my three data chapters. The three themes include *1. Geography of opportunity, 2. Institutional barriers and double standards, and 3. Habits and frames*. These three themes eventually developed after reviewing multiple data points and holding these up against developing theories and explanations. This process of doubling back to the data and coding helped to solidify the themes and to identify which phenomena to leave behind (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Selection of Participants

Participants for this study included four African-American parents whose children formally attended the Eastside Middle School. As a white, middle class, administrator in the

school, I was nervous about finding parents willing to be interviewed about their experiences. I suspected that my role as an administrator might make people suspicious of my intentions, so I decided that one way to try to avoid a conflict of interest would be to find parents of students that had already left the middle school. It was my hope that because parents did not have a student in the school or a younger student coming to the middle school that they might be willing to be more candid about their experiences. I was not familiar with the names of many parents that fit the criteria for participation. Hence, I used a snowball sampling technique to identify potential informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). My first contact was Veronica. Veronica's youngest child, a daughter, graduated from the middle school in the previous spring. I knew Veronica because we had served on a district committee during the previous school year. Thankfully, Veronica was willing to discuss her experiences and the experiences of her daughter at the middle school. At the conclusion of the interview, I asked if she would be willing to share the names of any other parents that might be willing to discuss their experiences. Veronica gave me the names of two other parents. Of these parents, one consented to be interviewed and the other person was unable because she had moved out-of-state. The second parent that I interviewed provided the names of two other parents that I eventually interviewed. Interviews took place at their homes and places of employment. In all, I interviewed four parents.

Description of Participants

In an effort to provide the reader with a sense of my informants I offer a short biographical sketch of each person. This is not meant to offer exhaustive background but rather, a short introduction to my informants to help provide a context for their words. Gary identified himself as African-American. I identified the other parents as African-American but I did not confirm that this is how they self-identify.

Veronica

Veronica is the parent of two students in the Lexington School District. Both children attend Eastside High School. Veronica, her husband, and their children moved into the Lexington School District from the nearby urban school district prior to the start of the school year. Their house is located in an upscale residential neighborhood overlooking a private golf course.

Veronica is not currently employed, but she is active in her church and in a number of other community organizations. Her husband is active in coaching youth track and field. Veronica and her husband, both African-American, were actively involved parents in their children's elementary school. They moved to a new school district with the hope that their children would enjoy more resources in a safer and higher achieving learning environment. They came to Lexington after considering two other suburban school districts.

I met Veronica while we both served on a committee to plan an event at Eastside Middle School. I thought that Veronica would be an excellent person to include as an informant after listening to her talk about the need to reach out to parents of African-American students to help them feel comfortable in the school environment. It seemed that the people on the committee were not validating her experiences and understandings. I called her at home one day, introduced myself and my research and she agreed to participate. Veronica suggested that I contact Gary at the end of our first interview.

Gary

Gary and his wife have four children, one son and three daughters. Their son is the oldest of the children and he is a ninth grader at Lexington High School, the two oldest girls are still in elementary school and the youngest child is not school age. Gary is an executive at a local

public radio and television station. Gary's wife is a high school mathematics teacher in a nearby school district. Gary and his wife, both African-American, are active in the community and in their church.

Similar to Veronica, Gary and his family chose to live in the Lexington community to benefit from the resources available for their children. Similar to Veronica, Gary was involved in his son's elementary school. Gary has found it difficult to become meaningfully involved in any parent organizations at Eastside Middle School.

When I first contacted Gary, he agreed to participate and invited me to meet him at his place of employment. Subsequent meetings took place at the same place.

Caroline

Caroline and her husband, both African-American, have three children, two daughters and a son. The girls are ten and eight years older than their brother. Both girls are students at Lexington High School and their brother is not in school, yet. Caroline works as a community engagement manager for the local professional theater, which stages classic, plays, musicals, and original productions. She is well known in the community as a passionate arts advocate and educator.

Caroline and her family live in a house in a quiet residential neighborhood only a couple of miles from their elementary school and from Eastside Middle School. Caroline's children have attended Lexington schools since kindergarten.

Gary and Caroline have known each other for a long time. He suggested that I contact her after our first interview. Gary suggested that Caroline's viewpoints and opinions were important to hear. Interviews with Caroline took place at the theater.

Audrey

Audrey, who is African-American, lives with her mother and her son. They live in a house in the southern part of the school district. Audrey moved into the Lexington School District when her son was entering fifth grade, which was four years ago. They moved into the Lexington School District and into Audrey's parent's home so that Audrey could support her ailing mother and to save money while attending graduate school to become a nurse. Audrey is a graduate of the Lexington School District.

I contacted Audrey based on a recommendation from Gary. Gary said he did not know Audrey well, but he thought she would be willing to talk about the experiences she and her son had at Eastside Middle School. I called Audrey and introduced myself and she suggested that we meet at her house. The house is a split level ranch, probably built in the 1970s. The neighborhood is in a part of the school district that is more rural than the area where Veronica lives. Each interview with Audrey was conducted in the living room of her house.

Name	Role	Race
Veronica	Parent	African-American
Gary	Parent	African-American
Caroline	Parent	African-American
Audrey	Parent	African-American

Limitations

Perhaps my most significant concern in this study involved my professional relationship with the research site, Eastside Middle School. To this day, I am employed by this school district, Lexington School District. At different points in my career I worked in this school as a

teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal. Therefore, in the course of my research I needed to be constantly aware of my subjectivity, particularly in how it influenced my perceptions and awareness. I am very familiar with this research location, the administration, and the school staff. It would be very easy for me to not notice events, language, interactions, and other data because of my familiarity. It would be easy for me to miss the significance of everyday events and interactions. I say this because the everyday events identified by my informants that made them feel unwelcome or worse may be my habits, as well (Sullivan, 2006). I needed to constantly remind myself to learn from my informants, to use them as experts, to help me see their perceptions and understandings of Eastside, not my own.

Another concern in this study is the small number of participants. The sample size in this study was small and therefore, this study is not generalizable in the sense that it is highly unlikely that the findings will hold up beyond this research setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This study is not meant to be generalizable in this sense, however, it is written to show what persons think, feel, and experience and to show that human behavior is not random (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Karp, 1996). There may be a concern that the themes presented in this study are not representative or generalizable because of the small sample size. Certainly, I used subjective judgment to determine what is and what is not noteworthy, but these determinations were driven by the data to show novel and insightful examples of the issues and concerns being investigated (Karp, 1996). This qualitative research study cannot claim a sample to be statistically representative of the population, but using qualitative research methods has made possible the ability to capture a valid sense of what the experience is like for these African-American parents in this predominantly white school (Karp, 1996).

My Subject Position

In my study I hope to provide information about the experiences of African-American parents and children as they negotiate an educational setting that is primarily white and upper middle class. Data were collected using in-depth interviewing of parents. My social location as an adult, white, middle class, male, school administrator greatly impacts my research project. It is important to remain vigilant of the ways that my social and professional position impacts my view of the data. I am a data source in this research. My 20 years of experience in the Eastside School District inform the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. At times, I posit my thoughts because of my experiences. A strategy put forth in the culturally sensitive research framework suggests that analysis of the data and presentation of the group under study is co-constructed (Tillman, 2002). Though I used the constant-comparative approach to gain informants' thoughts and perspectives on emerging key ideas and sub-themes during data collection, co-construction on the presentation of the data would provide another strategy to put these experiences at the center of the research. Nonetheless, my goal is to take the information with which I am provided and illustrate the ways that dominant cultures act to marginalize African-American parents and students. It is my hope that school administrators and teachers use this information to reflect on the institutional structures and every day interactions that are taken for granted at Eastside. School administrators and teachers should view these structures and every day interactions with a critical eye to see how white students and families are privileged while African-American families and students are marginalized.

This goal is not without consequences, however, and it is important that I be cognizant of how my project contributes to the construction of the subject position for my informants. As Alcoff (1996) asserts, "The problem of speaking for others has followed two claims. First, where an individual speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what she says and thus

she cannot assume an ability to transcend her location. Second, persons from dominant groups who speak for others are often treated as authenticating presences that confer legitimacy and credibility on the demands of subjugated speakers; such speaking for others does nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces" (pg. 7). My social location as an adult, white, middle class, male, school administrator impacts my collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. My social location is such that I will never "know" the experiences of my informants. This became apparent while I was interviewing an African-American parent. During the course of our first conversation, she told me that she could not answer one of my questions because she "did not know me or trust me." I worked hard to build a relationship with this person, but I could never be confident that she trusted me completely. I was never sure that she or other informants felt as though they could speak honestly to me because of my social location (Duneier, 1999). Challenges in building rapport existed because of my social location, in particular my whiteness. I cannot escape or hide this role and it would be foolish to attempt to do so. To help my informants become more at ease, I asked them to choose a location for our conversations and I did my best to communicate the purpose of my study. Though it appeared to me that I had built a rapport with my informants, it would be an error for me to assume that I was getting the full story. Differences in race, class, and gender cause uncertainty as to whether I am hearing what I need to hear or know what I think I know. It would be a methodological error for me to assume that apparent rapport is real trust (Duneier, 1999).

I am an upper middle class white male professional observing, interviewing, and writing about African-American adults and students. Their lives are very different from my own. It is important for me to be aware that when I speak for others I am serving to act as an authenticating presence that confers legitimacy and credibility on the demands of subjugated speakers and that

such speaking for others does nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces (Alcoff, 1996). Writing against othering requires me to be mindful to (1) interpret and represent the voices and practices of the parents and students respectfully and with as much of their own language as possible; (2) be aware of when informants might be saying something solely for my approval; and (3) be aware of the ways that my race, class, gender, age and social status influence the ways informants respond to me and how I interpret them (Alcoff, 1996; Perry, 2002). There may be a sense on the part of my informants that I am exploiting them for personal gain, but it is my hope that this study will benefit African-American students in all schools through greater and more meaningful empowerment. There is no simple way to overcome these differences, but it is necessary to be aware that different social positions will have a serious effect on my work and these differences must be taken seriously (Duneier, 1999).

The different meanings of words found among people can be misunderstood and misrepresented. To understand the meanings that people intend it is important to pay attention to the choice and order of words and sentences (Duneier, 1999). I had to remain diligent to the accurate representation of the language used to help reader of this research come away with accurate understandings. For example, in response to a question about parent participation at his previous school versus parent participation at Eastside Middle School, Gary said,

> I think they work harder at Shaw [Elementary School] because they need more parent participation. They work harder to get it and at Eastside it seems like, you know, the parents are more willing to be involved. I mean schools struggle to have parents involved. At Shaw, they make it convenient for parents, they get transportation to things. They are really trying to make it accessible, they provide child care if needed for certain kinds of things, like when they have meetings, they will make child care available.

One possible interpretation of Gary's words is that schools in an urban environment are challenged by a lack of parent involvement. This analysis might continue to show that a lack of

parent involvement may be an indication of poor parenting and thus, part of the explanation for the challenge facing urban schools today. In this case, however, it is necessary to hear Gary's follow up statements to better understand his words. Later in the conversation, he stated, "At Eastside, you feel, what you get, is that there is a room parent that is involved and you can come to the classroom, but you really cannot. You know what I mean? That you should not come, that you really need to cut the strings." On the surface Gary's words could be understood to reinforce a stereotype that African-American parents are not involved in their children's education, but his words are actually an indictment of the ways that the Eastside school staff prevent or limit certain parents from being involved in their children's' education. I had to remain attentive of my social position while collecting, coding, and analyzing my data to ensure that I accurately represented the language and meaning of my informants.

I believe in this project. It is important for people to read about the experiences of African-American parents and children as they negotiate an educational setting that is primarily white as it may impact professionals working to create schools that reject the historical race and class exploitation of our population. It is important for people to read about these experiences because they can inform our understanding of structures, representations, and practices of domination (Biklen, 2004, Fine, 2000). My informants spoke about many positive aspects of Eastside Middle School and they spoke about many issues that exist for African-American students and their parents. In the next three chapters, I examine how African-American parents and children made sense of the resources and opportunities available at Eastside Middle School, the barriers that challenged them to feel welcome, to feel trust, and to be trusted, and how images and racialized perceptions impact the educational environment.

Chapter 4:

Geography of Opportunity

In this chapter I examine how parents make sense of the school and school district that their children attended before enrolling in the Lexington School District, the factors that led them to withdraw their children from this school system, the factors that led them to enroll in the Eastside Middle School, and the resources and benefits that they found once they relocated. These families believed Eastside Middle School was a geography of opportunity. A geography of opportunity is an understanding that the places in which people live affect their opportunities and life outcomes. This concept was used by Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2001) to counter the claims of "culture of poverty" theorists, by showing that many low-income Blacks participating in the Gautreaux housing relocation program showed the motivation and capacity to take advantage of the opportunities available in the predominantly white, middle-class, suburban communities to which they moved (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2001). In this study, participating families were not low-income but they consciously chose to re-locate out of the City School District to take advantage of the opportunities available in suburban schools. For these families, the benefits of enrolling in the Lexington School District outweighed the racism and other costs they encountered in making these moves. This chapter illuminates how these parents knew that moving required sacrifices including, the challenge of moving to a suburban school where their children would now be in the minority, to a school where racism would likely exist, and out of a neighborhood where they had attended after school activities and church. Despite this knowledge, parents made this choice and I explore what they identified as the resources and the opportunities that they found in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School.

This chapter is organized in five sections. First, the parent's talk suggests that they and their children had many positive experiences at their schools prior to moving to Lexington. They described the climate at these schools as warm and inviting where parents were encouraged to be involved in classrooms and in the life of the school. They described an environment where parents were understood to be partners in building a strong community. I emphasize these experiences here because once they moved to the Eastside Middle School they described a less inviting environment where they felt unwelcomed and unable to engage in the school community.

In section two, I examined how parents explained the need to move away from the city school district knowing that there was a general sense of satisfaction with their current schools. When evaluating the system as a whole, parents expressed skepticism about the school district's ability to provide a meaningful education for their children. They expressed concerns about what might happen to their children if they continued attending schools in the City School System. Parents were looking for academic, material, and educative resources, which could not be found in the city. They had the resources to re-locate and they chose to move to the suburbs. Here I emphasize how these parents' language highlighted their understanding of where the geographies of opportunity were located.

In section three, with a better understanding of why parents felt the need to leave the City Schools I examine how parents talk about their ideal schools. Parents described a desire for supportive environments where professionals took the time to understand the needs of all children, particularly students of color, and had the resources and skills to address each child's unique needs. I want to emphasize here that these parents hoped the staff at a suburban school

would treat their children fairly, hold them to high expectations, and provide them with the supports necessary to succeed.

In section four, I analyzed how parents talked about the decision to move to Lexington and enroll their children at Eastside Middle School. The history of educational excellence, proximity to former neighborhoods, familiarity with the school, and diversity of the student body were identified as the primary reasons parents chose to move to this district. It is clear that these parents did their homework prior to enrolling in this particular district. These parents expressed an awareness of the strengths of this district, but had a good understanding of the challenges that they and their children would face while attending school there.

In section five, I analyze how parents talk about the resources they found in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School after they moved. Parents expressed satisfaction with material resources, unique learning opportunities, clubs and activities, and the quality of the teaching staff. The parent's language suggested that their decision to seek this geography of opportunity was worth the price of moving. I say this because while the parents spoke positively about the geography of opportunities that their children could avail themselves of, they understood there were social, cultural, and economic costs that came with those benefits.

The experiences of parents at their previous schools

To begin my interviews with parents, I asked them to describe their experiences with their previous schools. I thought that hearing about the schools their children attended prior to moving to the Lexington School District would provide a way to compare these different schools and school systems. Two of the parents that I interviewed were at the same city school and had a very positive experience at the school. They described a positive and productive learning environment.

Gary and Veronica enthusiastically described Shaw Elementary School, as a warm and inviting "community of caring." They described an environment where people called each other by name and asked how things were going in their lives. It was clear that the effort that the administration and the teachers made to get to know the parents was recognized and appreciated. For Gary and Veronica, this effort made a lasting impression. The effort that the staff made to make parents feel welcome translated to an understanding that caring extended to the children. Gary stated that "it's a community of support that is there looking out for the best interests of your child…" The warmth that he felt from staff implicitly indicated that children would be extended this same level of kindness. Gary's words, "community of support that is there looking out for the best interests of your child" suggests that the school had both system-wide policies and individual practices that moved all the way down to the individual child.

Veronica talked about how her involvement at Shaw helped her see that "all children were important and safety is important. It was a non-threatening environment, building self-esteem was important and those are the things that matter to us." Veronica's words suggest that she valued the policies and practices in place at Shaw because they supported a nurturing and safe environment. The experiences and words Gary and Veronica conveyed demonstrate the value they placed on personal attention and meaningful interactions. The personal attention and meaningful interactions helped Gary and Veronica feel a sense of trust in the school administration and staff. Ultimately, the staff at Shaw made them feel like they were partners with the school.

A second way that parents described their children's previous school was with respect to the partnership between staff and families, which was built on personal interactions between parents and administrators and parents and staff and extended through meaningful participation

throughout the school. These two parents identified different levels of involvement that were open to them. One level of involvement was through participation on the Shaw Community Roundtable, which was the school's version of the parent-teacher organization. Gary thought that the title of the group was important, stating, "you really feel like you're part of a special community of participation." Veronica emphasized that the Shaw Community Roundtable was unique saying, "it was run on a consensus basis and not the formal President, Vice President-type of set up." Minutes of the meetings were emailed to all parents so that everyone was aware of what was going on. Veronica's words, "it was run on a consensus basis," show that the lack of formality and the feeling of equality at the roundtable were important indicators that the school was more about substance than performance, and more about inclusion than power or judgment. Her words support that she felt as though she were a part of the schooling process. Repeatedly, these two parents relayed a sense of inclusion and validation. For example, Gary acknowledged that the school needed to work hard to get parents to participate, but he said, "they go out of their way to make you feel welcome." Gary and Veronica were pleased that the school acknowledged the importance of parent involvement, encouraged parents to get involved, and provided different avenues for parents to be involved based on their ability and comfort.

Another level of parent involvement meant participation beyond the Community Roundtable to being involved regularly in classroom activities. Veronica was asked by her children's teachers to chaperone on many field trips. In addition to the field trips, Veronica recounted that her husband, a local business leader, was asked to speak to the students. Furthermore, during Black History Month, Veronica and her husband were encouraged to go into the classrooms and do presentations for the students. Veronica reflected very positively on the time that she and her husband taught students about the Black National Anthem. Another time

they did a presentation on the Buffalo Soldiers, and one year they exposed students to poetry

written by Black authors. Veronica may have been unique in her level of involvement and both

she and Gary recognize that not all parents were willing or able to participate in school events or

decision making, but the invitation to get involved in the school was extended to all parents. The

school's desire to engage parents helped Gary and Veronica to understand Shaw as a welcoming

and safe space for children and parents.

After describing all the ways she was involved, I asked, "how was your level of

involvement accepted by the school administration, teachers, and other parents?" Veronica

explained,

> I was very well accepted. I was initially even, personally encouraged to get
> involved, so I felt welcomed…I think I was used somewhat, and I didn't mind, to
> encourage other African American parents to get involved. Just by my presence
> and maybe welcoming them at the beginning of the school year and encouraging
> them to come out personally and as a group.

Her words clearly show that the staff at the school welcomed her involvement and encouraged

her to use her knowledge and expertise to encourage other African American parents to be

involved, as well. Veronica understood the staff at the school as hopeful for more parent

involvement and she was comfortable and even, flattered, that they would ask her to help reach

out to other parents. She understood that she was being "used," but in a positive sense of the

word. This is important because this experience is in contrast to the one Veronica would

eventually have at Eastside Middle School when her offer to contact African American parents to

encourage them to attend a parent forum was rebuked.

Another way that parents talked about their satisfaction with Shaw was when they

discussed the commitment teachers had to helping children succeed academically. Gary's

daughter was struggling academically and as the issues with her progress emerged, he said, "she

was getting the support that she needed because they have it and the environment was supportive." Veronica explained the support that the Shaw teachers provided to <u>all</u> students. The school communicated with parents their goal that all students would succeed on state administered standardized tests. As Veronica explained, "a fourth grade teacher said it was her goal that every child do well and it was important to her that she lose no one and they would work towards success every day, and that made me feel good." The support and encouragement provided by the teachers resulted in students wanting to do their best on the state tests. Veronica explained that as a result of her son's teacher's efforts, he was motivated to perform well but did not feel undue pressure. Veronica said,

> [The students at] Shaw did pretty well on the standardized test and the fourth grade teacher that was instructing my son for the ELA, um, my son went into it and did very well. Before the test he said, 'I'm going to do my best and show what I can do.' He was not nervous at all even though everything about the school is based on the tests.

Veronica's words show that she felt good about the preparation, support, encouragement, and goal that all children would succeed. The commitment to the success of every student and the expectation that each student would try his or her best to show what he or she has learned contributed to the feeling that the school was looking out for the best interests of the students and families in the school community. I cite this particular example because in later chapters Veronica's experiences at Eastside Middle School led her to believe that the needs of all students were not attended to fairly. Her examples show the value that she felt about this school and the attitude that we are all in this together.

The parents explained that the students at the schools attended by their children prior to coming to Lexington School District were predominantly African American and middle to lower-middle class. As has been noted, these parents explained that the teachers and other staff

were skillful and encouraging and the environment at the school was warm and inviting. Gary explained that the staff in his children's school was "fiercely protective of what they have there because it feels very special." When I asked him to describe the demographics of the faculty at Shaw Elementary he explained, "Interestingly enough, there are a lot of students of color, but I don't believe they have any African American teachers and they don't have any [African American] administrators there and despite that you still feel welcomed." Interestingly, he uses the words "despite that you still feel welcome" after describing the faculty and staff's race, though he never used the words white or Caucasian. What he is saying is that a warm and inviting educational environment where students are taught well and encouraged to do well comes about as a result of the attitudes and actions of the staff. This is important because in subsequent chapters, data from Gary and other parents illustrate that the actions and attitudes of some staff at Eastside clearly demonstrate something different from what existed at Shaw.

In this section the experiences of parents at the schools attended by children prior to going to the Lexington School District builds an understanding of the trade off that parents would make when deciding to relocate. Parents describe their previous school environment as warm and inviting and the administration and staff as desiring parental involvement and providing meaningful opportunities for that to occur. Parents describe the teachers as caring and talented, willing to work with each student and hopeful that all students succeed. One may wonder if the environment was so good at these schools, why parents chose to withdraw their children from this school and school system.

Leaving the existing school system

The parents used a language of academic concern to describe the reasons why they chose to leave such an enriching environment during the children's elementary schooling. By

"language of academic concern," I mean the parents spoke about their hopelessness that the city

schools could not provide educational opportunity for their children as they moved to middle

school and then to high school. Indeed, the parents voiced these concerns in two ways. The

parents used racialized language to emphasize the point that the odds were stacked against their

children if they remained in the district. Additionally, a second way the parents spoke about the

challenges facing these schools was to use descriptions of misbehavior in the classroom and a

lack of safety in the school. It was clear to these parents that an alternative had to be found

before their students moved to middle school.

Each of the parents spoke about the need for their children to have an alternative to the

city schools before moving to middle school. Specifically the parents believed that the city

school district was not going to be able to provide their children with the level of education they

expected. When asked why they moved to the Lexington School District, Veronica immediately

mentioned "the success rate for African American males is horrible." She was referring to the

success rate for African American males in the City School District. State test results and

graduation rates for all students and African American male students in particular support

Veronica's concern. For years, the city school district has been challenged to meet student's

needs. Audrey identified a related concern when she talked about the fact that her son "needed

to be challenged more academically." Audrey did not think that the staff at Hillview Elementary

School was meeting the academic needs of her son. When she questioned his teachers, she was

told by the staff to "spend time with him taking steps to provide him with interactive games for

math and science and things like that online." Audrey's words suggest that she was dissatisfied

with the notion that it was her job to supplement her son's education. She expected that his

needs would be met during the school day and not need to wait until she worked with him at

home. Audrey believed that it was unlikely that the City Schools would provide the academic

challenge that she thought her son needed. Though only two examples, these parent's words

suggest that future educational opportunity was the primary driver to leave the city. On one hand

there is the dismal academic performance of large segments of the population. On the other

hand, there was an inability to meet the needs of students such as Audrey's son who wanted to

learn.

Another concern the parents spoke about that was a factor in their moving to Lexington

was about the negative learning environment in city schools. One way parents talked about the

negative learning environment was by describing the distractions that took time away from

learning. Audrey spoke about her observations of the classrooms at Hillview, where the teachers

had to "spend half of their time in the classroom telling students to put that down, go over there,

go to the office, hold on for a second, all kids, come on guys, let's [claps her hands], you know."

Audrey's description of the classroom routine, warm and friendly, but distracted from the

primary objective of learning was a challenge for her. Additionally, Audrey explained that her

son was unable to focus completely on his studies because he felt unsafe at Hillview. She stated

that,

> I didn't want my son to feel threatened, he needs to feel safe and secure, and not
> threatened physically. I want him to be in an environment, not just safe
> physically, but where it was encouraged to perform more academically. That he
> wouldn't be teased because he carries his books. I want him to feel like he is a
> part of the school.

Audrey's words suggest that she had concerns about her son's safety and about his ability to feel

comfortable at school due to the behaviors of other students. Her language "that he wouldn't be

teased because he carries his books" conveys her understanding that the learning environment

was unacceptable because it did not provide a safe environment where students were encouraged to perform to the best of their ability.

Another way that parents talked about the negative learning environment was by explaining that their children were uncomfortable and put into positions where they might make poor decisions. Audrey explained how she tried to teach her son to choose friends and to stay away from certain children. She told him "to have friends where they do their homework, they respect their parents, and they are involved in things." Audrey's words suggest that she was concerned about her son's classmates and the potential they had to distract him from his learning. She wanted her son to surround himself with peers that were invested in their education and there was a fear that this would be less likely to occur in the city school system. These distractions from the primary objective of school led Audrey to the conclusion that leaving the City School District was necessary. The language of the parents suggests they had significant concerns that as their children moved up in grades in the city schools that they would be distracted and would feel unsafe, which would threaten their academic success in school.

Parents made the choice to find an alternative to the city district despite their general satisfaction with their current schools. Further though, the words of the parents suggest that they had grave reservations that the schools their children would attend for middle and high school presented limited academic opportunities and the learning environment would disrupt the progress of their children. The parents believed that moving out of the district was necessary to provide an appropriate education for their children. For the most part, the environment in their current schools was warm and inviting and the teachers were doing their best to meet the needs of the children, but the future did not hold much promise for their children. Given this reality, what were these parents hoping to find in an alternative to city schools?

Characteristics of schools that parents hoped to find

When asked to describe their ideal educational environment the parents used a language of fair treatment, not equal treatment. Parents spoke about the need for high expectations for all students, regardless of race or economic standing. They talked about how excellence should be expected and academic supports must exist to ensure that all students have the chance to succeed and they talked about the need to have the cultural capital to negotiate an educational environment different than they had experienced at their previous schools (Bourdieu, 1990). A first-class education means many things to many people. For these parents it was a combination of excellent teachers utilizing pedagogical strengths to help all children succeed combined with a socio-cultural understanding that some students may need a little extra support to help them feel comfortable so that learning can take place (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

For those parents, moving out of the city school district meant moving to a suburban school district predominantly populated with white students. The parents had a clear understanding of the challenges that accompanied such a move. While reflecting on her own experiences and talking about her hopes for her children, Veronica shared her knowledge by saying, "if you don't have a strong personality, you can be eaten up or chewed up by a white institution." Veronica spoke from personal experience. She attended a competitive high school in New Jersey, one that she described as "academically intense." She described being well prepared for college and graduating with many offers of scholarships from various colleges. Veronica explained, when it was time to decide where to go to college, "I was determined to go to a Black school because I felt like I was being beat up at the white school." She was not abused physically, but no one had provided her with an understanding of the cultural capital necessary to navigate in a predominantly white, competitive high school environment. When

faced with the dilemma of whether or not to send her children to the same type of environment, Veronica was equipped with the knowledge of what to look for in an appropriate school for her children. These parents know from experience that racially marginalized students in predominantly white schools encounter unique and difficult challenges and they were looking for a school district with resources to address these challenges.

The language Veronica used next to describe the necessary supports for racially marginalized students emphasized the need to treat people fairly, not necessarily equally. She believed this concept should be in her ideal school. She said, "the system has to accept that if you have to pay special attention to a segment of society that it is okay, everyone will still benefit." Veronica points directly to the need for school leaders to model expectations and hold others accountable to treat each person fairly. She said, "let it be known that they are going to at least show that they care about this group and that they are going to make them feel like they are important." Veronica's language illustrates her passion for strong leadership that will model and reinforce the expectation that all students are treated fairly and respectfully inside the school despite what goes on in the larger community. Her words illustrate her understanding that schools equipped with knowledgeable, supportive, and committed staffs are more likely to provide racially marginalized students with the supports necessary to succeed. She wants students treated fairly, not equally.

A second way that parents talked about their ideal school was in regards to the lack of cultural capital that their children may have had in relation to white children in suburban schools. They talked about the unique pressures that come with being a Black student at a predominantly white school and the challenges associated with negotiating an environment that is unfamiliar. Veronica said,

> It is especially challenging when no one is taking you under your wing and
> helping you out. Culturally you won't know how to respond to the situation
> because that's not the way you were raised and nobody would say, "hey, come
> here for a second and let me tell you how to handle this. I'm going to try to give
> you tips about how to respond in that environment.

Veronica understands that these white institutions are premised on different cultural orientations

and that Black students may not be equipped with the cultural capital to successfully negotiate

the environment. These parents recognized that moving out of the city and the City School

District and into the predominantly white suburban schools would necessitate a series of trade

offs and challenges. For example, a move to the suburbs meant trading the challenge of limited

educational opportunities due to behavioral concerns for the challenge of navigating a

predominantly white school where educational opportunities could be limited because the

language and actions of some staff could jeopardize the social and emotional well being of

students and parents. Another trade off is the comfort of cultural understanding in the City

School District versus the struggle to understand the culture in a predominantly white, suburban

school district.

A third way that parents talked about the need to treat everyone fairly is premised in the

idea that all students need to feel safe so that they are open to learn. Gary talked about the need

for teachers to help students feel safe and to be careful with their language when he said,

> I just want to make sure that kids feel safe. That they feel validated, that they feel
> welcome, and that the teachers recognize that in a classroom situation where the
> child might be feeling a little uncomfortable because of the white mindset, that
> they don't do anything to amplify that discomfort.

Again, this racialized language illustrates the concern that parents had about the potential

challenges students would face in predominantly white schools. Gary's words, "kids feel safe,"

"feel validated," and "feel welcome" suggests that he is aware of the likelihood that there will be

times when his children will feel unsafe, not validated, and unwelcome in their school because

they are Black. Gary's words, "the white mindset" suggests that the adults in the school may have preconceived notions about the way certain children behave and perform in school. These parent's words suggest that they are aware that the adults in the school may do things or use language that would make Black students feel unsafe physically or emotionally, which would jeopardize their ability to succeed in these schools. Parents hoped to find a school district committed to fair treatment of students, not a district limited to equal treatment of students.

Parent's words suggested that they wanted an administration and a teaching staff that is keenly aware of the need to help students feel safe socially and emotionally and who are skilled in teaching practices that help all students succeed. Parents were clear that they wanted everyone held to high expectations for the treatment of all students. Veronica emphasized this when she said, "all teachers and staff are to be held accountable to treat people like they are human beings regardless of their color." Veronica's language illustrates that she was aware of unequal and unfair treatment of Black students in predominantly white schools and she would demand that such treatment would not occur at a school attended by her children. Her language "to treat people like they are human beings regardless of color" highlights her fear that her children could be dehumanized in the particular school space. Parents expected the administration and staff to uphold the right of all students to be treated fairly.

A fifth way that parents spoke about their ideal schools was to talk about ways to accommodate racially marginalized families. Parents talked about the need to support families as well as students. Gary said,

> There should be a support group for Black parents, in particular, who have similar concerns. This group would be a resource to the district. The concept would be that there would be a place in the district that would help parents whose children might have issues in the classroom that could be related to race, ethnicity and that there would be a place to support them and change the dynamics to be more inviting.

Gary's language suggests that he would like to take the concept of the Shaw Community Roundtable and apply it at a predominantly white school. He had a vision of a space created by the school or district where Black parents could air their concerns and receive support and assistance from the district. In return, these parents would offer the school or district knowledge and experiences to inform educational practice to better meet the needs of all students. The parents' language illustrates their demand for schools to recognize the unique needs of students and to be prepared to meet those demands in a partnership with parents. Interestingly, Gary is proposing that the ideal school or school district engage racial issues directly. Further, he believes that issues around "race and ethnicity" inevitably will occur and that schools should be proactive in addressing such issues.

Parent's language suggested they were aware of this trade off and they had a clear understanding of the resources that they hoped to see in a predominantly white institution. Specifically, parents were looking for a teaching staff and school leadership that would make the educational environment conducive to success for their children. They were looking for a school staffed by individuals that treated all people fairly, not necessarily equally. Parents were hoping to find resources in a school that would provide their children with the cultural capital necessary to navigate and succeed in a different environment.

Choosing Lexington School District and Eastside Middle School

In our discussions, parents were able to identify a number of reasons for choosing to move to Lexington. They talked about the history of educational excellence, the proximity to former neighborhoods and churches, familiarity with the school, and the diversity of the student body. Each of these factors contributed to their decision to move to Lexington as opposed to another suburban school.

One parent talked about the past educational results as a critical component in her family's decision to move to Lexington. Veronica did her research. She looked at a number of options and focused primarily on state test results. She compared the results at Lexington with a number of other suburban districts and felt that Lexington offered the best opportunity for her children. At the same time, Lexington offered her and her family the chance to remain involved in other activities. She stated,

> We selected Lexington because they had results, the test results from the standardized tests. And, it was in close proximity to where we were when we moved and the kids could still go to their karate on school days and our church is in this area and we could still be connected to the community on this side of town. We would be only five minutes of driving distance from where we used to live.

Lexington offered Veronica and her family the opportunity for a better education without leaving key elements of their previous neighborhood. Though she and her family felt forced to move to provide a better education, they could choose to live somewhere close to their former home to maintain connections to key parts of their lives. Veronica's wish to "still be connected" illustrates a desire to live in the suburbs but still be connected culturally to the environment where she and her family go to church and participate in out of school activities.

One parent talked about being familiar with Lexington and that historical knowledge provided some level of comfort. For Audrey, coming to Lexington meant coming home. Audrey attended Lexington schools as a child. Her parents were still living in the district so it was a logical choice for her to move back into this particular district. Though it was a logical choice to return to Lexington, Audrey came back with clear hindsight. She explained that,

> I went to Johnston Elementary School [in the Lexington School District], you know, and I was the only African American in the school. So, when I went to the middle school, I saw these different colors of people. So, I was in la-la land and I just embraced the whole experience and didn't notice anything until I got older and looked back. You know, honestly, I think that some teachers may not come from a background where there is diversity and this is the first, you know first

interaction with minority students. So I question where they were getting their information of how these people are.

Audrey's critical reflection on her experience at Lexington helped her to see that some of the teachers she had as a student were unaccustomed to teaching racially marginalized students. Though she did not realize it as a student, as an adult she is aware that teachers at Eastside Middle School with limited experience teaching racially marginalized students may have preconceived notions of how some students will perform and behave. Her words, "so I question where they were getting their information of how these people are" suggest her understanding of potential racial stereotypes teachers bring to the classrooms.

Audrey recounted her experience and what it felt like to be the only African American student in her class. She explained,

It was necessary for my parents to teach me to embrace my culture and heritage and to be proud. Proud of who I am and to know that there are successful people that looked like me, because you won't see any in school textbooks and things like that.

Her words show an understanding of institutional forces such as "school textbooks and things like that" that do not acknowledge the accomplishments of African-Americans. Though Audrey explained that it was a logical choice for her to move back to Lexington, returning came with costs such as the need to supplement her son's education with cultural awareness and support as her parents did for her when she was a student at Lexington.

One parent talked about the attraction of a diverse student body, which existed at Eastside Middle School but was not available at other suburban schools. Gary said,

Lexington is Pleasantville and those of us who live here are choosing to live here for a variety of reasons. Lexington is a very odd district in that it is diverse. One of the few suburban districts that is diverse and more diverse than others in the area…So, why would you choose a district like that? You know, we can live where we want to live. You know what I'm saying and so, one of the things, one

of the reasons why we chose that district is we found a house in that district but
we really hesitated.

Gary and his family hesitated to move to Lexington because they were aware of the challenges of

moving to a predominantly white school and a predominantly white neighborhood. His

reference to the movie, Pleasantville, hints at his understanding of Lexington as a complex

environment that looks one way to the outsider but different to those living there. Gary also

understands, like in the movie, that when change started occurring in the town, the residents

strongly resisted. All of the parents that were interviewed knew they had to leave the city

schools, but they came to Lexington knowing that there were sacrifices associated with the

choice.

Parents could choose from a number of alternatives to the city school system. They

identified the factors that led them to choose Lexington including, documented educational

success, closeness to activities and other resources in previous neighborhoods, awareness of the

school through previous experience, and a diverse student body.   Having made their choice to

move to Lexington and to the Eastside Middle School, how did these parents talk about the

available resources and the strengths of the school district and the school?

Resources at Lexington

Parents spoke fondly about the resources they enjoyed at Lexington after they enrolled

their children. Their descriptions suggest a great deal of satisfaction with the material resources,

unique learning opportunities, clubs and activities, and excellent teachers. These were some of

the assets that they hoped to find when they chose to move out of the City School District.

One parent's language suggested that the money that is available for infrastructure and

basic necessities to run the school was important so that teachers can teach and students can

learn. These resources are available because the district residents overwhelmingly passed the

school budget each year. As Gary explained,

> Eastside Middle School has wifi networking and my son is emailing and learning
> computer skills. He knows more about computers than his mom. Then, try to
> find a computer in the city school, I mean, I'm sure they have them, but my son
> has that all the way through. So, you definitely see the split…what's the word?
> Disparity. You see the disparity very clearly in the resources. That's because
> Lexington taxpayers, one of the things that we value in school and will
> consistently pay for is stuff like a new gym or a new whatever.

Material resources, such as computers, textbooks, desks, chairs, tables, etc. are the foundation of

educational needs. Gary suggested, however, that the resources go beyond the basics and

include services such as a wireless internet network and email. When he points out that his son

has consistent access to resources, he is showing that there is no disruption of services in the

school saying, "my son has that all the way through." That is, computer technology is available

and functional all the way through high school. As well, Gary mentions that the community

comfortably passes referendums for large scale capital projects, such as a "new gym or a new

whatever." These capital projects ensure that the buildings and classrooms are constantly

updated and always in good condition. Gary pointed to the resources that are provided to

maintain buildings and provide educational necessities as strengths of Lexington.

A second way that some of the parents talked about resources they found at Eastside

Middle School was to identify the unique learning opportunities enjoyed by their children.

Caroline talked about her daughter's success in the area of fine arts. She explained that,

> Christine was fortunate enough to be part of the first class to study the violin.
> That's been a great experience for her, the music program. When I think about it,
> I think she has excelled academically and I think it has to do with whatever music
> does in the brain and so that's been great for her. I think the training that my kids
> have gotten artistically has driven them both to want to excel and that, you know,
> you don't have to be the best but you've always got to be a little better and that is
> constantly reinforced. The music program has, you know, exceeded my
> expectations. I felt that for the most part the teachers were excellent.

Gary echoed Caroline's points about the music program at Eastside as he told about his son's participation in the arts program. Gary explained, "now, he's involved in every single thing at Eastside, from every chorus to every band to everything. I think he is having a better experience." Gary pointed out another unique opportunity that is available at Eastside is the annual trip that all students take to a local theater production. Funds from the Parent Teacher Group were used to defray costs of this and other special events. Parents suggest that the resources available at Eastside, resources in the form of an extensive fine arts program, act to engage their children more deeply in school and perhaps even enhance their cognitive development.

Parents spoke about the extracurricular programs at Eastside as a resource that they enjoyed. Audrey talked about the wide variety of activities available to her son. She explained that, "I told my son that he needed to be on the yearbook committee, to be in the Spanish Club, in Student Government, and on a sports team." Caroline pointed to the opportunity to learn another language as a resource that she appreciated at Eastside. For her, the fact that Eastside offered instruction in Mandarin Chinese was a fantastic opportunity, but it was even better because the teacher was Chinese. Caroline said, "I love the fact that Eastside is offering Mandarin Chinese, love it, love it, love it. I mean having that teacher even on the staff is a benefit. She's a unique addition." Caroline's description of the Mandarin Chinese teacher as a "unique addition" illustrates her pleasure that the staff reflects some level of racial diversity. Her statement that it is a "benefit" to have a Chinese teacher on staff reflects her understanding that students of color need to see diversity in the staff as models of success.

Parent's examples suggest that these opportunities are not available at other schools and they felt it was important to take advantage of the chances that were available in the Lexington

School District and at Eastside Middle School. These were the opportunities offered by a change

in geography. Parent's language suggests that they felt these learning opportunities were part of

what made Lexington and Eastside Middle School unique when compared to other school district

and schools, and this is what motivated these parents to move.

In addition, parents talked about the strength of the teaching staff at Eastside Middle as a

resource. Veronica described the teachers by saying,

> I think the teachers are great. I think they are encouraging. I think they are well
> trained. I think they know what they are doing, um the question she [her
> daughter] had last year was were the teachers feeling excited about what they
> were doing and their enthusiasm came across. So, overall I think they are great.

Veronica's daughter struggled with reading and was placed in a remedial reading class.

Veronica explained that placement in this class was helpful for her daughter. She said, "I know

she's in what she calls the support class. She's getting the back up and the support she needs to

see what the weak areas are and maybe boost her with it so she's not teetering on the line."

Veronica's descriptions of the staff as "encouraging," "well trained," and "enthusiastic" illustrate

her appreciation for the way the teachers are helping her daughter feel good about herself while

addressing specific academic challenges in a positive and supportive learning environment.

Audrey explained that she had a rapport with certain teachers and that her son felt a

particularly strong relationship with some of the staff. She said,

> I know that several teachers really did take an interest in him, seeing his potential
> and basically tried to get it out of him and working with him. My son loved Mrs.
> L. There was something about her that he felt comfortable with opening up.
> Another teacher, Mrs. A., took special interest in him and she would call me and,
> you know, we would talk school. We had a great relationship and my son
> respected her, he listened to her. She was approachable.

Caroline talked about a number of her children's teachers that were outstanding.

> Let's see, Mrs. R., the French teacher, was very supportive of both my girls. She
> wrote letters for them in the summer, she would send cards, just little things like
> that. The reading teachers were supportive. Mrs. M., the orchestra teacher, was

liked for different reasons. She helped them develop their solo potential and
helped them prepare for competitions. She worked with them individually.

These parents' descriptions demonstrate that they view the teachers at Eastside as a valuable

resource. Words such as "taking an interest," "special interest," "approachable," "supportive,"

and "helpful" epitomize how these two parents made sense of the actions and characteristics of

some of the teachers. The parents made it a point to illustrate how teachers made an effort to

build relationships with students, relationships on which learning is built. The parents' language

suggested that the teachers demonstrated a deep understanding of their content and exhibited

enthusiasm for their subject matter and for learning, in general. Clearly the parents value the

time and attention that teachers took to make their children "feel comfortable" and to "develop

their potential." The teachers at Eastside Middle School were part of the geography of

opportunity that parents sought when they made the decision to leave the city.

The resources parents found at Lexington and at Eastside Middle School after they

enrolled their children in many ways affirmed their decision. The parents pointed to the material

resources such as computer technology, a new gym, and fine art programs as things found at

Eastside, but not necessarily in their previous school. They talked about the willingness of the

community to pass referendums for capital projects that allowed the district to maintain facilities

as a resource. Parents talked about the extracurricular activities and other opportunities available

outside the classroom as a resource. Finally, the strength of the teaching staff was identified as a

benefit that supported their decision to relocate. Parents easily articulated a number of factors

that supported their choice to move to Lexington.

Summary

The contents of this chapter stem from my thinking about disparate schools and school

systems and the factors that influence a family's decision about where they want to enroll their

children. What is it about their current school or school system that led them to want to move? What were the characteristics of a school that enticed them? How did they think about the trade-offs that would be necessary to move to a new school? How did they come to a decision about where to move? Finally, after making the choice to move, what were the resources that they found in this new school? Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum's (2001) study of participants in a housing relocation project use the term "geography of opportunity" as a way to understand that the places in which people live affect their opportunities and life outcomes. In this chapter, I explored how parents thought about their existing school systems as geography of limited opportunity and how relocation may open up a new geography of opportunity. In short, what led these parents to make such a dramatic move and what did they see as the benefits?

Two parents were complementary in their descriptions of the elementary schools that their children attended prior to moving to Lexington. They described the administration and staff as "warm and inviting." The climate was such that parents were invited and encouraged to participate on shared decision making bodies, such as the Shaw Community Roundtable. Parents were welcomed into the classroom to do presentations, to give talks, and to provide a helping hand. The parents described the teachers as committed and supportive. Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction with these schools. If this is the case, why did parents feel a need to re-locate? What was it about this school system that made parents look elsewhere?

Parents described a sense of academic hopelessness and concern as they talked about the future that faced their children in the city's middle and high schools. The dismal success rate of African American males in the city schools was particularly disturbing. There was a sense that behavioral issues would take precious time away from learning in the classrooms as students got older and parents did not want their children to feel "threatened." In general, parents felt that as

their children got older and moved through middle school and into high school that the quality of the school system would not meet their expectations. Therefore, what was it that parents were looking for in a school?

When describing their ideal educational environment, parents began talking about the challenges their children would face moving to a predominantly white school where "you can be chewed up." At times, they spoke of their fears and the need for fair treatment, not equal treatment for their children. There was a call for the school to support parents and to recognize that parents could offer useful suggestions and unique perspectives to the school. Parents drew on their experiences at Shaw as they explained the ideal type of involvement. Concern was expressed about the different levels of cultural capital that would exist between their children and children already enrolled in Lexington. They called for the school to extend a helping hand and to provide children with "tips about how to respond in that environment." Generally, parents were looking for an environment where there was an understanding of the challenges facing Black students in predominantly white schools and where the trade offs of moving to schools with these demographics would be worth the investment.

There were a number of reasons provided for why parents chose to move to Lexington. Past educational results and the availability of resources were primary reasons explained the parents. One parent identified the school's location, close to their previous neighborhood as another important factor. Familiarity with the school and the diverse student body were attractive, also. On the whole, it was clear that parents had done their research by exploring and comparing many different schools and districts. Having made the choice to move to Lexington, what benefits did they identify?

Parents articulated many benefits that they and their children enjoyed. The ability and willingness of the school district to spend money to maintain facilities and to provide educational necessities was important. The opportunities for learning outside the classroom through extracurricular activities and clubs were also identified as an advantage. As well, the quality of the teaching staff was discussed. Overall, parents expressed satisfaction with many parts of the educational experience at Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School.

This critical analysis, therefore, suggests that parents possessed a deep understanding of the concept of geography of opportunity. My informants believed that Lexington School District would provide an appropriate educational experience for children. Though they recalled positive experiences in city schools, there was a feeling that as their sons and daughters got older the quality of education and the educational environment would not be conducive to learning. They were hoping to find a school that would provide an excellent education and that would offer the necessary supports to help racially marginalized students succeed in a predominantly white environment. These parents knew that moving to a predominantly white school meant leaving one life behind and beginning a new chapter that would bring challenges for them and for their children. They knew it was an opportunity, but at what cost?

Chapter 5:

Institutional Barriers and Double Standards

In this chapter I examine how the parents in this study made sense of the institutional practices and cultural norms that existed in the Lexington School District in general and at the Eastside Middle School in particular. After making the decision to move to Lexington and enroll their children at Eastside, parents talked about the challenges they faced. In chapter four I showed how parents understood that Lexington and Eastside offered a geography of opportunity that was accessible but with anticipated costs. In this chapter I explore what parents identified as the actual cost of this opportunity: feeling unwelcome, not being able to develop a partnership with school staff, overrepresentation in remedial classes and unequal access to enriched classes, and under representation in curriculum and instructional resources. These parents' experiences show how those institutional practices and the resulting organization and enforcement of everyday life in Lexington and at Eastside act to marginalize African-American parents and their children.

Chapter four explored the characteristics of the educational environment that these African-American parents hoped to find in the Lexington School District. As they described their wishes, however, these parents also talked about the challenges they expected to find in a predominantly white, suburban school. Their cautionary words help to provide a complex understanding of the Lexington School District and Eastside Middle School in particular. Institutional norms and accepted practices in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School resulted in parents feeling like outsiders. By "institutional norms and accepted practices," I mean the racial structures in place that reproduce white racial privilege in society. These are the social, economic, political, and ideological mechanisms used by dominant groups

to maintain and justify an unfair distribution of rewards (Vaught, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In this particular instance, rewards include representation in curriculum and instructional resources, which results in white students making a personal connection to material presented in classes and therefore they are more likely to be successful. Increased success results in greater access to enriched learning opportunities and educational resources. Rewards for white parents include greater access to administrators and other staff and therefore greater ability to influence decisions impacting school practices and procedures. The mechanisms of institutional racism are often subtle and may be disguised and justified to be a result of cultural limitations of African-Americans. White people use ideologies such as meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness to justify discriminatory practices and explain away unfair treatment of African-Americans. These mechanisms are sometimes covert and sometimes overt. Institutional racism is found in the classrooms of Eastside Middle School via curriculum, instructional practices, and general expectations for performance. For example, African-American students at Eastside Middle School are more likely to be placed in remedial classes and more likely to face unfair disciplinary treatment. This is a result of white staff members who have low expectations for African-American students' academic success and behavior in the classroom, which are likely to be adopted from media portrayed images of African-Americans as lazy, lacking family involvement in education, and violent. This is how institutional racism is manifested. Interpersonal relations between staff and parents are informed by institutional racism. For example, the staff in the main office treated African-American parents with hostility rather than friendliness. In more covert instances, staff treating African-American parents and students unfairly may be disguised as equal treatment, despite a clear need for individual attention or accommodations for unique needs. This colorblind ideology is another way institutional racism

is apparent.   Beneficiaries of institutional racism defend and support normal customs and practices that help keep the system in place. When African-Americans attempt to access institutions such as Eastside Middle School, they experience unfair treatment as they butt up against these unjust practices. Despite their best efforts, African-Americans struggle to change the status quo or become resigned to their position (Vaught, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This chapter is about how institutional racism works. It is about how to keep the *in group* in and the *out group* out.

To begin, I provide an anecdote that provides a backdrop to understand Eastside Middle School, which comes in the form of a letter written by a visitor to the school who had an egregious encounter in the main office. His response to this event was to write a letter to the Principal, which was shared with me in the course of an interview. I provide this letter to illustrate institutional racism in the form of enforcement of racial practices in everyday life in one particular space, the main office at Eastside Middle School (Omi & Winant, 1994). The letter, in part, reads as follows:

> I am writing this note to express my disappointment with the treatment I received when I visited the school. I came to the school around 7:30 in the morning…to inquire of the principal about using the gym for an event we are planning at our church in the early fall…
>
> As I came into the office, the secretary's non-verbal language suggested that I was a person unworthy of dialogue with her and that she was completely disgusted by my presence in the office. Her short, 'May I help you?' was cold, unwelcoming, and seemed a bit forced. To this question 'I replied that I was here to see the principal,' handed her my card and briefly explained my business. She told me that he was in a meeting with the vice principal and that he would be in this meeting for quite some time. I explained to her that I was in no hurry and that I would wait for him to complete his meeting as the principal and I are classmates. She then said when he comes out of the meeting he would not be able to see me. I thought to myself, surely this man cannot be so busy that he is unavailable to the community for the entire day. I reassured her that I was in no hurry and I sat down in a chair. At this point students and teachers began to make their way in and out of the office as I sat patiently in the chair. Mr. R., who I had as a teacher when I

was a student in the district, and Mr. A., who was a fellow student of mine, came in and we briefly exchanged pleasantries before they made their way out of the office. After these exchanges I returned to my seat to continue waiting.

In the meantime another man, a white man, came into the office. I am unsure of his business but I did notice a marked difference in the manner with which he was greeted and the manner with which I was greeted. I began to wonder why we were greeted so differently. As a person who roamed these halls for a couple of years I was surprised to find myself thinking that the color of my skin may be playing a role…While I was sitting in the chair, the woman with a hint of annoyance re-stated her point as to the unavailability of the principal and that I needed to make an appointment if I wanted to see the principal. I asked her if she handled his calendar or does he make his own appointments. She told me that he makes his own appointments. I said to her that while I was there I would wait for him to finish his meeting and make an appointment when he comes out. At this point the woman walked from her desk, stood in front of me and with one hand on her hip and the other hand pointed to the door told me that I must leave the building.

It had been a long time since I had been engaged in such an abrasive manner. I wondered, other than being a large Black man dressed in motorcycle gear, what I had done to bring this woman to this level of indignation. Throughout the entire episode I found this woman's actions to be hurtful, saddening, rude, unnecessary and completely unprofessional. I was put off by the woman's attitude and the persistence of her attempts to quickly dismiss me and my business as irrelevant and insignificant. After her last statement I sat in the chair and did not say another word until Mr. C. emerged from the meeting. When he came out she quickly went to him and gave him my card and pointed me out as a transgressor of some sort. As I expected, Mr. C. was very friendly and accommodated my request for a moment of his time.

The letter concludes with the author explaining that this note should serve as an agent of learning and with a suggestion for further training for this staff member. The author's words, "I am writing this note to express my disappointment with the treatment I received" clearly indicates that he expected a different type of welcome as a visitor to the school. The author pointed to the main office secretary's "non-verbal language" and "cold, unwelcoming" greeting as indicators of her displeasure with having him in the office. He pointed to the "marked difference in the manner with which he was greeted" and the manner with which a white visitor to the office was greeted as an indication that it was his race that was off-putting for the secretary

because the white person that entered the office was treated differently. His description of the

secretary's demand for him [the Principal] to leave the building because "I said to her that while

I was there I would wait for him to finish his meeting and make an appointment when he comes

out" showed that this visitor was willing to challenge the secretary's explanation that visitors

must make an appointment to see the Principal. The conclusion that this author draws from this

event is explained when he says, "throughout the entire episode I found this woman's actions to

be hurtful, saddening, rude, unnecessary and completely unprofessional and I was put off by the

woman's attitude and the persistence of her attempts to quickly dismiss me and my business as

irrelevant and insignificant." Despite the historical relationship that existed between this visitor

and the Principal, the secretary was compelled to enforce rules and regulations that prohibited

contact between the two men. First, she told the visitor that the Principal was too busy for an

interruption. When that tactic failed, she relied on established practice such as the need to make

an appointment before being granted access as a means to insulate the Principal. Finally, the

secretary attempted to use verbal force and non-verbal gestures to remove the visitor from the

premises. Though this may appear as though the secretary in the main office was simply running

interference to protect the Principal's time, I argue the hostility demonstrated by this woman

toward the African-American visitor is an example of the typical response African-American

parents received in the main office at Eastside Middle School. If this is taken as one isolated

incident, one may just think it is the bad attitude of one secretary. However, as the rest of the

chapter will show, there is a pattern of practices at Eastside Middle School that functions to

marginalize African-American parents and students. African-American parents' words suggest

they were met with some form of hostility in encounters with clerical staff and administrators in

the main office and throughout the school. This hostility is likely a result of whites responding

to African-Americans based on media portrayed images and representations and is intended to reinforce and maintain the social inequity between whites and African-Americans at Eastside Middle School. This incident reinforces parents' experiences and shows how institutional practices and enforcement of policies and rules in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School act to marginalize African-American students and parents. His words help to shine a light on the racial inequality that has been constructed at Eastside Middle School (Omi & Winant, 1994).

This chapter is organized in five sections. One common thread runs through these sections: African-American parents' talk insinuates episodes of institutional racism manifested in various ways. First, parents' talk suggests that they did not feel welcomed at Eastside Middle School. They described interactions with administrators, school staff, and parents that left them feeling like outsiders despite the fact that they lived in the District and their children attended the School. Parents described the strategies they used to negotiate this challenging environment. I emphasize parents' experiences here as they contrast remarkably with the interactions at previous schools.

In section two, I examined how parents talked about how the Lexington School District and the Eastside Middle School were unwilling to create a partnership with parents. Parents described the District as being uncomfortable with the idea that there was a segment of the student population that was unsuccessful academically because they did not feel comfortable in classrooms, of teacher bias, and of low expectations. They described the District staff and School staff as unwilling to partner with parents to open a conversation about children with issues in the classroom that could be related to race and ethnicity. Again, I emphasize parents' experiences here as they contrast with experiences at previous schools.

In section three, I examined how parents talked about academic placement and tracking. This was a different facet of institutional racism that I wanted to examine because parents described inconsistencies in information they received from teachers and administrators about their children that resulted in unfair academic placements. Parents shared their experiences about their children being unfairly placed in remedial classes based on a single measure of achievement despite strong academic performance over the course of a year. Parents also talked about how some children were shut out of enriched and advanced learning opportunities based on criteria that were subjective and unavailable for interrogation. Parents' experiences at Eastside affirm other research which shows that Black students are overrepresented in remedial classes and underrepresented in honors or advanced classes (Mickelson and Velasco in Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Noguera in Sadowski, 2010).

In section four, parents talked about the unfair and unequal application of disciplinary responses imposed on African-American children. Parents talked about the lessons they taught their children about how to navigate environments that are hyper-critical of the behavior of African-American children. Again, these experiences affirm previous research which found that African-American students are more likely to be punished for behaviors that may be overlooked for white students (Delpit, 1995; Mickelson, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Ferguson, 2007).

In section five, I examine how parents talk about the curriculum and the lack of resources available to teach beyond a Euro-centric perspective. Parents talked about the unwillingness of the school to acknowledge, let alone celebrate, African-American History month. I examined parents' disappointment with teachers' abilities to incorporate African-American contributions to

history. These experiences are emphasized here to show how experiences parents had at their

previous school differed significantly from the experiences they had at Eastside Middle School.

It's all about respect: Stuck on the outside

One manner in which institutional racism was evident was in the manner the African-

American parents were made to feel as they interacted with staff in the school. The institutional

racism had different manifestations but with the same result: parents felt like outsiders despite

the fact that they were living in the Lexington School District and their children were enrolled at

Eastside Middle School. Parents shared their experiences about interactions with administrators,

with main office staff, working on committees, and with other parents. Parents shared the

strategies they used to negotiate this challenging environment. In these myriad examples,

parents were left feeling dissatisfied, disrespected, and distrustful. I argue the hostility African-

American parents encountered were institutional racism because the responses effectively

reinforced the white racial privilege at Eastside Middle School.

One way that a parent talked about feeling like an outsider was by describing a

conversation with an administrator that showed a lack of concern for the well-being of all

students enrolled in the school. Veronica shared the experience she and her husband had with an

administrator at Eastside Middle while they toured the school prior to enrolling at Lexington.

> I am definitely unsure, confidentially of course, about Mrs. B. I don't feel that
> she has the foggiest notion. I'm not going to say she's prejudice. I don't know. I
> should say that I felt that way from the first time I met her when my husband and
> I were taking a tour of the school. I told her that I had just recently read test
> results showing that African-American students were not as successful at the
> school. Her response was, 'Well, I don't think that will be a problem with you
> because you guys seem like you are going to be involved parents.' This was the
> wrong answer. We didn't make reference to the other students, first of all. I have
> a concern. I wasn't talking about my children; they are not even in the system,
> yet. This woman is talking about *those* kids. She had a lack of concern for all
> students and she thinks that I am only concerned about my children.

Veronica's words show she had done her research on the District and had concerns with the school environment even before choosing to enroll her children. Veronica's explanation that the response provided by the administrator addressing her concern about the low academic performance of African-American children at the school "was the wrong answer" shows that Veronica was looking for an explanation of how the school was working to support all students. Veronica's experiences at Shaw made her feel that each staff member at the school was doing all they could to help every child succeed. In contrast, this administrator's response that "you guys seem like you are going to be involved parents" exposes her belief and understanding that the success of children is directly related to the level of parent involvement. Notice here how the school administrator used a rhetorical maneuver to protect the institution and its many failings. Veronica's words, "this woman is talking about those kids" indicates her understanding that the administrator believes there are two groups of children in the school, our kids and those kids. The underlying message to Veronica is that this administrator believes that, in general, African-American parents are less involved in their child's education and therefore, those students are less successful. This is how institutional racism manifests itself through the perpetuation of the myth that African-American parents are less involved and therefore African-American students are more likely to be unsuccessful in school rather than questioning this historical understanding in an effort to help all children succeed. I argue that these myths about African-Americans permeate the culture and climate at Eastside Middle School and serve to inform how white staff members interact with African-American parents and students.

A second way that parents talked about not feeling welcome was a result of their interactions with the main office staff. Gary explained his feelings that, "I don't get the same sense of welcoming as I got at Shaw. It is almost as if you have to affirm yourself a little bit

more and prove to people that you are not from the projects." Gary's words, "It is almost as if you have to affirm yourself a little bit more and prove to people that you are not from the projects" is a comparison of the treatment of African-American parents and white parents. Gary felt pre-judged by the main office staff when he entered the school. His words suggest that the main office staff was unwilling to afford the same level of respect to African-American parents as was bestowed upon white parents. This contrasts to the feeling of welcoming Gary had at Shaw Elementary. It is clear to Gary that he was treated differently in the main office due to the color of his skin.

Gary provided a second, more specific, example of a frustrating encounter he had in the main office. He told the story of losing money in a soda machine in the school. Gary explained that this story was the "perfect example" to describe why he felt that the staff at the school was not helpful. He said,

> I go into the main office and I said to the administrator, "I lost money in the [soda] machine." The administrator responded, "We do not have anything to do with that." So I'm like, "What?" And she said, "We have nothing to do with that." I said, "What should I do about getting my money back?" Finally, she said, "You have to call the lunch person." So, I called the lunch person and she was wonderful. Maybe a better response [from the administrator] was, "Just see the lunch person, call them up, and they will help you." As opposed to, "We have nothing to do with that." See, it's just in the way that things are said.

Gary used this story as an example to illustrate how the staff at Eastside was unwilling to go out of their way to provide assistance. Some may argue that Gary is being overly sensitive here, but when you have been repeatedly disrespected in white environs you become acutely aware of the tone people use when they speak. Gary was appreciative of the help he received from the person in the cafeteria and he wished he was treated with that same level of response in the main office. The institutional racism Gary was subjected to at Eastside Middle School is in contrast to his experience at Shaw. At Shaw, staff showed respect for each person regardless of race or class

through their warm and welcoming attitudes and actions. Some of the staff at Eastside was

callous toward African-Americans, which resulted in parents' feeling disrespected. .

     A third way parents talked about the challenges at Eastside was when they described the

unwillingness of staff to provide accommodations or understanding when it came to a unique

situation. The practice at Eastside Middle School is to not allow parents to walk around the

school and visit classrooms during the school day. Veronica told the story of the beginning of

her daughter's first day of school at Eastside.

> My husband and I were nervous about her going there. Our daughter was nervous
> about going there on the first day of school and we promised her that we would,
> this is the first day of school, and that we would be at the school when the bus
> arrived. We made sure she got on the bus. She didn't have to take the bus to her
> previous school. She got there and we missed her somehow getting off the bus
> and we went to the office and I think my husband got there before I did and we
> asked, 'Is there any way possible we can just even see her at the class or wave to
> her? I know she's afraid, that's our baby, and it is important to her, we thought
> because she was so anxious.' And we were told, 'No' by one of the
> administrators. Like nobody was going to make any accommodations for us.

Veronica's words show that she was angry and dismayed at the treatment she and her husband

received on the first day of school. The behavior of the main office staff at Eastside Middle was

in direct contrast to the behavior she and her husband had grown accustomed to at Shaw.

Veronica explained that her "baby" daughter was "afraid" and that it was "important to her" that

she see her mother and father before entering this new school. When Veronica and her husband

arrived after the bus, they became worried about the well being of their daughter. Beginning a

new school in a new school district is a challenging event for students and parents. Their anxiety

was especially heightened because they had put their daughter on a school bus for the first time.

The school bus can be a challenging space due to the cultural norms and social rules that are well

established and that are unfamiliar to their daughter (Bettis & Adams, 2005). Veronica and her

husband asked if "there was any way possible to see her at class or wave to her." They wanted

to make sure that their daughter had an uneventful trip to school and that she was emotionally

prepared for the school day. Veronica's words, "like nobody was going to make any

accommodation for us," illustrate her understanding that the treatment she would receive at

Eastside Middle School would be dramatically different to the treatment she received at Shaw.

Notice here how the administrator did not make any accommodation to support Veronica, her

husband, or their daughter. The administrator was unwilling to see the uniqueness of the

situation, which was an African-American family, new to the District, attending a predominantly

white school. Instead she relied on accepted practice to guide her decision making effectively

choosing to treat people equally rather than fairly.

Veronica explained further that the events on the first day of school were not an anomaly

when she said,

> So initially, I thought, well accommodations to, I don't know, just be sympathetic
> to what we are going through. The first day of school has got to be hard for the
> people in the office and so we thought maybe it's that she is going to have to
> grow up finally. I don't know, maybe it's this different environment, but for
> several times after that, whenever we entered the office we were, we felt, because
> there was no specific way that I don't want to say people were not polite, but it
> was certainly, there wasn't any warmth.

Veronica's words, "the first day of school has got to be hard for the people in the office"

demonstrate her willingness to excuse the lack of accommodations provided to her and her

husband based on the fact that it was the first day of school, which can be very busy. Her words,

"we thought maybe it's that she is going to have to grow up finally" indicate that Veronica and

her husband were even willing to excuse the cool reception by rationalizing this is the way things

work in middle schools. In the end, however, Veronica received the same reception in the main

office regardless of the circumstances and so she came to the conclusion that "I don't want to say

people were not polite, but it was certainly, there wasn't any warmth." This is another

manifestation of institutional racism. The staff working in the main office offered a cool reception to Veronica and other African-American parents and the result of these interactions left African-American parents without an emotional connection to the school. An emotional connection to school and to the people in the school is the basis on which relationships are built. These relationships become the cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate institutions such as Eastside Middle School.

Additionally, Veronica's words, "just be sympathetic to what we are going through" are loaded with meaning. Veronica had done her research about the Lexington School District and about Eastside Middle School prior to enrolling. She learned that African-American students perform poorly when compared to their white peers on standardized tests. During her tour of the school, Veronica learned that at least one of the administrators believed that African-American students are likely to be unsuccessful in school due to the perception that their parents are less involved in schooling. Now, on the first day of school Veronica was faced with the troubling fact that her daughter was on her own in this foreign and unfamiliar territory and Veronica and her husband were being effectively shut out of the school and unable to check on the well-being of their child. Veronica's words, "just be sympathetic to what we are going through" were her plea for someone to recognize the racial challenge that faced her and her family. That plea, however, fell on deaf ears. Similar to Gary, the institutional racism that Veronica experienced is rooted in the dominant culture's inability and unwillingness to see that African-American parents and students may need a kind and gentle hand or an affirmative acknowledgement of the barriers faced by African-American families entering a predominantly white educational environment. Veronica's experience, however, strengthened her understanding of Eastside Middle as unfriendly territory.

A fourth way that parents described not feeling welcome was around work on committees comprised of administrators, teachers, and parents. Veronica described her experience of working on a committee whose task it was to organize the annual Eastside Middle School Parent Forum. While serving on this committee, Veronica was rebuked in her request for a list of names and contact information of other African-American parents with children in the middle school. Veronica explained, "I think a couple of them looked at me like I was out of my mind." The Parent Forum was an event that took place on a Saturday at the school where speakers were invited to discuss issues such as identity development, internet safety, changing friendship groups, transitioning to the high school, or a range of other topics relevant to parents of middle level students. Veronica hoped to use the list of names and contact information to recruit parents of color to attend the forum by re-assuring these parents that the event would be a safe and welcoming space. Her understanding of the committee's response to her request was that, "I really could not say what they were thinking, but it was just a feeling that they are unfamiliar with someone who is an advocate for African-Americans." Veronica's experiences at Shaw led her to believe her efforts to reach out to parents would be welcomed and appreciated as it could increase attendance at the forum. The other people on the committee, who were all white, were taken aback with her initiative because, they claimed, it was unfair that only African-American parents would be called with a special invitation. The other members of the committee were unwilling and unable to see how cultural norms had effectively marginalized African-American parents. The committee was compelled to treat all people equally regardless of the color of their skin. This colorblind ideology effectively erases the subordinating function of racism by constructing race as power-neutral (Vaught, 2011). Veronica tried to explain to the committee that African-American parents may not feel comfortable attending a school sponsored forum on

parenting. The white people on the committee were unable or unwilling to see how African-American parents may have had experiences that made them feel unwelcome at the school. The other committee members could not see that a phone call may help to bridge a divide between the school and members of the African-American community.

Ultimately, a white Assistant Principal denied the request for the list of parents on the grounds that the school could not release such personal information. Veronica described the Assistant Principal by saying, "I don't feel that she has the foggiest notion. I'm not going to say she is prejudiced. I don't know, but she has a tendency to determine what she does not know without talking to people." Veronica interpreted this incident as one more way that school did not recognize the privilege of some and the marginalization of others. Indeed, institutional racism manifested as colorblindness positions races as different cultural groups functioning on a level playing field. Colorblindness acts to disregard the existence of racial hierarchy as an organizing practice that exists in institutions such as Eastside Middle School with beneficial results for whites and deleterious effects on African-Americans (Vaught, 2011). The reaction to Veronica's request contrasted with the actions of administrators at Shaw. Unlike at Eastside, the administrators at Shaw asked Veronica to make calls to African-American parents with the hope that she would influence people to attend events. As a result of this event, Veronica explained, "that committee was the last committee I'm going to be on. I felt too tense and too much of a hurdle to get over and way too big of an issue."

A fifth way that the parents in this study talked about not feeling welcome was when they talked about interactions with other parents. Parents in this study felt white parents judged them and restricted their chances to work with the parent-teacher group and limited other opportunities

to volunteer at the school.   For example, Audrey explained her experiences at school sponsored

sporting events with some white parents.

> I've had a couple of parents snub their nose at me as if I'm not good enough to be
> in the group that picks the kids up from school. There is the stay-at-home group.
> Please, trust and believe that I'm not into that clique. Parents have a lot to do
> with it. They want to keep that upper echelon going. They want their kids to
> basically go to school with people like themselves. At games, at sporting events,
> interacting with parents, with them asking, 'What do you do?' First conversation
> is, 'What do you do for a living? Where did you say you lived?' They want to
> know what my 30 second pitch is, where you come from, what you got, what you
> don't have, what type of cloth am I cut from, you know, let's see what she's got,
> where she is.

Audrey's words suggest her interpretation of these interactions with white parents as a type of

interview. With any interview there is a power dynamic; the interviewer has more power than

the interviewee. When Audrey said, "They want to know what my 30 second pitch is, where you

come from, what you got, what you don't have, what type of cloth am I cut from?" she

understands this interaction as superficial, not as a means to get to know one another as friends,

as equals. Audrey's explanation that "I've had a couple of parents snub their nose at me as if I'm

not good enough to be in the group that picks the kids up from school" shows that she has had a

number of interactions with judgmental parents that made her feel unqualified. Her words,

"They want to keep that, um, that upper echelon, keep it going. They want their kids to basically

go to school with people like themselves" shows her concern about the power differential that

exists in the community of parents whose children attend Eastside Middle School. Whites

benefit from this power differential in school by having a greater ability to connect with the

people that are making decisions that impact their children. One way this power differential is

maintained is to treat people as though they are not capable and therefore should not be trusted to

influence decisions about schooling.

A sixth way parents talked about feeling unwelcome was when they described interactions with the local Parent-Teacher Organization. Gary and Audrey shared similar feelings as they explained frustrating encounters with trying to volunteer with this organization at Eastside Middle School. Gary explained,

> I was at a parent-teacher group meeting and a woman says, 'Well, if you don't like something, you get off your butt and you make it known.' And, ah, she said, 'If you don't feel like you're getting, if you're not getting the support you need, then you're not doing something.' And I remember, for example, when my son came to middle school and I came to the Welcome Back Picnic and I tried to sign up to volunteer and I can't do anything. I can't volunteer for anything, because everything is all locked up. I asked, 'Like can I do this?' The response was, 'Well, we've already got that.' I said, 'Why are you having a picnic? Why are you having a signup sheet if just about everything that I can do or want to do is filled?' I just don't feel that it is a welcoming environment as much as it should be, you know?

Gary's language depicts that he wanted to be involved in the Eastside Middle School community, but he was unable to find an access point. His explanation that all of the volunteer opportunities were "locked up" illustrates the point that it was difficult to find a way to be involved in the school community. When Gary offered to volunteer, the person running the sign up event told him that "we've already got that." This response indicated to Gary unwillingness on the part of the white parents to go out of the way to involve African-American parents. The person working the event did not offer to expand the volunteer opportunities. He did not understand the importance of engaging Gary and other African-American parents in the school. As a result, Gary was left feeling that Eastside is not as welcoming an environment "as much as it should be."

Audrey's experience was similar. She explained

> I went to one meeting and I totally did not feel welcome and it is very hard to make me uncomfortable. I have to sit back and analyze why I did not feel comfortable. I have to say, whether you are not embracing my presence or not, I am here and you are going to have to deal with it. Do not make it hard for me,

don't work against me, let's work together. "What are your ulterior motives? Well you know what, I don't have any. I'm here just like you are, let's work together."

Gary felt shut out and Audrey felt "uncomfortable." Audrey's words, "Don't work against me, let's work together" illustrate her understanding that the Parent-Teacher Organization actively shunned her efforts. As a result, Audrey felt the group had "ulterior" motives and left her suspicious of their intentions. These events differ greatly from the experiences Audrey and Gary had at their elementary schools, where all parents were encouraged to get involved. Their perspective was that at Eastside Middle School opportunities were limited to certain groups of people and this left them feeling left out and disempowered. This is another example of how institutional racism works. Chances to volunteer in the school are opportunities to build partnerships with staff. Existing dominant and subordinate positions are maintained when whites control those opportunities and limit African-American participation. By effectively limiting African-American parents' ability to volunteer, whites maintain their stranglehold on the opportunities to make connections with teachers and other staff. These connections are the foundation upon which cultural capital is created and spent to maintain white racial privilege.

A seventh way parents talked about not feeling welcome or feeling like an outsider was when they described strategies developed to negotiate the environment at Eastside Middle School. Veronica explained her strategies in the context of an example about her frustration with the need to prove herself rather than being afforded respect simply because she was a parent of students in the school.

> I think they [the main office staff] have gotten to know me. I made it a point to bring in treats or goodies to let them know that I won't threaten them in any way. So now, I think they are at least, the office staff is nice. I think, overall the teachers are professional and very good. I don't feel a sort of warmth or anything. I mean, you're not giving warm fuzzies but I don't feel like there is animosity. Like my husband said, 'There are the kinds of people in the whole place, in terms

of a relationship, with everybody you can't expect any more of anybody. That's who they are and this is who we are.' We're not, we won't be, either one of us, are not very threatening people. But, it's a different culture and it's a different way we relate to one another. And, why do you have to prove yourself before you get respect? It's all about respect, it really is. And all of it comes down to is that sometimes you want to feel respect.

Veronica's words suggest that she found a way to negotiate the environment at Eastside, but that she continued to be frustrated by the lack of respect that she was afforded. First, Veronica explained that she elected to "bring in treats or goodies" to build a working relationship with the main office staff and the teachers. Her husband's words, "that's who they are and this is who we are" demonstrate their understanding of the limitations of the relations that could be developed at Eastside. Clearly, they felt like outsiders as indicated by the statement "it's a different culture and it's a different way we relate to one another." Her question, "Why do you have to prove yourself before you get respect?" shows her frustration with the realization that not all people are treated fairly or equally and her understanding of the existence of institutional racism at Eastside Middle. Veronica's take away is that the cost to attend Eastside includes having to tolerate a level of distrust and disrespect from the staff. Sadly, she and her husband have resigned themselves to this level of treatment.

Parents' language suggests that they understood there was a limit to how much they would be welcomed at Eastside. Part of the cost of having their children attend this school included an unwillingness of staff to go out of their way to make them feel welcomed. Another part of the cost included being judged by staff and parents and made to feel unworthy or left to feel like an outsider rather than feeling like a partner. Institutional racism is implicated here because hostility toward African-Americans and decisions guided by a colorblind ideology, though not outwardly prejudice behavior, are certainly not affirmatively seeking ways to support African-American parents and their children.

Unable to develop partnerships

In this section, parents explain how they felt like outsiders in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School because of the staff's unwillingness to build a partnership with them. This is in contrast to the atmosphere that parents enjoyed in their previous schools. Parents described the atmosphere at their previous schools as warm and inviting and they talked about the ways that the staff worked to build a partnership between home and school. This partnership allowed for parent involvement and created a feeling that the school wanted to work with parents to address issues that impacted student success. In this section, I analyze how parents talked about the ways that the Lexington School District and the Eastside Middle School resisted working with parents for systemic change and for change at the classroom level. Again, institutional racism is implicated here because those whites in power act to resist change because to do so will result in the sharing of power and benefits with African-Americans, which is understood as a loss of power and influence for whites.

One parent explained that he did not sense the same level of desire by the staff to work with African-American parents when dealing with issues such as low student achievement in Lexington or at Eastside Middle. Gary explained

> Now, I heard a lot about what the District wanted to do as a result of the
> achievement gap, but are there any sustained efforts? See what's happened?
> What I think, in terms of race and relationships and diversity, is that it's not
> something that the district is comfortable with because it would make them have
> to acknowledge that there are Black people that live here and we don't want to
> make that acknowledgment. We want it to appear as though, well, you're in our
> territory now. You want Black issues, if you want to be recognized go to the city.
> This is the impression you get. That's where those issues are discussed. That's
> the impression you get, that there's a discomfort with dealing with issues of race
> and diversity in the District because it's not dealt with up front.

Gary's statement that "it's not something that the district is comfortable with because it would make them have to acknowledge that there are Black people that live here and we don't want to

make that acknowledgment" shows his understanding that the District was resistant to acknowledging that there was a segment of the population living in Lexington that was not successful academically, which may have been the case because of institutional racism. The district relied on a colorblind ideology, which made it taboo to talk about race as if it did not shape the daily experiences of African-American parents and students (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). The District had a long-standing record of strong results on state assessments and high graduation rates. A closer look at this data, however, showed that many of the Black students were not successful. Yet, the District was unwilling to address these issues in a sustained and meaningful way. Gary's words, "That's the impression you get, that there's a discomfort with dealing with issues of race and diversity in the District because it's not dealt with up front" and "if you want to be recognized go to the city" illustrate his understanding that issues will not being addressed. Despite evidence to the contrary, the District was unwilling to even acknowledge that issues existed let alone try to change practices to ensure that all students are successful. This unwillingness to acknowledge issues related to race effectively allowed the Lexington School District to explain failure as a form of African-American culpability and a mark of inferiority rather than a call to interrogate current practices and beliefs (Vaught, 2011). In this instance, those who control and sustain institutional power chose silence as the means to protect their power differential as well as blame the victim for their failures.

Veronica echoed these sentiments and the need for the District to be more responsive to each family's needs when she said, "I think we need an overall awareness at Lexington. The system needs to accept each segment of society and that if you have to pay special attention to certain students, that's okay." Veronica's words illustrate her belief that schools need to subscribe to the practice of providing each student with the resources necessary to help him or

her be successful. Her statement that "if you have to pay special attention to certain students, that's okay" shows her understanding that an equal distribution of resources is not fair. For Veronica, fair is not always equal (Wormeli, 2006). Veronica pointedly stated that there needs to be "an overall awareness at Lexington" illustrating her belief that the institution was ignorant of the discrepant needs of some students and their families. Powerfully, she uses the word "system" in her comment, which suggests an ongoing intentional effort.

One parent suggested a venue used in a previous school as a model for Lexington and Eastside Middle School to involve and support parents. Gary suggested that parents of students of color discuss this challenge and would be an excellent resource for the district when he stated

> We would be a resource to the district. We even came up with an organization that would meet our needs but wouldn't scare the district and we would call it Parents Promoting Diversity. The concept would be that there would be a place in the district that would help parents whose children might have issues in the classroom that could be related to race and ethnicity. That there would be a place to support them similar to what the Parent Teacher Organization does in supporting the school.

Gary's words suggested two important concerns. First, he submitted that there are "children who have issues in the classroom that could be related to race and ethnicity." Second, he explained that parents would benefit from a space created to discuss issues "related to race and ethnicity." Gary draws on his experiences with the Shaw Community Roundtable as a model that could be used to create a partnership between home and school. His experiences at Shaw shaped his understanding that the school should work with parents to address issues related to student success particularly when race and academics intersected. As noted above, however, Gary is challenged with the reality that the Lexington School District and the Eastside Middle School are unwilling to acknowledge or even address these issues.

Gary further explained that an organization such as the Parents Promoting Diversity would be an asset to the Lexington School District,

> This would be a place to support parents of diverse children in the District so that the District would then have a resource to deal with issues of, of, of things that we [the District] don't see, you know, that's happening but we don't see it. There's a place to do that. I'm a resource; I can come in and talk on TV about community kinds of issues. I've had a lot of experience in communities. In other words, one of the ways that we change the dynamics is to be more inviting.

When Gary states that the Parents Promoting Diversity group could help the School District and the School "deal with issues that are happening but we don't see it," he demonstrates his deep belief and understanding of the limitations of the Eastside Middle School to recognize issues around race and ethnicity. Whether it is by choice or by ability, Gary brings forth the notion that the Lexington School District is not addressing these issues. Gary was willing to use his expertise as a local television host and tap resources that were available to him as a community leader to help the Lexington School District take a first step to build such a partnership. He recognized the challenges around creating a group such as the Parents Promoting Diversity but he was willing to assist the School District and the School with the goal that this type of change would result in "a more inviting" environment.

Institutional racism is reproduced because whites receive material benefits from the existing social order and African-Americans struggle to change the status quo or become resigned to their position (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Gary challenges the status quo by looking for the School District to; at least, acknowledge the racial diversity that exists in the Eastside Middle School and in the Lexington District. The frustrating response for Gary is that the District is not aware of or will not acknowledge that there is a dominant/subordinate culture that serves to reify social and educational inequality. Rather than working with parents to find a solution to the achievement gap, the district continued to maintain the status quo. As mentioned above, this

unwillingness to acknowledge issues related to race effectively allowed the Lexington School

District to explain failure as a form of culpability and a mark of inferiority rather than a call to

interrogate current practices and beliefs (Vaught, 2011). This inertia contrasts dramatically with

parents' experiences at previous schools.

Parents also talked about the need for collaboration at the classroom level. Caroline

expressed her wish that teachers were more willing to work with her to best meet the needs of

her children. She explained

> At least show that we are a safe space, that people can come and express whatever
> opinion you have. It's not all one way. It's a conversation back and forth. That's
> what people just want to be, they want to be at the table and they want to be
> included in the conversation. If they felt kind of pushed away this is another
> opportunity to bring in families again.

To begin, Caroline expressed her concern that Eastside is not a "safe space" for African-

American parents. In other words, she felt that some parents may have felt emotionally or

socially unsafe meeting with certain staff members because their experiences had shown that

interactions were "one way" and not "conversations back and forth." Her point that "people just

want to be at the table and they want to be included in the conversation" shows that some staff

demonstrated a lack of respect for the knowledge and experiences that African-American parents

have about their children. Caroline echoes the sentiment that the staff have all the answers and

that the opinions of African-American parents do not matter. This is in contrast to the

experiences parents had at previous schools.

Veronica echoed these sentiments when she described her sense that the Eastside staff

was unwilling to listen to input about her children in the educational process. Veronica

compared her experience at Shaw and Eastside as she explained

> I think they [administrators and teachers at Shaw] work harder because they need
> more parent participation. They work harder to get it [at Shaw] and at Eastside it

seems like parents are more than willing to be involved. At our previous school they try to make it convenient for parents. They talk about getting transportation to events. They're really trying to make it accessible, they provide child care if needed for certain kinds of things, like when they have meetings. It's just that they don't assume they know everything. At Eastside, they don't come ask you about your child. They seem to assume that they know everything and they have all the answers. They have the answers already and nothing you, none of your experience counts, because they have all the answers. Where it seems like at our previous school, for example, it's more of a partnership.

Veronica's words suggest that she was deeply dissatisfied with the fundamental approach that staff at Eastside took when it came to working with parents. She explained that it was necessary for staff at Shaw to put forth more effort to get parents involved as opposed to the environment at Eastside where parents are more willing to be involved. Her description of the strategies used to involve parents at Shaw include, "they try to make it convenient," "they get transportation," "they make it accessible," and "they provide child care." As well, she pointed out that at Shaw "they don't assume they know everything." Veronica's words demonstrate the comfort she had in knowing the staff at Shaw respected each parent for the information they provided about their child. To Veronica, that the staff at Shaw knew that success in the classroom was, in part, dependent on the information they received from parents about their children. Veronica understood the staff at Shaw knew parents provided critical information about their children, which helped ensure that each child's needs were met. Veronica's statement that "they have the answers already and none of your experience counts" illustrates the contrasting approach used by staff at Eastside. To Veronica, the information she could provide about her child did not matter. Veronica's words show her understanding that the staff at Eastside failed to respect and value the experiences and information parents provide about the unique needs of their children. This is another form of institutional racism. The dominant group is able to silence the subordinate group

by putting forth an aura of exceptional knowledge and understanding to effectively mute the opinions of others.

Parents explained how they felt like outsiders in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School. This was due, in part, to the staff's unwillingness to build a working relationship with all parents. Parents talked about the ways that the District and the School resisted working with parents for systemic change and for change at the classroom level. In addition to the challenge of feeling left out, another cost parents faced in having their children attend Eastside Middle School was the disproportionate placement of African-American students in remedial classes and the under-representation of African-American children in enriched and honors level classes.

Unequal academic placements

Parents talked about academic placement as another institutional barrier that made them feel unwelcome and limited access to educational resources for African-American children at Eastside Middle School. Some talked about the over-identification of African-American children needing remedial and special education classes, while other parents talked about the lack of representation of African-American students in honors level classes. Re-segregation via tracking and ability grouping highlights administrators and teacher's attitudes and beliefs about the ability of African-American students to succeed (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016).

Veronica explained her disappointment that her daughter was scheduled for a remedial reading class despite being successful throughout the school year.

> I'm disappointed that she missed the [cutoff] by one point for the ELA [test]
> having thought that the school system was so much better than what was in the
> city and she had the advantage of being here for the whole year. I'm following
> her progress closely. She says that there was a student that was sitting next to her
> and distracting her to no end that day so I don't know if that's it or something
> else. She was on the honor roll all year. I don't know the mechanics of it. I

would have expected her to do okay and her Language Arts teacher didn't think
that it was going to be any problem with her doing well.

Veronica's words convey the disappointment about her daughter's results on the state test. Her words, "having thought that the school system was so much better than what was in the city and she had the advantage of being here for the whole year" show that she placed the blame for her daughter's performance at the feet of the school. Veronica enrolled her children at Eastside because the reputation of the Lexington School District was much better than the City School District. Despite the reputation, Veronica believed the school was unable to meet the needs of her daughter and in fact, the school lived up to her expectation that Black children are less likely to be successful at Eastside. Veronica had been told by the Language Arts teacher that her daughter would have no problem passing the state test. Veronica's daughter was on the honor roll all year and understood this to mean that her daughter would be successful on state assessments. Despite the feedback from the teacher and her success all year, Veronica's daughter missed the cutoff to be identified as successful by one point. Veronica's statement, "I don't know the mechanics of it" suggests that she has some reservations about the process used to schedule her daughter into a remedial reading class despite having done well throughout the school year. Veronica's words suggest that the attitudes and beliefs of the administrators in charge of assigning her daughter to a remedial class were biased and that they relied more heavily on a single test score rather than a year of class work to mark her child as a failure. As a result of this decision, Veronica's daughter was labeled in need of remedial services. Labels such as this serve as institutional mechanisms to maintain racial hegemony (Brayboy, 2005). I say this because those defining and assigning labels exercise power and in this case used that power to define the African-American student as deficient despite evidence to the contrary.

Gary explained the challenge he faced when he pushed the school staff to include his son in the enriched math class. Gary explained, "Our biggest battle in middle school. They were trying to tell us that there was a criterion that was used but it was not clear. It wasn't just scores. It was other things and we just couldn't understand it. Well, if it was other things, why couldn't he get into advanced math? I don't know if its low expectations but I think that it is." Gary's son was not recommended for the advanced math class in grade seven despite receiving excellent grades in previous years. Gary complained to the administration and was told that his son did not meet the criteria for entrance to the class. Gary and his wife vigorously challenged the placement claiming that the criteria "were not clear." Gary's explanation for the decision, "I don't know if its low expectations but I think that it is" suggests that he understands the system to have lower expectations for African-American students. As a result of these low expectations for academic performance, African-American students are over-represented in remedial and special education classes and under-represented in enriched or honors level classes. This is how institutional racism works (Mickelson & Velasco in Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Noguera in Sadowski, 2010). Academic placement in remedial tracks or honors levels tracks limit or open up resources for students. The language of two parents suggested that national trends of over-identification of Black students as needing remedial support and under-representation of Black students in honors level courses played out at Eastside Middle School as well.

Unfair disciplinary treatment

In this section, I examine how parents talked about inconsistent discipline practices involving different groups of children and the impact that these practices had on the level of comfort parents felt with the school. The African-American parents talked about discipline in general and how they taught their children to negotiate the environment at school to avoid being

singled out for punishment. Gary shared these sentiments as he talked about discipline in general at Eastside Middle School.

> One of the responses that we [other parents of African-American children] have is about how children are perceived and how they're dealt with. We talk about how African-American children seem to be disciplined more. There is no leeway. You know, you get disciplined. My perception, not that my son is getting in trouble, but I'm just saying that it just seems like that's the first thing that happens. We don't work, we don't talk, we don't cough, you know.

Gary uses racialized language to suggest that at Eastside Middle School African-American children are likely to be disciplined more than white children. His words "there is no leeway" and "that's the first thing that happens" suggests that school staff were likely to impose a disciplinary consequence for behavior exhibited by an African-American child. Gary's point that "African-American children seem to be disciplined more" suggests that behaviors that lead to a disciplinary consequence for an African-American student may be overlooked or handled outside the disciplinary process for a white student. Institutions have the power to create, shape, and regulate social identities. These identities, labeling practices, and the exercise of rules marginalize and isolate African-American youth and act to maintain a racial hierarchy (Brayboy, 2005; Ferguson, 2001). Administrators and teachers at Eastside Middle School maintain white racial privilege by allowing white students that misbehave the opportunity to remain in classrooms or in school in contrast to African-American students who are more likely to be pulled from class or suspended from school for their transgressions.

One parent explained how she tried to teach her son to navigate the school environment to avoid getting in trouble. Audrey explained that she had a conversation with her son about how not to draw attention to himself. The conversation is illuminating because it shows the compromises that Audrey made to help her son negotiate the Eastside school environment. It is

clear that Audrey was well aware of the rigidity of the structure, administration, and staff at the

school.

> What I told him is, I said, 'You can't do what they [the white friends that are getting in trouble] are doing.' He said, 'Well they get away with everything' and I said, 'So what?' I said, 'As long as you're not being mistreated, not being abused, do your work, keep your mouth shut, have fun, learn, come home. Don't worry about what he [white student] is not getting in trouble for or what they're doing. Don't you, you can't do everything you see everyone do.' He replied, 'He didn't get in trouble for what I did.' I said, 'Don't do anything.' He told me that several weeks before, he was walking down the hallway and he was going somewhere and a teacher said, 'Where are you on your way to?' And he said, 'One of his classes,' and he said the teacher basically continued to question him. I said, 'Okay, were you going where you're supposed to go?' And he said, 'I was on my way.' I said, 'Were you mumbling? Were you talking back?' 'No,' he said, 'I just kept straight and he said the teacher turned around and said something.' I said, 'You have to keep going and not worry about it.'

Audrey's words suggest that she felt it necessary to educate her son on how to navigate the

school environment to avoid drawing negative attention. Audrey's suggestion that "you can't do

what they're doing" illustrates her understanding of the ways that African-American and white

children were treated differently. There is an invisible but present double standard. In that

exchange, Audrey explained to her son that "you can't do everything you see everyone do."

Similar to Gary, Audrey's words show her awareness that behavior leading to a disciplinary

consequence for an African-American student may be overlooked or handled outside the

disciplinary process for a white student. She felt compelled to explain this to her son. Audrey's

first lesson to her son was that he may be treated differently because of the color of his skin. She

reiterated to him how not to draw attention to himself when questioned by authority. Her

question, "were you mumbling or talking back" is used as an example to show behaviors that

draw the attention of authority. Her statement, "you have to keep going and not worry about it"

was her lesson on how to react when questioned by authority. Audrey understood that it was

important for her son to know how to navigate this white environment so he would not be

disciplined, which could jeopardize his access to the education available at Eastside.

Audrey further explained how she helped her son to see why she was willing to put up

with unfair treatment.

> He was mad and he said, 'You're just letting everything go. I'm surprised at you.'
> And I said, 'No, I can't kick down the door and scream.' I said, 'My focus is on
> education and this is how I really feel. If you had done your homework, if you
> would have handed in your homework on time, if you wouldn't have to go to your
> locker to go get your book when you should have had it, maybe they would have
> treated you different. Seriously, you come prepared; don't give anyone a reason to
> treat you different. You know, I don't think skin color is everything, but don't
> give anyone a reason to treat you different. If they choose to and you're hurt, then
> we've got issues, but if you're sloppy, if you are going to your locker and you're
> talking and all this stuff going on. Don't give them a reason to pick at you,
> complaining that those guys in the back were talking and they didn't get in
> trouble. It happens; I could scream and kick down the door. Everyone is not
> aware, everyone is kind of going to sweep it under the rug, you know? This is
> great district, you're going to have ups and downs, pros and cons, you know?'

Audrey's words suggest that she is fully aware of the social and emotional costs associated with

attending the Eastside Middle School, but these costs are offset by the belief that Lexington is a

"great district" and her "focus is on education." Audrey's advice to her son, that he cannot draw

attention to himself by not doing his homework and by not being prepared for class, and her

conciliatory stance, "I can't kick down the door and scream unless you are being mistreated or

abused," illustrate that she has consciously decided to accept that there is a double standard and

that the predominant ideology has resulted in a different disciplinary code for African-American

students. This double standard is an ideology that comes from school adults calling upon

images, representations, and beliefs about family to theorize away school dilemmas and

difficulties in dealing with youth: troublesome children come from troubled or troublemaking

families (Ferguson, 2001). Her concluding statement that "This is a great district, you're going

to have ups and downs, pros and cons" implies she has accepted the cost of attendance. She was

willing to accept that her son may be treated unfairly for the opportunity to access the resources available at Eastside Middle School.

Parents talk about unfair and unequal disciplinary practices at Eastside Middle School reflect national data. Learning how to negotiate this environment rather than spending time trying to change practices at the school was how parents managed the cost. This resignation to the subordinate position is how institutional racism is reproduced. Reproduction of institutional racism occurs because Whites benefit from the existing order. In this instance, over identifying African-American students for disciplinary response to mis-behavior is a benefit to whites. For example, the removal of African-American students from classes ensures that the remaining students, the white students, receive more attention and support from teachers.

Unable to make connections to the curriculum

In this section I analyze parents' talk about the limited number of available educational opportunities at Eastside Middle School due to the lack of teaching about cultures and cultural contributions of people beyond the Euro-centric viewpoint. Parents talked about the need for all children to learn about many different cultures and cultural contributions, the lack of programming around African-American History Month, the dominance of the Euro-centric perspective in curriculum and curricular materials used throughout the year, and the need for professional development for teachers that tried to include resources that demonstrated African-American contributions.

Veronica expressed general satisfaction with her daughter's teachers, but her satisfaction was tempered by the response of a few teachers to parent involvement in the celebration of Black History Month.

> I wasn't particularly encouraged by the response I got when I volunteered to do some activities around African-American History Month. I was not encouraged at

all. I knew my sixth grader didn't really want mom in the classroom but I would
be willing to prepare something outside, in the background, and get involved.
The Language Arts teacher was encouraging, but I had to talk to another teacher
and I wasn't happy at all with the response and I think it was from a blatant
misunderstanding about how important it was to our family. But in this
educational system, in the entire school culture there is nothing about what
African-Americans have done to make this country great. That's very important
for her [my daughter] because when you live in a world that, in America, not all
over the world but in America where you are a minority, you want other children
to know the important role of African-Americans. My daughter is going to get
African-American History from me and my husband and our experience in this
community, but for other children they may not have a similar opportunity.
Because they are going to be the adults in the world, if they don't get it in the
school, where are they going to get it?

Veronica's words illustrate the importance of teaching about the contributions of many cultures

and "what African-Americans have done to make this country great." Veronica was concerned

that a teacher had a "blatant misunderstanding" about the importance of African-American

History month. This was another example of a teacher unwilling or unable to partner with a

parent to enhance the education for all students at Eastside Middle School. Veronica goes

further, however, to implicate the entire school in a failure to recognize and teach "about what

African-Americans have done to make this country great." Veronica's argument was that the

school district failed to provide appropriate education for white students, which will have a

deleterious effect on racially marginalized students. Her statement that "when you live in a

world…where you are a minority, you want other children to know the important role of

African-Americans" shows her concern about the continued subordination of African-Americans

and African-American culture. Veronica called upon schools to help end systemic racism by

arming future adults with a greater understanding of the importance of African-Americans to

American culture. Veronica's question, "if they don't get it in the school, where are they going

to get it?" indicated her belief that the school has a moral obligation to ensure that all cultures are

represented in the curriculum, so that all people are treated fairly throughout their lives.

Typically, the existing content and curriculum reflects a Euro-centric viewpoint, which accentuates and values the importance of whites to American culture and dismisses contributions of African-Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. The unwillingness of school officials to address socio-cultural issues related to whose knowledge, understanding, and meanings are valued in academic settings is another way that institutional racism is reproduced (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ferguson, 2001).

A second way parents talked about a lack of available cultural resources was when Veronica talked about the Euro-centric viewpoint that dominated the curriculum and educational materials used to support that curriculum at Eastside. Veronica provided a specific example from one of her daughter's classes when she said,

> Last year, she took world history. I don't think the way that it was taught that the children were even aware that there were people of color, that there were Black people in these white civilizations and that's important. There were Black people and I don't think that came across but more than that, I want my child to see that it's okay to be who she is, it's more than okay, it is just fine.

Veronica's example provided an anecdote of the singular approach to teaching history, but it goes further to show the potential danger to students. Her statement, "I want my child to see that it's okay to be who she is" illustrated her point that racially marginalized students may begin to question their self-worth and the worth of their culture when the content and the resources bear no resemblance to them. To reiterate the point, institutional racism persists because school officials failed to recognize when segments of the population are made invisible, such as when people of color are ignored in the curriculum and not represented in instructional materials (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ferguson, 2001).

Gary talked about the dearth of multicultural instructional resources when he reflected on his experience at a meeting of the Parent-Teacher Organization where he asked a question about

programming for Black History Month at Eastside   He offered an analysis of the school's unwillingness to celebrate Black History Month.

> During Black History Month, what is the middle school doing, if anything? What and when I say, what are they doing, who's to do it? Do we [the parents] bring it up? What is the plan? I mean a couple of posters, is there programming? What is there in the school that says, 'Wow, we have contributions?' Whether it's one week, one day, or one time, but you don't get the sense that it is something they want to do. I don't even know if there's a display in the middle school. I haven't seen one, if there is one, I haven't seen it. But how do these contributions get recognized?

Gary's words convey that he, too, is concerned about the lack of information provided to students. His analysis of the lack of programming led him to believe "that it is something they don't want to do." Gary echoed Veronica's point that each student's education is incomplete without recognizing the contributions of African-Americans. Not recognizing these contributions promotes a curriculum that ignores African-Americans and is another example of the institution making Blacks invisible (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ferguson, 2001).

Caroline recounted a concert where the chorus incorporated a spiritual but she was frustrated by the quality of the work. Though the chorus teacher made an effort to include a Negro spiritual in the concert, it was clear to Caroline that he did not make an effort to understand the content taught and this made Caroline feel that the teacher was disrespectful of the piece.

> I think that maybe the teacher tried but, you know, it was done very poorly. That piece is a major Negro spiritual; I mean not doing it right is almost like disrespect. I mean, he did it, he made the effort, but it was awful. I don't know. You know, what can I do? Maybe what I should have done was, you know, I joked with my daughter, I said, 'Maybe we should get a copy of the Revelation CD and give it to him and say this is how this is supposed to be sung. So, the next time you do it please listen to this first.'

Caroline's words acknowledge that an effort to include African-American history into the curriculum and teaching about the contributions of African-Americans throughout history is important, but it not enough. Caroline explained that teachers must have a deep understanding and appreciation of the content because "not doing it right is almost like disrespect." Caroline contemplated a strategy to navigate the system which would result in a better opportunity for future children. She felt compelled to provide this teacher with a copy of the music so that he could hear a performance and know how it was supposed to sound. Caroline's idea that she should provide a copy of the music is interesting because it removes the burden from the teacher and places the onus on her to help the teacher better understand the content to be taught. I speculate the chorus teacher included the Negro Spiritual in the concert program as a means to acknowledge that there are a number of racially marginalized students in the group and to demonstrate his willingness to include pieces from other cultures. I speculate this was his token way to appease African-American parents. I argue this is institutional racism because simply including the piece in the curriculum and not fully engaging students in the study of the background and meaning of the piece is a way to avoid criticism but does not treat African-Americans fairly.

Summary

The contents of this chapter come from listening to parents talk about the challenges they faced at Lexington and in particular, at Eastside Middle School. Based on comments explained in chapter four, prior to enrolling their children at Eastside parents were aware of the racial and social difficulties they and their children would experience in a predominantly white middle school. Despite these challenges, parents elected to take advantage of the educational opportunities that were available in the suburbs. This chapter explored the institutional racism

that shaped the daily experiences of African-American parents and children at Eastside. Because institutional racism is geared to maintain racial inequality by unfairly distributing resources to whites rather than to African-Americans, the African-American parents experienced feelings of frustration, distrust, and disenfranchisement.

Parents talked about feeling unwelcome, feeling like an outsider, unequal access, and unfair treatment. Parents and a visitor described some of the administration and main office staff as not friendly and judgmental towards people of color. The incidents described by parents were centered on interactions with individuals, but the people in this study reflect dominant and subordinate races in an environment marked by a racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Administrators were seen as having a lack of concern for all students and placing blame for lack of student success on families rather than critically examining practices at Eastside. Labeling African-American families as uninvolved and African-American students as more likely to be unsuccessful because their families are uninvolved is a mechanism for the reproduction of an existing racial structure. This existing racial structure provides material benefits for whites. Contrary to previous school experiences, parents described administrators and staff as unwilling to partner with African-American parents to help their children succeed. Despite their offer to work with the school and the district to provide new perspectives and to discuss challenges facing their children, parents were faced with a reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue. Utilizing a colorblind ideology allowed the Lexington School District and the Eastside Middle School to escape talk about race and to maintain a system of privilege by following normal customs and practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Because of this institutional silence regarding race, the white students benefitted by seeing people that looked like them in positions of power, leading classrooms, and in curricular and instructional materials. African-American students, on

the other hand, faced low expectations for academic performance and behavior that led to them being placed in remedial classes, not considered for honors classes, and unfairly targeted for disciplinary consequences. Finally, parents described their frustrations with the lack of resources and programming to help students make meaningful connections to curriculum. Large systems such as schools, corporations, legal institutions create different opportunity structures for whites and for African-Americans. These large social forces are responsible for patterns of inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Vaught, 2011).

These challenges forced parents and students to learn strategies to negotiate this educational environment. Parents developed and utilized strategies to navigate interactions with staff at Eastside. They taught their children how not to be noticed to avoid being targeted for unfair treatment. These are the costs that parents were forced to accept to have their children educated in the suburbs. Institutional norms and accepted practices in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School resulted in parents feeling like outsiders. In the next chapter I explore how images and racialized perceptions impacted the educational environment for some parents and students.

Chapter 6:

Habits and Frames

In the previous chapter I explored how institutional norms at Eastside Middle School in particular and Lexington School District in general disadvantaged African-American students and challenged African-American parents' ability to be comfortable in a particular educational environment. Parents' experiences showed how institutional practices and the resulting organization and enforcement of everyday life in Lexington and at Eastside marginalized African-American parents and their children. In this chapter I continue to delve into institutional racism at Eastside Middle School and in the Lexington School District by looking at the organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate. This white racial frame includes negative stereotypes, images, and metaphors concerning African-Americans, as well as assertively positive views of whites and white institutions (Feagin, 2006). Sullivan's (2006) notion of habit is a useful tool to analyze parents' talk about their experiences and the experiences of their children at Eastside Middle School. Sullivan explains habits as the manners of being and acting that constitute the self. These are not objects of conscious awareness; they are enacted without thinking (Sullivan, 2006). Analyzing the language my informants used to describe everyday experiences with some of the staff at Eastside through the lens of habits informed by the white racial frame illustrates how African-American students and parents are marginalized. For example, my informants described the instructional materials used by some of the staff at Eastside as exclusively teaching white culture and a Euro-centric, white perspective about historical events. The habits these staff use when selecting instructional resources diminishes the contributions of African-Americans to the historical and cultural development of the United States.

This chapter is organized in three sections. First, parents talk about instances and issues that made their children feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, and socially isolated at Eastside Middle School. Parents described instances when their children felt out of place and isolated and connected these negative feelings to the color of their skin. Parents talked about the ways teacher's unconscious use of insensitive language made their children feel unwelcome and consciously neglected opportunities to educate their students on issues related to race and diversity. I emphasize parents' experiences and the children's experiences as parents reported them to illustrate the ways African-American children in a predominantly white educational environment experience unique challenges and their experiences highlight the negative impact of the white racial frame (Feagin, 2006).

In section two, I examine how parents talked about negative stereotypes, images, and metaphors and how they are used by staff at Eastside Middle School to judge African-American students' academic abilities and expected behaviors in the classroom. Parents provided their understanding of the ways that media conveyed images and portrayals of African-Americans results in teachers labeling African-American students. Parents described how the habit to use these labels result in the sorting and selection of students, which impacted students' self-esteem and resulted in missed educational opportunities. Parents described instances when teachers' generalized African-American students' ability to know the Black experience in American history. Again, I emphasize parents' experiences here to show how stereotyping students based on images negatively impacted the educational experience for African-American students in this predominantly white educational environment.

In section three, I examine how parents' experiences led them to understand their children and other African-American children faced lower academic and behavioral expectations

with harmful consequences. Parents provided their understanding of why staff approached African-American children with lower expectations. Parents shared their experiences with teachers who focused exclusively on monitoring the behavior of African-American students at the expense of providing a rich educational experience. Parents shared how pre-determined expectations for African-American students resulted in limited access to enriched classes and unique extra-curricular opportunities. Teachers' inability and unwillingness to meet the needs of all students in their classes was explained by parents. Parents' experiences with teachers whose habits included preconceived notions about African-American parenting were shared to illustrate how low expectations for behavior in the classroom were tolerated. These experiences illustrate the cost of lower academic and behavioral expectations for African-American children.

My child feels isolated

Parents associated their children's discomfort at school with feelings of isolation or alienation. Parents explained their children's uncomfortable feelings and negative self-perceptions to be a result of going to school in an environment where the habit is to not acknowledge race, the importance of discussions about race, and the unique needs of African-American children in a predominantly white environment. These examples show how the white racial frame marginalizes African-American students and their parents. One way parents talked about feeling uncomfortable was the recollection of a daughter's description of the students on the school bus. Caroline shared a conversation she had with her daughter.

> Christine said, 'I'm the darkest person in my school. I'm the darkest person on my bus.' She appeared to be devastated by this. She said, 'I'm even darker than Casey [her sister].' Casey, my older daughter is fair skinned. I said, 'Aren't you beautiful?' So, I was able to negate that traumatic event. You know, if she had a teacher in her environment or any person, a lady behind the lunch counter, she might not have begun to feel that way. Another thing, we were watching something on television like Entertainment Tonight. There is this blond woman, who was talking about some artist, or what have you, and she might have been on

screen for three minutes and then a Black woman, she comes on and her thing was
30 seconds and Christine was like, um, they only gave her 30 seconds, she must
not be as good as that other girl. You know, it is things like that that kind of
perpetuate the stereotype of we're not good enough. So I constantly have to
reinforce that point.

Caroline's daughter, Christine, was devastated because she began to notice she was the darkest

person on her bus. Caroline's point was that her daughter associated dark skin with bad or ugly.

Blackness was understood by Caroline to carry a negative meaning (Lewis, 2001). This is how a

white racial frame, which is consciously and unconsciously expressed in the routine operations

of institutions such as schools, results in feelings of inferiority of those that are racially

oppressed (Feagin, 2006). Caroline understood these negative feelings to be rooted in a lack of

African-American role models throughout society and especially at Eastside Middle School. A

point Caroline made was that in the school environment her daughter was surrounded by whites.

Her teachers were white, most of the other staff was white, and most of the students were white.

Caroline emphasized the point that her daughter associated Blackness with a negative meaning

by recalling a conversation they had about more airtime given to white celebrities as opposed to

Black celebrities on television shows such as Entertainment Tonight. Caroline's recollection of

Christine's words, "they only gave her 30 seconds, she (the Black woman) must not be as good

as that other girl (the blond woman)" illustrates Caroline's understanding that not seeing

African-Americans in positions of power or respect led her daughter to believe African-

Americans are inferior, not just different.

A second way parents talked about feeling socially isolated was regarding the formation

of friendships within peer groups and the work of teachers to help children make friends. Gary

described his son's understanding of why he was having trouble making friends. Gary explained

that his son felt as though he was unable to make friends because he is Black and Gary expressed

a desire for the staff to recognize the challenge his son faced and to do more to help him.

> Let me go back to my children. It is really about my children and how they feel.
> My child at times feels socially isolated. He feels, um, and this could be his own
> personality, certainly, but he does feel at times, actually, I remember one time, I
> invited him to my radio show and he said, 'Well, I'm the only Black boy in my
> class and nobody likes me.' Now, I don't know if he wanted me to feel that way
> or whatever, but I suspect that if he had more friends it would not be an issue.
> But, he sometimes feels isolated in that environment.

Gary's recollection of this conversation suggested his son understood he could not make friends

because he is Black and his son struggled due to this lack of friendships. This understanding of a

relationship between being Black and not being able to make friends is likely connected to racial

identity development. Tatum (1997) explains that racial grouping, even in schools where

students are continuously together for many years, may be a result of the search for personal

identity. The exclusion of Gary's son from social groups may be a result of habits or everyday

understanding and enactment of dominant and subordinate status, where white students feel more

privileged and powerful than Black students. The feelings of isolation that Gary's son

experiences may be a result of his engagement with an exploration of racial identity development

and a lack of connection he feels with his white peers. It is likely that Gary's son is challenged

to do this racial identity development and exploration on his own due to the predominant number

of white classmates and a lack of understanding of the school staff about the need to provide

adolescents with identity-affirming experiences and information about their own cultural groups

(Tatum, 1997).

Later in our conversation, but while still discussing issues of diversity and the challenges

his son faced at Eastside, Gary described his general impressions of the staff when he said, "I

think as a Black parent, a parent of African-American children in this district, you don't always

feel that either the teachers understand or want to understand your children." Gary's words convey that a pervasive atmosphere of willful ignorance existed between teachers and African-American students (Lewis & Forman, 2002). His racialized language accuses teachers of neglecting to do the work necessary to build meaningful student-teacher relationships. Gary's language implies teachers are more willing to build meaningful relationships with white children. In this instance, these habits of unknowingly neglecting the needs and feelings of African-American students resulted in Gary's son feeling socially isolated at school. Gary's point was that the staff at school should have recognized the unique needs of his son, a young, African-American in a predominantly white school. The school should have pro-actively recognized this need and provided support to make sure all students feel included, especially the African-American students.

Caroline echoed this point when she explained her concern that a teacher may act unintentionally, but his or her actions, nonetheless, have significant consequences. She said, "I want my children to feel welcome and for teachers to recognize that in a classroom situation where the child might be feeling a little uncomfortable because of the white mindset, that they don't do anything to amplify that discomfort." The "white mindset" Caroline refers to is the language habitually used by teachers and their everyday actions, which are often not viewed as racist because they have become the ways of thinking and acting among the majority (Feagin, 2006). It is the white frame, the habits (Sullivan, 2006). Here, Caroline intimates that teachers do not have the necessary understanding or training to evaluate their language and actions based on a need for racial understanding and sensitivity. Nonetheless, their words and actions may be discriminatory and help to maintain a hierarchical society.

The unwillingness of teachers to create intellectual space to discuss issues regarding race is another way parents talked about their children feeling uncomfortable in this predominantly white educational environment and shines a light on the white racial frame at Eastside Middle School. Gary recalled a field trip the students took to see the play, *Big River*.

> I'll give you an example of, of, of insensitivity. One of the things I raised was the play, *Big River,* because of the content. One of the things that my son said to me, I raised the question at the Parent-Teacher Organization meeting. I said, 'You know, what kind of preparation are you going to give kids for the play? The play is dealing with a sensitive issue and they could use racial epithets in this play. How are you dealing with educating the kids about the epithets that could be used?' Now the play, editorially, decided not to use these epithets but, um, 'How will you fit in time to discuss these issues?' I asked my son and he said, 'Well, they have study guides and all that.' When I asked him, I said, 'What kind of preparation did you have for that class? [He responded] 'Well, they said we were going and this is what it is going be about. Period.' But the story, to make a long story short, he said, that there were some kids making fun after the play around issues in the play but there was no space created by the teacher where sensitive issues could be discussed.

Gary explained his belief that educators should teach about race, especially when students are exposed to curriculum that contains racial messages and language. First, Gary explained his attempt to raise concerns while attending a meeting of the Parent-Teacher Organization, but his concerns were not addressed. To Gary, this was an indication of failure at the institutional level to address this issue of sensitive content prior to students attending the play. For Gary there was the distinct possibility that students would hear racial epithets and the use of this language may be particularly disturbing to African-American children. The administration effectively maintained racial inequality and reinforced white privilege by determining what is and what is not *sensitive* through the silencing of dialogue. Gary's words, "there was no space created by the teacher where sensitive issues could be discussed" insinuates the teacher failed in her obligation to help students deal with issues around racism. As a result of this experience Gary's son, other African-American children, and the white children in the classroom likely came away with an

understanding that race is something that is lived but not discussed and that making jokes around issues of race is acceptable. This is ironic, of course, because *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the book on which the musical is based, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* are commentaries on the supposed differences that are innate in human beings and explore issues of race and identity. It is as if the school checked the box to show that they addressed the issue of diversity by taking their students to the theater and exposing them to a play that dealt with race. Certainly exposure is important, but this was a missed or ignored opportunity to address issues of race and to demonstrate how to engage students in grade level appropriate discussions. Again, school staff fell into the habit of using silence to ignore racism and allow racial inequality to remain unchallenged.

Parents' language suggested the cost they and their children paid to attend Eastside Middle School was coming home with low self-esteem and other uncomfortable feelings due to the white racial frame that exists and is maintained through habits of language and action at Eastside Middle School. In this case, these ideologies resulted in staff being unable or unwilling to identify and meet the unique needs of African-American children in a predominantly white environment.

You just assume that that's just how they are

In this section, I explain how parents' language suggested the clear presence of a white racial frame that permeates this institution and the habits of white adults at Eastside Middle School, which negatively impacted African-American children's self-esteem, denied access to educational opportunities, and forced students to participate in uncomfortable educational environments. Parents talked about these habits and understandings and the influence they had on teachers' expectations for African-American students' behaviors, abilities, family

background, intents, and desires. Additionally, the parents' language described how they

negotiated these racialized experiences at Eastside. Resistance and accommodations to the white

racial frame were two tactics the parents discussed. One parent suggested a change in approach,

which is necessary to counter these stereotypes.

Parents gave examples of ways their children were treated differently, but one parent

provided an interesting explanation. Audrey provided her understanding of why some teachers

at Eastside Middle School may treat African-American children differently than white children.

> I think that some teachers may not come from a background where there is
> diversity. They may have gone to a wealthy, suburban type of school and they
> lived in that type of neighborhood and this is the first, you know first interaction
> with minority students. So, therefore, where are you getting your information of
> how these people are, movies, videos, the TV shows, or what? People say
> robbing, stealing, they are angry, they are mean, they are bad, you know, you can
> kind of get that. This kind of kid, he's dressed this way. He thinks he's LL Cool
> J or, you know, it happens when you are not around those kinds of people. So,
> you just assume that that's just how they are and now I'm going to treat them that
> way.

Audrey's opinion about why the teachers act the way that they do reflects what many authors

describe as the result of a steady diet of media-created images of African-American youth

(Anderson, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Britzman, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-

Billings, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 1999). The stereotypical images whites grow up seeing in

our racialized world powerfully influence their expectations of African-American students and

their families. Differing expectations for whites and African-Americans are part of the

seemingly invisible and yet actively productive habits of white privilege (Sullivan, 2006).

Unless educators consciously work to undermine these stereotypes, they act on them

unconsciously. Our assumptions related to race are so deeply entrenched that it is virtually

impossible for us not to hold them unless we take conscious and deliberate action. Whites do not

approach new encounters with African-Americans with minds that are blank slates, but rather

with minds framed in terms of traditional white-racist thinking, interpretations, and inclinations (Feagin, 2006; Noguera in Sadowski, 2010). Audrey's explanation affirms the research on white teacher's assumptions about African-American children (Anderson, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Britzman, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 1999). Audrey's description of teachers' white racial frame provides a meaningful backdrop for the events shared by other parents that show how African-American students are labeled and treated at Eastside Middle School.

This community is suspicious

One way parents talked about labels involved discussions about their experiences with teachers assuming each African-American student lived in a particular neighborhood or came from a certain type of family situation. Audrey recounted an afternoon after school when her son was almost put on the wrong school bus.

> Andy almost missed the late [after school] bus and a teacher wrote a bus pass for him to get on the bus to Rosewood Gardens. And he's like 'Ma, what is this big deal with the Rosewood Gardens?' And then I had to explain to him that Rosewood Gardens is a housing unit. I said there are a lot of minorities that live there. He said, 'So they don't own their own homes?' He said, 'Well, they [teachers] just assumed that I rode that bus.' He said, 'Why would the teachers think I lived in Rosewood Gardens?' I said, 'Think about it.'

> Now as far as teachers, um, I do know that if there is a student that is, say from that area or assuming to be from that area, it's assumed that they come from a broken home or there are some dynamics in the household. Or they, um, what's it called, that the student receives reduced lunch.

This exchange is loaded with significance. First, Audrey explained to her son that many of the families living in a particular subsidized housing complex were "minorities." A message that Andy may have come away with from his mother's explanation is that African-American families are more likely to live in subsidized housing. Second, Audrey's lesson to her son about why teachers thought he lived in Rosewood Gardens, as illustrated by her answer "Think about

it," demonstrates the type of education that African-American parents are forced to provide to help their children better understand the school environment where teachers perceive African-American children in problematic ways. In this case, Audrey helped her son to see that some teachers come with an inherent understanding that all African-American children are poor and therefore must live in subsidized housing. Finally, Audrey words "Now as far as teachers, I do know that if there is a student that is from that area [Rosewood Gardens] it is assumed that they come from a broken home or there's some dynamics in the household" suggest her understanding of a type of white racial frame. In this case, Audrey explains that some teachers believe that if a student lives in Rosewood Gardens then he or she lives with a single parent who is not involved in their child's education. Therefore, a student living in Rosewood Gardens is likely to misbehave in the classroom or be unsuccessful in the classroom. These determinations are habitual and are made without careful reasoning.

Gary provided a similar understanding about the white racial frame of many of the teachers at Eastside Middle School. His understanding was expressed as a comparison of his experience at Eastside Middle to the experience he had at Shaw Elementary School.

> At Shaw it just seems that they're looking out for you, that there is a community and that's the word I want to use. It's a community of support that is there looking out for the best interests of your child. As opposed to this community, that is somewhat suspicious of your child. You know, suspicious of intent.

As was mentioned in chapter four, Gary described the environment at the school his children attended prior to coming to Eastside as very supportive. The administration and the teachers at that school offered support to students to help them succeed and support to parents to help them be involved with their child's education. Gary's experience at Shaw Elementary contrasts with his experience at Eastside where he found the school staff suspicious. Gary understands the Eastside community as being suspicious of African-American parents, as if these parents were

out to take something that does not belong to them or enjoy resources they do not deserve. His understanding is that many of the teachers come with a preconceived notion about African-American children. Gary's words "this community is somewhat suspicious of your child" suggests his understanding that African-American children do not enjoy the opportunity to be judged by their actions and achievements. African-American children come to this school and are deemed "suspicious." Gary's words suggest that the white racial frame identifies African-American parents and children as suspicious, as if they have ulterior motives for attending Eastside Middle School. Gary did not elaborate on why whites are suspicious, but he may be suggesting that whites are concerned that African-American students are trying to take advantage of the resources available in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School. As well, whites may question how African-Americans could afford to live in the Lexington School District, as if they could not possibly have the income to do so.

Gary provided another example that illustrates ways teachers drew conclusions about African-American parents.

> [I know] A professional whose last name is different than her daughter's. The assumption was, because her name was different that she was not married. Well, not that she was a married professional who maintained her name because she was a married professional. No, it's because she must be one of those parents. There is always the expectation that you are one of those parents. That you are from Rosewood Gardens or something.

Gary's words provide another example of the white racial frame. In this case, Gary's point is that it is not atypical for a white woman in the Lexington School District to have a different last name from her child because this is a choice exercised by many professional women; however, if an African-American woman has a different last name from her child then it is likely that she is a single mother with multiple men in her life. This is another example of one way the white racial frame includes a negative stereotype as well as asserts a positive view of whites.

She will not suffer by thinking she is less than everybody else

A second way parents talked about labels and their impact on children's self-esteem was around the use of standardized tests, which are used to sort students into remedial classes. Each year, students at Eastside Middle School take nationally normed assessments and state assessments ostensibly used to gauge student success and to inform necessary programmatic changes. One such assessment, the Test of New York State Skills (TONYSS) was used to help determine each student's need for academic support. Veronica shared the impact that placement in a remedial class had on her daughter's self-esteem.

> But, regardless of what that teacher's opinion is, she won't be in that class next year because I think it will play, it'll play a big part on her self-esteem. I'd rather put her in over at Huntington Learning Center or over at Sylvan Learning Center where I'll work with her because I will not have her suffer in terms of thinking that she's less than everybody else that goes to that school. Her ego is damaged. Especially having done well in school all year long, Yes, I think it's damaged. I won't let that completely ruin her. It's okay for kids to respond out, 'Hey, I need help' or if I need help, you know it's available and I can be in there with everybody else getting help but it's especially hard I think for black students.

Veronica's language denotes that placement in a remedial class had a negative impact on her daughter's perception of her abilities and of her worth. Additionally, Veronica was concerned that her child was scheduled for remedial support based upon a single test. Veronica seems somewhat resigned to the fact that her daughter was scheduled for a support class and she recognizes that the class may help her daughter succeed in English language arts, however, she is not comfortable with the impact that this class has had on her daughter's self-esteem. Veronica is very sensitive to the fact that her daughter feels or may feel like she is not as smart as other children because she is receiving support. It is clear that Veronica is sensitive to the messages from classmates and teachers that her daughter receives about her ability and self-worth. This is particularly clear when she states "It's okay for kids to respond out, 'Hey, I need help'…but it's

especially hard I think for black students." Her point is that when an African-American student asks for help he or she is affirming the white racial frame that African-American students are not as academically capable as white students. Veronica, who is clearly cognizant of the habits of the staff and the lens staff use to judge African-American children, is willing to pay for academic support beyond the school, rather than affirm the stereotype.

Parents talked about the markers used to classify African-American children and the resulting loss of educational opportunities. Caroline's daughter was diagnosed with a learning disability. Caroline talked about the conflict that occurred when her child was forced to miss out on the opportunity to learn to play an instrument because of a scheduling conflict. The scheduling conflict may or may not have been avoidable, but the presence of the conflict had a lasting, negative impact on her daughter's self-esteem.

> Casey started pulling away in middle school. She felt like she was not smart. She wanted to do music and the teacher, there was one teacher in particular, suggested to me that because she was in resource support class, she had to be pulled out [of the general education curriculum] at some point. She said, 'Casey being in music wouldn't be a good thing because she would miss her academics.' And that one act, I think, made Casey feel like she was not smart. When, in fact, she was smart and to this day she still talks about not being part of the band. She wanted to learn how to play an instrument and that never happened. And so, that kind of haunted me about Casey with her experience going through.

Caroline's regret about acquiescing to the school's decision to not allow Casey to pursue learning an instrument was clearly evident in her words "that kind of haunted me." Caroline attributed Casey's "pulling away from school" because "she felt like she was not smart" to this "one act." Caroline was clear that Casey is smart, but the messages Casey received from adults at Eastside became the basis for a lack of confidence in her academic abilities. Caroline was haunted because the message Casey received about her academic ability led her to become disengaged with school. Caroline's description of feeling "haunted" about Casey's experience

leads me to believe that Caroline felt powerless to defend her daughter against these forces. I say

this because I observed many meetings where parents relied on the expertise of school staff to

make recommendations about educational programs. School staff often used these meetings to

provide answers *to* parents rather than working *with* parents to collaboratively agree on a plan of

action for students.

Parents talked about the way their children were treated by classmates and how teachers

tolerated this behavior. Audrey's description of an incident involving her son during a lesson in

class is an example of the bias that exists at Eastside Middle.

> Andy comes home and he's like, 'Ma, guess what? My friend and I were the
> subject of the class.' And I said, 'How?' He said, 'We were discussing slaves and
> slavery.' He explained that everybody looked at them and he said the teacher, he
> was playing a video clip or something. He said that they [other students] were
> just all looking at Andy and his friend and his neighbor. They kind of, like, talked
> about it and kind of, like, laughed it off. But, Andy was like, he [the teacher] just
> shook his head. I said, 'Did you feel uncomfortable?' He said, 'I felt weird.' I
> said, 'They are ignorant and ignorance is a lack of knowledge, not knowing what
> they don't know, thinking that all Black people come from slavery and they are
> slaves.' He said, 'Wow.' He said, 'Oh my God, my friend and I were just being
> looked at and it's really funny because his mother is, um, bi-racial and his
> grandmother is white.' It's like, you don't have to shout to the world that they
> don't know, they just don't know. You know, they're your friends; they'll get to
> know you and accept you for who you are. You know, like I was saying before,
> you can go to 80,000 diversity trainings, sensitivity trainings, but if you are not a
> passionate educator it may not gel.

Audrey's words "You know, they're your friends; they will get to know you and accept you for

who you are" suggest her willingness to excuse Andy's classmates because they are ignorant, not

malicious. Audrey laid blame for not addressing this incident in the classroom at the feet of the

teacher when she said, "You can go to 80,000 diversity trainings, sensitivity trainings, but if you

are not a passionate educator it may not gel." Audrey's point was the teacher in this classroom

needed to be sensitive to the messages being sent by students. She understood the role of the

teacher was to intervene and to educate the class that not all African-Americans are descendants

of slaves and that African-American students may not have a deeper understanding of the life of

a slave, simply because they are African-American. Because the teacher did not address this, the

white students did not learn that all African-Americans are not descendants of slavery and, more

importantly, did not learn to complicate their understanding of the African-American experience.

Tolerating versus embracing diversity

Finally, parents provided an explanation for the discrepant treatment of African-

American children. Audrey's words introduced this section with her understanding of how a

steady diet of media created images of African-Americans provides meaning for white teachers.

Here, Audrey provided her understanding of the prevailing environment, the white racial frame,

at Eastside, which is characterized by tolerance, not embracing of diversity.

> As far as the teachers, I can say that they are tolerating diversity, they are
> tolerating but there is a difference between embracing and tolerating. When you
> embrace, you celebrate and you ask to share. A lot of teachers compliment Andy
> on his clothes. It's great to give compliments but you know, Andy earns his
> money. He mows lawns. He works to earn his money. He buys his clothes and
> he said all the teachers are like, 'Wow, you bought something new on every single
> day?' That is not true. Little do they know we went to the clearance rack and we
> get what is on clearance. It just so happens that I make sure everything is ironed
> up neat because I say, if you are going to go to school with a bad reputation, at
> least look nice. At least you look nice, you know. I said to him that you need to
> let the teachers know you for Andy, that is raising his hand and answering
> questions and being good. So, if they only see that you got your clothes that is
> not good. I said, they're noticing you but you want them to notice you for
> something else. I said, you know, just say thank you and go. Tolerating diversity
> and embracing diversity? I think that is what is going on. When you tolerate it
> there could be some conflicts of interest. When you embrace diversity it's like
> you know, you are welcome.

Audrey's explanation of the way that teachers show tolerance versus embracing diversity was

interesting and complicated.   Audrey's words "I say, if you are going to go to school with a bad

reputation, at least look nice" illustrates her understanding that her child was saddled with a bad

reputation. From her experiences and demonstrated by the explanation provided earlier, it is

clear that Audrey believes that all African-American children come to this school with a label of deficient. Her words "at least look nice" illustrate her strategies to derail that deficit thinking. Her words "you need to let the teachers know you for Andy that is raising his hand and answering questions and being good" show the lessons she was teaching her child about how to disrupt teachers' understanding of African-American children as deficient. It was interesting; however, that Audrey connected understanding about teacher's preconceived notions about African-American children, the lessons that must be taught to disrupt that narrative, and tolerance versus embracing diversity. Audrey's words suggest that when teachers are tolerating diversity they connect with students around less meaningful topics and on a shallow level. In this case, Audrey understands that the teacher's compliment about her son's clothes was superficial in nature. The teacher did not take the time to find out that Andy earns money by mowing lawns and he buys his own clothes, which may have created a feeling of respect or admiration rather than identifying him with stereotypically images of African-American young men who are materialistic and shallow. There was no evidence of the teacher embracing diversity by working to connect with Audrey's son on more meaningful and educationally related topics. This teacher maintained and reinforced the power differential that exists between whites and African-Americans through tolerance rather than choosing to embrace diversity. Embracing diversity through meaningful connection would disrupt the power differential and challenge the ideology that African-American children should be labeled as suspicious or deficient.

Parents' language suggested labels used by staff to mark African-American children as deficient negatively impacted children's experience at Eastside Middle School. The cost of attending Eastside Middle for these parents and their children was lower self-esteem, denied

access to educational opportunities, and forced participation in uncomfortable educational environments. Further, parents explained the impact of media portrayed images on the way staff understood African-American children at Eastside Middle School.

Low academic and behavioral expectations

In the United States, stereotypes that connect racial identity to academic ability and behavioral expectations negatively impact children as they grow up in the school context. Simply put, there are often strong assumptions made that if you are white you will do better in school than if you are Black (Noguera, 2009). Parents' experiences in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School in particular led them to understand that their children and other African-American children faced lower academic and behavioral expectations with deleterious consequences. African-American students experienced surveillance rather than learning, closed doors to enriched learning opportunities, disbelief from their teachers when performing well, an unwillingness to address unique learning needs, and neglect when academic re-direction was necessary. To begin, Audrey offered an explanation for teachers' thinking and behaviors as she responded to a question about her son being treated fairly at Eastside Middle School.

> There were times when I did feel that he was not getting fair treatment. I feel as if he was being targeted not as Andy, but as a person of color when those instances would happen. Um, students, depends on their background. They may, they come from different heritages and ethnicities [than the teachers]. Teachers may not have any idea so they just make assumptions.

Audrey's words "teachers may not have any idea so they just make assumptions" suggest her understanding of why teachers act in particular ways. Her words do not tend toward an indictment but rather an explanation, one that provides an excuse rather than an accusation, which is interesting given that it is the context of reflecting on unequal and unfair treatment that

her son endured. One would expect Audrey to be angry that her African-American son was targeted because he is a "person of color." Instead, Audrey provides another example of the ubiquitous white racial frame. White teachers, she explains, are in the habit of making assumptions about African-Americans; white teachers' minds are framed in terms of the traditional white-racist thinking, interpretations, and inclinations (Feagin, 2006).

My teachers underestimate me

One way that parents talked about low expectations from teachers involved a situation where it was presumed African-American students did not know how to behave in a public setting while on a school-sponsored field trip to the local community theater. Earlier in this chapter I explained that Gary was frustrated that academic space was not created to discuss the sensitive nature of the content of the play. Here, Gary explains his frustration with the focus on behavior rather than on education.

> The teacher talked about how you are going to sit, in fact, he [his son] told me that Mrs. Crandall was more concerned about how he was going to be sitting, as if he'd never gone to the theater. As if he'd never gone to the theater [said with emphasis]. How is he to sit still for the whole time that the play is there? She was worried about him and another student. That's who she was worried about, [the other student] is African-American. She [the teacher] was worried about what my son and this other student were going to do.

Gary expressed dismay that the teacher's primary focus was on how the students behaved during the play, paying particular attention to the two African-American students in the class. His words "As if he'd never gone to the theater" illustrate Gary's belief the teacher could not fathom that an African-American student would be exposed to the theater and it was part of her job to outline behavioral expectations. In this instance, surveillance became the primary objective rather than focusing on educating the students about this literary piece.

Parents also talked about teachers' habits of assuming African-American students are less capable than their white peers. Caroline shared her experience with her daughter and how she reacted to the teacher's establishing an expectation of low potential for performance.

> My point is Christine came home in 7th grade, when students are placed in advanced math. She knew her grades because grades were talked about between friends. She was not geared towards [selected for] advanced math and that choice was made, but she had confidence. She said, 'I think my teachers underestimate me.' She used those words and then when it came out that, you know, that certain friends were put in advanced math and she wasn't, she was like 'Call them [the school], I should be in advanced math. I've got this grade, I've got that grade, I'm better than her and I'm not there.' She asked me three times to call. There was one day I was on the computer. She came in and sat on my lap and gave me the phone. She said, 'Call them now.' She was adamant. I was like, okay this kid needs to be in advanced math. But it turned out, and I was surprised by this but her teacher did not recommend her for advanced math. She ended up going and she did very well in it, she excelled in it.

Caroline's daughter was not recommended for the advanced math program. The message Christine received was that "my teachers underestimate me." The teacher did not recommend her despite excellent grades as compared to her white peers. This educational opportunity could have been lost had it not been for the strength of character demonstrated by Christine. She was not going to be passed over and insisted that her mother advocate for her to be in the advanced math class. As a result, Christine fought the prevailing understanding of her ability and fought to gain entry into the upper level math class and proved that she belonged there.

Gary had a similar experience with his son and his son's English/language arts teacher. Gary described feeling as though his son was not getting credit for being a capable student while at a parent-teacher conference.

> He has a teacher and they are not clicking. Now in her view she doesn't know if he's going to make it through 6th grade. Then on another view, we have a teacher who says, he's the greatest thing since sliced bread. I said to the one teacher, 'You know, my son read 32 books this summer.' Her response was less than blank. She said, 'Well, he's not showing that in my class.' You know what I mean? So, now how do you deal with that? In other words, the celebration is

> glad that we have a good reader. Now let's get him, you know, I guess he has an inquisitive mind. Now, let's get him to focus on task here. So that enthusiasm for education can be consistently applied.

Gary's words "Her response was less than blank" shows his understanding the teacher did not believe his son had read over the summer. Instead of recognizing the work this young man had accomplished and using that as a springboard for deeper learning, this teacher relied on her assumptions about African-American students to frame her understanding of his innate abilities. Gary's recounting of her response, "Well, he's not showing that in my class" demonstrates the teacher was not working with the student to better understand what he read and learned over the summer. Gary clearly articulated the words he wanted to hear from the teacher, which were "we have a good reader, now let's get him to focus on the task here." Gary wished for the teacher to move beyond her racialized emotions to help his son realize his potential.

Low expectations and unfair treatment of African-American students took place in extra-curricular activities, as well. Caroline explained her understanding of one of the unwritten rules that guided casting for the chorus.

> I've heard that some kids do not really get a shot at lead roles. Christine was not chosen for the select chorus and she was devastated. Christine came home and said she heard that only one Black kid makes it each year unless you come from a good family and I missed it this year. Christine happened to make it the next year and she was like, 'Now we come from a good family? So, that is why I made it?'

When Caroline says, "some kids do not really get a shot at lead roles," she means African-American students are not chosen for these parts. According to Caroline, it is a habit of white teachers to select white students instead of African-American students. This habit may be because white teachers cannot picture in their mind's eye what an African-American "star" looks like. When white teachers turn on their televisions or go to the movies they see people of their race widely represented (McIntosh, 1998). This limited exposure to minorities in lead roles

impacts one's thinking when making choices about the roles that particular people can play. For white teachers in predominantly white schools, it may just be natural to pick a student that looks like them and that looks like what a "star" typically looks like in mainstream culture. Caroline's reiteration of her daughter's belief that "only one Black kid makes it each year unless you come from a good family" shows another challenge facing African-American students and their families. That is, all African-American students and their families are defined as coming from *bad* family situations unless proven otherwise. This belief, rooted in low expectations for African-American children resulted in reduced opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities such as the select chorus. Finally, it is interesting to note that Caroline's daughter was able to challenge the explanation of why she finally earned a spot in the chorus. Offering her understanding of why she made the select chorus, Christine sarcastically explained to her mother that "Now we come from a good family?" Unfortunately, it is not clear if Christine's analysis is a critique of the prevailing belief of white teachers that one has to be from a good family to be chosen for the select chorus or if it is a critique of the explanation used by African-Americans to justify unequal treatment. In either case, her analysis shows that prevailing ideologies exist to explain behaviors of white teachers.

Set the bar a little higher and they will go

Teachers may be challenged to meet each student's individual learning needs when faced with a diverse group of learners. Gary offered an explanation of the choice teachers make when challenged to meet the needs of all children.

> I think people come to expect that a benefit of working at Eastside is that they only have to teach kids who are, whose parents are well-off, and who have resources. That if you have to do any work to teach kids who are not at that level, then that's a problem, and you'd rather not. You'd rather, you'd rather not.

Gary's words "that if you [teachers] have to do any work to teach kids who are not at that level, then that's a problem and you'd rather not" expresses his understanding that teachers make a conscious choice about which student's needs are going to be met. In his analysis, high performing students will be successful and struggling learners are left behind. He explained that teachers choose to not address the needs of students "who are not at that level." Gary insinuates the choices teachers made about which students to teach and which to leave behind was based on an expected level of performance, those that could or should succeed were taught and those that were expected to fail were left behind. Using Sullivan's (2006) notion of habit to analyze teachers' behaviors might suggest that teachers are in the habit of designing units and lessons without fully thinking about the needs of all students in their classrooms. They plan lessons and learning experiences that will support the growth of some students. When other students are not successful, teachers' habits lead them to explain away this student failure through the shortcoming of the student rather than critically examining their own habits and practices looking for reasons to explain why students are unsuccessful.

The explanation provided by Gary about teacher choices was supported by Caroline as she described her hopes and dreams.

> At some point, I would just have our teachers dream, you know, have a paradigm shift. Open themselves, open up to the possibility that all of the kids can learn, albeit some of them learn differently and that maybe, just maybe, if you raise the bar, raise the expectations you have for the children of color they may do that. All you have to do is set it a little higher and they will go.

Caroline's call for teachers to have a "paradigm shift" supports Gary's understanding that teachers do not address the needs of all students. This is the reality she experienced, but Caroline challenges the teachers to "dream," to imagine the unimaginable, that all students can learn. Teachers, she explained, are closed to this notion, but she calls for them to "open up" their

minds and their hearts. Caroline has a dream just like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream of

what could one day be possible. Caroline's dream is that teachers will "raise the expectations for

children of color" so that "they will go."

Parents talked about being unfairly judged in the realm of student discipline and how the

staff presumed they knew how parents expected their children to be treated. Gary shared an

interaction with a teacher where she clearly misunderstood Gary and his expectations for his

son's behavior. Gary explained that the teacher was caught off guard when told that she should

hold the boy accountable for his behavior as she would for any white child.

> I remember a teacher saying about [my son] that he was misbehaving. I was like,
> well that's not acceptable. Tell him not to do that. And she seemed to be surprised
> that that was an option. She was surprised that that was something we wanted to
> enforce. I don't know why that is. It seemed common sense; tell us what he's not
> doing right so he can get it done.

Gary's words illustrate his understanding that the teacher thought there was a different

expectation for African-American students as opposed to white students. Gary implies the

teacher expected the African-American student to misbehave during class. Gary words "she was

surprised that that was something we wanted to enforce" may have multiple meanings. First,

these words may imply Gary understood the teacher believed African-American parents accepted

misbehavior from their children. This is another example of institutional racism in the form of a

common narrative used at Eastside Middle School to generalize an understanding of African-

American parents and children as unruly and misbehaved. Another explanation may be that

Gary understood the teacher was surprised African-American parents would want the teacher to

discipline their child. This is another example of a narrative used at Eastside Middle School to

explain African-American parents as complacent about their children's behavior at school. Both

analyses suggest teachers had low expectations for the behaviors of African-American children.

The parents' language suggested their children and other African-American children faced lower academic and behavioral expectations at Eastside Middle School. This cost of attending Eastside resulted in African-American children having limited access to enriched classes and unique extra-curricular opportunities.

Summary

The examples of this chapter come from listening to parents talk about the challenges their children faced at Eastside Middle School. In this chapter I examined the language parents used to primarily describe interactions with staff. One parent talked about the "white mindset" that existed in the Lexington School District and in particular, at Eastside Middle School. All the parents described interactions that highlight the white racial frame that existed in the District and in the School. The white racial frame informed the habits of staff that resulted in unfair treatment of African-American students. For instance, parents talked about their children feeling isolated and having low self-esteem because of the labels and other markers used by staff to judge students' academic abilities and behavioral challenges. All parents described how this mindset resulted in the needs of their children being neglected. In one case, a parent described how staff should have noticed his child, one of a very few African-American children in the class, was struggling to make friends. In another case, a parent described how staff did not create educational space to discuss issues of race being presented in a theatrical performance that all students attended. Whether it was intentional or not, the staff missed prime opportunities to help African-American children feel welcome and to help all students better understand the salience of race in their school and in society. Parents talked about the ways labels are used to sort and select white and Black students at Eastside Middle School. A parent explained staff at Eastside may not have had experience or familiarity with African-American students and

therefore relied on media supported representations of African-American culture to guide thinking around abilities and behaviors. This thinking, explained the parents, resulted in denied access to educational and extra-curricular opportunities for their children.

This chapter is a critical analysis of the institutional norms at Eastside Middle School. Looking at the organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, and inclinations to discriminate in this institution through the experiences and words of African-American parents explains how these parents and their children are marginalized. An analysis of the experiences and words of these African-American parents using Sullivan's notion (2006) of habit illustrates how negative stereotypes, images, and metaphors concerning African-Americans are used to disadvantage African-American students and their parents while reinforcing positive views of whites and white institutions. This chapter reinforces how institutional racism at Eastside Middle School is maintained and enforced. The white mindset guiding much of the thinking at Eastside Middle School resulted in significant challenges for African-American students and their parents. These are the costs African-American parents and children absorbed to attend the Lexington School District.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

The central focus of this study, *Opportunity, but at what cost?*, is to better understand the experiences of African-American parents and students at a predominantly white school. How do African-American parents understand the opportunities this school presents and how do they negotiate the racial realities within which the opportunities exist? African-American parents and students talked about the abundant availability of resources in this suburban school district. The challenging curriculum and excellent teachers that are the basis of a meaningful educational experience are frequently mentioned. The commitment the District makes to the development of each child's social, emotional, physical, and artistic abilities, as well as their academic growth, is identified as a reason for the District's outstanding reputation. Extra-curricular activities and other learning opportunities available beyond the classroom are other reasons that people give to explain why they are satisfied with their experience in the Lexington School District and at Eastside Middle School, in particular. My study, however, insinuates that not all students at Eastside Middle School benefit equally from these available resources.

Many of the African-American parents and students at Eastside Middle School are exposed to persistent forms of racism. My informants helped me to see the inequality and unfair treatment that occurs in everyday interactions. As a result of this unequal and unfair treatment, students do not enjoy equal access to educational resources and often experience feeling bad about themselves. Rarely are there overt racist events occurring at this school; more frequently there are subtle interactions that indicate a need for white students, parents, teachers, and administrators to interrogate their white privilege and the impact that privilege has on African-American students and their families. The persistent racism that some African-American

students and their families face at Eastside Middle School can be identified as microaggressions.

Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007) define racial

microaggressions as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental

indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or

negative racial slights and insults towards people of color. These microaggressions occur in

interactions with staff, in overrepresentation in remedial and special education classes and

underrepresentation in enriched or advanced courses, in low expectations for behavior and

academic performance from some teachers and administrators, and in a lack of representation in

curriculum. These conclusions are drawn from the data, which is summarized in the next section

of this chapter.

Summary of findings

Chapter four of this dissertation focused on the research question: What are the

educational opportunities that African-American parents are looking for when choosing to move

to the suburbs? In investigating this question, I explored how parents made sense of the school

and school district that they chose to leave before moving to the suburbs. I also analyzed the

factors that led them to leave their original school and the notion of a geography of opportunity

that attracted parents to this particular school and school district.

Most of the parents in this study spoke highly about the schools their children attended

prior to moving. Much of their language centered on the idea that the schools were warm and

inviting and the school staff went to great lengths to ensure success for all students. Gary talked

effusively about the sense of caring he felt when interacting with staff. Similarly, Veronica

talked about being welcomed by school staff as a volunteer and a partner in the education of her

children. The school staff welcomed parent involvement throughout the school. Parents were

asked to help in the classroom, to chaperone field trips, to present lessons to students, and to serve on committees aimed at school improvement. In support of the findings of Brown and Beckett (1997), parent involvement in school increases parents' social capital, enabling the school and home to better align academic and behavioral expectations for students. The school staff demonstrated a commitment to the success of every student, which was important to parents. Veronica explained, "a fourth grade teacher said it was her goal that every child do well and it was important to her that she lose no one and they would work towards success every day, and that made me feel good." Despite these positive feelings, all of the parents in this study had a sense of foreboding about the prospects for the success of their children should they continue in the urban schools.

Parents explained the need to move out of the city despite their satisfaction with their child's current school. In fact, the parents discussed their explanations in three ways. First, parents talked about the distractions in the classroom that took time away from learning. For example, Audrey described her son's teachers as having to "spend half of their time in the classroom telling students" how to behave. Second, parents talked about their concern for the safety of their children should they remain in the current environment. Veronica talked about her fear that her son would get caught up in an environment that was unlikely to support his academic pursuits and had the potential to be physically unsafe. Finally, African-American children were being put in positions where they may make detrimental decisions. Audrey felt compelled to constantly remind her son "to have friends where they do their homework, they respect their parents, and they are involved in things." These and other challenges gave parents a feeling that the current educational environment did not hold much promise for their children.

Looking at the suburban schools, parents saw opportunities that were not available in the urban environment. The parents included in my study deliberately chose to move to the Lexington School District. Before moving, however, they did their homework and purposefully made their decision based on a number of criteria. Parents' language suggested they were looking for a school that was staffed by administrators and teachers that were aware of the need to help students feel safe socially and emotionally, who are skilled practitioners, and committed to the success of all students. Veronica emphasized this when she said, "all teachers and staff need to be held accountable to treat people like human beings regardless of their color." Parents talked about the importance of the school staff treating people fairly, not necessarily equally. Veronica talked about the need for administrators to model support for African-American students and to recognize that it is expected that some children may need more support than others. She described her expectation that the school leaders show "they care about this group [African-American children] and they are going to make them feel like they are important." After doing their research, the parents I interviewed chose to move to the Lexington School District and to enroll their children at Eastside Middle School.

At Eastside Middle School, parents saw more academic, material, and educational resources. In addition to these resources, parents identified the history of educational excellence, the proximity to former churches and neighborhoods, familiarity with the school, and the diversity of the student body as factors in their decision-making. Parents identified a wealth of opportunities in the suburban schools that were not available in the urban environment (Hallinan, 2001). These resources included material resources such as newer desks and tables, unique learning opportunities in and out of the classroom, and a highly skilled teaching staff. For Gary, material resources such as computers, textbooks, desks, chairs, computers, and a wireless

network available to teachers and students made up the foundation of a productive educational environment. Eastside Middle School offered Veronica and her family the opportunity to enroll in a school "that had results from standardized tests" and was "only five minutes from where we used to live." African-American parents considered a number of factors before choosing to enroll their children at Eastside Middle School. Understanding the successes and challenges parents faced in urban schools, their rationale to move out of the city and the factors that led them to Eastside Middle School provides the foundation for understanding their experiences in this predominantly white suburban school.

Chapter five of this dissertation focused on the research question: How do African-American parents experience the institutional practices and cultural norms at this institution? Again, by "institutional practices and cultural norms," I mean the racial structures in place that reproduce white racial privilege in society. In investigating this question, I explored how parents made sense of their level of involvement with the school, the enrollment of their children in remedial and enriched classes, and the curriculum and educational resources used in classrooms.

In contrast to their experiences at previous schools, parents generally felt unwelcome and unable to create a partnership with school staff in this predominantly white educational environment. Indeed, the parents articulated a number of ways in which their interactions with the staff at Eastside Middle School justified these feelings. For example, Veronica recounted her disgust with the words used by an Assistant Principal at Eastside Middle School when she said, "this woman is talking about *those* kids. She had a lack of concern for all students and she thinks that I am only concerned about my children." To Veronica, it was clear that there were two groups of children at Eastside Middle, our kids and those kids. Other interactions with school staff left African-American parents feeling as though they were second class citizens. Gary

explained that at Eastside Middle School, "It is almost as if you have to affirm yourself a little bit more and prove to people that you are not from the projects." Furthermore, African-American parents were acutely aware of the staff's unwillingness to see the uniqueness of a situation where an African-American family, new to the District, attending a predominantly white school may need accommodations to support their children. Veronica explained that on her daughter's first day at Eastside, she and her husband were denied the opportunity to walk down the hall to their daughter's classroom to check to make sure that she was emotionally comfortable in this new environment. Caroline echoed this sentiment as she explained her desire for teachers at Eastside to be more willing to work with parents to meet the need of African-American children. Caroline explained that African-American parents "want to be at the table and they want to be included in the conversation" as opposed to the prevailing attitude of some staff that they have all the answers and the opinions of African-American parents do not matter. This treatment was in stark contrast to the treatment African-American parents received at their previous school. These interactions and events left parents feeling as though the District was unable and unwilling to acknowledge, discuss, or partner with parents to address issues around race and ethnicity. Parents were acutely aware that school staff relied on an ideology of equality rather than a practice of fairness to justify the maintenance and enforcement of institutionally based racist practices (Feagin, 2006; CampbellJones & CampbellJones, 2002; Lewis, 2001). I say this because parents' language showed their frustration that school staff was unwilling to make any accommodations or adjustment to every day practice, which would affirmatively acknowledge that it is appropriate to provide people with different levels of support if needed.

Another way the African-American parents experienced and discussed institutional practices and cultural norms at Eastside was through the overrepresentation of African-American

students in remedial classes and the underrepresentation of African-American students in

enriched classes (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Noguera, 2010). Parents were incensed that

academic placements were justified by school staff based on a single test score or using criteria

that were kept secret. Veronica was angry that her daughter was assigned to a remedial reading

class despite have done well throughout the school year. Gary was frustrated that his son was

not recommended for the advanced math class despite receiving excellent grades in the previous

school year. In these cases school staff appeared to make decisions about students' academic

abilities that were contradictory to past performance. Decisions such as these lead to

overrepresentation of African-American students in remedial classes and underrepresentation of

African-American students in enriched classes, which essentially closed off academic

opportunities that were identified by parents as part of the geography of opportunity. These

placements unfairly burdened African-American students while preserving benefits for white

students. Remember, the goal of institutional racism is to maintain and justify an unfair

distribution of rewards (Vaught, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Similarly, parents' experienced, navigated, and discussed institutional practices and

cultural norms at Eastside through the lens of unfair and unequal application of disciplinary

responses enforced on African-American students. I explored how parents understood the

administration of discipline and the hyper-critical view of behavior of African-American

students. Gary explained his understanding of the approach used by school staff to mete out

discipline by stating, "There is no leeway. It just seems like that is [a disciplinary consequence]

the first thing that happens." His point was that African-American children are less likely than

white children to receive a warning or an opportunity to correct inappropriate behaviors. Parents

felt it important to teach their children how to navigate this environment to avoid being unfairly

accused or punished as a result of the approach taken by administrators and teachers to address behavior. For instance, Audrey felt it was necessary to explain to her son that he could not behave like his white friends and expect to get away with similar behavior. When her son complained that the white students did not get in trouble for what he did, Audrey recounted telling her son, "I said, 'You have to keep going and not worry about it.'" Audrey's words suggest that she felt it necessary to educate her son on how to navigate the school environment to avoid drawing negative attention. It was clear to parents that African-American students were more likely to be punished for incidents that may be overlooked for white students (Delpit, 1995; Mickelson, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Ferguson, 2007).

Parents pointed to the dominance of the Euro-centric curriculum and lack of diversity represented in the instructional resources used as another manifestation of institutional racism in this predominantly white environment. African-American parents felt compelled to offer supplemental instruction and materials to help make the curriculum and instruction more meaningful for all students. Veronica explained that "My daughter is going to get African-American history from me and my husband, but other children may not have a similar opportunity." Veronica's point was that her daughter was going to learn about the cultural contributions of African-Americans, but unless teachers make a conscious effort to include this information in the curriculum, there are a number of students that will miss out on the chance to learn this information. School staff rebuked African-American parents' offers to supplement the curriculum and instructional resources. Both Veronica and Gary offered to prepare and teach lessons but were denied the opportunity to be involved. Caroline was challenged with how to respond when a white teacher made an attempt to include African-American cultural contributions to the curriculum by including a Negro spiritual in a chorus concert. The piece was

poorly done and as Caroline said, "Not doing it right is almost like disrespect." Though it was not her job, Caroline felt compelled to help the teacher gain a deeper understanding of how the piece should have been performed. The lack of respect shown by this teacher and the failure of other teachers to recognize the contribution of African-Americans to the history and culture of the United States of America through the exclusion of diverse viewpoints and resources in the classroom is how institutional racism maintains and enforces racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Vaught, 2011).

How do African-American parents talk about their everyday experiences and the institutional practices in this predominantly white educational environment is the research question addressed in chapter six. This chapter extends the analysis begun in chapter five around institutional racism by looking at the use of microaggression, or the organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate that occur in everyday interactions between African-Americans and whites at Eastside Middle School. My analysis of the habits of staff in this predominantly white school illustrates how the white racial frame privileges white members of the school community while marginalizing African-American parents and children (Feagin, 2006).

African-American parents talked about the challenges their children and other African-American students faced in this predominantly white educational environment. For example, Gary's son felt socially isolated because he was the only African-American boy in his class. Gary explained that "as a parent of an African-American child in this district, you don't always feel that either the teachers understand or want to understand your children." Gary's words suggested that teachers' habits, or microinvalidations, unknowingly neglected the needs and feelings of African-American students. Gary provided another example of microinvalidation as

he described the failure of his son's teacher to engage in a discussion with her students around the topic of racism after viewing the play, *Big River*. Gary explained, "There were some kids making fun after the performance around issues in the play but there was no space created by the teacher where sensitive issues could be discussed." Attending the play provided an opportunity to engage students around the issue of racism; instead the teacher silenced any dialogue thereby nullifying the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of African-American students (Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007). Caroline echoed this point when she said, "I want teachers to recognize that in a classroom situation where the [African-American] child might be feeling a little uncomfortable because of the white mindset, that they don't do anything to amplify that discomfort." Caroline's description of actions that a teacher may take based on a white mindset is another way of describing microinsults, or use of language that is insensitive to a person's racial heritage or identity (Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007).

African-American parents talked about the ways their children were labeled based on stereotypes, images, and metaphors and how these labels were used to sort and select students. The parents used language such as insensitive, assuming, and suspicious to describe how African-American students' academic abilities and expected behaviors in the classroom were judged. As a result, African-American students were treated unfairly or felt poorly about themselves. Parents provided numerous examples of how their children were treated unfairly, but Audrey provided an interesting explanation for teachers' habits. Many teachers come from backgrounds that are not diverse, explained this parent. Therefore, the habits and understandings about African-American parents and students are not based on interactions, but rather are based on media-created images. For instance, Audrey thought her son, Andy, was identified as a behavior problem. Audrey explained that she thought he "was being targeted, not as Andy, but

as a person of color." Gary explained that a teacher assumed his son would misbehave at the theater. Gary was troubled that this teacher paid particular attention to the two African-American students in the class, focusing primarily on how they might behave during the performance.

These assumptions about African-American children went beyond behavior to include judgments about academic abilities, as well. Caroline shared her frustration that her daughter's explanation for not being recommended for advanced math was because "my teachers underestimate me." Gary had a similar experience with a teacher that did not believe his son had been reading during the summer. Instead of recognizing the work his son accomplished, this teacher relied on her assumptions about African-American students to frame her understanding. Caroline's daughter and Gary's son experienced microassaults, non-verbal attacks meant to hurt through discriminatory action (Sue, Bucceri, et al, 2007). This explanation affirms the research on white teacher's assumptions about African-American children (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ferguson, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 1999; Anderson, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Britzman, 1986). These habits of white adults in this educational institution are a result of a white racial frame or white mindset that existed in this predominantly white educational environment. This white mindset negatively impacted the educational opportunities afforded to African-American students and created an uncomfortable educational environment.

Implications and recommendations

This study attempted to illuminate African-American parents' experiences in a predominantly white educational institution. African-American parents shared their efforts to fully access the resources available in this school and school district and the struggles they encountered when faced with unequal and unfair treatment. From this research, I offer two

recommendations that may help to dismantle the legacy of institutional racism. These areas include professional development and changing hiring practices. Professional development includes work with school staff to develop a deep understanding and commitment to culturally responsive practice (Delpit, 2012, Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). This work begins with an examination of the pervasiveness of whiteness in this institution and similar institutions. This professional development would help school staff complicate the notion of white privilege, recognize the various ideologies and strategies used to maintain and enforce power and privilege, and make a commitment to take a stand against oppression.

With the goal of making educational equality a reality, beginning a program of in-service for white school staff about white privilege may be challenging because there is a lack of awareness and unlearning that needs to occur. First, there is the need to make people more aware of and willing to change the discrepant levels of access that are enjoyed by different groups of students. Second, teachers and other school staff need to challenge the ideology of meritocracy that is central to the operation of public schools in the United States.

Closing the achievement gap is often cited as a driving force behind many current educational initiatives. In fact, federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top seek to identify and penalize those schools and school districts that fail to meet the needs of underserved populations. Too often, schools that are challenged to help all students succeed use a lack of parental involvement or poor student behavior as means to explain away more complicated social and economic difficulties facing students and families. There needs to be professional development that engages this issue. Recognizing that public schools are part of a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources may be challenging for many people but this is necessary to challenge and

disrupt institutional racism. Teachers and other school staff need to acknowledge their power and privilege and use them responsibly (Kaufman, 2001). Helping people see whiteness as it exists in institutions such as public schools is a necessary prerequisite to change. I would center professional development efforts on the aforementioned issues.

Moreover, challenging the existing notion that all students have equal ability to succeed but differ in their willingness to work hard as a primary explanation of varying levels of success is necessary to disrupt systems of inequality. Racism, as many of us have been taught, puts others at a disadvantage. Outward examples of racism would not be tolerated in public schools because these actions disadvantage others and act to disrupt the meritocratic process. Making teachers and staff aware of white privilege and whiteness as an embedded ideology in public schools requires white people to come to terms with racism in the United States to see that we live in a society that is structured along racial lines and that schools play a part in its structuring (Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1997).

It is important for teachers and staff in a school to acknowledge inequality is not simply enacted in the interactions of people, but often is embedded in our social systems (Yancy, 2008). A successful beginning to change requires whites to name their whiteness, to understand their role in normalizing whiteness and also understand how whiteness is a site that is dutifully maintained (Yancy, 2008). Naming whiteness, not just as racist interactions and beliefs between and about people, but seeing it as a self-constructive effort to maintain a normative status that benefits whites at the peril of African-American students is to challenge one of the primary principles around which schools operate. In professional development initiatives, I expect that there will be strong resistance to the idea of whiteness. To accept this notion is to see that one is participating in and part of a racist structure and to accept that meritocracy may be

fundamentally flawed because there is systematic unequal treatment of certain groups of students.

When we come to realize that our society is structured along racial lines, then it is imperative that we take on the project to change; educators must accept the challenge to address racism. Heightened awareness about racism without also providing some hope for social change is a prescription for despair. We all have a sphere of influence and the task is to help people identify what their sphere of influence is and to consider how it might be used to interrupt the cycle of racism (Tatum, 1994). To begin, we must recognize that our actions are constantly creating, recreating, challenging, and transforming the networks of relationships that make up the fabric of our shared world. We influence the fabric of society by the choices we make about whose actions we choose to acknowledge and whose we choose to ignore; by where we take a stand and where we choose not to; by how we treat others and how we expect to be treated (Kaufman, 2001). Taking a stand against systems of oppression and challenging others to do the same is a beginning to question ideologies that perpetuate whiteness and disadvantage students of color. When we take on the role of ally we speak up against systems of oppression and challenge other whites to do the same (Tatum, 1997).

Caution must be used to ensure that we maintain a focus on challenging systems of oppression and not get stuck in projects that support white self-fulfillment or self-congratulations. Acts of resistance and questioning often do more to improve the sense of self of the white person involved than to challenge the racist structures of society. Rather than focusing on individual acts or renunciation, a more fruitful approach would be to look at the ways that we can challenge the racial structures of society. Teaching about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered people of color

and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners to establish a more just society (Kaufman, 2001; Averling, 2004).

A successful program aimed at disrupting whiteness in public schools requires participants to desire change for the betterment of all, to reflect on current practice to see how some groups are systemically privileged while others are systemically disadvantaged, and to act on new understandings to resist racial oppression. Kaufman (2001) identifies a series of recommendations to transform our consciousness. This begins with the need for each person to read, to inform him or herself. People of color should not be expected to do all the work of educating about race. Next, people need to be prepared to listen and to talk to people of color about racism. Expect that there will be much hesitation and mistrust. The person of color you engage with will be likely to suspect you of wanting to enter into the discussion to have your own view of reality affirmed. Allow your world-view to be disrupted by the radical otherness of a different perspective. If you ask a question, really listen for the answer. Finally, be humble and open to the possibility that much of what you take for granted, as the building blocks of your world-view, are likely to be shattered. Try to get used to being in situations where you feel oddly and unexpectedly ignorant, exposed, vulnerable, and just plain uncomfortable. From an informed view you can challenge the political opinions that follow from an unconsciously racist world-view. To disrupt this inequality it is necessary for teachers and other school staff to recognize the institutional racism that is enacted each day throughout our schools.

I expect that there will be significant resistance to this work in schools, which I characterize as denial, adherence to colorblind ideology, and the limits of the white guilt confessional. In public schools today, much of the talk around supporting African-American students places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the student or on his or her family. This

discourse is often centered on the idea that students are not successful because they do not work hard enough and/or their behaviors in school do not conform to standards and expectations. The impact of this discourse often results in low expectations for African-American students. This simplistic explanation of an existing discourse in schools acts to insulate teachers and other school staff from the need to confront existing system-wide unequal treatment of students of color.

A necessary first step to making schools appropriately responsive to typically marginalized students and families is to recognize that *white* is a social position with cultural characteristics that enacts privilege on an individual basis and within institutions. A challenge is that many teachers and staff do not feel comfortable identifying themselves as white. The dominant, the majority often see themselves simply as a person, which leaves whiteness as a dominant social position unmarked. Additionally, with the recognition of oneself as being white, one must recognize and own that with whiteness comes privilege. It may be difficult for whites to see racism. To do so disrupts the sense that we view of ourselves as good, responsible, respectable, deserving people and forces us to understand the contrast of the lives of people of color. Accepting that we live in a racist society means we are given privileges based on our race, by the mere fact of our whiteness (Kaufman, 2001). This may be a challenge for many of us.

Another challenge with this work in schools is that systemically privileged persons must want to give up something and to recognize that oppression is not a thing of the past. Although it is crucial that whites internalize racial justice since they possess the strongest form of investment in race, they also have the most to give up in terms of material resources and privilege (Leonardo, 2004). As Kaufman instructs, it is necessary for people to listen and to read about the experiences of African-American parents and students, because this will allow your world-view

to be disrupted by the radical otherness of a different perspective. This becomes a challenge when systemically privileged people disagree with accounts or refuse to consider that they are systemically privileged. This resistance to knowing is offensive to marginalized persons and reproduces systems of oppression and privilege. Denials of systemic injustice are fueled by culturally supported moral sensibilities. In terms of race, teachers and other school staff might argue that they do not see color and consider this morally virtuous (Applebaum, 2010). The colorblind ideology is excellent insulation from awareness.

White people protect their moral innocence by maintaining ideologies of color ignorance and meritocracy that, in effect, deny and dismiss how racism exists in the lives of many African-Americans. Confronting colorblindness ideology is to challenge the pull up your bootstraps mentality that is so pervasive in American education and throughout society. White ignorance is a systemically supported, socially induced pattern of misunderstanding the world. Disrupting the colorblind approach requires white teachers and administrators to understand the link between privilege that benefits white people and how such benefits sustain systems of oppression. Disrupting the colorblind ideology forces us to recognize the social structures that have been built through hundreds of years of exploitation so that we can see that race is built deeply into the fabric of our society (Applebaum, 2010, Kaufman, 2001). The colorblind ideological stance poses a formidable challenge because it is widely used by educators and attractive when not interrogated.

The white confessional, or the act of recognizing the unequal treatment of African-American parents and students, can be disruptive to the work of dismantling systems of inequality because the result may be limited to self-congratulations. White privilege awareness may lead to an individualistic psychologizing of privilege that white people assume can redeem

them from complicity. The emphasis on person awareness, therefore, overshadows the need for understanding and challenging systems of power. The work to disrupt institutional racism in schools depends on people moving past awareness of privilege to owning their complicity in institutional racism. It is necessary for us to understand that white domination is never settled once and for all (Applebaum, 2010).

Beyond professional development, it is necessary to interrogate hiring practices at Eastside Middle School. Typically, committees of teachers and administrators that are formed to hire new teachers or other staff often talk about the need to hire more teachers of color. More teachers of color are needed in white institutions because students of color need to see that they, too, can achieve positions of power and authority (Noguera, 2006). Certainly, there are a handful of non-white teachers and staff working at Eastside Middle School, but the majority of the teaching staff is white. Despite these conversations, the number of non-white teachers remains quite small (Appendix B). This stability is often explained away by saying that the majority of teachers graduating from teacher education programs are predominantly white and the pool of candidates reflects that fact; however, there has been no significant effort to change teacher recruiting practices to deepen the applicant pool. Making a commitment to actively encourage teachers of color to apply for openings and attending teacher recruitment fairs with an eye toward accomplishing this goal are two immediate steps to address this need.

Limitations and next steps in the field

This study was limited to African-American parents in one particular suburban school district. Although my initial interviews included African-American students and parents, I chose to limit my analysis to the experiences of African-American parents, only. I chose to exclude interview data collected from students during the analysis and writing of this study because it

became apparent that the interview questions I used with students did not help to answer my research questions.

Another consideration of this study is the limited number of African-American parents that were interviewed. Certainly, a larger pool of participants may have added different experiences to be analyzed and understood within this context, but it was not my intention to make generalizations based on the data. This study is not meant to be generalizable, it is written to show what persons think, feel, and experience and to show that human behavior is not random (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Karp, 1996). There may be a concern that the themes presented in this study are not representative or generalizable because of the small sample size. Certainly, I used subjective judgment to determine what is and what is not noteworthy, but these determinations were driven by the data to show novel and insightful examples of the issues and concerns being investigated (Karp, 1996). This qualitative research study cannot claim a sample to be statistically representative of the population, but using qualitative research methods has made possible the ability to capture a valid sense of what the experience is like for these African-American parents in this predominantly white school (Karp, 1996). This study is not meant to be generalizable, it is written to illuminate the larger field of institutional racism in predominantly white educational institutions, as well as explain how African-American parents and students navigated and negotiated within this space.

There are aspects of this study that should be further developed as a result of this work. The intent of this study was to learn about the experiences of African-American parents and students, how they made sense of their experiences, and how they navigated and negotiated this predominantly white educational institution. Further studies may include an exploration of the notion of diversity and how attending a diverse school can be used to privilege whites. For

example, the discourse of white parents and teachers around the ideal of diversity shows that this

is a beneficial attribute. Many people describe Eastside Middle School as diverse and

welcoming of diversity. White people talk about the benefits to their children of having them

attend a school that is diverse. Questions about what it means to be diverse, about who is

diverse, and how the goal of diversity impacts those that embody diversity should be explored

(Ahmed, 2009). Continued work should be done to better understand the school level factors

that contribute to cultural flexibility, the notion that students can cross perceived racial

boundaries to pursue opportunity and fully participate in the life of an institution and society.

What are the characteristics of schools where African-American students and parents report a

low level of racial isolation, high self-esteem, and high level of access to all curriculums? What

does it look like when diversity is embraced because diversity creates an opportunity for the free

flow of ideas, rather than when it is held as a badge of honor?

Final thoughts

Each year, Eastside Middle School and the Lexington School District receive

accountability data that clearly show there are students struggling to succeed on standardized

measures. In general, the administration and teaching staff are caring individuals that want all

students to succeed. To make schooling more responsive to students from diverse backgrounds,

however, requires culturally responsive administrators, teachers, and staff that have socio-

cultural consciousness as well as a sense that they are both responsible for and capable of

bringing about educational change.   This project requires teachers and staff to critically examine

the data, to go beyond the numbers, to question the personal interactions and the existing

structures that privilege some while excluding others. It is important that all staff interrogate

their personal interactions and complicate their understanding of racism and inequality to be able to see how institutional structures protect white privilege.

The example of teachers stereotyping students living in the Rosewood Gardens apartments and the existence of an environment where racist discourse goes unchallenged and accepted is one example of the institutional injustice that is pervasive at Eastside Middle School. It is the responsibility of all staff to interrogate these underlying norms. White educators often utilize discursive strategies to distance themselves from racist actions and to not interrogate systems that privilege certain groups of students and adults. One strategy is the use of color-blindness. Administrators and teachers often explain that they don't see color when looking at students as a way to mask unequal treatment. This discursive strategy reinforces the myth that color has no historical legacy of racial inequality (Butler, 1997 as referenced in Warren, 2001).

Examining whiteness requires all staff to complicate their understanding of white privilege and to understand and accept how systemic privilege protects white moral standing. It is important to provide staff with strategies and resources that enable them to move beyond the feelings of guilt that critically examining whiteness frequently engenders. Making schooling more responsive and accessible for students from diverse backgrounds requires that teachers and administrators have knowledge, attitudes, and skills to deconstruct common sense cultural assumptions and frames of reference. It is important that the critical project of making seen the unseen of white privilege in mundane contexts is a significant endeavor (Yancy, 2008).

The African-American parents that I interviewed made a deliberate choice to move their families from an urban school to the Lexington School District and to Eastside Middle School in particular. These parents were pessimistic that the needs of their children would be met given the persistent challenges facing city schools. They were looking for educational opportunities

for their children. They were looking for a school that offered better resources, a culture of high expectations within a nurturing environment, and highly skilled and motivated teachers and administrators. For the most part, these opportunities exist at Eastside, but for African-American parents and children they come at a cost.

Appendix A:

Staff at Eastside Middle School (2015-2016)[2]

	African-American	Hispanic or Latino	White	Multi-Racial	Total
Administrators			3		3
Teachers	2	1	72	1	76

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[2] New York State Department of Education

Appendix B:

Informed Consent Letter

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Cultural foundations of education
350 Huntington hall
315.443.3343

Doctoral Dissertation: *Opportunity, but at what cost?*

My name is Peter C. Smith, and I am graduate student at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

I am interested in learning more about the experiences of African-American parents who enter a predominantly white suburban school. How do they negotiate and construct their identities in that world, and how do teachers and staff of the school respond to them? This will take approximately one hour of your time. All information will be kept confidential. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details about the information you provide.

I would like to record our interview. Tapes will only be used to provide data for this study and all tapes will be disposed of when the study is complete. May I tape record the interview?

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand public schools. This information should help us by better understanding the ways that schools can better meet the needs of all students. I hope there will be some benefits to you in engaging in a dialogue about these issues, and having your voice heard.

The risks to you of participating in this study are that you may become sad or frustrated as you recount what may have been a challenging time.

If you do not want to take part, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, contact Dr. Barbara Applebaum at 315-443-3343. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, if you cannot reach the investigator contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

All of my questions have been answered, I am over the age of 18 and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of the consent form.

_____ I agree to be audiotaped.

_____ I do not agree to be audiotaped.

_____   _____
Signature of participant   Date

_____
Printed name of participant

_____   _____
Signature of researcher   Date

_____
Printed name of researcher

Appendix C:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you mind if I tape record the interview?

2. What is your name?

3. How old are your children? In what grades?

4. Where do you live?

5. How long have your children attended schools in this district?

6. What other schools have they attended?

7. How would you describe their experiences at other schools?

8. Thinking back to your children's previous school, how would you describe your involvement?

9. Talk about what it is like being a parent with a child in this school.

10. Tell me about the teachers.

11. Talk about the communication between school and home.

12. Talk about the curriculum and about what your child is learning.

13. Tell me about the services and support available to students at this school.

14. Tell me about the students in this school.

15. Tell me about the friendships your child has or has not made.

16. Talk to me about the expectations teachers have for your child.

17. Tell me about the challenges your child has faced.

18. Tell me about the challenges you have faced.

19. Tell me about the successes your child has enjoyed.

20. Tell me about the successes you have enjoyed at this school.

21. Tell me about the other parents at this school.

22. What changes would you make in this school?

23. What things should be maintained in this school?

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VITA

Peter C. Smith was born in Syracuse, New York. After graduating from Westhill High School in 1983, he attended the Northfield Mount Hermon School in Northfield, Massachusetts for a post-graduate year. Peter went on to attend Tufts University where he majored in Economics. After graduating from Tufts in 1988, Peter returned to Syracuse where he worked in sales for one year before enrolling in the School of Education of Syracuse University. Peter completed a Master's Degree in Social Studies Education in 1991 and began his teaching career in the Westhill School District in Syracuse, New York. Peter taught seventh and eighth grade social studies at Onondaga Hill Middle School for six years. In September 1997, Peter moved to the Jamesville-DeWitt Central School District where he taught seventh grade social studies at Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School for four years. From September 2001-December 2002, Peter took a leave of absence and returned to Syracuse University as a full-time doctoral student in Cultural Foundations of Education. Concurrently, Peter was fulfilling the requirements of the Certificate of Advanced Study in the Educational Leadership program at Syracuse University. While at Syracuse, Peter acted as a teaching assistant for Dr. Gerald Grant's class, The American School, in the Cultural Foundations of Education program. Thereafter in 2003, Peter was hired as the K-12 Curriculum Coordinator at Jamesville-DeWitt. This was followed by appointments to the positions of Middle School Assistant Principal at Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School and Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Jamesville-DeWitt School District. In July 2007, Peter was hired as the Principal of Moses DeWitt Elementary School also in Jamesville-DeWitt. In December 2008, Peter was appointed to be the Principal of Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School. After five years as Middle School Principal, Peter was chosen to be the Assistant Superintendent for General Educational Services for the Jamesville-DeWitt Central School District. In this role,

Peter provides leadership in the areas of curriculum, personnel and labor relations, and serves as the Chief Information Officer.