

## ABSTRACT

### MY KIDS WILL NEVER GO TO (URBAN) PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A STUDY OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS' ABANDONMENT OF URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Esther Lynette Williams

Access to a quality education is a recurring theme in the history of African-Americans. From America's infancy to the present, African-Americans have steadfastly held to the conviction that a quality education was inextricably intertwined with notions of freedom and upward mobility. Historically, most African-American parents relied on public schools to provide that education. However, by the mid-1980's, many African American parents became disillusioned with public education, and those who possessed the requisite resources to do so, began to abandon urban public schools, choosing to educate their children in suburban schools, independent private schools, and parochial schools. Researchers studying school choice primarily focus on charter schools and school voucher programs, giving little consideration to the abandonment of urban public schools by the African-American middle class. This qualitative study investigates the experiences of seven middle class African-American parents to ascertain how they constructed their decisions to exclude urban public schools as educational options for their children. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the structure of qualitative inquiry and the flexibility and fluidity of natural conversations. In addition, more than twenty-five informal interviews and conversations with African-American parents of various socioeconomic levels were conducted. The parents' narratives revealed five concerns: academic achievement; discipline and safety; teacher quality; racism, and cultural issues. Analyses of those concerns resulted in two major findings. First, parents do not believe urban schools possess the requisite resources to effectively educate their children and enable them to gain admission to a reputable college or university. Second, parents do not believe their children can acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed as a prerequisite to become economically and socially successful in the world of the dominant culture when they are educated in an urban public

school. The concerns and findings were analyzed through intersecting lenses of critical race theory and social reproduction theory. The author discusses how issues of race and class often underpin the inequities and inadequacies of urban public schools.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Clifton and Lucy Williams, for the love and support you have given me throughout the years. There are no words to convey the depth of my love and appreciation for you. I only wish that every child in America could have the parents that I have.

I also dedicate this work to my three brothers, Daryl, Kelsey, and Thamar. Thank you for your continuous support of all my endeavors. You really are the three best brothers in the world.

To my nephews and nieces, Kelsey, Jr., Nicole, Clark, Kirk, Carson, and Christopher, I dedicate this work to you. Paint a dream and make it happen!!

And finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandmother, Julia Haynes Smith, who taught at the Rosenwald School at New Grove Baptist Church in Jackson County, Georgia in the early 1900's.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Historical Context

The annals of history reveal that access to a quality education has been a recurring theme and long-standing tradition in the growth and development of not only the African-American middle class but also African-American people as a whole. From America's infancy as a nation to the antebellum period; from the Civil War through Reconstruction; throughout the long, dark decades of Jim Crow segregation to the post-*Brown v. Board* years of forced integration; and to the current era of No Child Left Behind, African-Americans have steadfastly held to the conviction that a quality education was inextricably intertwined with the ability of African-Americans to improve their station in life.

Understanding the lifelong social, political, and economic implications of a sound education, African-American parents, educators, and community leaders, for more than 200 years, have been at the forefront of numerous legal, social, political movements to secure educational opportunities for their children. While most Americans are familiar with the much-celebrated events such as the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in which African-American parents successfully sued to end school segregation, or the 1957 integration of Arkansas's Little Rock Central High School, there are, in fact, many lesser known cases that championed the cause of equal education which more accurately illustrate the day-to-day struggles of African-Americans to provide a decent education for their children. The following three historical examples clearly demonstrate the determination, sacrifice, and commitment of African-American parents, as well as the historical significance of public schools in the education of the African-American community. Moreover, they underscore the centrality of race in the history of schooling and educational policy and practices in the United States.

One of the earliest examples of African-Americans parents advocating for the educational rights of their children occurred in 1787 in Boston, Massachusetts when Prince Hall, an African-American veteran of the Revolutionary War petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to provide for the education of African-American children. Hall argued that because free African-American

men in Boston responsibly paid their taxes, their children were entitled to the same privileges to which white children were entitled:

“...a great number of blacks, freemen of the Commonwealth, humbly sheweth, that your petitioners are held in common with other freeman of this town and Commonwealth and have never been backward in paying our proportionate part of the burdens under which they have, or may labor under; and as we are willing to pay our equal part of these burdens, we are of the humble opinion that we have the right to enjoy the privileges of free men. But that we do not will appear in many instances, and we beg leave to mention one out of many, and that is of the education of our children which now receive no benefit from the free schools in the town of Boston, which we think is a grievance ... We therefore must fear for our rising offspring to see them in ignorance in a land of gospel light when there is provision made for them as well as others and yet they cannot enjoy them and for not other reason can be given this (than) they are black...” (Aptheker, 1973, p. 94.)

The rejection of Hall’s petition was not unexpected, given that only a few years earlier; the Massachusetts legislature had denied petitions to abolish slavery (Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts by judicial decree, not by the Massachusetts legislature.). Infuriated, yet undaunted by the denial of their petition, African-American parents in Boston would continue to seek a public education for their children. After subsequent petitions met the same fate, Prince Hall eventually established a privately funded school for Boston’s African-American children. Not until 25 years after Hall’s first petition was filed, would the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provide a very limited amount of funding—a pathetic pittance of two hundred dollars—for the education of Boston’s African-American children.

In a study of the Caswell County (North Carolina) Training School during the height of the Jim Crow era, Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) chronicles the personal and financial sacrifices which the entire community—parents, teachers, as well as civic and religious leaders and students—endured to insure that the Caswell County Training School in North Carolina provided a learning environment for their children that rivaled the best white schools in their region of the state. By 1933, the Caswell county school board had provided bus transportation to white students for nine years, and during that same time refused to provide transportation for African-American students so that they could make the long and exhausting trek from Milton, N.C. to the county’s only black high school in Yanceyville. African-American parents used whatever resources they could muster to make certain that students in the county had the opportunity to extend their education beyond grammar school:

...parent and farmer E. C. Jones provided the first truck... in this open-air vehicle students rode standing up approximately twenty miles from the Milton community. 'We rode it until it started getting cold and they knew they had to do something,' student Marie Richmond recalls. A bus body was then put on Jones' truck...Other children came to school on 'bread wagons that were closed in and some were transported in cars...' some students were who unable to obtain transportation moved to Yanceyville and boarded with residents in order to be able to attend...(p. 32).

In 1934, the school board finally acquiesced to the demands brought by African-American parents for bus transportation for their high school children, but only under certain circumstances, which precisely exemplify the depths of the racist practices and policies during the Jim Crow era. When the school board eventually agreed to provide funding for buses for African-American students, it was only with the following contingencies: new buses would not be purchased, African-American parents had to pay for the chassis for the buses, and they could only use bodies from old buses if they were not needed for other white schools. To be sure, this policy was enacted to eliminate the impression that African-American children would be afforded equality in any aspect of their schooling.

In yet another incident involving the Caswell County school board and its African-American community in 1943, Walker (1996) describes the parents' unyielding resolve to build a new school when the existing structure could no longer serve the needs of the steadily increasing student body, and the school board plans for the construction of a new building were in a continuous state of delay:

"Many members of the Negro community remember that the parents of CCTS students were asked if they could provide some of the lumber for building part of the new school...the board told the parents that if they could furnish some of their own lumber, they could come up with a school. In response to this request, the boys in the CCTS agriculture department went throughout the county to cut down tree donated by various Negro farmers. The trees were cut and the lumber was sent to Yanceyville" (p. 54.)

The school board then used the lumber to construct a new edifice in Yanceyville for a white community whose school had been destroyed in a fire. This incident of deception and betrayal was the first of many setbacks that Caswell County's African-American parents would experience before their children would finally begin the school year entering the doors of a newly constructed Caswell County Training School in 1951. These examples emphasize the manner in which race has been used to determine educational policy and practice since the earliest days of this Republic.

Throughout much of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's, the African-American community—still believing in the potential and possibilities of the United States Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to dismantle segregation “with all deliberate speed,” and still confined by questionable real estate practices and discriminatory housing patterns in this country—continued to place their hopes and dreams for their children in public school systems, sending their children into hostile environments as schools districts in areas such as Boston, Cleveland, and Cincinnati as well as communities throughout the South responded to the demands of court-ordered busing as a result of *Brown v. Board* case . The desegregation of these school districts revealed to the American public and the world at large that volatile racial issues surrounding the integration of America's schools were not limited to southern states.

By 1990, however, many African-American parents as well as American parents in general had deep and serious concerns about the government's ability to provide a quality education to children of the lower socioeconomic stratum as well as students of the middle class. Urban school districts suffered from the effects of the social, political and economic ills plaguing the neighborhoods in which they were located as well as the loss of resources and support they experienced as a consequence of “white (and eventually black middle class) flight.” Rural school districts languished under a school financing system that favored affluent communities and left rural schools under-funded with their students often lacking the most basic of supplies and equipment. And suburban districts, which previously enjoyed a robust base of community support, had yet to provide middle class parents with an adequate response to the implications of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1983) that children in suburbia were neither exempt from nor immune to the “rising tide of mediocrity” in public schools throughout America. In sum, as this nation entered the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, African American parents were disillusioned with public education and those who possessed the requisite resources to do so (primarily those in the middle class), abandoned urban public schools, choosing instead, to educate their children in suburban public schools, independent private schools, parochial schools, and in fewer numbers, charter schools and home-based schools. The African-American community was no longer restricted and confined to urban public schools. School choice—which for the purpose of this study will be defined as parents' ability to utilize resources whether personal, public, or private, to provide schooling for their children other than the government-

assigned school—presented viable alternatives to African-American parents seeking to escape the inadequacies and racial inequities of urban public schooling.

### **Research Problem Statement**

As the school choice reform movement continues, so too will the African-American middle class abandonment of urban public schools. The magnitude of the myriad social, political and economic implications of this shift suggests the educational community needs to better understand the underlying parental concerns, values, beliefs, and aspirations which form the impetus of this phenomenon. While there is an ever-increasing body of knowledge on school choice in general as well as more specific projects organized around charter schools and school voucher initiatives, the educational research community has, for the most part, ignored the participation of middle class African-Americans in the school choice movement. Existing studies are usually organized around charter schools, voucher schemes, or inter-district and intra-district policies that permit parents to utilize public funds to provide schooling options for their children. For the most part, the African-American middle class has not employed these government-funded options in their quest for a quality education for their children. Rather, they have utilized their own monetary resources to provide better schooling through two methods: moving to suburban communities in which the schools purportedly provide better educational opportunities or enrolling their children in parochial or independent schools. Regardless of which method they employed, the departure of the African-American middle class from urban schools constitutes another facet of the school choice movement.

Yet the educational research community has paid little attention to this. For researchers to ignore the role of middle class African-Americans in the school choice movement is yet another act of marginalization, racism, and discrimination by the dominant culture. To dismiss the role of middle class African-American involvement in the school choice movement as an insignificant aberration or anomaly is professionally erroneous and intellectually unsound. The middle class African-American parents' perspectives represent a voice that heretofore has been silenced and an unexplored dimension of school choice discourse in specific and educational discourse in general. Thus, any attempt to comprehend, interpret, or analyze the school choice movement that fails to acknowledge the presence of the African-American middle class renders such an endeavor inaccurate and fragmentary at best.

### **Purpose And Focus Of The Study**

While the purpose of this study was to explore the presence of middle class African-American parents in the school choice movement, the overarching focus of this study was to better understand how middle class African-American parents construct their decisions either to exclude public schools as options for their children or withdraw their children from the traditional urban public schools and enroll them in suburban, parochial, or independent schools. More precisely, I sought to identify the socio-cultural, political, and economic realities and influences that have shaped and informed their decisions. For example, part of my study seeks to determine the extent to which African-American parents make conscious, political decisions to challenge the existing power structures in public education when they elect to enroll their children in suburban, parochial, or independent schools. Another dimension of the study attempts to investigate the impact of academic, social and economic considerations in the parents' decisions.

Given the emergent nature of qualitative research, this study also embraces the unexpected and is guided by the natural developments of the inquiry as well as its predetermined guidelines. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to disrupt the silence we currently hear in school choice discourse by giving voice to middle class African-American parents.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in the new perspective and dimension it brings to extant research on the school choice reform movement in urban communities in the United States. Most researchers studying this phenomenon focus primarily on charter schools and school voucher programs, giving minimal, if any, consideration to another facet of school choice occurring in the urban communities: the abandonment of urban public schools by the African-American middle class. However, the departure of the African-American middle class from urban public schools is a form of school choice. The parents of this study assessed the conditions of urban public schools, and, based on those conditions, determined that their children would not receive a quality education in an urban school. Consequently, they utilized their resources to send their children to parochial schools or independent schools, or they moved to communities outside of the urban area to find schools that could provide the kind of education they sought for their children. Thus, their actions constitute a form of school choice.

This study provides valuable insights into the hopes and aspirations that African-American parents hold for their children. Their perceptions, thoughts, and opinions will facilitate urban educators' understanding of African-American parents' expectations of teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Yet, the value of this study is not limited to urban school educators, as it is relevant to all individuals who are actively engaged in the mission of educating African-American children regardless of where the children live or the children's socioeconomic status.

### **Defining the African-American Middle Class**

The African-American middle class is perhaps one of the most enigmatic social entities in the United States. For the vast majority of other Americans, whose perceptions about African-Americans often are informed by a constant barrage of negatively skewed media images rather than personal experiences and interactions, the notion of an African-American middle class contradicts and disrupts one of the most widely-held stereotypes in this nation: that to be African-American is synonymous to being a member of the urban poor (Oswald, 2001). Despite the stereotype, a thriving African-American middle class does exist, and moreover, as history reveals, on some level, a "black elite" or "black middle class" has existed in this country since the late 1700's, when free blacks, primarily in northern states, managed to accumulate relatively large amounts of wealth through the acquisition of real estate and the establishment of service-oriented businesses (Frazier, 1957).

Invariably, researchers attempting to investigate the world of the African-American middle class are confronted with the difficult challenge of crafting an operational definition of the term "African-American middle class." Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, whose seminal yet controversial treatise on the subject, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), serves as a part of the requisite historical grounding for any scholarly treatment on the African American middle class, never offered his readers a definition of the term "Negro middle class" ("Negro" being the accepted term during that time period for those Americans whose skin color suggested they were of African descent). Perhaps he experienced the same frustrations of subsequent researchers attempting to define this group, or more importantly, he realized the ultimate futility of such an endeavor. In the absence of a concrete definition, Frazier offered numerous descriptions of the Negro middle class throughout his work on the subject.

Recent scholars' efforts to characterize the African-American middle class have also failed to definitively answer, "Who comprises the African-American middle class"? Patillo-McCoy (1999) in a synthesis of literature which applied class definitions to African-Americans found that economists tend to organize definitions around income levels, whereas sociologists employ numerous and varying descriptors including, income, occupation, and education to frame their research of the African-American middle class. Bowser (2007), who characterizes the term middle class as a "conceptual moving target," (p.7) also acknowledges the difficulty of the task:

Most simply avoid the messy issue. Social scientists will acknowledge that income, education, and employment in a specific range of occupations are not the only criteria that distinguish the middle class from others. But then they proceed in their studies as if there are no criteria that distinguish the middle class from others (p. 7).

In this study the term African-American middle class incorporates the aforementioned descriptors—income, occupation and education—as well as a commonality of values and beliefs regarding education. Collectively the parents in this study represent individuals who have post-secondary schooling ranging from coursework at community colleges to doctoral work at major universities; annual family income levels that range from \$40,000 to incomes that are well above \$100,000; white-collar professions that range from social work to business management to community college instructors; and a deep and profound understanding, belief, and commitment to the notion that a quality education is foundational to one's social and economic success. Thus, as with previous researchers of the African-American middle class, I have not provided a concrete definition of the African-American middle class. Rather, the common characteristics of this group of informants should facilitate the reader's understanding of "middle class" as it pertains to this study.

### **Organization of the Study**

In the first chapter, preceding this section, I introduce the study by providing historical contextualization, focusing on the interconnectedness of the African-American middle class and education in the progress and development of the African-American community. Also included in this first chapter is an explanation of the research problem as well as the purpose and focus of the study. Chapter One also provides an overview of the research approach to be used and the significance of the study.



Chapter Two explores contemporary literature and research on the African-American presence in the school choice movement. In addition, literature on critical race theory and social reproduction is also discussed.

Chronicling the researcher's journey through the essence of the research process, Chapter Three provides an in depth discussion of the various methodological aspects of this study. Here the reader is informed of the researcher's background and personal interest in this topic, how participants were selected, why a qualitative design was chosen and how that design was implemented in this study. In addition, this chapter also discusses how the investigation evolved from a study on charter schools to a study that focused on schooling and the Africa-American middle class. Chapter Three ends with a summary of the five emergent themes identified from interviews with the participants of the study.

Chapter Four presents the results of the semi-structured interviews. The five themes—academic achievement, teacher quality, racism, safety and discipline, and cultural matters—are contextualized through the voices of the parents and related literature. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the five themes.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes this study with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for curriculum leaders, administrators, and school policymakers in Ohio. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also included in the last chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

School choice discourse, critical race theory and social reproduction theories create a framework for examining and comprehending the abandonment of urban public schools by the African-American middle class. This literature review will discuss each of these areas. The literature on school choice reveals the issues that underlie the contentious and controversial atmosphere surrounding school choice. Critical race theory, with its emphasis on the permanence of racism, provides a lens through which imbedded, institutionalized racism can be examined. It also underscores the importance of the knowledge and lived experiences of people of color in the development of policies governing various aspects of our society. It is important to note that critical race theory was not included in the initial literature review for this study; however, as this study progressed, it became clear that critical race theory provided the necessary framework for analyzing the issues of race that were imbedded in the parents' narratives. Thus the semi-structured interview questions were not informed by critical race theory. Rather, critical race theory was employed after data collection to facilitate the process of analysis, deconstruction, interpretation, and meaning-making. Social reproduction theories and notions of social and cultural capital expose the hegemonic nature of schooling by revealing the role of educational institutions in reinforcing and perpetuating power relations of the dominant culture. I will use the literature on school choice, critical race theory, and social reproduction collectively to illuminate the plight of urban schools and offer new avenues for investigating the African-American middle class' abandonment of these schools.

#### **School Choice**

While most educational writers have largely ignored the presence of African-Americans in the school choice movement, the limited existing data tend to highlight the work of three nationally prominent individuals—Annette “Polly” Williams, Howard Fuller, and the Rev. Floyd Flake—as instrumental school choice advocates in the African-American community, (Morken and Formicola, 1999; Viteritti, 1999; Witte, 2000;). Morken & Formicola (1999) identify three approaches or paradigms—the political approach, the ministerial approach and the activist

approach—that are commonly employed in the African-American school choice movement and situate Williams, Fuller, and Flake within these paradigms. Williams’ work is considered primarily political, while Fuller’s endeavors are characterized as activist-oriented; Flake’s work, obviously, is characterized as religious (Morken & Formicola, 1999). Arguably, all are political activists in that their work has the potential to transform power relations between the African-American community and the educational governing bodies that control their schools.

### **Why African-Americans Choose ‘Choice’**

Viteritti (1999) asserts that the debate over school choice occurs on two levels: “As intellectuals engage in esoteric discourse on the abstractions of distributive justice, market dynamics, religious liberty, and civil society, the poor understand on a more visceral level that it is their children who are trapped in inferior schools ” (p. 11). Indeed numerous school choice commentators ( Brighthouse, 1996; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Cookson, 1994; Coons and Sugarman, 1978; Gutman, 1987; Howe, 1997; Maranto, Milliman, Hesh and Gresham, 1999) argue the merits and flaws of school choice within the context of such principles as democracy, freedom of choice, the separation of church and state, and free enterprise. However, as Viteritti posits, what appears to be of utmost concern to poor and minority parents is the ability to provide a decent, quality education for their children (Barnes, 1997; Manno, Chester, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998; Morken and Formicola, 1999; Murdock, 1998; Nathan, 1996; Shokraii, 1996; Sugarman and Kemerer, 1999; Witte, 2000). Viteritti’s illuminating commentary should offer valuable insight to those who fail to comprehend the essence of school choice advocacy in the African-American community and question why the African-American middle class has abandoned urban public schools. African-American parents, as with marginalized parents in general, seem to agree that a quality education is their primary objective in supporting charter schools, vouchers, (Morken & Formicola, 1999; Shokraii, 1996; Sugarman and Kemerer, 1999; Viteritti, 1999) or other methods of choice such as utilizing one’s resources to relocate to a community with quality schools or sending one’s children to parochial or independent schools.

Discipline was also cited as a major explanation for Black support of school choice. Shokraii (1996), for example, noted that many Black parents choose parochial schools not because of the religious ideology but the strict discipline that is commonly associated with religious schools. This point was underscored by Cleveland Councilwoman Fannie Lewis, an

African-American, who was instrumental in the advancement of Ohio's school choice movement: "In most instances (the parents') decisions have nothing to do with religion. They want their children in a safe environment with strong disciplinary standards where they can get a good education" (Shokraii, 1996, p. 24). Polly Williams suggested that parental rights are also a major factor in parents' decisions to leave traditional public school for choice schools:

Parents have the right to decide on the quality and the type of education that their children receive. If their kids need a private school they should have the right to make that decision, and their taxpayer dollars ought to go where they want their children educated, not to some bureaucracy that says they know better (Billingsley, 1994, p.9).

Howard Fuller and other school choice advocates in the Black community have expressed concerns about empowering parents in the decision-making processes that affect their children. Fuller, through his work in the Institute for Transforming Learning, sought to demystify the school choice movement as well as the public schools in general so that minority parents can make better decisions about their children's education and reap the full benefits for their children through the school choice movement (Morken and Formicola, 1999). Relying upon the limited body of literature that addresses the middle class African-American presence in the school choice movement, one could conclude that African-American parents appear to embrace school choice as a means to secure for their children schools in which learning is paramount; discipline problems are minimal; and parents are empowered to determine what kind of education is best for their children.

In 1997 a Phi Delta Kappan poll found that 72% of African-Americans surveyed agreed with some form of school choice and that African-American parents are more inclined to support school choice than parents in general (Rose, 1997, cited in Sugarman and Kemerer, 1999). Similar results were evident in a poll conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Policy (Shokraii), 1996. Although this evidence suggests a strong support base for school choice, the African-American community has not reached consensus on the matter.

### **African-American Opposition to School Choice**

African-American advocacy for school choice comprises a broad spectrum of individuals from various social, political, and economic groups within the African-American community. Black school choice opponents, on the other hand, belong largely to the middle class where parents—many of whom are educators in public schools—have the financial resources to educate

their children in independent, parochial, or suburban schools (Murdock, 1998; Shokraii, 1996). Shokraii observes:

Black teachers are twice as likely as are other black parents to send their children to a private school and 30 percent of the congressional Black Caucus members with children send their children to private schools. Meanwhile, only 4 percent of blacks possess the means to exercise this option (p. 23).

It is important to note, however, that few writers have explored the opposition of the African American middle class to the school choice movement.

Black school choice opponents often premise their arguments against school choice with four issues. First, they claim, as do school choice opponents in general, that school choice will further exacerbate racial and economic stratification. Second, they believe that school choice schemes extract (or “cream” as the practice has been commonly described) the best students from the public schools. A third argument is that school choice diverts much needed revenue from traditional schools to private or charter schools. And fourth, many fear that school choice will jeopardize the future employment of African-American teachers (Fuller and Elmore, 1996; Henig, 1994; Lewis, 1998; Levin in Sugarman and Kemerer, 1999; Powers and Cookson, 1999; Shokraii, 1996; Smith and Meier, 1995; Tyack, 1992; Viteritti, 1999).

I think it is important here to briefly discuss each of the arguments put forth by black school choice opponents. First, African-American families did not create the racial and economic stratification that exists in the United States. Rather, such stratification is the result of the long-standing, hegemonic structures, systems, and institutions (including schools) of economic domination, political oppression, and racial discrimination under which this country was birthed, nurtured, and developed. Residents of the inner cities are the victims of these systems and structures, not the perpetrators. To suggest that African American families should reject school choice in an effort to stem racial and economic stratification is tantamount to a “blame the victim mentality.” African-American families should not be expected to sacrifice the education of their children in an effort to alleviate social conditions that plague their communities. These conditions will only be eliminated when legislators and policy-makers throughout this country acknowledge the dignity and worth of all Americans and put forth a national political agenda designed to transform social and political conditions that perpetuate the

racial and economic stratification in America. Unfortunately, the prospects of such an agenda are dismal. In the absence of such, African-Americans in urban areas will continue to seek school choice as a means to better educate their children.

Second, the educational establishment usually raises the issue of “creaming”. Several writers and researchers examining this issue report that “choice” students in the African-American community are often those who make inadequate academic progress in the traditional public schools. (Fusarelli, 1999; Shokraii, 1996; Viteritti, 1999). Fusarelli’s study of charter schools in the urban centers of Texas found that charter schools served a greater percentage of “at-risk” students” (a term that is often applied to those who cannot be labeled as “the cream”) than did the public schools. The educational establishment’s inability or unwillingness to provide all children with a quality education is undoubtedly why many African-American parents have abandoned public schools. Dr. Peter Negroni, Superintendent of the Springfield, Massachusetts Public Schools, reminds educators that it is “our responsibility to educate our students regardless of how they come to us” (Negroni, 2000). Public education will not regain the trust and support from its constituents until they perceive public schools as possessing the capability and commitment to provide a quality education to all children “regardless of how they come to us.”

Third, in many states, the per pupil expenditure is transferred from the public school to the choice school for each student enrolled in a voucher or charter program; thus, most voucher and charter school systems do in fact, divert substantial funds from traditional public schools to choice schools. Choice parents are critical of how school districts, especially urban districts imprudently allocate and manage their resources. This criticism is not unwarranted. As I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Williams, 1997; Williams, 1999), throughout my years in urban education I have witnessed—on numerous occasions and in four separate school systems—hundreds of thousands of dollars squandered and misspent under the guise of school reform and what is best for the students. Unfortunately, these occurrences are not rare and unique to the districts in which I have worked. Instead, fiscal irresponsibility has become a recurring theme in urban education. While this neither negates nor diminishes the crucial impact of lost revenue on public schools from school choice schemes, it does indicate that public school personnel must be more judicious in their budget allocations and in their management of public funds.

Finally, Levin (1999) posits that the African-American community questions the impact of school choice on the job status of Black teachers, citing the experiences of Black teachers who lost their jobs in the aftermath of desegregation. However, Levin fails to consider two points, which weaken this argument. First, although Levin is correct in noting that African-Americans comprise only a small fraction—less than seven percent—of the existing teaching population in the U.S., the vast majority of these African-American teachers are tenured, veteran educators who will retire within the next decade. Therefore, school choice options will have little impact on the employment status of these teachers. Second, the projections and trends for the educational job market reveal that few African-Americans enter the teaching field when they pursue post-secondary education. Thus, there is not a sufficient quantity of young African-American educators entering the job market to replace those who are retiring. Urban districts as well as other districts often must devise creative and innovative signing bonuses to recruit new African-American teachers. Together, these circumstances should alleviate the concerns around school choice as a threat to job security for African-American teachers.

### **Critical Race Theory**

“It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years... it is obvious that if a man is entered in a starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow man.” Martin Luther King, Jr. (As cited in Gillborn, 2006)

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More than forty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledged the significance of race and history in the plight of African-Americans and the establishment of policies and laws that govern the lives of African-Americans as well as all people of color. The centrality of race and history figures prominently in critical race theory, a still evolving discourse, born out of the frustration of legal scholars with the “the inability of traditional legal discourse to address anything except the most obvious and crude versions of racism” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 22). The origins of the critical race theory can be traced to the latter half of the 1970’s when a diverse group of faculty and students of color in the legal academy began to re-examine and challenge traditional, liberal civil rights discourse, viewing it as a hindrance rather than a support toward further progress in social justice (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, Crenshaw, 1993; Tate, 1997) According to Matsuda et al., (1993)

The civil rights movement of the 1960's had stalled, and many of its gains were being rolled back. It became apparent that dominant conceptions of race, racism and equality were increasingly incapable of providing any meaningful quantum of racial justice (p.3).

Indeed, by the 1970's critical race theory scholars were frustrated with the seemingly stagnant nature of the civil rights reform however, CRT's critique of civil rights discourse should not be viewed as its wholesale dismissal of the Civil Rights movement. Kimberley Crenshaw, one of the pioneering voices of critical race theory clarifies this point:

Our opposition to traditional civil rights discourse is neither a criticism of the Civil Rights movement nor an attempt to diminish its significance...we draw much of our inspiration and sense of direction from that brilliantly conceived, spiritually inspired and ultimately transformative mass action. (Cited in Gillborn, 2006)

What critical race scholars did reject however, was the increasing inability of traditional liberal discourse to examine, address, and challenge the embedded racism in our society. Thus, critical race theory emerged as a response to the ineffectiveness of traditional liberal discourse within the legal arena and the necessity to question how race is—or perhaps more appropriately how race is not—examined in our society.

Critical race theorists describe CRT not as a concrete theory but a set of defining elements, or tenets, and conceptual tools that guide and frame the discourse of critical race scholars (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). Those six major tenets are:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is a permanent and pervasive part of American life.
2. Critical race theory challenges dominant claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and merit.
3. Critical race theory rejects ahistorical and acontextual analyses of law and society.
4. Critical race theory recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the goal of eliminating racism and all other forms of oppression. (Matsuda, et al., 1993, p. 6)

In addition, the work of critical race theorists is facilitated through the use of key conceptual tools including storytelling and the interest-convergence principle. These defining elements and conceptual tools provide a lens through which racism in urban public schools can be examined, exposed, and challenged. Since the publication of *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*



(Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), critical race theory has been employed by an increasing number of educational scholars as an analytical tool and framework to explore racism in American schools (Dixon and Rousseau, 2006). A discussion of the defining elements and conceptual tools will facilitate a better understanding of the usefulness of critical race theory in education and also review some of the seminal works in the discourse.

### **The Permanence Of Race**

If we accept the notion that “race is always already present in every social configuring of our lives” (Toni Morrison cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9), it is reasonable and logical for critical race theorists to conclude that racism is neither aberration nor anomaly but exists as a permanent, social construct in American society (Bell, 1992; Matsuda, et. al, 1993). Racism can be defined as a dynamic, multi-dimensional phenomenon, occurring through individualized or institutionalized acts by overt or covert means which are designed to bring harm, injury, or disadvantage to someone based on his or her perceived status in a racial group.

The focus of racism for critical race theory scholar-activists moves beyond the direct, overt discriminatory acts that most Americans readily identify as racism. Rather, the focus of critical race theory is the “larger, systemic, structural and cultural...deeply psychologically and socially engrained” (Matusda, et al. p. 5) form of racism that is more commonly known as institutionalized racism. Lynn and Parker (2006) declare, “One of the main arguments of CRT has been that while classic forms of overtly violent racism subsided, the everyday racism has arisen (p. 260). The authors’ point here is to not suggest that blatant acts of racism no longer occur, for indeed they do. Their argument is that forms of racism such as signs prohibiting service to people of color, the burning of churches, homes, schools, and entire communities, or government official refusing to allow African-Americans to enter schools are virtually non-existent, while we have microaggressions—subtle, automatic, and often unconscious acts of racism—that are “incessant and cumulative as practiced in the everyday actions of individuals, groups, and institutional policy, rules, and administrative procedures” (p. 260) that continue to escalate beneath the surface. Institutionalized racism is the most insidious form of racism, as it is so embedded into the natural fabric of organizations, systems, and institutions, such as schools, that it is not recognized and, as with most hegemonic structures, it often becomes accepted as normal and is left unchallenged. Valdes, Culp, and Harris (2002) in their assessment of CRT’s

first decade, succinctly distilled critical race theory's position on the institutionalization and the permanence of racism:

Critical race theorists have located racism in its everyday operation in the very structures within which the guilty... were to be identified: not the individual "bad-apple" cop but the criminal justice system; not the bigoted school board members but the structures of segregation and the transmission of wealth (p.2.).

In school systems, institutionalized racism is exemplified through discipline policies, tracking systems, standardized testing, inadequate curricula, ineffective pedagogy, magnet school programs and a profusion of other local, state, and federal policies, practices, and procedures (Ladson, Billings, 1998; Lynn and Parker, 2006; Stovall, 2005;) that are accepted by students, rarely questioned by parents and continually reinforced by school personnel, community members, and society at large.

Critical race theory recognizes that what is most dangerous in our society is not the blatant, "in-your-face" acts of racism but the structures and ideologies which underpin those acts, and more importantly, the manifestation of those structures and ideologies in the form of the policies that appear normal while inflicting what is oftentimes irreparable social, psychological, and economic injury and harm to people of color.

### **The Challenge to Colorblindness and the Ahistorical Nature of Liberal Discourse**

Critical race theory posits that neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy are illogical and discriminatory constructs because of the historical and continuing presence of race in our society (Crenshaw, 1995; Gotanda, 2000). CRT further contends that historical analyses are imperative considerations in the development of law and policy due to the "current inequalities and social/institutional practices linked to earlier periods" (Matsuda, et al., p. 6.). Thus, the notion of color-blindness, or the "nonrecognition" of race" (Gotanda, p. 35) is a fallacy; therefore, its accompanying constructs—ahistoricism, neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy—should not form the basis of legal decisions and policymaking. However, as Gotanda states, "Advocates of the colorblind model argue that nonrecognition by the government is clearly superior to any race-conscious process. Crenshaw (1995) offers a cogent argument to refute the role of colorblindness and illustrate how the model of colorblindness and its supporting constructs function within law and policymaking to further serve the interests of the dominant culture.

Crenshaw (1995) in a response to Thomas Sowell's critique of racial remedies such as affirmative action challenged Sowell's contention that equality of process results in inequality of

opportunity. In short, Sowell claimed that if all individuals of various races participate in a given process—for example, applying for a job opening—that has been equally administered, then all persons had equal opportunity for that position. Sowell’s argues that if such practice is neutral, objective, and based on merit, the employer’s decision should be colorblind. Crenshaw sees such a practice as inherently flawed and discriminatory in that it assumes that everyone has started from the same point. She argues:

This belief in colorblindness and equal process would make no sense at all in a society in which identifiable groups had actually been treated differently historically and in which the effects of this treatment continued into the present... One could not look at outcomes as fair measure of merit since one would recognize that not all had been given an equal’ start. (p. 106).

Gotanda (2000) concludes that such a process of “nonrecognition ultimately supports the supremacy of white interests” (p. 36).

### **Experiential Knowledge and Storytelling**

CRT scholars maintain that the lived experiences of people of color should be acknowledged in the analysis of law and society (Matsuda, et al., 1993). Calomare (1995) asserts:

Critical race theory challenges the universality of the white experience as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentment and behavior... As critical race scholars, we thus seek to demonstrate that our experiences as people of color are legitimate, appropriate, and effective bases for analyzing the legal system and racial subordination (p. 318).

Calomare’s assertion contradicts traditional legal discourse, which privileges universalism over particularity and abstract principles over perspectivism. Delgado also argues against the use of universal truths and abstract principles in the analyses of law and society, declaring that truth is situational: “truths only exist for this person in this predicament at this time in history” (Delgado as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998). His “call to context” (Delgado, 2002, p. xvii) declares that the experiential knowledge of people of color cannot be excluded in moral and political discourse. According to (Delgado 2002), normative discourse does not allow for nuances of context, which can dramatically alter intuition as well as outcome:

For example, imagine a youth convicted of a serious crime. One’s first response may be to urge severe punishment. But add one fact—he was seen laughing as he walked away from the scene—and one’s intuition changes. Even more serious punishment now seems

appropriate. But add another fact—he is mentally impaired or was abused as a child—now leniency seems in order (2002, p. xvii).

Delgado (2002) avers that principles such as formal equality that ignore the context of life—the lived experience—impede rather than advance the quest for racial justice:

Our social world with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed, rather, we construct it with words, stories, and silence. But we need not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided.... By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better world (p. xvi)

Writing and speaking against injustices through the literary device of storytelling remains one of CRT's most distinguishing and controversial features. While Derrick Bell pioneered the use of legal storytelling in an effort to demystify for the average reader complex legal concepts (Delgado, 2005), Delgado has continuously advocated for the legitimacy of storytelling in legal scholarship. As the aforementioned quotation suggests, Delgado (2000) challenges the existing paradigm in which only the stories of the dominant culture are considered worthy constructs upon which law and society can be organized; moreover he argues that a variety of literary forms such as parables, chronicles, biographies, and narratives should be utilized to articulate the experiences of people of color.

Lawrence (1995) argues that a tradition of storytelling exists in the field of law, albeit different from that of people of color:

Litigation is highly formalized storytelling...but the law's tradition of storytelling is very different from African traditions. Where our tradition values rich contextual detail, the law excludes large parts of the story as irrelevant...Where we seek to convey the full range of depth and feeling, the law asks us to disregard emotions. Where we celebrate the specific and the personal, the law tells stories about disembodied 'reasonable men.' (p. 343).

He further contends that the use of narrative by critical race theorists constitutes an act of liberation and resistance: “The ability to produce text, to stand in the position of subject and tell one's own story is central to one's humanity and one's freedom...the assertion of our subjective presence as creators and interpreters are political acts” (p. 349).

### **Interdisciplinary and Eclectic Scholarship**

The inclusive nature of critical race theory necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to its scholarship. According to Matsuda (1993), borrowing from numerous discourses—feminism,

black feminism liberalism, poststructuralism, and Marxism—allows critical race theory to “to examine and incorporate those aspects of a methodology or theory that effectively enable our voice and advance the cause of racial justice even as we maintain a critical stance” (p. 6).

Bergerson (2003) concurs noting that:

...epistemologies vary for people with differing experiences. Because the way we see the world and ask important questions about it is shaped by our experience of that world it is important to recognize that there are many legitimate ways to construct knowledge (p. 60).

Bergerson’s commentary underscores the interdependency of the defining elements of CRT. Giving voice to people of color cannot be restricted to a single epistemology just as it cannot be limited to a single literary genre. Tate (1998) cites the work of Kimberle Crenshaw as an exemplar of CRT scholarship that embraces various epistemologies and the intersectionality of race and gender to facilitate a comprehensive examination of law and society. In *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw (1995), clarifies the necessity of intersectionality:

...to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (p. 358).

Additionally the scholarship of Crenshaw reiterates the primary goal of critical race theory: to eliminate all forms of oppression.

### **Eliminating All Forms of Oppression and Interest Convergence**

Critical race theorists, in general agree that the dismantling of all forms oppression is the ultimate objective of their work. However, Derrick Bell (1992), one of critical race theory’s founding members, offers a seemingly paradoxical perspective on the potential of critical race theory to transform society:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. (Bell, 1992, p.12.)

Bell’s (1980) interest convergence principle buttresses his position that African-Americans as well as other people of color will only experience “peaks of progress” in the quest for racial

justice. The interest convergence principle posits that African-Americans will only achieve progress if that progress is tied to the interests of whites. CRT scholars cite the *Brown v. Board* case as an example of the interest convergence principle (Bell, 1980; Dudziak, 2000). They argue that the Brown decision was an attempt to suppress black radicalism in the U.S. and a response to foreign critics who saw the obvious hypocrisy in a democratic nation in which millions of citizens were disenfranchised. Thus, the Brown decision was considered a victory for whites in that it served as a blow to communism and a vindication of American democracy. (Dudziak, 2000).

While Bell's position on the permanence of racism appears contradictory to the mission of critical race theory, the conclusion to his commentary resolves the paradox:

This is a hard to accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of defiance...African-Americans must confront and conquer...the deadening reality of their permanent subordinate status. Only in this way can we prevent ourselves from being dragged down by society's racial hostility. Beyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly a reason and the means for racial struggle (Bell, 1992, p.12).

### **Critical Race Theory in K-12 Schools**

The work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) generated a burgeoning interest in critical race theory for educational scholars, resulting in a growing body of literature organized around the application of critical theory in education. In *Toward A Critical Theory Of Race* Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) endeavored to advance Harris' notion of whiteness as property (As cited in Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and the four ways in which it is manifested in schools. Harris states "Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property was defined to include only practices of Whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—that which Whites alone possess—is valuable and is property"(As cited in Ladson Billings and Tate, 1995). The authors then provide examples of how the "property functions of whiteness" impact education. First through the "right of disposition," whiteness is deployed when students are expected to adhere to cultural practices that reinforce the dominant culture and reject the cultural practices of minorities. Second, the authors borrowing, from the work of Kozol (1991), claim the "right to use and enjoyment" is demonstrated by comparing the enrollment of white students of in a K-6 school that totals 825 and the enrollment of an African-American school that

totals 1550 but only has a capacity of 1000. (While the point the authors attempt to make—urban schools are often overcrowded while white schools are not—is clear, the evidence to support their claim is faulty in that it does not reveal the capacity of the white school. A more valid comparison of the two schools would include a comparison of the enrollment capacity of both buildings and the actual student enrollment of both buildings.) Third, the authors suggest whiteness is deployed through “reputation and status” when bilingual education holds a secondary position to the standard, mainstream curriculum. They also cite the use of the word “urban” as having a negative connotation and the word “suburban” as having positive connotation. Consequently urban schools have a reputation and status that are lower than suburban schools. Finally, Ladson-Billings and Tate assert that “the absolute right to exclude” has been exemplified through segregated schooling, and more recently, white flight and the profusion of school choice schemes such as voucher programs, inter-district and intra-district initiatives.

By examining the manner in which the property rights of whiteness function in schools, Ladson-Billings and Tate’s work served as the impetus for new opportunities for educational scholars to investigate racism in America’s schools.

In subsequent and separate articles Tate (1997) and Ladson-Billings (1998) continued their examination of critical race theory. Tate (1997) conducted an exhaustive review of critical race theory with in depth discussions of each of the defining elements and key scholars. Tate’s work focused heavily on Kimberle Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality, which emanates from Crenshaw’s assertion that women of color are simultaneously situated within at least two groups—by virtue of race and gender—that are subjected to broad societal subordination and thus an intersectional framework is needed to address multiple systems of subordination. Tate’s conclusion to the article challenges educational scholars to consider several issues. First, how do current educational theoretical movements such as multicultural education underserve students of color, and how can critical race theory remedy this? Second, are educational scholars employing the most effective theoretical and conceptual frameworks to examine issues of equity? Third, what role should experiential knowledge play in educational discourse? Tate’s work mapped not only the history and meaning of critical race theory but also possibilities for future research and application.

Ladson-Billings (1998) established the relevance of critical race theory to education

through examples of critical race theory in curriculum, instruction, and other areas of education. Ladson Billing calls for a critical race perspective to counter the current curriculum in American schools which silences the contributions of African-Americans or relegates them to a dominant discourse interpretation. Additionally, she argues that rigorous curricula that prepare students for collegiate work and motivate and inspire independent student learning are often absent from minority schools. Instructors in urban schools, the author contends, utilize strategies based on deficit models that assume that minority student are lacking in basic skills. As a result students are exposed only to ineffective, basal pedagogy and curricula. She identifies educators such as Jaime Escalante and Marva Collins as examples of educational excellence in urban schools. Finally, Ladson Billings cautions educators to the dangers of innovation in education. If critical race theory to is to survive its current novelty status to sustain itself and create meaningful change in advancing the cause of social justice and the elimination of oppression, educators working within the discourse of critical race theory must be prepared to expose racism in education and develop radical proposals for addressing it...

We will have to take bold and sometimes unpopular positions... We may have to defend a radical approach to democracy that seriously undermines the privilege of those who have skillfully carved that privilege into the foundation of the nation. We will have to adopt a position of consistently swimming against the current. We run the risk of being permanent outsiders. (p. 22).

Imbedded within her warning is a challenge, a call to action, for critical race theory scholars to move beyond erudite disquisitions and intellectual treatises to diligent, committed engagement in meaningful praxis in the fight for social justice.

In *Forbidden Conversations: On Race, Privacy, and Community (A Continuing Conversation with John Ely on Racism and Democracy)*, Lawrence (2005), another founding member of critical race theory, explicates the impact of racism on urban schools and middle class parents as he chronicles his journey from disquisitions and treatises to diligent, committed engagement. His work is particularly germane to this study in that Lawrence writes from the vantage point of not only a critical race theory scholar but also as an upper middle class African-American parent who *did not* flee the urban schools and as a former member of the Washington, D. C. school board. Thus, Lawrence's perspective is informed by his immersion in praxis.

Lawrence hypothesizes that middle class African-Americans as well as middle class whites have abandoned urban public schools because of four fears: the fear of blackness, which



emanates from negative cultural beliefs about blacks; the fear of having one's child treated like black children, which is premised on the belief that in urban schools less is given to and expected from black children; the fear that one's child will not fully develop her gifts and will lose the race for privilege, which suggests that children in urban schools will not be prepared for the many challenges of a 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalist society; and fear of the loneliness in the hard work of raising children that is experienced by middle class parents whose children remain in urban public schools. Lawrence's hypothesis was derived from his conversations with parents and his grassroots initiative with other families in his racially and culturally diverse upscale Washington, D.C. neighborhood to maintain, at best, a modicum of integration at the local elementary school. This praxis yielded not only an understanding their racial fears of parents but also their hopes and aspirations for their children:

What parents want most in a school is a place where their child is safe and treasured, her talents recognized and nourished, where she loves to go to school and learns to think of herself as competent in the universe. And parents want a school where they, the parents, are listened to and taken seriously. All parents want this from their children's school and privileged parents believe it is their entitlement (p. 1365).

Additionally, Lawrence's activism accorded him the authority to address the myriad manifestations of racism in urban schools and empathize with parents' fears as they faced the dilemma of where their children will attend school. Lawrence shares his ruminations during a community meeting in which a parent comments on the dilapidated physical conditions at the neighborhood school. His thoughts encapsulate the essence of the fear of having one's child treated like a black child:

Her fear is not so much a fear of black children as it is the fear of having her children mistreated because of their proximity to other black children. She knows that because the children who attend the school are mostly black, it is not likely that the broken toilet seat will be replaced. It is likely there will be fewer experienced and qualified teachers, fewer books, fewer computers, and fewer science and math labs. Chances are there will be no kiln to fire a child's clay pot, no violins and cellos to outfit an orchestra. But more than these material inequalities, she fears that the school system, the teachers and even the parents will expect less of children in this school than of the children in the school in the white neighborhood across the park... (p. 1374).

The author argues that despite these undeniably grim and dismal conditions for urban public schools, current school choice remedies—including middle class flight—fail to remedy the substantive problems of urban schools: the underlying structural issues that underpin racial

inequities.

### **Social Reproduction and Capital**

Without question, *Schooling In Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) was one of the most influential publications in the sociology of education during the last fifty years. Arguing that “the structure of the educational experience is admirably suited to nurturing attitudes and behaviors consonant with participation in the labor force (p. 9.), the authors elaborated a Marxist-oriented conceptualization of American education in which schools are complicit in the reproduction of the social, political, and economic inequalities of the nation. Several major tenets underpinned their argument. First, market, property, and power relationships determine economic inequalities. Second, schools perpetuate and legitimate economic inequality through purportedly objective and neutral systems of recognition and promotion based on meritocracy. Third, the relationship between students and teachers as well as the relationship between teachers and administrators corresponds to the workplace hierarchy. Fourth, schools have the potential to promote a more egalitarian society. Finally, schools in America have continually responded to the needs of capitalists.

The authors contend that through the parallel, or corresponding, organizational structure between the educational system and capitalist production system, the school functions to create workers who possess not only the technical skills required for specific occupations but also the social and psychological dispositions that socialize workers to be successful (i.e. obedient and docile) workers, thereby enabling capitalists to be profitable. Toward this end, the schools “teach people to be properly subordinate and render them sufficiently fragmented in consciousness to preclude their getting together to shape their own material existence” (p.130). In their conceptualization of modern education, it is not the mission of schooling to foster civically oriented goals such as producing a learned, moral, and democratic citizenry or to advance the very human project of discovering, cultivating, and enriching the intellectual and creative talents of pupils; nor does schooling allow for upward social mobility. Rather, schools exist to serve the dominant classes through “the production of labor power and the reproduction of those institutions and social relationships that facilitate the translation of labor power into profits” (p.129). The authors further contend that:

The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients

of job adequacy. Specifically, the social relationships of education—the relationships between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work—replicate the hierarchical divisions of labor." (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p.131).

Student's alienation from work and tracking systems, the authors claim, provide two concrete examples of the manner in which the "correspondence principle" is manifested in schools. Students are alienated from their assignments in much the same way as workers are detached from their responsibilities. Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated, "Alienated labor is reflected in the student's lack of control over his or her education" and "the alienation of the student from the curriculum content" (p.131). Both groups—students and workers—contribute little, if anything at all, to the decision-making processes involved in the work they are expected to perform. (This is especially true of students in this era of high stakes testing in which students, teachers, and individual schools as well as entire districts face intense and mounting public pressure to increase test scores.) Tracking schemes, systems of organizing or grouping students into homogeneous groups (often determined by inaccurate assessments of a student's ability or potential), correspond to work place organization as "high school, vocational and general tracks emphasize rule following and close supervision, while the college track tends toward a more open atmosphere" (p.132). This suggests that just as low-wage, blue-collar workers are closely supervised and expected to simply conform to rules, students in lower academic tracks are expected to do likewise, while white-collar workers are subjected to less monitoring and more freedom. The authors further argue that similar patterns exist in schools of different social classes. Thus, schools in working class communities reflected discipline, authority, control and student alienation and detachment from the curriculum, while schools in more affluent communities emphasized a more open atmosphere, which promoted student participation and engagement.

With empirical data from lower, middle, and upper class schools, Anyon's study (1980) offers substantiation of Bowles and Gintis' claims. Anyon reported working class schools offered a curriculum in which the schoolwork is "is mechanical and routine...denies the human capacities for creativity and planning...is a source of profit to others (p. 88). At the opposite end of the continuum, upper class schools prepare students with the "knowledge of and practice in manipulating the socially legitimated tools of analysis...their school is preparing them ...for

ownership and control for physical capital and means of production in society (p. 89). The educational system's hidden agenda, or "hidden curriculum" (p. 89), Anyon concluded, through their classed-based curricula, pedagogy, and assessment practices, reproduce relationships that are advantageous to capitalists and perpetuate the existing social stratification. Additionally, Anyon reported evidence of resistance in the form of the students' disobedience and refusal to complete assignments; however, she determined such methods do not produce changes in the relationships of control and exploitation in either the schools or the workplace and eventually yield a negative effect for students as well as workers.

Critics of Bowles and Gintis argued their theory was flawed in that its overly deterministic orientation failed to account for agency and resistance and it paid insufficient attention to race and gender. (Giroux 1983; Schwarz, 2002; Schwarz, 2003; Willis, 1977;) Giroux asserted "by downplaying the importance of human agency and the notion of resistance, reproduction theories offer little hope for challenging and changing the repressive features of schooling" (p. 259). Willis (1977) through his study of British youth explored the possibilities of agency, conflict, and resistance. The authors would later acknowledge numerous flaws in their work and ultimately rejected their Marxist orientation of education. (Sharwz, 2003). However, the shortcomings of their work do not negate the various forms of reproduction —socio-cultural, political, and economic—that continue to exist in American schools today.

While Bowles and Gintis elaborated a theory of social reproduction grounded in the capitalist structure of the American economy, Bourdieu (1973) articulated a theory of reproduction organized around his notion of cultural capital, and social capital. However Bourdieu's work poses an initial problem in that what constitutes cultural capital varied throughout his writings (Lamont and Lareau, 1999). For the purposes of clarity, this discussion will utilize Lareau and Horvat's (1988) interpretation of cultural capital, synthesized from Bourdieu's numerous works. They define cultural capital as "attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge (including language), behaviors, and credentials" (p. 156). According to Bourdieu (1986) schools are organized around cultural capital of the dominant culture, and such that capital is transmitted intergenerationally, from one generation to the next. Therefore, students from dominant culture families will experience greater success in school than students from non-dominant cultures, as they are familiar with the cultural capital of the dominant culture, which is the culture through which instruction is transmitted. Bourdieu (1973) asserted,

An education system which puts into place an implicit pedagogic action, requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible familiarization, offers information and training which can be received and acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is condition for the success of the transmission and inculcation of the culture. (p. 80.)

Therefore, a student's unfamiliarity with the cultural practices of the dominant class jeopardizes not only a student's academic success but also the opportunity for upward mobility, which is often also linked to one's academic success in school. Bourdieu (1973) further argues that when schools create hierarchies that appear to be based on talent, skill, and merit, but are to a great extent based on one's accumulation of dominant cultural capital, schools are complicit in the act of social reproduction:

By making social hierarchies and the reproduction of these hierarchies appear to be based upon the hierarchies of gifts, merits, and skills established and ratified by its sanctions, or in a word, by converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, the educational system fulfills a function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the social order... (1973, p.84)

Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital also has implications for social reproduction. He defined social capital as:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its member with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word. (p. 249).

These networks of relationships when exploited, according to Bourdieu, have the potential to provide numerous benefits to individuals. The dominant classes utilize the various benefits to maintain power. Other social classes may have their own (social and cultural) capital; however, it is generally not acknowledged by the dominant culture.

Lareau and Horvat (1999) in their study of the use of capital in school settings noted, "the ability to activate social and cultural capital and the way in which it is activated influences its value..." (p. 39). Lareau and Horvat (1999) modified Bourdieu's analogy of a card game to further explicate and clarify the activation of capital:

In a card game (the field of interaction), the players (individuals) are all dealt cards (capital). However, each card and each hand have different values. Moreover, the value of each hand shifts according to the explicit rules of the game (the field of interaction)

that is being played (as well as the way the game is being enacted). In other words, a good hand for blackjack may be a less valuable hand for gin rummy. In addition to having a different set of cards (capital), each player relies on a different set of skills (habitus) to play the cards (activate the capital). By folding the hand, a player may not activate his or her capital or may play the cards (activate the capital) expertly according to the rules of the given game. In another game, the same player may be dealt the same hand, yet because of a lack of knowledge of the rules of the game play the hand poorly. (p .39)

The effectiveness of capital is dependent upon four factors; the individual; field of interaction, or the setting, in which the capital is being deployed; the capital itself; and the habitus, or the skills and dispositions the individual possesses in relation to the capital. From their study of social and cultural capital, Lareau and Horvat (1999) concluded social reproduction is not deterministic, nor is it seamlessly transmitted across generations; rather it can be influenced by an individual's accumulation of and facility with social and cultural capital.

As with Bowles and Gintis' work, a major criticism of Bourdieu's theory was its deterministic nature and the failure to account for agency and resistance as well as race and gender in the reproduction of social classes. (Devine-Eiler 2005; Giroux, 1983;). Devine-Eiler (2005) noted that race effects the manner in which capital is deployed and the manner in which it is received, consequently affecting its utility not only in schools but also in the larger society.

In sum, *Schooling in Capitalist America* and Bourdieu's theories on social and cultural capital offer a starting point for understanding the role of schools in reproducing class inequalities; however, the limitations of their work necessitate examining social reproduction within the context of race and gender as well as exploring the influence of agency and resistance.

### **Summary**

This review began with an examination of school choice as it pertains to the African-American community. The arguments of both proponents and opponents of school choice were discussed. Critical race theory, a relatively new discourse to education, was examined through its six major tenets. Critical race theory provides a means to investigate and dissect both forms of racism, overt and covert. Finally, the manner in which schools contribute to the social inequalities in our society was examined through *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1973, 1986) notion of social reproduction and cultural and social capital.



# CHAPTER THREE

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This qualitative investigation is a study to examine the lived experiences of middle class African-American parents in the school choice movement. Qualitative research attempts to serve one of three purposes: to explore, explain, or describe a specific phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) and, as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), it should be flexible enough to “unfold, cascade, roll, and emerge,” (p.210). While I concur with Lincoln and Guba, I would add that qualitative research must also be flexible enough to allow for the unexpected but necessary changes that may occur and redirect the focus—but not the purpose—of a study. Hatch (2002) offers further support for the element of flexibility in qualitative studies by encouraging qualitative researchers to design projects with a “flexible structure that allows for change when real circumstances dictate” (p. 38). (As my study progressed, Hatch’s words would soon resonate with me as I was confronted with decisions dictated by current circumstances of charter schools in Ohio.) Maxwell (1996) extends the discussion of purpose, asserting that there are, in fact, three distinct categories of purposes that the researcher must consider—the research purpose, the personal purpose, and the practical purpose. Research purposes are those which concentrate on gaining insight into something by enhancing one’s understanding of meaning, context, process, or identifying unanticipated phenomenon and influences and generating new theory (p.15). While practical purposes seek to accomplish goals such as changes in policy, process, or practice, personal purposes are the driving force and motivation of a study and are influenced by an individual’s curiosities, political passions, or desires for career advancement (p. 15). Maxwell also warns that researchers must be aware of the effects of their personal purposes for conducting research and the potential problems they can pose to a study:

...it is important that you recognize and take account of the personal purposes that drive and inform your research. Attempting to purge yourself of personal goals and concerns is neither possible nor necessary. What is necessary is to be aware of these concerns and how they may be shaping your research and to think about how best to deal with their consequences (p. 16).

Applying Maxwell’s framework of purposes to this study, the research purpose of this study was to better understand middle class African-Americans’ abandonment of urban public schools. My



personal and practical goals for this study were essentially one and the same: to encourage urban school boards, administrators and teachers to rethink their policies and practices regarding those issues which force African-Americans to flee from urban schools. (Those issues are discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this study).

### **Changing Course**

Originally, this dissertation began as a study of the African-American presence in the school choice movement. More specifically, the focus of the investigation was African-American parents in the charter school movement; however, when it became evident that gaining access to charter schools created unforeseen and insurmountable obstacles, I was forced to redirect the focus of my study. I believe a brief discussion of the controversy surrounding charter schools is necessary to further explicate the issues underlying the problems I encountered which led me to change the focus of this study from the African-American presence in the school choice movement to an investigation into middle class African-Americans' abandonment of urban public schools.

In the decade since their inception in 1997, charter schools or "community schools," the legal term for charter schools in Ohio, have withstood a constant barrage of attacks from opponents representing both private and public organizations and institutions. For public schools, (that is, traditional public schools) that, collectively, have been one of the staunchest critics of community schools, much of their argument against these schools stems from the financial losses they incur as a result of community schools. Traditional public schools contend that community schools threaten their existence as state education funds are transferred from traditional public schools to community public schools via Ohio's per pupil expenditure funding formula. (Russo, 2005). Their concerns are not unwarranted. Public schools have lost large sums of state education dollars to community schools as the enrollment in community schools throughout Ohio has grown from approximately 2,245 students in 1998 to more than 60,000 students in 2005 (Russo, 2005). Consequently, the loss for some of Ohio's largest urban districts has reached well into the millions of dollars. The steep loss of students and dollars have forced public school districts to make drastic budget cuts in numerous areas including staffing, academic programs, and capital improvement projects. The charter schools have negatively affected traditional public schools, more than any other educational institutions. Both major

teachers unions, the Ohio Federation of Teachers and the Ohio Education Association, in an effort to protect the interests of their membership, launched aggressive campaigns against charters schools, “generating negative press about the charter movement and raising suspicions among many public school educators and Democratic lawmakers” (Russo, 2005).

As a result of this contentious environment in which charter schools have languished, most charter school administrators were reluctant to have outsiders, especially researchers, visit their schools. Of the five charter school administrators I contacted, only two would allow me to visit their buildings. The three administrators, who would not allow me to visit their schools, sighted a host of reasons including being too busy; the time not being right; and the principal not being available. None of the school administrators was willing to assist me in identifying parents who might be willing to participate in this study.

Therefore, I changed the focus of my study from the African-American presence in the charter school movement to the presence of middle class African-Americans in the broader school choice movement, which is essentially a movement away from traditional urban public schools.

I chose to study the African-American middle class abandonment of urban public schools for three reasons. First, this is an area that has been overlooked by educational researchers as well as the American public in general who seem to view the African-American community as a monolith, characterized only by the negative portrayals of African-American life that are reported on television news broadcasts and misguided comments by black celebrities who suggest that African-American students are only concerned about “ipods and sneakers” (Oprah Winfrey cited in Samuels, 2007). For this segment of the American population, the notion of an African-American middle class is an oxymoron. Second, if educators in suburban, parochial, and private institutions genuinely desire to create positive, meaningful, and effective educational experiences for all students, it is imperative that these educators gain a better understanding of the role of education in the history and development of African-American society and a better understanding of the motivations and sensibilities of middle class African American parents. And finally, I selected the topic because I understand the far-reaching impact and implications of the “African-American middle class flight” from the urban public schools, and I sought to ascertain a better understanding of the complex issues that underpin this phenomenon.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this study described the predominant attitudes, behaviors, values, and beliefs that inform middle class African-American parents' decisions to exclude urban public schools for consideration as the educational institutions for their children.

### **The Researcher**

Since the late 1970's, I have taught in urban schools in Cleveland, East Cleveland, and Cincinnati, Ohio. I am quite familiar with the issues that confront urban schools and perhaps force many middle class African-American parents to abandon their neighborhood schools for independent, parochial, and suburban schools.

In urban schools, I have seen hundreds of thousands of dollars squandered away under the guise of reform as educational experts, consultants, and vendors peddle programs and packages of wares and services, exploiting districts looking for a quick fix to the myriad problems of inner city schools. In the 1970's, the federal government allocated millions of dollars for the Federal Teacher Corps Program with the hopes that its graduates, who would receive a government-funded graduate education, would go into urban and rural schools to serve not only as educators but also community change agents. The 1980's saw an emphasis on pedagogy and reading comprehension as schools throughout the nation trained teachers in the Madeline Hunter technique and universities schools offered convenient, on-site graduate-level courses on reading in the content area. During the 1990's schools in Ohio were encouraged to write grants to receive venture capital funding—\$125,000—from the state for innovative educational programs. The 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in yet another phase of reform as most states throughout America spend millions of dollars in test prep materials and professional development courses designed to assist school districts in raising student performance on state-mandated tests in an effort to meet the demands of “No Child Left Behind.” In sum, millions of dollars have been spent on educational programs over the past 30 years in the state of Ohio. Yet, these programs have yielded few positive results for the vast majority of urban school students.

I have witnessed and experienced the effects of the glaring inequities that exist within many urban districts. It is not uncommon in urban districts for certain schools such as magnet schools to maintain a “favored school” status among district officials. The long-standing, unwritten district policy is to promote and advance these schools at the expense of other schools and more importantly, at the expense of other children in the district. This is but one example of

the inequities found in urban school districts. In reality there are numerous inequities that exist within urban districts as well as between urban and suburban districts, which are indicative of the broader social, political, and economic issues impacting schools that cannot be sufficiently explored within the boundaries of this study. At present, the prospects for true, genuine equity in urban schools are grim.

As an African-American, I understand that throughout history African-American parents steadfastly believed that the prosperity and success of future generations were inextricably intertwined with freedom and a quality education. While most African-American parents still believe that education is foundational to the socioeconomic advancement of their children, thousands have become disillusioned and disenchanted with urban schools and seek viable alternatives. These parents who seek to distance their families from the direct and collateral effects of poverty and oppression that are perpetuated and reproduced in urban schools, will not wait another five, ten, or fifteen years for the educational establishment to reinvent itself and transform the urban public school systems in this nation. Most importantly, I understand that for many African-American parents, school choice represents not only their alternative to public schools but also a new era of hope.

Thus, I make no claims of neutrality or objectivity on this issue. I encourage school choice because at the present, urban public schools do not adequately serve the needs of the majority of African-American students. Yet, I recognize that school choice, in and of itself, will not resolve the educational crisis in this nation. Ultimately, school choice should be considered an integral element of a broader national initiative to restructure, renew, and transform our current system of schooling in America. In the interim, however, school choice represents a viable solution for families throughout the United States, and middle class African-American families in increasing numbers will continue to embrace school choice as an alternative to traditional urban public schools.

### **Data Collection**

The primary purpose of the data collection phase was to better understand the how parents constructed their decisions to enroll their children in independent, parochial or suburban schools. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven parents to obtain the data that addressed the major question of this study. Parents selected for the study were acquired through

the use of a non-statistical sampling method, the snowball method, which is also referred to as the chain method or network method. Snowball sampling is based on acquiring leads for additional informants from those who have already been interviewed. Utilizing my affiliation with several educational, civic, and cultural organizations, I began my search for informants by making a list of acquaintances whose children attended independent, parochial, or suburban schools. As I began to review the list it became quite evident that I had a vast network of middle class African-American parents at my disposal, however, most were public school educators. It is of interest to note that most African-Americans who teach in urban public schools do not live in those communities; consequently, they do not enroll their children in the urban districts in which they teach. For this study I sought a more diverse group of parents, a group that would represent a broader spectrum of the African-American middle class. As I conducted pre-interviews with potential informants from my initial list to determine who would be selected for the final interviews, I inquired about other parents who might be interested in the study. Recommendations from this initial group of parents yielded the names of parents who represented areas of employment within the public sector as well as parents employed in the private sector. From the two groups, thirteen parents were part of the preliminary interviews; of the thirteen, seven were included in the final interviews. The seven parents included in the final interviews were chosen because they had rich, complex, multi-faceted stories to tell about their abandonment of urban public schools as well as their experiences with suburban, parochial, and independent institutions. And moreover, they appeared willing to talk openly, candidly and without reservation about their experiences.

Prior to each interview the informants reviewed the informed consent letter (See Appendix A). Before they signed the letter, I addressed any concerns they expressed. Several informants were quite concerned that, for professional and personal reasons, their real names would not be used. I assured them that fictitious names would be assigned to all informants, and presented them with the option of selecting their own pseudonyms if they desired. This seemed to allay their concerns and uneasiness regarding matters of confidentiality and anonymity.

The semi-structured interviews created a framework in which I could design the interviews, yet they afforded me the opportunity to refine the study as needed. Another reason I chose the semi-structured interview is because it was more conducive to developing natural or authentic conversations as opposed to the contrived, constrained discussions that would have

occurred by using a fixed data collection instrument. The broad, overarching question of this study was: “What led to your decision to enroll your child in a private, parochial or suburban school?” This question was precise enough to focus the parents’ responses, while also providing enough latitude to allow the parents to give more detailed and elaborate responses. Subsequent questions were more specific in nature such as: “What did you like most about your child’s previous school?” and “What did you like least about that school?” The preliminary list of questions is located in Appendix B.

Initially, I intended to tape record and take notes of the interviews with the parents; however, because of a distrust that many African-Americans have of various forms of media, both of those methods proved to be threatening and intrusive to some parents. In situations where the parents did not allow me to take notes or tape record their conversations, I arranged the interviews into my daily schedule so that immediately after each interview I had time to transfer my mental notes into written summaries. Every attempt was made to review, transcribe, and analyze data on a regular basis as to prevent a data backlog.

### **The Informants**

Seven parents from the African-American middle class formed the sample group for this study. The relatively small number of informants does not in any way diminish the legitimacy or significance of their messages. Their sentiments are reflected in the voices of literally dozens of parents whose informal conversations substantiated and bolstered the parents’ stories. Saturation in a qualitative study occurs at the point when the message of the respondents begins to follow a pattern, or in other words, when the informants’ responses are similar. For this study the pattern emerged after interviewing five parents; however, I added additional interviews to ensure that saturation had in fact occurred. The additional two interviews verified my conclusion that saturation had occurred. In identifying this sample group as members of the African-American middle class, it is important to note that there is no single definition for the term “African-American middle class.” In this study, the major factors that unify this sample group are income, occupation, level of education, and the parents’ high regard for education and the potential benefits it will bring to their children’s lives. Only one member of the informant group is a single parent. All other members of the informant group are married. When income is used as a measure of middle class status, the members of this sample group are solidly positioned in the

middle class, as the average family income is more than \$90,000. Their employment and levels of education reveal a wider degree of diversity than their incomes. Their careers cover a broad spectrum of white-collar occupations including one social worker, one teacher, one school administrator, one corporate executive, one customer service specialist, and one community college instructor. One participant was a stay-at-home mother. Six of the seven participants attended elementary and secondary schools in public districts. All have attended college. Five have bachelor's degrees. Three of those five also have master's degrees. A brief biographical sketch of each informant is presented below.

Harvey Judge is a customer service representative for a major technology corporation. He was educated in the public schools in an urban city of southwestern Ohio. He and his wife, currently reside in what is considered a suburban community in southwestern Ohio. Their two children have attended the public elementary schools in their local school district and attended high school at a Catholic school in the area. Both children are enrolled in universities in a neighboring state. Mr. Judge brings a unique perspective to the interview, as his disenchantment and disillusionment with the Catholic educational system would ultimately lead him to withdraw his youngest child from the parochial high school and enroll her into the local public high school in their city. Mr. Judge's interview chronicled his journey from public schools to parochial schools and back.

Carlton Smith is an assistant principal of a suburban high school, whose career has included administrative positions in both urban and suburban districts. He was educated in the public schools of the south and moved to the Midwest to pursue a career in education. Mr. Smith and his wife, who is also employed by a local school district, have one son who was educated in suburban schools. In an effort to shield his family from the dangers of urban life and to provide his child with the opportunities that suburban schools would afford him, Mr. Smith, like many other African-American educators who are employed by public school districts, made a conscious decision to move his family to the suburbs. Keenly aware of the myriad issues of race, class, and gender that impact the ability of a child in any school and in particular African-American males, Mr. Smith provides insight into the concerns and fears that all parents of African-American boys must confront.

Marilyn Jones, an educator in an urban school district in a midwestern state, was educated in the school system in which she now teaches. Unlike the other informants of this

study, Ms. Jones is a lifelong resident of the urban community in which she currently resides. Although she and her family remained in the city and planned to educate their children in the same school system from which she and her husband graduated, after experiencing what she describes as “the incompetence, indifference and lack of compassion” of some public school employees, Ms. Jones abandoned the public schools for parochial schools.

Gwendolyn Mills is the only member of the informant group who attended parochial schools. A devout Catholic, Ms. Mills grew up in one of America’s largest urban centers. She and her husband reside in the same Midwestern, semi-rural, semi-suburban community in which her husband was raised. They live within several blocks of the high school from which her husband graduated in the early 1970’s. Their three children, for whom public schools were never a consideration, have been solely educated in the Catholic school system. In selecting parochial schools, Mrs. Mills sought the structure, order, values, and pastoral care of the Catholic school.

Lara Daley is a single mother of two children who have been assessed as gifted and talented. She is currently employed as a social worker with a residential facility for troubled teens. She and her children reside in a suburban community in Northeastern Ohio. Ms. Daley is currently the PTA president for her school district.

Maureen Jackson was educated in public schools on the east coast before she began her collegiate studies in the Midwest. She currently resides in an upscale community in northeastern Ohio. An instructor at a community college, Ms. Jackson began her teaching career in secondary public schools before joining the community college faculty. She and her husband, who is also a public school educator, have four children who were educated in independent, parochial, and suburban schools. In addition to her experiences as a public school parent, her contribution to this study provides insight into the challenges African-American parents must face when they seek to educate their children in the most elite schools available to them.

Winston Mills is a senior executive for a technology company in southwestern Ohio. During the course of this investigation, Winston Mills emphatically stated to me, “My kids will never go to public schools!!” (Thus, the title of this study emerged.) Mr. Mills’ views of public schools have been shaped and informed by his own educational experiences in public schools as well as his more recent business involvement with the urban school district with which his company holds several contracts. Mr. Mills, whose spouse, Gwendolyn Mills, is also a



participant in this study, wanted to ensure that his children had the best education his money could buy.

Collectively, the lived experiences of this diverse group of informants provided a broad spectrum of perspectives and insights into the thoughts, attitudes, and values of middle class African-American parents and their expectations of their children's educational institutions.

### **Analysis of Narratives**

The analysis of the parents' narratives, was an on-going process. Tape-recorded interviews and all hand-written data were transcribed using a word processor. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Hofmann's (1995) conceptual text segments, or thinking units, model provided a structured framework for narrative analysis. The constant comparative method is an inductive process designed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) in which the researcher continuously reviews and compares data collected from the interviews. Hofmann's model, a variation as well as extension of the constant comparative method, utilizes conceptual text segments, or thinking units, to guide the researcher through an analysis regimen that facilitates the identification of emergent themes. In this model each interview is considered as a textual unit. Each textual unit is then divided into conceptual text segments, which are specific statements from the informants. For this study, I used the informants' responses to the questions in the semi-structured interviews to develop the conceptual text segments. As I completed textual units, I began the process of organizing the conceptual text segments into two categories: academic and non-academic issues. Academic issues were those that directly dealt with the process of learning and teaching, while non-academic issues, were those that indirectly impacted instruction. Examples of academic issues included teacher quality, educational resources, and rigorous curriculum. Non-academic issues included students fighting, neighborhoods where the schools were located, and extracurricular activities. In addition to categorizing the conceptual text segments into academic and non-academic issues, after the second textual unit was obtained, I began to compare the conceptual text segments of the completed textual units for points of similarity and dissimilarity. The following example illustrates how I adapted Hofmann's model for this study:

#### **Example of Adaptation of Hofmann's (1995) Conceptual Text Segments Model**

**Step One:** I obtained a textual unit (interview) from Carlton Smith.

**Step Two:** I identified conceptual text segments from the question: “What specific events, if any, precipitated your decision to enroll your child/children in private, parochial, or suburban schools?”

- “With some teachers, black kids are all clumped together as thugs regardless of what kind of family they come from.”
- “A lot of black boys who are smart, assertive, and question their teachers about the subject they are teaching are often labeled as trouble makers by their teachers, while white boys who do the same thing are hailed as being precocious or inquisitive.”

**Step Three:** I obtained a textual unit from Winston Mills.

**Step Four:** I identified conceptual text segments from Winston Mills’ response to the same question.

- “The school district has changed a lot since I went there. I don’t even think they have 300 kids in the whole district.”
- “They don’t have the same caliber of teachers that they had when I went there. They don’t have good athletic programs, either. And all of my kids are involved in sports.”
- “I wanted a school where the expectation was that all kids will go to college, and it’s not like that at the neighborhood school. At my kids’ school the expectation is that every kid will go to college.”

**Step Five:** I identified similarities between the two sets of conceptual text segments:

- Both informants had concerns about the effectiveness of the teachers.
- **Step Six:** I identified conceptual text segments from Maureen Jackson’s response to the same question.
  - “The final straw for me was when they could not find my child in the after-school program. I knew then that it was time to put her in private school, and I didn’t care what it cost!”
  - “The teachers were spending too much time with discipline.”
  - “I didn’t want my child exposed to all the negative elements that are in public schools.”

**Step Seven:** I compared Maureen Jackson’s responses to those from Winston Mills and Carlton Smith and found that she also had concerns about the teachers. Those concerns from all three informants would be classified as “teacher issues.”

As I continued the process, I looked for teacher issues in the conceptual text segments in the other textual units (interviews). All statements regarding teachers were grouped together and

classified as teacher issues. As a result of this process, teacher quality emerged as a potential theme. The process was repeated with all the questions from the semi-structured interview. As conceptual text segments were classified by topics, potential themes continued to emerge. In addition to facilitating the process of identifying themes, this procedure was useful in determining when the study had reached the point of saturation. Themes were then used to report the results of the semi-structured interviews with the parents. Although I originally considered dividing the themes into two separate categories, academic and non-academic, I eventually concluded that such boundaries were unwarranted as all of the issues impact the instructional process and learning. The insignificance of the categories became more evident to me throughout the process of writing the results of the narrative analysis. Throughout that process the interrelatedness of the five themes emphasized how academic achievement, safety and discipline, teacher quality, racism, and cultural matters are not individual entities that function in a vacuum. Rather they are interdependent and interactive entities which impact each other.

### **Data Representation**

Each interview was used to identify commonalities among parents' responses regarding the decision to enroll their child in a particular school. Similar responses were then categorized into five major themes: academic achievement, safety and discipline, teacher quality, racism, and culture matters. The theme of academic achievement addressed parental concerns such as the quality of instruction, academic rigor, high expectations, college preparatory and advanced placement course offerings, and the schools' ability to prepare their children for success at the collegiate level. Safety and discipline issues ranged from the neighborhoods in which the schools were located to concerns about unruly student behavior in the classroom that disrupts the learning process and student fighting. Issues organized around teacher quality were evident in every textual unit I obtained. Parents identified issues such as the caliber of teachers, the manner in which teachers interacted with their students, and the dedication and commitment of educators as significant concerns regarding teacher quality. Racism was also identified as a theme. Some parents candidly expressed concerns about specific racist incidents, while others were reluctant to suggest the possibility of race as a factor in decisions and actions made by school personnel. Cultural matters emerged as parents explained it is important for their children to be educated in an environment that was economically, politically, and socially diverse, believing that this would

enable their children to acquire the skills and sensibilities to navigate in various social and cultural circles needed for upward mobility and economic success. This theme also revealed parents' perspectives on issues such as the importance of African-American history in the school curriculum and their views on the moral and historical obligation of the African-American middle class to urban school communities.

The themes present the parents' perspectives on the issues they felt were most relevant to the questions posed to them. Each theme consisted of three components: an introduction, a discussion, and a summary. The introduction briefly outlines the theme and provided a transition into each discussion. The most essential part of each theme, the discussion, was crafted with the intent of providing the most authentic representations of the parents' voices. Verbatim text from the interview was used to accomplish this task. Each discussion revealed parents' innermost thoughts about their hopes and dreams for their children; their concerns about urban schools and communities; their expectations for the schools they selected; and in some instances, the harsh realities and disappointments of education in suburban, parochial, and independent schools. Each summary reviewed the key points of the theme.

### **Trustworthiness**

Although the issue of trustworthiness, or credibility can be problematical in any qualitative investigation, it is, undoubtedly, the one issue upon which the success or failure of a qualitative research project depends. As a qualitative investigator, I acknowledge the parents in this study have their own perceptions of their experiences and for each parent those perceptions constitute the truth. However, I also acknowledge that it is reasonable and necessary expectation to corroborate or substantiate their "truths" and more importantly, to ensure that the data they provided and the manner in which they have been collected, analyzed, and interpreted are credible and trustworthy. Researchers must apply multiple measures to ensure that the data collected and the conclusions based upon those data are credible (Creswell, 1998; Lecompte and Preissle, 1993; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1995;). Ultimately, the researcher must ask herself, "How might I be wrong?" and then set out to prove that she is correct in her understandings of the data as they are manifested in her descriptions, interpretations, and conclusions in the study (Maxwell, 1995). Creswell (1998) asserts that qualitative researchers should use at least two strategies to rule out threats to the credibility of the data and evidence. In

addition to explicitly revealing my biases on the matter of African-American families migrating from urban public schools to parochial, independent, and suburban schools, I utilized four other techniques—triangulation, member checking, analysis of negative case evidence, and peer debriefing—to establish credibility.

The primary means of triangulation, acquiring data from multiple sources and methods, occurred through the use of multiple interviews from a diverse group of middle class African-American parents. A secondary means of triangulation came from the existing literature related to the five themes that reiterated many of the sentiments expressed by the parents. After the composing the results of the analysis of the parents' narratives, I conducted member checks by asking parents to read the selected excerpts to determine if it captured the essence of his or her reality about the experience. In cases where a parent disagreed with the representation of his or her voice we discussed and negotiated the points of concern and revised the material as needed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the use of member checks is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Most researchers will agree that using member checks is the best strategy for “ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they (informants) say and the perspective they have of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2005).

Peer debriefing is a process by which another qualitative researcher reviews and critiques a researcher's work and by probing questions about the methods, interpretations and conclusions of a study. Creswell (1998) in citing Lincoln and Guba (1985) characterizes the peer debriefer as the “devil's advocate, an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions...and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings” (p. 202). This process allows the researcher to reflect on her work and engage in discussions about procedures and strategies to amend her work. At various stages of this project, I reviewed my work with a colleague who was familiar with the content of my study and was also well-versed in the process of qualitative inquiry. He asked the probing questions and challenged me on numerous occasions to review, rethink, or rewrite specific sections of this study. In addition, he became a sounding board for my numerous questions and frustrations about the qualitative inquiry process.

Negative case evidence occurs when an anomaly or outlier is identified in the data. One informant in this study withdrew his child from a parochial school and re-enrolled her in the neighborhood public high school. Using Maxwell's (2005) notion that the purpose of negative

case analysis is to “rigorously examine both the supporting and discrepant data to assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all the pressures to ignore data that do not fit your conclusions” (p.93), I re-examined and analyzed the data from this informant to determine its impact on the conclusions of my investigation. As a result, I determined that although the parent withdrew the child from the parochial school, the reasons for doing so did not justify altering my conclusions. Through the deliberate and judicious application and review of triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis, I attempted to remove all possible threats to the credibility and integrity of this study. The effectiveness of these efforts are best assessed by the extent to which they have facilitated my endeavor to convince the reader that the “findings of the inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of...” (Lincoln and Guba, p. 290).

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the methodology for this investigation. I began by discussing the purposes and characteristics of qualitative design. I then reviewed why the focus of this study changed from the African-American presence in the charter school movement to a focus on the middle class African-American’ abandonment of urban public schools. Included in this discussion was a brief overview of charter schools in Ohio. My own biases on school choice were made public in the autobiographical sketch of the researcher. This is a central feature of qualitative studies in that the divulgence of the researcher’s biases toward the topic serves as yet another form of trustworthiness. Data collection methods were explained in an account of how I employed the snowball method to develop a diverse group of African-American informants and why I chose the semi-structured interview as a data collection instrument. I offered brief biographical sketches of each of the seven informants and presented a description of the narrative analysis process—a variation of the constant comparative method—that identified five major themes: academic achievement, safety and discipline, teacher quality, racism, and culture matters. Finally, in the last section of this chapter I discussed the four main strategies I used to address the issue of trustworthiness or credibility: triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

#### **Overview of Themes**

The narrative analysis process identified five major themes: academic achievement, safety and discipline, teacher quality, racism, and cultural matters. The theme of academic achievement addressed parental concerns such as the quality of instruction, college preparatory and advanced placement course offerings and the schools' ability to prepare their children to be successful at the collegiate level. Safety and discipline issues ranged from concerns about the neighborhoods in which the schools were located to unruly student behavior in the classroom and student fighting. Racism was also identified as a theme. Some parents candidly expressed concerns about specific racist incidents, while others were reluctant to suggest the possibility of race as a factor in decisions and actions made by school personnel. Cultural matters emerged as a theme through parents' articulation of their belief regarding the importance of their children being educated in an environment that was economically, culturally, and socially diverse, believing that this would enable their children to acquire the skills and sensibilities to navigate in various social professional circles needed for upward mobility.

Each of the themes will be discussed within the context of my conversations with the parents. Extant literature that augments, clarifies, or illuminates specific issues within a theme will be integrated into this discussion. It should be noted that not all questions were asked verbatim from the data collection instrument. Some questions were modified as a result of the natural flow of discussion. The spirit of the question remained intact; the integrity of the data was not compromised.

## **Theme One: High Academic Achievement**

“I did not want my son to go to an urban public school because I wanted him to be academically competitive and interested in something other than clothes, hip-hop, and basketball...” (Carlton Smith, Parent)

### **Introduction**

As with most parents in the United States when it comes to the matter of education, high academic achievement and expectations were at the forefront of the conversations with this group of African-American parents. But what constitutes high academic achievement? In the current era of academic accountability, high academic achievement has become an ambiguous and elusive term at best, as no uniform definition or criteria exists. Most public schools, laboring under mounting pressures from local, state, and federal bureaucratic (and extremely insufficiently funded) mandates to improve academic performance, have relegated high academic achievement to student results on standardized exit exams such as the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). For private and parochial schools, college entrance examination scores and the percentage of graduates enrolling in four-year, post secondary institutions characterize their interpretation of high academic achievement.

For the parents in this study, the notion of high academic achievement and expectations, for all intents and purposes, translates into an academic environment that prepares their children for matriculation at an institution of higher learning. Given that this group of parent informants attributes their social and economic successes to, in large part, their acquisition of a college education, it is only reasonable and logical for them to desire a college education for their children. These parents understand that a college education was their gateway to the middle class; and consequently, their hopes and dreams for their children’s future hinge on a college education. They do not believe urban public schools—constantly challenged by what are seemingly insurmountable social, political, and economic issues—possess the requisite resources such as personnel, curriculum, instructional materials, and technology to adequately prepare their children for a successful collegiate experience.

### **Discussion**

For Winston Mills, it was never a question of whether his children would attend private schools or public schools, even though his family lives within just a few blocks of the high



school from which he graduated. The decision to exclude the local public schools as an option for children was not difficult. He had witnessed the decline of his community since the 1970's. A neighborhood that was once a much sought-after, thriving, black suburb of working class and middle class families had deteriorated into a community that possesses many of the negative characteristics that plague urban areas throughout this nation. One of the greatest casualties of this decline has been the school district, which, over the past several years, has consistently been ranked as one of lowest-achieving schools the county in which he resides. It is evident that Mr. Mills recognizes that schools are a microcosm of the communities in which they exist. More importantly, he understands the implications of this condition for his children. From his perspective, the public schools in his community were tantamount to urban public schools. Thus, they were inferior and never a consideration for his children. His comments reveal not only his conviction and determination to provide his children with a high quality college preparatory education but also his understanding of the academic deficiencies and shortcomings of many urban public schools:

“I always knew my kids would go to private school. The school district is not the same as it was when I went there. This whole community is different! They don't have the same caliber of teachers; they don't have a strong curriculum to get the kids ready for college. I wanted a school where the expectation was that all kids will go to college, and that every kid will go to college...I wanted to make sure my kids had the best education my money could buy!!

Although Mr. Mills has had no direct contact with public schools in the education of his children, his criticisms of public schooling—the inability to provide a rigorous curriculum and low expectations—are validated by other parents in the study who had been involved with public schools, both urban and suburban, in varying degrees and capacities.

During the past 20 years Carlton Smith experienced urban education from the vantage point of a parent, teacher and administrator. Mr. Smith's decision to move his family to a suburban community to avoid sending his son to an urban school was informed by his involvement in those schools. While Mr. Mills, spoke in generalities of the educational consequences of the declining socio-economic status of his community, Mr. Smith's empirically-based commentary on the weaknesses of urban schools are more focused and specific, lending legitimacy to Mr. Mills' suggestion that the decline of his local schools could be attributed to the social and economic conditions in the community. Mr. Smith stated:

“I did not want my son to go to an urban public school because I wanted him to be academically competitive and interested in something other than clothes, hip-hop and basketball... Unless you are in a middle class environment, you get a laid back, laissez-faire attitude about school, and more emphasis on material things. If you’re around folks who only want to shoot the breeze, unless you have a strong family, that’s what you’ll end up doing. I wanted my son to have a healthy sense of competition, not just about athletics. In an urban school that (a healthy sense of competition) does not translate into the classroom.”

Mr. Smith’s assertion that most urban schools are not academically competitive speaks to the issue that public schools often lack the rigorous curricula required to prepare students for colleges and universities. However his belief that being educated in a middle class community is a safeguard against students “having a laid-back, laissez-faire attitude about school” contradicts the lived experiences of many middle class African-American parents (as well as their children’s teachers) who are frustrated by what they perceive as their children’s, especially their boys’, lack of initiative, drive and motivation in regards to schooling (Bowser, 2007; Ogbu, 2003; Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Bowser (2007) observes, “There is hardly a black middle class parent in the United States who does not have a tale of going to school and having a confrontation with teachers and administrators over their children’s education or lack of it” (p.137). Bowser’s statement underscores some of the most critical issues in public and private conversations about middle class African-American males: First, the perception that school often is not a priority for many of them and secondly, most schools, public and nonpublic, do little to encourage and motivate African-American males to engage in rigorous, challenging curricula because there is no expectation that they will enroll in institutions of higher learning if they graduate from high school. Clearly, both Mr. Mills’ and Mr. Smith’s perceptions of urban public schools justify their decisions to eliminate those institutions as options for their children.

Unfortunately, the written text of their interview excerpts fails to convey the emotions that permeated their conversation. Both parents spoke with a heightened sense of alarm and anxious awareness of what lies ahead for their children without a college education. The tone and tenor of their voices reflected an ever-present apprehension among parents of young African-American males that their sons might become a statistic of “the streets.” They know that even with doing everything “right” as parents a remote chance exists that their sons could become a “black male statistic.” Their concerns are not without justification. In recent years numerous researchers have explored issues affecting young African-American males. One mistake or

misstep in any direction by a young African-American male, coupled with a society underpinned by a racist legal system can alter the course of his life immeasurably and greatly diminish his life chances. An integral component of the parents' panacea for such an outcome is to immerse their sons in school cultures that possess three key elements: an academic environment in which the entire school community—parents, faculty and staff, and students—subscribes to the belief that academic excellence is an expectation, not an exception; the social climate is one of hope and promise (as opposed to one that is filled with the hopelessness and despair, which West [1994] first characterized as nihilism in the African-American community); and connections that will enhance, reinforce, and stabilize their middle class status.

Harvey Judge, the third male parent in this study, educated a son and daughter in the parochial school system in southwestern Ohio. Although he eventually re-enrolled his daughter in the public school district during her senior year of high school, he continues to view the parochial schools as superior to the urban public schools. He lives in a community that has undergone socio-economic changes that mirror those of Mr. Mills' community; however, unlike Mr. Mills, Mr. Judge's decision to enroll his son in a parochial school was not a consequence of the changing demographics of his community. Rather, the decision was a result of his son's interest in attending a parochial school:

“My son and his best friend, who was white, had gone to school together since they were in kindergarten. They wanted to continue to go to the same school when it was time to go to high school. His friend's parents wanted their son to go a Catholic School, so my son asked if we would take him to the Open House for the Catholic school so that he could find out about the school. As it turned out my son liked the school and wanted to go there...his friend's parents couldn't afford to send him, so he didn't go, but my son still wanted to go there. We didn't know how we were going to pay for it, but God intervened and some income opportunities were made available to us, we stepped out on faith and things worked out and he was able to graduate from the Catholic school.”

Although neither Mr. Judge nor his wife was the motivation behind the decision to enroll his son in a parochial school, Mr. Judge had a clear sense of what he wanted his son to acquire: “I wanted him to gain leadership skills, and good communication skills, I wanted him to acquire great knowledge in math, science and reading. I wanted him to be stimulated to focus on a career.” Furthermore, he was cognizant of the academic differences between the two types of schools and various elements of an urban education that, in his opinion, would preclude his children from getting the kind of education he wanted him to receive:

“They had a load of work to do. There was always work, constantly homework, homework, projects; they kept their minds occupied with maintaining a high level of knowledge. In the government school they didn’t get that kind of workload. The reason for that is because the teacher in the government school finds the middle of the class and carries the class at that level throughout the year. In the private school; ain’t no middle teaching; what happens in the private school is that you [meaning the student] are going to come up to he level where the class is you’re gonna come up to this level. We’ll get you some help, well high is the middle of the road and that’s where we’re going to go.”

Mr. Judge’s comments regarding “ain’t no middle teaching” and “high is the middle of the road” are references to schools in which teaching to the middle is the common pedagogical practice. Teachers in such schools provide no differentiation of instruction to address the multiple academic and intellectual needs of their students, applying what is essentially a “one-size-fits-all” approach to instruction. The problem of teaching to the middle is not peculiar to urban schools. In reality, this practice is the predominant method of instruction for the vast majority of schools in the United States, be they public or private, urban or suburban. However, the problem is exacerbated greatly when teachers operate from a premise of low expectations, as is the case with many urban or minority-dominated schools. Thus, teaching to the middle in urban and minority populated schools is comparable to “teaching to the bottom,” as teachers in these schools often fail to design and implement rigorous, challenging instruction that meets the criteria or standards for work that is at least on grade level.

For Maureen Jackson, a college professor whose teaching career began in urban public schools, her dilemma of selecting a school for her youngest daughter would be resolved by enrolling her daughter in an elite, Montessori school and for secondary education, an exclusive private high school:

“I did not want her to attend a school where every student was on the same page every day. I wanted her to attend a school where there was a work ethic among the students and where learning was valued, where teachers stressed the joy of learning. At the Montessori school, she was able to go on field trips to all kinds of things...see a performance of the Nutcracker and take a science field trip to Kelly’s Island...”

The education Maureen Jackson sought for her daughter exemplifies the type of education Anyon (1994), in her seminal study of the “hidden curriculum,” identified as one that is rarely found in public or parochial schools but is common among the wealthy and affluent: the “executive elite” (p.79) education. Most students in executive elite professional schools tend to

come from families in which at least one parent holds a position such as corporate executive, attorney, physician, business owner, although such schools often have students from upper middle class families with two-parent incomes, as was the case with Maureen Jackson. A brief review of what has been termed the “hidden curriculum” by Jean Anyon as well as and numerous other educational scholars (Apple, 2004; Bowles and Gintis, 1976) is helpful here to better understand why parents are willing to make sacrifices to educate their children in parochial and private schools.

These scholars theorize that curriculum and pedagogy in a given school are largely determined by the socioeconomic status of the students in the school. The hidden curriculum theory contradicts the prevailing notion among the majority of Americans that schools are designed serve as a sort of scaffolding to the American dream by to equalizing opportunities and fostering upward social mobility. Rather, according to the aforementioned theorists, schools serve as a site of reinforcement and perpetuation of the students’ socioeconomic status by the level and quality of instruction that is provided. Thus, schooling for working class students often consists of whole group, rote learning in environments that inhibit intellectual creativity, prohibit social interaction and stifle the development of analytical skills and abilities, while students from wealthy and affluent communities are exposed to a rich curriculum which engages them in independent projects designed to encourage them to problem solve, think critically, enhance their ability use reason and logic, and acquire the “abilities necessary for ownership and control of physical capital and the means of production in society” (Anyon, p. 89). To support an upper echelon education for her daughter, Maureen Jackson took on an adjunct faculty position with a local university in addition to her full-time position with the community college, and her husband re-entered the workforce after retirement. Their efforts to acquire an executive elite education for their daughter underscore the value that African-Americans assign to education and the sacrifices they will endure to provide their children with the best education possible.

Parents in this study understand the hidden curriculum on different levels. Some know it from a theoretical and professional perspective having been exposed to it in schools of education and from their experiences as educators in urban public school districts. Others have a more personal understanding, having narrowly escaped its intended effects. And some have clearly witnessed the manifestations of the hidden curriculum in the schools with which they have been involved as parents. Regardless of how their understanding of the hidden curriculum was

transmitted to them they are not content to sit idly by and let the operatives of this unjust system diminish their children's life opportunities.

Unlike Maureen Jackson, Lara Daly did not possess the financial means to enroll her children in an elite, private school to ensure that they received a quality education. However, armed with a tenacious attitude of determination and persistence, and unwavering demands and high expectations of unconditional excellence and quality from her children's teachers and administrators, she has navigated, negotiated, and maneuvered her school system to craft an educational program for her children—both of whom have been identified as gifted—that will enable them to be competitive with students from parochial and private schools when they enter college. As a PTA president, she devotes much of her time to the work of confronting and challenging the operatives of the hidden curriculum in her pre-dominantly African-American (77%), suburban school district. She is keenly aware of the educational inequities and inequalities based on socioeconomics of different neighborhoods; moreover she is also aware of the academic injustices that exist within her own school district and within individual schools, citing academic ability as well as race as contributing factors to the inequalities and inequities in her son's high school. She notes that students will get a quality education if they are in honors, advanced placement, or gifted and talented programs as are her children. When asked to rate the learning opportunities her school provides on a scale of 1-10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest), she offered a qualified response:

“It depends. For my son, who is in the honors/AP track, I would rate it 8 to nine, if you're talking about that track. But if I had a low level kid, I'm not talking about average, I'm talking about a lower functioning kid, they're not reaching them like I think they should. But if you're a bright kid, it's a whole different culture; it's a mixture of black kids and white kids learning and the rigor is there; the curriculum is fine; the program is probably one of the best. But that's not the majority of kids in the school; it's certainly not the majority of black kids.”

Her depiction of her school district is indicative of the schooling experiences for the vast majority of African-American students when they are subjected to a long-standing tradition in our nation's schools known as tracking, in which the instructional program for students deemed above average is distinctly different from that offered to students identified as average or below average, as they are “tracked” into achievement-based homogenously grouped classes. Oakes' (2005) delineation of the disparities between high ability and low ability tracks substantiates Ms. Daley's claims that students in lower tracks receive an inadequate education.

Oakes reported differences between high ability and low ability groups in nine instruction-related categories: rigorous curriculum, the development of autonomous thinkers; amount of time spent on instruction advanced use of computers; qualified and experienced teachers; enrichment opportunities; friendly, nurturing classroom environments; and high expectations. In each of these areas Oakes found that high ability groups were advantaged over low ability groups, and as, Ms. Daley noted, African-American students were more likely to be placed in lower achieving tracks.

Well-informed parents who understand the implications of the hidden curriculum and tracking systems enact measures to protect their children from the deleterious effects of these practices, if they possess the necessary resources: information, time, and money. Parents who have the financial resources generally will use those resources to “get the best education my money can buy,” either by moving to a community with highly rated schools or sending their children to a parochial or independent school. For Lara Dailey, a single mother with limited financial resources, it meant maximizing her use of time and information; however, even as a parent of two gifted and talented children, she expends an inordinate amount of time ensuring that her children receive the full complement of educational services to which they are entitled:

I shouldn't have to work so hard I have a smart, black, well-rounded, well-behaved kid. I got to work just as hard like I got a boy that has no brain at all. I have to stay on them (the school system) in every way. And it's a job. So imagine if I had 8 kids, or if I didn't have the know-how or resources to navigate the school system, or if I didn't have a big mouth that intimidates them just a little bit to make sure that they do right by my kids.

The curricular and pedagogical disparities and inequities that exist among school districts, among schools within the same school district, and among classes in the same school all exemplify how the tracking systems and the hidden curriculum serve as a hegemonic tool for the dominant culture by reinforcing and perpetuating existing power relations in American society. Wealthy students receive instruction that will assist them in maintaining their wealthy status. Poor students in urban public schools receive little more than “drill and kill” activities consisting of mindless worksheet packets or boring periods of textbook reading with the obligatory assignment to answer the “questions at the end of the chapter.” Such schooling practices offer little education and greatly limit chances for students to be competitive at the collegiate level or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce.

For the most part, African-American parents who understand the social, economic, and political implications of schooling in urban American will not jeopardize their children's opportunities by enrolling them in or allowing them to remain in urban public schools that cannot provide a quality education that will give their children a "competitive edge." Phrases such as the "ability to compete" and "a competitive edge" emerged as a sub-theme within the theme of academic achievement as most parents in some way referenced "competition" as one of the reasons for enrolling their children in suburban, parochial, or independent schools.

Marilyn Jones, who had hoped to educate her children in the urban public school district from which she and her husband graduated and for whom she is currently employed, ultimately opted for a parochial school, seeking the competitive edge: "I wanted my children to have a competitive edge with their white counter parts because that's who they will have to compete with." It was a decision to move her son to a parochial school that revealed the school's inability to provide the competitive edge that subsequently led to her disillusionment with her district and her decision to abandon the urban public school:

"After my son's automobile accident he needed to wear a protective mask over his face and I knew the kids at his school would not be sympathetic to him; I didn't want him subjected to that kind of ridicule and humiliation, so I decided to send him to parochial school; I had both of my kids tested for parochial school; my son scored really well, but my daughter, who was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade scored the equivalent of a student in the 5<sup>th</sup> month of 3rd grade and she was in the 5th grade college prep program! There was no way she was staying there! I was livid! So I moved her to the Catholic school... she was behind in the work but she was able to get caught up with extra tutoring.

The disparity between the quality of academic programs—such as college preparatory programs—in urban public schools and the quality of such programs in independent, parochial, and suburban schools represents a national pattern that has been observed by Oakes (2005) and other researchers studying the discrepancies in educational opportunities. These researchers found that often times these programs are "likely to be less rigorous and to be taught by a less-qualified teacher than a class with the same title at a school serving advantaged students" (p. 229). Those findings were underscored by Ms. Jones' early experiences with Catholic education: "My daughter had been making A's and B's in the public school, but when we moved her to the Catholic school she was making C's and D's." Parents find little assurance that their children will gain a competitive edge in urban schools that lack rigorous curriculum and teachers lack the experience and knowledge to deliver a challenging, competitive instructional program.



## **Theme One Summary**

For the middle class African-American parents in this study, high academic achievement was the major factor in selecting schools for their children. As mid to late baby boomers they represent the first generation of African-Americans to fully benefit from the educational gains achieved through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Collectively, they believe steadfastly in the notion of a quality education being the "great equalizer," as they have maximized their own educational opportunities in public schools to gain access to the middle class. While they still believe education is the key component to improving one's station in life, they no longer believe that urban public schools—consumed by the myriad social, political and economic ills which plague the communities in which they exist—can educate their children in an environment in which high academic achievement is the expectation. Instead, they have chosen parochial, independent, and suburban public schools to educate their children, believing that these schools not only have the appropriate academic environment but that they will also accord their children a "competitive edge" that will enable them to navigate and negotiate this nation's white-dominated society.

Their conversations revealed unsettling contrasts between the two categories of schools—urban public schools and independent, parochial, and suburban public schools—offering compelling arguments to support their decisions to abandon urban public schools. Harvey Judge compared the public schools' practice of "teaching to the middle" to the parochial school's practice of setting a high academic standard and then providing the necessary academic interventions to ensure that all students meet that standard. Maureen Jackson rejected the traditional practice of whole group learning that is characteristic of most public schools, both urban and suburban, and sought a school that would embrace and nurture her daughter's optimal learning style and individualize a program that revolved around her interests and needs. Ms. Jackson chose a Montessori elementary school and an elite private high school for her daughter. The negative impact of schools that fail to implement a rigorous and robust curriculum was made real to Marilyn Jones via the results of a parochial school entrance examination that revealed her daughter, enrolled in a college prep track in an urban public school, was more than one year behind her current grade level.

In sum, parents in this study view high academic achievement as the cornerstone to a quality education, and in their opinions, urban public schools have deteriorated into institutions

that are devoid of the key elements that foster high academic achievement: high expectations, challenging curriculum, and engaging, child-centered pedagogy. The absence of these crucial elements in urban schools served as justification for their decisions to abandon urban public schools.

## **Theme Two: Discipline and Safety**

“Ain’t no way I would ever send my kids to someplace like that! My kids will never go to public schools!!” Winston Mills, Parent

### **Introduction**

Discipline and safety-related issues in urban schools have escalated in volume and intensified in severity during the past decade (Thompson, 2003; Bon, Faircloth, et .al 2006 ). However, this phenomenon is not limited to urban school systems. During this same period, suburban, independent and parochial institutions have all experienced disturbing increases in discipline and safety-related issues ranging from the traditional litany of inappropriate and relatively innocuous classroom infractions such as talking out, gum chewing and (in more recent years) flagrant violations of dress code and cell phone policies to more serious and felonious acts ranging from schoolhouse shootings to drug involvement to acts of physical abuse or sexual molestation. One of the most disturbing dimensions of this phenomenon has been the alarming rise in the number of female students committing serious acts of violence (Molnar, Roberts, et. al, 2005; Bright, 2005). Whether these acts of violence occur in public or non-public schools or whether males or females commit them, they extract a huge toll on the entire school community in numerous ways, and ultimately disrupt learning process for students.

Reasonable parents anticipate that, invariably, any school, regardless of the demographics of its student body, will encounter discipline problems, and they expect school personnel to possess the capabilities and resources to sufficiently address those concerns in a manner that is just and consistent. What parents will not tolerate, however, are those schools which adhere to harsh and overly punitive discipline policies, or those schools which are overwhelmed by the magnitude and volume of a constant barrage of discipline problems to the degree that the safety and security of their children are at risk. Parents who possess the financial wherewithal to do so, withdraw their children from these schools or never consider them as an option for their children.

In varying degrees, the parents in this study expressed little confidence that urban and, in some cases suburban schools, were capable of effectively addressing issues regarding discipline and student safety.

## **Discussion**

Maureen Jackson's concerns about the rigid and intimidating disciplinary practices of her oldest daughter's school and the lack of adequate and responsible supervision provided sufficient grounds for her to permanently terminate her relationship with the suburban school district in her community:

“When she was in the third grade she had forgotten her pencil and the teacher yelled at her to never come to the class again without a pencil...a third grader! Later in the school year she could not find her pencil again, so she hid in a closet in the school because she was too afraid of telling the teacher that she did not have a pencil. I got a call at work that my daughter was missing. I was frantic. I left my school and when I got to her school they had found her hiding in the closet because she was so terrified of this teacher, and I just don't think any 8 year-old should be that afraid of her teacher.”

Maureen Jackson is an ardent supporter of structure, discipline, and well-managed classrooms; however, the incident her daughter experienced exceeded the boundaries of good discipline and illustrated how schools often fail to maintain an appropriate balance of structure, freedom, consequences, and common sense in their attempts to design and implement effective discipline practices. Recent research suggests that intimidation and harsh discipline measures as described above, tend to exacerbate rather than ameliorate discipline problems and decrease the likelihood of improving student behavior (Anderson and Kincaid, 2005; Osher, and Fleischman, 2005). Such practices inhibit the development of what McNeely (2002) refers to as “school connectedness,” which she describes as the bond a student feels with his or her school community—students and adults—that is derived from experiences of support, belonging and engagement: According to McNeely:

When young people receive empathy, praise, and attention in a clear and consistent fashion, they experience social support. The experience of social support generates a sense of belonging, which, in turn, leads to increased engagement and academic motivation.

Students who experience school connectedness, McNeely further reported, engage in fewer acts of misbehavior and generally have a more positive school experience. In the late 1990's schools

throughout the U.S. began to jettison the get-tough, zero-tolerance policies, replacing them with more child-centered, nurturing, early response approaches that foster a sense of school connectedness such as the Positive Behavior Supports model (Skiba, 2005).

In addition to the intimidating tactics of the third grade teacher Maureen Jackson's daughter would encounter other negative school experiences, which further led to Ms. Jackson's reservations about the school's ability to insure her daughter's safety:

In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade she and a friend were sent to the school library after school to write sentences as punishment for talking in class. They normally went to the school's after-school program, but the teacher took them to the library at the end of the day and told them to stay there and not move until she returned. That was at 3:10 when school ended. I went to pick them up at 5:30, and no one in the after-school program knew where they were. Anything could have happened to them. We finally found them in the library, but for two and a half hours no one in the after school program knew where my child was. The teacher who gave them the writing assignment forgot about them. She went home and left them in the library.

Continually frustrated by the school system's incompetence and determined to find alternatives to her suburban school system, Ms. Jackson eventually marshaled the necessary financial resources to enroll her daughter in a parochial school. For her youngest daughter, the public schools were never a consideration.

The discipline, structure, and order traditionally associated with parochial schools were frequently cited by this group of African-American parents as reasons for enrolling their children in parochial schools. Those features were a priority for Gwendolyn Mills, the only informant who was educated in parochial schools. As she explicitly outlined her discipline expectations for the schools she considered for her children, it was evident that her Catholic school indoctrination figured prominently in her decision of a school:

"I wanted a school where, when you see the kids in the hall, they are not out of order. I want to see children standing in line quietly with their hands to their sides or their hands clasped in front of them."

Regardless of their religious orientation, the quest for reasonable disciplinary frameworks of structure and order was a recurring theme throughout my conversations with African-American parents of parochial school students. This is consistent with the research on African-American parents and parochial schools as well as the comments of Cleveland Councilwoman Fannie Lewis, an African-American who was instrumental in advancing the school choice agenda in Ohio: "In most instances the (African-American) parents' decisions have nothing to do with

religion. They want their children in a safe environment with strong disciplinary standards where they can get a good education ” (Shokraii, 1996.p. 24).

In addition to structure and order, Winston Mills, spouse of Gwendolyn Mills, wanted to avoid the violence commonly associated with the urban school landscape. An executive with a computer technology firm contracted to provide technology support for an urban school district, Mr. Mills recalled a situation one of his employees encountered that solidified his resolve to avoid public schooling for his children:

“One of the technicians called to ask me a question, and I heard all this noise and commotion in the background. I thought he had not gotten to his worksite (one of the local schools), so I asked him where he was; he said he was in the school and the teachers were trying to break up a fight...Ain’t no way I would ever send my kids to someplace like that! My kids will never go to public schools!! The teacher can’t even teach with all that stuff goin’ on!

Winston Mills’ remarks point to two major sub-themes regarding safety and discipline in urban schools: the level of violent acts, as evidenced by the fight incident Mr. Mills’ employee witnessed and the disruption to the learning process brought on by the repetition of inappropriate behavior in the classroom as well as in the schoolhouse in general.

All parents in the study expressed their concern that teachers lost valuable instructional time as a result of addressing inappropriate classroom behavior. Carlton Smith’s comments on this topic are particularly salient in that he has experienced this from three different vantage points: parent, teacher and administrator:

“I wanted to avoid the violence that exists in urban schools: the physical and verbal, if you will, violence and... teachers having to teach social skills because of the social baggage that poor children often bring into the classroom with them. In the suburban schools, there are fewer discipline problems. Teachers are able to focus on academics, not discipline. It’s a safer environment.”

To some extent, both Mr. Mills and Mr. Smith suggest that poverty, a term that possesses the same elusiveness and ambiguity as “middle class,” accounts for the level of violence and unruly behavior in urban schools. Their allusions are worthy of further exploration for two reasons. First, if poverty is the reason for increase in discipline problems, how do we explain the historical accounts of African-American schooling by educators and writers such as Anne Moody (1968), Clifford Taulbert (1994), Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) and countless others African whose research and narratives chronicle various aspects of life, including schooling in

the era of Jim Crow segregation in the American South? Their stories belie the claim that the unruliness associated with urban schools can be attributed to poverty, as they describe stories of successful educational experiences in the midst of the racialized, abject poverty of the deep south that are devoid of the serious discipline matters that inhibit students' opportunities to receive a quality education in today's urban schools. Second, how do we explain current examples of successful schools in high poverty, urban communities where discipline is not a major issue and students are accomplishing academic and intellectual feats unparalleled in most urban schools (Monroe, 1997; Cole-Henderson, 2000)? These questions suggest the origins of discipline problems in urban schools cannot be attributed to poverty alone; rather, they are perhaps the result of a confluence of multitudinous socio-cultural, political, economic, and academic factors. In recent years, educational scholars have researched the underlying issues in what has been termed the "discipline gap" between black students and their white peers (Gregory and Moseley, 2004; Monroe, 2005a ). A brief review of their findings should facilitate our understanding of the factors that contribute to excessive discipline problems in urban schools. Their work reveals that while social baggage can be attributed to the discipline problems, especially with black boys, it is not the social baggage that students bring into the classroom

Monroe (2005b), in her synopsis of the racial inequities and disparities in discipline matters concerning urban, low-income, and predominantly African-American schools, situates the "discipline gap" within the cultural incongruence between students and school personnel, identifying three culturally oriented explanations for the high volume of discipline incidents in urban school: cultural misinterpretations, cultural stereotypes, and cultural reflection.

Monroe (2005b) cites the cultural misinterpretations of African-American communicative and behavioral patterns by predominantly white, middle class, suburban, female school personnel—especially teachers—as a primary source of the discipline gap:

Teachers identify elevated voice levels, self-initiated student speech, self-directed student movement, displays of emotion, and pupil-to-pupil interaction as inappropriate classroom behaviors. Yet, these actions are associated with many communicative cornerstones of African-American culture (p. 321).

Monroe further asserts that under these cultural constraints, behavioral success for African-American students can only be achieved when they have mastered the art of decoding the signals implicit in teacher expectations and miscues.

Monroe's (2005b) second explanation of the discipline gap suggests that often times dominant culture educators hold fallacious, preconceived, criminalized perceptions of African-American boys. Consequently their interactions with the students are impacted by their stereotypes and create a negative classroom climate. Thus, these teachers, apprehensively anticipating misbehaviors by African-American students, respond to their inappropriate behavior in ways that are unjustifiably harsh and punitive and drastically different from the treatment that would be meted out to white students exhibiting similar behaviors (Skiba et. al, 2000). Third, Monroe asserts that at present there are insufficient opportunities for teachers to reflect on and examine the cultural underpinnings of their disciplinary practices and engage in professional discussions and dialogue that address the necessity of creating a culturally synchronous or a culturally relevant classroom environment in which teachers are aware of the impact of their biases and values on their pedagogy and classroom management and endeavor to gain a better understanding of the cultural practices of their students. At present the vast majority of urban schoolteachers fail to understand the necessity for developing such a classroom environment; moreover, they lack the opportunities to acquire the strategies needed to incorporate culturally responsive disciplinary practices into their instructional practice (Monroe, 2005).

Thus, in light of Monroe's conclusions, when we return to Mr. Smith's assertion that the baggage that poor children bring to the classroom is an antecedent to the high frequency of discipline problems in urban schools, we are obliged to ask the question, "To what degree does the socio-cultural baggage that middle class teachers bring to the classroom contribute to the disturbing inequities, disparities, and disproportionalities in discipline matters concerning African-American students in urban schools?"

The debate as to whose social baggage underlies the serious discipline issues that impede educational achievement in urban schools, is however, secondary to the effects of the problem, which is the primary concern of the informants. Parental concerns addressing the loss of instructional time are legitimate concerns. I recently met an urban high school teacher, Mr. Brown (pseudonym), who explained that he spends the first two weeks of school socializing his ninth grade students to the appropriate classroom behaviors needed to meet the behavioral expectations in his classroom. During this time, the students are not engaged in meaningful academic work. Rather, they spend this time practicing behavioral routines such as entering the classroom; going to lockers; or learning to address to school personnel in a respectful, socially

acceptable manner. Mr. Brown justified the loss of instructional time during this two-week period with his evidence of high student achievement noting that, consistently, approximately 90% of his students passed the Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT) and, more recently, the Ohio Graduation Test (although the academic, intellectual, and evaluative benefits value of these assessments are highly questionable and controversial). He attributes his students' "high academic performance" to the fact that after their initial period of behavioral training, his students engage instructional activities in a classroom environment that encounters relatively few discipline problems and other behavioral issues that are frequently associated with urban classrooms. Mr. Brown's methods are characteristic of the Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) school discipline model, which has been endorsed by the U. S. Department of Education as well as numerous state departments of education and implemented in some variation by hundreds of school districts in America (Safran and Oswald, 2003). A central principle of the Positive Behavior Supports model is the teaching and reinforcement of desirable behaviors in an effort to eliminate or prevent their occurrence. While the program offers the potential for improving student behavior as has been reported by numerous researchers (Sugai and Horner, 2000; Saran and Oswald, 2003) it also requires an expenditure of time that most parents in this study would prefer to be applied toward the intellectual, creative, and academic enrichment of their children.

The informants of this study send their children to school with the expectation that they will behave appropriately because that is what they have taught them to do. It is not a responsibility that they assign to the school district. Thus, it is understandable why they would be frustrated with schools in which the teachers must use seemingly disproportionate amounts of instructional time to address behavioral and discipline issues. The obvious solution for parents who find themselves in this predicament is to enroll their children in schools in which the students' parents espouse the same values, norms, and expectations about school behavior as they do.

### **Theme Two Summary**

As with American parents in general, safety and discipline were major concerns for parent associated with this study. Their expectations regarding discipline are not unrealistic. They seek schools in which there is structure and order. While they expect any school to encounter disciplinary issues they also expect school personnel to discipline in a fair and just manner. Some



parents appear to believe that the social baggage that urban children from low-income communities bring to school accounts for the high frequency of discipline problems. However, current literature indicates that a more plausible explanation is the cultural disconnect between school personnel (who are mostly white, middle class, suburban females) and urban students.

### **Theme Three: Educator Quality**

“Who’s watching these teachers? They blame everything on the unions. But a horrible teacher is a horrible teacher, and my kids have had some horrible teachers, black and white!”

Lara Daley, Parent

#### **Introduction**

Over the past decade the concept of teacher quality has generated an increasing amount of interest, discussion, and research among educators at all levels of the schooling process. At the primary level, a crucial element of teacher quality is the teacher’s ability to provide a nurturing environment for young children, while at the intermediate level the focus of teacher quality begins to shift toward content knowledge and pedagogy. At the middle school and high school levels, especially in many urban schools, what often constitutes teacher quality is not a teacher’s proficiency in the subject matter or mastery of sound instructional practices but the degree to which the teacher can manage, or control, the students in a classroom.

This discussion of teacher quality is premised on the assumption that quality teacher encompass a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes which enable teachers to provide intellectually stimulating and engaging instruction to students; create an environment that fosters and promotes student inquiry; and interact with students in manner that demonstrates a sincere and genuine concern for the development of the whole child. This does not discount the significance of effective classroom management schemes in the mission of schooling. Indeed, one cannot engage students in meaningful instruction without their cooperation, or at minimum, their compliance; however, good classroom management absent the aforementioned criteria of quality teaching renders students unprepared to meet the numerous social, political, economic, and moral demands necessary to thrive and flourish in an ever-changing 21<sup>st</sup> century global society.

The issue of teacher quality in urban schools is further complicated by the cultural dissonance between the urban teachers who are predominantly white, middle class, suburban females and their students who are primarily urban African-American and Latino/a. Teacher quality must address, on some level, the willingness as well as the ability of educators to accept and teach all children “as they are, not as they would want them to be” (Carlton Smith, Parent) and celebrate the diversity they bring to the classroom.

The notion of teacher quality must be expanded to include school leadership and its impact on student achievement.

## **Discussion**

When parents send their children off to school every day, they do so with many assumptions. One of those assumptions is that the individuals charged with the responsibility of educating their children are indeed those who are most suited to accomplish that goal. Embedded within that naive assumptions are the beliefs that each teacher has a strong command of the content of his or her discipline; each teacher cares about the children in his or her charge; and each has mastered the art of creating an environment for students that is safe, nurturing, and intellectually stimulating. Whether their children attended urban, suburban, parochial or independent schools, parents in the study had serious concerns about the quality of some teachers assigned to educate their children. Their concerns ranged from teachers who neglected responsibilities such as keeping them informed of their child’s progress to teachers who had reputations for unfairly evaluating African-American students. Their conversations provided strong evidence that challenged some of the most basic assumption parents hold about their children’s teachers.

Lara Dailey’s concerns regarding teacher quality in her children’s school district were manifold. She argues that many of the teachers in her district are unable to connect with and relate to the students, and the students’ academic performance suffers greatly as a result; the district has done little to attract and retain qualified African-American teachers; counselors do not acknowledge the intellectual abilities and academic potential of African-American students; and the district is powerless in its ability to dismiss ineffective and incompetent teachers and administrators. Her concerns are not limited to her district. These issues are echoed by students, parents, teachers, community members, administrators, school board members, researchers,

policy-makers, and a host of other individuals actively engaged in and concerned about the education of African-American students and the future of the African American community as a whole.

Ms. Daley found it unacceptable that there was a minimal presence of African-American teachers who taught classes in what is referred to as the academic core—mathematics, science, social studies, language arts and foreign languages—at her son’s predominantly black high school:

The security is black; they’ve broken the school down into five smaller schools... four of those principals are black. The people slopping the food and slinging the mop are black, but there is only one academic core teacher that is black... I think in social studies, but that’s the only one. I’m talking about 2000 kids in this school; 77% black and we only have one core teacher that is black?

The issue she raises has been a major concern for urban schools as well as suburban, parochial, and independent schools that serve student bodies with increasing African-American populations. However, the problem is not limited to minority teachers, as a general teacher shortage exists in specific disciplines—namely science, mathematics, and special education—throughout much of America. Ms. Daley’s observation of the African-American teacher shortage, especially African-American male teachers, has been at the forefront of urban educators’ discussions on teacher recruitment for the past two decades (Hope-King, 1993; Franklin, 1994, Epstein, 2005;). Recent research reveals that in 2005 African American students made up approximately 16% of the elementary and secondary school population in the United States; however African-American faculty members comprised less than 7% of all teachers in those schools (NEA, 2006). Additionally, the percentage of African-American educators will be further reduced within the next 10 years, as the majority of African-American teachers retire from the profession, intensifying the problem of the recruitment of African-American teachers in U.S. schools.

Ms. Dailey’s emphasis on the quantity of African-American teachers evokes the controversial question of “Who is most qualified to best educate African-American students?” She cited evidence of the difference an African-American teacher made in her daughter’s schooling experience:

My daughter has a 99 percentile in cognitive ability in reading, language art, science... everything. My child couldn’t even make merit roll until she had a black teacher in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The (white) third grade teacher told me, ‘I saw on her report that you daughter is

gifted but I can't tell.' My daughter is as smart as anybody, but it doesn't matter how smart you are if the teacher can't bring out that talent; if she can't nurture that; she couldn't tell because she just lumped her in with all the other black kids.

When queried on the subject of the importance of African-American history in the school, Ms. Daley again referred to the need for African-American teachers to teach African-American history to African-American kids:

...again you got white people teaching my kids about black history. How do they know? Who told them? They ain't lived through it. You know they gonna add their own little spin to it. That's just like me trying to teach Asian culture to a class of Asian kids, they gotta hear it from a black woman. That doesn't make sense to me.

Gloria-Ladson-Billings (1994), who has written extensively on the topic of successful teachers of African American students, suggests the answer to this question must be located not in the race or ethnicity of the educator but the teacher's collective ideologies which shape and inform his or her pedagogical practices and interactions with students. Ladson-Billings (2006) elevates the discussion further by asserting that teachers cannot merely believe that knowing "what to do" (p. 30) or "how to do" qualifies them as effective teachers. Rather, she states, "we must begin to understand the ways our theories and philosophies are made to manifest in the pedagogical practices and rationales we exhibit in the classroom" (p. 30). Her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is predicated upon three major tenets: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness

In the first tenet, academic achievement, Ladson-Billings (2006) shifts attention away from standardized achievement tests, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) barometer of academic performance to "what it is that students actually know and are able to do as a result of their interactions with skilled teachers" (p. 36.) Teachers engaged in cultural pedagogy, think critically about the academic content of their instruction, posing thought-provoking questions to themselves and their students such as "Why are we doing this?" "Why is this important?" "How will this enrich my life or and/or the life of others?" (p. 34.) Equally important, according to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant teachers involve students in the long-term planning and goal setting for their instruction, empowering them to take ownership and responsibility for their learning, which is a crucial step in the building of a community of learners.

Ladson-Billings' (2006) second tenet of culturally relevant teaching highlights the goal of cultural competence noting that cultural competence positions teachers as change agents charged with the task of:

Helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead (p. 36).

Recognizing the apparent paradox embedded in her explication of cultural competence, Ladson-Billings justifies her definition by emphasizing that students must have command of the customs, values, and traditions of the dominant culture in order to effect sustainable and meaningful changes in society. Culturally relevant teachers must convey the significance of understanding and working within dominant culture paradigms without diminishing or devaluing the native culture of the students.

The third element of culturally relevant teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy is the development of a sociopolitical consciousness within not only the students but also within and amongst educators. Ladson-Billings acknowledges the difficulty of this work in that many educators have not thought deeply about how their pedagogy impacts and is impacted by their ideologies. To remedy this, Ladson-Billings suggests that teachers become well-informed about local, state, national, and international sociopolitical issues and examine and question their perspectives on those issues. Ultimately, Ladson-Billings asserts, teachers must competently utilize sociopolitical issues as starting points for the development of the students' consciousness by designing instruction that allows students to explore, confront, and challenge the vast span of social, political, and economic, inequities and disparities of their world. Moreover, students must be provided the opportunity to hypothesize and, when circumstances allow, implement solutions to the socio-cultural injustices they or others experience. Indeed, culturally relevant teaching must be viewed as an integral component of the larger project of social justice.

Other scholars such as Peter Murrell (2002), and Carol Lee (1994) offer similar versions of culturally based pedagogies, which focus not on the teachers but the on cultural sensibilities and cultural competencies that inform their pedagogy.

Ms. Daley's concerns regarding the quantity of African-American teachers will only be intensified in the coming years given the discouraging projections on the African-American representation in America's teaching force.

Concerns over the quantity of African-American teachers pale in comparison to broader concerns about the overall quality of teachers, counselors, and instructional leaders and the impact their work and their decisions have on students' lives. Several parents offered variety of examples that supported their displeasure with the quality of educators in their children's public schools. Marilyn Jones, whose children attended a parochial school, and Lara Daley, whose son attended a suburban public school, offered contrasting impressions of the quality of the counseling programs at their children's schools. Lara Daley noted inadequacies in the counseling program suggesting race might be a factor in how they engage in their work with the African-American students:

White counselors do not encourage the black students to take challenging courses; they haven't recommended my son for anything and he is an honors student; any advanced program that he has gotten involved in has been because I pushed to get him there... Now, my daughter is in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and this is what started me on the warpath this year. We had a 6<sup>th</sup> grade honors English class that was just started this year. Why is my child the only black child in there and there was 25 white kids? The counselors kept black kids who had tested as gifted out of that program and there were white kids who did not test as gifted who were put into the program.

Marilyn Jones, who described the counseling program in the high school in which she teaches as substandard and ineffective at best, marveled at the counseling program in the parochial school her children attended:

There is at least one counselor for every grade level; the counselor meets with every student and works hard to make sure that every student who wants to go to college will be able to go; they do a great job assisting families; they meet with parents and their children twice a year to discuss the student's progress, options for the future and so on.

The contrast between the counselors at the school attended by Marilyn Jones' children illustrates how yet again African-American students in urban public schools are often disadvantaged. The role of a guidance counselor is especially critical in high school, as guidance counselors, at least those who are competent and capably execute their duties, have access to an immense volume of resources that can provide assistance to student in improving their academic performance, give them the opportunity to participate in educational and cultural programs that will expand their horizons, and provide networks to other individuals and institutions that can be of vital assistance to them as they chart their course for their future.

Although Lara Daley argued that race was the influencing factor in why the counselor did not recommend her son for advanced academic programs, a study of high school guidance

counselors, (Linnehan, Weer, and Stonley, 2006) found that class or family income was often the influencing factor in how students were treated by their counselors and in the recommendations counselors made to them as to what post-secondary options they should consider. Whether their decisions are influenced by race or class, the role of the counselor cannot be underestimated, especially at the high school level, and must be considered an integral part of discussions on teacher or educator quality. Unfortunately in many urban schools, guidance counselors are often considered an expendable commodity, and school administrators, when confronted with mounting financial deficits, often eliminate guidance counselors, leaving urban school students with out yet another vital resource.

Educator quality as it relates to the classroom teacher, or teacher quality, is unequivocally one of the most important factors in a student's academic achievement and success (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hughes, 2007; Kennedy, 2006). Teacher quality was also one of the topics that generated the some of the most vigorous and emotionally charged responses from the three female interviewees whose children attended public schools. Marilyn Jones, Lara Daley, and Maureen Jackson encountered teachers who lacked the ability to nurture and develop their daughter's intellectual abilities and talents and demonstrated ineptness in their ability to effectively communicate and interact students and with parents. Marilyn Jones reported:

The teacher said if my daughter couldn't understand the math after she had explained it to three times, her then maybe she didn't belong in the college prep level classes!...I asked the teacher if she explained it to her the same was each time and she said yes.

Lara Daley experienced a similar situation with her daughter's teacher:

The third grade teacher told me, 'I saw on her report that you daughter is gifted but I can't tell.' My daughter is as smart as anybody, but it doesn't matter how smart you are if the teacher can't bring out that talent; if she can't nurture that!

Maureen Jackson noted that some teachers at her daughter's school often displayed a negative disposition toward the children and toward her that at times appeared to border on disdain:

Some of the teachers had nasty attitudes toward the children. It was almost like being in prison! I really don't think most of the teachers were trained to work with young children or with parents for that matter. Some of the teachers had attitudes with the parents and didn't want to take the time to talk with you about your child. (One teacher even rolled her eyes at me when she saw me coming down the hallway!)

In an attempt to improve teacher quality in our nation's schools, numerous organizations and local school districts have developed detailed, meticulous systems designed to define, quantify, and evaluate teacher quality. The infamous U. S. Department of Education's No Child Left Behind law required all states receiving federal funding to adhere to its policy of highly qualified teachers in all core subjects by June 30, 2006. In an attempt identify and monetarily compensate high quality teachers, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards through its intricate credentialing process has developed a national set of professional standards that defines accomplished teaching and has certified more than 50,000 teachers nationwide as National Board Certified Teachers. In addition, many states throughout the U. S. have adopted the Praxis Assessment Series to determine who gains entry into teacher education programs, who will be admitted into the teaching profession and who, among novice teachers, will remain in profession. To some extent these programs all require some form of tangible, quantifiable, and documented evidence of their teaching competency through verification of academic degrees, documentation of satisfactory classroom experience, videotapes of classroom teaching and other methods substantiating their work. Although these systems have greatly contributed to the presence of credentialed teachers in the classroom, do these certifications and credentials ensure true quality teaching? There is little doubt that the educators described by the parents possessed the necessary credentials that qualified them for their positions; however, such credentials do not necessarily translate into quality teaching. There are far too many stories of the extremely intelligent teacher who has a strong command of content but cannot relate to students; or the teacher who was once an outstanding educator, but now suffers from what is commonly known as "teacher burnout; or the teacher who simply feels "stuck" in a profession and is simply waiting to retire. Yet these individuals are considered highly qualified teachers. These are also the teachers that concern Lara Daley:

One of my struggles now with the district is to get them to get some of these teachers whose teaching methods are not conducive to children especially black children, to move on. It's like there's no checks and balances. Who's watching these teachers? They blame everything on the unions. But a horrible teacher is a horrible teacher, and my kids have had some horrible teachers, black and white. You got to motivate the kids to learn you gotta act like you like the kids in your class. If I'm (meaning the student) relating to you I'm gonna learn from you; if I'm feeling like you don't respect me or my mama, we're gonna have some problems.



In all likelihood, the teachers to whom Lara Daley referred are probably well credentialed to perform their duties, but a vast expanse exists between qualified to perform and quality performance in education. In other words, the qualifications of a teacher do not ensure effective teaching.

Mary Kennedy (2006) has explored different dimensions of teacher quality and provides interesting insights into this discussion. Kennedy (2006) puts forth three scenarios as to the key attributes of a quality teacher. In her first scenario, the quality teacher possesses a charismatic personality imbued with sense of creativity, intuition, and kindheartedness that enables them to captivate, motivate and educate students. Kennedy's second scenario describes what could be called the "social justice teacher," one who is guided by principles that motivates the teacher to "treat all students fairly, encourage all students to participate and present the content with intellectual honesty and integrity" (p. 14). In her third scenario, Kennedy suggest that through sound preparation in teacher education programs where they are trained in both content knowledge and pedagogy, quality teachers are made. Kennedy readily acknowledges that each scenario alone is not sufficient. A combination of charismatic personality, sound training, and a sense of social justice—offers the most promise for quality teaching.

In urban schools, poor schools, and minority-dominated schools, teacher quality raises another set of concerns in that these schools are the schools that are most affected by the shortage of teachers in area such as math, science, and special education. Numerous studies report that children in urban, low-income, or minority-dominated schools are more likely to be assigned to teachers who are inexperienced, uncertified, and teaching out of area (Howard, 2003; Porter-Magee, 2004; Pesti and Haycock, 2006) This fact coupled with the impending nationwide shortage of teachers in the next decade, resulting from the ongoing retirement of baby-boomer age teachers, suggests that urban schools will experience even greater deficits in not only quality teachers but in the quantity of teachers as well. While many of these schools are implementing alternative certification and licensing procedures to remedy their teacher shortages the overall impact of such programs is deemed minimal at best (Ng, 2003). Consequently, as African-American parents continue to consider their schooling options, the role of quality teacher quality in urban schools will figure largely in their decisions.

### **Theme Three Summary**

This discussion delved into various aspects of teacher quality that were expressed by parents in this study. The implication of the shortage of African-American teachers was discussed within the context of the three tenets of Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant teaching framework: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. What constitutes teacher quality was examined through Kennedy's (2006) three scenarios of quality teaching, noting that quality teachers bring elements of all three scenarios to their practice: personality, sound training, and a sense of social justice. Lastly, this discussion drew attention to the fact that although urban schools have employed various strategies to increase the number of licensed teachers, such remedies will only minimally address the problem, and African-American parents with the means to educate their children elsewhere, will continue to abandon urban public schools seeking schools that employ educators who not only have the qualifications to perform their duties but can perform their duties with quality.

### **Theme Four: Racism**

“One of the other black parents said that the ‘B’ in black stood for the highest grade that black students would ever get in that teacher’s class.” Maureen Jackson, Parent

### **Introduction**

Few parents were as direct as Maureen Jackson in addressing the issue of racism, yet most parents alluded to the racism in the schools. Some parents spoke candidly about school actions that they perceived to be racist, while other parents seemed reluctant to suggest that race was the underlying cause of certain school decisions or the specific behavior of educators. Nevertheless, racism, whether stated explicitly or implicitly, emerged as a theme in this study.

Although various interpretations of racism exist, for the purpose of this study, racism is defined as a system of privilege and penalty that is based on: “First, a belief in the inherent superiority of some people and the inferiority of others; and second, the acceptance of distributing goods and services—let alone respect—in accordance with such judgments of unequal worth.” (Weinberg, as cited in Nieto 2000, p. 37). In American schools, as in American society at large, racism is a dynamic, multi-dimensional phenomenon, occurring through the “ruckus of individualized acts or silence of institutionalized acts” (Weinberg, as cited in Nieto,

2000, p. 37) through overt and covert means. Individualized racism occurs in schools in incidents such as the one described above by Maureen Jackson. These acts of racism are committed by one or more members of the school community. Their behaviors and actions are independent of any official or endorsed policy of a specific school or school district. Thompson (2002) extends the definition of individualized racism to include racist behavior that is targeted toward a specific individual. In contrast, institutionalized racism consists of acts of racism targeting specific groups of individuals and emanates from established policies and accepted practices as well as the school's ideology that underpins those practices and policies. Institutionalized racism is the most insidious form of racism, as it is so embedded into the natural fabric of the school, or disguised in such a way that it is not recognized and, as with many hegemonic structures, it becomes accepted as normal and is left unchallenged.

Parents' subtle conversations regarding racism focused on the racism they sought to escape in urban schools and the racism they or their children encountered in suburban, parochial or independent schools. In general, their conversations regarding racism in urban schools reflected two of the four race-based fears which Lawrence (2005) posits as the motivational forces which drive both white and African-American middle class families from urban schools: "fear of having one's child treated like black children and fear that one's child will not develop her or his gifts and will lose the race for privilege, (p.1353)," or collectively, "the unspoken racial text of ...black middle class flight" (p.1370).

## **Discussion**

Critical race theorists argue that racism is neither an aberration nor an anomaly in American society; rather it is endemic and pervasive, permeating every aspect of life in America, including schools (Bell, 1980; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, 1993), and as parent Maureen Jackson would discover from her daughter's schooling at an "executive elite" independent institution, economic status offered no immunity from the ravages of racism in America's schools. During the interviews with parents, it was clear that parents understood the impact of institutionalized racism through the manifestation of the existing inequities in urban schools as well as through their experiences with suburban, parochial and independent schools. It was also interesting to note that few parents actually used the words "racist" or "racism" to articulate their concerns, giving further credence and new meaning to Lawrence's notion of the

“unspoken racial text” that underpins the flight of middle class African-American families from urban and minority-dominated schools.

In *Forbidden Conversations: on Race, Privacy, and Community (A Continuing Conversation with John Ely on Racism and Democracy)*, Georgetown law professor and critical race theory scholar, Charles Lawrence (2005), chronicled the evolution of his efforts to educate his children in the public schools of Washington, D. C. and to encourage other middle class African-American parents to do the same. Lawrence argues that middle class African-Americans as well as middle class whites have abandoned urban public schools because of four fears: the fear of blackness which emanates from negative cultural beliefs about blacks; the fear of having one’s child treated like black children which is accurately premised on the fact that less is given to and expected from black children; the fear that one’s child will not fully develop her or his gifts or will lose the race for privilege which suggests that children in urban school will not be prepared for the many challenges of a 21<sup>st</sup> century market driven economy; and fear of the loneliness in the hard work of raising children experienced by middle class parents whose children remain in urban public schools (Lawrence, 2005). The second and third fears of the “unspoken racial text,” the fear of having one’s child treated like a black child and the fear that one’s child will not fully develop his or her gifts and will lose the race for privilege are particularly salient to this study and provide a framework for a discussion and analysis of the parents’ implicit and explicit concerns on racism and urban schools.

### **Fear of Having One’s Child Treated Like Black Children**

Lawrence contends that this fear stems from the racial inequities that predominate urban or minority schools—inequities that encompass nearly every aspect of urban schooling from low teacher expectations and ineffective teaching to limited course offerings and the unavailability of course textbooks.

To some degree, every parent in the study articulated their concerns of having their children “treated like black children.” In other words, parents believed that enrolling their children in a predominantly African-American urban public school would create academic disadvantages for their children that they would not experience in suburban, parochial or independent schools, disadvantages that would have far-reaching implications for their children’s lives.

The level of educators' expectations for African-American children was a major concern for all parents as most expressed their belief that expectations for African-American students were lower in urban public schools than in suburban, parochial, or independent schools; moreover they understood the implications of low expectations. They knew that low expectations meant their children would not be challenged to take more rigorous courses, or that rigorous courses that would prepare them for college would not be offered. Harvey Judge noted the difference between instruction and expectations in urban public schools and private schools:

In the private school; ain't no middle teaching; what happens in the private school is that you [meaning the student] are going to come up to the level where the class is; you're gonna come up to this level. We'll get you some help, we'll get you some tutoring; but you're going to come up to this level and that's the level we're going to maintain. The one school (Catholic) has a higher level of expectations whereas in the other one (urban public) high is the middle of the road...

Both Winston Mills and his wife Gwendolyn expressed concern about the ability of urban schools to prepare their children for college and the expectations of schools. Winston Mills stated:

They don't have the same caliber of teachers; they don't have a strong curriculum to get the kids ready for college. I wanted a school where the expectation was that all kids will go to college, and it's not like that at the neighborhood school. At my kids' (Catholic) school the expectation is that every kid will go to college...

Gwendolyn Mills commented that she wanted her children to go to:

“a school that would prepare her children to go to any college or university they wanted to attend...a school that had a rigorous academic program. They have a high percentage of students that go on to college at their school (the Catholic school).

For most parents, the purpose of schooling at the primary and secondary level served one purpose: to prepare their children for higher education, which, in turn, would provide them access to employment opportunities that would secure their children's future economic status in nothing less than the middle class. In general the parents believed that the many racial inequities and inadequacies of urban schools would not afford their children the advantages of suburban, parochial, or independent schools.

Carlton Smith noted that often in urban public schools expectations are low especially for young African-American males who are often allowed to languish academically but flourish athletically: “I wanted my son to have a healthy sense of competition, not just about athletics. In

an urban school that (a healthy sense of competition) does not translate into the classroom.” In this quotation, Smith offers a general reference to the thousands of young African-American males whose athletic abilities and prowess are nurtured, cultivated, and exploited, by school districts that simultaneously allow these same young men to suffer academic hardships that will impact their lives more profoundly than their athletic abilities. This is a recurring theme in urban schools across America. This phenomenon continues on college campuses where young African-American males are again exploited for their athletic abilities, which literally add millions of dollars to the university coffers; yet, many of the young athletes conclude their collegiate experience with out a degree and no future support for academic assistance from their institutions.

Carlton Smith described the difference in teachers’ perceptions of bright, African-American boys and bright, white boys:

A lot of black boys who are smart, assertive, and question their teachers about the subject they are teaching are often labeled as trouble makers by their teachers, while white boys who do the same thing are hailed as being precocious or inquisitive.

This is a phenomenon that occurs not only in urban schools but also in other schools as well. This behavior is not limited to teachers in that other school personnel— secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, school nurses, and so forth—commit similar acts of racism and discrimination toward African-American and other minority children.

Marilyn Jones highlighted the distinct differences between the guidance department at the urban school where she teaches and the guidance department at her children’s parochial school:

There is at least one counselor for every grade level; the counselor meets with every student and works hard to make sure that every student who wants to go to college will be able to go. At my school there is only one counselor for more than 1000 students!

Lara Daley also commented that counselors have low expectations of African-American children: “white counselors do not encourage the (African-American students to take challenging courses; they haven’t recommended my son for anything.” As mentioned elsewhere in this study, the role of a guidance counselor is especially critical in high school, as guidance counselors have access to an immense volume of resources that can provide assistance to students in improving their academic performance, give them the opportunity to participate in

educational and cultural programs that will expand their horizons, and provide connection to other individuals and institutions that can be of vital assistance to them as they chart their course for their future. However, in many urban schools, as evidenced by the comments of Ms. Daley and Ms. Jones, African-American students, often receive little support or guidance from the counselors who in some cases are overwhelmed with too many students on their case loads, or from counselors who, as unconscionable as it may seem, simply do not believe that African-American students have the potential to move beyond their current station in life.

In sum, Carlton Smith, perhaps, provided a most fitting analysis of middle class African-Americans' fear of having one's child treated like a black child when he posited, "Most who are middle class don't want to sacrifice their kids by allowing them to attend urban schools."

### **Fear That One's Child Will Not Fully Develop His or Her Gifts and Will Lose the Race for Privilege**

Lawrence's third fear, fear that one's child will not fully develop his or her gifts and will lose the race for privilege, epitomizes the essence of the parents' concerns about urban and minority-dominated schools: their children being able to maintain, at minimum, a middle class life style and all the privileges, opportunities, and benefits that accompany it. Parents' comments throughout the interviews reflected their beliefs that urban schools did not have the ability, desire, or resources, to nurture and develop the talents of their children. Two parents, Lara Daley, and Marilyn Jones, were made aware of the shortcomings of urban schools and minority-dominated schools in this area when they encountered teachers who questioned their children's intellectual ability. Lara Daley experienced first-hand the inability of schools to develop her children's talents when she encountered a teacher who questioned her daughter's status as a gifted student:

The (white) third grade teacher told me, 'I saw on her report that you daughter is gifted but I can't tell.' My daughter is as smart as anybody, but it doesn't matter how smart you are if the teacher can't bring out that talent; if she can't nurture that; she couldn't tell because she just lumped her in with all the other black kids.

Marilyn Jones found a similar experience at her daughter's urban school:

The teacher said if my daughter couldn't understand the math after she had explained it to three times, then maybe she didn't belong in the college prep level classes!...I asked the teacher if she explained it to her the same was each time and she said yes.

Carlton Smith expressed his concern that urban schools often limit the possibilities of their students by stereotyping males with a “ghettoized” image of young African-American males:

“I did not want my son to go to an urban public school because I wanted him to be academically competitive and interested in something other than clothes, hip-hop and basketball...

Smith inferred that in urban schools educators often assume that African-American males live in a world that is characterized by little else than sports, fashion, and entertainment and that these schools offer limited opportunities and exposure to a world beyond that.

In contrast to the limited possibilities of urban schools, parents commented on the vast array of opportunities and advantages their children experienced as a result of attending suburban, parochial, or independent schools. In addition to a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, students at these schools had access to various social and cultural opportunities as well as exposure to the lifestyles of the upper classes that is rarely found in urban schools. Maureen Jackson commented on the many advantages her daughter found at the “executive elite” school as well as the connections she made with students from upper class families:

They attended all kind of field trips cultural field trips to events such as the Nutcracker and science field experiences at Kelley’s Island. This doesn’t happen in most public schools. She was exposed to children who had a totally different lifestyle from ours. Many of her classmates took trips in the middle of the school year to places like Europe and India.

Marilyn Jones also found that her children, who attended parochial schools, made connections with the upper class in addition to the wide range of academic and extracurricular options that were made available to them:

My daughter had the opportunity to participate in all kinds of extracurricular activities that would not have been available to her at the public school. She had a complete high school experience. She even took a course on how to survive your first year of college, so she got exposure to everything. My son was, and still is, friends with the son of a wealthy doctor who lived in a neighboring community. They would have done anything for him and bought anything for him if I would have allowed it.”

Harvey Judge, whose children were actively involved in the music program at the Catholic school, noted the opportunities for his children to travel abroad as a result of participating in the high school band:



My son had the opportunity to travel to Russia for a week with his high school band where they performed three times a day. His participation in band led to a music scholarship at the university. My daughter also traveled with the band and that gave her exposure to different places and people...different ways other people live.”

In general, the parents in this study believed that suburban, parochial, and independent schools held the greatest hope for facilitating their children’s realization of their full potential and ultimately maintaining their status as members of the middle class and the many benefits derived from that status. When asked if their children were disadvantaged in any way by not attending a predominately African-American school, whether it was urban or suburban, most parents contended that they did not. Maureen Jackson’s reply was indicative of most parents’ responses: “The benefits of the private school outweighed anything she might have missed at the public school.”

### **Racism In Parochial And Independent Schools**

Most parents avoided any direct discussion of racism, yet racism was the subtext throughout all of the conversations with this group of middle class African-American parents. In some interviews, it appeared that parents came very close to mentioning racism but retreated from the subject, or instead of attributing a specific incident to racism, they found a more palatable cause. This is best exemplified through an excerpt from my interview with Harvey Judge as we discussed his involvement in parent organizations in the school:

ELW: Now, at one point you took your daughter out of the Catholic schools?

HJ: Yes, I did.

ELW: What was your reason for that?

HJ: I got tired of fooling with those Catholics.

ELW: OK, what do you mean by that?

HJ: They just stick together. And they really showed how thick they are in terms of sticking together.

ELW: Sticking together in terms of...?

HJ: Well on one side they show that they want African-Americans to be involved, but on the other side they really don’t.

ELW: Can you give me a specific example?

HJ: Well they want to keep control; they want your services, but they don’t want to share any power. They want your ability to draw people. I worked on many new student campaigns helping to recruit new students, but they don’t want to share any power.

ELW: What kind of power are you referring to?

HJ: Any decision-making power. Since I wasn’t an alumnus; I wasn’t Catholic; I was working in the organization, but only on the outside.

ELW: You don’t think it was racially motivated?

HJ: It could have been, but they're real careful about that.

Harvey Judge's statement that "they're real careful about that" suggests that the individuals who were in power at the Catholic school his children attended were very careful to make sure that their actions, whether racist or not, were not perceived as racist behavior. This exchange also demonstrates the reluctance of most parents in this study to explicitly engage the conversation of race as it pertains to schooling. In the interview excerpt with Harvey Judge, Mr. Judge specifically states that the power structure in the Catholic school wanted to use African-Americans to recruit new students. He does not say that school officials want to use non-Catholics (Protestants) or those who are not alumni of the schools to recruit new students. However, when asked for his explanation of their refusal to share power he immediately attributes it to the fact that he was neither Catholic nor an alumnus of the school, not to the fact that he was African-American. Only when I asked him if he thought their refusal to allow him to participate in the decision-making process might have been racially motivated was he reluctantly willing to consider the possibility of race.

If we analyze Mr. Judge's experience through the lens of critical race theory, expanding Derrick Bell's (1980) interest-convergence principle beyond the realm of civil rights law, a strong argument can be made that Mr. Judge's experience was a consequence of race rather than a consequence of his membership or lack of membership in any particular religion or his high school affiliation. Bell's interest convergence principle posits that African-Americans will only achieve progress if that progress is tied to the interests of whites. In recent years, urban Catholic schools—such as the school Mr. Judge's children attended—have experienced widespread financial difficulties resulting from the continued flight of white Catholics from urban areas. Consequently, such schools have engaged in robust campaigns to recruit African-American students in an effort to increase revenue to the school. African-American students attending a Catholic school can be perceived as progress when compared to the prospect of attending an urban public high school. Yet this "progress" also has a benefit for the white Catholic school, as every African-American student who enrolls also pays tuition, which contributes to the financial solvency of the school. Employing the interest convergence principle, the willingness of the Catholic school to admit African-American children was based on the self-interest of the school rather than a desire to provide his children with a quality education.

The corollary of the interest convergence principle states that whites will not support civil rights policies and practices that threaten their social status. Again, when we apply the corollary of the interest convergence principle to Mr. Judge's encounter with the Catholic school, we find that the school encouraged Mr. Judge's involvement in the parent organizations until he sought to engage in the decision-making processes, an act that potentially would threaten the sociopolitical status of the those individuals wielding control and power in the school. Thus, the interest convergence principle and its corollary provide an alternative explanation for Mr. Judge's exclusion from the decision-making process at the Catholic school.

Mr. Judge's inclination to attribute his exclusion to factors other than race is not uncommon among the African-American middle class. Racism has become a taboo subject among many members of the African-American middle class. At least three reasons exist as to why middle class African-Americans are unwilling to talk about racism. In a follow-up discussion to his interview for this study, Carlton Smith offered his perspective on why middle class African-Americans are reluctant to talk about racism: "I will talk about racism, but not in environments where doing so might threaten my livelihood. I'm not Martin Luther King; that's not my calling." His statements suggest that some African-Americans, unlike Fannie Lou Hamer, Daisy Bates, or Ella Jo Baker, are afraid to challenge or even discuss racism for fear that it might have serious repercussions such as being denied a promotion or being terminated from one's employment. Or in other words, they are not willing to discuss racism if doing so might jeopardize their already fragile and tenuous middle class status. A second explanation is that they do not want to be accused of "playing the race card" when they find themselves in situations where they have been denied an opportunity or denied access to something, believing that far too often many individuals are quick to cite to racism as a cause when in fact there may be other causes for being denied opportunities, access or privileges. Finally, many middle class as well as upper class African-Americans simply do not want to face the painful, stark reality that their economic status offers no exemption from the racism that still exists and negatively impacts their lives and their children's lives in innumerable ways. It is a harsh reality. But racism does and will continue to impact African-Americans. And urban schools represent one of the sites where it is most prevalent and one of the sites where it is rarely challenged. Unfortunately, those who are perhaps most capable of challenging the racism that exists in urban public schools, those who

have the knowledge, skills, and resources to do so—the African-American middle class—are those who have abandoned urban public schools.

Maureen Jackson, whose daughter attended an executive elite school, encountered one teacher who had earned a reputation for refusing to give African-American students any grade high than a “B”:

One of the other black other parents said that the “B” in black stood for highest grade that black students would ever get in that teacher’s class, regardless of how much work they did or how good the work was. She withdrew her daughter from the school.

Eventually Maureen’s daughter fell victim to the racist practices of the same instructor, whose convoluted, subjective grading system allowed for the teacher, not the body of student work, to determine a student’s grade. She, too, never received a grade higher than a “B” from that teacher. However, Maureen Jackson, who was otherwise quite satisfied with the quality of education her daughter received, did not withdraw her from the school.

In general, the parents of this study believed that suburban, parochial, and independent schools held the greatest hope for facilitating their children’s realization of their full potential and ultimately maintaining their status as members of the middle class and the many benefits that are derived from that status. When asked if their children were disadvantaged in any way by not attending a predominately African-American school, whether urban or suburban, most parents contended that they did not. Maureen Jackson’s reply was indicative of most parents’ responses: “The benefits of the private school outweighed anything she might have missed at the public school.”

#### **Theme Four Summary**

This discussion examined the racial inequities in urban schools and the impact of these inequities on parents’ decisions to enroll their children in suburban, parochial or independent institutions. Using Lawrence’s (2005) framework of the “unspoken racial text” that characterizes why the African-American middle class has abandoned urban public schools, two of the four fears of the unspoken racial text—fear of having one’s child treated like a black child and fear that one’s child will not fully develop his or her gifts and will lose the race for privilege—figured prominently in the parents’ decisions. In addition, specific examples of racism in parochial and independent schools were discussed. Although racism occurred at all schools, parents concluded

that the academic, social, and cultural benefits their children derived from suburban, parochial, and independent schools compensated for any acts of racism they or their children encountered.

### **Theme Five: Culture Matters**

“I don’t need anybody to teach my kids how to be black.” Betty Madison, Parent

#### **Introduction**

During our discussions of important cultural aspects of schooling, numerous sub-themes emerged including the significance of African-American history in the school curriculum; the importance of interacting with dominant culture students; the negative impact of urban problems on schooling and the responsibility of the African-American middle class to urban public schools.

The first issue within this theme is the study of African-American history and culture. Although not an insignificant matter to the parents, this did not surface as a major concern. Some parents utilized family and community resources to enhance their children’s knowledge and understanding of the significant contributions African-Americans made in the growth and development of this country, while others reluctantly conceded that their children’s lack of knowledge in African-American history represented a deficiency in their education. Generally, parents did not believe that African-American history was vital to the college preparatory education they sought for their children. The second issue of this theme, the importance of interacting with dominant culture children, revealed interesting insights regarding the parents’ primary concern about schooling: enabling their children to thrive, flourish, and succeed in the dominant culture. The third aspect of this theme was centered on the negative elements of urban school culture, as most parents expressed grave concerns about the many social ills that currently impact urban schools. Finally, this theme concluded with the responsibility of the African-American middle class to urban public schools. This segment of the interviews elicited responses that ranged from contributing to alumni organizations to revisiting W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of the Talented Tenth; however no parent felt any sense of obligation to educate their children in urban schools.

#### **Discussion**

My personal and professional interests (as a social studies educator) in African-American history piqued my curiosity about the parents' views on the importance of African-American history and compelled me to elicit their thoughts on the subject as it pertained to the education of their children. For most parents, the study of African-American history was not viewed as a vital element to their conception of a quality education. In the preliminary interviews of this study I conversed with a parent, Betty Madison (not a member of the final interview group) who shared her sentiments on the subject of African-American history. For her, it was not a necessary component of a well-rounded education as she posited: "I don't need anybody to teach my kid how to be black!" While her statement was not indicative of the attitude of most parents in this study, it was apparent from their responses that they attached minimal importance to African-American history, and they did not view it as a priority in the children's schooling experience.

Gwendolyn Mills absolved the school of its responsibility for teaching African-American history as she stated, "the schools should expose them to it, but the understanding should come from home. Cultural values should be supported at home." If we view African-American history as the exclusive domain of the African-American family, that notion is troublesome for two reasons. First, it assumes that all families have the knowledge and resources to teach African-American history to their children. Given that most of the parents associated with this study attended high school and college during the time when African-American history was still a highly contested curriculum issue, it was neither taught as a separate course nor integrated into the teaching of American history and culture. Therefore, many parents, unless they are self-taught, have limited knowledge of African-American history. The second problem with this notion is that it leaves a void in the education of students who are not African-Americans, as those students will receive a distorted and biased representation of American history and society.

Ms. Mills and I further explored the subject of African-American history when she mentioned that her child traveled to Washington, D.C. with his eighth grade class. I asked if they would be visiting any of the African-American historical sights such as the Frederick Douglass' home, the Anacostia Museum or the Mary McLeod Bethune home, any one of which would have greatly enhanced the educational value of the experience for all students. Unfortunately, none of those sites was included on the itinerary. In a follow-up conversation, I asked if the school had added any African-American cultural sights to the itinerary for the annual 8<sup>th</sup> grade class trip.

She admitted that the itinerary had not been modified and she has not pursued the school in regards to amending the itinerary to reflect the history and culture of African-Americans.

Carlton Smith's detailed remarks on the subject of African-American history echoed comments from both Betty Madison and Gwendolyn Mills. They also reflected the ominous conditions that urban life poses for young African-American males. Stopping short of stating that he did not need anybody to teach his son how to be black, Smith's comments also demonstrate the secondary status he and other parents assigned to African-American history within the context of their children's education:

It's not a priority on my list because society could care less. Our society is based on capitalism, how to make and maintain a buck. If all things were equal that (African-American history) should come from the home. I'd rather have the public school teach him how to become a capitalist, how to survive the system without being a criminal. I was more concerned about him getting an education that would get him into college I did not pay that much attention to that because I did that stuff at home.

What is particularly noteworthy about Smith's comments is the obvious marketability factor that he assigns to African-American history. He suggests that the subject possesses little value, or capital, in gaining entrance to a college or university, and that it has even less utility in the quest for gainful employment in a capitalist society.

Some parents compensated for their school's inability to provide African-American history by involving their children in social, athletic, or religious activities anchored in the African-American community. Other parents encouraged their children to take African-American history courses in college. Marilyn Jones and Maureen Jackson both commented on how their daughters enjoyed these courses. Maureen Jackson reported:

In retrospect, she should have had more exposure to it; she is taking a Black history class now (in college) and she really enjoys learning about it. It would have been better for her to have taken it at an earlier age but her school did not have any blacks on staff so she only got a white perspective.

Marilyn Jones noted, "African-American history was not emphasized as it should have been. My daughter does not know her African-American history, so I suggested she take it at the university, and she is fascinated with it.

In general the parents' responses revealed that African-American history was not essential to the curriculum being offered at the school their children attended. It was not viewed as crucial to an education that would prepare their children for a post-secondary collegiate

experience; enhance their children's ability to secure employment after college; or further their ability to navigate the world of the dominant culture.

The second issue within in this theme dealt with non-academic concerns. Gwendolyn Mills cited the religious aspects of Catholic education as a primary non-academic benefit of parochial schools. "At their school prayer is allowed, whereas it is not allowed in the public schools, and I think that is an important benefit." However, out of the five parents whose children had attended Catholic schools she was the only parent to identify prayer as a non-academic benefit. She was also the only one who had been raised in the Catholic Church, which could explain why she was the only parent to cite religious rituals as a non-academic benefit of parochial schools. In general, most African-American parents who send their children to parochial schools, do so for two reasons. First, they want to place their children in an academic environment where strong discipline is maintained; and second, they believe their children will get a quality education by attending a parochial school. This is consistent with previous research on African-American families and parochial schools (Shokraii, 1996;). These parents generally have strong affiliations with other religions--as was the case with the parents in the study--however, those religions do not provide formally organized schooling programs.

Some parents highlighted the importance of their children interacting with children of similar backgrounds, noting the significance of peer influence in shaping the identity and character of African-American adolescents. Carlton Smith emphasized his desire for his son to be involved with students who had interests other than the stereotypical images generally associated with young African-American males:

I wanted my son to make friends with kids who wanted to do something other than rap, basketball, and just hanging out and shooting the breeze. I wanted him to be...interested in something other than clothes, hip-hop, and basketball.

Gwendolyn Mills noted family values, a strong athletic program and character building as the most important non-academic benefits of the parochial school:

We wanted a school where the parents had values similar to ours. Our school has good athletic programs; they don't just focus on the sport, not just on winning. They are strict about good behavior and building strong character.

Maureen Jackson also stressed the importance of interacting with of families with similar values as well as families from diverse backgrounds:



One of the benefits of the private school was having a school where other families also place a high value on education, but I also liked the fact that the schools provide an opportunity for students to interact with other cultures, races and socio-economic groups to give them a broad background that enables them to be successful in the adult world.

Ms. Jackson reference to the “opportunity to interact with other cultures and races,” and its inferences were also expressed by other parents in this study. However other parents were less subtle in their statements. Marilyn Jones stated that she “wanted her kids to know how to deal with white folks, because that’s who they will have to compete with.” Carlton Smith’s statements followed a tone and tenor similar to Ms. Jones’ comments when he asserted: “I wanted my son to be able to converse with white folks and learn the ins and outs of how to work with white folks and not be intimidated by them.” The statements made by Marilyn Jones and Carlton Smith reflected a continuous refrain in this entire study. For this group of middle class African-American parents, a main concern was their children’s ability to succeed in the world of the dominant culture. Similar results were identified by Shapiro (2004), whose comparative study of middle class African-American families and middle class white families revealed that “...black families consistently brought up diversity as an important and positive factor when they look at schools...blacks purposefully seek racial and cultural diversity” (p.175), with the ultimate goal being that of knowing “how to perform in a white setting” (p. 176).

Avoiding what Cornel West (1994) articulated as the nihilistic threat to the African-American community best characterizes the next issue of this theme. The impact of social, cultural, and economic problems that plague urban communities, and by extension, urban schools, was of great importance to most parents. In general, they believed these problems would not only impede the learning process in the classroom but also negatively influence their children’s social development. Their worries mirror those of middle class African-American parents throughout America who have witnessed, over the past two decades, the downward spiral of urban communities and the immense toll it has extracted on African-American families and youth. As documented by an ever-increasing body literature on the plight of urban America, their worries are not unfounded. Alarming rates in teen pregnancy, the dangers of AIDS, increasing violent crime and drug use, rising unemployment, and a callous disregard for human life are compounded by ineffective and insensitive local, state, and federal officials and policymakers. These conditions have resulted in schools that are fraught with the effects of these urban perils.

Parents of this study sought refuge from the dangers of urban schooling by enrolling their children in suburban, parochial and independent schools.

Carlton Smith recalled his earliest concerns when his family lived in one of the nation's largest cities. He unabashedly acknowledges his qualms about living in urban communities:

I wanted my family in a safe environment. I did not like the neighborhood my son would have to walk through to get to his school when we lived in that city. I wanted a social climate that was not full of the violence that is associated with urban schools.

Smith relocated his family to a predominately white suburban environment devoid of the dangers of urban life; yet he recognizes that the move to suburbia was not without some disadvantage as he lamented:

My son missed out on interacting with more African-American children, but he did not miss the violence. I wish he would have made more black friends. He would have had a more balanced view of what's going on in the world. He has some black friends. But some things you just can't compensate for.

Smith does not regret their decision to leave the urban community and schools and the violence associated with them. He stated, "I know my child's personality, and I know he would not have been better off in an urban school."

Parents of children in parochial schools experienced the same predicament regarding their children interacting with other African-American children, yet avoiding the dangers of urban life. Both Marilyn Jones and Winston Mills noted the participation in AAU activities as a means of addressing this issue. Mills commented:

My kids are involved in AAU sports so they are around other black kids and they have had a chance to see from their experiences what some of the kids from the inner city have to deal with. I think it makes them appreciate how good they have it. So they get to be around other black kids but they don't have to deal with all that other stuff that goes on in the school and in the neighborhoods.

Marilyn Jones stated:

My children were involved in different activities that that allowed them to be around other black kids. When my daughter first started parochial school there were only 6 other black kids in her class, and she became best good friends with one of the other black girls and they are still friends today. My son was participated in AAU track and my daughter was involved in church activities.

Marilyn Jones also talked about her children wanting to go to public school:

“Both of my kids wanted to go to public school because there were more blacks students there, and they really didn’t understand until they got out of high school why we wanted them to go to a private school...the admissions counselor at the university told us that they accepted my daughter because she went to the private school and it is more stringent than the public school so she should do well at the university.

Additionally, Ms. Jones compared the difference in safety and security at social events as the public school and the private school:

At the public school if the kids went to a dance or a football or basketball game you had to worry about whether a fight would break out or whether someone might have a gun and start shooting. I didn’t have to worry about that at the private school.

Concerns about fighting and the possibility of a shooting at a school function illustrate how the problems of the urban communities impact the schools. In urban communities violence, especially gun related violence, has increased significantly in recent years. School violence in urban schools has paralleled that of the community, as there has also been an increase in similar types of crimes in urban public schools. This increase in crime and violence in the urban schools is a result of what Carlton Smith refers to as the “social baggage that poor children bring to school” and the nihilism that West (1994) considers to be one of the greatest threats to the existence of African-American communities. West defines nihilism as:

The lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others (p.14).

This vicious nihilism has left thousands upon thousands of African-American youth with a sense of having little regard for his or her own life and a sense of having nothing to live for, and consequently they have little, if any, compunction about inflicting harm or injury, be it emotional or physical, upon other human beings. While this nihilism is not peculiar to poverty- stricken communities in urban America, it is more pervasive in urban communities than elsewhere. Parents in this study understand the detrimental effects of this nihilistic threat to their children, and they view urban public schools as an environment in which the attitudes, dispositions and behaviors that characterize nihilism are reinforced. Consequently, they have rejected urban schools.

The final issue of this theme addresses the responsibility of the African-American middle class to the urban public schools. Although tangential to this study, it is an important matter. One of the hallmarks of the survival of African-Americans has been the interconnectedness of African-American families and communities, a compelling interconnectedness that has served as a constant reminder to African-Americans that we must “lift as we climb.” This simple expression, “lift as we climb,” has been the fundamental doctrine of many African-American social, civic, and religious organizations since Reconstruction. It conveys the belief that as African-Americans ascend the socio-economic ladder, they have a moral as well historical obligation to assist and support African-Americans who continue to confront numerous social, political and economic challenges in their daily lives. Very few of the parents’ perspectives on this topic however, reflected the spirit of the “lift as we climb” doctrine. This topic appeared to be uncomfortable topic for some of the parents.

Marilyn Jones stated that the African-American middle class should “try to get the same benefits in urban schools that other schools have.” I did not pursue the matter beyond that point to ascertain how this might be achieved.

Winston Mills declared that urban schools were not an exclusive problem of the African-Americans:

With 20% of the population I don’t believe that the burden of public schools rests with only the Black Middle class. This is a problem for America. The American education system needs to be enhanced and it is up to everyone to fix it.

Maureen Jackson offered this comment:

I believe in public schools but I would not let my kids stay there. We’re (meaning the African-American middle class) the ones who know what they need to be successful in college because we’ve experienced what they have to go through. Urban parents sometimes don’t know what it is their kids need or they don’t know how to go about getting it. I’m just not sure what we can do.

Carlton Smith remarked:

The Black middle class should invest in resources to help students understand the importance of their history, a fulfillment of the talented tenth. I think the black middle class has an obligation to see that the urban schools work for all kids. Most who are middle class don’t want to sacrifice their kids by allowing them to attend urban schools.

The comments by Smith and Jackson were indicative of how all the parents unanimously felt that urban schools needed support from the African-American middle class; however, that support should not include educating their children in urban public schools.

Lara Daley suggested that much of the problem in urban public schools stems from the dysfunctional nature of urban families. She also is keenly aware that the African American middle class alone cannot solve the problems of urban schools:

The black middle class does and should have an obligation to urban schools but the reality is that most in the middle class probably have the attitude that 'there is enough going on right here in my own family that I have to deal with' so sometimes they don't have the time to help.

Daley's comments speak to Shapiro's (2004) notion of the "hidden costs of being African-American." Shapiro posits that the structure of the middle class status of African-Americans is vastly different from that of whites, citing inequities in income, wealth, and other resources as evidence of the differences. Included among those differences is the resource of time. As Daley, noted for most middle class African-Americans their time is consumed with working to maintain their middle class status and taking care of their own families. Thus, while parents may feel a sense of obligation or responsibility to urban schools and communities, they also recognize that their limited resources, especially time, often preclude them from being directly and actively engaged in philanthropic, "lift as we climb" projects. Many in the African-American community compensate for this by making monetary contributions to humanitarian programs organized by churches, fraternal groups and civic organizations engaged in social uplift projects in urban schools and communities.

### **Theme Five Summary**

This theme examined cultural issues that impact urban schools and have some degree of influence on the school choices parents make for their children. African-American history in the school curriculum did not surface as a major concern for the parents, as most felt this was not a priority. There was general agreement on the importance of interacting with dominant culture students. Most parents viewed this as a crucial element in preparing children for the adult world or as Marilyn Jones and Carlton Smith summarized it, "learning to deal with white folks."

The impact of urban culture on school environments was also explored within the context of Cornel West's theory of nihilism in the African-American community. Finally the responsibility of the African-American middle class to urban public schools was discussed and proved to be a

sobering reminder of “ourstory” (as opposed to “history”) and of our obligation to “lift as we climb.

### **Summary of Themes**

The narrative analysis process identified five major themes: academic achievement, safety and discipline, teacher quality, racism, and cultural matters. The theme of academic achievement addressed parental concerns such as offering college preparatory and advanced placement courses and the schools’ ability to prepare their children to be successful at the collegiate level. Safety and discipline issues ranged from concerns about the neighborhoods in which the schools were located to unruly student behavior in the classroom and student fighting. Teacher quality issues included the dearth of African-American teachers, ineffective pedagogy, and the impact of effective counseling programs. Racism was also identified as a theme. Some parents candidly expressed concerns about specific racist incidents, while others were reluctant to suggest the possibility of race as a factor in decisions and actions made by school personnel. Cultural matters emerged through parents’ articulation of their beliefs regarding the importance of their children being educated in an environment that was economically, culturally, and socially diverse. They believed that this would enable their children to acquire the skills and sensibilities to navigate various social and professional circles needed for upward mobility.

### **High Academic Achievement**

For the parents in this study, the notion of high academic achievement, for all intents and purposes, translates into an academic environment that prepares their children for matriculation at an institution of higher learning. Given that this group of parent informants attributes their social and economic successes to, in large part, their acquisition of a college education, it is only reasonable and logical for them to desire the same for their children. These parents understand that a college education was their gateway to the middle class; and consequently, their aspirations for their children’s future hinge on a college education. They do not believe urban public schools—constantly challenged by what are seemingly insurmountable social, political, and economic issues—possess the requisite resources such as personnel, curriculum, instructional materials, and technology to adequately prepare their children for a successful collegiate experience.

Instead, they have chosen parochial, independent, and suburban public schools to educate their children, believing that these schools not only have the appropriate academic environment

but also that they will afford their children a “competitive edge” that will enable them to navigate and negotiate the world of the dominant culture. In general, parents perceived the curricula in parochial, independent, and suburban schools to be far superior to those of urban public schools and believed parochial, independent, and suburban schools provided the best opportunities to prepare their children for the academic rigors of post-secondary schooling at a quality college or university. Thus, a strong college preparatory program was identified as the major issue for parents when selecting a school. Parents also viewed a well-balanced curriculum and engaging pedagogy as integral components to a quality education, and cited the experiences of their children who have participated in a diverse range of courses in sciences, humanities, and fine arts. Examples of these opportunities included children traveling to foreign countries as a result of their involvement in their school’s music program and children participating in extended, off-campus, science field investigations to study biology. Parents generally agreed that such academic opportunities and experiences would not have been available to their children if they had attended urban public schools. High expectations were identified as another condition for selecting schools for their children. These parents were keenly aware of the negative impact of low expectations on student performance; consequently, they sought schools in which all school personnel held high expectations for them and were willing to expend the effort to ensure that their children would meet those expectations.

The parents’ conversations revealed unsettling contrasts between the two categories of schools and compelling arguments to support their decisions to abandon urban public schools. Harvey Judge compared the public schools’ practice of “teaching to the middle” to the parochial school’s practice of setting a high academic standard and then providing the necessary academic interventions to ensure that all students meet that standard. Maureen Jackson rejected the traditional practice of whole group learning that is characteristic of most public schools, both urban and suburban, and sought a school that would embrace and nurture her daughter’s optimal learning style and individualize a program that revolved around her interests and needs. Ms. Jackson chose a Montessori elementary school and an elite private high school for her daughter.

The negative impact of schools that fail to implement a rigorous and robust curriculum were made real to Marilyn Jones when the results of a parochial school entrance examination revealed that her daughter, enrolled in a college prep track in an urban public school, was more than one year behind her current grade level.

Parents in this study view high academic achievement as the cornerstone to a quality education, and in their opinion, urban public schools have deteriorated into institutions that are devoid of the key elements that foster high academic achievement: high expectations, rigorous and well-balanced curricula, and an engaging, child-centered pedagogy. The absence of these crucial elements in urban schools served as justification for their decisions to abandon urban districts.

### **Discipline and Safety**

As with parents throughout America, discipline was another priority. Reasonable parents anticipate that, invariably, any school, regardless of the socioeconomic status of its student body, will encounter discipline problems, and they expect school personnel to possess the capabilities and resources to sufficiently address those concerns in a manner that is just and consistent. What parents will not tolerate, however, are those schools which adhere to harsh and overly punitive discipline policies, or those schools which are overwhelmed by the magnitude and volume of a constant barrage of discipline problems to the degree that the safety and security of their children are at risk.

Parental expectations regarding discipline and safety matters were organized around four major issues: the ability of the schools to maintain order and discipline in the classroom and throughout the school in general; the overall safety of their children; the enactment of fair and appropriate disciplinary measures when necessary; and the loss of instructional time due to the discipline problems. In general, parents' comments revealed their perception that discipline problems of urban public schools are a reflection of the numerous problems of the neighborhoods and communities in which they are located. Regardless of the causes, parents believed behavior problems would negatively impact the instructional process and ultimately reduce their children's ability to receive a quality education.

### **Teacher Quality**

Overall, the parents' views suggested that they believe quality teaching is foundational to high achievement; however, there was no single, unifying thread of thought in their discussions. Parents' specific comments regarding teacher quality covered a breadth of issues including schools having very few African-American teachers; teachers' inability to nurture the talents of their children; incompetent teachers; ineffective counselors; and teachers who comported themselves in an unprofessional manner. It was of interest to note that the parents who offered



the most descriptive detailed accounts regarding teachers were the three mothers who had children in public schools. This could be due to the fact that in most families it is the mother who takes on the responsibility of interacting with school officials and intervening or advocating when problems arise with the school. The limited number of American teachers was addressed by one parent who noted that in a school with more than 2000 students, 77% of whom were black, there was only one African-American teacher who taught in the academic core—math, language arts, social studies, science, and foreign languages—department. In contrast, she noted the high percentage of African-Americans working in support staff positions such as custodian, office staff, and cafeteria workers.

Two parents, Lara Daley and Marilyn Jones, commented on the importance of quality guidance counselors and their impact on a student's academic career in high school and their preparation for college. Lara Daley implied that racism might have influenced the manner in which counselors executed their duties. She specifically noted that although several black children had met the requirements to be enrolled in gifted and talented classes, they were not assigned to those classes; yet white students who had not met the requirements were enrolled in the gifted and talented class. Marilyn Jones, through her role as a parent of a child in a parochial school and her role as an educator in an urban public school, witnessed the glaring inequities between the counseling departments at the two schools. She noted that the parochial school counselors conference with parents and students twice a year to discuss student progress and plans for post secondary schooling, while at the urban public school in which she teachers there is only one counselor for more than one thousand students.

Both Marilyn Jones and Lara Daly encountered teachers who questioned their daughter's intellectual ability and their status in advanced classes. In both cases it became apparent to the mothers that the deficit rested not with their children but with the unwillingness or inability of the teachers to nurture, cultivate, and enhance their children's intellectual talents.

While numerous issues were embedded within this theme, the parents' major concern was that teachers should be well versed in the content of their discipline and capable of nurturing their children's talents.

## **Racism**

In reality racism was a recurring theme throughout this study in that the inequalities and inequities between the urban public schools and parochial, suburban, and independent schools that parents cited are often rooted in racist structures, which underpin our society. The fact that few parents directly mentioned racism as an explanation for various conditions that existed in urban schools speaks to the very insidious nature of the institutionalized racism, that form of racism which emanates from policies and practices which govern our lives and are so engrained into the natural landscape of society that it is unrecognizable and thus accepted as normal.

However several parents discussed overt racism, the form of racism that is tangible and concrete, as the cause of certain actions. Lara Daley identified racism as the reason counselors did not allow qualified black children into the gifted and talented program when white children who did not qualify were permitted into the program. Maureen Jackson commented on the grading practices of a teacher with a reputation of never giving African-American students any grade higher than a “B.” Harvey Judge’s conflict with the Catholic school’s parent organization led him to withdraw his daughter from the school. A critical race theory analysis of the incident suggests race might have contributed to this conflict. Mr. Judge however, was reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of race.

Parents’ subtle conversations regarding racism focused on the racism they sought to escape in urban public schools, which was evident in their comments regarding the vast differences between the schools’ curriculum, pedagogy, teacher expectations, guidance counselors, and extracurricular activities and other aspects of schooling. Although racism occurred at all schools, the general consensus among the parents appeared to be that the academic, social, and cultural benefits their children derived from suburban, parochial, and independent schools compensated for any acts of racism they or their children encountered.

## **Culture Matters**

Four socio-cultural issues impacting schooling for African-Americans formed the core of this theme: the significance of African-American history in the school curriculum; the importance of interacting with dominant culture students; the negative impact of urban problems on schooling; and the responsibility of the African-American middle class to urban public schools.

The first issue within this theme is the study of African-American history and culture. Although not an insignificant matter to the parents, this did not surface as a major concern. Some parents utilized family and community resources to enhance their children's knowledge and understanding of the significant contributions of African-Americans in the growth and development of this country, while others reluctantly conceded that their children's lack of knowledge in African-American history represented a deficiency in their education. Generally, parents did not believe that African-American history was vital to the college preparatory education they sought for their children. The second issue of this theme, the importance of interacting with dominant culture children, revealed interesting insights regarding the one of the parents' major concerns about schooling: preparing their children to thrive, flourish, and succeed in the dominant culture. The third aspect of this theme was centered on the negative elements of urban school culture, as most parents expressed grave concerns about the many social ills that currently impact urban schools and the impact of these problems on students in those schools. Finally, the theme concluded with the responsibility of the African-American middle class to urban public schools. This segment of the interviews elicited responses that ranged from contributing to alumni organizations to revisiting W.E.B. DuBois' concept of the Talented Tenth; however parents felt no sense of obligation to educate their children in urban schools. The overarching message of this theme was that parents wanted their children to be able to successfully maneuver, navigate, and negotiate their lives within the dominant culture paradigm.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

#### Discussion of Findings

This qualitative study sought to better understand how middle class African-American parents construct their decisions to either exclude urban public schools as options for their children or withdraw their children from urban public schools. More specifically I sought to identify the socio-cultural, economic, and political, realities and influences that shaped and informed their decisions. The parents' narratives highlighted numerous issues that were attributable to their rejection or abandonment of urban public schools. Those issues were categorized into five major areas of concern: academic achievement; discipline and safety; teacher quality; racism; and cultural matters. Throughout their conversations, parents compared and contrasted their children's experiences as well as their own experiences with urban public schools to their experiences with suburban, parochial, and independent private schools. Their stories revealed stark disparities between the two groups of institutions, leading parents to conclude unequivocally that their children would be greatly disadvantaged by attending an urban public school. Two major findings resulted from the analysis of the interviews with this group of middle class African-American parents. The first major finding is that parents do not believe urban schools possess the requisite resources—personnel, pedagogical skills, curricula, and technology—to effectively educate their children and enable them to gain admission to a reputable college or university. As previously discussed, these parents view a college education as a requirement to maintaining a middle class lifestyle. Thus, it is an expectation that their children will attend college. The second major finding is that parents want their children to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed as a prerequisite to become economically and socially successful in the world of the dominant culture. They do not believe urban public schools can facilitate this. These findings are immersed in issues of race and class. Critical race theory and social reproduction theory offer a means of examining how issues of race and class underpin the inequities and inequalities of these schools, which result in thousands of children receiving an inadequate education. In the following discussion critical race theory is employed to analyze the first finding and social reproduction theory used to analyze the second finding.

Critical race theorists acknowledge the permanence of racism in this country. They contend that what is most dangerous in our society is not the blatant “in-your-face” acts of racism but the structures and ideologies which underpin those acts, and more importantly, the manifestation of those structures and ideologies in the form of policies that appear normal while inflicting what is oftentimes irreparable social, psychological, economic, and *educational* injury and harm to people of color. In other words, institutionalized racism threatens the existence of people of color beyond the surface of the tangible act, “in-your-face fact.” It is that form of racism that critical race theorists seek to expose, challenge, dismantle, and remedy. Critical race theorists further posit that colorblindness, neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy are illogical and discriminatory constructs because of the historical and continuing presence of race in our society (Crenshaw, 1995; Gotanda, 2001). Thus, the notion of color-blindness, or the “nonrecognition” of race” (Gotanda, p. 35) is a fallacy; therefore, its accompanying constructs—ahistoricism, neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy—should not form the basis of legal decisions and policymaking.

One of the major constructs of critical race theory is the use of counter-narratives to disrupt dominant culture narratives that formulate the foundation upon which law and policy are developed. Counter-narratives have the potential to unveil the deeply engrained racism that is undetectable under the cloak of liberalist notions of merit, objectivity, colorblindness, and neutrality. Moreover, counter-narratives make plain the suffering endured by those affected by policies and practices shrouded in such notions. Numerous school policies that render urban schools ineffective must be examined and “unpacked” through the lens of critical race theory. In doing, so we can better understand why parents who want to ensure that their children have access to best educational opportunities and advantages reject the notion of public schooling in urban America.

The following counter-narrative exemplifies how racist undercurrents in school policy impact student achievement. Moreover, it demonstrates how local and state school officials fail to identify and fully comprehend, address, and remedy the discriminatory policies and practices that affect students of color.

## **Angela and the MBA:**

### **Urban School Inadequacies Take A Toll on Ohio High School Seniors**

In the process of completing this dissertation in the spring of 2007, I was catapulted into the midst of a major educational controversy that erupted in school communities throughout Ohio when I received a call from a close friend whose daughter, Angela, a high school senior at a quasi-suburban, (but more urban than suburban) predominantly African-American high school in Montgomery County, had failed by four points on her last and final attempt to pass the science section of the Ohio Graduation Test before graduation. Had she passed the exam I would be immersed in the celebratory moments of this age old tradition of graduation, spending inordinate amounts of time at the local Hallmark store scouring through greeting cards until I found the one card that would best convey how proud I was of Angela and her accomplishments including achieving Honor Roll status each quarter of her senior year, a feat she had not accomplished during any other year of her high school career. I would have looked for that perfect graduation gift wrapping paper in which I would wrap her gift, a book, probably the classic, *From Slavery to Freedom* by John Hope Franklin or one of my more recent favorites, *Lest We Forget: The Story of African-American History from Slavery to Emancipation* by Velma Maia Thomas. Whether I selected the Franklin work or Thomas work, I would include in the book, along with the traditional crisp, new one hundred dollar bill, a very sentimental and personal inscription of how strongly I believed that there is no greater story of faith than the story of how our ancestors survived slavery and the subsequent long, dark decades of Jim Crow racism. The inscription would also remind her that this journey called schooling was really the beginning of a lifelong quest for knowledge and how education had been the foundation for the success of our people since long before the era of Reconstruction. Were it not for the four points, I would have readied my old Nikon on graduation day and made sure that I arrived at the arena early so as to get the best possible seating that would render the best angles from which I could capture and document those precious, culminating moments of this 13-year journey: marching into the arena dressed in cap and gown with her friends and classmates that she had known since kindergarten; walking across the stage to receive her “passport” to go out into the world; and finally, the moving of the mortarboard tassel from left to right (or is it right to left?) signaling the end of this journey. Four points separated her from her diploma and the celebration. Four points robbed her parents of that moment for which all parents, family members, close friends and an unrelated “aunt” (as Angela

often referred to me) had anxiously awaited. But Angela was not alone. There were other seniors in her school who were denied their diploma and their celebration by one test. And they were not alone. In the days after I received my phone call, as school districts throughout Ohio revealed their test statistics, thousands of high school seniors learned they would not earn a diploma as a result of missing one or more parts of the OGT. In fact, the number of high school seniors in 2007 who would not receive a diploma because they failed to pass the state-mandated graduation test was three times higher than in 2006 (Tivin, 2007). Numerous concerns emerged from these alarming statistics. The immediate and external dilemma was: Should these students be allowed to participate in their school's commencement exercises? Other questions with deeper and more serious implications would have to be explored and investigated by local as well as state educational leaders: Why was there a three-fold increase in the failure rate of high school seniors on the state-mandated test? What would schools and even the Ohio Department of Education do to ensure that these seniors received effective intervention that would enable students to master the content and pass the OGT during the summer administration of the test? Why was this science test so particularly difficult for students? Why did so few students qualify for the "alternative pathway to a diploma" waiver. If the statistics show that urban, poor, and minority schools have a greater percentage of uncertified teachers in science, to what extent did that impact the test results?

The issue of graduation participation garnered media attention across the state as parents, students, and a few educators requested, demanded, or protested that school boards should allow students to participate in graduation if they had earned all their credits. Other voices—on radio talk shows, in newspaper editorials, in faculty lounges, at water-cooler sidebars in high-rise corporate office buildings and in numerous other places public and private—spewed forth vicious attacks on parents and students in what was, in many instances, tantamount to a "blame-the-victim-mentality. And in previous years perhaps, I too, would have been one of those voices, believing that schools and teachers had done all that was necessary to provide the appropriate and effective quality instruction and intervention opportunities for the students. After all, that was what I had done as a classroom teacher for many years. Whether I was a proponent or opponent of state-mandated testing—a position on which I have vacillated since the inception of the Ohio Proficiency Test—I knew it was my contractual responsibility as a social studies teacher to provide the necessary instruction for my students to enable them to pass the state test. I

knew that my failure to do so could result in their failure on the test. Moreover, the obligation to provide the necessary instruction for the students was not just a contractual obligation; it was a moral obligation and commitment to bettering the lives of students. Didn't all teachers and educators have that same moral commitment to do what is good and right and best for their students and to serve as change agents for their students? Doesn't teacher quality extend beyond the realm of certificates, licenses, content knowledge, and classroom management schemes to include a moral commitment to children? Given the impact of its consequences, don't all educators have a moral obligation to prepare their students for state testing? That's what I would have believed prior to this school year. But that does not happen in all schools, so should students be penalized and punished if schools have failed to provide the necessary, appropriate and effective instruction and academic intervention for **ALL** students? This graduation crisis was not simply the result of a lack of parental involvement and students' failure to study. Why should students be excluded from their celebration because of what was, to some extent, a failure of instructional leadership and an absence of teacher quality? What was the moral response to this dilemma?

As the graduation controversy escalated and intensified, school boards convened in early morning and late night sessions to decide whether or not students should be allowed to "walk" with their classes (Cincinnati Enquirer, 2007). Most districts had previously adopted policies that prohibited students from participating in commencement exercises if they did not pass the state test even though they had completed all other school requirements and earned their Carnegie units or credits. School leaders failed to pose the crucial questions about the numerous social, political, economic, educational, and bureaucratic issues that underpinned the exponential increase in failures. To do so would have perhaps revealed their culpability in this crisis. Instead, most chose to blame parents and students and hide behind policy. That was the effortless, morally deficient solution to this dilemma. Only one large urban district, Cincinnati Public Schools, would eventually conclude that the high failure rate among seniors was not simply the fault of parents and students, and in the absence of all relevant and pertinent data, students should not be denied their right to celebrate 13 years of work (CPS School Board, 2007). The Cincinnati school board exemplified the moral leadership that few other districts across the state had the courage to show.



As May drew to a close, the age-old ritual of graduation turned into a “side trip to hell” (Tivin, 2007) for many high school seniors. The actions of two school leaders call into question the very existence of moral leadership in the schoolhouse and reflect the mean-spiritedness that permeated this controversy in many school districts. In Toledo, an urban district with an extremely high percentage of OGT failures among seniors and in which a student with a 4.0 GPA had failed to pass one section of the OGT, the superintendent of schools forbid any non-graduating senior from attending the ceremony (Tivin, 2007). In Angela’s school, the principal refused to give students who had not passed the OGT their caps and gowns, which they had already purchased, until the day after the graduation ceremony. What benefit was served by such mean-spirited actions? In Akron, a father serving in the military in Iraq had received special leave to return home to see his son graduate, only to discover after arriving home that his son had failed to pass one section of the OGT and would not be allowed to participate in the ceremonies. The Akron school board decided that even in light of this unusual circumstance, they would stand on policy. (Anonymous Akron School Board Member, May 2007) Such actions by school leaders aggravated emotions in an already volatile situation, further infuriating angry students and parents. Moreover, they demonstrated diminished moral and ethical consciousness on the part of these school leaders.

By mid-June, the debate over graduation ceremonies had subsided into oblivion after graduation ceremonies were held throughout the state and thousands of high school seniors would end their 13-year journey of schooling, unable to share in the celebrations of the day and facing an uncertain future without a diploma.

However, the serious issues embedded in the commencement crisis would still have to be investigated, examined, and resolved. The role of teacher quality and instructional leadership figures prominently in the crisis and the resolution of the broader school issues that contributed to this graduation problem. A closer look into Angela’s story reveals numerous problems with teacher quality, ineffective counseling, and poor decision-making by school leaders. If similar problems existed in other urban schools, it stands to reason why there was such a dramatic increase in the number of failures on the OGT among high school seniors in urban schools.

In the fall of 2006 after meeting with Angela’s counselors to review transcripts, credits and test results, Angela’s parents learned that she had not passed the sections of the test she had taken during the summer. She would still need to pass the science and social studies sections of the

OGT. She was scheduled into an OGT intervention class that would prepare her for the next test in October. After asking some probing questions about the supposed OGT intervention class and having seen intervention classes in my own district taught by individuals without the certification and content knowledge to provide the necessary instruction in a given discipline, I reneged on a promise I made to myself to stay out of my friends' and relatives' affairs when it came to the matter of their children and schooling unless I was invited to do so. I asked if I could talk with the counselor and get a better understanding of exactly what was going on, and we agreed I would tutor Angela for the social studies test.

When I met with the counselor I asked her why Angela wasn't scheduled into an OGT class during her junior year. Her response was, "We like to allow students to make their own decisions." (However, I later learned that students had to be recommended for the OGT prep course in their junior year. Given Angela's academic record and the fact that she still needed to pass two sections of the OGT, why wasn't she recommended for an OGT intervention class in her junior year?)

I then asked, "Well, what is the role of a **guidance** counselor, if not to provide **guidance** on a matter of such critical importance as preparing for the OGT?" There was no response. As we moved on to the subject of her social studies test, I explained that I would need an American history book to use for tutoring Angela. The counselor replied that she had no control over textbooks. I asked her to speak with the Social Studies Department Chair about providing a book. He came to her office and offered me one of the most ineffective social studies OGT prep books on the market. I refused the book, informing the Department Chair that what I needed was an American history textbook. He argued that he did not have any extra textbooks, and I adamantly countered that I did not believe that "in this brand new, multi-million dollar state-of-the-art high school that there was not one extra book somewhere that could be given to a student who needed to pass the social studies exam!" When it became obvious that I would not leave without the requested text, the department chair relented, went back to his classroom, and returned with the American history book, and I was well on my way to becoming a Mad Black Aunt, (an MBA). My encounter with the department chair and the guidance counselor was indicative of what often happens when parents, family members, or other concerned adults try to advocate on behalf of students. The incompetence of the guidance counselor and the uncooperative attitude of the department chair provide concrete examples of why many parents

in the African-American middle class are abandoning urban public schools and seeking other educational alternatives for their children.

Issues of teacher or educator quality emerged again when I inquired about the instructor and format of the OGT prep class. From my own experiences with such courses, I knew that most students needed content-specific tutoring via individualized or small group instruction. As I talked to the OGT prep class instructor, it was clearly evident that Angela would receive neither content instruction nor individualized or small group instruction, as the teacher in the class was not certified in either science or social studies. Instead Angela would be directed to log on to Study Island, a computer program, which has become the default method of intervention in many schools. Or she would be instructed to review a set of flashcards or study from one of the OGT prep books. Those methods of review often work well for students who have a good foundation in the content material, but what about those students who needed more instruction in the content and not merely a review? How would Angela receive the science instruction she needed? Why wasn't there a content-specific intervention course offered? Instead she was scheduled into a generic OGT intervention class where students who needed intervention for any one of the five tests were also placed. How would any of the students get the content instruction they needed? In my discussions with the prep class teacher I inquired about the instructional materials she used for social studies and she explained that she was using the book that students had used for the previous version of state-mandated testing, the Ohio Proficiency Test, which tested a different set of skills and knowledge than the OGT. In sum, the intervention class appeared to be little more than a study hall, yet parents were led to believe that through this class their children were getting the assistance they needed to enable them to pass the test.

Through several weekends of social studies tutoring, Angela passed the social studies test that was administered in October. But the science exam was still an obstacle. Angela's parents engaged in several discussions with the school about the quality of the intervention class and the school finally decided in January of Angela's senior year to employ a science teacher to provide the science intervention (which is essentially three years of science content) that had been lacking in the OGT prep class. Unfortunately, this was too little, too late for Angela, and when the March test results were released in May, she learned she had missed the mark by four points.

When I received the news from Angela's parents, we began strategizing about her options. Angela did not qualify for a diploma under the State of Ohio's alternative pathway to a

diploma policy—which is fraught with numerous socio-political biases—because she did not have a 2.5 grade point average in science, but she met all of the other six stipulations of the policy. (I was bewildered by the policy. Was it really designed to be an alternative pathway to a diploma? If so, for whom? Certainly not for thousands of urban school students who had already been dealt a great disservice and injustice due to the fact that in many of their schools they did not have qualified and competent instructors, especially in science, to provide the necessary instruction and remediation or intervention required by the state. As I continued to review the policy it became apparent to me that this policy, which on the surface appeared to be “fair,” was inherently biased.) We discussed another reasonable option that would allow her to raise her grade point average in science by completing makeup and remedial work in her previous science courses so that she could receive her diploma and participate in the commencement exercises. With three weeks remaining before graduation there was enough time to fully execute this plan. When the plan was presented to the principal, he arrogantly stated without compunction, “I’m not willing to do this.” In essence, he was not willing to help a student. There was no discussion as to why or how this could or could not be done. It was simply in my opinion, a lack of moral fortitude to do what was right. Subsequent conversations with school board officials revealed “if we do this for her, we’ll have to do this for other students.” For the most part, school officials refused to accept the reality that there were flaws in their system of test intervention and that in some way they had perhaps, failed in their attempt to provide appropriate intervention to **all** students. Only one school board member was willing to acknowledge that their system was less than optimal, stating that she had lobbied for an OGT prep course to begin in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and that her son was a freshman at the high school. The self-interest was obvious.

As the dates for commencement ceremonies drew closer and school boards throughout Ohio debated the commencement issue, the broader issues with more serious implications were rarely mentioned. Ohio’s newly elected Governor who campaigned on a platform of support for public schools remained relatively silent on the issue despite hundreds of calls flooding his office in Columbus. (Preston, 2007). His only public comment on the matter was to call for a review of the testing program. However, he refused to speak on the commencement crisis. He offered no appeal to schools board to reconsider their commencement policy given the circumstances surrounding the OGT, leaving local school boards with no sense of guidance and direction on the matter. In the end, most Ohio high school seniors, including Angela, who fell short on their final

attempt to pass the OGT would be banned from participating in the culminating activities of their 13-year journey called schooling.

My role as the MBA had taken on a new dimension as I became enraged that there were too few school officials to speak out for the students; that the general public continued to blame the parents and students; that there were too many unanswered questions; that there was too little dialogue around the structural, systemic, and bureaucratic issues which underpinned this educational debacle in Ohio's public schools; and that once the surface issue dissipated, no one would continue to press for answers to the hard questions. I vowed that I would not let this quest for answers and solutions end in mid June.

Ironically, in the midst of the graduation crisis, the Governor's conference on "Increasing the High School Graduation Rate for Black Males" was held in the state capital. During his obligatory luncheon address the governor rattled off the usual litany of frightening statistics on the African-American males and articulated the politically correct sentiment that "there are no throw away children." Yet the governor offered no comments on the brewing controversy. Also in attendance at the conference was Ohio's Superintendent of Public Instruction, who spoke of future plans to improve teacher quality in urban schools, noting that urban schools are more likely to have inadequate teachers, especially in science and math, than suburban schools. Yet there was no mention of the existing crisis—until one MBA challenged her to explain what schools and the ODE would do differently in providing effective intervention that would assist these seniors in acquiring their diplomas. Caught with her defenses down—perhaps because she had been lulled into the proverbial "false sense of security" among the audience comprised mostly of members of the African-American middle class who appeared to espouse a blame-the-victim mentality toward the high school seniors caught in this crisis, she responded with quintessential, bureaucratic nonsense, even suggesting that "they could go and get a GED." However, she did agree to schedule a meeting with the MBA at her office in Columbus to further discuss the many unresolved questions, dilemmas and issues that would linger long after graduation season subsides.

The graduation crisis of 2007 exposed the inadequacies of public schooling in Ohio and the callousness of school officials mired in policy who lacked the moral fortitude to do what is fair and just for students. In sum, this crisis laid the foundation for a new wave of public school

abandonment by angry parents of various races who believed that an egregious injustice was meted out to their children.

### **Unpacking “Angela and the MBA...”**

A critical race theory analysis of Ohio’s graduation crisis of 2007 would identify numerous issues that suggest the inherent biases in the policies and practices surrounding this controversy. Those issues are too numerous to probe thoroughly within the confines of this study; however, by briefly exploring the nexus of teacher quality and the OGT policy in this controversy through the lens of critical race theory, it becomes evident how the constructs of merit, objectivity, colorblindness, and neutrality work against urban schools and their students.

Statistics from the Ohio Department of Education reveal that since the inception of the OGT, the highest failure rate for any section of the test has been science. It has been well established that urban schools are more likely to have fewer well-qualified science teachers than suburban, parochial, or independent schools. Therefore, the science instruction for students at urban public schools generally has not been equal to the science instruction of their counterparts at other schools; consequently, there is a greater likelihood that urban students will fail the test. Now, consider how, at Angela’s school as well as many other urban schools throughout the state, there was no qualified, knowledgeable instructor assigned to the state-mandated “intervention” for class students who failed any portion of the test. These students are further harmed because they still have no teacher to provide the necessary intervention. Therefore, all students who sit for the exam have had not equal opportunities to learn the material. Yet, members of the general public who are unaware of these inequities in urban schools will assume that the students’ failure is simply due to their lack of motivation and will. They will assume this because they view the test as being a fair and just way to evaluate all students. From this example, it is clear to see how policies purportedly based on merit, neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness work against students in urban public schools. Crenshaw’s (1995) comments capture the essence of this problem and are worthy of reiteration:

This belief in colorblindness and equal process would make no sense at all in a society in which identifiable groups had actually been treated differently historically and in which the effects of this treatment continued into the present... One could not look at outcomes as fair measure of merit since one would recognize that not all had been given an ‘equal’ start. (p. 106).

Given the conditions surrounding the shortage of qualified teachers in urban schools in fields such as science, it is not surprising that a greater percentage of students failed the science test in urban schools than students in suburban, parochial, and independent schools. Therefore given these facts along with the knowledge that the majority of students in urban schools are students of color, I submit that the state's policy requiring all students to pass the OGT as a condition for graduation is inherently biased and racist.

Moreover, state educational policy-makers and officials who were responsible for developing this policy were aware of how these teacher shortages negatively impact students of color. Yet they failed to modify this policy to address its flaws. Thus, I argue that it is *because* the vast majority of those negatively affected by this policy are students of color or poor that they failed to intercede and remedy the flaws in this policy. Indeed, this implies something far more sinister and conspiratorial than most individuals will want to acknowledge. I will leave that matter for the reader to ponder. Perhaps the policy did exactly what it was designed to do.

In sum the graduation crisis which occurred in the spring of 2007, exposed to those who were willing to see it, the manner in which race underpins the inequities in urban schools, leaving them incapable of providing the quality of education that middle class as well as all parents seek for their children. As has been stated and implied by the parents associated with this study, those who have the financial resources to educate their children elsewhere, will not allow their children to be victimized by urban public schools.

The second finding states that parents want their children to acquire the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and relationships—cultural capital and social capital—to be economically and socially successful in the world of the dominant culture. Two parents I interviewed, Marilyn Jones and Carlton Smith, expressed it in a more unvarnished manner. Marilyn Jones stated that she “wanted her kids to know how to deal with white folks, because that’s who they will have to compete with.” Carlton Smith’s statements followed a tone and tenor similar to Ms. Jones’ comments when he asserted: “I wanted my son to be able to converse with white folks and learn the ins and outs of how to work with white folks and not be intimidated by them.” The statements made by Marilyn Jones and Carlton Smith reflect the general attitudes of the parents in this study. Utilizing the social reproduction theory and notions of social capital and cultural capital to unpack the statements by Ms. Jones and Mr. Smith allows us to again see how urban schools create yet another disadvantage for their children. In Chapter Four, I discussed in detail

the manifestation of social reproduction in school settings through a comparison of working class schools and middle class, affluent, and executive elite schools. The curricula of these schools vary greatly and correspond to the general socioeconomic status of the student body, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the existing power structure. Students in working class schools are often subjected to a substandard curriculum that offers little chance for successful post-secondary schooling and, in turn, limited opportunities of upward mobility in the future. From this perspective, urban public schools, which usually are comprised of working class families, present another disadvantage for middle class students.

Additionally, the opportunities to acquire and activate cultural capital and develop the networks of social capital required to successfully navigate, negotiate, and maneuver one's life within the dominant culture paradigm are virtually nonexistent in urban schools, as these schools present little opportunities to interact with dominant culture children and parents. Social capital networks are as significant for the African-American parents as they are for their children in that it is through the formation of these networks, or relationships with parents, teachers, counselors and other members of the school community that parents and their children can attain, valuable information that has the potential to positively impact and enhance their children's lives. In a follow-up discussion with two of the parents, they shared how social capital benefited their children. Carlton Mills informed me his daughter had been invited to participate in an exclusive summer camp for students who were interested in pursuing the goal of becoming a physician. It was thorough the guidance counselor that this opportunity was made possible. Maureen Jackson described how her daughter obtained a summer job as a receptionist in a physician's office because she was a close friend of the doctor's daughter. While it could be argued that these opportunities might have been possible at an urban public school, I would argue that, given what has been learned about counselors from the narratives of Marilyn Jones and Lara Daley, the counselor in Angela's story, and the very limited number of physicians who send their children to urban public schools, the evidence suggests otherwise.

These analyses of the findings of this study through the lenses of critical race theory, social reproduction theory, and social and cultural capital should aid our understanding of the ways in which many urban public schools limit the academic and social opportunities for their students and why the African-American middle class has abandoned them.



### **Limitations of the Study**

The subject of race was a limitation to this study. Any discussion of urban schools in the United States must invariably address the issue of race. However, race is still an unsettling subject for many Americans, regardless one's of ethnicity or heritage, as I previously discussed in Chapter Four. I cannot ascertain the degree to which this inhibited parent's conversations.

All parents who participated in this study were all from the first generation of African-Americans to fully benefit from the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Most of their children have already graduated from high school. The voices of the second generation of Civil Rights Movement beneficiaries are absent from this study.

The purpose, focus, and semi-structured interviews of this study created certain boundaries for the discussion of the parents' narratives. While a critique of the African-American middle class is necessary, especially at this juncture in our history, such a critique was not the intention of this study. Thus, the reader should not view the absence of such a critique as a flaw or weakness. It was a conscious decision on my part as the researcher to consider how such a critique might have affected the participants. Would they feel betrayed, deceived, or even ambushed? They agreed to share their experiences with me to, in turn, present to the reader. I hope that I have accomplished that task and maintained my integrity with the parents. Each reader must develop his or her own critique and draw his or her own conclusions.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest the need for continued research organized around the theme of African-American parents and students in the school choice movement. At least seven possibilities exist in this area. First, such research might investigate the underlying causes as to why parents such as Harvey Judge return to public schools and the impact of such an action on their children who return to public schools.

A second possibility for further of research could be organized around middle class African-American families who remain in the urban public schools. How do their perceptions of urban schools vary from those of parents who have abandoned the schools? How have their and their children's interactions and experiences with school personnel varied from those of families who left? Are their hopes and aspirations for their children vastly different from those of parents who have left urban schools?

A third avenue for future study would be the experiences of middle class students who remained in urban public schools and those who did not. Such research might investigate the degree to which the two groups of students have acclimated themselves to the world of the dominant culture.

Fourth, the findings of this study revealed the hopes and aspirations of middle class African-American parents for their children. However, there is little research on the hopes and aspirations middle class African-American children. What are the hopes and aspirations of middle class African-American children? And what happens when there is discord between parents' expectations and the aspirations of the children? How do these children react under pressures to exceed the accomplishments of their parents? A study of this nature could have implications for other ethnic groups.

Fifth, one of the more intriguing discoveries from the literature review for this study was that the majority of African-American teachers who teach and live within urban schools districts do not send their children to schools in the district. A focus on these teachers should illuminate and augment the findings of this study.

Sixth, this study was limited to parents who represented the first generation of African-Americans to fully benefit from the Civil Rights Movement. Future research might compare and contrast the first and second-generation beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement on their perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions on urban public schooling and school choice.

Finally, this study exposed numerous socio-political issues confronting the African-American middle class that must be examined and critiqued in future research. What is the role of the "talented tenth" and the "organic intellectual?" What responsibility does the African-American middle class have to urban communities? To what degree are African-American students marginalized in dominant culture schools and communities? What is the impact of that marginalization, and how do parents address issues of marginalization with their children? Many dimensions of the African-American middle class must be explored by researchers in education and other disciplines within the social sciences.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the narratives of the parents featured in this study as well as the many informal conversations I had during the course of this investigation with numerous African-American parents of various socio-economic levels, African-Americans have lost confidence in urban

public schools. The findings of this study cite two reasons for this. First, parents do not believe urban schools possess the requisite resources—personnel, pedagogical skills, curricula, and technology—to effectively educate their children and enable them to gain admission to a reputable college or university. As previously discussed, these parents view a college education as a requirement to maintaining a middle class lifestyle. It is an expectation that their children will attend college. Second, the parents want their children to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be economically and socially successful in the world of the dominant culture. They do not believe urban public schools can facilitate this process. The fact that these findings represent a small, select group of parents does not negate the legitimacy of their statements as evidenced by the chorus of agreement from dozens of parents, who upon hearing of the topic of this study, echoed the sentiments of these seven parents.

Indeed, there is much work to be done by the many stakeholders involved in the process of schooling in urban America. The following recommendations may serve as a starting point for discussions of how educational professionals can improve urban schools and better serve the students who attend them. Teachers must maintain high expectations for themselves as well as their students. This is a first step toward creating classrooms that can prepare students for the rigors of post secondary schooling. Teachers must be willing to constantly seek new and creative ways to captivate, motivate, and teach through the utilization of engaging pedagogical styles that are intellectually stimulating and academically rewarding for their students. Teachers must be willing to challenge themselves as much as they challenge their students. Classrooms in which students are actively engaged in meaningful learning activities experience fewer discipline problems. Thus, an engaging classroom serves multiple purposes. Additionally, teachers must interact with students in a manner that demonstrates a sincere respect for their students and a genuine concern for the development of the whole child. As a colleague of mine once shared, “Kids don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care!”

Curriculum leaders play a major role in transforming the urban classroom. Curriculum leaders must serve as coaches, mentors, and advocates to content teachers. They cannot merely dictate and evaluate from the sidelines. They must become actively engaged with teachers by assisting them on developing meaningful and engaging lessons; co-teaching with teachers; conducting demonstration lessons; and encouraging teachers to expand their repertoire of instructional skills. Moreover, they must help teachers understand that they can prepare students

for high-stakes testing without the usual litany of “drill and kill” activities that have become the standard in many urban schools. At present state-mandated testing is an evil we must all endure; however, it should not control the teacher’s pedagogy. It should not preclude teachers from employing rigorous, high quality instructional strategies. It is imperative that curriculum leaders not only communicate but also demonstrate this to teachers. Another area of vital importance is the development of culturally relevant curriculum as discussed in Chapter Four. Such an initiative will only be successful with full support from district leadership and educators’ sincere commitment to open and honest dialogue, reflective thinking, and social change.

Finally, local and state education administrators, state and local board members, and state legislators must review policies to eliminate the racist and discriminatory practices in existence in our schools. As I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, critical race theory provides a means for us to closely scrutinize policies and practices to lay bare the institutionalized racism that negatively impacts students of color. However, this will be a difficult process, as Americans have not come to terms with the presence of racism in our society. It will take bold, skillful leadership to engage this process. A good starting point for state officials is to examine the current graduation policy in regard to the Ohio Graduation Test. Such a policy is fair and just only when students play on a level field, As we have seen from this study, the inequities of educational resources such as teacher quantity *and* quality, curricula, instructional material, and technology render the playing field uneven. It is time for serious and critical discussions and analyses of the OGT and other educational policies that impact students’ lives.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study sought to better understand how Middle class African-American parents construct their decisions to either exclude urban public schools as options for their children or withdraw their children from urban public schools. More specifically I sought to identify the socio-cultural, economic, and political realities and influences that shaped and informed their decisions. Through semi-structured interviews, parents shared their narratives, highlighting numerous issues that were attributable to their rejection or abandonment of urban public schools: Those issues were categorized into five major areas of concern: academic achievement, discipline and safety; teacher quality; racism; and cultural matters. Throughout their conversations, parents compared and contrasted their children’s experiences as well as their own interactions with urban public schools to their experiences with suburban, parochial, and

independent schools. Their stories revealed stark disparities between the two groups of institutions, leading parents to conclude unequivocally that their children would be greatly disadvantaged by attending an urban public school. Two major findings resulted from the analysis of the interviews with this group of middle class African-American parents. First, the parents do not believe urban schools possess the requisite resources—personnel, pedagogical skills, curricula, and technology—to effectively educate their children and enable them to gain admission to a reputable college or university. As previously discussed, these parents view a college education as a requirement to maintaining a middle class lifestyle. Thus, it is an expectation that their children will attend college. Second, the parents want their children to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be economically and socially successful in the world of the dominant culture. They do not believe urban public schools can facilitate this process.

Those are the perceptions of the parents of this study. Their perceptions are their realities; their realities are their truths. Their realities, their truths, are substantiated by thousands of parents in Ohio who are not satisfied the state of urban public schools. I am reminded of the many informal, “off-the-record” conversations in which colleagues, friends, and even total strangers at professional gatherings related their children’s experiences at urban schools that forced them to leave. Indeed, abandoning traditional urban public schools is not the exclusive domain of the African-American middle class. The thousands of families who have joined the charter school movement demonstrate this. Although charter schools, for the most part, have proved to be a dismal failure, the proliferation of these schools indicates there is a high level of dissatisfaction among parents of children attending urban public schools. Further evidence of this dissatisfaction among urban school parents is the burgeoning interest in school vouchers. The abandonment of urban public schools by the African-American middle class; the proliferation of charter schools; and the burgeoning interest in school vouchers signal that all is not well with schooling in urban America. Dissatisfied parents will not wait another five or ten years for the school districts to reinvent themselves. In the interim, they will continue to abandon urban public schools.

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## Appendix A

### Text of Informed Consent Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am currently enrolled in a course at Miami University that requires me to conduct a study of some aspect of education. For my study, I would like to learn more about why middle class African-American parents exclude urban public school as options for their children. I believe this study is important because it will help educators better understand the kinds of changes parents want to see in our public schools. I believe your viewpoint is important and vital to helping the educational community improve our schools

Through interviews that will last approximately one hour, I will conduct individual conversations with parents of charter school students. During each discussion, I will take hand-written notes and, to ensure the accuracy of my notes, I will also tape record the conversations. Your name and the names of any individuals and places mentioned during our conversations will be kept confidential in any written documents and presentations that may result from this study.

If you would like to participate in this study, please carefully review and sign the consent form below. If you have any questions about this particular study, please contact me at 742-9870. Any questions or concerns that you may have about your rights as a participant in this study should be directed to the Miami University Office for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching (513-529-3734).

Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,

Esther L. Williams  
Doctoral Student  
Miami University Dept. of Educational Leadership

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#### Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in the study conducted by Esther L. Williams. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from this study at any time. I also agree to allow my interview to be audio-taped. I have been assured that all information I provide will remain confidential.

Participant's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi- Structured Interview Questions**

1. At what point did you decide to enroll your children in a private/parochial/suburban school?
2. Which elements of the public school were you seeking to avoid?
3. What educational benefits were you seeking in a private/parochial/ suburban/school?
4. What specific events, if any, precipitated your decision to enroll you children in a private/parochial/suburban school?
5. What non-educational benefits did your children receive from the private/parochial/suburban/school?
6. How important is it to you that schools provide an education that enhances your child's knowledge and understanding of African-American history and culture?
7. In your opinion, what obligation does the Black middle class have to the future of urban public schools?
8. What makes this school a better school than the school (or schools) your child previously attended?
9. If applicable, to what extent were you involved at you child's previous school?
10. How would your characterize your level of parent involvement at your child's private school?
11. How would you characterize your child's social and intellectual development at this private school?
12. What experiences or opportunities did your children miss by not attending the public schools in your community? How did you compensate for this?
13. Under what conditions would you have withdrawn your children from the private school?
14. How would the public schools have to change for you to enroll your children in public schools?



