African American Parent Perspectives on Positive Relationships with Their Children's Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Despite research that suggests that improved relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers may be effective in supporting better academic outcomes, few studies have been conducted from the perspectives of African American parents. To address this gap in the literature, this study examined the research question: How are positive parent-teacher relationships characterized by African American parents?

To address this research question, I relied on a qualitative, grounded theory approach in combination with Black feminist epistemology as the conceptual framework as a way to privilege the voices of African American parents. Open-ended interviews provided data on ways that 13 African American parents characterize positive relationships with up to five of their children's teachers for a total of 20 teacher descriptions. I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method and addressed validity via member checks.

Teachers with whom the parents had positive relationships: a) connected with parents, b) cared for the child, c) had a shared commitment to the success of the child, d) stayed focused on learning, and e) effectively communicated. The study advances a theory of African American family positive relationships with teachers.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY, LITERATURE REVIEW, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I was starting my first year as a principal in a large, urban elementary school. In July one of the district leaders shared information about negative incidents between the staff in my new school and two African American families that had occurred the previous school year. She recommended I reach out to the families right away and begin to build a relationship with them as a way to repair the harm done. A couple of weeks into the school year a teacher came to me for help. He had believed he had a "good relationship" with an African American parent, but then when he called the parent about a situation involving the parent's child, the parent had gotten very upset with him. He was completely bewildered by the exchange and felt terrible that the parent was so upset with him. About a week later, I shared these situations with an African American gentleman who had been a parent liaison in the district in order to gain his insight on what I was noticing. He said, "I've had teachers tell me they have a good relationship with an [African American] parent, but then, when I talk to the parent, the parent doesn't even know the teacher's name."

My new school had a budding African American parent group that year that was beginning to meet monthly. I was in attendance at their first meeting of the year when an African American parent asked this question: "What I want to know is how come my child sits in the same classroom, next to a white child, gets the same instruction, does the same activities, and still does not do well on the tests? You all need to figure that out!" Her voice was passionate and controlled. I could feel her frustration and I knew she was right. Her African American children were sitting side by side with their white classmates and not finding success at the same level. Like many professional educators, I struggled with what to say in the face of this glaring disparity.

The interactions described above have caused me to reflect on the characteristics of relationships between teachers and African American parents and the potential impact on student academic outcomes. While parent involvement in schools is important (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, Jr., 2006; Christianakis, 2011; Dearing, Simpkins, Kreider, & Weiss, 2006; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Trotman, 2001; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017), some researchers argue that the development of positive parent-teacher interpersonal relationships is even more crucial for improving student achievement (Christensen, 2003; Cox, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Stormont, Herman, Reinke, David, & Goel, 2013; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Despite its importance to improved student academic outcomes, the intentional development of positive parent-teacher relationships has had minimal focus by schools and in the academic literature. Hughes and Kwok (2007) point out, "Schools' efforts to enhance home-school relationships focus almost exclusively on increasing parents' involvement (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005), to the neglect of enhancing the affective quality of home-school relationships" (p. 48). The intentional development of home-school relationships can be particularly important for African American students (Bryan, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Edwards, 1999; hooks, 1994; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2001).

To improve parent-teacher relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers, and thus improve educational outcomes for African American children, the literature suggests that the voices of the parents must be heard. Delpit (2006) puts it this way, "I have found that if I want to learn how best to teach children who may be different from me, then I must seek the advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students" (p. 102). Edwards (1999) also emphasizes the importance of listening to parents, stating that, "Indeed schools and teachers have fallen short by failing to communicate their own

expectations, listen to parents' expectations, and to mutually define and delegate responsibilities in this partnership" (p. xviii). Two-way communication between African American parents and teachers is critical. Compton-Lilly (2004) argues that parents must feel respected and accepted as a precursor to developing a positive relationship with a teacher. Listening to parents is important to the education of African American children. As such, this study addresses the research question: How are positive parent-teacher relationships characterized by African American parents?

Schools in the United States continue to struggle to meet the learning needs of African American students (Burchinal, et. al., 2011; Flowers, 2007; Hanushek, 2016; Husband, 2012; Pitre, 2014). Data from the U.S. Department of Education in the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2017_highlights/) shows limited improvement in narrowing the disparity in math and reading outcomes between white and African American students in the United States from 1998-2017 but the problem is older than this. In a report by Education Next (2016), Hanushek reviews the progress made on educational equity 50 years after the publication of the 1966 Coleman Report, titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Hanushek shares this conclusion:

> After nearly a half century of supposed progress in race relations within the United
> States, the modest improvements in achievement gaps since 1965 can only be called a
> national embarrassment. Put differently, if we continue to close gaps at the same rate in
> the future, it will be roughly two and a half centuries before the Black-White math gap
> closes and over one and a half centuries until the reading gap closes (p. 3).

Ladson-Billings (2006) makes the case that rather than an "achievement gap," historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral influences on policies and decision-making have led to an

education debt that creates disparities in academic outcomes. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that, given these influences, an "achievement gap is a logical outcome" (p. 5). The long history and continued impact of explicit and implicit racial bias (Dyson, 2017; Glaude, 2016, Hammond, 2015; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994, 2015), economic oppression through unfair labor and housing practices (Desmond, 2015; Irving, 2014), and sociopolitical marginalization through practices such as mass incarceration and state surveillance (Alexander, 2012; Goffman, 2015; Morris, 2016), have created a social system that perpetuates inequalities in society and specifically within and through schools. Scholars who examine factors influencing the so-called achievement gap have renamed this phenomenon an "opportunity gap" due to the influence of racist and classist policies and decision-making that create unequal opportunities for learning among low-income students and students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014).

Societal factors such as those described above wield considerable influence over school success. However, the American educational system and individual schools are not without responsibility for perpetuating racial inequalities that lead to socio-political and economic disparities for African Americans (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Pitre, 2014). Often, deficit-based programs and policies have been touted as addressing racial disparities in educational outcomes. Yet, programs such as special education and response to intervention (RtI) can serve to perpetuate racial inequality through over-identification of students of color and by segregating students of color during the school day when they leave class to receive "services" (Artiles, 2015; Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Ford & Russo, 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Other programs, such as gifted education, under-represent students of color and exclude them from opportunities to achieve at higher levels (Ford & King, 2014). In addition,

issues such as school segregation (Hanselman & Fiel, 2017; Pitre, 2014; Richards, 2017), explicit and implicit educator racial bias (Colbert, 1991; Delpit, 2006; Emdin, 2016; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Lazar & Slostad, 1999; Myers, 2015; Rowley, Helaire, & Banerjee, 2010), inequitable disciplinary practices (Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2016; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018), and low teacher quality in schools with large populations of students of color (Connor, 2008; Emdin, 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Kozol, 2012), all work to perpetuate the marginalization of African Americans in the United States.

Despite all of these negative influences that work against the academic achievement of African American children, some educators have found strategies that lead to success. Ladson-Billings (2009) studied the characteristics of successful teachers of African American children. The author argued that positive relationships between teachers and students are critical to student success and that the development of these relationships comprise one component of culturally relevant teaching.

Ladson-Billings (2009) identifies the following key characteristics in how successful teachers of African American students relate to the students and understand their role as educators: 1) high regard for others; 2) encourage students to see themselves as part of a community and to value giving back; 3) see teaching as an art, not just a science; 4) believe that all students can succeed; 5) help make connections to community, national, and global identities; and 6) believe they are bringing knowledge out of the child, not depositing information. This asset-based approach extends learning to encompass life outside the classroom as well as traditional academic subjects.

Ladson-Billings (2009) also makes the case that it is important to counter negative stereotypes about African American students and academic achievement, stating that "The

primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a "relevant black personality" that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture" (p. 20). The author explains that in addition to developing positive relationships with students, culturally relevant teachers treat students as competent, provide instructional scaffolding, keep the classroom focused on instruction, extend students' thinking and abilities, and have in-depth knowledge of both students and content.

Rather than only relying on test scores to identify successful teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings (2009) engaged parents in conversation about teachers they felt were successful. The author explains, "These parents indicated that they had a dual agenda for those they considered good teachers. They wanted them to help their children succeed at traditional academic tasks (reading, writing, math, and so on), but at the same time they wanted them to provide an education that would not alienate their children from their homes, their community, and their culture" (p. 30). One of the teachers in Ladson-Billings' study shares that she engages African American parents in a conversation about how they have educated their children at home. This helps her understand what the child already knows so she can connect to that learning in the classroom. Recognizing family assets and the knowledge children bring to school is important to the academic success of African American children. Though research shows that culturally relevant teaching (Gorski, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Hollie, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tileston & Darling, 2008) and positive relationships between students and teachers (Iruka, Burchinal, & Cai, 2010; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012) can improve the achievement of African

American children, we do not know as much about the relationship between African American parents and teachers.

Distinguishing parent involvement from parent-teacher relationships

One of the challenges in searching the literature for studies about the impact of positive parent-teacher relationships was distinguishing this topic from the numerous studies on parent involvement. Parent involvement is an important component of the school life of children and it has been linked to increased student achievement for all demographic groups. Some findings show it is even more important for the achievement of students of color and students from low-income households (Christianakis, 2011; Dearing, Simpkins, Kreider, & Weiss, 2006; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Trotman, 2001; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017).

Although a single, widely accepted definition of parent involvement is not available, studies show that there are some consistent themes about what constitutes parent involvement. Generally, the literature agrees that parent involvement includes participating in activities at school (Chrispeels, 1996; Christianakis, 2011; Hill & Craft, 2003; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005); communicating regularly with the school (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Christianakis, 2011); and supporting learning at home (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005). Some researchers also discussed ways the schools could support parents to become more effectively involved in the education of their children (Hill & Craft, 2003; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017). Supporting parents in getting involved with schoolwide decision-making was also mentioned (Chrispeels, 1996; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017).

Much of the research on parent involvement comes from the perspective of school personnel considering ways to support parents in becoming involved in ways that the school staff value. Research studies also emphasized ways schools could provide support for parents in

parenting skills and accessing community resources (Chrispeels, 1996). However, these approaches are not the same as building relationships and they leave out the voices of the parents on how they want to interact with their child's school. As a consequence, this view of parent involvement cannot be equated to the establishment of positive parent-teacher relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study focused on identifying the ways African American parents characterize positive relationships with their children's teachers. To address my research question, I focused my review of the literature on characteristics of positive relationships between teachers of African American children and African American parents, specifically looking for studies that explicitly included the perspective of African American parents.

Search Process

I conducted an extensive search using ERIC, EbscoHost, Academic Search, and JSTOR databases, relying on the search terms, "parent-teacher relationship," "parent-teacher partnership," "parent-teacher collaboration," "parent participation," "parent involvement," family-teacher relationship," family-teacher partnership," family-teacher collaboration," family participation," and "family involvement." I also searched for these phrases combined with the following: "African American," "Black", "race", "elementary," and "primary". I narrowed the date range of my searches to 1960-present.

An initial search for "parent-teacher relationship" in peer-reviewed journals from 1960-2018 found 1,447 entries on EbscoHost. When I added "African American", that number dropped to 40 entries. "Parent-teacher collaboration" and "parent-teacher partnership" combined with "African American" only drew three entries each and all three were studies included in the "parent-teacher relationship" search. I reviewed all 40 studies and found six that directly

addressed relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers. The remaining 34 studies focused on a myriad of topics ranging from parent participation to violence in youth. JSTOR provided sixteen entries for "parent-teacher relationship" AND "African American. Of the sixteen entries, only two of were directly related to my topic and had not been included in the EbscoHost search.

Thus, in total, I specifically reviewed, rated, and organized 42 articles by the strength of the connection to the topic of African American parents' relationships with teachers. Of the 42 papers, only eight (seven empirical and one non-empirical) were written from the perspective of African American parents as the study participants. The other 34 papers were either written from the perspective of teachers, included African American parents but did not analyze the data based on racial demographics, focused on parent involvement but not relationships, or was focused on a generic group, like "urban" or "low-income" students. In addition to the articles related to parent-teacher relationships, I also reviewed sixteen books that addressed culturally relevant teaching practices. None of the books were solely devoted to the topic of African American parent-teacher relationships but had relevant sections, examples, or chapters.

Since my focus was on the perspectives of African American parents, I chose to analyze the eight studies that privileged the voices of African American parents. I identified the language used by the parents to characterize positive relationships with their children's teachers. I then grouped the specific terms used by the parents into categories. The racial make-up of the teaching staff was not specifically identified in six of the studies. Myers (2015) shared that the teacher focus group comprised six African American teachers and two white teachers. However, the author did not specify the racial make-up of the teachers who participated in the survey. Rowley, Helaire, and Banerjee (2010) reported that 65% of the teachers were white and 25%

were African American in their survey. Knowing the racial background of the teachers in these two studies provided some background information about the schools connected to the studies. However, all eight of these studies were focused on gathering information about African American parent perspectives and therefore were carefully reviewed.

Characteristics of Positive African American Parent Teacher Relationships

Five themes about characteristics of positive parent-teacher relationships emerged: 1) mutual respect, 2) valuing/honoring parents' opinions, 3) non-judgmental beliefs about parents, 4) warmth, caring and personal connection, and 5) effective communication. I discuss these next.

Mutual Respect

Strong interpersonal relationships are built on a foundation of mutual respect and this is true of African American parent-teacher relationships as well (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Williams & Baber, 2007). Myers (2015) conducted a study involving three communities and three elementary schools in rural South Carolina. Myers interviewed a stratified sample of nine African American families (chosen to represent a range of socio-economic class, education level, etc.), surveyed 86 teachers (racial background was not included in the study), and conducted focus group interviews with eight teachers (six African American and two White) in order to gain their perspectives on parent involvement which lead to better understanding of parent-teacher relationships.

One theme that emerged from both the teachers and the African American parents in Myers' study was "parent involvement as relationships" (p. 445). Both groups identified mutual respect as essential to building relationships. Myers explains the perspective of African American parents about mutual respect this way, "From talking with the parents, it became

obvious that respect was nonnegotiable. When parents felt they were treated respectfully and seen as part of the instructional team with direct impact upon the instructional decisions as they related to their children, these Black parents were more inclined to work with their children's teachers and become involved in ways that were feasible to them" (p. 445).

Additional research supports the importance of mutual respect between teachers of African American students and African American families (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Rowley et al., 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007). Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) surveyed a non-random, self-selected sample of 130 African American parents of school-age children to learn how parents characterize their engagement with their children's teachers and schools. Partnering with the school community, characterized by mutual respect and trust, emerged as an important theme for the parents in this study.

In a study by Rowley, Helaire, and Banerjee (2010), African American mothers were invited to participate in a study focused on perceived teacher discrimination during their own schooling and the impact of this perception on their level of involvement in their children's schools and their relationships with their children's teachers. During interviews and through questionnaires, the 73 African American mothers in the study identified the teacher's respect for the mother as one critical element of positive relationships. A sense of respect encouraged them to work with the teacher, while a sense of disrespect led them to disengage from the school (Rowley et al., 2010).

Relatedly, Cooper (2009) describes the importance of recognizing the ways that African American families show care for their children if schools are to work together with families for the benefit of their children. Cooper argues that educators often dismiss or fail to understand the

ways that African American families show care for their children, leaving families feeling disrespected and de-valued.

Developing positive relationships between African American families and the teachers of their children must begin with respect. Relationships built on mutual respect can lead to opportunities for educators and African American families to work together to improve outcomes for African American students.

Valuing/Honoring Parents' Opinions

Related to mutual respect, African American parents want to be heard by their children's teachers and to know that their opinions and ideas about educating their children are valued (Cooper, 2009; Myers 2015; Williams & Baber, 2007). Finding common ground around the interaction between home and school and expectations for student behavior and academic achievement can be challenging for both parents and teachers when they come from different racial, ethnic, and/or social backgrounds (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Hughes et al., 2005; Iruka, Winn, Kingsley, & Orthodoxou, 2011). Hughes and Kwok (2007) point out, "When parties do not share a common culture, it is more difficult to establish shared understanding and to build trust" (p. 47). Listening to African American parents and inviting them as active participants in their children's education is important for student success (Myers, 2015).

Williams and Baber (2007) used a case study design, which included four African American parents, to generate information about ways to build culturally reciprocal relationships. They concluded that, "A culturally reciprocal relationship is the result of parents and professionals agreeing on what is best for the child as a result of deliberate conversations about values and beliefs, incorporating those values and beliefs into the education program, and being clear about expectations – thereby building a climate of trust, respect, and empowerment"

(p. 9). A culturally reciprocal relationship honors what parents know about the best ways to educate their children and invites parents to partner with their children's teachers (Williams & Baber, 2007).

African American parents' beliefs about whether their opinions and ideas are valued by their children's teachers can be a barrier or an invitation to home-school collaboration (Colbert, 1991; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Diamond and Gomez (2004) explain that when schools do not recognize or value the way African American parents engage in the education of their children, parents can struggle with establishing their ability to be meaningfully involved. They may feel pressure to prove that they have something positive to contribute and feel frustrated if not included as an equal partner in the decision-making for their children (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). However, honoring African American parents' opinions and ideas can lead to stronger relationships (Myers, 2015).

Engaging with schools and teachers can be challenging for some African American parents due to conflicting expectations of parents and school staff (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). A qualitative study by Colbert (1991) examined African American parental perceptions of schools by interviewing 23 African American parents whose children attended schools in a large urban district. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the ways African American parents perceive their involvement in the schools. The study yielded four themes, one of which focused on "parental management of interactions with school personnel" (p. 99). Within this theme, the researchers found that parents often monitor their own behavior with school staff, so they will be positively perceived by staff. They believed this was in the best interest of their children. Colbert also found that those parents who were more

assertive with school staff about what was best for their children also felt a stronger sense of "political control and influence in schools" (p. 100).

School staff need to be willing to invite African American parents to the table as partners in the educational process for their children and be willing to listen to their ideas and opinions about what their children need. This type of collaboration can foster strong relationships that support positive academic outcomes for African American children.

Non-Judgmental Beliefs About Parents

African American parents are aware of the negative racial perceptions and judgments many educators hold about them (Cooper, 2009; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007). The African American parents in Myers' (2015) study expressed the need for teachers to be non-judgmental about them or about their parenting and get to know them personally. Myers shared a situation from one of the African American mothers sharing about when the principal of her child's school made a comment to her that assumed she did not have a job, even though she was employed. In this case, the administrator was White. Another example Myers shared involved a Black teacher who would refuse to drink anything offered her during a home visit to a low-income Black family. The teacher did not realize the subtle message she sent to families by doing this. Myers (2015) explains, "Drelin's response shed light on the fact that she felt she was being respectful of the family by taking the cup she was offered. But more important were the subtle undertones in her comment and the ensuing laughter that, when closely scrutinized, shed light on the fact that she, the well-educated Black teacher, was "too good" to consume anything this family offered her" (p. 452). Since the majority of teacher candidates are educated by white, hegemonic programs, Myers challenges educators of all racial and social

backgrounds to examine their beliefs about poor, Black families and be open to establishing non-judgmental, mutually respectful relationships (Myers, 2015).

Likewise, Colbert's (1991) study found that 50% of the African American parents reported feelings of disempowerment and lack of influence within the schools, based on a lack of relationship with educators. The parents would leave meetings feeling like they had not been heard. Cooper (2009) argues that schools often prefer a "deferential" relationship with parents, as that of a cooperative helper, rather than an educational partner with equal status with the teacher. Cooper points out the negative impact of this perception:

> Consequently, African American parents, particularly those with low incomes or working-class status remain tied to a dichotomy that constructs them as lacking educational presence, values, and care when contrasted with white, middle-class parents who are constructed as being present, helpful, and caring. The taken-for-granted acceptance of this false dichotomy perpetuates bias and fuels exclusionary, if not racist, educational practices. Moreover, it prompts too many educators to construe personal confrontation or lower school-site presence with lower quality parenting – an assumption that has gender implications as well (p. 382).

Positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers require teachers to examine their racial biases and refrain from making negative assumptions about African American parents based on race and social class.

Warmth, Caring, and Personal Connections

Warmth, caring and personal connections contribute to positive parent-teacher relationships (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lewis & Forman, 2002). However, the ability of educators to develop warm, caring relationships with parents can be impacted by differences in

race, ethnicity, language, and social class (Cooper, 2009; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Myers, 2015). Cooper (2009) explains, "Data affirm the ideas that care, trust, and partnering are reciprocal activities influenced by power dynamics, and that parents do not operate with equal access, knowledge, resources, or power in educational systems – a point that should be considered as educators form their expectations for site-based school involvement" (p. 390). African American parents need to feel welcome within the school and a sense of connection with their child's teacher as part of building a positive relationship.

West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, and Behar Horenstein (2010) examined the parenting practices of low-income African American parents whose students were academically successful. The study included five African American mothers who participated in a focus group interview. All of the mothers expressed their belief in the importance of building a relationship with their child's teacher. One mother explained how she meets each of her child's teachers in order to get to know them. She expressed wanting the teachers to know who she was and to invite them to connect with her. Another mother expressed how this connection helps her reach out to the teacher in order to help her child with homework or to get answers to other questions.

Myers (2015) found that African American parents who are welcomed as valued, respected contributors to the education of their children believe that they and their children are important to the teacher and that the teacher cares about the success of their children. Similarly, the African American mothers in a study by Rowley et al. (2010), expressed the importance of the warmth of the teacher and the perceived support for their children, as critical to building a positive relationship. Many of these mothers in the study had felt discriminated against by teachers when they were students themselves and entered the school warily as parents. However, when a teacher shows warmth and caring, African American parents are encouraged to engage

with the teacher which can lead to a positive, productive relationship that supports their children as learners within the classroom.

Effective Communication

Positive African American parent-teacher relationships are characterized by effective communication (Hughes et al., 2005; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). West-Olatunji et el. (2010), found that African American parents identified the importance of frequent and clear communication with their children's teachers as important to developing a positive relationship with the teacher, gaining information to support learning at home and also for the purpose of raising teacher expectations for their children.

African American mothers' comfort in interacting with their child's teacher was a critical aspect of mother-teacher relationship quality in a study by Rowley et al., (2010). Similarly, the African American parents in Myers' (2015) study explain that frequent, negative, deficit-based communication creates mistrust while respectful communication from school supports the relationship and contributes to a sense of partnership. An example from one parent exemplified this situation. The parent shared that she was receiving many negative phone calls regarding her daughter's behavior and was ready to leave the school. However, when she met with the principal and teacher to discuss the situation, a solution was reached, and she felt she and her daughter were both valued.

Demands on the time and resources of families can lead to less opportunity for contact between African American parents and their children's teachers while cultural differences can make contact less comfortable (Stormont et al., 2013). However, the quality and nature of communication between African American parents and their children's teachers is crucial to developing positive relationships (Myers, 2015).

Edwards (1999) suggests that teachers use open-ended parent stories as a way to engage parents in effective communication and build positive relationships. The author writes, "Inviting parents to tell their stories shifts the order of relationship between teachers and parents. Parents become the "more knowledgeable other" about their child especially when it comes to interpreting and describing their child's home environment and the role they play in preparing their child for school" (p. xxiv). This shift in communication roles can be important as a way to build trust and dispel stereotypes between African American parents and teachers, thus encouraging the development of respectful relationships that support African American children in the classroom (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016).

Conclusion and Limitations in the Literature

The literature revealed five themes that demonstrate how African American parents have characterized relationships with their children's teachers. Underlying all of them is the issue of trust. African American parents need to be able to trust their children's teachers, regardless of the teachers' race, to respect their parenting efforts and how they choose to engage with the schools. They need to know that they will be welcomed at the school as a valuable, informed partner in their children's education. They need to be able to trust that teachers will not judge them based on their race and label them as deficient without really knowing them. They need to be treated with caring and warmth and know that their children are getting the support they need to succeed. Finally, they need to trust that communication with the school will be two-way and asset-based.

While these themes provide some insight into African American parent – teacher relationships, these themes emerged from only eight studies that included the perspective of

African American parents (seven empirical and one non-empirical). Table 1 shows a breakdown

of the characteristics of these studies. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) had the largest sample

of African American parents included. However, the authors point out that the sample is

quantitative in nature and does not provide information about why parents responded as they did.

Rowley et al., (2010) studied the data from 126 African American mothers. One limitation to

this study is that the sample was non-random because the mothers included in the study were

invited to participate based on data about them which was provided by teachers (whose racial

backgrounds were not identified by the authors of the study). The other five empirical studies

included qualitative data from a combined total of 59 parents and span 24 years from 1991-2015.

A major limitation to these studies is that none of them focused specifically on the relationships

between African American parents and their children's teachers.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Eight Studies Written from the Perspective of African American Families

Author/s Date	Primary Research Focus	Methods	Sample Population and Size	Limitations of the study for this literature review
Colbert (1991)	African American parental perceptions	Mostly open-ended interviews	23 African American Parents	Relationships were one part of focus
Cooper (2009)	African American parent involvement	Non-empirical	NA	Relationships were one part of focus
Diamond & Gomez (2004)	African American parental perceptions of schools	Semi-structured interviews	18 African American parents	Relationships were one part of focus
Latunde & Clark Louque (2016)	Black parent engagement	Quantitative survey	130 African American parents/guardians	Need to know why parents answered as they did
Myers (2015)	Black families and parental involvement	Combination of surveys, interviews, home visits,	9 parents (interviews, home visits,	Small sample of parents, relationships

		researcher participation in family activities	researcher as participant) 86 teachers (survey) 8 teachers (interview)	were one part of focus
Rowley, Helaire, & Banerjee (2010)	African American mothers' perception of discrimination in own school experience and the effect on current school involvement	Quantitative survey	126 African American mothers 37 teachers	Non-random sample
West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, & Behar-Horenstein (2010)	Parenting practices of low-income African American parents of academically successful 5th graders	Case study, focus group, semi-structured interviews	5 parents (focus group) 2 parents (interview)	Small sample size
Williams & Baber (2007)	African American parent perspective on home/school/community collaboration	Individual semi-structured interviews, open-ended group interviews, document review	4 African American parents	Small sample size

Many other studies about parental interactions with teachers and schools include various

racial and ethnic groups but do not draw conclusions about relationships based on race or

ethnicity (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009; Vickers & Minke, 1995) or do

not include the perspectives of African American parents (Hughes et al., 2005; Hughes & Kwok,

2007; Pepe & Addimando, 2004; Stormont et al., 2013). The majority of studies conducted

about parent interactions with teachers and schools focus on parent involvement and only include

the perspectives of educators (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, Jr., 2006; Christianakis, 2011; Drummond

& Stipek, 2004; Hill & Craft, 2003; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

However, the field of education is dominated by white, middle class individuals. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 81.9% of public school teachers in the United States during the 2011-12 school year were white (https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_2013314_t1s_001.asp). Generalizing the opinions of majority white teachers about parent-teacher relationships is not a racially relevant way to make inferences about relationships between teachers and African American parents.

The importance of hearing the voices of African American parents about their relationships with the teachers of their children cannot be overstated (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). There are significant risks of deficit-based framing of the issues and blaming the victims (Valencia, 1997) when the voices of people from traditionally marginalized groups are not included in research. Williams and Baber (2007) explain, "Without the perceptions, needs, and desires of all stakeholders included in the schooling dialogue, home-school-community relationships will remain untrustworthy, and genuine cultural reciprocity will remain out of reach" (p. 9). Other researchers state that relying on teacher perceptions of interactions between themselves and parents is limiting, and parent voice is needed to better understand relationships between parents and educators (Stormont et al., 2013). Vickers and Minke (1995) point out, "Lastly, future research should also consider whether and how the constructs developed here apply within other cultural contexts" (p. 146). The authors go on to argue that focusing on particular ethnic or cultural groups is important to understanding parent-teacher relationships.

The research on parent engagement with schools has focused on parent involvement rather than relationships, has privileged the opinions of majority white educators, and has mostly excluded the voices of African American parents. Therefore, this lack of empirical studies written from the perspective of African American parents about parent-teacher relationships

represents a significant gap in the research. What is needed is research with an asset-based lens that focuses on African American parent perspectives about positive relationships with their children's teachers. These positive relationships could influence educational outcomes for African American children.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Black feminism provided the conceptual foundation for this study and the lens through which I explored my research question: How are positive parent-teacher relationships characterized by African American parents? The tenets of Black feminism informed the development of the study design, identifying participants for the study, data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of the data.

Black feminist thought rose as a response to the unique position of being both African American and female (Crenshaw, n.d.; Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; Hull & Bell, 2015; Taylor, 2001). Hill Collins (2009) describes the pressure placed on Black women to remain in solidarity with Black men in the struggle for civil rights, even if this loyalty meant ignoring sexism and their needs as women for equality with men. Hill Collins (2009) also argues that feminism tends to be dominated by the interests of White women and remaining in solidarity with White women is expected, even if feminism does not adequately address the disparities for Black women specifically. Understanding this unique position of Black women and the key ideas of Black feminism provides an important lens for understanding the characteristics of positive relationships between African American families and their children's teachers.

Black feminist epistemology includes four major tenets (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009). Hill Collins (2009) explains these four tenets beginning with the distinction drawn between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge implies surface-level knowing, while wisdom

comes from lived experiences, carries great value, and is key to surviving in an oppressive society. Second, dialogue is essential to validating knowledge claims. Dialogue is needed to establish understanding and connectedness, has its foundation in African tradition, and is expected from individuals. Third, the ethic of caring includes three components: 1) emphasis on individual uniqueness; 2) appropriateness of emotions in dialogue; and 3) showing empathy. The ethic of caring provides the basis for why something matters. The final tenet of Black feminism is the ethic of personal accountability. This tenet addresses the importance placed on being able to back up one's opinions with a moral and/or ethical stance. Pushing against ideas to get to the heart of why someone believes as they do is acceptable and expected within Black feminist epistemology (Hill Collins, 2009).

In addition to the four tenets, another important theme emerged from the study of Black feminism: the importance placed on education (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). The significance assigned by African American women to education has been evident since the days of slavery and education continues to be viewed as a crucial factor in racial uplift. Hill Collins (2009) tells us that racial uplift and education became intertwined during slavery and this continued through the 20th century. Education is also seen by Black feminists as a means of liberation and empowerment (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). hooks (1994) shares the story of when this understanding of the power of education came to her:

> That shift from beloved, all-black schools to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination. The rare white teacher who dared to resist, who would not allow racist

biases to determine how we were taught, sustained the belief that learning at its most

powerful could indeed liberate (p. 4).

Davis (1981), following the rise of Jim Crow education, describes the importance of education to the cause of racial justice in this way: "But the beacon of knowledge was not easily extinguished – and this was the guarantee that the fight for land and for political power would unrelentingly go on" (p. 109). Black feminist thinkers do not just value education, they believe it is essential in the fight for racial justice and equity.

Black feminist epistemology provides a crucial foundation for this study about African American parents' perspectives on positive relationships with their children's teachers. As noted in the literature review, few studies about relationships with teachers have been written from the point of view of African American parents. Therefore, I designed this study to represent the voices of African American parents, but not to speak for them. I relied on the tenets of Black feminist epistemology to design the study procedures, to recruit the participants, to create the interview questions, and in the analysis of the data. I describe in detail the research design and methods in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methods of the study. I describe the study design, participants, and procedures for data collection and analysis. I also report on the outcomes of my pilot study and I conclude with a discussion of validity and ethical considerations, including my researcher positionality.

Design

To address my research question, I designed the study to center African American voices. To do so, I relied on a qualitative design. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research in this way:

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes (p. 37).

Marshall and Rossman (2016) further explain that qualitative researchers "… are intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meaning the participants themselves attribute to these interactions" (p. 2). A qualitative approach focuses on how individuals and groups make sense of social interactions through their own lens. Thus, a qualitatively designed study was best suited to answering the research question: How are positive parent-teacher relationships characterized by African American parents?

Several methodological frameworks provide structure to qualitative inquiry. Creswell (2007) identifies ethnography, narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case

study as the qualitative approaches one might take. This study employed grounded theory methodology in combination with Black Feminist epistemology.

Crotty (2015) explains that grounded theory "… seeks to ensure that the theory emerging arises from the data and not from some other source" (p.78). According to Creswell (2007), "Grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain a process" (p. 66). The author also states that, "On the practical side, a theory may be needed to explain how people are experiencing a phenomenon, and the grounded theory developed by the researcher will provide such a general framework" (p. 66). Marshall and Rossman (2016) share that "… theories and data are constructed by the researcher in interaction with and interpretation of the social phenomenon of interest; they are not discovered, as the original ideas of grounded theory suggested" (p. 19). A grounded theory approach is intended to build a theory based on the researcher's interpretation of information gathered from participants.

Strictly following a grounded theory methodology could have led to concerns with validity in this study due to my positionality as a white female school administrator conducting educational research within the African American community. Therefore, I combined grounded theory with the conceptual framework of Black feminism to minimize potential racial bias that could arise from my interpretation of the data. Bourke (2014) explains that awareness of researcher positionality is critical in qualitative research because the researcher becomes the data collection instrument. The author explains that:

> The concept of self as research instrument reflects the likelihood that the researcher's own subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings. Interpretation consists of two related concepts: the ways in which the researcher accounts for the experiences of the subjects and of her or himself, and the

ways in which study participants make meaning of their experiences. Related to

subjectivity is the expression of voice that results in the reporting of research findings.

Through this voice, the researcher leaves her or his own signature on the project,

resulting from using the self as the research instrument and her or his subjectivity (p. 2).

Grounded theory develops a new theory that emerges through the interpretation of the data by

the researcher (Crotty, 2015). However, grounded theory alone could have resulted in my study

design, procedures, analysis, and interpretations being heavily influenced by my position as a

white female school administrator. The goal of this study was to elevate the voices of African

American parents. Therefore, the tenets of Black feminism informed the themes that emerged

from the data. By combining grounded theory with Black feminism, I sought to minimize the

potential influence of my positionality on the study design, understanding that it is not possible

to eliminate it entirely. As such, I relied on Black Feminist Epistemology to guide the data

collection and analysis, yet I was not constrained by the framework. I remained open to themes

that emerged outside of Black Feminist epistemology and understood that not all Black Feminist

epistemology tenets would necessarily emerge from the data.

Participants

This study involved open-ended individual interviews with African American parents

who live within or in the suburbs of a moderately-sized Midwestern city. Creswell (2007)

recommends purposeful sampling in qualitative studies which involves choosing participants the

researcher believes can share information that supports an understanding of the research

problem. The snowball method was the purposeful sampling method employed in this study.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) describe the snowball or chain sampling strategy as starting with

one or two interviews with people familiar with the study and with the phenomenon being

studied, who can then recommend other potential participants. This word-of-mouth strategy for recruitment was deemed to be the most effective method for this study, due to researcher positionality. It was imperative that participants not feel any type of pressure to participate.

Studying within the African American communities requires researcher transparency (D'Silva, et. al., 2016). Many African American parents have had negative school experiences when they were children and in the present time as parents, which could have caused them to view this study with suspicion or distrust. Bourke (2014) highlights the importance of the researcher establishing trust with the participants. The author points out, "In conducting research, it is critical to be mindful of the fact that conducting a study that highlights issues of difference may contribute to the further marginalization of the participants of the study" (p. 3).

I acknowledge the inherent risk that the participants in the study took by agreeing to participate. Given that I am a white researcher who was seeking to conduct a study within the African American community, having an introduction by someone within the African American community who already has a trusting relationship with me or who had already had a positive experience with me during their interview could help alleviate this concern for other African American parents.

This study included thirteen interviews of African American parents who completed an in-person interview, lasting approximately one hour each, with the goal of reaching data saturation. I was open to interviewing two parents from the same household together, however there were no couples that participated. Creswell (2007) describes the importance in grounded theory research in reaching a point of data saturation, where no new information is forthcoming. Saumure and Given (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016) define data saturation as, "The researcher notices when he sees or hears the same patterns repetitively, and senses that little

more can be gained from further data collection since there is saturation of data" (p. 229). When data saturation occurs, the researcher can be reasonably sure that the data gathered represent a complete picture of the phenomenon being studied. At the end of the thirteenth interview, a review of the data indicated data saturation had been reached, as there were no new patterns emerging.

When the interview of a parent identified multiple positive relationships with teachers, I encouraged the participant to speak about each, up to a total of five, beginning with the relationship that stood out the most. Thus, within the thirteen interviews, I collected data on twenty examples of positive teacher relationships.

I limited the criteria for participant selection as follows: 1) individuals who identify as African American; 2) individuals who currently have or have had children in school; and 3) individuals who agree that they have had at least one positive relationship with a teacher of their child/ren. Gathering other demographic data such as income level, education level, among others, would have provided additional lenses through which to understand the dynamics of relationships between teachers and African American parents. However, collecting that demographic information could have sabotaged my ability to establish trust and rapport or could have caused individuals to decline to participate altogether. Therefore, the only information on parent demographics that I gathered included what was voluntarily disclosed during the interviews but was not prompted for during the interviews.

I provide more details on how the interviews unfolded and details on the participants in the Prologue following this chapter. Next, I describe the data collection procedures.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, I first interviewed two different African American parents whom I am familiar with through my personal and professional contacts. I then asked these participants to identify additional parents who may be willing to be interviewed and to have these individuals contact me by phone or email. I provided business cards for participants who completed an interview to give to other potential participants who may have an interest in having their opinions included. The business cards stated the name of this study and provided my contact information. Having potential participants contact me by phone or email first allowed me to screen participants prior to interviewing them to be sure they met the three criteria identified above. I conducted the interviews at a place of the participants choosing.

I collected data through the use of topical or guided interviews focused on African American parent perspectives of positive parent-teacher relationships. Marshall and Rossman (2016) describe the process of engaging in topical or guided interviews this way:

> …the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects the way the participant frames and structures the responses. This method, in fact, is based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)" (p. 150).

This emphasis on the emic perspective privileges the voices of African American parents and is in keeping with Black feminism's tenet of wisdom by encouraging participants to speak their truth based on their lived experiences.

I followed all IRB requirements and protocols. Prior to beginning an interview, I shared the information contained in the informed consent form with the participant orally and in writing,

should avoid offering advice during the interview (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Creswell (2007) recommends that interviewers stick to the questions on the interview protocol to help avoid problems that could arise from either the researcher or the participant making assumptions or about the interview becoming too casual.

However, influenced by Black feminism, I considered the importance of dialogue with the participants. It is likely that I would not have been able to establish rapport by sticking to a research "script". I needed to balance the need to follow the protocol for each interview with allowing enough give and take in the conversation to establish the needed connectedness with the participant. Otherwise I risked coming across to the participant as distant and uncaring or having the interview feel artificial. Both of these risks would have hurt the quality of data gathered.

I developed the Guided Interview Participant Protocol (Appendix B) for the interviews. I developed the protocol using suggestions from Creswell (2007) who recommends about five open ended questions that narrow in on the central question. I structured the Guided Interview Participant Protocol to allow some time for rapport-building before moving from broader ideas into the focus of the study. I included additional questions in the event that a participant was unsure what was meant by the broader question or gave highly concise answers when elaboration would be more beneficial. I pilot tested the protocol which I detail in a later section.

The tenets of Black feminism informed my development of the Guided Interview Participant Protocol. I intentionally started with rapport-building questions, sharing about myself and my study and invited them to share about themselves and their families (tenet of dialogue). I also encouraged them to share thoughts based on their experiences. It was my intention to gather data on positive relationships the participants have had with teachers. If a participant got into a description of a negative relationship, I carefully guided them back to the

positive experience. Trying to prevent the participants from mentioning negative experiences with teachers (or dismissing these experiences) would have likely felt inauthentic to the participants given the individual and institutional racism they have experienced. Instead, I acknowledged the truth in any negative situations they shared and then redirected to how they felt the positive experience was different. Ignoring or appearing to dismiss painful or negative experiences would be counter to the tenets of wisdom and caring. Therefore, the sharing of these experiences needed to be treated with respect.

Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2016) list seven steps to qualitative data analysis: "1) organizing the data, 2) immersion in the data, 3) generating case summaries and possible categories and themes, 4) coding the data, 5) offering interpretations through analytic memos, 6) searching for alternative understandings, and 7) writing the report or other format for presenting the study" (p. 217). These steps informed my data analysis. I implemented the constant comparative method throughout the data analysis in this study. The constant comparative method offers an iterative process that allows for the development of emerging themes as data is collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

With the consent of participants, I audio-recorded each interview to capture the language and ideas of the participants. I also wrote descriptive field notes during and immediately following interviews to capture any pertinent contextual factors. Descriptive field notes can be used to gather facts about the body language and other data not included in a response to a question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Writing became a critical step in immersing myself in the data and to identifying emerging themes. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), "Writing notes, reflective

memos, thoughts, and insights is invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative" (p. 221). I scheduled an hour following each interview to finish writing my field notes. Within the field notes, I considered: 1) my methods and whether I needed to make any adjustments prior to the next interview (methodological memos); 2) how the data was informing my research question (thematic or analytical memos); and 3) how the data was connecting to my literature review and Black feminist epistemology (theoretical memos) (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By engaging in this type of writing, I checked emerging themes in subsequent interviews and built my theory from the emerging data.

Creswell (2007) describes three phases of coding that occur within a grounded theory study: open, axial, and selective. Following the data immersion, I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts and field notes by analyzing each interview question across all participants and across all teachers, focusing on words and phrases that described parent-teacher relationships, summarizing the ideas, and identifying emerging categories. Creswell (2007) identified these emerging categories as open coding. Next, I moved into axial coding of the transcripts and field notes. Axial coding involves identifying a category and the context and conditions that connect to it (Creswell, 2007). In the study I identified the descriptors of each emerging category based on the transcripts and field notes. Next, I engaged in selective coding, the final category of coding according to Creswell (2007). Selective coding involves the generation of theories that connect the categories. I examined the findings from each interview question and considered how the findings addressed my research question. I relied on analytic memos (step 5 from Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to engage with the emerging findings, look for unexpected outcomes, and to compare back to the themes identified in the literature review and within Black

feminist epistemology. I also relied on the analytic memos as a way to push back against my data and examine it for alternative understandings.

Black feminist epistemology informed my identification of emerging themes. As discussed in Chapter 1, Black feminist epistemology includes four tenets: 1) wisdom, coming through lived experiences; 2) dialogue, which is expected and establishes connectedness; 3) caring, which values individual uniqueness, showing emotion in dialogue, and showing empathy; and 4) personal accountability, with the expectation that speakers back up what they say (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009). In addition to these tenets, the value placed on education has also emerged as a critical tenet of Black feminist epistemology (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). Since data is collected through the researcher's actions, I needed to be careful with my interpretations of the data and with the naming of themes so as to limit my outsider bias (Bourke, 2014). The tenets of Black feminist epistemology provided an important lens to support my understanding of the themes emerging from the data and also provided a critical lens through which to push back against my emerging interpretations and to check my own racial bias.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study in December 2018 to test the interview protocol. The participant for the pilot study was an African American woman with five grown children who all graduated from public schools. She felt she had positive relationships with some of her children's teachers. The participant currently works as a Special Education Assistant in an urban school district and is a member of a panel of African American educators that meet regularly with the superintendent of schools for the district. She and I have discussed my study and she had an interest in helping me.

We met face to face for the interview at a mutually agreed upon time and location. I went over the consent form with the participant, explained the process, and she gave consent to audio-record the interview. Following the interview questions, I asked the participant for feedback about my questions and process. Altogether the interview and debrief of the process took approximately one hour. I made some revisions to the protocol based on my reflection and the feedback I received from the participant.

Overall the participant indicated that she enjoyed the interview. She liked talking about her children and their experiences with the schools. She felt she had learned a lot over the years about ways teachers can better work with African American children and their families and the interview gave her an opportunity to share these thoughts. She also stated that she appreciated that I let her do the talking and did not attempt to re-phrase her words. She stated she felt I had truly listened to her. My pilot study goal had been to keep my words to a minimum. However, at times the conversation moved away from positive relationships with teachers and focused on advice for teachers for working with African American children and their families. During the rest of the interviews, if I needed to steer the conversation back to the questions in the protocol, I did so in a respectful way, such as, "How did Teacher A do/show/exemplify that?"

The participant in the pilot study indicated the questions in the protocol were good and suggested some additional questions that occurred to her as we were talking. She suggested that I ask participants about the gender of the teacher and the child because she felt that impacted her children, particularly a male teacher for her son. I opted not to include this suggestion about gender mainly because it is a topic that is outside the scope of this study. In the interview transcripts, I was able to discern the teachers' gender. However, gender did not emerge as an important factor in the analysis.

Next, the participant suggested I ask future participants whether they initiated contact with the teacher first or if the teacher contacted them. She believed some teachers are afraid to contact African American parents and that initiating contact indicates the teacher is willing to work with the families. I chose to add this question in the communication section of the protocol to see if any patterns would emerge in the data around who initiates contact and how this is or is not connected to the parent feeling they have a positive relationship with the teacher.

Finally, the participant suggested that I ask future participants to suggest one thing teachers could do that they believe would help their child the most. Initially, I opted not to include this suggested question at the end of the interviews. I felt this question could lead to the interview veering away from the descriptions of actual positive relationships with teachers and focusing more on what participants wish teachers would have done. However, as each of the parents in the earlier interviews offered their advice, I decided to add the question and include this information. The Black feminist tenet of personal accountability means that speakers are expected to back up their opinions. The parent participants shared their recommendations for teachers who want to establish positive relationships with their children's teachers and then backed up this advice with examples and non-examples from their experiences with teachers.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Qualitative research requires the establishment of trustworthiness and validity (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Traditionally, reliability measures focused on the instrument used and the likelihood of similar results each time it was used (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) explain how reliability differs in qualitative studies. They explain, "…. in qualitative inquiry, where the researcher is the "instrument," calling herself "reliable" isn't enough. Instead, we distinguish the traits that make us personally "credible" and

ensure that our interpretations of the data are "trustworthy" (p. 44). Thus, it is important to identify what validation strategies a study will employ.

To ensure trustworthiness, I relied on member checks. Marshall and Rossman (2016) explain the benefit of member checks to validity. "Through member checks, the participants can correct the researcher's (perhaps not quite accurate) representations of their worlds" (p. 48). This study centered the voices of African American parents about relationships with their children's teachers. To be true to this purpose, I needed to accurately represent the language of the participants and be careful not to impose my own language into the interpretations and identification of themes.

I provided two opportunities for participants to speak back to my work. First, I provided participants a copy of the transcripts of their interviews by mail, email, or in person (based on their preference) for them to examine for accuracy and make any necessary corrections. I contacted them by phone, email, or in person to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and make any requested changes. Second, I shared an executive summary of the research findings in the same way, asking them to check it for accuracy and to share any questions, concerns, or corrections they may have. None of the participants asked for any corrections or had any questions or concerns about the findings.

As part of the follow-up, I met with Thea on a Friday afternoon in early spring to discuss the findings of this study and hear her feedback. We talked through the themes from the literature review and how the findings in this study had agreed with two of the themes from previous research. I shared how this study then added to our understanding of positive African American parent teacher relationships by including the child-level factors that were not included in the previous studies. Thea said, "That's right. The way the teacher treats our kids is

everything. We want to know the teachers care about them and are educating them." Thea emphasized the importance of relationships and a focus on learning. Thea and I then discussed how the findings in the present study are in alignment with the tenets of Black feminist epistemology. At this, Thea smiled broadly at me and shook her finger, saying, "You're getting it." She agreed with my descriptions of the characteristics of positive African American parent-teacher relationships and how they connect to Black feminist epistemology.

Thea then shared how a number of the parent participants had been at her house a couple of weeks after the interviews were completed. She said,

> We were sitting around in the basement, talking, and people were saying how they
> enjoyed talking to you. They liked that you listened to them and it felt good to share their
> stories. We been wanting to tell our story for a long time, especially the fathers. It's hard
> for them to be involved, not because they don't want to but because sometimes the
> mothers don't include them, and the schools don't reach out to them. They [schools]
> don't expect the fathers to be involved.

Thea agreed with me that a parent panel discussion in the fall, including some of the African American fathers from this study, could really help teachers better understand how to establish positive relationships with the African American parents of their students. Thus, detailed descriptions and quotes from participants, that have been verified by the participants as accurate representations of their words and ideas, were critical to establishing the trustworthiness of my findings.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2007) explains that, "Ethical validation means that all research agendas must question their underlying moral assumptions, their political and ethical implications, and the

equitable treatment of diverse voices (p. 205). Marshall and Rossman (2016) add that, "For any inquiry project, ethical research practice is grounded in moral principles of *respect for persons, beneficence, and justice*" (p. 51). Respect for persons includes respecting their privacy, their anonymity, and their right to choose whether to participate. Participants are not merely a means to an end. Beneficence means the study will do no harm to the participants. Justice refers to the consideration of who does and does not benefit from the study and awareness of past societal injustices (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Anchoring this study in the conceptual framework of Black feminism, utilizing member checks, being transparent about my positionality, and including procedural strategies to mitigate the impact of my positionality, were all means to address the ethical need for respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

I obtained consent from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin – Madison prior to any contact with potential participants. I provided participants in advance a written copy of the consent form that included the purpose of the study, steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and a list of any potential risks to them. I reviewed the consent form with participants orally in person and then asked for their signed consent to participate in the study. I selected pseudonyms in place of all names mentioned in the interviews.

Positionality

Research with traditionally marginalized individuals and across all racial lines requires transparency of researcher positionality (D'Silva, et. al., 2016). My interest in studying African American parent-teacher relationships began when I started my first year as a principal in a large, diverse, urban elementary school. As a white female school administrator, my experiences with my school community have led me to consider the critical nature of parent-teacher relationships and the potential impact on student learning when these relationships are positive. I regularly

witness the struggle for mutual understanding and partnership between African American parents and their children's teachers. Given my position as a white school principal, I needed to be sensitive to any potential concerns that participants may have about my study and how the information would be used. I only interviewed African American parents of children who are not currently in my elementary school to help alleviate concerns that there could be some type of negative consequence for their child/ren or families if they share their perspectives honestly and openly.

Gathering accurate information about positive African American parent-teacher relationships required a personal connection with the African American parents. In the following chapter I open my findings with a prologue where I share details about the context for the parent interviews and information about the participants themselves.

CHAPTER 3: PROLOGUE

DATA COLLECTION CONTEXT

When I began planning for the interviews that make up the data set for this study, I envisioned participants being reserved because of my positionality as a white female school administrator. I wanted them to be as comfortable with me as possible to ensure they felt free to speak their minds during the interviews, but I was concerned about my ability to establish a connection that would allow this. I predicted we would likely need to meet in a neutral space, such as a library, community center, or church. I thought they might be put off when they found out that, in addition to a PhD student, I was also a school administrator. I thought some may be wary of my intentions or suspect my motives as I asked personal questions of people that had no reason to trust me. Truth be told, in my own worried imaginings, I pictured an uncomfortable situation, kind of like a blind date, where neither of us knew the other except through a description from a mutual acquaintance. I expected awkward pauses and halting conversation. I imagined myself blundering ahead and making mistakes that would confirm that I was just another white woman thinking I could conduct research in the African American community.

Instead, what I found was a warm, inclusive, and open group of parents who willingly shared with me their stories, hurts, hopes, feelings, and opinions about their experiences with schools and teachers, and how schools could be better for their children.

After I received IRB and PhD committee approval for my study I arranged to meet in person with my pilot study participant, Thea. She had mentioned a couple of people that might be interested in participating in my study. I envisioned giving her some of the business cards I had made with the name of my study and my contact information and then hope one of them

would contact me.   Thea gave me a smile and said, "Oh, honey, we can do better than that." She then graciously offered her home as a place for me to meet with the two parents she mentioned.

On a cold, snowy Wednesday evening in early February, I nervously knocked on Thea's front door, wondering how the parents would react to me. Thea welcomed me inside, introduced me to her family, and settled me into a seat at a large formal dining table near a picture window overlooking the street. She brought me a soda and asked me if I was warm enough. Soon after, the next potential participant arrived at her home and she introduced us. During the rest of the evening, many members of Thea's family and other friends came in and out of the house. While interviewing, I could smell dinner being prepared and hear hushed reminders to a couple of middle school students to get their homework done. Conversation and laughter floated out from the kitchen where the family was having dinner.

The first participant that night started the interview seemingly careful with her words, at one point asking if she could start again. Then, as the conversation flowed, she became more animated and seemed to relax. We found out that we have daughters that are nearly the same age and we commiserated over sending them off to college far from home and how hard that transition can be. At the conclusion of the interview she joined the others in the kitchen and my next participant joined me in the front room.

The second participant that night jumped into the conversation with enthusiasm and appeared to talk freely about her experiences. When we had finished our interview, Thea and the earlier participant joined us in the front room. I was curious how they felt about the interviews and asked what they thought. They both commented about how they enjoyed the interviews and felt like we were just having a conversation. The three of them expressed eagerness to help me find additional people to talk with. Together they generated a list of people they wanted to invite

to meet with me. Some names caused them to giggle, but there were other parents they seemed to feel strongly should talk to me. Hugs were shared, and I headed home feeling like I had two new friends.

Thea invited me back to her home the following Sunday. She had lined up seven people for me to interview, including four men and three women, and had a schedule ready. They were each assigned a time to show up and were promised dinner when they arrived. On Sunday, I was picking up a few more gift cards about 15 minutes before we were scheduled to begin when Thea called me to see where I was, because my first interviewee was ready. When I arrived, she had me set up in my same spot at the large table with a view through the picture window, and we got started. The rest of the day unfolded with almost a party-like atmosphere. People arrived, met Thea in the kitchen, talked to me and ate dinner around her kitchen table. Several of the men joined Thea's husband and son in a recreation room in the lower level to watch basketball before and after speaking with me. Thea checked on me a couple of times to see how close we were to being done because my next person was there. She made sure I had something to drink, that I was warm enough, and at one point she briefly interrupted an interview to bring one of the participants a sample of what she was cooking to see if it was seasoned correctly. All in all, I felt like I had been welcomed into a warm, extended family. At the end of the day, Thea was concerned about the snowy weather and my drive. I was sent home with more hugs and plastic containers filled with macaroni and cheese, greens, and barbeque to share with my husband. I enjoyed my time thoroughly and left with my head and heart full.

Throughout the interview process I was amazed and humbled by Thea's generosity and by the gracious way these individuals opened up to me and shared their successes, their worries, and, sometimes their hurts caused by people in the educational system. Initially I felt like I stood

out like a sore thumb with my blond hair, consent forms, and notebook. However, I quickly learned that this feeling was of my own creation and it did not last past the first few minutes. I decided in the moment to be upfront with everyone about being a school administrator. I did not want them to feel like I was trying to fool them. I thought it could feel demeaning or like a betrayal to realize later I had not told them this fact. I worried they might suspect I did not believe they would figure it out. I decided that if I was asking them to be open with me, I also needed to be transparent with them. Not telling them felt like a poor way to repay their kindness and openness.

Several of the Sunday participants were curious about me and my experiences as a school administrator, specifically about my work with African American families and they asked me questions at the end of their interview. One father questioned my desire to do a positive study and felt like that could be kind of artificial. He felt we needed to look at the problems and address them. I answered their questions truthfully and shared with them my hopes as an educational leader and as a PhD student and listened to their feedback. Their honesty and openness had touched me deeply and I wanted to be just as open and honest. All in all, at the end of these two evening dinner sessions at Thea's home, I had interviewed ten participants.

My next three interview participants chose to meet with me at my elementary school because they all live in the same neighborhood and it was convenient. Amanda is a mother of four and her children no longer attend my elementary school. However, she still helps with our yearly Read Your Heart Out (RYHO) program by doing a special presentation on an aspect of Black history for the students. Last year, she presented on Black Wall Street and this year she focused on the Harlem Renaissance. I had told her about my study after a RYHO planning meeting earlier in February. She was excited about the study and asked if she could be included.

Following an exciting day of Black history presentations, special guest readers, a talent show by the students, and a soul food luncheon that was second to none, we met in my office and she shared her experiences with the schools and teachers. As I drove her home after the interview, she and I talked about the study and how to help teachers better understand how to build connections with African American parents.

I was able to connect with my final two participants through a mutual friend. Ursula's child attends school in a different elementary school in the district. She arrived in my office after working a night shift at the hospital. She declined my offer of coffee or water and settled wearily into a chair. The interview went smoothly but then we talked for almost an hour after I turned off the recorder about issues she and her family regularly face due to racism and other topics which were not related to this study. We kept finding connections and I enjoyed her company very much. Michael met with me one evening after he had worked a full day and had met with someone about a group home for youth that he wants to open in our neighborhood. Michael was eager to share his thoughts with me about positive relationships with teachers and about his family's experiences with the schools. At the end of the interview, he declined my offer of a gift card because he said that was not why he agreed to talk to me. He agreed to talk to me because he felt the information was important. I suggested he take a card to give to one of the young men that he mentors. He sighed, gave me a relaxed smile, and agreed.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were all African American parents with children who are currently or who have been in the K-12 school system, and they agreed that they have had a positive relationship with at least one of their children's teachers. However, other than those characteristics, their backgrounds varied.

Thea, my pilot participant, has four grown children who all graduated from the K-12 public school system. She works as an assistant in an elementary school. Her children live in the same city and her grandchildren now attend school. Thea is passionate about supporting African American children, to ensure they can succeed in school.

LaToya works in the healthcare field and while she was a high school student, gave birth to her oldest daughter. She described how her family helped her to finish high school on time, work, and raise her daughter at the same time. Her daughter is now the first in the family to be attending college and plans to become a nurse practitioner. Her son is a successful high school student and her youngest daughter is in middle school and receives special education support. LaToya believes her involvement with the decision-making for her youngest daughter is critical to her daughter being successful in school.

Monique, a home daycare provider for 25 years, is currently writing a business proposal for her own food truck. She described the complicated process of writing the proposal and projecting revenue with pride and a rueful shake of her head. She smiled broadly as she shared about how much she loves to cook and cater events.

Michelle's family moved to the Midwest from Atlanta, Georgia when her oldest daughter was in high school. She explained that her oldest daughter was being bullied in high school for being smart and Michelle decided to try sending her north to stay with family in hopes that the bullying would stop. After her daughter experienced success in her new school, Michelle and her husband decided to move the family to be with her. Michelle recently opened a daycare center licensed for 75 children after having been a home daycare provider for many years. Prior to daycare, Michelle served as the first female technician in the city and climbed telephone poles

for a living when she was younger. She told me with a smile that I would find her name and picture in city archives.

David grew up in Michigan but left the state due to the lack of jobs and increasing violent crime. David shared his concerns about what he identified as Black on Black crime and feeling like the climate there was kill or be killed. He expressed his concern for his family's safety many times during our interview and his worries that his children could also be victims of police violence and unfair treatment in the judicial system.

Likewise, Dwayne was born in Michigan and left the state for employment opportunities elsewhere. Dwayne's son recently created a rap video which featured music and lyrics his son wrote about a declining community in Michigan. The song speaks out about the income disparity between his side of the bridge, where poverty, violence, and drugs are prevalent and the rich, White side of the bridge. Dwayne showed me the video and spoke with pride about the way his son is taking a stand against the social injustice he witnesses daily.

Keisha spoke with a soft, gentle, yet confident manner as she discussed her daughter and her work as a librarian in the city's public library system. She shared that she is currently earning a master's degree and feels she's been in school herself as long as her daughter has been in school. She smiled as she talked about the students she is able to help at the public library and lamented the fact that so many are missing basic skills now. She spends much of her time helping students with formatting letters and writing resumes.

Joseph shared his experiences raising a teenage son and the pitfalls he believes are awaiting him. He commented, "It's hard to be a Black man, period." He takes pride in having his son work alongside him, helping to maintain an apartment complex. He feels his son is a

hard worker and is learning important skills. Joseph is passionate about helping his son him do well in school so that he can go to the local college and not have to take basic classes.

Onicah arrived for our interview with her one-week old son cradled in her arms. She sent the rest of her family into the kitchen to have dinner as she settled into a seat across from me. She explained that her oldest son has sickle cell anemia and some other complicating factors that cause him to miss a lot of school. Despite this challenge he is a successful high school student who is smart and able to keep up despite his absences. Onicah's daughter is currently in middle school and also a successful student. Onicah feels it is critical to establish relationships with teachers so as to support her children's success at school. She stated that she thrives on communication with school staff.

Isaiah feels strongly in reinforcing to his children their value, despite what society may tell them about who they are or what they are worth. He and his wife have two children in high school and one in middle school. Isaiah is active in the lives of his children and he described the clear expectations he sets for them. He laughed as he said that his wife deals with the school work and that he is more of the enforcer.

Ursula's family immigrated to the United States from Africa when she was very young. She grew up in New York City and moved to the Midwest when she was a teenager. Her experiences in these two places gave her a unique perspective about race in the U. S. Her husband's family came north from Louisiana and she talked about the difference in how they make sense of the racial bias and discrimination they witness daily. Ursula earned a degree from a major university and works as a nurse. She and her husband are raising two sons, with the oldest being in kindergarten.

Amanda adopted her youngest four children after raising her oldest daughter. All of her younger children were born with various levels of drug dependency and fetal alcohol syndrome. Amanda has poured her time and energy into learning about her children's needs and advocating for them with the schools. Amanda's care for children also extends to any young person she sees who has a need. When a local community planned to close their Boys and Girls Club due to lack of funding, she spoke out at various meetings and to the media about the devastating effects this could have on African American children who rely on the Club.

Michael works hard to be involved in the school life of his children. He and his wife are raising four children, with the oldest in high school and the three youngest in elementary school. In addition to his professional position at a local healthcare system, he is also working on opening a group home in his neighborhood for youth who have had judicial contact. Following the interview, we talked about the challenges and barriers he is facing in this endeavor and the importance of a home like this for young people who need a place to live while getting their lives back on track. His passion for helping struggling youth is inspiring.

The number of children the participants each have ranged from one to fifteen. The ages of their children ranged from one week to young adults who graduated from college and are working. Two of the participants shared that they have adopted children with special needs after their own biological children had grown. All but one of the participants indicated they have had at least one child who has experienced struggles in school with learning or behavior, or due to a health-related need. Five shared that at least one of their children has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and receives additional help through special education services.

The teachers who were described by the participants also varied. The twelve participants described positive relationships with twenty teachers in total. Thirteen teachers were from

elementary schools, four were from middle schools, two were from high schools, and the school level was not disclosed for one teacher. All of the elementary teachers were from 4K through third grade. Altogether, fifteen of the teachers described were classroom teachers, three were school counselors, one was a physical education teacher, and one was an assistant principal. The race of the teacher was identified for seventeen of the teachers. Fourteen teachers were identified by the participants as white, two were identified by the participants as Black, and one was identified by a participant as Latina. When asked, none of the participants said they minded sharing the race of the teachers.

I began the interviews by inviting the participants to tell a little about themselves and their families, without elaborating on what should be included. Thus, the participants shared as much or as little as they chose about their personal lives. They were then asked to share about their general experiences with the K-12 schools as parents as a context for their positive relationships with teachers. I share the findings about their school experiences in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' GENERAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES WITH THEIR CHILDREN

The thirteen African American parent participants shared information about their general experiences with schools as parents. They described schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, from school districts in two states. Eight of the parents still have children in the K-12 school system, while the other five parents have adult children who are no longer in the K-12 school system. They described both positive and negative aspects of their experiences with the schools. The experiences with schools of these African American parents clustered around four themes: 1) racial discrimination in the schools; 2) parent interaction with teachers; 3) importance of high-quality instruction; and 4) importance of relationships.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN SCHOOLS

The African American parents described a variety of ways they and their children have experienced racial discrimination in the schools. The parents characterized racial discrimination in the school context as: 1) feeling they and/or their children were disregarded by teachers, and 2) teachers making negative racial assumptions about them and/or their children.

"And [they] never asked who I was." (Thea)

Feeling unimportant, disregarded, or not included was a common experience for several of the African American parents in this study when they discussed their general experiences with K-12 schools. The parents shared examples of times that: a) they felt marginalized as parents, and b) they felt their children were marginalized.

Thea began by sharing a story about a meeting she went to at the high school about her son and the marginalization she experienced as a parent. She related:

I had a lot of discrimination stuff like, … I even went to the point where I went to a

family meeting and they was looking for his mother and I was sitting there the whole

entire time (smiling) and they didn't realize that I was his mother, they thought I was just

a teacher. Because they thought he was Hispanic. ... They just sit there and said they was

waiting for [Derrion's] mother to appear. And I had to look at them and say, "I am his

mother." And that told me right there that they need to take more interest in who the

parents are and more initiative to know and to know what kid belongs to who.

Thea felt she was treated as someone who was unimportant and further explained that teachers

should, "…stop thinking that the parents are inferior..." She made her way all the way to the

meeting with no one taking the time to introduce themselves to her and this frustrated her.

Monique shared her thoughts that many teachers have a disregard for parents. She

explained: "I've run into a lot of problems where, because the teacher was the teacher, the

teacher thinks they're more knowledgeable than the parent, as far as, when the child is involved."

This made no sense to her. Monique then shared this story:

There was one instance where I just became extremely livid … [The teacher] gave her

[Monique's daughter] some extra credit to complete because she hadn't finished her

assignment and if she didn't complete the extra credit, she was unable to go on the field

trip … at the last minute she finally completed the assignment, but she missed the bus.

So, I drove her to the school. … and she came back outside in tears and I said what's

wrong? … He said that my assignment had to be in at 7:25. It's 7:32. So, I can't go.

And when I went into the school, I was really nice and trying to explain to him, like

listen, you know, I already told you…. She completed the assignment and she's been

struggling and had a challenge in this class as it is. At least she completed the

assignment. Can't you give her some type of recognition for at least completing this assignment? This is something she's really not used to doing. But it's definitely complete and because it's like, what, four minutes late? No. She can't go. Like I say, in that aspect, you know the teachers they feel that they are more knowledgeable, they know more than you know about your kid. Now, cause if I was any other parent, I would have told my daughter, to hell with it, don't worry about the field trip. Let's go. But I was just adamantly angry. Here you have a child who is already struggling in this class. She really doesn't get it, well, she gets it in her own way. You're not understanding her way. I understand her way. But you don't, and I'm trying to help and explain her way to you and you have blinders on and you don't want to hear it because you're the teacher and your way is your way. This is my class. This is how I conduct my class, so I don't care what your opinion is. I don't care what you do at home. I don't care how you teach your child. This is how I teach at school. So, that's the things I wish that I could change. Cause having four adult children, well now they're adults, coming through and I've had that situation pretty much with all of mine.

Monique felt frustrated in trying to understand why the teacher seemed so resistant to working with her to help her daughter in his class. Her ideas and thoughts seemed to be disregarded by the teacher.

Michelle also shared about how she handled a situation with a teacher where she felt disregarded. She related:

Teachers when they come to you and when they talk to me, they don't know that I'm educated also. When they look at me they don't see an educator. So, when they're talking to me, like this one Spanish teacher at the school where my son goes. When he first met

me, I wasn't well-dressed, you know, professional, just dressed like, casual. You know

what I'm saying? And he prejudged me, and he got his feelings hurt. But I was very

professional about it because everywhere I go, I represent my business. So, I'm very

professional about it. But I can dress you down and still be very professional about what

I'm saying.

Being an educator herself, Michelle felt confident in challenging the teacher when she felt he was marginalizing her.

In addition to situations where school staff engaged in behaviors that were barriers to the establishment of connections with parents, Michael shared his experience where school staff never made the attempt to establish a connection with him or his family. Michael described a type of marginalization that was more exclusionary in one of the school districts his children attended. He shared:

They were very standoffish. I didn't feel included. My kids didn't feel included within the

school. As much as I try to impose myself, I still just kind of got that pushed off feeling

and it was kind of a happy issue when we left because I for one personally wasn't a fan of

the school district or the teachers that we had encountered at the time.

Michael further explained about his family's experience in another school.

And to be honest I'm not sure who the principal was at the time, but we didn't really have

a good connection with the teachers or the staff. It was more of a transactional

relationship. We dropped her off and picked her up. We dropped her off and picked her

up. She's always been a pretty decent student. So, grades were never an issue. She's

never been a problem child. So, she pretty much skated under the radar of most

teachers…

This exclusion that he felt at the school impeded his ability to connect with the teacher for the benefit of his children.

Michael's family is now in a school district where he feels welcome. He stated, "… it's 180 degrees different, at least in my opinion, so far to this point." Michael further explained his concern about the marginalization of African American children. He shared:

> So, I feel like a lot of the teachers need to take some of their bias, and put it, maybe not completely out of their mind, but just a few more steps back and realize that how they feel about the way that they've interacted with this child's mother or father or anybody in this child's life does not define who this child is… and that they have, they have the power to, to show that they support, respect, and want the best for that child.

He felt children were particularly susceptible to being disregarded or marginalized due to the actions of their parents and how the teachers perceived them.

"What I had to make them understand is, I wasn't a typical black mother…" (Michelle)

Not only did the African American parents regularly feel disregarded by school staff, they also felt they were subjected to a number of negative racial assumptions. These assumptions were made by teachers about the parents and the children.

Ursula provided an example of the hurt caused by teachers' assumptions about parents. In this situation, Ursula and her husband were attending a parent-teacher conference. She shared:

> So, we had our first parent teacher meeting you know, kind of like when it's not the grades that come out but it's more of getting a sense of, oh, this is the kind of child that you have. This is the areas of strength and weakness. So, one of the things she noticed was, Oh, yeah, [Charles] has a mom and a dad. So that was, you know, she made that

observation. So that was fine. So, we both came to the meeting but we both left feeling

very small.

She went on to explain how this interaction and others like it impacted her and her husband, "So,

it was very unnerving. And my husband and I, we felt judged and because we felt judged, I don't

think my husband came back." Ursula felt it was both interesting and uncomfortable that the

teacher felt the need to comment that Ursula's son had both parents.

Michelle expressed her concern that teachers make the mistake of prejudging parents.

She explained:

So, when you come to them and you talk to them, don't talk to these parents like idiots.

Don't talk to this Black woman because her braids are going all kinds of ways like this.

That may be just the way she wears her hair. But if you're, if you listen to her she may

have a doctorate. Prejudgment. These teachers prejudge, preconceive parents and

students. And as a minority I know this for a fact because I got through it.

For Michelle, the prejudgment of teachers was a significant barrier to establishing positive

relationships with African American parents.

Thea felt that the relationship she established with the teachers helped address the

negative racial assumptions they may have made. She shared:

I worked very close with them, so we would have a good relationship. And with that

relationship that I built with the teachers, they understood that I wasn't that type of

mother that was going to sit back and let my children do anything.

She wanted teachers to understand that, "A lot of minority parents care about their children…".

She felt this was important to developing the ability to work together for the child and to avoid

the stereotype that African American parents do not care what their children do at school.

In addition to the negative racial assumptions made about parents, several parents shared experiences where the teachers expressed their negative racial assumptions about African American children. Ursula shared a situation that was alarming to her during her son's parent-teacher conference when he was in 4K. She related:

> He reads at like a 5th grade level, but she said that he doesn't comprehend, and that she's concerned. And her word choice was the perception of him being perceived as a delinquent if he doesn't comprehend and I'm thinking to myself, he's only four! Does a 4-year-old comprehend what they read? Or I'm still amazed at the fact that my son can read any word. And he has great phonics, like, so I didn't feel like she was celebrating… what he could do inasmuch as she was expressing concern. She even recommended summer school because she said the reading is not the issue. And then she's saying he's like real fidgety. Most of the kids in 4K are fidgety.

Ursula felt the teacher was making negative racial assumptions that her son would be seen as a delinquent and that he had a behavior issue, while dismissing the fact that he was reading.

The negative racial assumptions made about the behavior of their children also was discussed by the African American parents. Thea shared her concern that teachers assume an African American child is a threat when their behavior is not what is expected. She explained:

> He had a behavior problem and the way I corrected the behavior problem, the school did help a little bit, but I had to go in and show the teachers that you don't be scared of him, because he's not running the school. And don't run from him. I had to come up with a solution…

Monique shared a similar experience of having to show a teacher how to handle her son. She explained that he was able to get engaged in learning, "…once he realized he could not

overpower her, or she wasn't afraid of him, or you know, he couldn't just buffalo her…". Up to that point, Monique felt the teacher was allowing her son to disengage because she was afraid to be stern with him. Monique explained, "Sometimes with head strong children your bark has to be worse than your bite. You know, you can't just say, oh you know, [Johnny] please don't do that. Please knock it off, or that's not… No! Look, knock it off!" She felt the teacher was too gentle and this approach was not successful for her son.

The African American parents readily shared stories from their experiences as parents within the schools. They explained how they and their children had been marginalized by a variety of words and actions that made them feel unimportant, disregarded, or excluded. They shared many negative racial assumptions made about them and their children and how they made sense of them.

<center>**Parent interaction with teachers**</center>

In addition to sharing about the racial discrimination they and their children experienced in the schools, the African American parents in this study also discussed the ways they interact with the teachers of their children. Two themes emerged from the data involving proactive and reactive interactions: 1) parents want to partner with teachers, and 2) parents will intervene to protect their children if they feel it is necessary.

"I said, listen, this is what I have to do with him." (**Monique**)

Seven of the parents shared about ways they have partnered with the teachers or ways they would like to partner with the teachers. This parent-teacher partnership included: a) working specifically with a teacher to support their child, and b) African American parents working with the school or larger educational system to support students.

Monique shared how a partnership with the teacher for her son began. Monique knew he was struggling, and she explained, "…she [the teacher] sat down and just kind of asked me, how can we make this work? What do you do at home? Because he doesn't listen. He runs out of the classroom. He does this. He does that." Monique was not offended by this but wanted to help. She shared how it worked out:

In the schools, they can't do what I do at home, so it was just a little helpful tool for her. Like, okay, if he is this out of control then this is what you can do, and he will knock it off. He caught right with it like, okay, I don't want to do that. So, we didn't have any problems.

Monique appreciated that the teacher asked for help in working with her son.

Thea expressed that she felt she needed to go to the school in order to understand her children's experiences. She stated, "Again, I had to go up to the school and really see what's going on." Thea shared that it is important for the teachers to work with the families when a child struggles in school. She explained:

I think that teachers need to learn, when you have a child that don't know what they're doing you need to get with the family and work with the family instead of pushing the child to the side and having them wait until they [the teacher] decide that they're going to go to them.

Only by going to the school and checking in on the classroom did she realize how things were going for her daughter. Once she knew what was happening, she reached out to the teacher to help change the situation.

Other parents discussed ways that they connected with teachers to support their children. Dwayne shared, "So, what I did, was again, was that I made my presence in the school more…".

This helped his son stay on track behaviorally. Keisha explained how she sought out the teacher when there was a behavior issue, "I want to go have an understanding. If the teacher's telling me you cutting up in school I got to go see why." Keisha shared that her daughter was not always happy with her approach:

> And I think my daughter didn't like that. She wanted me to be a cut-up mom that I wasn't. … Like something's going on. I was the mom, let's get a reason and an understanding. So that level helped her have you know …. I don't know where she got that from because that's not me, not the cuss-out type of parent.

Both Dwayne and Keisha felt that their partnership with the teachers addressed the behavior concern, so their children could be successful.

Two of the African American fathers in the study shared their ideas about ways that parents and educators could form a partnership at a systems level. Dwayne explained his idea:

> I don't necessarily think, I mean schools are schools, and it's like they have their mission statements or whatever, but speaking of that, not to get too sidetracked, but even a mission statement like, the parents should know what is the school's mission. What do the schools really aim to do? You know what I mean? Understanding that and being able to see those particular values that's in the mission statement of the school being instilled in the child and these are values that the parents actually believe in themselves.

Dwayne saw an opportunity for African American parents to be in partnership with school leadership in a way that promoted unity around shared values.

Michael also shared a bigger picture idea about partnership between parents, teachers, school systems, and other agencies. He shared:

Whether it be collaboration and communication with parents and teachers, the teachers

and the other teachers as kids grow older, the school district as a whole, and if these kids

do get into judicial trouble, the judicial system. Just so that every avenue, every adult-

governed body that these kids have to be a part of doesn't take that choice or that moment

or that, that one moment in time that, that kid had, a great moment or a bad moment, and

use that to judge them as a whole.

To Michael, every adult has a responsibility for helping to support the children in a community

and he envisioned a unified system of support to include parents, schools, and other

governmental agencies.

"I've heard some bad things about the teachers and that's when I come to play…" (LaToya)

While the African American parents described many of the ways they seek to partner

with teachers, they also discussed times when they had to intervene with a teacher on their

child's behalf. They felt they needed to intervene when: a) they felt their child was being treated

unfairly, b) they felt there was a threat to their child, or c) they needed to advocate for their child

to get what they needed.

Monique explained the need she felt to defend her daughter when she was being treated

unfairly by a teacher. She shared:

I can't even remember exactly what the class entailed but I know it had to do with a lot of

acting and a lot of singing and she loves poetry. He [the teacher] was just like, no. He

wasn't trying to listen to me and I was trying to explain to him that she loves poetry,

she's involved in Spoken Word. She's a very good public speaker. She's not afraid or

shy to vocalize or anything that's going on, so is there some other part of the assignment

that she can do? Not saying that she won't complete this but is there some other type of

way that she could interpret a lot of this stuff? No. No. And me and him went head to

toe, head to toe where a lot of programs and a lot of field trips that she was supposed to

go on, he wouldn't allow her to go.

Monique felt like the relationship was extremely strained with the teacher and this caused him to

be unwilling to work with her, to her daughter's detriment.

Keisha felt the need to intervene for her daughter when she felt a teacher was being unfair

in wanting to retain her. She shared, "…so she wanted me to hold [my daughter] back and I

didn't because it was not academically necessary to hold her back." Keisha shared that she did

not allow the teacher to hold her daughter back and her daughter continued to be successful in

school.

Michelle discussed that she's worked with a lot of teachers, having raised her own

children to adulthood and now raising an adopted son. She felt a need to intervene when she

perceived there was a threat to her child. She related, "I've dealt with many different types of

teachers, and different races. I've noticed that I've never really had problems with the teachers

until I had a child that had a problem." Michelle further explained that, despite not going to the

school due to a discipline issue, she, "…had to go to school because my child was being

disrespected and because my child felt that they were being picked on or left out and it was a

particular teacher that was causing my child that pain." Michelle went on to share that her son's

teachers felt he was not able to learn to read. She explained:

> I raised a child that had a reading problem, had a learning disability that they told me that
>
> what he was going to have this or that done or he was never going to be able to live on
>
> his own and I found a way to teach my son and I taught him in song, because he could
>
> memorize a song on the radio, but he could not read it with a book. So, I learned that his

mind was wired differently. … But I couldn't be there all the time, so I started buying books, you know what I'm saying, on tape. So that he would be able to read. That's how I taught my son to read. Every child can be reached at some kind of way.

As an educator herself, Michelle felt that her son could indeed learn to read. She was concerned that the teacher had no expectation that he would be able to learn, and Michelle wanted to find a way to reach him.

The experience of racial discrimination and negative racial assumptions that Ursula's son had in 4K made her wary of the schools and the teachers. She shared, "And I told him if he ever needs me for anything, call me. I will come like the Kool-Aid Man. I'll just show up." If her son ever felt threatened at school, Ursula wanted him to know that she would be there to intervene for him.

Onicah shared about a situation that she perceived as a threat to her son. The response of the school staff caused her to lose trust and consider removing her son from the school. She related:

…if parents are being reasonable especially after the fact, the schools should be willing to acknowledge a breakdown in their system too without fear of retribution or whatever. Like I wasn't out to be like I'm taking your job or I'm suing you guys or whatever, you know. But having that if they would have been more open and honest and saying, hey we made a mistake and we're going to do this to fix this mistake, that would have made me a lot more comfortable. … So, I guess being able to acknowledge that if the school is doing something that is not helpful to the situation or if they can't acknowledge that there's something wrong going on, then that is not going to encourage parents to be a part of, you know, their child's schooling. And I was like this close from pulling him from that

school, you know, because it was, it was that bad, you know? But I guess I had made such a spectacle of myself that day that everybody pretty much knew the school was in the wrong. But, cause I was loud. Oh yeah. I still can't believe it. It was like an out of body experience. Seriously. I've never been that upset in my life. I mean where you're thinking like I have already watched this kid flat line and he's had all these seizures like you're thinking like now he's just, poof!, gone, you know like that is the scariest thing in the world and you're trusting these people to take care of your child…

In this case, Onicah felt the school staff refused to acknowledge their mistake and this damaged her relationship with them. She felt the response of the staff was a threat to her child's safety.

In addition to collaborating with teachers and intervening when there was a perceived threat to their children, parents also interacted with school staff when they felt they needed to advocate for their children to get what they needed to be successful. When her oldest daughter started school, Amanda realized she was going to have to advocate for her child. She explained:

[Adrianna] was my first kid that came here, and she was in Ms. D's class. And then I had to learn that [Adrianna] had learning and educational problems. And I had to seek help to figure out how to handle that. [Adrianna] was born with alcohol fetal syndrome. So, I had to advocate strong and hard because there was some sensory areas in her brain area that was messed up. So, she looked like a normal kid. But her behavior wasn't going to be normal like the other kids. Not to mention being separated from me for the first time starting school, the behavior, and mom's leaving me, you know. So, the anxiety to that.

Amanda felt the need to advocate for her daughter with the school and teacher because she believed the staff would expect her daughter to behave like a typically developing child, despite her disability.

The African American parents in this study interacted with their children's teachers in both proactive and reactive ways. Parents expressed a desire to collaborate with the teachers in order to support their children and they shared their ideas about ways they could collaborate with school leadership to improve the learning environment for all children. The parents also made clear that they were willing to intervene with teachers if their children were not being treated fairly, if they perceived a threat to their children, or to advocate for their children.

IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION

The parents shared their experiences with racial discrimination and ways they interact with school staff on behalf of their children as characteristics of their overall experiences with schools as parents. The parents also emphasized the importance they place on their children having access to high quality instruction. High quality instruction as identified by the African American parents included: 1) high expectations for learning and behavior, 2) high quality instructional programs.

"It felt to me like you're pushing kids through school." **(Keisha)**

The African American parents in this study expressed concern that African American children were subjected to lower expectations for learning and behavior when: a) the children came to school without the expected skills, b) when children's behavior presented challenges for school staff, and c) through a lack of rigorous classes. Ursula described how she explained her expectations for the role each of them would play in her son's learning. Ursula shared:

So, when I came I introduced myself and I told her [the teacher] just in the same manner, I said your job is not to save my kids. That's my job. Your job is to teach. And if there's anything that I can do to supplement, please let me know because I wanted to just take her off the hook. You don't have to do any of those things.

She felt this conversation would help them get on the same page about the responsibilities each of them held in the learning process. Ursula wanted the teacher to focus on teaching her son.

Several parents shared that they felt teachers had neglected their responsibilities to teach African American children when the students did not start at the same academic level as other students. Due to lower expectations, teachers then let the children go through school with minimal effort and minimal learning. Thea explained:

> Her teacher, because she [Thea's daughter] didn't know a lot of the things, and being honest that like, I had just started, I had just moved to [town] when she was starting her kindergarten year and because she didn't know how to write her name at the time and she know some of her alphabet and she started reading I think it was like in the middle of her kindergarten year because I didn't realize that the teacher was pushing her to the side until I happened to pop up to the school and she was sitting to the side and all the other kids were working and working around her [the teacher]. And I walked in and I said. "Why is she sitting over there?" and the teacher said because she's waiting on her (the teacher) to come and help her. Meanwhile she had all the other kids around her, working with all the other kids.

In Thea's daughter's case, Thea felt her daughter was neglected by the teacher because she did not come to school with all of the expected skills.

Several parents made a connection between a child's behavior and lowered expectations for learning by the teachers. Keisha shared about her nephew's experience. He was experiencing homelessness with his mother and had some behavioral issues in school. Keisha related:

…but what I didn't like they did with him, was when he did cut up in school, instead of going back to the center for the learning, they took them outside and play football with him. So instead of helping him get through that, OK this is not what you going to do in school, "Oh, calm down, calm down, let's go outside and throw the football until you calm down. Now that will go on for a couple hours, you know what I mean? Because he couldn't calm down. Right now, today, he's passionate about football. And I don't think he graduated school.

When her nephew struggled, Keisha explained that the school staff removed him from the learning environment for extended periods of time.

Monique also felt that teachers would lower their expectations when her child had behavioral issues in the classroom. She shared:

She [the teacher] would give him when he was clowning or acting ugly in the class, she would give him that photo and have him go over to the quiet area which was a pillow and a blanket, and some soft stuff and he would lay there with the picture for hours. And it was like, no, he has no learning time. He's not a baby. This is something that he shouldn't be doing. None of the other kids are laying down in the corner. So, all the other kids are working on their shapes and numbers, and letters but he has a picture of me and my husband and he's laying down sleeping. No! That's not productive. We're not doing that no more.

She was frustrated to learn that this was how her son was spending his days when he struggled with behavior in the classroom.

Michael felt concern about lower expectations when he volunteered at his daughter's school and noticed a student showing some inappropriate behavior. Michael explained:

I still remember this kid to this day. He was running around smacking girls on the butts and I grabbed him by the arm and said, Hey, we're not doing the Smack Ass Fridays. Like, you're a student. You're in school. That's not what we're here for and he kind of like, you're not my dad. You don't tell me what to do. I know I'm not your dad, but at the same time I'm a man. You going to be a man. Somebody has to tell you what's right and what's wrong. And I think I used a few choice words when I said that. And then as he walked away one of the teachers was standing right behind, that I didn't notice, and I was like, oh, crap. I'm getting in trouble talking to this kid like this. And oddly enough she didn't say anything. She just said, thank you for doing that. You know, he's a handful and you know a lot of us don't even really address his issues because he just keeps going. And for me I was like, that's kind of a miss right there because you have to keep reinforcing that what you're doing is wrong.

He was concerned that the teacher seemed to have given up on correcting this child's behavior.

In addition to feeling like teachers lowered their expectations when African American students struggled with learning or behavior, David felt the classes were not rigorous enough. When asked what he felt needed to improve in the schools, David explained teachers should be, "Teaching the kids instead of putting them in fluff off everything." He went on to share, "You've got to find out what the solution is, cause half these ain't got no guide. They don't have no guidance. They're growing up on their own."

Joseph shared a similar opinion. He stated, "I think they need to have more classes instead of, you know, these study halls and different things like that." The African American parents in this study expressed their desire for teachers to hold their children to high expectations both for learning and for behavior.

"…if a teacher isn't strong it makes the child weak also." **(Thea)**

Not only did the parents want the teacher to hold high expectations for their children, they also wanted to feel confident that: a) the instructional materials were of high quality, and b) the teacher was highly capable. They believed their children should have access to rigorous instruction and strong teachers.

Michelle shared her frustration with what she viewed as lack of curriculum which hurt her child's learning. She related:

> I'm very structured and structure is something that these teachers are not teaching my child. Instruction. My son come home and he's here, he's there, he's here, he's there. What do you guys do then we do this … What kind of curriculum are we having in these classes? What are these teachers, are they spending time on their curriculums anymore? I don't know maybe it's freelance today.

As a daycare provider she was aware of the expectations for her programs by the licensing board. She explained, "I don't know how the schools do it, but I know how hard they are on us with licensing." She felt that instruction was too loose in her son's school.

As a public librarian, Keisha felt the schools had abdicated some of the responsibility for providing what she believed was a basic education for the students. Keisha pointed out:

> Kids get out of school and can't even read a letter. It's ridiculous what we do at the library to help these young kids learn how to do basic curriculum that they should've learned in high school. [The local college] has become the new high school. What [the local college] is teaching is basic high school stuff. You know setting up your page for a letter. Not even writing, just setting it up on the computer: name, teacher, basic stuff, crazy basic that I learned in high school. So [the local college] to me feels like the new high

school. Yeah, the basic curriculum they should have gotten. So now you're charging them

for an education, right, that they should have gotten.

Keisha argued that the schools are simply passing children through rather than ensuring they are learning.

Thea expressed her strong belief in the importance of highly capable teachers. She stated, "What I think work[ed] is when they were able to get a strong teacher." She further explained that the best situation for children is when they have both a strong teacher and strong curriculum materials. She shared:

"But you have to have a strong teacher to teach it [reading program] because if you, and

it has to be someone that can really deal with the children. And if you find someone

really strong and really know what they're doing with it [reading program], our kids

learn.

Thea felt that the program she described had been beneficial to her daughter who struggled with reading.

LaToya had a similar feeling about a program her daughter was able to access in high school that LaToya felt helped prepare her daughter for college. She shared:

She [the counselor] made sure she got her [LaToya's daughter], she was also in [a

preparation] program which really helped her also. Yeah. That also helped her, made

sure she was on track and she knew how to take notes when she left from school and she

knew how to study correctly.

LaToya said that this program, in addition to strong school counselors were a huge help for her in getting her first child to college.

The open classroom concept combined with grade level looping was a practice used by the elementary school that Monique's children attended. Monique identified this combined approach as important to her children's success. She explained:

> The open classroom, I loved it because it gave my kids, like I said, all of my kids have gone through it, from my 28-year-old to my 19-year-old. It gave them an opportunity to, what's the word I'm looking for? It was more, easier on them detaching from me and socially being able to be more comfortable with school and their peer group and their teacher because in the beginning I think in Kindergarten they would enter into the program at [Lyle School] and whatever the group of kids they were in, they would follow that group of kids and that teacher for two years. And then that group of kids would leave that teacher and they would go to another teacher for second and third grade. And then that entire group of kids would have that teacher for two years and then that whole group would transfer over to 4th and 5th. So, the group of kids they started with in Kindergarten, they would be with that group of kids all the way to the 5th grade. And they would only have 3 teachers.

The opportunity for her children to really connect with the teachers supported her children as they began their school careers.

Michael shared about a teacher-designed grade level block at the school his children attend that he felt is innovative and supportive of children. He related:

> One thing I like about the current school my kids are at, and I think… I've never seen it before. It's a novel idea. I don't necessarily know the ins and outs of the workings of the fourth-grade block here. I mean I think that is… it seems like it keeps the kids in motion. And not just sitting all day and getting squirrely. It mixes them up between classrooms,

so they got a wider peer group. And ultimately, I feel like what they're doing now is preparing them for their later years once they get to middle school and high school. They're getting a view of what things will look like when you have to move around throughout the day but in a more controlled… I would say safe environment for them because they feel like they're the oldest kids in the school now. So, they feel like they've made it. So now that they get the chance to start to move around a little bit and feel themselves, they won't be as intimidated when they go to [middle school] or hopefully to high school.

Michael believed that the teachers are preparing the children for a successful transition to the middle school and this is something he appreciated.

The African American parents in the study shared the importance they place on their children having access to strong teachers who hold high expectations for their children, strong instruction, and instructional arrangements that support these efforts. They expressed the conviction that schools need to provide a high-quality education despite the children's needs when they come to school.

IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING REALTIONSHIPS WITH THE CHILDREN

The African American parents in this study shared their school experiences with racial discrimination, the ways they interact with school staff, and the importance of high-quality instruction for their children. The parents also expressed the importance of relationships to the success of their children. They felt it was critical for the teacher to purposively develop a relationship with the children based on respect and caring.

"…try to draw more of a connection to who the child is…" **(Michael)**

The African American parents shared the importance of their children knowing that they matter to the adults who take care of them.   As Michael explained:

… a lot of children go into many situations feeling like nobody cares about them. But consistency with showing the kid they do matter and just valuing and appreciating some of the situations they're going through can help them be vulnerable, to just being open. And also, I think the teachers should just be more vulnerable to be them… their true selves, instead of making it be like, "I'm the adult, you're the child. This is what it is." We all got quirks and issues and small things that even children can relate to, just being open to them, and just be like, "Hey, I see you don't like tying your shoes. I didn't start tying my shoes till I was 12." Or something like, just little things that help just build that relationship and just trying to wholeheartedly connect as much as possible with the students that they have. Because I think that connection builds up on what the students at least attempt to try to learn. If there's no connection, then they shut down immediately.

To Michael, this connection between the teacher and the child, will help teachers be more effective with the children.

Thea echoed this feeling that the relationship between the teacher and child is critical. Thea shared, "if you don't get a relationship with him, you'll never, the teacher will never be able to grasp, or never be able to teach him anything. Because they're not going to listen." Thea argued that a relationship is necessary for learning to happen.

LaToya explained that teachers should help African American student to open up in order to build a connection. She stated:

So that's why I say I think when it comes down to the communication with the students though, let them open up to you. Help them to open up, make them feel comfortable. I

think it can go smooth. Sometimes they are going to have bad days. Everybody do. But I

understand also you, if you have to be that friend, or that mother figure, and be like, okay

buckle down, let's do work. Like, let's do it. Okay then. At the end of the day, I think

that student will come more with respect for you, then have something against you.

When children feel this connection, LaToya believed children are then more open to learning and

putting in the effort in the classroom.

Amanda stated her belief in the importance of teachers building a connection with the

children entrusted to them. She explained:

I don't think that should ever happen with a teacher and a parent or a teacher and a

student, where your kids don't want to come to class, with some teachers. That should

never be. Like you should make that a point to want to connect with all the students that

you have to teach.

Amanda felt it was the teachers' responsibility to try to build a relationship with each child in

their classroom.

The parents in this study explained the importance of their children feeling a connection

with the teacher. Establishing a relationship between the teacher and the child was considered a

prerequisite to learning by many of the parents and the responsibility for building the relationship

fell on the teachers.

CONCLUSION

The African American parents in this study shared about their many positive and negative

experiences as parents with the schools in general. Some of the parents felt they and their

children were disregarded and marginalized when interacting with teachers. The parents noticed

when teachers made negative racial assumptions about them and their children, whether these assumptions were overt or were subtler micro-aggressions.

The parents discussed three primary purposes they have when interacting with school staff. Parents initiated interactions with the teacher to partner around strategies to help their children succeed in the classroom. They shared examples of collaboration related to learning and improving the child's behavior. Parents also initiated interaction with school staff when they perceived a threat to their children, for example, if their children were not being treated fairly. Finally, parents initiated interaction with school staff to advocate for what they felt their children needed to be successful in school, particularly for their children facing learning challenges.

African American parents emphasized the importance of high-quality instruction for their children. They characterized high quality instruction by the teacher holding high expectations for learning and behavior and by strong instructional programs and teachers. In particular, parents appreciated programs that helped prepare their children for their futures, such as the transition to middle school, high school, or college.

Last, the African American parents discussed the critical nature of relationships between the teachers and their children. Several parents felt that developing a relationship with the child was the responsibility of the teacher and a prerequisite to being able to successfully teach the child.

The descriptions shared by the African American parents in this study speak to their general experiences with schools and teachers as parents. The parents described years of racial discrimination with teachers across generations, unfair treatment of their children by school staff, the persistent problem of teachers having low expectations for African American children, sub-par curriculum materials, and little interest of school staff in developing supportive relationships

with their children. Despite these on-going challenges, all the parents could easily recall and

eagerly discussed their positive relationships with teachers. I turn to these stories in the next

chapter.

CHAPTER 5: POSITIVE PARENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

The thirteen African American parent participants readily described positive relationships with 20 teachers, ranging in grades from kindergarten through high school. Of the 20 teachers they described, 14 were White, two were African American, one was Latina, and race was not disclosed for three teachers. Parents identified 14 elementary teachers, four middle school teachers and two high school teachers. Female teachers made up 15 of the teachers identified, while five male teachers were described. Thirteen previous teachers were mentioned and seven teachers currently teaching their children were identified. The African American parents shared that teachers with whom they had positive relationships: 1) connected with parents; 2) cared for the child; 3) had a shared commitment to the success of the child; and 4) stayed focused on learning.

CONNECTED WITH PARENTS

The African American parents described how teachers with whom they had positive relationships truly connected with them as parents. The teacher connected with the parents by 1) understanding the parents and their context, 2) treating the parents with respect, 3) establishing trust, and 4) showing caring for the parents, in addition to the child.

"She understood me and was willing to work with me…" (Monique)

The parents in this study felt a close connection with the teachers they described, and several explained how important it was to them to feel understood by the teacher. Understanding was described as: a) knowing the parent, b) understanding the parent's situation or context, and c) familiarity with the parent's community. Monique shared, "So, with that being said, me and her developed a relationship where she completely understood me, and she completely understood my parenting skills." Monique further explained the depth of the relationship,

saying: "… It's not like she's just a teacher, she's actually like a part of my family. … It's kind of like she was inducted into my family because she understood not only my kids, but my family as well." Feeling understood by the teacher mattered to Monique.

Keisha added that it is important for teachers to understand the parent's expectations for their child. Keisha explained that sometimes teachers expected her to come in angry. However, "…after that, once I got my conversation across and got my understanding of what I was there for, I never had those problems. I think that when the teachers knew I cared about my daughter and her education, it made a difference". Thea felt similarly, and when describing teachers with whom she had a positive relationship, she stated: "they understood me, and they understood what my goals were for my child." The parents felt strongly that it was important that the teacher knew their expectations for their children's success.

Some of the participants described the benefit of having the teacher understand their individual context or situation. Thea shared: "They knew that I didn't have a car. And they, if I couldn't make it to parent-teacher conferences, they would come and sit down and talk to me, and we would have the conference right there." Monique also expressed the importance of the teacher understanding the home situation. Monique explained:

Once you understand the whole home structure and not just the kid and the mom or the kid and the dad, once you understand how things are ran at home, you'll have a better perception on how to deal with the kid and the parent.

These parents felt a solid understanding between home and school was important for the child's success.

Just as the parents wanted to feel as though the teacher knew them and understood their individual situations, Thea shared that African American parents really appreciate it when a

teacher makes the effort to understand their community. One of the teachers with whom she had a positive relationship would regularly spend time with the parents of the Black community. Thea related:

> So, [Mandy] was a very good teacher, but she also made herself known in the Black community. She would be at every football game, and I'm talking about the little boys. You know, the Raiders. She made sure she was at every football game. She made sure she was up there with all the parents cooking and drinking coffee and making sure the kids had chili and chips and stuff. She was just, even though she worked in the schools she was just, she was out there on the football field. [Mandy] learned all the kids, so she took that extra step, that extra initiative to know who every child was and not only 'cause she worked at [Midwest School] so she knew kids at [Midwest, at Lyle School], everywhere. Because they came through [Midwest] and she just learned all their names. I mean, and the outbursts she got from parents. When she came out, everybody was so happy to see her. Because she took the extra initiative to be with a lot of the minority parents.

This willingness to spend time to develop relationships with parents away from the school helped this teacher connect with the families.

The parents in this study emphasized how important it is for teachers to understand them. They described understanding as the teacher making the effort to really get to know the parents, their situations, and their communities. When a teacher took the time to develop this understanding, it was noticed and appreciated by the African American parents.

"She never talked down to me." (Michelle).

Respect emerged as a second crucial factor in the positive connection between African American parents and their children's teachers. The parents described: a) steps they take to earn respect from teachers, b) why respect is important, c) ways they see teachers demonstrate respect for parents and their children, and d) the importance of mutual respect between teachers and parents.

Keisha was quite intentional in how she approached teachers in order to be received with respect. She described how she entered a conversation with teachers:

> And so, when I went there, and I didn't speak like the rest of the Black mothers, that made them respect me a little more. When my tongue didn't roll off the barrage of cuss words, and I came with a conversation and questions, they had to respect it. They had no other choice. So, my reaction was never that I'm coming here to tear this damn school up and blow it up and whoop the teachers, … (laughs).

Although she laughed while she said this, there was also a rueful shake of her head.

Amanda expressed why she felt it was so important for teachers to treat parents with respect. She stated, "You are listening to what I have to say because at the end of the day, I am my child's mom and I know how she learns before anyone else, you know, can tell me how she learns." She went on to explain, "I know because I've had her all her little life. So, I'm helping you, doing a deed for you to inform you." Amanda viewed her role as a bridge between what her child needed and what the teacher provided. Being able to successfully support her child depended on the teacher's willingness to respect what she had to say.

Teachers demonstrated their respect for the African American parents and their children in a variety of ways. Ursula shared that her son's teacher provided him with books to read that had a Black boy as a main character. She related:

And what really struck a chord with me was the character of the book was a Black boy. And I'm like, he got it. It was culturally relevant to my son. The main character was a Black boy and him being a Black child. So that, that resonated volumes.

The focus of their conversation had been on what her child was working on as a reader. She was not meeting with the teacher about the kinds of books available to her child. The seemingly simple fact that her son had access to culturally relevant books meant a lot to her.

LaToya shared that she felt the teacher respected her as a parent and stated, "They respected who I was as a parent… She made sure she reached out to me, anything, any problems." Keeping her informed helped LaToya feel respected by the teacher.

Amanda explained that her daughter's teacher listened to what she had to say about her daughter's disability and the struggles her daughter was having in the classroom. She shared:

I think she worked awesome with me. She listened to what I had to say. And it wasn't a confrontational situation where, you know, we had to get angry with one another because of the situation at hand. It was able, you know, with both of us being able to sit down and I expressed how I felt and I expressed how I felt about my child and her job was wanting to know how to reach her and how to meet my needs and she did that.

She stated that the teacher admitted that she did not know much about Amanda's daughter's disability, but she was willing to learn. She recalled, "I handed it [handout about fetal alcohol syndrome] to Ms. D, hand to hand, and a couple of other teachers that had to work with her [Amanda's daughter] who had never seen it before, didn't know nothing about it, but was willing to learn about it". This exchange helped Amanda to feel respected because the information she shared was valued by the teacher.

In addition to a variety of ways that teachers showed their respect to families, several African American parents stressed the importance of mutual respect between the teacher and the parent. Keisha explained:

> The thing I think is the parent has to have respect for the teacher. You can't get off of work and be pissed off because the clients are assholes at work. Then you go to school and you're still pissed from this and you take this attitude in this classroom. You know some things people don't know how to separate. Like, you box that up and leave that in the car before you go in the school and put a smile on your face and go find out what's going on with your baby.

Keisha argued it is important for adults to put away these kinds of frustrations in order to work together for the child.

Ursula felt her son's teacher had earned her respect following a situation in which her son was hurt at school. She shared:

> So, he explained it. I don't even know if he apologized. I don't think there was anything to apologize… but when he explained his thought process, how he handles his classroom, I gave him the respect where it's due. Let him handle his classroom. So, that was good.

Hearing what the teacher had to say about the situation led to an outcome in which both Ursula and the teacher felt respected.

"I felt like everything that they said, I could trust their word." (Thea)

According to the African American parents in this study, connecting with parents includes the development of understanding and mutual respect. Closely related to understanding and respect, trust emerged as a third critical component to the effective development of a connection between African American parents and their children's teachers. The importance of

trust cannot be overstated. African American parents are forced every day to send their children to a school system that was designed to marginalize them (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014). The parents in this study identified: a) the perceived safety of their children and b) teacher integrity as the foundation for a trusting relationship with a teacher.

Amanda shared her thoughts on the issue of trust saying, "So, if I feel that they are not comfortable with someone, then how often do you think I want them to be around you?" Monique poignantly explained her position on safety and comfort as a condition of trust. She stated:

> Not only educate them but you must realize, when, it's almost like when a bird leaves the nest. When my babies leave me, I'm entrusting them into your hands so of course I have to feel safe and comfortable with you, as long as you have to feel safe and comfortable with me and not thinking that I'm this crazy nut job that's going to come in and tear your classroom up (laughs). And I have to feel the same way about you.

Michelle added, "I felt secure leaving my child with her because I knew that she had his best interests at heart." The African American parents expressed the need to know their children are safe and comfortable with the adults responsible for their care.

Parents in this study described personal integrity of the teacher as another important factor in establishing trust. Ursula shared, "There was a genuineness. I don't even know if that's a word, but he was very genuine even when we spoke in the meeting and he had the parent teacher meeting." Later she stated, "I like the fact that he had a open outlook." The teacher's authentic way of engaging with the parents was noticed by Ursula.

Onicah explained the importance of transparency. She shared, "She made sure that we were all in the same loop that anything, nothing was going to be like a secret or anything, you know it's like upfront." Being upfront and honest helped her trust the teacher. When asked how she felt working with her child's teachers with whom she identified as having a positive relationship, Thea described it this way, "Well, I felt very good. I felt confident. I felt like… I could trust them." Being able to trust the teacher helped her to feel secure about what her child was experiencing at school.

"When she talks to the parents she talks with compassion." (Michelle)

The final characteristic of teachers who successfully connect with African American parents of their students is the care they show for the parents. The parents discussed the positive nature of communications as evidence of the care shown for them by the teacher. For example, Onicah described the teacher as, "I would say, compassionate and understanding. I would almost even say loyal." She also shared how this teacher cared enough to correct her, saying, "I mean she even at one point let me know something I was doing wrong." She further explained that rather than being upset with the teacher, "I was glad that she actually cared enough to step up and say, you know as a parent and a teacher, you know… that she helped me out, you know, for myself in that situation." Onicah also described the teacher as compassionate and understanding of Onicah.

Ursula shared that her son's teacher always brought her positive information about her son and that this kind of surprised her. She related:

So, when we have the meeting and he told me everything and I'm like everything is good. I'm like, you sure? Mr. So and So, are you sure? And he was like, what? Is there anything else you want me to…? And I'm like, no.

He made a point to identify her child's strengths and not just comment on his needs. This made her feel that the teacher cared about her family.

Establishing a positive connection with parents is an important step to the development of positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers. The participants in this study characterized the teachers with whom they had positive relationships as understanding, respectful, trustworthy, and caring of the parents. Next, I will discuss how the teachers discussed in this study demonstrated their caring for children and the impact this had on positive relationships with African American parents.

CARED FOR THE CHILD

First, the parents discussed their observations about how the teachers interacted with the children. Second, they shared their observations about the ways their children responded to the teachers. Several of the parents also shared how the interactions between the teachers and their children made them feel.

"…he was almost like a dad to the kids in the class…" (Monique)

The African American parents in this study identified the care the teachers showed for their children as an important component of positive relationships between themselves and their children's teachers. One way that care for the children was identified by the parents was when they observed teachers' interactions with the children. The parents shared examples of teachers who: a) showed empathy for the children, and b) devoted extra time and effort to their children.

Empathy was exemplified through statements from several parents indicating the teacher really cared about their children. Thea shared the following example of how her son's teacher showed she understood him and cared about him:

And they worked very hard to make sure that my child had everything that they needed. … I remember [Ms. F.] was cleaning the room and [William] sprayed the tables and got bleach all over his clothes. She went out and bought him new clothes. And I was like, "You didn't have to do that." And she wanted to just make sure that his clothes were nice, and he wouldn't be upset about his clothes.

The teacher understood that Thea's son did not want to get in trouble and that he was concerned that his clothes look nice when he was at school.

Onicah also shared a story about a teacher who showed empathy by helping her son when he was teased about being in special education despite the fact that his need was health-related. She explained:

You know, because he got teased one time at school, like, you're in special ed. and you know, he's like, no I'm not. And of course, he comes home like, why am I in special ed.? And I'm like, well, really, you're not but because of your IEP if you've missed more than a week of school or however long and the teacher thinks you need some help getting caught up, you will go to a special education classroom with that certain teacher and get that extra help to catch up. You know, of course, explaining it to him, he was fine with it, but other students are like, oh, you were with that teacher, you're in special education. And blah, blah, blah. But [Mrs. R.] you know, she was great at even letting him know, who cares if you were, you know? She was just a very positive person. She had so much energy. I don't know how she did it. She's going, going all the time. Yeah, she just told me, she was very encouraging, uplifting. She was very student focused and she gave that same attention to every student.

The positive interactions between the teacher and her son and the empathy the teacher showed demonstrated to Onicah the teacher's level of caring for her child.

Several other parents also emphasized the importance of teacher empathy for their children. Amanda stated, "…you just got to have the right teacher to sit and really understand what the kids is going through because they don't know what their little bodies is going through." To Michael, the teacher showed her caring for his son who was struggling with school. He shared, "And then she also put some affirmations on the paper that she goes through with him daily."

Ursula related that her son's teacher showed his caring for the children by interacting with them at their level.

> His desk was at the level of the kids. So, that lets me know that how he interacts with them is at their level and not from the perspective of an adult. Even though he is an adult. So, you know that really impressed me because I said I know it has to be uncomfortable standing at his stature, but he's totally committed.

Empathy was demonstrated by teachers in a variety of ways and was noticed and appreciated by the parents.

In addition to empathy, the parents felt that care for the child was expressed through the teachers' commitment of time and effort. Monique gave an example of the way the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship gave of her time. She shared, "My daughter, she's a local violinist. Any time my daughter had a show, she would come to all my daughter's shows." Similarly, Onicah explained, "You know, she came up to the hospital to visit him when he was in the hospital." Her son frequently had extended absences due to sickle cell anemia and Onicah appreciated the teacher coming to see him.

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For Onicah, caring for her child also included the effort the teacher put in during the

Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. Onicah shared that her son's IEP was for support due

to his sickle cell anemia and seizures. However, teachers sometimes associated having an IEP

with also having learning needs or behavioral needs. She explained how his case manager

showed her caring by the way she handled his IEP:

> You know, and I feel like she like, in the IEP process she's actually like she kind of gave
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> everybody a different perspective. The IEP process, you know, like by separating the
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> fact that this isn't a kid with behavioral issues or a learning disability per se. This is just a
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> kid with health issues and we need to treat it as such. She knows she conquered that
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> divide. You know what I mean, and I really like the fact that she did that because she saw
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> the situation for what it was.

Onicah explained that her son is a smart young man and it was important to Onicah that this be

recognized by his teachers.

Ursula noticed the way two different teachers responded to her son's desire to identify as

a man rather than as a boy. She related:

> So, in 4K he told his teacher, because he told me at three, but told his teacher on the first
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> day when the teacher said, come on, boys. He said I'm not a boy. The teacher said, then
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> what are you and, I'm glad I was there that day, he told the teacher, I'm a man. And he

held her to the fire. He did not respond to her unless she… unless she addressed him as the man that he was. … So, she refused to call him gentle… call him man. She said gentle man. She wanted to put a prefix. Totally fine. Whatever makes you feel better, but I want you to recognize my son is who he say… is who he say he is. So, when his current teacher, I expressed that with him, he was like, it's totally fine. That's like kids who say what they want to be Spiderman. It doesn't matter what it is, but I like the fact that he had a open outlook. He didn't read too much into it but rather that he recognized and acknowledged the children for what they identified themselves as and then keep it moving. So, my son has never complained. I've never said anything about the teacher not recognizing or acknowledging me or any of those things. Very inclusive.

Ursula's son's kindergarten teacher had no problem with acknowledging him as he wanted to be identified and this was important to her. Her son felt confident, happy, and accepted in his class and she attributed this to the care shown by the teacher.

"…and you know my kids just love to see him" **(Amanda)**

The participants in this study were keen observers of how the teachers interacted with their children and they also paid close attention to way their children responded to their teachers. These interactions provided them with information about how their children felt with the teachers.

Ursula explained that her son loved to go to school and that, "I know, that's not quite the same boy in 4K, you know, who was kind of beating himself up a lot. This one, he got …. He's walking around with his chest a little bit puffed up…". Amanda offered another example of how her daughter responded to her teacher that was evidence of the teacher's caring. She shared:

Seeing her and, you know, you see your kid running away from this person at one point, and then the next thing you do, you look up and you see them running up to give them a big hug, and then they don't want to leave. That was the big turnaround for me. That she definitely took time out to reach her.

When her children were happy and comfortable with a teacher, Amanda felt the teacher cared about her children.

Thea also expressed the importance of how her children responded to their teachers. She explained the long-term effects of building this type of connection:

And when you're that phenomenal teacher that kids come back just to see, you know that you have done your job. You know, because you have touched that life and they work just that much harder for you. When you be that phenomenal teacher all kids want to work for you because they know that you're looking out for them. And with minority kids, the very first thing they want to know and when they walk in, if they don't feel love, if they not feeling you, then they have a voice, when you say they have a voice, they open up and they say it. And you can take it two ways. You can say that it hurt my feelings, I don't like this kid, get out, or wait a minute, that's not me, I'm fixing to touch your life. I'm going to be that phenomenal person for you.

Monique provided another example of how her child still responds to a teacher with whom Monique had a positive relationship:

He was just pretty much on it. No, I already know what the game is. I already played the game. Stop playing with me. And once they [the students] all got past that, they just loved him to death, they knew. Right now, today, she's what? 28 years old. They went to [Washington School] and I just live right there in the area. My granddaughter now, I

have a five-year-old grandbaby. When they go for a walk now in the summer time, she'll

walk on down there and they'll go and visit [the teacher] at the school and they'll go visit

the classroom. They have big, yucky cockroaches and they'll go and play with them.

Yuck! No, no, no. He has them as pets in the classroom. Mmm, mmm. But yeah, she

walks them down there and still now at 28 years old, she still goes down there to visit.

Because he was, he was more like, I guess she felt, once they developed their

relationship, she felt like she was at home.

The fact that her daughter still wants to visit her middle school science teacher and has

introduced him to her child was evidence to Monique that the teacher cared about her child.

***"Oh, I felt great working with [Mrs. Richards] …"* (Onicah)**

The parents in this study identified how the teachers interacted with their children and

how their children responded as evidence of the care the teacher showed for the children. When

the participants felt the teacher cared about their child, they responded in a variety of ways.

Joseph, one of the fathers in the study, explained how he felt this way:

I, I feel like it's the best thing that could ever, ever, ever happen because it gives me a

sense of relief that even though I love my son or whatever knows, I've got people out

here that's in this community and this school that care too, you know. They ain't just my,

my whole self, have to do everything because as one parent that's pretty tough.

He had found himself in a more involved role as his son moved into high school and was starting

to have some struggles in school. Being a single father suddenly thrust into this role was a

challenge for him, but he was grateful for the support of a couple of his son's teachers.

Thea expressed that, "I felt like I could send my child to school and know that they're in good hands." She felt confident because of the care the teacher showed. Amanda echoed that confidence she felt with the teacher when she shared:

So, if I know that you got them happy and jumping. Yeah, I can leave my kids right there and know that when I come back, they're still smiling and happy, the way I dropped them off. So that's a bonus for me.

Knowing a teacher cared for their children gave these parents a sense of comfort and security.

The African American parents noticed when teachers showed caring for their children through empathy and the commitment of time and effort to their children. They also paid close attention to how their children responded to the teachers and noticed their children's comfort level and ease with teachers. When they saw evidence of caring, parents reacted with relief and confidence.

SHARED COMMITMENT TO THE SUCCESS OF THE CHILDREN

In addition to connecting with parents and showing genuine caring for the children, the African American parents in this study identified that teachers with whom they have had a positive relationship demonstrated a shared commitment to the success of the children. Parents described a shared commitment as: 1) the teacher demonstrated that they were as invested in the child's learning as the parent and 2) the teacher went over and beyond the expectations of the job in order to provide something of benefit to the child or the family.

"… any help you can get in that organization is very helpful and I'm grateful…" (Joseph)

Mutual investment in the child is an idea that was expressed many times by the participants in this study. African American parents noticed when teachers: a) were willing to

put in the effort with the child to ensure learning, and b) built a partnership with the parent in order to help children succeed.

Onicah explained, "Like, she really put her effort into making sure my child understands what's going on." Onicah continued, "[The teacher] made sure she reached out to me if she felt as if [my daughter] wasn't understanding. She'd give her more work to try to help, to take it home. Instead of just in school."

Monique shared a similar story about the investment she noticed her daughter's middle school science teacher make to her daughter's learning:

He was never the type of teacher where if she had a situation or problem she couldn't figure out, okay, I already showed you. Go sit down and think about it, figure it out on your own. No, whatever was going on in the classroom if he had to take time away and sit down and give her one on one help on anything or if she had to stay later or if he had to stay later with her or if he had to miss his lunch hour or if she had to miss hers. You know he was just right there with her to help her through whatever she needed help with.

Monique appreciated the teacher giving his time to help her daughter succeed in his classroom.

Thea shared that she appreciated the teacher holding her son accountable for learning and behavior at school. In particular, she recalled her son's 8th grade English teacher:

And I knew that whatever happened there, they wasn't my child's babysitter but they were my child's educator and that they were going to keep them straight and they were going to make sure that they were following the rules and really giving them their education and giving them what they need to go out in society… I had some middle school teachers, like Mr. B., and being my son's English teacher where I thought my oldest son was not proficient and he took the initiative to keep him after school and really

work hard with him and that's how he really passed his English… And he kept on my son

and I thank God for that. You know at that time I wasn't a single mom, but I was

working two jobs, or three. I was working three jobs at the time, trying to make ends

meet and so he was my inspiration and he really helped me with my son.

This extra effort to support the child's learning demonstrated to parents that the teacher was also

invested in the success of their children.

In addition to putting in extra effort and ensuring the children were learning, parents

explained that they felt the teacher was really invested in their child when they were able to be in

partnership. This partnership was sometimes described as "coming together" or "having an

understanding". Monique shared about the partnership she had with her daughter's middle

school science teacher:

We both come together. This is what we've done. How do you think we've done so far?

Our parent teacher conferences would be marvelous because we would sit down and

probably wouldn't even talk about her. We would talk about all the different little

strategies and tricks that we did to get her to the point that she is.

Monique felt this partnership was supportive of her daughter, although her daughter would

sometimes be exasperated by it. Monique believed that being in partnership with the teacher

kept her daughter on track.

Keisha also felt that a partnership with the teacher was important to her daughter's

success. She stated, "I always went with a sensible conversation to get an understanding, like

what can we do together, teacher-mother, to get my daughter ready for this." She pointed out,

"I've always had positive relationships with her teachers." Keisha explained how she felt about

the teacher's commitment saying, "That the teachers cared about my daughter's education was

important to me." She approached teachers with the expectation that they would want to work together with her.

Onicah shared a slightly different situation that also exemplified the teacher working with the parent in a way that demonstrated a shared commitment to the success of the child. Onicah was in the middle of a divorce and her daughter was struggling in third grade. During one of the parent-teacher meetings, Onicah noticed the teacher taking a firm stand with Onicah's soon-to-be ex-husband for the sake of the child. She explained:

> So, she even you know, basically stood up to him and said, like you know, this is about the kid, this is not about you or divorce or anything like that because he just wanted to be, his whole thing was involved with, her mom this, her mom that… but like, this is school… But I think [Ms. C] even cried at one meeting when he came on and she held her ground and she was like you know that this is about the student and we're not going to tolerate no bad behavior from any parent. You know we're going to get this issue solved and fixed and [my daughter] still asks to go see her all the time.

As shared earlier, this same teacher later pointed out some things to Onicah that Onicah needed to work on for her daughter's sake. Standing up to her daughter's father and keeping Onicah on track were both appreciated as a demonstration of the teacher's investment in the success of Onicah's child.

"She goes out of her way with her children." (Michelle)

Six of the thirteen participants in this study gave at least one example of a time a teacher went over and above the expectations of their job in order to meet the need of the participant's child. This made an impression on the African American parents.

Onicah shared how she felt about this saying, "You know she really cared and I mean you can't expect every teacher to have that same genuine, like, giving all of themselves. But you know it's encouraging when you have a teacher like that." Thea described, "They take the initiative, both of those [teachers], they really took the initiative. … they just really went over and beyond the call of duty. David said of his daughter's teacher, "She's a life-saver. That child of mine? You couldn't tell her nothing." He appreciated the teacher's support during a time his child was having a lot of behavioral issues at school.

Thea also described a teacher who would run a Saturday "academy" for the children and would spend that time teaching them reading, writing, science, and math. She incorporated music and made the learning fun. She described the teacher's commitment:

Then I took her to the academy on Saturday, well, all of them, all my kids went to the academy on Saturday and we used to, parents used to drop their kids off, and she would be like, "Would you all just leave? I do not need no help, nothing." And we would take… we'd be like, "[Ms. D.], we brought snacks." And she'd be like, "I didn't ask you all to bring us nothing. We okay." And we'd be like, "Ok. Are you sure?" ... And you'd go in and it's like quiet and everybody has their head buried in books, doing work, and learning and singing. She had them doing everything and it was like, the best academy. And the kids loved it. But she was very interested, she was a very interesting teacher. She worked hard, and she worked very hard with our kids.

Thea shared that this teacher would also keep her daughter after school for some extra help with reading and then bring her home. Thea stated, "

> [Ms. Daniels] worked so hard with her. And I would pick her up after school and she
> would be like, [Ms. Daniels] would be like, "Go home. I will bring her home. She's
> going to sit here and she's going to read with me."

Thea also shared with pride that her daughter was reading above grade level at the end of that year.

Monique shared another way that a teacher demonstrated her willingness to go over and above expectations for her students. She smiled as she recounted the scene:

> She would come and if my son had a good day or if my daughter had a good day or
> whatever, she would round up the kids, like in her open classroom. She would round up
> the kids. She would get a van and round up all the kids that had a good day or even if it
> was a mediocre day, she would round them all up and take them all out for ice cream.
> This was all her own personal time. Her own personal time. Or I just live maybe six
> houses from the school and after she got off, left the school. She would walk, if my son
> had a good day, she would.... Now he walked home by himself. If he had a good day,
> she would walk him home and me and her would sit in the front yard and sit and talk and
> she would tell me how his day was and the whole nine yards.

Monique later shared that she and this teacher had such a strong relationship that this teacher was accepted like a member of the family.

Other participants described materials and resources the teacher provided to the parent as another way teachers went over and above expectations. Michelle shared about her son's kindergarten teacher, "As he went on, she gave him books and stuff and she gave him material for him to work on through the summer to help him going on to the first grade."

Ursula had a similar experience with her son's kindergarten teacher and stated, "…the thing that was really nice about his teacher, he gave me things to work on…". She went on to share how the teacher also makes an effort to bring special learning opportunities into the classroom. For example, she shared, "

> You know he has gone out of his way to purchase equipment where they, my son knows the lifecycle of a monarch butterfly! What? He may never catch a butterfly. But the fact that he was telling me, I didn't even know the thing that they form was called chrysalis."

Ursula expressed her joy at hearing her son explain all that he was learning about butterflies

Michelle described one final way a teacher showed her commitment to the students. A father and mother had come to the school and the father was clearly upset. Michelle shared:

> We were outside on the playground and this Spanish lady with her husband come up. I guess that were sad and the man was being so disrespectful and then he started being so disrespectful to the lady and the teacher she was so calm, and she just defused that situation. She speaks Spanish, you know she was dual-language. And as a white lady, she stands about this tall and was about this big and there was something she was saying, and she did her arms like this. Whatever, they just calmed down and they was talking and I'm thinking to myself, I don't know what the heck this lady said, but she is so good. She just defused a crazy man who came up there and said something and the wife was trying to tell him that he was wrong and, oh my gosh, it was about this kid. She calmed that so quick. The other teachers was fretting. It wasn't even her student. It was from the other class.

Michelle was amazed at this teacher's willingness and ability to defuse the situation when the student was not one her students. This spoke to Michelle about the commitment of her son's teacher to all children.

The teachers with whom the African American parents indicated they had a positive relationship demonstrated to the parents a shared commitment to the success of the children. They showed their commitment through words and actions that the parents identified as evidence the teachers felt a mutual investment in the children's success and by the teachers going over and above the expectations of their jobs.

STAYED FOCUSED ON LEARNING

Getting a good education was specifically mentioned by twelve of the thirteen participants in the study. David put it this way, "I figure education is the best thing you can ever get. If I can't get you nothing else, I can get you that because it supposed to be free." The African American parents wanted teachers to ensure their children were learning. The parents described: 1) the emphasis the teacher placed on learning and 2) the positive impact on their child's learning as a result of their positive relationship with their child's teacher.

"This is the academy and we here to learn." **(Ms. Daniels, as quoted by Thea)**

The parents who spoke about the importance of an education for their children, spoke with passion during the interviews. They expressed the importance of: a) keeping the children engaged in learning, and b) supporting the children if they struggled.

Monique shared this situation with her son who, as she put it, "was hell in the classroom." When asked how the relationship with the teacher impacted her son's learning, she shared:

 It affected them greatly, because like I said, after the fact, my son, he would sit in the

corner with a picture of me and he wasn't being educated. He was just sitting there

asleep. But once me and her established, I guess once she…. How can I put it? I think

the problem is that a lot of teachers, because there can be a lot of really harsh and

ignorant parents out there, so I think that a lot of teachers they're kind of standoffish and

afraid to you know, really get in there with a kid. Because a lot of parents have the mind

frame that well, my child is always right, or don't say this to my kid, or don't do that, or

the band playing on… So, a lot of them are really standoffish as far as, you know, I'm

damned if I do and damned if I don't. But once her and I established a relationship

where, it's like, look, you're pretty much damned if you don't. You're not damned if you

do but you are damned if you don't. You're not going to let my son sit over here in this

corner with this photo of me and my husband and not be educated. No. He can sleep at

home. He needs to get up and get to this table.

Monique then described the strategies she taught the teacher to use with her son to get him

engaged in the learning. The teacher was somewhat hesitant, asking at one point, "Can I do

that?" and waited for Monique's permission.

Once the child was engaged and learning, Monique and the teacher continued to have a

positive relationship. Monique felt like she had to teach the teacher how to interact with her son.

Monique explained her philosophy about the role of the teacher and the parent, in regard to

educating the child:

I shouldn't have to get a phone [call] unless he got his head knocked off or bleeding or

something (laughs). But other than that, I should not have to get a phone call. Like I said,

when I'm giving them to you, I'm giving them to you. Now, we work together, we figure

this out. But at the end of the day, I'm giving him to you. So, like I said, with her I think that's what did it with me and her because we established a relationship where no, I'm not going to come in here screaming and yelling if he has to sit in a corner for 35 minutes. I'm not going to come in here yelling if he didn't go to recess because he didn't finish his assignment or what he needed to do. No, I'm not going to come in here yelling if you tell him look, do we need to visit the bathroom? No, if these are the things we need to do to educate my son and get him to a higher level, let's ride!

In Monique's view, the teacher is responsible for the child at school and needs to ensure he is learning. She is willing to partner but she did not want to have to manage him from a distance.

Both Thea and LaToya talked about the importance of the teacher being focused on the children's learning. Thea shared about her children's teachers, "And they showed me how much they really cared for my child and how important their education was to them and for them to get an education." LaToya echoed this feeling about a teacher, saying, "They understood, she understood as far as, how important it was to work with my child and was really, I'd say, in tune, really tried." Onicah also had a similar experience with a teacher who helped her become a stronger advocate for her son. She recalled this conversation with the teacher:

…she let me know that it was important that I kept, that I kept, you know, being his advocate, being supportive of him because he's a smart kid. You don't want him to fall between the cracks because of this health issue.

Onicah's son's health issues have made it difficult for him to keep up with his schoolwork. She shared he can be out of school for weeks at a time. However, because he is a strong student, he gets stressed about the amount of work that is waiting for him when he gets back. Onicah explained, "And then this is a kid who's smart, who's gotten good grades, and who is looking at

the assignments that he's missed and is overwhelmed. Like, I know, I know this stuff." She appreciated the teachers who have helped her support him with this.

Ursula felt like the teacher was very aware of her son's strengths and his needs as a learner and taught Ursula how to support her child at home with his reading. She shared that working with the teacher, "… it confirmed everything that I was already feeling but at the same time he was just letting me know where they were, what they were learning, how they measure. So, it was that reassurance, you know." Ursula also expressed her feeling that male teachers were more focused on learning than female teachers. She stated:

> … but with a male teacher, I've had a few male teachers, I feel like it's about the business of learning and not, I have to connect with you in order for me to teach you, type of thing. But more like this is what I'm committed to and you're going to see it in how I interact with each and every child.

Working with the teacher and both of them being focused on her son's learning helped Ursula feel like she had a positive relationship with her son's teacher.

In addition to the teachers being focused on learning, Keisha expressed her own interest in knowing about the curriculum. She shared:

> I think because I've always been in school that I had a different way of interacting with the teachers because I really wanted to know what the curriculum was. What is my daughter doing and what do I need to do at home? I wanted to know.

She felt that her interest in the curriculum also helped her establish positive relationships with teachers, possibly because she is a librarian and well-educated herself.

"…he's like, I know everything mom." (Ursula)

Seven of the African American parents shared that they felt their children had made good progress during the year they were with the teacher identified as having a positive relationship with the parent. Some of the participants shared specific indicators of progress and others shared more general comments. Thea explained the impact her relationship with the teacher had on her son saying:

> It helped him a whole lot. It gave him, just that much… to work that much harder. And he ended up going to… college, you know. And that was his inspiration. And he was a very good football player, but he ended up having the grades to stay in school.

She added that her daughter also made solid progress in reading during the year she had Ms. Daniels:

> And she would read and [Thea's daughter's] reading level, I think that year, because she transferred to [Lyle School] and Ms. [Daniels] was her third-grade teacher, and she went up like three or four levels. When school was out she was reading above grade level.

Thea was proud of the achievements of her children and how they are all successful adults now because they were able to get a solid education.

Michelle also noted an improvement in the year her son was with the teacher with whom Michelle had a positive relationship. She stated, "He did very well. He actually did much better that year than he did the next year." Michael shared a similar example. He related, "I feel like there's an impact on him academically. I think so. So, [Ms. Wilson] worked well with him, so I think he's… he's riding this wave now. I know it's going to get rocky…"

LaToya share that she had a very specific way she wanted the teachers to work with her youngest daughter so that her daughter would develop independent learning skills. She explained the impact that this had on her daughter's learning:

> She did good. She came…. Some stuff was above, not above but at least at the grade level we told her she needed to meet, that we agreed that she needed to meet. Became very much more independent. And pushed herself. It was a self-motivation that they pushed her to and rewarded her for her good behavior, good…. As far as like participation, still rewarded her but you're not going to get a reward all the time. You still need to be able to push yourself. And that's what…. That helped so much and that made her so much better as this year in middle school.

Developing independence and an internal drive to succeed were important goals LaToya had for her daughter and her work with the teachers helped her child reach them.

Monique shared about a teacher that held students accountable and that she felt her daughter did really well in that class. She recalled, "She did very, very well. Yes, because it was kind of like, you know, she couldn't slide anything past him." Now, she explained, her daughter still remembers him and feels like he was a great teacher.

Amanda explained why it was so important to her that her daughter have a good year in four-year-old kindergarten. She said:

> It impacted her a great deal. Because with that she loves seeing [the teacher]. She loves coming to school, at that point. She was able to come to school and actually get her education and she's graduated from here. So, you know the start of school is your big factor if they going to make it.

She strongly believed that if her daughter loved to come to school, that would set her up for success in the future.

Ursula had a similar feeling that her son's kindergarten year was setting the stage for future success. She shared:

"…it just lets me know that my son is engaged and he's enjoying, and he values what

you're saying. You know, when I talk to my son. What did you learn today? He's telling

me something. Whereas in 4K, it wasn't quite connecting…".

Later she adds on to this saying:

So, he'll work at it or he'll get frustrated and he'll shut down. I have not seen that all year

this year. So, that alone says that the teacher's making a difference because I can't say

I've changed my way of doing things and I love the fact that my son will read any book

down.

Ursula identified specific behaviors in her son that indicated the teacher's focus on education.

Her son was eager to tell her about his learning and he no longer shut down when frustrated. She

felt this focus on her son's learning contributed to her positive relationship with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

The African American parents in this study identified many factors that contributed to

their ability to establish positive relationships with their children's teachers. The parents felt a

connection with the teacher when the teacher demonstrated understanding, respect, trust, and

caring for the parent.

Teachers who showed their care for the children were also identified as teachers with

whom parents had a positive relationship. Parents observed the ways the teachers interacted with

the children, including the ways they showed empathy and the time and effort they put into

helping the child. Parents also noticed when their children had a positive response to the teacher,

such as wanting to spend time with the teacher. When their children were at ease with a teacher,

the parents felt a sense of relief and confidence.

African American parents noticed when teachers seemed to feel a sense of shared commitment to the success of the child. Teachers demonstrated a mutual investment in the child when it was clear to the parent that the child's success mattered to the teacher. Parents also appreciated teachers who went over and above the regular expectations of the job, such as working with a child after school or during lunch.

Finally, the parents felt positively about their relationship with the teacher when the teacher kept the classroom focused on learning. Parents looked for evidence of their children's growth as learners and several identified specific ways they knew their children were progressing. The parents placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of their children getting a quality education.

Effective communication emerged as a key aspect of the African American parents' positive relationships with their children's teachers. I delve into the details of this effective communication in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: COMMUNICATION

The African American parents in this study clearly articulated that effective communication contributed strongly to their positive relationships with teachers. The parents also discussed how effective communication benefitted their relationships with teachers. When discussing the communication with the teachers with whom they had a positive relationship, the parents described: 1) the characteristics of communication, and 2) the purposes for communication.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATION

The parents shared common characteristics of their communications with the teachers with whom they had positive relationships including the variety of communication methods used, and the factors that influence the frequency of communication.

***"…he does a great job communicating via e-mail."* (Ursula)**

Communication between the African American parents and the teachers and other school staff with whom they had positive relationships occurred primarily through the use of e-mail, text messages, and phone calls. Some teachers made the effort to visit the parents at their homes or walked out with the child to talk with a parent during the afternoon dismissal time. Ursula also shared, "…he [her son's kindergarten teacher] has everything on Google docs so he'll send us pictures. We even have Facebook." She enjoyed being able to see pictures from the classroom.

Keisha appreciated the notes and documents her daughter's teacher sent home and kept these through the years. She related:

And like I was saying, with the notes that the teacher would send home to let me know [my daughter] … and I got a crap load of them. I kept them from birth or from her

kindergarten year. I kept them from preschool years. I got all the notes. I put them

together a couple years ago. I got all her notes of her being chatty, her not sitting down,

her "I"s her "S"s, I've got all of her report cards. It's amazing. And then I saw exactly

how [my daughter] was. It just showed me how my child was, having all those reports

showed me that my child is chatty.

Keisha laughed as she shared this information. The notes and updates from her daughter's

teacher that Keisha kept for her daughter were still important to Keisha years later.

"I mean they constantly stay in touch with me…" (Joseph)

The frequency of communication between the parents and the teachers with whom they

had positive relationships varied. Several parents shared that they communicated with their

children's teachers as often as once per day or more. Others explained that they communicated

with their children's teacher weekly or every other week. Some parents indicated they only

communicated once a month or less with their children's teachers with whom they had positive

relationships.

Thea explained her desire for communication saying, "Sometimes I contacted them

twice, three times a day. It all depends on what was going on through the day and how much I

needed to know…". She appreciated that the teachers with whom she had positive relationships

were willing to keep her informed.

LaToya shared that the frequency of communication with one of the teachers with whom

she had a positive relationship varied depending on the needs of her child:

Every time there was a problem, she made sure she reached out to me through an email,

or text, or even a phone call if she needed to. At least, I'd need to talk to her…. It

depends on the month we're having. If we're having a good month I don't need to talk to

you for another two or…. But if we had a bad month, then we're talking all the time. So,

it all depends.

LaToya chuckled as she shared this information about communication with her daughter's third

grade teacher. She felt it was obvious by the number of contacts what kind of month her child

was having at school.

Michelle felt there was no need for contact with the teacher with whom she had a positive

relationship unless there was some kind of a problem. She shared:

She didn't call because [my son] didn't have problems, so she had no reason to call

because he had problems because he didn't. He's not a bad child. He's never had, just

like my other kids. Nope. No calls from school.   I never called her. I didn't need to.

Michelle believed if there was an issue, this teacher would contact her, so there was no reason

for her to contact the teacher.

Michael echoed this same feeling that he did not need contact from the teacher unless

there was a problem. He stated, "I definitely feel that if there were any issues, I'd hear from them

[the teachers with whom he had positive relationships]. And again, I'm, I'm not big on the fluff

communication. So just let me know when they're being bad." Michael felt that if there was an

issue, "… [I] just want to be on top of it." He trusted that the teachers with whom he had

positive relationships would contact him if needed.

Dwayne concurred with other African American participants that communication with

the school staff depended on how his child was doing. He shared:

After that, after that one particular incident where I came to the school, it was like, never

after that really, because it was it was like [my son] got himself together. You know, he

was always a, he was really a good kid anyway, truth be told. He wasn't so problematic.

And so, I didn't have to worry about the discipline end of it no more but a little bit after that she would probably call and just let me know he was doing fine, or I would call her. And then, it's like, after that I honestly quit calling her because it was obvious that he wasn't having all those types of problems no more.

Once Dwayne stopped hearing about problems his child was having from the teacher with whom he had a positive relationship, he felt the work he had done with his son had been effective so contacting the teacher was no longer necessary.

The expectations for communication between the African American parents and their children's teachers with whom they had positive relationships ranged from multiple daily contacts to no contact at all unless there was a problem. LaToya and several other participants tied the amount of communication to the presence or absence of challenges their children were experiencing in school.

PURPOSES FOR COMMUNICATION

The frequency of communication between the African American parents and the teachers with whom they had positive relationships was based on the needs of the children. However, communication was not solely for the purpose of addressing a problem. The African American parents in this study communicated with the teachers for the purposes of: 1) clarity, 2) collaboration, and 3) personal connection.

"We would get daily updates." (Monique)

The parents in this study wanted to communicate with their children's teachers to gain clarity on what was happening at school. Clarity included: a) notification about school activities and events, b) sharing information between the parent and the teacher about things like homework or attendance, and c) sharing information about learning or behavioral difficulties the

child was having at school. Communication for the purpose of clarity was characterized as primarily one-way communication from the teacher to the parent or the parent seeking information from the teacher, without the expectation of collaboration or personal connection.

Keisha expressed how she enjoyed going through the communications she received from her daughter's teacher about activities and events. She shared:

> The back and forth, teacher and parent, with her bringing stuff home that I had to actually read and sign off on and send back worked with us, understanding what was going on. I was always abridged… I mean, aware of activities and events and run through these notices and [my daughter's] weekly reports of her behavior, this is elementary now. Her weekly behavior reports were very great cause if it did have a bad report at least I got to see it and we talked about it and did on our end what we needed to do to address the issue, so she can go back to school and be productive.

Keisha went on to explain how the communication from the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship helped her to attend more events. She explained, "Yeah, I actually loved having the book fairs. I loved that part of her experience. The activities that they have at times that I was able to get there and knowing advanced times allowed me to get there." Advance notice provided her the opportunity to be at the school for special activities and events.

Ursula shared that she appreciated how her son's kindergarten teacher was careful to provide a structure that supported effective communication. She explained:

> You know… or if I feel like I missed some kind of information. He does a good job because he's teaching them organization skills. So, he has a folder with their names, so he makes sure, when you go home, make sure your parents go through your folder and pull everything out. So, even though I mean, I read everything, I make sure to pull it out. But

sometimes my son, he'll chuck his flier and just do all this other stuff. But yeah, but he [the teacher] definitely provides structure…

The structure created by the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship helped Ursula feel informed and also supported her son learning about organization.

In addition to seeking information about events and opportunities happening at school, the African American parents sought information about how their children were doing in meeting school expectations. This included information-sharing between the parents and the teachers about things such as homework, assignments, attendance, and grades.

Joseph explained what information he gained from communication with the high school counselors with whom Joseph had a positive relationship. He shared, "They're keeping me informed on his status as far as his attendance, his grades, and being accountable for my child while he's at that school." Joseph felt this information helped him support his child in making positive decisions while at school.

Thea felt strongly about the need to have information about the expectations for her children at school. She explained why this information mattered to her:

> … if I felt like I missed something that they [the teachers with whom she had positive relationships] were talking about, I would contact them back. … I used to say, "Are you tired of hearing from me?" or "I'm sorry I need to ask you this." Cause I needed to make sure I had all my ducks in order for when they [her children] got home, what I needed to do to make sure to see them succeed and get their work done.

Thea had high expectations for her children and created an incentive for them to keep up with their school work. She laughed as she shared:

You know… me and my kids always had this thing that come Friday, once everybody's

work was done, I go out and play basketball at the park across the street. If I wasn't

playing basketball on that Friday, my neighbors would say, "Okay, who didn't get their

work done?" And I used to laugh because I was like, "How did you know somebody

didn't get their work done?" and they'd say cause the kids said that if everybody get their

work done, mom going to play basketball with us. Everybody on the block knows who

didn't get their work done because they weren't outside. And I was just that type of

parent that if you missed something that mean before Monday come, you need to have it

done. So, all weekend long, we working on trying to get this done. And when I'm

outside playing basketball with them, I would have every child in the neighborhood

come, and let's play ball. You know…

Thea identified the teachers with whom she had a positive relationship as teachers who kept her

informed. She stated, "They would call me and tell me what homework they had, assignments

that they were missing..." Thea relied on the information teachers shared with her about the

assignments and homework to support her children and help them be successful.

Along with identifying the importance of communication about school activities and

events, and communication about school expectations, such as homework, the African American

parents in this study explained that it was also important for teachers to communicate when their

children are struggling in the classroom. LaToya shared, "She [the teacher with whom she had a

positive relationship] kept in contact if there were any other problems that were going on…".

This kept LaToya aware of any potential difficulties. By knowing about behavioral and learning

issues, the parents felt better informed and able to support their children.

Ursula described a situation where her son was upset because he had been hit in class. Ursula did not understand why she had not heard from the kindergarten teacher. She related:

> And you know, I told the teacher at any time you feel concern, you send me an e-mail. So, then… so, one situation that happened that I thought was phenomenal, my son was like you need to talk to my teacher. You need to talk to my teacher. I'm like what's going on? I think we were in school like a month or two. Mom, there are kids hitting me and I'm like OK. The fact that my son is telling me kids hitting, and the teacher did not tell me what is going on. So, then I emailed him. I like to talk this way (pointing). I don't like to write. And then also I know paper trails and stuff and things can get misread and get people in trouble. So, if we don't have to do that, that's totally fine. He wrote me such a long, detailed… … So, he was explaining, yes, your son is right. But we have, we have a child in the class that has other things going on. So, it's not just your child but others, but I thank you for your concern.

Once she understood the information the teacher shared, she felt her trust restored that her son was safe at school and this trust supported her positive relationship with the teacher.

The parents in this study felt that effective communication between home and school required clarity. The parents wanted to know about events and activities happening at school. They wanted to know information about school expectations, such as homework, assignments, and attendance. They also wanted to be kept informed of any challenges their children were facing. When the teachers with whom they had positive relationships provided the parents access to this type of information, the parents felt they could better engage with their children's school experience.

"What was funny about it, he would call me before she got home…" **(Monique)**

Providing clear communication involved one-way communication patterns between home and school and the African American parents felt this was effective for some aspects of the educational process. However, the parents also identified collaborative, two-way communication with their children's teachers as an important component to their positive relationships with the teachers. The parents wanted opportunities to collaborate with the teachers and school staff when: a) their children had learning needs, and b) when their children struggled to meet behavioral expectations in the classroom.

LaToya explained how she started the conversation about her daughter's learning needs with the third-grade teacher. She shared, "Well, like I said, she [LaToya's daughter] had to have an IEP meeting. So, when I had to go in there first IEP meeting I sat down and gave my ground rules." LaToya went on to explain her rules, which included her expectations that her daughter develop academic independence within the classroom. She further explained, "And what my rules was they made sure, okay, we came up with an agreement and perfectly fine. Yeah, keep an open communication." LaToya set out the expectation right away that she would participate in her daughter's education as a full partner and invited the teacher to maintain communication with her, saying, "And she knows she's very open, if anything, to call me." LaToya wanted to be kept closely informed of her daughter's academic progress. This willingness to collaborate to support her daughter as a learner was important to LaToya in the development of a positive relationship with the third-grade teacher.

Thea shared how her son's teachers with whom she had positive relationships would contact her about upcoming lessons and curriculum. She described:

Sometimes I heard from them [the teachers] four times a week. It all depends on how hard the curriculum was, how much they felt like the child, my child, was shutting down

because things got too hard for him. Or, if they thought that they [her child] could do it

or if it was going to be difficult for them [her child] and get them ready for it. And that's

prepping them, getting them ready for it.

Thea wanted to know what the new learning was going to be for her son, so she could work with

the teachers to help him. This willingness to communicate and collaborate around her son's

learning was a characteristic Thea identified in teachers with whom she had a positive

relationship.

Onicah appreciated that her son's third grade teacher met with her early in the school

year to set learning goals. She shared:

She [the teacher] reached out to me because once he got put in her classroom she like, I

think she sent out a letter or email or something like that to set up the beginning of the

year like meet and greet thing or whatever. And I think we met with her, like everybody

met separate. It was almost like a beginning of the year conference or something. Every

kid set goals and stuff like that.

This type of a parent-teacher conference early in the year encouraged a collaborative

conversation around the goals Onicah had for her son's learning that school year and contributed

to the positive relationship that Onicah had with this teacher.

When her oldest daughter was in high school, LaToya valued the collaboration she had

with the high school teachers and counselors with whom she had positive relationships. She

shared:

And that's like, of course you have your high school drama, but as far as classes, she took

all AP classes. And when she needed help and when I needed to sit down with the

teachers and talk to them about any, grade-wise, they were willing to sit down. They

were willing to talk. They made sure, dealing with the counselors, they made sure she

had all her credits to graduate on time. She got all of her scholarship stuff done.

LaToya's daughter was about to be the first college student in her family and LaToya

appreciated the collaborative conversations she was able to have to help both LaToya and her

daughter be ready for this important step in her life.

Monique described a positive collaborative relationship with a middle school teacher in

support of her daughter's learning. She explained:

…but I could say there was a point in time where she [Monique's daughter] wouldn't

turn her homework in and try to be manipulative and stuff like that and he [the middle

school teacher] was real good about it…. Then he would call me after the fact and let me

know what went on. What was funny about it he would call me before she got home and

let me know. I'm going to give you a heads up, x, y, z. This is what happened. She's

probably going to... I'm going to tell you exactly what she's going to come home and say.

This is exactly what we did about the situation. Okay, gotcha. When she walked in the

door, mom, this is what happened, x, y, z, and Mr. Such and Such, whatever. And I'd

already be ready for her, like, no, that's not true. That's not true. How do you know? I

already talked to him. And as soon as I'd say that she'd get a blank face, like, I'm

busted. So, yeah. I mean like I say, I can't stress any more than say, communicate.

Having collaborative conversations about her daughter's behavior helped keep Monique's

daughter on track academically.

Michael shared about the conversations he's had with one of his children's teachers that

supported his child both with learning and with behavior. He explained:

One in particular, I'd say would be [Ms. Boyle], and again that'll just go back to my concerns I had with my son academically as a whole. I had that before he started coming, before even starting school. I just knew that school wasn't his, his main thing. But just through some very honest conversations, honest suggestions, open listening, … I think she works very well with us. I mean she's very… she communicates well.

He goes on to share about how they communicate about his son's behavior:

I let her know very early on in the school year that if there are any major issues that, you know, can't wait until a[n online] message or a note home, that, you know, I work 12 to 15 minutes away. Just call me throughout the day and I'll be here, and she's done that. … I've tried to just stay in most contact with her just because I know that, I know my child. So, I don't want to be in a situation where an incident might occur and go on for a long period of time, until it becomes a major problem without being aware of it.

Michael felt strongly that he and the teacher are able to work collaboratively to support his son, who is finding school to be a challenge, both academically and behaviorally. Michael identified this collaboration as a critical aspect of his positive relationship with this teacher.

Some of the parents focused on their collaboration with teachers around correcting their children's behavior at school. David shared:

Well because she told me what my daughter was doing wrong and my daughter was telling me something totally different. [Ms. Thomas] says I'll call you every day she wrong and she did. I went to the school every day. I went to sit in the classroom.

Having a conversation with the teacher about what David's daughter was doing at school helped empower him as a parent. He further explained, "They [the teachers with whom he had positive relationships] help me out a lot. Kept on the right track. By letting me know what she was doing

wrong. Weren't taking her bull crap. I was a concerned parent, so I wasn't having it." He described his relationship with the teacher in this situation as, "She kept me in touch with reality because the way my daughter was going, she would come home and lie and never have her homework, but her homework was always in her bag." David relied on the collaborative communication and teamwork with the teacher to address his daughter's behavior.

LaToya also valued the collaborative relationship she had with her daughter's third hade teacher. She found the conversations about behavior to be helpful in keeping her daughter focused on learning at school. She explained:

She [LaToya's daughter] knew she had boundaries. She knew that she cannot get away with nothing. She knew, especially… She knows what my expectations of her are and she knows there's a report getting back to me from the teacher. There we go.

Being in communication with the teacher about LaToya's expectations for her daughter helped LaToya and the teacher work together to support her daughter.

Joseph found a collaborative partner in one of his son's high school teachers. Joseph was just beginning to work with the school staff and his son's mother to help correct some behavioral issues that were starting. Joseph shared about the issue:

That's the one that calls me. She's a white lady and she said, she said he's a good student, [Joseph]. The only problem he has is just that he just skips classes. When he's there, he does a good job and then she says I know he could do it, but he just likes to skip.

Joseph believed he needed to work with the school staff to help keep his son on track. He went on to explain:

I mean they [the counselors] constantly stay in touch with me and their mom, you know, they got both of our numbers so she, if they don't get a hold of me, they call her. So, we

guarding it. We got it. And now that he know that they got us, he's like, did they call you

today? I'm like, why should they? I was just making sure that, you know I'm saying….

No, you know what you supposed to do when you punch in that clock, right? So, you tell

me, was they supposed to call me? No, that's why I was calling, to make sure they didn't

call you. He's slippery, he's slippery.

The collaboration with the school staff has helped Joseph feel like they had a positive

relationship and are able to make positive changes for his son. He further shared:

Well, right now, he [Joseph's son] has a counselor, I forget her name, but they're working

with them. They talk to the mother. You know, we, we stay in a little bit of contact. She

left a message the other day. So, it's working for me. I don't know how things are going

for them but I'm just happy that I'm able to make a difference and I'm able to be that

father that some kids wish they had. So as long as I do my part and help to communicate

with them, I feel like we're going to have some success.

Without the conversation with the school staff, Joseph felt he might not be aware of what his son

was doing during the day that was counterproductive to his education.

The African American parents in this study relied on communication from the teachers

with whom they had positive relationships to work in collaboration for the benefit of their

children. These collaborative conversations focused on both academics and behavior. The

information the parents gained helped them feel empowered to support their children as learners.

"...you got to have that phenomenal teacher that will say, "I'll take calls on the weekends."

(Thea)

In addition to the value placed on communicating for clarity and collaboration, the

African American parents also noted that communication can build an important personal

connection between themselves and a teacher. The establishment of a personal connection supported positive relationships between the African American parents and their children's teachers.

Onicah shared about a serious communication breakdown between school staff and herself and contrasted that experience with the way her son's teacher with whom she had a positive relationship handled a misunderstanding. The teacher's response to the situation led to communication that ultimately helped her establish a positive connection with her son's teacher. She shared:

This year he missed a lot of first semester because actually dental issues which really didn't have much to do with his sickle cell except for the fact that dentists didn't want to treat him because he has a high stroke risk. …. His case manager told him you know I'd like to see you log on at least twice a week. You know he had went this two weeks you know and basically I got the impression that the teacher was trying to say like he just didn't care, or you know like if he didn't do it then they're going to think he didn't care about the work. Whatever, I wasn't there for the exact conversation. I know he was super discouraged about it but his case manager, I talked to him and it's like it was a misunderstanding. So, he explained to me that you know if he's logging on twice a week the teachers are seeing that he's giving some effort even if he doesn't get a lot done. So just a simple misunderstanding like that but he actually took the time to talk to me about it and explain to me about it. So, I think that's a good thing that even when there's a misunderstanding or if a student comes home and says this teacher said this or that. For the parents to take the time to get both perspectives and actually just have a conversation

with the teacher and be like why'd you tell my kid that? You made them feel like this you know. So, I think that's an important thing, school wise.

Onicah trusted that she could share honestly with her son's case manager about how her son was feeling, and the information would be received positively and be used to help her son. This helped her trust the case manager.

Several of the parents in the study shared examples of communication that helped them build positive connections with teachers. Monique shared this example about the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship:

She [her son's teacher] would call me or sometimes she'd just walk him on down to the house. Hey, buddy. Come on. He would start walking and she'd say, hold up. I'll walk with you. I want to say hi to your mom. She'd come on down to the house and we'd hug it out and sit on the porch and drink some tea or water or soda or sit and talk about not even the kids, not even school. Just talk about miscellaneous things like the weather or I don't know, the president or just anything, the flowers or whatever.

This personal connection through communication reinforced to Monique that her son was in good hands with the teacher and kept her informed of his progress.

Onicah shared about the personal connection she felt with her daughter's third-grade teacher. She explained:

Oh, we seen each other all the time, at least a couple times a week. Even if, even if I didn't go into the school she was usually outside when they were getting dismissed. And she's one of the teachers that would come up to the car. Hey, chit chat, what's going on? So at least two to three times a week, I'd say. [Communication was] positive, definitely positive.

This kind of casual conversation initiated by the teacher appealed to Onicah and made her feel a connection with the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship.

Monique appreciated the personal approach to communication that her children's kindergarten teacher took. Monique shared:

And like I said, all of [my children] were not the same, they each required something different. And me and her were able to sit down and talk about it where she knew. And right out of the gate like, my third youngest, my third oldest? She was a knucklehead and she would already know after dealing, after me and her talking, she would come over to the house. We would sit down and drink tea or coffee.

The connection they had established felt comfortable to Monique and she felt confident working with this teacher to support her children.

Having a connection with the teacher helped Keisha with communication about her daughter's progress when it was difficult for Keisha to find the time to reach out. She shared:

She [Keisha's daughter] likes to visit. She likes to… she can do the work, but you know she's going to do it in a lackadaisical kind of way. But she can do it. And she did it. So that having that [paper] trail for me was great. That was the connection I had with the teacher when I couldn't get a phone call in because I was pre-computers and that technology. But the letters in the mail like parents need to respond to these things. Parents need to read these things with an unbiased mind, with an open mind that the teachers are here to really help the kids.

Keisha felt a connection with the teacher with whom she had a positive relationship because the teacher willingly communicated with Keisha when Keisha was a single parent, working full time, and trying to complete a degree.

When asked about communication with teachers, Dwayne explained what happened when he went to his son's teacher and introduced himself. He shared:

> But I told her to feel free to communicate with me about anything and everything. … She was very, she was glad I did that! She looked forward to that. You know, and I remember her even telling me, she was like, you know what? She was like, he [Dwayne's son was] at that age now where it would take a man to get him to settle down a little bit and get a little bit more focused. You know, he was like 8 years old and so, I was like, okay. I appreciate her telling me that. I didn't feel like she was speaking out of place. I was like, thanks! That's good to know. You know, so yeah. She was comfortable enough to talk to me is what I'm saying, and I think that's important. Like, just, just communicate. You know, talk.

Dwayne expressed some surprise at the positive way he was received by the teacher when he attempted to establish communication with her about his son. Her reaction helped him feel connected and respected.

A personal connection is what Michael felt with his son's teacher as well. He appreciated that she was willing to have conversations with him, even about things that did not concern his son. He explained:

> So, she's very open to just communicating and talking, whether it be about him or just from other initiatives that are going on, some things that you know she feels like with the school district, or her own personal life and in the same with me and like some things I'm working with that might incorporate with schools and kids too. So, a very… very open relationship.

Michael was involved with the school through participation in the Parent Teacher Organization and the African American Parent Organization. He regularly sought information about what was happening in the school and the school district and felt a connection with the teacher with whom he had a positive relationship when she was willing to discuss these things with him.

The African American parents shared the importance of personal connections they were able to establish with the teachers with whom they had positive relationships. In so doing, the parents felt respected and confident working with the teacher to proactively support their children.

CONCLUSION

Effective communication emerged as a central aspect of the African American parents' positive relationships with teachers. The parents identified many ways that they communicate with teachers including phone calls, digital methods, face-to-face visits, and through notes and documents. Frequency of communication varied from several times each day to once or twice a month determined by how much their children struggled in school.

The parents identified several purposes for communication with teachers and other school staff with whom they had positive relationships: clarity, collaboration, and connection. Clarity focused primarily on one-way communication. Teachers shared information such as upcoming activities and events at school, grades, or academic or behavioral updates. Parents sought information from teachers and school staff such as information about homework, assignments, classroom needs, or volunteer opportunities. Last, teachers shared information about potential issues, such as academic or behavior challenges the children were beginning to demonstrate.

Communication for the purpose of collaboration involved two-way communication between the parents and the school staff with whom they had positive relationships.

Communication for collaboration included opportunities for the parents and the teachers to work together to try to solve any academic or behavioral challenges their children may be facing. These opportunities were sometimes initiated by the teachers and sometimes initiated by the parents.

Communication for the purpose of establishing a personal connection between the parents and school staff emerged as a third reason and that involved two-way communication. The African American parents shared examples of times when the communication between themselves and a teacher created trust and a positive connection, which supported the positive relationship they had with a teacher.

The African American parents in this study identified the key aspects of their positive relationships with teachers, including the central importance of effective communication. In the next chapter I discuss the advice the parents offered to teachers who are interested in establishing positive relationships with the parents of their African American students.

CHAPTER 7: ADVICE FOR TEACHERS

When asked, the parent participants in this study offered their advice for teachers to establish positive relationships with African American parents. By order of the emphasis the parents placed on the themes, their advice included: 1) become more racially aware, 2) develop a mutual, positive relationship, 3) develop a relationship with African American children, and 4) teach the children.

BECOME MORE RACIALLY AWARE

The African American parents discussed the importance of teachers being aware of the impact of on-going institutionalized racism and other negative racial influences that they and their children face every day. They felt it critical that teachers: 1) seek to understand African American daily experiences of being Black in society, 2) become more aware of the teachers' own implicit and explicit bias, and 3) make the classrooms more racially relevant to children.

"…it's so hard being a Black man period." (Joseph)

The negative impact of racial discrimination that begins at birth was discussed by several parents. Joseph shared his thoughts about the inequities he sees in society every day. He shared:

> And then to be here, here in [the Midwest] there's a lot of hidden racism that goes on and we have to acknowledge that and don't shy away from it because it does happen. I'm not a racist but you know it's just a part of life. You have to accept it. You don't have to embrace it, but you have to understand that this is a very important issue and that a topic that no one needs to shy from. As far as just the policing and everything else, you know a lot of unfair things get done to people. What you get some people that have the same case and get two totally different outcomes when it comes to handing out punishment. I've watched it and seen it with my own eyes. You know, listen on the news. I watch it

every day and it was just time for everybody to make a change and try to come together. I

mean it's just so difficult to justify everything that people do. Some things just seem so

wrong.

Joseph felt that institutionalized racism has a heavy impact on the African American community

and it impacts families and children. He challenged people to address it rather than avoid it as an

unpleasant topic.

Onicah explained that the impact of racism has caused her to train her son about how to

handle himself in public so that he is less likely to be perceived as a threat. She shared:

Like, I have had that conversation with my son about the hoodies and having hands in

pockets in the store. You know, just things that we don't want to talk about, but we have

to talk about. Like my son, he will tell you right now if he's going into the gas station his

hands are out of his pockets. Like he's not, and if somebody's following him around the

store he would walk with his hands out and just leave. Like, don't take any chances of

your life. Just get out and go. Don't, even if, you know, you obviously have money, I

even tell him don't go in the store if you don't have money unless it's an emergency or if

it's like too cold outside or something. I mean even if it's with a friend that has money,

don't do like… So, I think if teachers can kind of realize what's going on in society that

these kids are seeing and dealing with… Maybe take that into perspective. Like I said, I

don't expect them to take any disrespect or anything, to be like, oh well they're dealing

with all this so they're going to be mean to me and say this and say that but I think if

that's taken into some perspective maybe it can create a better understanding of why

some African-American kids do certain things in certain ways and why certain situations,

what's the word, trigger them. You know, do certain things or act a certain way. I think

that's important.

Onicah believed that teachers need to be aware of this reality for African American children and

their parents because it will help teachers understand some of the ways the children may react in

certain situations.

Onicah also pointed out that there can be a disconnect between what African American

parents teach their children about how to handle themselves when they are in public and what the

teachers expect from them when they come to school. Onicah explained:

And well, as far as the approach to students maybe, I know things can get difficult

because I mean, any student can be disrespectful, but I know in African-American culture

some of the things they teach these kids. You know it's like, respect your elders but don't

let nobody talk to you like this or don't let them, you know. And so that creates this fine

line of respect and disrespect and I don't expect any teacher to tolerate any disrespect.

Maybe try to create a… and I don't even know how this would even be done but try to

have an understanding of the African American culture and what's being taught to these

children and even the things they are seeing on the news and society has an impact.

Two different sets of expectations can be challenging for children. If teachers have a better

understanding of the African American community and what is being taught at home, they can

better support the African American children in their classrooms.

Keisha believed society is set against African American children from birth and that this

has a negative consequence for them when they come to school. She shared:

So when Black kids are born into an entire white society and they are really shunned and

marginalized like this, they have to live in concrete jungles and cities, urban cities

because we don't live in smaller communities whereas this young white kid was born of the same doctor has all these other elements around him to make his life comfortable and to make his life progressive whereas this kid has to fight from birth in this predominantly white society that's not always accepting of little Black kids. So, what I mean that to say is, from the time that Black babies are born we're indoctrinated into white doctors, white nurses, white pharmacists, white teachers, everything around us is white. When this baby that's white is born into this small community of 1200 people, everyone is white. And it's more embraced. And they work to keep him and uplift this girl or boy. They get a different foundation.

Keisha argued that African American children come to school having had to fight their whole lives in a society that does not value them. She explained why this is important, "So, I think that that's the difference. The stress level and the amount of stress in the first five years of an African American kid's life is heightened which makes it harder to concentrate." The stress of the early years of an African American child's life can make the transition to a predominantly White classroom and school challenging.

"Don't presume and that will help all of us." (Michelle)

Along with being racially aware and understanding of the race-based realities African American families face, the parents cautioned teachers to be aware of their implicit and explicit racial bias and how they communicate that to African American families. Many of the parents shared stories of times that teachers' language showed their racially biased beliefs.

Ursula shared a personal experience when she went to her son's classroom to read to the students as part of a school-wide event. The teacher made a misstep when she introduced Ursula to the students. Ursula related:

I think a lot of the problems is there's a lot of assumptions and some of the experiences that I had as I did… what is it? Read out loud? Read Your Heart Out. I did it at [my son's school] and majority of, from what I saw, were Black mothers which was awesome. But when the teacher had told the classroom, and it could be a oversight or whatever. But what happened is my ring finger broke out. I had my wedding rings on the other side and she was quick to make sure the whole classroom addressed me as [Miss J.] and I'm like, I'm Mrs.., and I noticed because … a lot of Black moms who are married have had that experience of being referred to as Miss. And it's clear you know, so that distinction, you know. So, it's just paying attention I feel like, and not making assumptions or presumptions about the family life of a child even if the child appears to be a little more disruptive or may require a little more, you know, one on one. Don't assume that the parents are not caring or not involved, you know, because that's what seems to be going on a lot lately is these assumptions.

The teacher's use of the title "Miss" made Ursula feel that the teacher had assumed she was not married to her son's father and this was hurtful to her.

Michelle was most bothered by the racially biased remarks made by teachers that was evidence to her that they did not believe she was educated or capable. She explained, "If you feel something that you say you can help me with, find a way to talk to me about it. Find a way to reach me. Don't come at me. You don't know me. Don't presume to know me." LaToya also suggested that teachers remember, "Every parent is not the same, as we know." She felt it important that teachers do not subscribe to stereotypes or over-generalizations about African American parents.

"We're too divided and it shouldn't be this way." (Joseph)

The African American parents discussed the marginalization of themselves and their children by educators and the impact of negative racial assumptions that are made about them and their children. Three of the parents also discussed the need for schools to become more racially relevant places for their children.

Keisha is a librarian with the public library system and she explained what she noticed as a parent and as a librarian:

So, what I needed from the teachers, there was not enough culture, like there was nothing in [my daughter's] curriculum that taught her about people that looked like her that were doctors, lawyers, not even kings and queens, like people, everyday nurses. Just people that look like her. And that was part of that thing that I started thinking out. That's why the history books are written the way they are, not because we don't want to indoctrinate slavery, but we don't recognize the people in the community that are doctors and lawyers that are important people that are of color. We don't write about them, they're not included because who writes our books? They're writing from their perspectives. I get it. It's not cool but I get it. So even having books in the library that are of culture. If they're not part of the curriculum it really doesn't matter. Kids aren't going in the books saying, "Oh, I want a Black book about a nurse." That's not happening.

This lack of culturally relevant materials caused her concern. She felt children need to see themselves in their books.

Isaiah also expressed the importance of culturally relevant materials and for more diversity among teachers. He stated:

Maybe they need more teachers of other cultures maybe, something like that. When I talk

to my kids every day and let them know their worth, regardless of what they might be

going through in school even though they're not seeing a lot of their heritage.

Isaiah made a point of encouraging his children to be proud of who they are but also felt his

children would have benefitted from seeing more teachers of color in the schools.

Joseph shared his concern about the lack of racial understanding and the importance of

people from different races being able to come together. He explained:

They need to address diversity classes where people can kind of identify and you know,

be around in uncomfortable situations. It empowers the mind to think and work on, you

know, talking about things that aren't comfortable, talking about things that aren't

comfortable, because what it does is, it comes out of you. And you know maybe you can

figure out something. 'Cause just doing the normal daily thing as far as history and math,

you know, biology, different things like that, that it helps with the brain. But in this

world, this new world that I'm looking at have to get more diverse. They have to. I think

just the most key class they could come up with to not only help the, the teachers, but to

help the parents too.

Joseph felt that perhaps classes that focused on racial identity development would help people

from different races understand each other and come together.

The parents shared their thoughts about and experiences with racial discrimination and

evidence of negative racial assumptions the teachers held. They recommended teachers get to

know the challenges facing the African American community due to the persistence of

institutionalized racism and be more reflective about the way their negative racial assumptions

show when they interact with African American families. They also felt teachers could do more to make the schools culturally relevant places for all children.

DEVELOP A MUTUAL, POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP

In addition to developing more racial awareness, the parents recommended that teachers develop a mutual, positive relationship with parents. As a reminder, in chapter 4, I discussed how teachers with whom the parents held positive relationships, got to know the parents. At the same time, for advice, the parents felt teachers should: 1) be open to sharing about who they are, and 2) take an assets approach when talking about their children.

"…I just say be… be open…" (Michael)

The African American parents advised that teachers should be open to sharing about who they are as individuals. Being open was characterized as: a) listening to parents, and b) the teacher sharing about themselves. When teachers were open with African American parents, the parents felt more confident that their children were in good hands.

Onicah shared her thoughts about the importance of listening to parents in order to establish a connection. She explained:

> I mean just be open to…. I don't know. I live on communication. That's how things work out for me. When it comes to communication, be open, open to listening to the parents and looking at their perspective and go beyond just the situation that has occurred or whatever you know…

Onicah wanted to know that her children's teachers would listen to her and respect that she knew her children best.

Amanda explained that getting to know about the teacher is important to her. She wanted to know who is responsible for her children when they are away from her. She explained:

I'm dropping off my treasure to you. Who are you? You know what I mean? Who are you? Who are you that I'm dropping my kid off? What do I know about you? So, I think that some of the teachers should give a presentation of themselves, so that, you know, a parent know exactly who they are dropping their kid off, just like if you was going to a daycare. You want to look at the background of this place, you know, how they treat the kids, or what have you. The same way you will feel toward the teachers. I would like to know, you know, a little bit about you. You know, are you a mom? You know what I mean? I like to know how long have you, you know, taught in school? Have you ever had a dispute? How did you handle it? Just as if you were getting a job. I would like to know who you are, why I'm leaving my baby with you. You know what I mean? So, I will have to figure that out. And so, with myself being here, I kind of know predominantly of the teachers that I leave my kids with. So that makes me comfortable enough to leave my kid there.

Amanda wanted to be reassured that the people she was leaving in charge of her children were people with whom she felt comfortable. She needed to feel like she knew the teachers in order to be comfortable.

Michael agreed with the importance of teachers sharing who they are with parents. He stated:

For me, I just say be, be open and just be, be willing to not only actively listen but also share just some of your personal experiences to try to build that connection with the family that you feel is being difficult to connect with.

Michael suggested allowing parents to get to know the teacher personally as a strategy that may help a teacher develop a mutual, positive relationship with parents.

"Stay away from the whole, "most students" comment." **(Onicah)**

The final recommendation from the parents for teachers related to mutual, positive relationships centered on wanting teachers to be asset-based in their conversations with parents. The parents felt that too often, a positive relationship is derailed by thoughtless words from a teacher that cause hurt to the parents.

Onicah offered a specific example of word choice that, when used by a teacher, could be a barrier to establishing a connection with African American parents. She explained:

Stay away from the whole, "most students" comment. I've heard that a lot with some teachers, not necessarily in my situation. And I get it because they're dealing with a group of students all the time and… I know everybody has students. You don't have much time for one on one. But I'm not saying teachers should have a personal relationship with every student but just try to take every child into perspective on their own and not just seeing everybody as a group can be helpful because I think that's intimidating to some African-American parents because they feel it can make them feel like their child is less than or something when it's used in that aspect. And the African-American culture is very sensitive to the whole being grouped. And you know so when a teacher says, well most students do this and your student's doing this. I have seen that be a problem. So, the word choice I guess. I mean anybody can be affected by that feeling like you're being grouped into a certain situation. But I think that African-Americans definitely have a tendency to be more sensitive to things like that.

Onicah felt that this might not be something most teachers would be aware of and teachers could unintentionally hurt their efforts at building a relationship with African American parents by comparing African American children to "most students" when sharing information.

Michelle had many thoughts to share about the way teachers interact with parents. She explained this need for teachers to emphasize a child's strengths:

You know when you talk to a parent and you have your parent teacher conference I find as many good things to say about John, Jim, and Harry before I have anything, even if I have something that they need to work on, I be careful about how I present it to their parent.

She continued to explain how it felt to her to be the parent receiving a report card and comments from a teacher. She related:

But when the teacher talked to me about my son, his problem, just like report cards came out last week. So, the teacher, what she said in her report card, when I was reading it I could hear her in my head. And that's not a good thing. It wasn't nice. So, when you put it out in black and white, you couldn't be a little bit nice? How am I supposed to feel about you? You know what I'm saying, you say… so all you see is my child doing this? OK. But he's a good child. She tells me that afterwards. He also is very helpful. He is. He can help everybody. He don't speak out of turn. He don't talk in class. He does not disturb anybody. He's not a fighter. No problems with him, period. None! But he's slow. He doesn't know how to do this. He doesn't know how to do that. He's behind. I know that! He has two tutors! I already know this! I don't need my son looking at this. Then the part he can figure out to read is disheartening. So, I was not happy at all.

Michelle felt that the way teachers spoke to parents about their children was vital to establishing a connection with the parent. When her son's teacher focused on the negative remarks on the report card, Michelle felt like she lost respect for the teacher.

Michelle explained how she trained her daycare workers to be aware of their words when speaking with parents. She related:

> That's how I train my teachers. To be, you know what I'm saying, when you're talking to my clients and you're talking to these parents, you better be aware of your conversation before you open your mouth, you need to sit and write it out. Listen to yourself. Bounce it off someone before you say something else to someone. Because we as parents, we do get very touchy about our children. It's natural. Especially if you want to say something negative about my child so be aware of everything.

Michelle understood the importance of words as both a parent herself, and as a daycare provider. She cautioned teachers to be aware of their words and how their words may land on African American parents.

The African American parents in this study recommended that teachers who want to build a positive relationship with African American parents be intentional about creating mutual and positive relationships with parents. They suggested that teachers be open to listening to the parents and allow the parents to get to know them, and that they consider assets-based language and they choose their words carefully to avoid harming the relationship with careless words that indicate that negative racial assumptions are being made.

DEVELOP A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHILDREN

Along with developing better racial awareness and engaging in mutual and positive relationships with parents, the African American parents wanted teachers to develop a positive relationship with the children. In chapter 4, I discussed that the teachers with whom they had a positive relationship, cared for their child. Care was observed when the teachers' interactions with the children resulted in the children being comfortable with the teacher. Here, the parents

also advised that to develop a positive relationship with their children, teachers should take an interest in the children and show empathy.

"I just think the teacher needs to find a common ground with the student." (LaToya)

Thea felt strongly that having the teachers more invested in the success of African American children was imperative for keeping the children on track. She shared:

> If we had more teachers to take more interest in our African American students and their families, we will have that many more children going to college. I think that when they say it takes a village, we could help steer our children, help steer the children straight where they're not going out after school doing things that they shouldn't do.

Thea wanted teachers to partner with the parents to help support the children within the school, so the children would be less likely to have difficulties away from school.

Michael also wanted to see teachers be more connected with the children. He suggested that teachers:

> … also try to draw connections with students. If you see a student that, that is withdrawn a little bit or might be having a few issues, try to connect them with other students and try to implement and encourage a peer mentor type, type classroom. Because ultimately these kids learn more from each other than they learn from any of us adults. So just finding the right ones to try to pair them with and just getting them in an encouraging environment. And I know, not that I have taught before, but I can tell that teaching is by far not an easy profession. But it is a profession just like many others that we choose to get into. And so, accepting what we chose to get into and then taking as much extra time as we can to put into those that we feel do need or could benefit from it.

Michael felt that teachers who were connected to and aware of their students' needs were in the best position to support the children.

"But if they would … slow down … and show a little more compassion…" (Monique)

The African American parents encouraged teachers to show compassion and empathy for their children so as to build a positive relationship with them. They reminded teachers that many children have difficult situations away from school and this can impact their ability to focus.

Keisha felt that some of the children are coming from home environments that are more challenging. She explained:

> It's a whole lot of stuff that they don't need like TV. Whole lotta scattered brain activity, hollering, yelling, screaming, you know, arguments and all this stuff that this baby … 5-year-olds have to deal with. Then they get to school, and you want them to sit still. He hasn't been able to sit still all his 5-year-old life.

Keisha argued that sometimes school expectations do not match the expectations the child has away from school. In this case, she urged teachers to treat the child with empathy.

Michael pointed out that schools can have unrealistic expectations for the children and need to remember that they are still young. He shared:

> And the biggest part for me is realizing that not every child learns the same way. I feel like a lot of teachers just from my experience expect the children to adapt to their teaching style. And honestly, I just feel that is truly unrealistic. When you're dealing with children, especially younger children who don't necessarily even know what their physical actions might get them into at the time. You know, just looking at them as kids and realizing that kids do nothing but make mistakes and not necessarily condemning or

writing them off or just saying that they just don't care or want to be bad. Especially at a younger age, the younger level, and even when you get up to the high school level.

In Michael's opinion, mistakes are part of learning and teachers need to keep in mind that all children will make mistakes and struggle sometimes. This does not mean the children are not capable of learning or doing better.

Amanda shared about her experience with a teacher that she described as giving her the "cold shoulder" and how this made her concerned about the children assigned to the teacher. Amanda explained:

> … the whole demeanor of the cold shoulder, kind of a little mean-ish, right off the bat like you don't have to be that way in society. ... You know, and that's just how you feel and then that also makes me worry, like if that's how you act in front of me and I'm a mom, a grownup, a person who can speak back fluently about your behavior, how do you treat the kids when we're not around who cannot speak for themselves? What do you do with them? That would bother me every day. You know, to know if my kid was in that class with this person. Like, you know what? I don't know if I want my baby in there.

The teacher's demeanor with Amanda made her question whether the teacher would be able to empathize with her children.

The African American parents' advice for teachers included developing positive relationships with their children. To have a positive relationship with their children, the parents advised that teachers need to take an interest in their children, like finding something they have in common, and making connections with them. African American parents also wanted teachers to show empathy for their children and try to understand what challenges they may be facing so as to better connect with them.

TEACH THE CHILDREN

As a fourth piece of advice, the parents emphasized that the teachers need to teach! Many of the parents expressed their frustration with African American children coming to school and not learning. The parents struggled to have a positive relationship with a teacher who did not support their children as learners.

"…we expect for you guys to teach them." **(LaToya)**

David believed that many teachers are not teaching the African American children, and this frustrated him a great deal. He explained:

> You know, how you going to just pass these kids through that ain't doing nothing? But when they get old enough to graduate they can't do nothing. Them teachers don't want to put up with the kids so they just pass them on. Kid can't even read. Just go. I used to go to my wife's school. Kids from early in the morning until time to get out sitting in detention. What's going on in detention? What you going to learn in detention? You won't learn nothing. You know why? Because you get the books closed up on the desk. … But you create more problems by not dealing with them. You know by sending them home. You want your kid to get an education. Why not somebody else's? Because they don't like to listen, they're hard headed, because of this, because of that. No, it's because you don't want to do your job. You want the police to do your job. It's crazy. Yes, straight crazy.

David felt that the teachers he had heard talk about students would allow African American students to not be educated but would never allow that for their own children.

Michelle believed that teachers would allow learning to slide for African American children when the teachers were afraid of the African American parents. She shared:

But then the Caucasian female teacher in the school is almost like they're so standoffish and skittish and timid with the little Black kids because they're afraid, well, I don't want to do this, the last time, mom came in and she said this, and she did that. The hell with mom. Let's get these kids educated! This makes no sense. When you come in the classroom, if you afraid to do your job, then you don't need be working there! You know what I'm saying? It's like a doctor. If you afraid to perform surgery, why are you a doctor? If you're afraid to deal with the kid and the family and a child, why are you a teacher?

Michelle believed teachers need to start working with African American parents rather than being afraid of a possible confrontation.

Michael summed up many of the suggestions that the African American parents in this study had for teachers who are wanting to build a positive relationship with African American parents. He believed that teachers who love what they do are able to connect with parents and children and they are focused on learning. He explained why he felt this is important:

You got to truly love what you do. That way you can truly put your all into it and encourage the kids to do what they do best. If you're coming to something that you truly hate doing, the kids can pick that up faster than any of us adults can, and they check out faster than anybody and they're the ones that are hurt. Just being able to communicate, connect, and then check out as needed.

Michael felt strongly that teachers who no longer loved working with the children should move on to something they do enjoy. He believed they presented a threat to the learning of all children.

CONCLUSION

The African American parent participants shared four recommendations that they felt could help teachers who wanted to build positive relationships with their African American parents. The parents explained that teachers need to become more racially aware, such as getting to know the African American community, seeking to understand African American daily experiences of being Black in society, and reflecting on their own negative racial assumptions.

The parents believed that teachers should create mutual and positive relationships with parents by being transparent with the parents about themselves and emphasizing assets-based language to avoid causing harm through careless language that implies a negative racial assumption.

Developing positive relationships with their children emerged as a third recommendation the African American parents made. They encouraged teachers to take an interest in their children and show empathy for their children. The final piece of advice that the African American parents in this study offered for teachers was that they wanted teachers to actually teach their children. They wanted to know that when they sent their children to school, no matter what, the teacher would teach their children what they needed to know to be prepared for their futures.

In the next chapter I discuss how the findings of this study compared to the literature and the conceptual framework. I also advance a theory about how African American parents characterize their positive parent-teacher relationships based on these comparisons.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

The literature has centered teacher perspectives in the research on the relationships between teachers and African American parents, while the voices of African American parents have been mostly absent (Hughes et al., 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009; Pepe & Addimando, 2004; Stormont et al., 2013; Vickers & Minke, 1995). However, the literature suggests that African American parents' voices must be heard if schools are going to fulfill their promise to fully educate African American children (Edwards, 1999; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Stormont et al., 2013; Williams & Baber, 2007). According to Vickers & Minke (1995), "Lastly, future research should also consider whether and how the constructs developed here apply within other cultural contexts. It may be beneficial to study parent-teacher relationships of successful and unsuccessful students within a given ethnic or cultural group" (p. 146). The purpose of this study was to privilege African American parents' voices to address the research question: How are positive parent-teacher relationships characterized by African American parents?

Thirteen African American parents participated in individual interviews and shared their descriptions of teachers with whom they had positive relationships. Altogether, the thirteen parents described relationships with twenty teachers. Five themes emerged from the data that characterized the positive relationships the African American parents had with teachers. The teachers with whom the parents had positive relationships: 1) connected with parents; 2) cared for the children; 3) had a shared commitment to the success of the children; 4) stayed focused on learning; and 5) communicated effectively with parents. Knowing these characteristics can help teachers and other school staff intentionally build positive relationships with African American parents and support African American children in the classroom. First, I compare these findings

to the literature and the conceptual framework, questioning whether my findings align with, disagree with, or extend that literature. Then, I advance a theory of how African American parents characterize their positive relationships with their children's teachers.

<div align="center">LITERATURE REVIEW THEMES</div>

The review of the literature on African American parent-teacher relationships yielded only eight studies that were written from the perspectives of African American parents. Five themes emerged from these studies about the characteristics of positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers: 1) mutual respect, 2) valuing/honoring parents' opinions, 3) non-judgmental beliefs about parents, 4) warmth, caring and personal connection, and 5) communication. I compared these themes with the themes that emerged from my study data (see Table 2). The discussion of how the themes from this study compare to the themes from the literature review follows.

Table 2: Alignment of Literature Review Themes to Study Themes

Literature Review Themes	Study Themes
Mutual respect (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007)	Connected with parents
Valuing/honoring parents' opinions (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Myers 2015; Williams & Baber, 2007)	
Non-judgmental beliefs about parents (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007)	
Warmth, caring, personal connection (Cooper, 2009; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010)	
Effective communication (Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010)	Effectively communicated
	Cared for the child
	Shared commitment to the success of the child
	Stayed focused on learning

CONNECTED WITH PARENTS

One key characteristic of positive parent-teacher relationships according to the African American parents centered on the ways that the teacher connected with the parents. The parents elaborated on this characteristic by saying that the teacher: 1) understood the parent; 2) treated the parent with respect; 3) established trust with the parent; and 4) showed care for both the parent and the child. This theme from the current study aligns with some aspects of the themes from the literature review of mutual respect, valuing/honoring the parents' opinions, non-judgmental beliefs about parents, and warmth, caring, and personal connection. This study theme also extends the prior research findings on the importance of establishing trust.

Understood the parent

The African American parents in this study felt that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships knew them and the goals and expectations they held for their children. The parents felt that the teachers understood the barriers the parents face on a daily basis in a society that marginalizes them and their children. Finally, they appreciated that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships took the time to get to know the African American community, whose children they serve in their schools.

Prior research emphasized the importance of teachers understanding the parents but characterized this understanding differently than the African American parents in this study (Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Cooper (2009) explained that teachers need to understand and value the ways that African American parents show educational care for their children. While the parents in my study emphasized the importance of a high-quality education for their children, they expressed a much more nuanced experience of teachers connecting with

parents to understand and value the parents' ability to contribute positively to their children's school experiences.

Comments from some of the parents in the current study indicated they agree with those made by participants in the Cooper (2009) and Diamond & Gomez (2004) studies, that teachers need to understand and value how the parents show care for their children and how they engage in the educational process. However, the parents in my study also expanded on what it means for teachers to connect with them to include an understanding of the societal context and influences that impact the lives of the parents and their families

Treated the parent with respect

A second way that teachers connected with parents centered on parents being treated with respect by the teacher. The African American parents in this study discussed the steps they regularly take to earn respect from teachers and school staff. The parents described monitoring their words so as not to appear angry or confrontational. They use their language to signal teachers that they too are educated and capable. They are careful to express their concern for their children, their willingness to work with teachers, and the goals and expectations they have for their children. Teachers with whom the African American parents had positive relationships reciprocated with their own respectful actions such as showing they value the parents' input and ideas.

Mutual respect was discussed extensively in the prior research studies written from the African American parents' perspectives (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007). Parents expressed their desire to be included as a full member of the instructional decision-making team for their children (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015), as well as the desire to have agreement

with teachers on what's best for their children (Williams & Baber, 2009). The parents in Colbert's study (1991) also described the pressure they felt to monitor their own interactions with school staff so as to be received with respect.

Trust

In addition, the parents described trust as another important component of feeling a connection with the teacher. The research alludes to trust related to mutual respect but does not address trust specifically (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010). The parents in the current study explained that trust meant that the parents believed their children were safe with the teacher. They elaborated that when their children felt comfortable and safe with the teacher, they felt they could trust the teacher. In addition to safety, the parents pointed out that the personal integrity of the teacher was an important aspect of their positive relationship. They felt a connection with a teacher who was genuine with them and who acted in a transparent way, ensuring they all were kept in the loop about the children.

Teacher care for the parent

According to the African American parents in this study, care for the parent was shown when the teacher with whom they had a positive relationship demonstrated compassion and understanding for the parents. The parents described the teacher as someone who showed their care by speaking to them with compassion, letting them know if there was something they should or should not do to support their children, and using asset-based language about their children. Compassion and understanding of the parents helped establish a connection between themselves and the teacher and fueled the development of a positive relationship.

This finding agrees with the prior research studies. For example, in a study by West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, and Behar Horenstein (2010), African American mothers shared their

strategies for getting to know the teachers and letting the teachers know them early in the school year, so they could be more comfortable reaching out to the teacher later. Myers (2015) explained the importance to African American parents in feeling welcomed and valued by the teachers. The perceived warmth of the teacher was another important factor identified in prior studies (Rowley et al., 2010).

A positive relationship between the African American parents and their children's teachers was characterized by the parents in this study in part by the parents feeling a connection with the teacher. This connection was described as the teacher understanding the parent, treating the parent with respect, establishing trust and showing care for the parent.

EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATED

The ability to engage in effective one-way and two-way communication was identified by the African American parents in this study as crucial to the establishment of positive relationships with teachers. The parents explained that the frequency of communication with the teachers with whom they had positive relationships was driven by the academic or behavioral needs of the children. The parents also clearly articulated three purposes for the communication they had with the teacher. They and the teacher would communicate to share and clarify information. This was mainly one-way communication. They would also engage in two-way communication as a way to be in collaboration for the benefit of the children and to establish a personal connection with each other. The parents in this study felt strongly that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships were effective communicators.

The participants in prior research studies also emphasized the importance of communication between parents and teachers (Hughes et al., 2005; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). The African American parents explained that

communication should be frequent and clear (West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Parents also shared that effective communication supports their ability to get the information they need to support the learning of their children at home and also helps the parent raise the teachers' expectations for their children (West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Other African American parents explained that respectful communication supports their ability to partner with the teacher (Myers, 2015).

African American parent participants in the current study and in prior research agree on the importance of effective communication with teachers and school staff. Effective communication is a critical component to the establishment of positive relationships between African American parents and teachers that support the children in the classroom.

THEMES EXCLUDED IN PRIOR RESEARCH

The following themes from the current study were not addressed in the prior research studies. Prior research written from the perspective of the African American parent participants centered on the interpersonal relationship between the parent and the teacher and focused on the adult-level interactions. (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, and Behar Horenstein, 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007). The parents in the current study repeatedly addressed their belief that positive teacher-child interactions were also critical in the ability of the teacher and the parent to establish a positive relationship.

CARED FOR THE CHILD

The first child-level characteristic about positive parent-teacher relationships according to the African American parents in this study focused on the care the teacher showed for the child. The parents determined the teacher's care by observing how the teacher interacted with the child and how the child responded to the teacher.

Teacher interactions with the child

The African American parents shared that the teachers with whom they had a positive relationship demonstrated they cared for the parent's child. This care was shown through the teacher's empathy for the child, such as supporting a child when the child was being teased for having an IEP, sharing daily affirmations with the child, or getting down on the child's level when speaking to the child. The parents also observed that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships would commit extra time and effort to support the child, such as attending their special events outside of the school day.

Child's response to the teacher

Teachers with whom the African American parents in this study had a positive relationship were acutely aware of how their children responded to that teacher. Parents observed evidence that their children felt safe and comfortable with the teacher. As Amanda noted, "…me being a mom, I'm paying attention to how my kids feel with a particular person." The parents described with smiles the ways their children responded to the teachers with whom they had positive relationships. They shared that their children would run up to the teacher, would go visit the teacher long after they were no longer at the school, and would be happy to see the teacher.

SHARED COMMITMENT TO THE SUCCESS OF THE CHILDREN

The African American parents in this study identified the teacher's commitment to the success of their child as a second child-level characteristic of positive parent-teacher relationships. The parents observed a teacher's commitment to their child when the teacher demonstrated a mutual investment in the child's learning and when the teacher went over and beyond the expectations of the job to provide something of benefit to the child or the family.

Mutual investment

Teachers with whom African American parents had positive relationships demonstrated to the parents that they were as invested in the learning of the child as the parent. The parents noted that these teachers put extra effort into ensuring their child was learning and built a partnership with the parents to help the child succeed. Parents described times when a teacher provided one on one support for their child, kept the child after school for extra help, and held their child accountable for learning and behavior. Several parents explained how the teachers with whom they had a positive relationship reached out to the parent to establish a partnership to support their child. The parents shared about the ways they established "an understanding" with a teacher that led to a partnership approach to their child's school success. A teacher's willingness to listen to the parents about what was best for their child and to work with the parents was critical to establishing a positive relationship.

Over and beyond the expectations of the job

Several of the African American parents recalled the ways that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships went over and beyond the expectations of their job when supporting the children. Thea described a Saturday academy that a teacher initiated to help the children with learning free of charge. Other parents described the ways teachers kept them informed of their child's progress, walking the child home to tell the parent about the day, and preparing materials for the child to use through the summer so as to stay on track academically. The parents expressed gratitude at the commitment demonstrated by the teachers.

STAYED FOCUSED ON LEARNING

The third child-level characteristic of positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers is the emphasis the parents placed on their children

receiving a high-quality education. Teachers with whom the parents had positive relationships were described by the parents as focused on their child's learning and having a positive impact on their child's achievement.

Focused on learning

According to the African American parents, the teachers with whom the parents had positive relationships kept the classroom focused on learning. They did this by keeping the children engaged in learning and supporting children if and when they showed signs of struggling. Parents in the study explained how the teachers with whom they had positive relationships insisted the children stay engaged in the classroom. Thea expressed how the teacher's commitment to her son's learning was evidence to her that the teacher cared. The parents also expressed their appreciation when the teacher did not allow their child to disengage with learning and would contact the parent for collaboration on how to keep the child focused.

Positive impact on achievement

The African American parents in the study believed that their children were more academically successful during the years they were with the teacher with whom the parent had a positive relationship. Parents, like Thea, explained that their child improved her reading level or were reading on grade level at the end of that school year. Other parents, like Ursula, described how her child was more confident as a student at the end of the school year when they were with the teacher with whom the parent had a positive relationship. When the parents in this study had a positive relationship with the teacher, they felt their children were academically more successful during the school year.

Comparing the findings from the current study on African American parents' positive relationships with their children's teachers to the prior research on the same topic showed

agreement with the adult-level themes. The first key finding from the present study, connected with parents, aligned with and extended the literature review themes of mutual respect, valuing/honoring parents' opinions, non-judgmental beliefs about parents, and warmth, caring, and personal connection. The current study and the literature review also yielded a common finding of effective communication. However, child-level findings in the current study diverged from the literature review findings. The African American parent participants in this study believed that the teachers' relationship with their children and focus on learning were critical factors in the parents' ability to develop a positive relationship with their children's teachers.

COMPARISON OF FINDINGS TO LITERATURE ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent involvement in schools includes a much larger body of literature than that of parent-teacher relationships and shows that parent involvement is also important to the success of students of color and students from low-income households (Christianakis, 2011; Dearing, Simpkins, Kreider, & Weiss, 2006; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Trotman, 2001; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017). Like the literature on parent-teacher relationships, the literature on parent involvement focuses primarily on the perspectives of teachers. Evidence of parent involvement includes parent participation in school activities (Chrispeels, 1996; Christianakis, 2011; Hill & Craft, 2003; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005), regular communication with the school (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Christianakis, 2011), supporting learning at home (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005), and the involvement of parents in school-wide decision-making (Chrispeels, 1996; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Vanderpool Robinson, 2017).

Based on the data shared with me by the participants in this study, I believe parents can be considered by educators to be involved in their children's school without necessarily having a positive relationship with their children's teacher and vice versa. For example, parents could

show up for school events, trade emails with the teacher, and make sure homework is completed, without feeling connected to the teacher or feeling that the teacher demonstrates caring for their child. Similarly, a parent could feel a connection with the teacher, have effective communication, believe the teacher cares about their child and is committed to their child's success without attending school events or getting involved in schoolwide decision-making. As such, while it may appear that parent-teacher relationships are a part of the bigger topic of parent involvement, African American positive parent-teacher relationships as described by the participants in this study are different and speak to a deeper connection with the teachers that can lead to partnership for the success of the child.

In addition to comparing my findings to the related literature, I also analyzed the findings of my study through the lens of my conceptual framework, Black Feminist Epistemology.

BLACK FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY THEMES

Black feminist epistemology provided a crucial lens through which I developed this study and analyzed the data. As a white, middle class, female school administrator, it was imperative that I ground this work in a conceptual framework that would support my goal to minimize the impact of my own racial bias and elevate the voices of the African American parents. I wanted to represent their thoughts and words, not speak for them.

Black feminist epistemology includes four primary tenets: 1) wisdom, 2) dialogue, 3) ethic of caring, and 4) personal accountability (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009). In addition to these four tenets, a fifth theme emerged from the literature around Black Feminism: the importance placed on education (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994).

In a similar way to the literature review, I compared the themes of Black feminism to the study findings (see Table 3). The tenets of Black feminist epistemology were developed by Hill

Collins, based on the actual lived experiences of Black women. Considering the findings from

the present study in light of the five tenets of Black feminism provided additional insight into the

ways the African American parents in this study characterized their positive relationships with

their children's teachers.   A comparison of the findings from the current study and the tenets of

Black feminism follows.

Table 3: Alignment of Black Feminist Epistemology Tenets to Study Findings

Black Feminist Epistemology Tenets	Study Themes
Wisdom (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009)	Connected with parents (Understand the parents, treat the parents with respect)
Dialogue (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009)	Effectively communicated
Ethic of caring (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009)	Connected with parents (Care for the parent) Cared for the child
Personal accountability (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009)	Connected with parents (Establishing trust)
Focus on education (Hill Collins, 2009; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1994)	Shared commitment to the success of the child Stayed focused on learning

WISDOM

Black feminist epistemology and Black feminist thinkers draw a distinction between

wisdom and knowledge (Hill Collins, 2009). Wisdom goes beyond the surface-level of knowing,

such as information one can gain from a safe distance. Rather, it comes from the personal,

intimate experiences of living. Wisdom is gained through a lifetime and afforded great value in

Black feminist epistemology. Through wisdom, one learns to survive in an oppressive society

(Hill Collins, 2009).

The African American parents in this study identified the teachers with whom they had positive relationships as being connected with parents and this aligns in part with the tenet of wisdom. Being connected with parents was defined by the parents as: 1) understanding the parent, 2) treating the parent with respect, 3) establishing trust, and 4) showing care for the parent, in addition to the child.

The Black feminist epistemology tenet of wisdom aligns with the study theme of the teacher being connected with the parents through understanding the parents and drawing on the parents' wisdom of their own children to effectively teach their children. The parents in the study explained that they had positive relationships with teachers who understood them, meaning the teachers knew the parents, knew the parents' individual contexts, and were familiar with the African American community. When the teacher took the time to understand the parents, the parents felt the teacher recognized and valued the lived experiences of the African American parents.

The tenet of wisdom also aligns with the study findings that the teachers with whom African American parents had positive relationships connected with the parents by treating the parents with respect. Teachers who listened to the parents, reached out to the parents for support, and indicated they were willing to learn from the parents demonstrated respect for the African American parents of their students. As Amanda noted, she knows her child better than anyone else, so it made sense to Amanda that the teacher would want to learn from Amanda how best to help Amanda's child.

The Black feminist epistemology tenet of wisdom helps us to understand why the African American parents in this study felt connected to the teachers with whom they had positive relationships. The parents felt the teacher valued their unique experiences as African

American parents living in a society that marginalizes them and their children and approached the parents with a respectful desire to learn from them and work with them. In this way the teachers validated the African American parents' wisdom about the best ways to teach their children.

DIALOGUE

The second tenet of Black feminist epistemology centers on the importance of dialogue (Capper, 2019; Hill Collins, 2009). According to Black feminist thinkers, dialogue remains foundational to African tradition and that claims to knowledge and understanding are worked out in dialogue with one another. Participating in dialogue is a responsibility, especially if one disagrees with something being said. Particularly important to the present study, establishing understanding and connectedness between individuals requires dialogue (Hill Collins, 2009). As such, the study finding of effective communication aligns with the Black feminist epistemology tenet of dialogue.

The African American parents in this study emphasized the ways they rely on communication with teachers to improve their children's educational experience. The parents found one-way communication helpful in being able to gain needed information, such as information about school events and assignments. More importantly, the parents found the two-way communication they were able to establish with the teachers with whom they had positive relationships to be critical to supporting their children in the classroom. The parents relied on two-way communication or dialogue to collaborate with the teachers and school staff when their children struggled to meet learning or behavioral expectations in the classroom. The parents also relied on two-way communication to establish a personal connection with the teacher. This

personal connection supported the development of a mutual, positive relationship between the teacher and parents.

For Black feminist thinkers, dialogue is an expectation and a responsibility (Hill Collins, 2009) and this tenet informs our understanding of the importance of communication for the African American parents in this study. Onicah described herself as thriving on communication with teachers. Effective communication and dialogue helped the parents establish a positive relationship with the teacher that supported their children as learners through improving their ability to collaborate with the teacher.

ETHIC OF CARING

The ethic of caring within Black feminist epistemology emphasizes the importance of individual uniqueness, the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue, and showing empathy (Hill Collins, 2009). The ethic of caring pushes back against the idea that emotions should be stifled in dialogue. Due to their own struggles in an oppressive society, Black feminist thinkers show empathy for others who struggle (Capper, 2019).

The ethic of caring as a tenet of Black feminist epistemology aligns with two findings from the present study. First, the African American parents in the study identified being connected with the teacher through the care shown by the teacher for the parent. Care for the parent was shown by the teacher with whom the parents had a positive relationship when the teacher spoke to the parents with compassion and understanding, showed empathy for the parent, and when the teacher used asset-based language when discussing the African American parent's child. Asset-based language, as described by the parents in this study, demonstrated that the teacher recognized the child's strengths and individual qualities, and not just their needs as a student.

The second study finding that aligns with the ethic of caring related to the teachers care for the children. The parents relied on their observations of the teachers' interactions with the children and the children's response to the teachers to identify whether or not the teachers cared about the children. Teachers who the parents identified as caring about their children showed empathy for the children and devoted extra time and effort to helping the children to succeed in the classroom. According to the African American parents, the children responded to the care shown by the teacher by being excited to see the teacher, wanting to spend time with the teacher, and showing themselves to be comfortable with the teacher. The teacher's obvious care for their children strongly influenced the teacher's positive relationship with the parents.

The ethic of caring allows for individuals to be themselves with others and provides insight on why these study findings were important to the parents. Teachers with whom the African American parents had positive relationships were not alarmed or put off by the parents when they expressed themselves, but rather showed compassion for parents and used positive language when discussing their children. They also showed empathy for the children and provided them extra time and support when needed. These acts aligned with the ethic of care.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Personal accountability, as the fourth tenet of Black feminist epistemology, refers to the expectation that a person's moral or ethical stance undergirds their opinions (Hill Collins, 2009). When an individual makes a claim or states an opinion, that individual must be able to explain their thinking and not be afraid to take a stand based on their personal beliefs (Hill Collins, 2009). Pushing back against each other's ideas is acceptable and expected within Black feminist epistemology (Capper, 2019).

The tenet of personal accountability aligns with the study theme that African American parents feel a connection to the teacher with whom they have a positive relationship through the establishment of trust. In the study, parents identified the key aspects of trust as feeling their children are safe with the teacher and the teacher's actions are transparent to the parents. For example, Ursula explained that her son's teacher with whom she had a positive relationship always took the time to answer any questions she had with detail. This helped Ursula feel like her son was safe at school and that the teacher's reasons for his actions were made clear to her.

The tenet of personal accountability informs our understanding of why trust was identified as an important aspect of positive parent-teacher relationships. Trust came when the teachers with whom they had positive relationships demonstrated personal accountability by taking the time to share openly and be transparent with the parents. Parents were able to better understand the teacher's decisions and actions and be at ease with them.

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Black feminist thinkers emphasize the importance of education. African Americans have viewed education as critical to racial uplift, as a means of liberation, and as a source of empowerment since the days of slavery (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). The African American parents in this study echoed the importance of their children having access to a high-quality education.

Two study findings aligned with the focus on education tenet of Black feminism. The African American parents in the study explained that the teachers with whom they have positive relationships: 1) demonstrated a shared commitment to the school success of the children, and 2) they kept the focus in the classroom on learning.

The teachers described by the African American parents showed their shared commitment to the success of the children when they put in extra effort to ensure the children were learning and when they reached out to parents to build a partnership to support the children. Thea explained how the teachers with whom she had a positive relationship would let her know if her children were starting to struggle with something. Monique shared that her daughter's science teacher would work with her daughter during his lunch break. These acts demonstrated to parents that the teachers were invested in the academic success of their children. The parents also described teachers who went over and beyond the expectations of the job to support the children. For example, Ursula described the way her son's kindergarten teacher would purchase materials for the classroom that would make learning exciting for the children. Thea shared about a teacher that would work with her daughter after school and then drive her daughter home.

The Black feminist tenet focused on education informs our understanding of the importance placed on learning by the African American parents in this study. The African American parents held high expectations for their children's learning and behavior. Above all else, they expected the teachers to teach. The parents described the importance of teachers keeping their children engaged and supporting the children if they struggled with learning. The parents also shared that the teachers with whom they had positive relationships were willing to reach out to them to collaborate on ways to support the children. The parents believed that this focus on learning led to higher academic achievement for their children.

The tenets of Black feminist epistemology are conceptual and represent a belief system that informs the way individuals interact within a society that continues to marginalize them. These tenets inform the study findings about the ways that the African American parents in this

study made sense of school expectations and interacted with school staff with whom they had positive relationships. All five tenets of Black feminist epistemology aligned with my study findings and all of my study findings fit within the tenets of Black feminism.

In the following section, I examine the ideas that have emerged from comparing my findings to prior research and Black feminist epistemology and consider what I have learned to advance a theory of how African American parents characterize their positive relationships with their children's teachers.

TOWARD A THEORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS
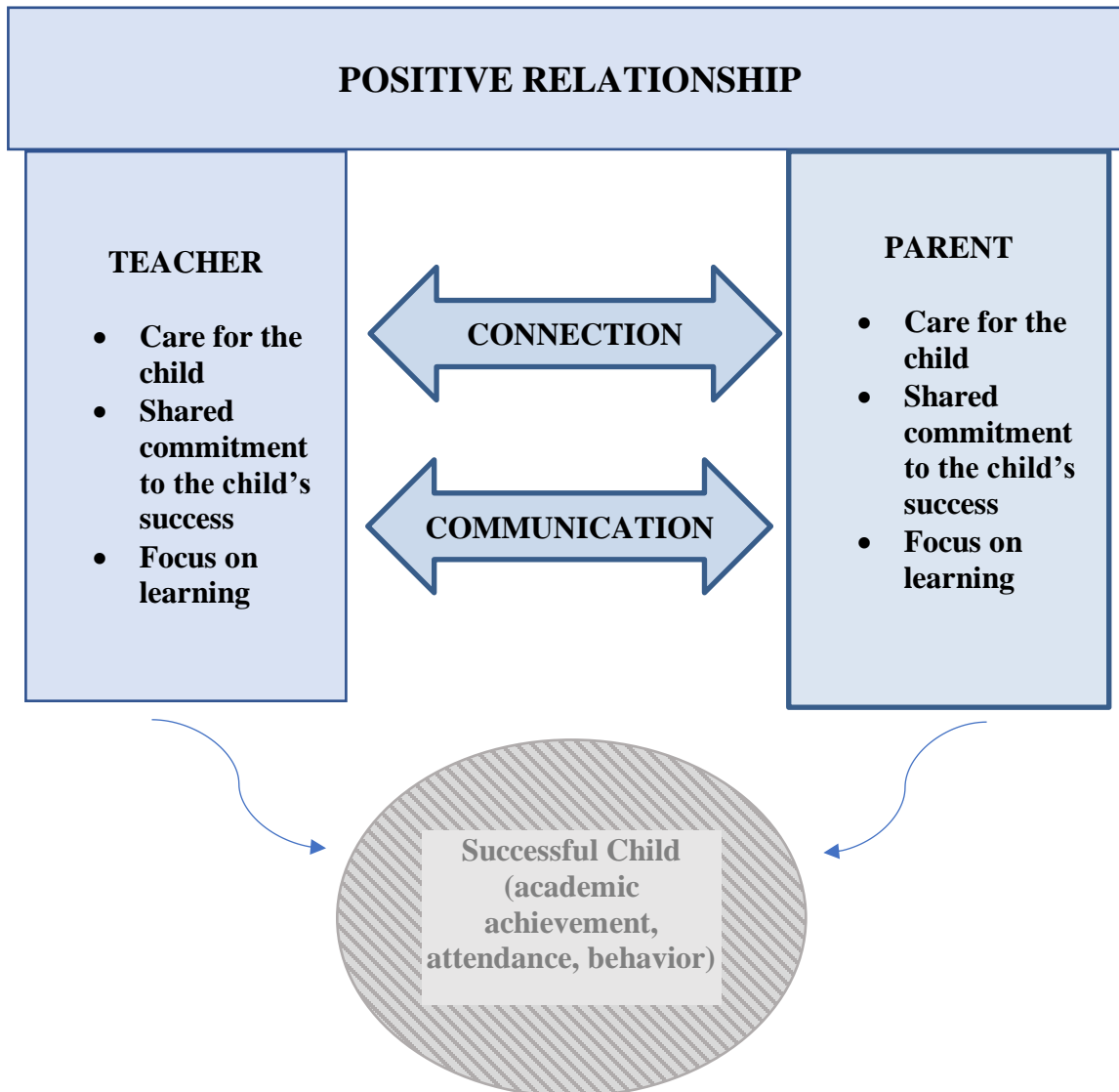
The African American parents in this study readily shared their perspectives of their positive relationships with their children's teachers. The study findings yielded several key characteristics of positive relationships between the parents and teachers. These characteristics involved adult-level factors and child-level factors. The adult-level factors included connecting with the parents and effective communication, while the child-level factors included caring for the child, staying focused on learning, and having a shared commitment to the success of the child.

The findings from prior research studies that were written from the perspective of African American parents about their relationships with teachers focused on the adult-level factors and agree with the adult-level findings presented in the present study. However, the prior research did not identify any of the findings on the child-level factors identified here as being important to the development of positive African American parent-teacher relationships. Based on the prior studies one may have understood the characteristics of positive African American parent-teacher relationships in this way:

FIGURE 1: Literature Review Themes
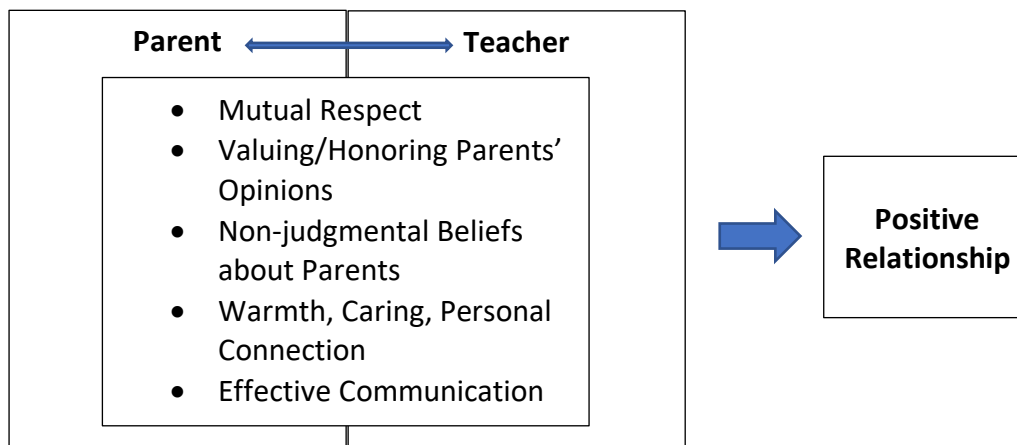
The findings from the data in the present study extend this previous understanding about the characteristics of positive parent-teacher relationships from the perspectives of African American parents. To review, the five key characteristics of African American positive relationships with their children's teachers included: a) connected with parents, b) cared for the child, c) had a shared commitment to the success of the child, d) stayed focused on learning, and e) effectively communicated. The parents in the current study placed an emphasis on the interactions between the teacher and their children (see Figure 2) as well as the interactions between the teacher and themselves (see Figure 2), illustrating a theory of African American positive relationships with their children's teachers. This theory depicts not only the five key study findings, but also the relationship of these findings to each other.

FIGURE 2: Toward a Theory of African American Positive Relationships with Teachers

The theory of African American positive relationships with teachers in Figure 2 does not imply a causal relationship between any of the findings. Rather the theory illustrates the way the African American parents in the study expressed their beliefs about the characteristics of positive relationships with their children's teachers. The teachers and parents together form the pillars of support for their children at school. Both teachers and parents show care for the children, are committed to the children's success, and focus on learning. The teachers and the parents

strengthen this support for the children through their mutual connection and communication. These child-level and adult-level factors represent a positive relationship. The parents in the study believed that their children were more successful at school during the year they were with the teacher with whom the parent had a positive relationship. The African American parents identified academic achievement, like reaching grade level expectations, and improved behavior as evidence of their children's success. However, establishing causality between positive relationships and increased academic achievement is outside the scope of this study.

Black feminist epistemology can help us understand why the child-level factors emerged as key aspects of positive African American parent-teacher relationships. The tenet of personal accountability involves the expectation that individuals can support their opinions and beliefs. The parents in this study are keen observers of the interactions between their children and the teachers. When a teacher demonstrated care for the child by showing empathy, holding themselves accountable for the child's learning, and putting in extra time to help a child, that action spoke to the parents about the teacher's concern for the child and shared commitment to the child's success. The teacher's actions were backing up their words and the parents felt reassured by that.

The African American parents in this study were adamant that they wanted the teachers to teach their children. Black feminist thinkers and the parents in this study were in complete agreement on this. Focusing on educating the children remained the parents' top priority! The parents wanted to know what their children were learning and how they were doing which in turn could support the learning at home. The parents appreciated the teachers who stayed focused on learning at school and insisted their children engage in the classroom. The parents pointed to the

academic gains made by their children with the teachers with whom they held a positive relationship.

The African American parents in this study clearly articulated that positive relationships with their children's teachers were characterized by both adult-level and child-level factors. This diverges from prior research studies which reported only on teacher factors. Black feminist thinking about the importance of personal accountability and the importance of education provides insight on why the child-level factors emerged as key aspects of positive parent-teacher relationships.

In the next chapter, I turn to the implications of this new theory about positive African American parent-teacher relationships for teacher and school leader practice, and future research. I also discuss the limitations and significance of the present study.

CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, SIGNIFICANCE

Implications for educator practice and preparation emerged from the data, as well as opportunities for future research. These implications are based on the characteristics of positive African American parent-teacher relationships and the advice offered by the parent participants to teachers and school staff. As David stated, "They [teachers] going to need help. We're going to need more than just you [researcher] out here doing that footwork [research on relationships] like that."

Implications for teacher and school leader practice

I present here implications for educator practice based on the findings of the present study. I also collected data from the parents on their advice to teachers for developing positive relationships with teachers (see Table 4). As a reminder, five findings emerged about the characteristics of positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers. In the first column of Table 4, I begin with the study findings and then list the advice from parents that aligns to that finding. In some cases, the advice from parents aligned with more than one study finding and is included with both, such as developing racially relevant classrooms. Implications for teachers' and school leaders' practice are identified in columns two and three for each set of findings.

TABLE 4: Implications for Educator Practice Based on Study Findings and Parents' Advice to Teachers

Study Findings/ Parent Advice	Implications for Teacher Practice	Implications for School Leader Practice
Connected with parents (Study Finding)	Get to know the families and community and their experiences in society	Get to know the families and community and their experiences in society
Become more racially aware (Parent Advice)	Let families get to know the teachers	Let families get to know the principal

Develop a mutual, positive relationship (Parent Advice)	Use asset-based language about children Racial identity work	Establish an asset-based culture in the school Be the lead learner in racial identity work
Cared for the children (Study Finding) Become more racially aware (Parent Advice) Develop a positive relationship with African American children (Parent Advice)	Get to know the children/take an interest in them Racially relevant materials Challenge racial inequities	Get to know the children/take an interest in them Racially relevant materials Challenge racial inequities
Had a shared commitment to the success of the children (Study Finding) Develop a mutual, positive relationship (Parent Advice) Teach the children (Parent Advice)	Get to know the parents' goals and expectations Hold high expectations for the learning and behavior of the children	Get to know the parents' goals and expectations Bring parents into school improvement planning Hold high expectations for the learning and behavior of the children
Stayed focused on learning (Study Finding) Teach the children (Parent Advice)	Interrogate student achievement data to identify disparities Collaborate with administrator, colleagues and parents to improve outcomes Implement effective instructional practices	Create the opportunity for staff to work with data and collaborate Support collaborative teacher teams through resources and scheduling Hold all accountable (including self) for improving outcomes for African American children
Effectively communicated (Study Finding)	Listen to parents Engage in two-way communication with parents	Listen to parents Engage in two-way communication with parents

Develop a mutual, positive relationship (Parent Advice)		

Here, I discuss the implications for teachers and school leaders that emerge directly from the study's key findings.

Connected with parents

The first implication for teachers and school leaders alike is to intentionally pursue positive relationships with African American parents. Teachers and school leaders need to take the time to get to know the African American parents of their students and allow the parents to get to know the teachers and school leaders. To establish a positive connection, teachers and school leaders will need to become more racially aware. Educators need to acknowledge the persistence of racism in society, how this impacts their African American families, and be willing to acknowledge that schools are socially unjust institutions that have long perpetuated educational inequities (Artiles, 2015; Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Ford & Russo, 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014. Educators need to work on recognizing and interrogating their own racial bias (Collins, 2009; Dyson, 2017; Glaude, 2016, Hammond, 2015; hooks, 1994, 2015), and commit to the creation of more culturally relevant classrooms (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). School and district leaders need to be the lead learners in this work. Disrupting institutionalized racism in schools will require focused, intentional racial identity work and professional learning for teachers and administrators.

In additional to racial equity work, school leaders need to work with teachers to develop an asset-based culture in their school. The parents in the study cautioned educators to be asset-based in their language about African American children. Parents notice if the teacher knows the

child well enough to identify and clearly articulate the child's strengths and not only focus on their needs. School leaders who are regularly present in classrooms will be able to observe teacher language and mindset. This enables leaders to coach and push teachers in making the change from deficit-based to asset-based language about children. According to the parents in this study, positive language about children promotes a positive relationship with African American parents.

Cared for the child

A second implication for educator practice is that teachers and administrators need to understand the importance of relationships with African American children. According to the parents in this study, African American children will be much more willing to work hard with teachers who show they care about the children and who work to establish a positive relationship with them. The parents encouraged educators to take an interest in the children and show empathy for them. While educators should not succumb to negative racial assumptions about the home lives of the children, they should listen to the children and treat them with empathy when the children face challenges within and outside of school

Racially relevant classrooms support African American children and demonstrate the care of teachers. Ursula felt her son's kindergarten teacher cared about him when the teacher made sure to have books that featured African American main characters. In addition, teachers and school leaders need to be willing to challenge racial disparities when they witness them in their schools. School leaders need to work with teachers to create a culture where it is safe for educators to point out inequitable practices when they see them.

Had a shared commitment to the success of the children

Teachers and school leaders need to work with African American parents to understand the goals and expectations the parents hold for their children. This understanding supports collaboration between parents and teachers and supports children in the classroom. Likewise, teachers and school leaders need to maintain high expectations for the learning and the behavior of African American children and work to implement effective instructional practices.

In addition to establishing a shared set of goals and high expectations for individual children, school leaders need to engage with parents and other community stakeholders in deliberate planning for school improvement to create racially just schools. Parents need to become part of school improvement teams and have input into strategic planning. School leaders and teachers will need support from district administration in making needed changes and supporting these changes with material resources and staff.

Stayed focused on learning

A fourth implication for educator practice is that educators need to know how passionate African American parents are about their children receiving a high-quality education. Educators need to be willing to insist the children engage with learning, be willing to acknowledge when the teacher is failing to keep the children engaged, and also be willing to collaborate with the parents to get the children back on track, when needed. Educators cannot simply keep the children entertained or quiet. They must ensure the children are learning. Hammond (2015) refers to this type of teacher as a "warm demander." It is not enough to love the children, educators also have to effectively teach the children.

School leaders play a critical role in ensuring every child receives a high-quality education in their school. Leaders need to be active observers of classroom instructional and management practices. By being present in classrooms, leaders will be able to observe the level

of engagement of students and intervene with teachers when classroom practices are not serving African American children well. School leaders also need to be well-versed in the achievement data for their school. Disaggregating school-wide data and leading teacher teams in interrogating the disaggregated data will help bring disparities to light to be addressed. Teachers will know where they need to focus and collaborate to improve outcomes for students who are showing signs of struggle.

Effectively communicated

The final implication for educator practice is centered on the importance of effective communication. The African American parents in the study found value in one-way communication but relied on two-way communication to establish a meaningful connection with their children's teachers. Two-way communication supported the parent's efforts to collaborate with the teacher to support the children. Teachers and school leaders need to be willing to engage in dialogue and collaboration with African American parents to improve learning outcomes for African American children.

Implications for system-level work

This study presents structural implications for consideration at the larger school-system level, as well as implications for teachers and school leaders. First, strategic planning in districts needs to prioritize the development of positive relationships with African American parents. Publicly making this a priority creates a sense of urgency and accountability for those within the system. Second, school districts must prepare educators and leaders to build positive relationships with their African American families. Training during new principal and new teacher induction should be mandatory and on-going training should occur throughout the school year for all staff. This training should be designed, scheduled, and funded by the school district

to ensure that all staff have access to this learning and that it is not optional. Third, school districts must intentionally build time into school calendars for teachers and families to meet. Twice yearly conferences of fifteen minutes each will not support the development of positive relationships. Teachers need to have the time to connect with parents as part of their contract, rather than expecting them to juggle time with parents and all of their other responsibilities.

Finally, I believe school district leaders and policymakers have a responsibility to lead the way in challenging racial inequity. Just as teachers need to work in a culture where it is acceptable and expected to challenge racist practices, district leaders and policymakers need to do the same. Data on issues such as school segregation need to be interrogated and challenged and solutions sought. The participants in this study explained the importance of educators understanding them, their community and the challenges they face daily in a racist society. They also shared the importance of collaborating with teachers to support their children. District leaders and policymakers should work directly with the African American community to dismantle practices that inhibit the success of African American children in schools.

Implications for future research

Additional questions arose throughout this study that prompt further research. One important question is whether or not the establishment of a positive relationship between African American parents and their children's teachers can indeed be causally tied to higher student achievement outcomes. The stubbornness of the disparity in learning outcomes for African American children and their white peers makes this question highly important (Burchinal, et. al., 2011; Flowers, 2007; Hanushek, 2016; Husband, 2012; Pitre, 2014). In this study, I cannot make the claim that positive relationships lead to better outcomes, despite having the parents anecdotally relate to me that their children did well the year they were in a classroom with the

teacher with whom the parent had a positive relationship. Further research, perhaps using a mixed methods approach, should be conducted that can determine the existence (or not) of a causal link between the African American parent-teacher relationship and the student learning outcomes.

Another potential research focus could be the differences in demographics within the African American community. For example, do middle class African American parents have a different way of characterizing positive parent-teacher relationships than low-income African American parents? I did not ask the parent participants in this study any demographic questions, thus, I could not determine any potential differences with any certainty.

The importance of positive parent-teacher relationships is not unique to African American parents. Additional research studies have found positive parent-teacher relationships supportive of improved learning outcomes (Christensen, 2003; Cox, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Stormont, Herman, Reinke, David & Goel, 2013; Wong & Hughes, 2006). What is unique in this study is the voice of the African American parents about how they characterize a positive relationship with their child's teacher. Replicating this study with other traditionally marginalized populations, such as Latinex families, could also support their children in school.

LIMITATIONS

I identified three limitations of this study. First, the sample size included just thirteen parents who discussed a total of twenty teachers. This small size limits the generalizability of the findings, but the data do suggest some patterns in the thinking of the participants about the characteristics of positive relationships they have had with their children's teachers. Further, as discussed in the methods chapter, I did reach theoretical saturation with this sample size. Second, all the participants were from the same geographic region in an urban community, which

may impact the overall generalizability of the findings, particularly to rural settings or other regions of the country. Finally, as noted in my methods section, I intentionally did not disaggregate the participant data based on social class. Distinguishing between participants at different income levels may have illuminated some differences in the way African American parents characterize positive relationships with their children's teachers. However, asking participants about their income levels could have impeded my ability to establish rapport and trust given my positionality as a white school administrator.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study contributes to the literature in the fields of education and educational leadership regarding the critical importance of positive relationships with African American families in three ways. First, this study elevates the voices of African American parents related to the education of their children. Prior research studies focused on relationships between teachers and parents of their students. However, these studies centered on the perspectives of researchers or teachers (Christensen, 2003; Cox, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Stormont, Herman, Reinke, David & Goel, 2013; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

Second, unlike previous related studies completed without a conceptual framework, I conceptually framed this study with Black feminist epistemology. Doing so supported centering the perspectives of African American parents in speaking about their positive relationships with their children's teachers.

Third, this study revealed the importance of child-level factors between the teacher and the child as key aspects of positive relationships between African American parents and their children's teachers. The tenets of Black feminist epistemology help us to better understand why these child-level factors (the teacher caring for the child, having a shared commitment to the

success of the child, and staying focused on learning) emerged as significant in the data. Prior research did not include any child-level factors when discussing relationships between African American parents and teachers (Colbert, 1991; Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Myers, 2015; Rowley et al., 2010; West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, and Behar Horenstein, 2010; Williams & Baber, 2007). Teachers and school leaders who also understand the importance of these factors and work to implement them are more likely to be able to establish positive relationships with their African American parents.

In summary, the African American parents in this study were clear about their perspectives on the characteristics of positive relationships with their children's teachers and about why they believe positive relationships are important to the school success of their children. While a causal connection between positive parent-teacher relationships and student achievement cannot be drawn from the data, the African American parents in the present study believed their children were more academically successful when the parents had positive relationships with their children's teachers. Schools across the country continue to struggle with meeting the educational needs of their African American children. This study adds to the research by providing guidance directly from African American parents on steps school leaders and teachers can take toward making their schools more racially equitable.

EPILOGUE

It was good talking to you too. Sometimes it's good to talk to other people that don't know you. You get things out that, like, don't know if I would even talk to nobody else about that. Know what I mean? But I felt like, I feel comfortable enough with you to do that. - Joseph

An immediate impact

I am both humbled and grateful to the parents in this study for allowing me the privilege of listening to and learning from them. Just a few short weeks into the data collection stage of my study, I found myself continuously reflecting on what I was learning from the parents and how it might apply to my work as an elementary school principal. I saw the teachers and wondered which of them would be identified by an African American parent as someone with whom they had a positive relationship? I wondered which teachers are aware of the goals and expectations their African American parents have for their children and for us as educators? I wondered how many teachers are aware of how important it is to African American parents that their children receive the best education possible?

Beginning with the first initial interviews, I learned that African American parents have high expectations for educators, as well as their own children. When they send their children to us, they are entrusting us with their treasures and they want us to care for, respect, and connect with their children. However, the most important thing they want is for us to educate their children, not simply keep them in the classroom, keep them happy, or keep them entertained. They want us to ensure the children are learning and will be prepared to graduate and pursue higher education and/or careers. Several participants felt that some teachers did what they needed to do to keep the children from causing a problem in class, even if that meant keeping

them from learning. As a principal, I believe teachers do feel that pressure. They may be concerned that when they push a child with academics, the child gets frustrated and acts out. Then they will have to call the child's parent, and this may make them uncomfortable. To avoid this situation, some teachers may opt not to push academics too much, resulting in the child falling behind compared to peers.

In my own school, I have seen teachers willing to let a child sleep because the teacher believes the child is not able to sleep adequately at home (for a variety of assumed reasons). This misplaced empathy (based on implicit racial bias) does the child a huge disservice. I do not believe this situation would be acceptable to any of the parents I interviewed. Having the child miss learning is simply not okay. Instead, I believe they would want a phone call from the teacher letting them know that the child is wanting to sleep so they could work on a solution together.

The participants also shared about behavioral challenges their children have had in the classroom. What I heard from each participant in this situation is that they wanted the teacher to do the hard work of correcting the inappropriate behavior in the classroom, while leaning on the parents' knowledge, input, and support. They did not want their child to be allowed to misbehave at school. When teachers do not insist on good behavior, the parents felt the schools were allowing misbehavior which takes away from their child's learning and sets a poor precedent for the child in the future. Now when I sit in classrooms, I notice which students are actively engaged, which students may be off to the side, which students are allowed to move away from the group during a lesson, and which students are allowed to leave the classroom during core instruction for the restroom or drinking fountain.

These reflections have caused me to consider how to best share with my staff what I have learned in this study to help build our collective capacity to do better by our African American families. I could stand up and tell them. That's the privilege of having positional authority as a principal. However, I believe it would be better for the teachers to hear directly from parents. I am considering bringing together an African American parent panel in the fall during our beginning of the year professional development days. This will require careful planning to ensure that the teachers feel respected and not criticized, and for the African American parents to feel respected and heard. I believe it will be worth the effort and risk, though. I know how deeply I have been affected by this information and I would like the teachers in my school to have this opportunity. What the participants have shared with me is both simple and profound. It is straightforward and moving. What the African American parents are asking for is nothing less than what I expect from my own children's schools. Not only do I expect it, as a White, middle class mother, I feel entitled to have my children in a high-quality school with teachers that push them and challenge them to be their very best. I want opportunities for my children. The parents in this study told me the same thing. African American parents are trusting us (most of us educators are White) with their children in a racially unjust system and it is crucial we not betray that trust and that we hold ourselves accountable for educating their children in a way that allows them to follow their dreams. This study suggests we can only do this in true partnership with the parents.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: African American Family Perspectives on Positive Relationships with Their Children's Teachers

Principal Investigator: Dr. Colleen Capper (phone: 608-263-3106) (email: capper@education.wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Angela Montpas (phone: 608-963-1027) (email: montpas@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a research study about African American parents' experiences in establishing positive relationships with their children's teachers. You have been asked to participate in this study because another participant recommended you as someone who may want to contribute their opinions to the study. This study is being conducted entirely from the perspective of African American parents.

The purpose of the research is to better understand the relationship between African American parents and their children's teachers.

This study will include parents who identify as African American; currently have or have had children in K-12 school; and agree that they have had at least one positive relationship with one of their child/ren's teachers.

You will be asked to select the location where you would like to meet with the researcher for a face to face interview. Audio tapes will be made of your participation.

With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded so that transcripts can be made. The transcripts will be used to identify the common important themes that African American parents in the study identified about positive parent-teacher relationships. The audio-recordings will be kept secure. The only individuals that will hear them will be the researcher and the individual typing the transcript. The audio-recordings will be destroyed after the final report is written.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for a face to face interview that will last about one hour. Following the interview, you will be sent a copy of the transcript and asked to review it for accuracy. You will be welcome to make any corrections.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

We don't anticipate any risks to you from participation in this study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

WILL I BE COMPENSATED FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

Individuals will receive a $25 gift card for completing the face to face interview. Couples who complete the interview together will also receive a $25 gift card.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published.

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today, you should contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Colleen Capper at 608-263-3106. You may also call the student researcher, Angela Montpas at 608-963-1027.

If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print): _____

_____ _____
Signature   Date
_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

APPENDIX B

Guided Interview Participant Protocol

Introduction

- Purpose of the study – To better understand African American parent perspectives about their positive relationships with their children's teachers

- Internal Review Board Protections

  - Informed Consent and permission to audio-record

  - Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information (Rapport Building)

- I share with participants about the study and why their perspectives are important to the study.

- Tell me a little about yourself and your family (following questions may be used to encourage elaboration).

  o Do you have children currently in school?

  o If so, what grade?

  o Tell a little about your experiences in school.

  o (other questions to prompt elaboration if needed)

Thoughts about schools in general

- What is your overall impression of the schools your children attend/ed? (following questions if needed to encourage elaboration)

  o What do you like about their school/s?

  o What could be improved in the schools?

Perspectives on your child/ren's teachers

When we spoke on the phone, you indicated you have had a positive relationship with at least one of your child/ren's teachers.

- o Think about a teacher with whom you have had a positive relationship. Let's call that person Teacher A. (If more than one, start with teacher A and then move on to teacher B, up to five total)

- o Ok. Let's talk about Teacher A.

    - o Please tell me a story about this teacher that makes you think of this teacher in a positive light.

    - o How did you feel working with the teacher?

    - o What words would you use to describe the relationship?

    - o What did the teacher do that made it a positive relationship?

    - o What did you do that allowed a positive relationship?

    - o How did your positive relationship with the teacher impact your child?

    - o What was the race of the teacher?

Ok. Those questions were for Teacher A. Now let's talk about Teacher B.

- • Describe the communication with Teacher A. (following questions if needed for elaboration)

    - o How often did/do you hear from the teacher?

    - o How often do you contact the teacher?

    - o What is the nature of the communication?

    - o When or why does communication happen?

    - o Who initiates contact?

    - o What do you think about that?

Closing

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your positive relationships with

teachers?

Do you have any questions for me?