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# Hear our voices : African American parent and student perspectives for promoting academic excellence in elementary schooling

Bweikia Foster

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The University of San Francisco

HEAR OUR VOICES:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES FOR  
PROMOTING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLING

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Bweikia Foster  
San Francisco  
May 2007

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

<u>Burkley Foster</u>	<u>5/2/07</u>
Candidate	Date

Dissertation Committee

<u>Becky Saper</u>	<u>5/2/07</u>
Chairperson	
<u>Patricia A. Mitchell</u>	<u>5/2/07</u>
<u>Reita J. Galang</u>	<u>5/2/07</u>

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all of my students. Your enthusiasm,  
support, and encouragement never ceased to amaze me.

Always follow your dreams... they are free!

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First, I want to thank God for giving me the passion to want to make a difference in children's lives, for guiding my every step, and for giving me the strength to sustain faith during the times when I could not see the light.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

#### Introduction

Historically, the African American population has endured hardship, oppression, and disparagement since the beginning of slavery. One of the myriad of ways African Americans were denied equal access to various opportunities was in obtaining equal education (Bell, 2004). As Saddler (2005) stated, African Americans have dealt with the “persistent struggle for liberation in the history of their education” (p. 41) starting as far back as slavery.

Due to fear of revolt, acquiring deployable knowledge such as learning to read and write was prohibited from the slaves (Franklin & Moss, 2000) and laws were enforced that criminalized helping slaves acquire valuable knowledge (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Although very aware of the harsh consequences if caught reading, slaves surreptitiously developed new languages, taught one another how to read and write, and were determined to reclaim their freedom (Bennett, 1993; Williams, 2005).

After slavery was abolished, African Americans continued to struggle for the same opportunities that were allotted to their European American counterparts in spite of the “Jim Crow” Laws that were developed to keep America separate and the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court case which upheld these laws (Banks & Banks, 2005; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Fifty-seven years later, in 1953, the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision proved that the struggle for equal opportunity in education would not be obtained simply by acquiring freedom (Bell, 2004). The African American population was kept segregated from that of their European counterparts. Separate

schools and unequal educational funding and resources were a few of the inequalities which persisted. In the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, the courts ruled that separate schools and resources for African Americans and European Americans was not equitable (Bell, 2004). Shortly after this case, the Civil Rights Movement was developed to address discrimination and battle against the harsh inequalities in the African American population (Banks & Banks, 2005; Carson, 2003). Although the exact origins of the Civil Rights Movement were unclear, the focus of the Civil Rights Movement was to provide equality for the African American population by breaking down racial barriers (Carson, 2003).

The cruel practice of the African slave traders made it illegal to teach slaves to read and write (Baugh, 1999), and the practice of denying African Americans equal access to educational opportunities has had pernicious effects upon the African American population (Hale, 2001). Now, more than 100 years after slavery, 50 years after the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, and less than 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have continued to trail behind their European American counterparts on many measures of achievement (Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Thompson, 2004).

Academic achievement is one of the criteria in which African American students have consistently lagged behind that of European Americans (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The quest to discover strategies that will help to narrow the academic achievement gap has been a beguiling challenge.

This study gave educators an opportunity to discover what parent(s)/guardian(s) and students think will help to close the academic achievement gap and effectively promote

academic excellence. Most importantly, the study allowed the voices of the people most affected by the academic achievement gap a chance to be heard by administrators and educators. “Dialogue has a *majoritarian* interest in the rights, voices, and potential of nonelite groups” (Shor, 1992, p. 110).

### Statement of the Problem

Although there have been research studies indicating that the academic achievement gap between the African American student population and the European American student population has narrowed (Armor, 1992; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003), the academic gap still remains (Education Trust, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Nationally, too few African Americans read or do math at proficient levels (Education Trust, 2003). Failure to learn to read is one of the most common reasons for school dropout (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). The Education Trust (2003) stated that typically by the end of high school, African American students have math and reading skills that are virtually the same as those of 8th grade European American students.

There was a vast amount of research analyzing the qualities of effective teachers of African American students who have helped to narrow the academic achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Obidah & Teel, 2001; Paley, 2000). There has been little research conducted in which young African American students and their parents are included in discussing their views about the qualities a teacher would need to possess as a means to narrow the academic achievement gap and promote academic excellence (Kozol, 2005; Nieto, 2004; Obidah & Teel, 2001). “In the United States the voices of African Americans have historically been disparaged, ridiculed, and ignored” (Thompson, 2004, p. 217). As Delpit (1995) has stated, “Black parents, teachers of color,

and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate in discussion of what kind of instruction is in their child's best interest" (p. 45). This is important because both the parents and the teachers should be cognizant of the styles and strategies that worked for improving academic achievement, and when the two have collaborated success will follow.

The research study which was conducted aimed to fill the void in the research that has focused on academic achievement. As research stated, the academic achievement gap begins as early as Kindergarten (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, (2003). It is imperative that elementary educators be provided with effective strategies and practices that will ensure that all students are provided equal opportunities to achieve academic success regardless of home environments, lack of resources, or lack of parental involvement. The study that was conducted listened to the opinions of elementary school-aged African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) about the strategies they perceived administrators and educators should incorporate to help to improve the academic achievement of African American students.

#### Background and Need for the Study

Academic achievement has been considered critical for assessing student intellectual growth. Academic achievement represents the ability to participate in the production of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Academic achievement also empowers students on a personal, emotional, and social level (Gay, 2000; Thompson, 2004). Although research has stated that most students need to feel valued on many different levels; emotionally, socially, and culturally in order for them to perform at a high academic level, (Gay, 2000)

the African American student population is too often not provided the necessary tools to achieve academically.

Research studies showed that the current state of affairs in public education is not much better than it was fifty years ago for the African American student population (Hale, 2001). African American students are more likely to attend segregated schools with less qualified teachers, inadequate funding, and lack of resources (Armor, 1992; Fashola, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Stewart, 2006). African American students have typically scored lower on the academic achievement scale in almost all measures of achievement, forming a gap between African American students and that of their European American counterparts (Aronson, 2002; Education Trust, 2003; Hale, 2001; Perry, Stele, & Hilliard, 2003).

The fact that the African American student population persistently scored lower than any other nationality on the academic achievement scale is indisputable (Aronson, 2002; Banks & Banks, 2005; Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Davis, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Thompson, 2004). Educational statistics continue to show that African American students fail academically in schools nationwide. By the second and third grades, African American students scored less than European American students (Davis, 2006) and that by the age of nine, African American students are an average of 29 points behind the scores of their European American counterparts on all measures of academic scales (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Kunjufu, 1990). Nationally, in reading, 12 % of African American 4th graders reach proficient or advanced levels, while 61% have not been taught to even the basic level. Furthermore, African American children continue to achieve below grade level, drop out in much greater numbers, and go

to college in much lower proportions than their European American peers (The Education Trust, 2003; Nieto, 2004). According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003), by the time young African American students leave elementary school, they have fallen tragically behind.

The academic achievement gap ostensibly begins in the elementary grades (Banks & Banks, 2005; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 1990; Thompson, 2004). Developing effective strategies and practices that will help to narrow the academic achievement gap and promote academic excellence within the African American student population must begin as early in a child's academic learning and continue throughout their academic careers. As Banks and Banks (2005) posited, "the longer students of color remain in school, the more achievement lags behind White mainstream students" (p. 4).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to find out how to effectively promote academic achievement and excellence within the African American student population from the perspectives of parents and/or guardians and their children. The researcher conducted dialogues with the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the students to determine the effective practices and strategies the parents/guardians and their child/children perceived should be implemented in the schools and in the classrooms.

This study also aimed to investigate key elements that will help administrators, and educators grasp a better understanding of how to efficaciously include African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) in school related decisions concerning the African American student population. The voices of the parents/guardians and the students, whom some research has continued to prove as the blame for the academic achievement



gap (Ladson-Billings, 2001), were heard. They shared their thoughts, their opinions, their fears, and their concerns about the current educational system. In hearing the voices, the study focused on the point of view of the interested participants instead of an educational perspective of explaining, rationalizing, and dismissing the academic achievement gap as a product of today's disinterested parents and lazy students (Thompson, 2004; Saddler, 2005). It was crucial to listen and learn from the participants' perspectives about what needed to be done to help to promote academic achievement amongst the African American student population.

### Research Questions

The major questions for this participatory study were the following:

1. What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?
2. What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap in the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?
3. From the perceptions of the parent(s)/guardian(s), how can parent(s)/guardian(s), schools, and students work together to promote student academic success and parent involvement?

### Theoretical Rationale

Two theoretical perspectives that helped to guide the research of this study were critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching. Critical race theory focused on the

effects race and racism has had on people of color (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Saddler, 2005). Critical race theory has been useful in the educational field because the theory recognized the role racism has played in the structuring of schools and of schooling practices (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The African American population has had to persevere and fight for their equal educational opportunities. Gaining equitable access to education has been an example of one of the innumerable accounts of racist policies forced upon the African American community: racist laws, separated schools, unequal facilities and resources, and under qualified teachers. As Solorzano and Yosso (2001) stated, “critical race theory in teacher education provided a framework to challenge and empower educators to look for many strengths within students and communities of color in order to combat and eliminate negative racial stereotypes” (p. 6). The students of color and their parent(s)/guardian(s), are also provided the opportunity to find their voices and to gain empowerment when racism is examined and racist injuries are named (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

Culturally responsive teaching was the second theory to help guide the research study. Culturally responsive teaching is based on the research relevant to the need to empower students on the personal and societal levels (Thompson, 2004). Shor (1992) defined empowerment as a pedagogy that “relates personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change” (p.15). Ladson-Billings (1994) added, it “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 18). As Gay (2000) stated, culturally responsive teaching, “teaches to and through students’ personal and culture

strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments”(p. 24).

Additionally, the primary aim of culturally responsive teaching is to provide students with many opportunities to learn about their culture and to have the opportunity to view their culture as important and valuable (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Thompson, 2004).

Culturally responsive educators incorporate each child’s culture into the curriculum, to ensure that students learn about, value, and take pride in their own culture as well as other cultures (Kohl, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 1999). Culturally responsive educators recognize and capitalize on each student’s strengths to motivate and enable him or her to learn (Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

Critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching provide educators with a foundation for approaching African American students. Racism has overtly shaped the United States institutions since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has continued to shape our institutions (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). If academic achievement and excellence is to be fostered, educators must critically evaluate their own teaching practices as well as their own beliefs. Critical race theory posits that racism and biases in public schools are institutionalized, systemic, and cumulative (Saddler, 2005). In addition, culturally responsive teaching acknowledges the child’s home experiences and the talent every child possesses (Au, 2006).

As Shor (1992) noted, “people begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings” (p. 17). Students enter into the classroom with a wealth of knowledge, talent, and experiences and they have been ready and willing to learn. It is the teacher’s responsibility to incorporate the child’s culture and home experiences, look past the

circumstances that can not be controlled, reflect on their own practices and their roles in the production of underachievement, and to tap into each child's knowledge and talent (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

#### Limitations and Delimitations

The purposive selection of 11 elementary students and their parents/guardians decreased the generalizability of the findings. This study was not generalized to all African American students and their parents. Researcher's bias was also a limitation in the study. At the time of the study, the researcher was a teacher at the school where the study took place.

This study was confined to 11 selected students and their parents/guardians from one elementary school within one school district within the San Francisco East Bay Area for engagements of critical dialoguing over a 4 month period of time. The small number of students and parents/guardians who participated in the study and the fact that the study was limited to one school within one school district limited the generalizability of the study. Although information was gained by analyzing the responses of the participants, the researcher realized that the participants were a sampling of a much larger district population.

#### Significance of the Study

The findings of the study were important because they could lead educators to look upon African American students and their parents as resources instead of as hindrances. Too often, African American students and their parents are looked upon as the causes for the academic achievement gap. This study exemplified the need for school districts, administrators, and educators to begin to listen to their students and parents, working

along side their students, parents, and communities instead of ignoring and placing the blame for underachievement on them. In addition, this study could provide educators with awareness that students and their parents/guardian(s) can be viewed as conduits of information regardless of family backgrounds, socioeconomic factors, and other outside factors.

The children's and parents' participation in the study, allowed the community most affected by the achievement gap the opportunity to share their concerns about and solutions for the achievement gap and to take the necessary steps to promote academic excellence within the African American student population. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued, "the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system" (p. 58).

The findings from the study provide the necessary steps towards dismantling the biases, stereotypes, or assumptions many educators have towards the African American student population and their families. This study gives insight into how parents, young children, communities, and educators can work together to alter the draconian history of underachievement within the African American student population. Educators must move beyond placing the blame for underachievement, and search for effective solutions to promote academic achievement.

African American students are capable of achieving to their fullest potential when they are taught by a knowledgeable instructor who has taken the time to understand each child's unique needs and cultures (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thompson, 2004). Achievement is defined as an experience or accomplishment and every student can do something well when they have been provided

the knowledge, the time, and the space to achieve (Gay, 2000). These students can be made to feel valued and comfortable in their school setting if the right practices are applied.

The next chapter reviewed the research findings about the elements that contribute to the academic achievement gap between African American students and European American students and the solutions researchers have found that have helped to promote academic excellence for African American students. Historical implications and theories related to effectively narrowing the academic achievement gap and promoting academic excellence are also discussed.

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were defined as follows:

*Academic achievement gap:* The academic achievement gap is the gap between the average performance of African American students and the average performance of their European American counterparts (Davis, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

*African American:* African American describes the population sample with consideration given to African heritage to African Americans in the United States.

*European American:* European Americans are people who define themselves as having a European background.

*Bias:* Bias is an attitude or belief about the inferiority of the members of another group that supports the unfair treatment of the members of that group as a result of their identity (Ada & Campoy, 2004).

*Critical Race Theory:* Critical race theory examines how low teacher expectations, biases, and stereotypes coupled with unequal opportunities play a role in the subordination of students of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

*Culture:* Culture refers to a set of shared beliefs, symbols, values, activities, or knowledge of a group or individuals influenced by a wide variety of factors (Banks & Banks, 2005; Davis, 2006; Gay, 2000).

*Culturally Responsive Teaching:* Culturally responsive teaching posits that most students need to feel valued on many different levels; emotionally, socially, and culturally in order for students to perform at a high academic level (Gay, 2000).

*Cultural Capital:* Cultural capital is a process of powerful practices that are determined unconsciously by the dominant culture and which are used to promote success for specific groups in our society (Wink, 2005).

*Family:* Family refers to the student participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s).

*Guardian:* Guardian refers to an extended family member who has full custody of a child.

*Hidden Rules:* Hidden rules refers to the salient, unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit (Payne, 1996).

*Institutional Racism:* Institutional racism refers to sanctioned institutions like public schools that have play a role in replicating and maintaining systems of racial inequity (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

*Jim Crow Laws:* “Jim Crow” laws refers to the legislated segregation and other discriminatory practices, such as poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests, vagrancy laws, property requirements, voting fraud, intimidation at polling places, and whites-only primaries (Carson, 2003).

*Racism:* Racism is a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals (Tatum, 1997).



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Overview

“Education is rife with complexities, contradictions, multiple realities, and change” (Wink, p. 11, 2005). One of the myriad of challenges that has faced the educational system dealt with developing effective strategies that will help to close the academic achievement gap between the African American students and that of their European counterparts (Gay, 2000; Kunjufu, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tatum, 1997).

This review of literature is divided into four sections and includes the following themes: the first section discusses the historical aspects of the African American population with education and its effects on the academic achievement of the African American student population today; the second section discusses the importance of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in practices to help to raise the academic achievement of the African American student population. Also, critical race theory is used to discuss the biases and stereotypes educators consciously or unconsciously bring with them to the classroom. The third section discusses the causes and the effects of the academic achievement gap within the African American student population and the fourth section discusses the influences of the parents, the schools, and the educators/administrators.

*Historical Aspects of African American Student Populations and Education*

Historically, the African American population has had to struggle and fight for their equal educational rights (Bennett, 1993; DuBois, 2003; Franklin & Moss, 2000) and have overcome many obstacles. Less than 150 years ago, Africans were stolen from their homes they were separated from their families and brought to various New Worlds to work as slaves (Baugh, 1999; Bennett, 1993; Franklin & Moss, 2000; Lynn, 2006; Williams, 2005). “Through slavery, Black families were destroyed, self agency was crushed, the desire to learn was punished, and both body and spirit were often broken” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 118).

Although the slaves were faced with tumultuous times, many slaves understood that in order to escape the cruel practices, they needed to learn to read and to write the language of the slave masters (Williams, 2005). “Access to written word revealed a world beyond bondage in which African Americans could imagine themselves free to think and behave as they chose” (Williams, 2005, p. 7). “For the slaves, literacy was more than a symbol of freedom; it *was* freedom” (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p.13). Many slaves taught themselves to read and write under the threat of severe punishment or death (Delpit, 1995) and the law that prevented the education of Blacks (Tobin & Dobard, 1999). Some slave owners permitted training to slaves for service purposes but not training in education (Lynn, 2006). Still some had slave masters, mistresses, or the master’s children to help them become literate (Franklin & Moss, 2000). However, this practice was rare since many slave masters felt threatened and feared insurrection from the slaves (Baugh, 2000; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). As Williams (2005) stated that the

slaves masters feared that if the slaves were to become literate, “it would prove that they had a mind” (p. 7).

This is exactly what the slaves wanted to prove. They wanted to prove that if given the proper tools and an equal opportunity, they too could gain the power that was necessary to thrive and to survive. “Black self-sufficiency, threatened White dominance” (Bell, p. 40, 2004). Slaves were passionate about their desire to educate themselves and others (Bell, 2004; Bennett, 1993; Williams, 2005). They would read anything that was available to them and surreptitiously developed their own schools to educate other slaves (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Williams, 2005). “Blacks whether slave or free, saw education as both a self-sustaining proof of their humanity and a stepping stone to wealth and respect” (Bell, p. 40, 2004). They fought hard to acquire their equal rights to education. “Once literate, many used this hard-won skill to disturb the power relations between master and slave, as they fused their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom” (Williams, 2005, p.7). Slaves risked their lives and their families’ lives to teach one another to read and write. Even in slavery, with violence, insults, and punishments, many African Americans yearned to become literate, to have access to news and ideas that were beyond their reach (Williams, 2005, p.12).

Although slavery was abolished in 1863, with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and ratified in 1865 by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, African Americans, after slavery, remained isolated (Baugh, 2000; DuBois, 2003). They had no support, no tools, they had no shelter, they weren’t provided equal opportunities in educations, and they were surrounded by hostile men who were determined to prove that providing freedom to slaves was a monstrous mistake (Bennett, 1993). Slavery ended but the unequal and

unfair treatment toward the African American population continued. African Americans were still thought of as inferior to the European American population and the European American population wanted it to remain that way (Bell, 2004; Carson, 2003; Franklin & Moss, 2000).

After slavery ended, the African American population continued to fight for their equal educational rights through legal and civil approaches. In the *Homer Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, the courts approved a law for separate facilities to become legal as long as they were equal (Bell, 2004; Carson, 2003; Kozol, 2005). Fifty-eight years after this law was passed, African Americans continued to oppose the separate but equal law (Carson, 2003). One of the numberless ways the separate but equal decision licensed segregation was in the school systems (Bennett, 1993; Carson, 2003). Because of the separate but equal law coupled with the fact that many European Americans did not believe that African Americans deserved the same education as they had (Franklin & Moss, 2005; Williams, 2005), African Americans were forced to attend segregated schools with less amenities (Bell, 2004; hooks, 2003; Williams, 2005).

In 1954, a seven year old African American child and her family decided to fight the law that had segregated the African American population for more than fifty years. In the *Linda Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, Linda Brown and her family did not think it was fair that their daughter had to ride many miles to a segregated all Black school, when there was an all White school in their neighborhood (Bell, 2004; Bullard, 2004; Carson, 2003; Thompson, 2004). Although the courts conceded that separate schools were not equal, and Linda Brown won her case, immediate integration was not put into action. Many European Americans went to great lengths to keep African American

children from integrating their schools: expulsions, closing of schools, taking their children out of the schools where African American students were integrating and putting their children into private schools (Bullard, 2004; Carson, 2003; Franklin & Moss, 2000). Still, African Americans continued to strive for their equal rights.

The Civil Rights Movement was established after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools (Bullard, 2004). African Americans were tired of change not happening within reasonable timing and the Civil Rights Movement was the drastic action necessary to secure African American equal rights (Franklin & Moss, 2000). The movement proved that the African American population would stand up to European American intimidation regardless of retaliatory violence that could claim their lives at any time (Bullard, 2004; Carson, 2003). As cited in Bullard, 2004 by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressors, it must be demanded by the oppressed."

This process of doing whatever it took to demand equal rights has lasted for over 100 years. "One must consider the long and persistent denial of limiting educational opportunities for African Americans" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 32). African American students continued to attend segregated schools, receive less educational opportunities and lower academic expectations, (Thompson, 2004). Research studies have highlighted these current conditions coupled with the long history of insuperable inequalities and adversities as contributions to African American students remaining on the lower end of the academic scale and performing academically below that of their European counterparts (Fashola, 2005; Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004).

In the past ten years, the academic achievement gap has fluctuated. Researchers witnessed an academic achievement gain for African American students during the 1970's and the 1980's (Armor, 1992; Flannery & Jehlen, 2005). According to Armor (1992), the reasons for the gain were due to European American achievement remaining constant and the African American students making some gain in achievement; however, recent data showed that the gap has once again increased (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Hale, 2001; Haycock, 2001; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Research demonstrated that by the time African American students are seniors in high school they are performing on an eighth grade level of those eighth grade White students (The Education Trust, 2003). Unfortunately, the struggle for equal educational opportunities has continued. As Nieto (2004) stated, "the discrimination that students face in schools is not a thing of the past" (p. 39). African American students have continued to encounter unfair treatment and lowered expectations by administrators and educators (Hale, 2001).

#### *Theories Relevant to the Major Research Questions*

The United States should be a nation in which every child is allowed to celebrate his or her linguistic and cultural heritage, and none should ever be made to bear false burdens of cultural or linguistic shame through historical circumstances that have always been beyond their capacity to control. (Baugh, 2000, p. 103)

This section explored the literature which is related to the themes of culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory. It discussed the importance of implementing a culturally responsive teaching into the practices of educators. The second theory discussed the implications of racism within the educational systems by using critical race theory as it related to student academic achievement.

### *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Banks and Banks (2005) have stated that when the cultures of students and teachers are not congruent, someone loses out. Students of color are often the ones who lose out. Research demonstrated that diversity in the U.S. is becoming increasingly reflected in the nation's schools and in 2003, 40 percent of the students enrolled in grades 1-12 in the public schools were students of color (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Banks & Banks, 2005; Cortes, 2000; Davis, 2006; Nieto, 2004). Culturally responsive teaching, a term coined by Geneva Gay (2000), and culturally relevant pedagogy, coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), have the same characteristics and the same goals. Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy both build on the cultural strengths of the students (Au; 2006; Gay, 2000; National Research Council, 2000). For the purpose of this study, the term culturally responsive teaching was used.

Culture "is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, and communication industries" (West, 2001, p. 19). Researchers have explained that the culture students bring into the classroom are related to the cultures of their family members and their communities and that their culture, their language, and their experiences work together to develop students' identities (Delpit, 1995; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Nieto, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching is concerned with building on students' cultural strengths in the classroom (Au, 2006). Researchers have defined culturally responsive teaching as a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their academic and psychosocial abilities (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Further, culturally responsive teaching has incorporated prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic

identities of teachers and students (Au, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Children shouldn't have to give up pride and self-respect as the price of membership in an alleged democracy (Kohl, 1994).

“Students don't leave their cultural background at home” (Banks & Banks, 2005, p. 228). Far too often, students enter into the classroom with their own cultural norms or “hidden rules,” expectations, and ideas that are familiar to them but different from the norms of the educational system or the educators (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 1999; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Payne (1996) defined “hidden rules” as the “salient, unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit” (p. 18). Often times, the rules and the norms of students of color are not the rules and the norms of the educational system (Payne, 1996; National Research Council, 2000). School systems operate from the dominant, middle class, White norms that are deeply rooted in Western education (Au, 2006; Davis, 2006; Nieto, 2004; Payne, 1996). The students from socially and culturally dominant groups generally begin school with the knowledge and are familiar with the “hidden rules” that will place them at an advantage for learning and academically succeeding (Nieto, 1999; Payne, 1996).

This advantage and the practice of powerful ways of behaving, talking, acting, thinking, and moving is also termed cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Wink, 2005). Those who have cultural capital enter into the classroom with an advantage over the students who do not. Many African American students have little to no experiences with the cultural capital, the school norms or the hidden rules. Au (2006), concurred, “members of the subordinate culture become marked as inferior to members of the dominant culture” (p.20) when they are not familiar with the norms of the school system.



Implementing a culturally responsive pedagogy, allows for students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to be used as resources in their learning (Nieto, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching allows for the experiences of all students to be valued and ensured that no student or group is left out (Au, 2006). Culturally responsive teaching provides students with the opportunity to grow in, to understand, and to respect their culture of origin and that of others (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Educational studies showed a positive correlation between incorporating a child's culture and differentiating learning instruction to help raise academic achievement (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). Educators and educational systems that demonstrated a culturally responsive high regard for the cultural competence of students and their families, aimed at school success for students of diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Payne, 1996). The studies of schools that have proven to raise test scores and other measures of achievement have done so by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy coupled with various other effective strategies. Researchers conceded that these strategies do help African American students to academically succeed (The Education Trust, 2003; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 2004). The schools and educators enhanced students further in the instructional process and improved educational achievement by respecting culture and each child's individual learning style (Au, 2006; Conchas, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2001).

Culturally responsive teaching has proven to be one of the most salient strategies to help students of color achieve academic success. It has been an active approach to teaching, demonstrating, modeling, explaining, pushing, and prodding. It incorporates finding ways to use the language, the culture, and the experiences of students

meaningfully in their education (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Nieto, 2002) and empowering students holistically (Gay, 2000; Thompson, 2004).

To provide diverse learners with culturally responsive instruction, we must build relationships and hold high expectations, provide rigorous content knowledge while making explicit the hidden rules of learning, and teach students how to learn as well as what to learn. (Davis, 2006, p. X)

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory has examined and challenged the ways race and racism shaped our social structures in the United States and how the system of racism functions to oppress people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006). Critical race theory originated within the law professions, when lawyers, activist, and legal scholars realized that forms of racism were continuing as the social norm (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Critical race theory was related to the education profession as existence in schooling in areas such as school discipline and hierarchy, controversies over curriculum, and historical events, and IQ and achievement testing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

According to Cornel West (2006), educators must be “ready and prepared for racism. It hasn’t disappeared” (Stanford University Conference). Research findings suggested that critical race theory forced educators to look at race and racism and the role it plays within the educational system on student achievement (Yosso, 2006).

Yosso (2006) posited that critical race theory has its original beginning with “how race has been socially constructed in the United States history and how the system of racism functions to oppress people of color” (p. 7). According to Nieto (2004), racism is based on the perception that one ethnic group, class, gender, or language is superior to all others. She further stated, “racism is the acceptance of disturbing goods and services –let alone respect- in accordance with such judgments of unequal worth” (p. 39). Tatum

(1997) defined racism as “a system of advantage based on race” (p. 7). Critical race theory began with the notion that racism is a natural and necessary part of a society that is founded on White supremacist principles (Lynn, 2006).

The African American population has been victims of racism for more than 100 years, beginning with slavery (Franklin & Moss, 2000). Unfortunately, the educational system has had a long history of discrimination against the African American population because of race. The logics of our past have produced the systems, patterns, and social arrangements that many educators have accepted as normal (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Although many educators do not think they are implementing racist practices into their classroom, often times, these negative practices are occurring subconsciously (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

The historical dominance of Europeans in education may be responsible for the institutional racism which overwhelms the educational system today. Institutional racism has been maintained by the people who enforced systems that overlooked or ignored the established inequalities of our society (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Institutional racism benefits the groups with the most power (Nieto, 2002) and refers to public schools that do not provide all students the same quality of educational opportunities (Thompson, 2004). “When inequity has been institutionalized, teachers and administrators no longer have to be biased to continue biased practices; we merely have to do our jobs and maintain the normal practices of the system we have inherited” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p.3).

Critical race theory provides educators with the goal of working toward the transformation of education inside and outside of the classroom (Yosso, 2006).

Educators bring their personal biases and stereotypes to the classroom (Davis, 2006; Jost

& Whitfield, 2005). As Nieto (2004) stated, “negative and positive stereotypes have negative results because they limit our perspectives of an entire group of people” (p. 36).

Critical race theory has allowed discussions of race and racism to be brought to the forefront of discussions within the educational system. Critical race theory has informed educators about the framework of racism and the effects of racism. The perceptions of educators, their choice of teaching styles, what they teach and their expectations toward groups of students are stifled by racism thus impacting upon educational achievement.

Although the Civil Rights Movement created legal equality of opportunity, institutionalized racism persists (Hale, 2001). Discussions about race, institutionalized racism, and dominance must be brought to the forefront of conversations within the education profession (Davis, 2006; Hale, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Tatum, 1997; Thompson, 2004). As West (2001) stated, “race is the most explosive issue in American life” (p. 156); however, the first step schools need to take in order to improve the academic achievement of all students is to acknowledge how the school’s day-to-day practices participate in the creation of underachievement (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). “We must acknowledge how we differ as individuals and groups if we are to understand why normative assumptions are problematic” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 72).

### *Summary*

Both culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory provide educators with the tools to critically evaluate their perceptions and biases toward the African American student population and the strategies to positively incorporate the knowledge, the skills, and the talents the African American student population bring into the classroom. The conceptual framework which guided this study provided a link between racism and its

implications on student academic success. As defined by Tatum (1997) racism is a “system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (p. 7). Tatum (1997) further concluded, “the dismantling of racism is in the best interests of everyone” (p. 14). The academic achievement gap will narrow when educators learn about, understand and respect their students’ cultures, home lives, and language (Au, 2006; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2002). African American students do achieve in school environments that are culturally responsive, that develop a sense of group membership, and in which the expectations that everyone, regardless of race, can achieve is explicit and regularly communicated (Delpit, 1995; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thompson, 2004).

#### *African American Students and Educational Achievement*

Many African American students have been subjected to inequalities within the educational system (Fashola, 2005; Thompson, 2004). This struggle to achieve academic equality and success begins as early as Kindergarten (Gay, 2000) because by the time students enter Kindergarten the gap is already half its ultimate size (Flannery & Jehlen, 2005; Thompson, 2001). Educational research and statistics show valuable information about the African American student population and their willingness to learn while in Kindergarten (Thompson, 2001); however, because of teacher low expectations for their learning capabilities and teacher lack of understanding about the different cultural and linguistic styles, these students lose their desire to learn and by the eighth day of Kindergarten and have developed a positive or negative self esteem (Aronson, 2002; Flannery & Jehlen, 2005; Gay, 2000; Kohl, 1994; Kunjufu, 1990; Shor, 1992). By the second and third grades, African American students score lower than European American

students, and the African American student population have higher incidents of behavior problems (Davis, 2006; Hale, 2001; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Thompson, 2004).

African American students are also chronically underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented, being only half as likely to be placed in a class for the gifted as are European American students (Nieto, 2004). African American students, especially males, have received more suspensions and expulsions and are more likely to be placed in remedial classes (Conchas, 2006; Fashola, 2005; Hale, 2001). African American students also drop out of school in much greater numbers and go to college in much lower proportions than their European American counterparts. According to Fine (1991) and Larson & Ovando (2001) suspension has led to a “throw-out or drop-out rate of up to seventy-percent of African American youths in schools across the nation” (p.34).

It is during the primary grades where the foundation for success is laid. As Hale (2001) pointed out, “it is important to address the needs of African American youth at a young age because by the time they really have problems in adolescence, the problems are more difficult to reverse” (p. 41). Ladson-Billings (2001) added that these problems are often times, “fixed and immutable” (p. 58). For example, studies showed that students with poor reading skills at the end of third grade are more likely to remain academically behind for the duration of school. Studies further state that a child’s reading abilities in the second grade predicted that child’s academic performance in the eleventh grade (Hale, 2001; Hirsch, 2006; Thompson, 2004). Other studies added that by the third grade, evidence of students receiving the message that they were deficient, permeated within the African American student population (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2004).

As research has demonstrated, schools are not connecting the African American student population to academic achievement, are not teaching the African American students the “rules,” and they are not providing various opportunities for the students to choose academic success (Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Far too often these students are not expected to succeed and are given more opportunities to academically fail than they are to succeed (Delpit & Dowdy 2002; Fashola, 2005; Kunjufu, 1990). From the research, we learn that “academic failure is not an accident” (McDermott, 1987, p. 41). The school culture, teacher bias and low expectations, lack of exposure and experiences, and lack of teacher and family support all work together to contribute to the explanation of why many African American students are not succeeding academically (Banks & Banks, 2005; Conchas, 2006; Davis, 2006; Larson & Ovando, 2001;Thompson, 2004).

Historically, education was how African Americans asserted their identity as free people, (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Tatum, 1997) but now the African American student population is more likely to reject education because of the expectations from many educators that the students become familiar with and fit into the European American way of life (hooks, 2003; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Tatum, 1997) instead of maintaining their cultural pride and achieving academic success. Today, students often resist schools by choosing not to learn, dropping out, or withdrawing into passivity or silence, or becoming behavior problems in the classroom because they feel as though the teachers don’t respect their culture and they feel as though they are not being treated equally (hooks, 2003; Kohl, 1994; Nieto, 2004; Shor, 1992; Thompson, 2004). They are being forced to sit in classrooms that are boring, unchallenging, and culturally

irrelevant with educators who infer negative messages (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Porter, 1997; Nieto, 1999; Thompson, 2004).

All students possess intelligence (National Research Council, 2000), but only a fraction have experienced a peculiar blend of circumstances which have tapped into their intelligences. . Excellent instruction, a stable home, resources or attention directed at the child's development, a sense of trust, and a sense of pride about their culture all conflate to promote academic excellence (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Shor, 1992). Students need to be taught the brilliance of their ancestors and the tenacity the African American population demonstrated in order to obtain their equal educational rights (Tatum, 1997). This intellectual legacy should be celebrated within the classrooms (Delpit, 1995). Then, as Tatum (1997) explained, African American students can achieve academically while maintaining their culture and feeling proud about their culture. "Black students can become an emissary, someone who sees his or her own achievements as advancing the cause of the racial group" (p. 64). African American students can learn whatever they are taught (Hale, 2001) but they have to feel as though their history, their culture, and their families have a place at the schools and within the classrooms (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Obidah & Teel, 2001).

#### *Causes and Influences upon African American Student Achievement*

Research studies have provided educators with insightful findings about the significance of parental involvement, positive school culture, and teacher expectations and how they all play major roles in determining whether a child will succeed academically (Banks & Banks, 2005; Davis, 2006; Kohl, 1994; Nieto, 1999). Other studies suggest that when children are socialized and supported by their families, their



schools, and their communities, academic success follows (Berns, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Payne, 1996) because children are then motivated to succeed (Berns, 2004; Cole & Cole, 1996; Shaffer, 1994).

### *Parental Involvement*

A child's home has been identified as the first classroom and the parents and the family members are the first and the most essential teachers in a child's life (Banks & Banks, 2005; Berns, 2004; Clark, 1983; Delpit, 1995). In such settings, nurturing, affection, protection, and a variety of opportunities are provided for the child (Berns, 2004). Although research studies have demonstrated the negative perceptions many educators have toward African American parents, such as the perceptions that they do not value their child's education (Conchas, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Nieto, 1999), African American parents do value education (Nieto, 1999; Shaffer, 1994, Tatum, 1997; Thompson, 2004). African American parents want their child to succeed academically, equally as much as European Americans (Banks & Banks, 2005). Often times, African American parents have demonstrated that they care about their child's education in sometimes different ways than that of the dominant, middle class, school norm (Payne, 1996; Thompson, 2004). Instead of attending school functions and regularly visiting the classroom, African American parents may show their care by providing shelter, food, and clothing for their child (Hale, 1986).

Most educators are accustomed to the dominant, middle class way of showing an interest in their child's academic success. They equate positive parent involvement with helping their child with homework, attending all or most of the school meetings, and volunteering in the classroom (Davis, 2006; Howard, 1999; Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 2005).

However, when African American parents show their interest in their child's academic career in different ways, such as helping with homework to the best of their ability or only showing up to school related functions when prompted, educators perceive that the parents are uninterested, indifferent, or simply do not value education (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gibbs, 2005). Educators tend to label the parents as unsupportive (Banks & Banks, 2005; Obidah & Teel, 2001; Wink, 2005) and place the blame of underachievement on the parents (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Teachers equate the lack of attending parent/teacher conferences or various school events and the lack or inconsistent amount of help with homework as apathy toward their child's academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999; Thompson, 2004).

However, many parents do not have the time, the resources, or the skills to assist their child (Banks & Banks, 2005; Hale, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Thompson, 2004) and many African American parents feel that because the teacher has had the formal training to educate their child the parent should leave the education to the teacher (Gibbs, 2005; Thompson, 2004).

African American parents may also distrust the school system because of their own negative school encounters, or the negative experiences their child had encountered while in school (Banks & Banks, 2005; Baugh, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Hale, 2001; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Thompson, 2004). Because of the negative experiences many African American parents and students have encountered, they may become apprehensive, and question whether an environment where academic ability is prized is their best fit (Aronson, 2002).

As Kohl (1994) stated, education works best when “it merges the skills and knowledge of the community with the skills and knowledge of the educator” (p. 62). “The family, school connection is essential because it places education at the heart of the community” (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 49). Parents are the experts on their child’s needs and they must find ways to understand the different ways parents show their concern for their children (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Delpit, 1995). According to Hale (2001), “parental involvement programs that work for White, middle class are not as effective with Black parents” (p. 8). Studies suggested that African American parents desired teachers and administrators who cared for their children, met and supported their needs (Berns, 2004; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Further, educators who formed negative assumptions about parents tended to initiate contact with the parents when there was a behavior problem or when they needed help handling the child (Darling- Hammond, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 1999).

African American parents want to feel welcomed, they want their needs addressed, and they want teachers to communicate to them that they were valued members of the school (Banks & Banks, 2005; Rief & Heimburge, 2006). They want educators to challenge their children, to be patient with their children, and to have their child’s best interest at heart (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Davis, 2006). When schools work together with families to support learning, children’s level of success in school and afterward is greater (Berns, 2004).

### *School Environment*

Children spend 180 days in schools. The schools they attend and the teachers they encounter play significant roles in determining a child’s academic success (Berns, 2004).

The quality of a child's experiences at school can make a decisive difference in their academic success (Cole & Cole, 1996). However, the quality of school experiences most African American students receive is poor (Thompson, 2004). Research reported that the schools African American students attended are four times as likely to have received inadequate funding, under qualified teachers, insufficient resources, and these schools are more likely to be run down and older schools (Armor, 1992; Crosby, 1999; Obidah & Teel, 2001). In addition, these schools have higher drop out and suspension rates and lower test scores (Lipsitz & West, 2006). Sadly, these schools come to represent the social relationship and inequalities that are found in American society (Aronson, 2002). These are the schools in which students resist and choose not to learn because they feel they are treated unfairly (Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 2005; Nieto, 1999).

Research has also provided positive examples of successful schools which have narrowed the academic achievement gap between the African American students and that of their European American counterparts (Conchas, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Fashola, 2005; Hirsch, 2006; Nieto, 2004). These schools provided high expectations for the students and supported those expectations. These schools provided a welcoming atmosphere that is conducive to learning and provided a sense of purpose (Cole & Cole, 1996; Lipsitz & West, 2006). As Nieto stated (2004), schools that have successfully narrowed the academic achievement gap are characterized by "well-trained and motivated teachers who are teaching in a culturally sensitive, challenging way with a school culture that reflects a focus on high academic achievement" (p. 3). "For a school to be a powerful institution for African American students, it must also function as a cultural, social, and political institution" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 34).

Successful schools do not operate in isolation. They build connections to families and communities as a way to strengthen relationships in support of children, and as a way to better understand students so that teaching can be tailored to them as individuals. (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 46)

### *Teacher's Bias and Teaching Style*

“It is not the bag of tricks, but the attitude of a teacher that is important” (Delpit, 1995, p. 106). The teaching profession is comprised of 90 % European American, middle class, female teachers (Gibbs, 2005) Teachers from the dominant, middle class backgrounds often do not have the prior experience and the knowledge and understanding to distinguish between the differences in norms (Berns, 2004). Too often, teachers from middle class backgrounds entered into the classroom with their own biases and preconceived stereotypes about the African American student population (hooks, 2003; Howard, 1999).

Stereotypes undermine minority children and can spoil a person's school experience just by suggesting to the target of a stereotype that a negative label might apply to one's self or one's group (Aronson, 2002). Teachers have the ability to use characteristics such as class, race, gender, and ethnicity to determine students' prescribed social category and the teacher inadvertently acts on the prescribed expectations (Aronson, 2002; Banks & Banks, 2005). Many educators have sent overt and covert messages to the students (Nieto, 2004) and the students then act accordingly (Kohl, 1994; Thompson, 2004). Lowered standards and expectations for students inevitably affect children's self-esteem. Often, students have lowered their performance abilities to meet the standards that are set by the teacher; the students have fulfilled their assigned prophecy (Aronson, 2002; Berns, 2004; Nieto, 2004; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). This negative, self-fulfilling

prophecy has affected African American student's lack of trust for the schools and the teachers, and the students have often silenced themselves, becoming behavior problems, and deciding "not to learn," or dropping out of school (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Conchas, 2006; hooks, 2003; Kohl, 1994; Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Regardless of the family situations and outside factors that may not be repairable, child and the teacher interaction can be changed (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Hale, 2001). Administrators and teachers may not know what their students experience before the school day, but they can change what has happened to students while they are on the school grounds. The decisions educators have made have an impact on the lives and the experiences of the students (Conchas, 2006; Nieto, 2004). "A child's belief in the power and importance of schooling can be interrupted by teachers who explicitly or subtly convey a disbelief in the child's ability for high academic achievement" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 79).

Teaching styles have an enormous impact on student achievement. Teachers who developed a range of strategies and practices have helped to ensure that all students have had the opportunity to reach their fullest potential (Cork, 2005). Every child possesses talents and natural capabilities that need to be developed (Cork, 2005; Hale, 2001). Gardner (1983) has identified seven different intelligences, talents and capabilities, which students entered into the classroom encompassing: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and natural. Rief and Heimburge (2006) have noted that differentiated instruction and incorporated learning styles and intelligences have enhanced student academic performance.

The role of the teachers as an extension of the role of the parent (Delpit, 1995) has helped to ensure that each child is treated equally (Delpit, 1995; Kohl, 1994; Nieto, 2004; Thompson, 2004). “Young people are experts at understanding false pretensions” (Delpit, 1995, p. 151). Children are aware of teachers who are truly compassionate and devoted to teaching all students. Teachers must look beyond the unfamiliar gestures, style, and sounds that the African American student population may have brought into the classroom, and look within a person (Kohl, 1994). Educational research has shown that caring teachers who have provided high expectations, developed relationships, discovered the talents of every student, and accounted for the different learning styles that permeate the classrooms have students who perform at high levels of academic achievement (Berns, 2004; Sousa, 2001; Thompson, 2004, Tobias, 1994).

#### *Summary*

This literature review revealed that although the African American population has triumphed over many obstacles, there are many more obstacles that the African American population has to overcome (Bennett, 1993; hooks, 2003; Williams, 2005). Fifty years after the Brown vs. the Board of Education, African American students have continued to struggle with segregated schools and receive unequal opportunities within the education (Delpit, 1995; Fashola, 2005; Hale, 2001). African American students have continued to score lower than their European American counterparts on any measure of academic achievement and are suspended and “dropped out” of schools at higher rates (Banks & Banks, 2005; Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). “The educational experiences of these students often included low expectations, a feeling of inferiority, and a sense of defeat in their academic pursuits” (Fashola, 2005, p.1).

When students are provided with the opportunity to speak about their school experiences, their thoughts concerning their education are revealing (Nieto, 2004). Children are aware of the different types of strategies that work to improve their academic success. As Kozol (1991) stated, “children come to school with a degree of faith and optimism, and they often thrive during the first few years” (p. 57). Children need to receive quality early education to help keep them engaged and successful throughout their school careers (Smiley, 2006). High expectations coupled with the appropriate support, has proven to ensure that all students received equal opportunities to achieve academic excellence. Any student can hit a target if they can see the target, it holds still, and they know what is expected of them (Sagor, 2003).

African American students thrive in welcoming school environments in which administrators and teachers are reflective about their biases and teaching styles, and where students are recognized as capable learners. When schools, teachers, and the African American community work together, there is hope because it is a dynamic process that encourages, supports, and provides opportunities for teachers, parents, and community members to work together to improve student learning (Banks, 1996). Believing in hope is at the center of the art and craft of teaching. “Hope can be sold, it can be taught or at least spread, it can survive in the strangest and most unlikely places” (Kohl, 1994, p. 43).

The literature revealed the harsh reality that the academic achievement gap starts during a child’s early academic career. In current study, the researcher dialogued with nine different families about their perceptions for the causes of the academic achievement gap and their suggestions relating to effective teaching practices and better school



environments. Elementary school-aged students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) shared their school experiences, their concerns, and their recommendations for administrators and educators.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to allow the voices of 11 elementary African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) the opportunity to share their opinions and concerns about what they perceived were the elements which contributed to the academic achievement gap and the strategies they felt administrators and educators could use that would effectively promote academic excellence. This study entailed engaging the participants of the study in dialogues about elementary school-aged African American students and effective practices and strategies that would promote academic excellence.

#### Description of Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach and participatory action research methodology as the strategy of inquiry (Conde-Frazier, 2006; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Maguire, 1987). Participatory research is a process which combines three activities: research or social investigation, education, and action and involved doing research with and for people (Gardner, 2004; Maguire, 1987; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993). As Wink (2005) stated, “we are called by Paulo Freire to name, reflect critically, and to act” (p. 3). “The important thing is to help men help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them agents of their own recuperation” (Freire, 2000, p. 16). Participatory action research is a process that develops from the needs, challenges, and learning experiences specific to a given group and moves toward social justice (Conde-Frazier, 2006; Kidd & Kral, 2005). Participatory action research provided the researcher and the co-researchers/participants the opportunity to dialogue

about the possible causes of the academic achievement gap and their perceived solutions toward promoting academic excellence within the African American student population. It focused on working with people to identify problems in practice and identify solutions (Kidd & Kral, 2005). As Gardner (2004) stated, “Participatory research removed the distance between the objective observer and subjective subject and included the community being studied as an active participant in the research, with the end goal of empowering the community to create change” (p. 10).

Maguire (1987) posited that participatory research aimed to “develop critical consciousness, to improve the lives of those involved in the research process, and to transform fundamental societal structures and relationships” (p. 4). Participatory research is a research method that has captured the voices of those most impacted by inequities or oppressive conditions (Ada & Beutel, 1993). Participatory action research is a process that allows the researcher and the participants the opportunity to participate in the gathering and analysis of data and implement the results in a way that will raise critical consciousness and promote a positive difference (Kidd & Kral, 2005). The method afforded the opportunity for the researcher and the co-researchers to raise critical consciousness about current conditions of the African American student population in regards to academic achievement and the opportunity for the co-researchers to speak out about the problems within the educational system.

In participatory research, dialogue has a “horizontal relationship between persons who are engaged in a joint search” (Freire, 2000, p. 45). “Dialogue linked the people together through discourse and links their moments of reflection to their moments of action” (Shor, 1992, p. 86). Wink (2005) referred to dialogue as a “change agent chatter”

(p. 41). By allowing the parents and the students the opportunity to express their opinions and concerns about the educational problems the African American student population continually experience, the community most affected by the achievement gap has the chance to dialogue with the researcher, reflect on the problem, and take the necessary actions toward helping to promote academic achievement. “Participatory research offers a partnership: *We both know some things, neither of us knows everything, working together we will both know more, and we will both learn more about how to know*” (Maguire, 1987, p. 39).

Through dialogue people come together and participate in all crucial aspects of investigation and collective action. This cannot be achieved through the exercise of merely answering questions in a conventional questionnaire or a formalized interview, because these techniques do not allow the respondent to speak in a full voice. Problems facing the poor and the powerless must be understood in the hearts and the guts as well as in the heads, and the people with the problems must talk to each other as whole persons with feelings and commitment as well as facts.

(Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993, p.12)

The use of a participatory research method, action research, allowed the researcher and the co-researchers the opportunity to work together to investigate and collectively develop an action plan that aided educators in implementing effective strategies and practices that grasped and maintained young African American students’ interest toward school. Young children and parents have needed to express and enlist their opinions about how schools have contributed to low academic achievement (Fashola, 2005; Wink, 2005). “Children have no ideologies to reinforce, no superstructure of political opinion to promote, no civic equanimity or image to defend, no personal reputation to secure. They are pure witnesses” (Kozol, 2005, p. 12).

## Research Setting

### *Demographics*

The research for this study took place in one elementary public school within a suburban, diverse public school district in the East San Francisco Bay Area. At the time of the study, the school district was comprised of eight elementary schools encompassing a vast number of nationalities such as: Hispanic, African American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Indian American, Filipino American, and European American. The elementary school was comprised of 741 students, 7.56 percent of that population was African American. The data were collected over a 4 month time period. The students who participated in the study ranged in grade level from 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

### *Selection of Participants*

Eleven elementary-school children, ages 6-10 and their parent(s) and/or guardian(s) participated in the research study. Seven boys and 4 girls participated in the study (see Table 1). The 11 students who participated in the study encompassed different family backgrounds: two parent homes, single parent homes, and 2 of the participants lived with a legal guardian. Fifteen parent(s)/guardian (s) participated in the study. Six of the parent participants consisted of two parent homes, Two of the parent participants consisted of single parent homes, two of the parent participants were legal guardians, and in one of the single parent homes, the grandparents were the legal guardians (see Table 2). The participants volunteered to participate in the study and attended the same elementary school within the school district.

Table 1

*Demographic Data of the Student Participants*

Student Name	Age(s)	Gender(s)	Grade
Student A (Jasmin Smith)	7	Female	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Student B (Anthony Jones)	10	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>
Student C (Goldie Jackson)	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>
Student D (Chris Lowe)	7	Male	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Student E1 (Kori Cuff)	6	Female	1 <sup>st</sup>
Student E2 (Eric Cuff)	7	Male	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Student F (Derek Carruthers)	8	Male	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Student G1 (Marcus Hughes)	6	Male	1 <sup>st</sup>
Student G2 (Keisha Hughes)	8	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Student H (John Burton)	9	Male	4 <sup>th</sup>
Student I (Sean Merrida)	8	Male	3 <sup>rd</sup>

Table 2  
*Demographic Data of the Families (the students and their parent(s)/guardian(s))*

Family (Last Name)	Type of Family	# of Family Members who participated in the study	
Family A (Smith)	two parent	Mother, Father, and Daughter	3
Family B (Jones)	two parent	Mother, Father, and Son	3
Family C (Jackson)	legal guardian	Grandmother and Granddaughter	2
Family D (Loves)	single parent	Mother and Son	2
Family E (Cuff)	two parent	Mother, Father, Son, and Daughter	4
Family F (Carruthers)	two parent	Mother and Son	2
Family G (Hughes)	two parent	Mother, Father, Son, and Daughter	4
Family H (Burton)	two parent	Mother, Father, Son	3
Family I (Merrida)	single parent	Mother, Grandfather (legal guardian), Son	3

*Questions that Guided the Initial Dialogues*

The following questions that guided the initial dialogues were based on the three major research questions.

1. What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?

For the Student Participants:

- a. How do you feel about school?
- b. What is working for you in school and what isn't working for you?
- c. What is the best thing a teacher has ever said or done for you?
- d. What is the worst thing a teacher has ever said or done to you?
- e. Tell me what you like about your teacher.
- f. What types of things do you like to do in your classroom?

For the Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

- e. What do you feel is working for your child or isn't working for your child in school to achieve academic success?
2. What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the key elements to help to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?

For the Student Participants:

- a. What do you like about school?
- b. How do you like that your teacher does to help you in school?



c. Do you feel comfortable approaching the teacher for help? Why or why not?

For the Parent (s)/Guardian(s):

d. What strategies do you feel your child's teacher uses that help to promote academic excellence?

e. What would you like to see your child's teacher doing more of to help him or her academically succeed?

3. From the perceptions of the parent(s)/guardian(s), how can parent(s)/guardian(s), schools, and students work together to promote student academic success and parent involvement?

For the Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

a. What does your child's school do that you feel is successful in promoting parent involvement?

b. What do you think your child's school should do to reach out to the African American population?

#### *Data Collection*

The following steps were followed in the collection of data:

Initially, the researcher asked various teachers from the selected elementary school within the school district for recommendations of potential African American families who would possibly want to participate in the study. The families were contacted and asked to attend an informational meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the participants about the study. After the informational meeting, the families who decided to volunteer to participate in the study signed the parental consent form

(Appendix A) and the Release Form for Audio Tapes and Transcripts (Appendix B) at the meeting. A family background questionnaire (Appendix C) was given to the participants at the meeting to be completed and returned during the first dialogue. Each participant scheduled the first dialogue session during the informational meeting.

Before the first dialogue sessions, the questions that were used to help to guide the dialogues (Appendix F) were piloted on volunteers who did not participate in the study. The questions to guide the dialogue were piloted on a small group of parents and their children. From the pilot, the researcher found that the guiding questions were admissible.

#### *First Dialogue*

The purpose of the first dialogue was to allow the parent(s)/guardian(s) and their children the opportunity to voice their perceptions for the causes of the academic achievement gap between the African American student population and the European American student population and possible solutions toward narrowing the gap. Each family, parent (s) /guardian(s) and their child or children, attended the session together but dialogued with the researcher separately. The child/children dialogued with the researcher first, for approximately twenty minutes while their parent(s)/guardian(s) waited outside of the meeting room. After the researcher dialogued with the child/ children, the parent(s)/guardian(s) were brought into the meeting room to dialogue with the researcher. The child/children stayed inside of the meeting room while the parent(s)/guardian(s) dialogued with the researcher. The child/children played on the computer, completed homework, or watched movies

while their parent(s)/guardian(s) dialogued with the researcher. The first dialogues with the child/ children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were taped and transcribed.

After the dialogues were completed, a date was determined to conduct the second dialogue. A date was also set to mail the transcriptions to the families for review. Each family received their own copy of the transcriptions. Each family had the opportunity to review the transcriptions and make corrections or additions where necessary. The transcriptions were read to the younger participants as needed.

### *Second Dialogue*

The purpose of the second dialogue was to provide an opportunity for the parent(s)/guardian(s) to share their expectations from the schools, the administrators, and the educators. During the second dialogue, both the parent(s)/guardian(s) and their child/children were afforded the opportunity to share thoughts and opinions about the qualities of an effective teacher.

The second dialogue was conducted with each family separately. Each family, the child/children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) dialogued with the researcher. The child/children dialogued with the researcher first while the parent(s)/guardian(s) waited outside of the meeting room. After the child/children dialogued with the researcher, the parent(s)/guardian(s) were asked to enter into the meeting room to dialogue. The child/children were allowed to wait inside of the meeting room while their parent(s)/guardian(s) dialogued with the researcher. During the second dialogue, participants were asked follow up questions, clarifying questions, and asked to add comments if needed. The second dialogue was also taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were mailed to each family. The participants were asked to review the

transcriptions and make changes or additions if needed. The transcriptions were read to the younger participants.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis was conducted by the following:

After each of the first and second dialogues was transcribed, the researcher read and analyzed the transcriptions for generative themes. The themes came about by reviewing the similarities and the differences amongst the students who participated in the study and the similarities and the differences amongst the parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study.

After the generative themes were analyzed, the researcher then contacted each of the families to schedule a group meeting. All of the families met together in one setting to discuss the themes which emerged and to discuss possible steps toward reaching more African American students and families. The children and the parent(s)/guardian(s) all met together in one setting at the same time. During the group meeting, the findings from the study were shared with the participants to ensure that the findings represented the ideas of the participants. The group meeting also gave each of the participants the opportunity to give additional input and feedback on the data analysis, the generative themes, that would be included in the research study. During the group meeting, participants were asked to provide further suggestions or recommendations for the necessary next steps toward promoting academic excellence for the elementary school African American students. The fourth meeting, the group meeting, was also taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were mailed to each family. The results from the fourth meeting with all of the families were also

included in the data analysis section along with the results from the second and the third meetings with the families.

In chapter 4, the raw data from the transcriptions were taken and given a citation. The researcher cited the participant's comments, suggestions, concerns, and fears and gave a citation under the researcher's name.

#### *Confidentiality and Protection of Participants*

The researcher received permission to conduct the research from IRBPHS (Appendix D) and the school district (Appendix E). All names of the district, schools, and participants are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Parent(s)/ guardian(s) signed a consent form (Appendix A) and provided the researcher permission to conduct the research and dialogue with their child/children.

The dialogues were conducted at an agreed upon location. The parent(s)/guardian(s) agreed to meet at the local library in a small, private setting, or in a secluded classroom to ensure confidentiality.

*Background of the Researcher*

I am an African American educator who was raised in Montgomery, Alabama. I am one of two children born to a mother who stressed the importance of education. My family moved from Alabama to California by way of Alaska before I entered into high school. After high school I received my undergraduate degree and Teaching Credential from Mills College in Oakland, California. While pursuing my teaching credential, I began to witness the harsh realities that many educators lowered their expectations for the African American student population and that many African American students were giving up on school by the time they entered into the second grade.

Currently, I am an elementary school educator. I have taught in diverse school districts in elementary grades for seven years. My personal experiences of dealing with racism as well as my professional experiences as an educator helped me to draw inferences that too many African American students are becoming apathetic towards school at a young age. My personal and professional experiences were my impetus toward discovering effective strategies and practices that will aide educators in promoting academic excellence for all students.

### *Summary*

This chapter has explained the participatory action method used in this qualitative study of dialoguing with African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) about strategies African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) perceived have and will effectively promote academic excellence. The researcher dialogued with 11 children and 15 parent(s)/guardian(s) from one school within a large school district. During the first dialogues, the students discussed their experiences in the school systems and the parent(s)/guardian(s) discussed their child/children's experiences within the school system. The students and the parent(s)/guardian(s) shared the various strategies they felt administrators and teachers were incorporating that either helped to promote academic learning or deterred academic learning. The second dialogues were focused on the parent(s)/guardian(s) expectations and goals for their child/children and their expectations of their child's school and their teachers. The students dialogued about the qualities they perceived that made an effective teacher. During the third dialogue, all of the participants met in one setting and discussed the findings of the study. The participants were also shared additional comments, suggestions, concerns, or fears during the third dialogue.

The next chapter presented the findings of the study. All of the dialogues with the participants were taped, transcribed, and analyzed for generative themes.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

The intention of this study was to allow nine African American families from one elementary school within a diverse elementary school district the chance to share their thoughts, suggestions, concerns, and fears about the academic achievement gap. The families discussed the possible causes for the academic achievement gap between the African American student population and the European American student population. Each family dialogued about effective strategies and practices they felt administrators and educators could implement into the schools and the curriculum that may help to promote academic excellence and parent involvement within the African American community. The participants engaged in the dialogic process of participatory research to examine the issues and challenges young African American students encounter while in school and the concerns of their parent(s)/guardian(s) about their child's academic career.

This chapter is organized in terms of the three major research questions and the questions that helped to guide the dialogues. The questions that helped to guide the dialogue were open-ended, which allowed the participants to take the conversation wherever they chose. After dialoguing with nine different families, 11 different children, 15 different parent(s)/guardian(s), major themes immersed and were analyzed.



This chapter identifies the findings from the dialogues with the participants. This chapter is divided into three sections. As a result of the study, the first section provides an introduction to and profile of each of the families, briefly giving a synopsis of their family structure and experiences in the school system. The second section discusses the generative themes which derived from the analyzed data. The third section provides a discussion of the findings.

### *Profiles of the Family Participants*

The participants in the study openly shared their experiences with their child/children's schools and their teachers. They also elaborated on their expectations for their child/children. Although the families encompassed various family structures, experiences, and economic status, each of the parent(s)/guardian(s) had similar experiences with their child's teachers and similar expectations for their child/children. Regardless of their home circumstances, family make-up, or their child/children's current academic level, each of the parent(s)/guardian(s) wanted her/his child/children to excel in school, to become well-rounded, and to become the best at whatever they chose to do in life.

The following are descriptions of each of the nine families. The descriptions of the families were gathered through the parent/guardian questionnaire (see Appendix C) and the interactions between the researcher and the participants during each of the dialogues. The family background, the child/children's academic experiences and personal experiences with educators, and the parent(s)/guardian(s) definition of "success" as it related to their child/children are included in the profiles.

*Family A (The Smiths)*

Family A was comprised of five family members: A mother, a father, and three daughters, the oldest being 12 and the youngest 7 months old. The father was of African American decent and the mother was biracial: African American and Latina. The student, Jasmin, who participated in the study, was 7 years old at the time of the study and was in the second grade. The father worked outside of the home while the mother was a stay at home mother. She called her job the “household manager” (Foster, 2007, p. 3). The mother described her relationships with her 7 year old daughter’s teachers as being very receptive. She further stated that all of the teachers answered any questions she had and were open to have dialogue with her concerning her daughters. She also explained that she was not intimidated or afraid to approach any of her children’s teachers. At the time of the study, the mother described her 7 year old daughter’s academic skills as needing improvement. The parents defined success as it related to their daughter as: “Having a goal and taking the steps to achieve that goal. If she makes any progress, it’s a success” (Foster, 2007, p. 45).

*Family B (The Jones)*

Family B was a family of four: a mother, a father, and two sons. The oldest son was 17 at the time of the interview and the youngest son was 10 and in the fifth grade at the time of the interview. The 10 year old, Anthony, participated in the study. Both of the parents were of African American decent. Both of them worked outside of the home. The mother and the father described their relationships with their children’s teachers as “okay” (Foster, 2007, p. 6). Both of the parents described negative experiences with their children’s teachers where they have repeatedly asked

these teachers to inform them about any problems with their sons. However, the teachers either didn't inform them of the troubles until it was report card time, or until the problem was out of control. At the time of the study, the mother described her son's academic experiences as being "fair" (Foster, 2007, p. 6). The mother (2007) stated, "Our son does just what he needs to do. We have to challenge him to do more" (Foster, 2007, p. 7). The parents defined success for their 10 year old child as: "Ummm... the best way I could define success for my child is to be educated because I think if you're educated it opens doors for you"(Foster, 2007, p. 39).

*Family C (The Jacksons)*

Family C was comprised of legal guardians and a 10 year old girl named Goldie. Goldie was in the fifth grade at the time of the study. The legal guardians were the child's grandparents. Both the grandfather and the grandmother were of African American decent. They were both retired. At the time of the dialogues, the grandmother stated that her granddaughter was doing well in school and that she seemed happy. She stated that the teacher was explaining the material in creative ways that made it easy for the granddaughter to understand. However, the grandmother stated that the child had had trouble with academics in her previous grades. As for encounters with educators and administrators, the grandmother stated that she was okay with the teachers she had encountered but that she wanted teachers to remember that she had not been in school for a very long time. She needed extra help with assisting her grandchild with academics. The grandmother defined success for her granddaughter as: "Success for my granddaughter is staying focused and

having confidence. I want her to bring good grades and to be a positive child” (Foster, 2007, p. 33).

*Family D (The Lowes)*

Family D was a single parent home. The mother and the 7 year old son, Chris, lived with the mother’s parents. The mother worked outside of the home and the retired grandparents took care of the son while the mother was working. The mother and her son were both of African American decent. At the time of the study, the son, who was in the second grade, was receiving speech therapy. The mother described her son as very shy and reserved. She stated that her son needed extra help in school because of his speech problem. As for experiences with the administrator and educators, the mother stated that she had had good experiences with her child’s school and teachers. But she did mention that a few teachers were not as responsive to her child’s needs as other teachers. The mother defined success for her child as: “Getting good grades and learning how to survive in this world” (Foster, 2007, p. 30).

*Family E (The Cuffs)*

Family E was comprised of four children. The children’s ages are 21, 12, 7, and 6. A mother and a father head the household. They both worked outside of the home. Both the mother and the father were of African American decent. The 7 year old son, Eric, and the 6 year old daughter, Kori, participated in the study. Eric was in the second grade and Kori was in the first grade at the time of the study. The mother and the father stated that both of their children were doing well academically in school. The Eric had some problems in school because of behavior issues and his outspokenness. Eric had been suspended from school during the previous year for

fighting. They also mentioned that they made sure to let their children's teachers know to notify them for any reason, good or bad. The father stated that most of the teachers had been responsive to their request. The mother defined success for her two children as: "Being the best at whatever they choose to be in life. If that is being a garbage man, then I want them to be the best garbage man" (Foster, 2007, p. 40).

*Family F (The Carruthers)*

Family F was made up of a mother, a father, and four boys. The boys ranged in ages from 18 years old to 8 years old. The youngest of the boys was 8 years old at the time of the study and in the third grade. The 8 year old son, Derek, participated in the study. Both the mother and the father were of African American decent. The mother worked outside of the home and the father was incarcerated at the time of the study. The mother stated that she had had some problems with her child's teachers. She described her son as active. She stated that the teachers blamed her son for a conflict without truly knowing the entire story. She also mentioned that her son had been struggling academically in school and that he needed hands-on strategies in order for him to succeed. Derek had also been suspended once in the first grade and four times already in his current grade. She feared that he was off to a bad start, obtaining a bad reputation that had the potential of following him throughout the rest of his academic career. The mother defined success for her son as: "Success for my child is that he is a well rounded young man. I want him to see education as a skill and to utilize that skill to the best of his ability" (Foster, 2007, p. 36).

*Family G (The Hughes)*

Family G was comprised of two children. Both the mother and the father worked outside of the home. The oldest child, a girl, was 8 years old at the time of the study and in the third grade. The youngest child, a boy, was 6 years old at the time of the study and in the first grade. The girl's name was Keisha and the boy's name was Marcus. Both the mother and the father were of African American descent. Both parents conceded that they have had a few problems with the youngest child's current teacher, but they have had good experiences with the oldest child's teachers. Their youngest child was not keeping up academically with the rest of the class and was approaching but not yet meeting grade level standards. The parents felt as though the teacher did not know how to effectively deal with their son's learning style. Also, she was not communicating with the parents. They mentioned their disgust toward the negative notes the teacher was sending home and the negative report card with no explanations about the failing marks on the report card. At the time of the study, the parents were in the process of removing their son from that particular teacher's classroom. Academically, Keisha was doing well. She was working on third grade level. The parents defined success for their children as: "Don't go for a 'B' go for an 'A'. We want them to be consistent" (Foster, 2007, p. 41).

*Family H (The Burtons)*

Family H was a small family made up of a mother, a father, and a son. The son was 9 years old at the time of the study and in the fourth grade. His name was John. Both the mother and the father were of African American descent. Both the mother and the father worked outside of the home. The mother described her son as

definitely not being shy, “he is active and outgoing” (Foster, 2007, p. 25). She further described her experiences with her son’s teachers and administrator as both good and bad. Some teachers had strategies that reached her son and other teachers did not know how to reach and teach her son. The parents continued to have problems with their son’s teacher’s inability to channel his energy and use it in a positive way. Teachers have suggested that their son seek medical advice about the possibility of taking Ritalin. The parents defined success for their son as: “We want our son to achieve academic excellence, to become a well rounded student and human being” (Foster, 2007, p. 42).

*Family I (The Merridas)*

Family I was comprised of a mother and one son. The son, Sean, was 8 years old at the time of the study and in the third grade. The mother was of Mexican American descent and the son was biracial: Mexican American and African American. The mother did not receive financial or emotional support from her son’s father. At the time of the study, she had always worked outside of the home and received help from her parents with raising her son. The mother and the child’s grandfather participated in the study. The mother described her son as responsible, sensitive, and caring. She stated that she and her son have had satisfactory experiences in the school system until his third grade year. There was a lack of communication between the mother and the third grade teacher. The mother stated, “This year, his teacher does not attempt to contact me about anything. That really bothers me” (Foster, 2007, p. 41). The parent defined success for her son as: “Becoming a great human being, which he already is...and becoming the best he can be” (Foster, 2007, p. 52).

## Summary

Although the family structure, experiences, and make-up varied according to each family, all of the parent(s)/guardian(s) shared similar concerns and desires for their child/children. They were all concerned with their child developing apathy toward school during elementary grades. In addition, all of the parent(s)/guardian(s) desired for their child/children to obtain life-long success.

### *Generative Themes*

The researcher had organized the findings emanating from the dialogues with the participants into generative themes. Each dialogue centered on the questions which guided the dialogue, and the comments, suggestions, and concerns each student and their parent(s)/guardian(s) chose to discuss. The responses to the questions that guided the dialogue, the comments, suggestions, and concerns were reflected in the findings for each of the three main research questions.

The generative themes were divided into two categories: themes which derived from the conversations with the students and themes which derived from the parent(s)/guardian(s). Two of the major research questions were discussed with the students (See Table 3), whereas, themes emerged for each of the three major research questions for the parent(s)/guardian(s) (See Table 4).

### *Students*

The 11 student participants ranged in ages from 6 years old to 10 years old, and ranged in grade levels from first grade to fifth grade. There were 4 girls and 7 boys who participated in the study. Although the participants varied in age, grade level,



and academic levels, they all had similar experiences and similar suggestions for schools, administrators, and educators to help promote academic excellence.

Statistics continue to show that nationally, in every academic area, African American student populations do not score as high as our European American student population (Fine, Weis, Pruitt, & Burns, 2004). For example, nationally in reading, 12 % of African American 4th graders reach proficient or advanced levels, while 61% have not been taught to read even at the basic level. In math, African American students are at the 14<sup>th</sup> percentile, behind eight out of nine European Americans (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These alarming statistics prove that administrators and educators must learn effective strategies that will reach and teach the African American population during the early grades in order to help narrow the academic achievement gap. As one guardian stated during one of the dialogues, “Talk to the kids. Find out what they need” (Foster, 2007, p. 5). Based on the major research questions, the students discussed the strategies and practices teachers were using that deterred academic learning and also strategies and practices teachers were using that promoted academic learning. The children also discussed the harmful effects negative strategies and practices can have on students and their desire to learn. The following are strategies that the children in the study felt were the causes of the academic achievement gap.

#### *Qualitative Themes of the Students*

During the first dialogues with the students, the students discussed their perceptions for the major research questions. The themes which emerged from the first dialogues with the students were as follows: (a) lack of caring and receptive

teachers (b) lack of extra time to grasp and accomplish task and a lack of encouragement from teachers, and (c) uninteresting curriculum.

The second major research question for the students entailed discussions in which participants identified key elements they perceived would help to promote academic excellence amongst African American students. The themes which emerged from the students' second dialogues included: (a) enthusiastic teachers, and (b) teachers who listened and were patient.

Table 3

*Major Questions and Themes Which Emerged from the Students' Dialogues*

Questions	Themes
<p>Question #1</p> <p>What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?</p>	<p>*Lack of caring and receptive teachers</p> <p>*Lack of extra time to grasp and accomplish task and a lack of encouragement from teachers</p> <p>*Uninteresting curriculum</p>
<p>Question #2</p> <p>What do African American students perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?</p>	<p>*Enthusiastic teachers</p> <p>*Teachers who listened and were patient</p>

*Research Question #1: What are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?*

All eleven of the participants, regardless of grade level, sex, or age, had similar explanations for the causes of underachievement amongst the African American student population. Themes surfaced due to discussions of the struggles and challenges the participants of the study confronted within the school system. The themes which emerged were: (a) lack of caring and receptive teachers, (b) lack of extra time to grasp and accomplish task and a lack of encouragement from teachers, and (c) uninteresting curriculum. The students also shared the negative effects the causes of the achievement gap had on students.

*Lack of Caring and Receptive Teachers*

Many of the students felt that their teachers treated them differently than the other kids. They believed their teachers did not listen to the things they had to say, and they sensed they were always the ones getting blamed for incidents without the teacher really knowing all of the facts. As John, one student who was in the fourth grade explained, “I don’t like it when teachers don’t listen and then I get in trouble but it isn’t always my fault” (Foster, 2007, p. 64). Similar to that student’s experiences, Sean, a student who was in the third grade stated, “Sometimes I want to cry when my teacher is mean to me. Sometimes teachers just jump to conclusions without even knowing the whole story.” (Foster, 2007, p.54). This particular student was talking about an incident which happened in his classroom where his teacher sent him to the office because she saw him out of his seat. He further explained, “She didn’t even ask me why was I out of my seat, she just told me to go to the office” (Foster, 2007, p. 54).

Many of the 11 students mentioned during their dialogues that teachers had the tendency to yell at them and treat them unfairly more often than any of the other students. “I feel mad when my teacher yells at me” (Foster, 2007, p. 56). When the researcher asked Derek, one of the third grade participants: “What would you rather teachers do?” He replied: “I’d rather them respect me. Just tell me what I did wrong and not to do it again.” (Foster, 2007, p. 52). During the dialogue that particular student passionately shared how he had been suspended from school every year except for his second grade year. He then added, “I’d rather be at home anyway, it’s more fun.” Goldie, one of the fifth grade students who participated in the study shared her advice for teachers:

Sometimes when you think you’re not hurting kids, you are. Teachers need to listen to themselves and when they talk to kids, and what they are doing.. listen to themselves instead of saying whatever they feel because you can make a kid feel bad by the things you say and the way you handle it. (Foster, 2007, p. 69)

#### *Lack of Extra Time and Encouragement*

“The most valuable thing you can give a kid is your time” (Esquith, 2007, p. 146). Another theme which surfaced during the dialogues with the students about the causes for the academic achievement gap dealt with students not receiving the extra help and extra time they needed in order to achieve academic success. The participants discussed the negative effects the lack of attention caused, emotionally and academically. Some of the students explained that when teachers did not help them, they did not have any motivation to keep trying to learn. Nine of the students described an effective teacher as one that was willing to give extra help, provide examples, and allow extra time to the students who needed it. When the researcher asked the students how it made them feel

when teachers took extra time to help them, Jasmin, one second grade student responded: “It makes me feel cared for” (Foster, 2007, p. 80).

At the time of the study, one of the first grade participants was in the process of changing to a new teacher because the parents did not feel as though the current teacher was adequately meeting their son’s needs. When the researcher asked Marcus, the first grade child, if he wanted to stay in his current classroom: he responded: “I don’t want to stay there because she won’t let me have more time on my work and sometimes when I ask her for help... sometimes she helps me and sometimes she tells me to put my hand down” (Foster, 2007, p. 62). Many of the other students were all too familiar with teachers not providing the extra help they needed. One second grade participant, Eric, recognized that some teachers don’t walk around the classroom to help students who need the extra help. He commented, “Sometimes teachers don’t go around the classroom and ask if anybody needs help and ask each kid if they need help” (Foster, 2007, p. 66). When the researcher asked him what he thought the other kids were feeling when they did not receive help, he replied, “I think they must feel like they don’t know nothing” (Foster, 2007, p. 66). As Sean, a third grade student suggested: “Teachers need to help kids and take their time with students. They need to teach the kids what they need to know” (Foster, 2007, p. 55).

### *Uninteresting Curriculum*

Throughout the course of the dialogues the young participants reflected on how academically damaging it was when they were forced to learn in classrooms with teachers who did not take the necessary time to learn about each child and the strategies that helped each child to enjoy learning. They also mentioned that it was hard to learn

from a teacher who did not incorporate creative and fun lessons into the curriculum. Keisha, one of the third grade students, reflected on how she felt when she was not learning because the material was not interesting. “When teachers are not creative and fun I don’t want to learn. I like to team up with other kids and do group work and when teachers don’t do that, then it doesn’t help me to learn” (Foster, 2007, p. 63). The researcher observed that particular child as being extremely outgoing. Sean explained that he did not like his second grade teacher because she was not interesting. He continued: “I like my teacher this year because she teaches in a funny way” (Foster, 2007, p. 57). When the researcher asked Sean to explain, he responded: “My teacher in the second grade always gave us worksheets and made us sit at our table. I’m not good at just sitting” (Foster, 2007, p. 57). Goldie had similar experiences with her teacher. She stated, “One of my teachers is boring. All she does is put three things on the board that says what we’re going to do for the day. Then we do those things in our seat” (Foster, 2007, p. 69).

Another theme which emerged during the dialogues dealt with being bored in the classroom because of familiarity with the information that was being taught. As Kori, one of the first grade participants explained, “When we’ve already learned something and I have to wait for the other students to learn it and be patient, I get bored because I always get stuff the first time but some kids don’t” (Foster, 2007, p. 65). When the researcher asked Kori what she thought the teacher should do for the students who were bored in the classroom, she stated: “Teachers should let the kids who already know the stuff try something harder and help the other kids who need more help” (Foster, 2007, p. 65).

*Other Causes: Consequences for not academically engaging the African American students in learning activities*

Research continues to prove that students misbehave or develop apathy for school out of boredom, disinterest, or frustration (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). The children who do decide to academically “give up” are withdrawn and nonresponsive or angry and nonresponsive (Kottler, 2002). For a few of the children who participated in the study frequenting the office was not a rare occasion. As Marcus commented,

I’m embarrassed when I get in trouble and I have to go see the principal....and I get whooped at home so I don’t want to go to the office. Sometimes it makes me feel like I can’t ever do right. (Foster, 2007, p.62).

When the researcher asked Marcus why he felt he frequented the office, he stated, “Cause, I like to talk in class” (Foster, 2007, p. 62). Research showed that students who are sent to the office lose out academically, develop a loss of trust for adults, and often times decide to “give up” academically (Nieto, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Many students become silenced when they feel as though they are treated unfairly or as though their thoughts and opinions are not validated. As for the children who participated in the study, many of them reflected on experiences where they did not feel like they were treated fairly. They accused the teacher’s unfair treatment as the reason for misbehavior. Sean reflected on an incident where he was sent to the principal’s office by a teacher because of a confrontation with another student. He recalled, “When that teacher asked me did I do it.. I said no. Then she said she wasn’t there so she didn’t know who did it but she sent me to the principal’s office” (Foster, 2007, p.57). When I asked Sean how that incident made him feel, he replied: “I felt angry because she said she wasn’t there so how come she sent me to the office. I started yelling at the teacher, then I had to miss



recess for the rest of the week” (Foster, 2007, p. 57). When the researcher asked Chris, a second grade participant, if he liked school, he responded: “No, it takes a long time to the end of the day. I’m always in trouble at school. I’d just rather be at home” (Foster, 2007, p. 71).

*Question #2: What do African American students perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?*

It is the administrator and the educator’s job to ensure that all of the students feel comfortable, welcomed, and respected at the school and to assure that students look forward to attending school (Ladson-Billings, 2001). As Anthony stated, “I like my math and science teacher because she shows us respect. Like she calls us by our last name. I like going to that class” (Foster, 2007, p. 75). During the dialogues, many of the students shared that they wanted to attend school and tried their best when they felt like the teacher had their best interest in mind and respected each student for who they were and what they brought into the classroom. As John student explained, “I like my teacher because she’s nice to me. She helps me and shows me how to do the problems that I am trying to do. Sometimes teachers don’t do that” (Foster, 2007, p. 63). Each of the participants shared the strategies they felt would help to promote a passion and a desire for learning. The themes which emerged during the dialogues about effective strategies that would promote learning were: (a) teachers who were enthusiastic and creative, and (b) teachers who were patient and willing to listen to each student’s needs.

*Enthusiastic Teachers*

As Goldie stated, “We kids feed off of you teacher’s energy. If you’re not into your job, then we won’t want to learn” (Foster, 2007, p. 70). This particular participant continued, “My favorite teacher always walked into the classroom with a fresh attitude. Whatever happened yesterday stayed in yesterday but today is a new day. Learning was made fun” (Foster, 2007, p. 70).

Another theme which emerged during the conversations about enthusiastic teachers dealt with a desire for teachers to be creative in their teaching style. Most of the participants admitted that the enthusiastic teachers were the fun teachers. All of the participants suggested that teachers make learning fun. As Keisha stated, “Sometimes we like to have fun and learn at the same time. Plus it allows us to be creative.” (Foster, 2007, p. 63). During the second dialogue with Keisha, she continued to explain about the need for teachers to be creative. She continued:

That’s why I like science because it’s creative. It’s like cooking. You add these different things together to equal something and it’s fun. You can be creative.... Like what does this do and what does that do. (Foster, 2007, p. 67)

Jasmin, one of the second grade participants explained why it was important that teachers were creative and funny while teaching, “I like it when teachers tell funny stories about them. My teacher this year is funny. She sometimes give us examples that are funny and it makes me want to pay attention and learn” (Foster, 2007, p. 81). During each of the dialogues with the children, incorporating enthusiasm, creativity, and humor into the routine was critical to promoting academic excellence. All of the participants shared experiences about laughing at a teacher’s joke, using hands-on materials to help with

learning, or playing educational games, either on the computer or as a whole class, all contributed to their desire to learn. As Marcus explained:

I liked in Kindergarten when we made gingerbread men and then they ran away and we had to go all around the school to find the gingerbread men and when we got back they were sitting on the table. That was fun! (Foster, 2007, p. 62)

### *Teachers Need to Listen*

As evidenced in the previous section, all of the participants expressed a need for educators to take time out to listen and acknowledge their opinions, questions, thoughts, and interest. They also wanted teachers to be patient with each individual student. Students don't learn in the same way at the same time (Hale, 1986). The participants recounted experiences where they did not feel as though their teachers truly listened to their issues and concerns. They recounted experiences where they did not receive the extra help they needed from their teacher and the effects the lack of attention had on their spirits. As John stated, "Just be patient and not yell and listen to the students." He further explained, "When you listen to us, it shows us that you respect us. It makes me want to go to your classroom" (Foster, 2007, p.90).

Each of the young participants expressed a need for teachers to take special one-on-one time with each student. The older students explained that when teachers took time with each student, that meant the teachers truly wanted to get to know every student. A first grade student, Kori, shared her experiences with her current teacher during her second dialogue. She mentioned how special she felt when she did get one-on-one time with her teacher. "I like it when my teacher gives me one-on-one time. It makes me feel special. We just sit and talk during lunch" (Foster, 2007, p. 65).

Six of the participants in the study were having academic difficulties in certain subjects. They mentioned that they were noticing progression but that they did not grasp some subjects as quickly as they did other subjects. These participants suggested that teachers make sure that they are patient with each student. The participants who were having difficulties in certain subjects made it very clear that they knew they were struggling. All of the six participants commented that the teachers who were patient with them and took the time to help them, were the reasons why they were progressing. John shared his frustrations about certain teachers. He stated, "I may not get it the first time, or the second, but if you don't give up on me, eventually I'll get it." (Foster, 2007, p. 90).

During the second dialogues the researcher asked each participant to share an experience with their favorite teacher. Goldie shared about a math test which she received a 60%. She stated, "The best thing a teacher ever did for me was gave me a second chance on that test. It made me feel like she believed in me. Math is ... it's difficult sometimes" (Foster, 2007, p. 69). Goldie mentioned the need to have a teacher who ultimately believed in her abilities regardless of how long it took for her to understand a subject.

Our second dialogue ended with her adding:

Teach me and show me what I need to know because when a teacher says oh you know how to do that problem, but, I really don't. It makes me feel stupid because I really don't know how to do that problem and you can't lie and say you do know how to do that problem when you really don't know. (Foster, 2007, p. 70)

### *Student Summary*

The primary purpose of this participatory research project was to discover, from the voices of African American students, the causes for the academic achievement gap and the strategies the children needed from teachers that would help to promote academic excellence. In this section, each child reflected on his or her experiences within the school system, the ineffective strategies and practices and the effective strategies and practices. Each participant, regardless of age, grade level, or gender, shared personal experiences of obstacles and triumphs within the educational system.

By analyzing the responses from the 11 children, the findings revealed that the young African American participants were outgoing and active and desired enthusiastic teachers who could spark their interest in learning by incorporating creative methods.

All of the participants yearned for respect, acknowledgement, and care from their teachers. Although the youngest participants were 6 years old at the time of the study, all were aware of unfair treatment from their teachers. They were also aware of the negative messages often received from teachers who did not have their best interest in mind. However, regardless of the various encounters each of the 11 participants had experienced, they all expressed a desire to learn. They were aware of the strategies used by teachers that were promoting learning and the strategies that discouraged learning. The 11 participants desired administrators, educators, and the other staff members who sincerely cared for their well-being and were willing to take the time to help them become successful. “First we have to love them. If you can convince your children that you love them, then there’s nothing you can’t teach them” (Avi, 1987).

*Parent(s)/Guardian(s)*

Dialoguing with the 15 parent(s)/guardian(s) made it clear that the participants had experiences and expectations in common. The themes that emerged from analyzing the data were centered on the three main research questions (See Table 4). The following themes emerged from the three main research questions.

*Qualitative Themes for the Parent(s)/Guardian(s)*

For the first research question, the parent(s)/guardian(s) identified their perceptions for the causes of the academic achievement gap. The themes which emerged from the first question were as follows: (a) lack of motivation due to boredom, (b) lack of stimulating curriculum, (c) impatience, inadequate enthusiasm, and low teacher to student interaction, and (d) teachers' lack of concern in understanding the behavior and learning styles of African American boys and low expectations for African American boys.

The second major research question for the parent(s)/guardian(s) centered on their expectations for their child's school, administrators, and educators. They shared their experiences with administrators and educators and their expectations for keeping the lines of communication between home and school open. They also provided their suggestions about alternative ways to include African American families in school activities and school decisions. The final, group meeting, was a culminating meeting centered around the third research question. The final meeting allowed the parent(s)/guardian(s) to discuss further suggestions, concerns, and questions. The themes which derived from the third dialogue were interwoven throughout the findings and further discussed in the final chapter.

Table 4

*Major Questions and Themes Which Emerged from the Parent(s)/Guardian(s)' Dialogues*

Questions	Themes
<p>Question #1</p> <p>What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?</p>	<p>*Lack of motivation due to boredom</p> <p>*Lack of stimulating curriculum</p> <p>*Impatience, inadequate enthusiasm, and low teacher to student interaction</p> <p>*Teachers lack of concern in understanding the behavior and learning styles of African American boys and low teacher expectations for African American boys</p>
<p>.Question #2</p> <p>What do African American parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?</p>	<p>*Parent(s)/guardian(s) expectations for schools, administrators, and educators.</p>
<p>Question #3</p> <p>From the perceptions of the parent(s)/guardian(s), how can parent(s)/guardian(s), schools, and students work together to promote student academic success and parent involvement?</p>	<p>*Schools, administrators, and educators need to keep the communication open and provide alternative ways to include the families.</p>

*Question #1: What are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?*

The nine families shared their perceptions for the causes of the academic achievement gap. The common causes for the academic achievement gap were identified as: (a) boredom in the classroom, (b) lack of stimulating curriculum, and (c) inadequate teacher enthusiasm and low teacher to student interaction.

*Bored and Not Stimulating*

All of the families shared similar reasons as the causes for the African American student population not achieving academically. The parent(s)/guardian(s) in the study felt that one of the reasons for the academic achievement gap was that the students were bored in the classroom. As Mr.Cuff stated, “Our kids are just bored” (Foster, 2007, p. 15). As research noted, one reason for the academic achievement gap is that African American students are bored, the curriculum is monotonous and not stimulating (Hale, 1986). Some of the families attributed their child’s boredom to the teacher’s lack of enthusiasm or lack of engaging the students in fun, hands-on curriculum. Many of the families described their children as being bored because the work was not challenging.

A few of the parent(s)/guardian(s) witnessed their child/children developing an inferiority complex. They saw their child/children as developing low self esteem toward academics because they were not grasping the information as quickly as the other children. Sadly, a few of the families were afraid that their child was mentally dropping out of school.

One of the guardians, Mrs. Jackson stated, “I think teachers need to be energetic. They feed off of the energy of the teacher. If the teacher is not enthusiastic, the students



are not going to be enthusiastic” (Foster, 2007, p. 4). This particular guardian described her granddaughter as being easily distracted. She recognized that if her granddaughter’s attention was not captivated, then she would tune out and become disinterested. She further stated, “I know that when my granddaughter is bored, she starts to daydream. But when learning is made fun and interesting, she is motivated to learn” (Foster, 2007, p. 4). Another family, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, explained about similar experiences with their son in school. That particular family stated, “When our son is bored, he drifts off task” (Foster, 2007, p. 8). This is true for many students, regardless of race, class, or gender (National Research Council, 2000; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Mr. and Mrs. Jones continued by saying, “Our son feeds off of the energy that’s around him. If there’s an energetic teacher, he’ll be enthusiastic” (Foster, 2007, p. 8). Research has proven that when students are bored or uninterested in the content, they do not perform well academically (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). However, far too often, African American students are seen as behavior problems or having academic problems when they are not motivated to learn (Esquith, 2007; Kottler, 2002).

Teachers need to reflect on what is and isn’t working with each child. The lessons need to be fun and if it’s not fun and they get uninterested, then it’s not going to work. (Foster, 2007, p. 17)

Educators are important factors in whether a child succeeds academically (Kohl, 1994). As Mrs. Carruthers noted, “When educators are passionate about what they are teaching, the students become passionate as well” (Foster, 2007, p. 10).

#### *Lack of Stimulating Curriculum*

“Kids need a push, they need to be challenged” (Foster, 2007, p. 21). Many of the African American students are not academically challenged in the classroom because of

low expectations from their teachers (hooks, 2003; Howard, 1999). Too often, teachers make assumptions about a child's academic abilities because of language, appearance, or family background (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Children need educators who believe in their ability to learn and who are willing to scaffold and provide them with the strategies to achieve (Esquith, 2007). As Mr. and Mrs. Burton stated, "Challenge my children but give them the skills to meet those challenges" (Foster, 2007, p. 41). During the dialogue with this particular family, the parents described their son's current teacher as an effective teacher because she took the time to teach him the material he needed to learn in an interesting way. They mentioned that once he gained confidence in the skill that was taught, the teacher then challenged him with more work.

Often times, children do not find the curriculum stimulating in the classroom because they have already mastered the content that is being taught (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). During one of the dialogues, Mr. and Mrs. Cuff explained the problem they encountered with their son when he was in Kindergarten:

In Kindergarten, our son was bored. He already knew the work that was being taught because I had taught it to him. So, he was getting into a lot of trouble, he was sent to the office a lot, and he began to develop low self-esteem. (Foster, 2007, p. 14)

They further stated that their son began to regress and acquire a dislike toward school.

#### *Feeling of Inferiority*

Many of the families attributed their children's boredom and lack of academic achievement in school to feeling academically inferior to the other students in the classroom. "Sometimes when our kids don't get it, they stop wanting to learn and then

they're bored and thinking they're not smart. They feel like they aren't comparable to other kids" (Foster, 2007, p. 6).

Some of the families reflected on their child/children's current academic level and acknowledged that their child/children were struggling in school. They mentioned that their child/children would bring home homework and not understand how to complete the homework. Derek's mother commented, "That's one thing you definitely don't want... to make our kids feel like they aren't smart. I think that's another reason why a lot of our kids don't like school" (Foster, 2007, p. 10). Mr. and Mrs. Hughes discussed the concerns they had with their son who was in the first grade. They mentioned that the teacher expected all of her students to be on the same level academically. They continued, "My son is not comprehending and maintaining the work that is being taught. He feels rushed... and he's being left behind and he is giving up" (Foster, 2007, p. 20). As Mrs. Jones stated, "When our children don't fit the mold, they are left behind, then they start feeling insignificant" (Foster, 2007, p. 9).

#### *Inadequate Teacher to Student Interaction*

Fairness does not mean treating everyone the same; it means providing support, help, care, and various opportunities each individual needs in order to have an equal chance to achieve success (Rief, 2005). "What can teachers do?" Mrs. Carruthers asked during the first dialogue. "Teachers need to verbally say, we're here to help you, we care about you and we will do whatever we need to help you out" (Foster, 2007, p. 11). All of the parent(s)/guardian(s) discussed the dismal realization that too many African American students are not receiving the extra help that they need in order to achieve academically. When students do not understand what is being taught, or do not keep up with the rest of

the class, educators deleteriously assume that the student is not capable of attaining information (Conchas, 2006). “When our kids don’t understand, they feel as though the teacher won’t take the time to explain the work to them. These teachers just expect our kids to get it on the first try” (Foster, 2007, p. 49). However, all students do not learn at the same rate, in the same way. Students have different learning styles (Hale, 1986; Reif & Heimburge, 2006). It is important that administrators and educators acquire knowledge about the different learning styles and knowledge about effectively incorporating the different learning styles into the curriculum (Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

Some teachers need to give kids more time. I wish they could spend more time on each child. Teachers have to be more patient and explain things in different ways. Some kids may get things one way but not the other. Use games....whatever it takes...so that all kids can learn. (Foster, 2007, p. 6)

#### *African American Boys*

Research continues to show that the African American males are suspended and expelled from school, drop out of school at higher rates, are labeled hyperactive, and seen as behavior problems in disproportionate numbers (Hale, 1986). In this study, 7 out of 11 of the children were African American boys. Out of the 7 African American boys that participated in the study, 5 of the boys had already received referrals from their teachers and 3 of the boys had been suspended from elementary school at least twice during the current year. As Ms. Merrida proposed, “Yes, our boys have a different temperament than other races, they are more active, louder, and outgoing. But, the problem is that the teachers do not know how to deal with them” (Foster, 2007, p. 48). The concerns and the fears the parent(s)/guardian(s) of sons shared during the individual dialogues as well

as the whole group dialogue about the possibility of their sons losing an interest in school so early were discussed. As Mrs. Jones stated:

We have to be careful with our boys. Once our black boys get to be 9 or 10 years old, they tend to be bigger than a lot of the other kids and the teachers are afraid of them and begin to send them to the office for little things.

(Foster, 2007, p. 49)

They reflected on how low teacher expectation and lack of knowledge about strategies that effectively reach African American boys were two major contributing factors to the low academic achievement amongst African American boys.

#### *Low Teacher Expectation*

Mrs. Hughes stated, “I told one teacher, my son is only in first grade. If you break his spirit now, that’s it” (Foster, 2007, p. 49). Because African American boys do tend to be more active and vocal than other races, teachers develop low expectations for them (Thompson, 2004). The hidden rules within the educational system are that students come into the classroom, sit down, and listen to the teacher (Payne, 1996). But, often times, young African American boys prefer standing while doing their work and are not afraid to question or test the teacher. Mr. Cuff explained, “Yeah, my son normally tests the teacher during the first three weeks of school to see what are the boundaries” (Foster, 2007, p. 40). The parents of African American boys described how many of the teachers developed low expectations before they even got to know their child because of their speech, appearance, or active behavior in the classroom. As Mrs. Hughes angrily explained, “It wasn’t even September yet and the teacher was telling me that my son would probably need to be held back in the first grade” (Foster, 2007, p. 41). This particular parent questioned how the teacher could determine that her son should be held

back so early in the school year. She wanted the teacher to try different strategies with her son before coming to such a harsh conclusion. As Mr. Cuff described his son's

Kindergarten experiences:

When our son was in Kindergarten, his teacher would send home a paper marking how many times he got out of his seat. We felt that if she had time to mark how many times he got out of his seat then she couldn't have been teaching. (Foster, 2007, p. 39)

The parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study were very aware of the low expectations that some of their teachers had toward their sons.

It's our African American boys. I think it has a lot to do with expectations. Unfortunately, many teachers don't expect your son or my son to do well. They expect them to be locked up. They don't expect our children to be successful. (Foster, 2007, p. 48)

All of the families of African American boys discussed how they literally had to be the advocate for their sons with school related situations. At the time of the study, Mr. and Mrs. Hughes were changing their first grade son's classroom teacher to a new classroom teacher because they did not feel that she had their son's best interest in mind. Mrs. Carruthers shared her encounters with the principal. The mother talked about the different referrals she was receiving and how she refused to sign one of the referrals because she did not believe her son was at fault. She expressed her fears concerning her son and the negative reputation that could follow him for the rest of his school career. "I refused to sign the referral forms. I didn't want my child labeled. That's what happened to my oldest son" (Foster, 2007, p. 35).

*Lack of Understanding about the Behavior  
and Learning Styles of African American Boys*

“Yes, our children tend to be a little more energetic. That’s how our children are and educators have to be educated to understand how to teach our children who may be a little bit outside of the box” (Foster, 2007, p. 49). All of the families expressed their disdain with the lack of knowledge many administrators and educators tend to have about teaching the African American student population. They all agreed that a change needed to be made in regards to allocating their tax dollars equally between the English Language Learners and the African American student population. “Our African American students are performing lower than the English Language Learners yet there is 250,000 dollars set aside for English Language Learners and nothing set aside for our African American students” (Foster, 2007, p. 48). The parent(s)/guardian(s) expressed their frustration with the schools lack of realization that the African American student population is in dire need of funds that will help to train teachers and provide resources to raise the academic levels of the African American population.

During the group meeting, most of the parent(s)/guardian(s) agreed that the educators who are serving their children do not know how to adequately reach and teach their children. They all conceded that the district should mandate that teachers attend diversity workshops and trainings where they learn about different cultures and various learning styles. As Ms. Merrida explained:

Different children learn differently. Children of different races and who are in different environments, and different cultures, they learn differently. I think in the public school setting, especially, with African American children, a lot of educators who may not have ever dealt with African American kids before... they don’t get it. Teachers need to focus on diversity training and need to pay more attention to this problem. (Foster, 2007, p. 3)

*Question #2: What do African American parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?*

By discussing the causes for the academic achievement gap, a theme that surfaced was the expectations each parent/guardian had for their child's school, administrator, and teacher. Each of the parent(s)/guardian(s) shared their expectations and the strategies they felt would help the schools, administrators, and teachers promote academic excellence amongst their own children and other African American children. Although the parent(s)/guardian(s) were aware that many of the strategies would only work if changes were made from the top-down:

Changes have to be made from the top-down. It's systemic. The governor has to require that each school district... the superintendents, that they require that the administrators require that our teachers are doing whatever it takes and provided with the necessary strategies to reach our African American children. (Foster, 2007, p. 50)

Each of the parent(s)/guardian(s) remained hopeful that the changes that could be made within each school, should and would be made.

Each parent(s)/guardian(s) discussed the important impact a caring and welcoming school environment, administrator, and educator could make in helping to promote academic excellence. The participants also expressed the urgent need for administrators and educators to collaborate and keep the lines of communication open and honest with the African American families.



### *School Environment*

All of the families wanted the schools that their child/children attended to be safe, caring, clean, and welcoming. Children attend school each day for six to seven hours, five days a week. Children need to feel safe and cared for while at school (Lynn, 2006). Parent(s)/guardian(s) put their trust in the people working at the schools: the administrators, educators, secretaries, custodians, paraprofessionals, and cafeteria workers. They expected the professionals to take on the role of protecting and caring for their children while they were in their hands. Mrs. Smith expressed her expectations:

I expect my child's school to have standards: behavioral and academic. I expect the school to nurture and train the teachers so that the teachers are better equipped to deal with the students. The environment is a huge component down to the secretary that is greeting the kids. The environment needs to be free for kids to dream and explore. (Foster, 2007, p. 23)

The school environment does play a major role in helping students to feel like their thoughts, opinions, and interest are validated and important to those working within the schools (Kohl, 1994). As Ms. Lowe explained, "I expect the school to create an environment where the child can be free to be who they are. Where they can be themselves" (Foster, 2007, p. 27).

### *Administrators Attitude and Beliefs*

Throughout the dialogues all of the parent(s)/guardian(s) felt that the administrators must model for the teachers and the students good character, tolerance, and acceptance of differences. They also expected the administrators to keep an open communication with the staff, the students, and the parent(s)/guardian(s). In addition, when the administrator

models good character and tolerance, the students are more likely to feel comfortable both attending the school and approaching the administrator. During one of the dialogues a father, Mr. Burton, commented that the teachers and the students follow the administrators lead. "If the administrator isn't treating certain kids fairly, the kids are gonna notice" (Foster, 2007, p. 32). Each family expected the principal to be understanding and receptive regardless of outside circumstances which many children have no control over. As one parent stated, "I expect the principal to be understanding and to reach out to the families even when it seems like the families don't care" (Foster, 2007, p. 45). Ms. Merrida, a single mother, beamed when sharing about the level of comfort and trust she had developed with her son's current administrator, she recalled:

Once, the administrator took the time and called me just to tell me about the nice things my son had done. That made me feel very good and proud. I think every administrator should take the time to make some sort of connection with every family. They don't realize how much reaching out to us means. (Foster, 2007, p.48)

The need to feel comfortable trusting, approaching, and addressing the administrators was a common theme throughout the dialogues. The grandmother who participated in the study, Mrs. Jackson, described her need to personally feel comfortable with the administrator. She stated, "I need to know that he will listen to any concerns I may have about raising my granddaughter" (Foster, 2007, p. 20). She further added that she wanted her child's principal to help her by looking out for her granddaughter.

Each family expected the administrators at their child/children's school to do whatever it took to communicate any needs or issues pertaining to the district, the school, and their child/children. Keeping the lines of communication open about district and school related activities or issues were important. As Ms. Merrida stated, "I expect the

principal to keep the community informed as to what is going on in the school and within the school district” (Foster, 2007, p. 47). All of the parent(s)/guardian(s) expected the administrators to develop some way to keep the lines of communication open for the parent(s)/guardian(s). As Mr. Cuff stated, “Administrators need to somehow make it easily accessible for parents to communicate with them” (Foster, 2007, p. 41). He acknowledged that administrators are busy, but he suggested emailing parents, sending home newsletters, calling with good comments, and even having a suggestion box available for parents and students to leave their suggestions or concerns.

The parent(s)/guardian(s) also wanted to know that their suggestions, concerns, or comments would be heard and that the necessary actions would be taken. “I want to feel like I can go and talk to the principal or that my child can go and talk to the principal and what he or I have to say will be heard” (Foster, 2007, p. 26). Mr. and Mrs. Cuff discussed their experiences with the principal concerning their son’s need to move to another classroom during the middle of the school year. They explained that the principal was very open and receptive to their feelings and their concerns and he made suggestions about other teachers he felt would be a better fit for their child.

### *Teacher Practices*

The parent(s)/guardian(s) expected the administrators to keep the lines of communication open, but, more importantly, they expected the teachers to keep the communication open. Teachers deal with their child/children on a daily basis for six to seven hours a day. All of the families agreed that since the teachers take care of their child/children on a daily basis, in most instances, the teachers know their child/children just about as well as the parent(s)/guardian(s). As Mrs. Jones reminded, “I always tell my

child's teacher... I know my child better than anyone. So, if we work together, we can't help but to help my child succeed" (Foster, 2007, p. 46). All of the families identified communication as being the most important strategy any teacher could have. I asked each family to explain the expectations they had for their child/children's teacher. Mrs. Smith explained, "I expect them to have open communication with me. Don't brush me off when I want to discuss something with MY child and never make the mistake to think you know My child better than I do" (Foster, 2007, p. 24). Each of the parent(s)/guardian(s) expressed the joys and the frustrations of interacting with teachers who were open to communicating and teachers who were not open to communicating. As Ms. Lowe stated, "The parent and the teacher must form a connection" (Foster, 2007, p. 28).

Many of the African American participants, felt the parent-teacher connection began with the teacher making the first move. They felt that it was the teacher's job to express care and sincere dedication for their child/children. "Let me know what's going on, good or bad, be proactive, but I don't want to hear bad all of the time" (Foster, 2007, p. 30). When the researcher asked Mrs. Carruthers to explain how she felt when she received phone calls or notes home that were majority negative, she replied: "I get defensive. I wonder what they aren't doing in the classroom because my son isn't like that at home" (Foster, 2007, p. 34). Research showed that hearing negative about your child often raises defenses, anxiety, anger, and fears (Reif & Heimburge, 2006). The majority of the parent(s)/guardian(s) expressed dissatisfaction with educators who waited until the problem, whether academic or behavioral, escalated. "When you wait until the problem is bad... or when you are just sending home notes but not explaining about the notes, what

am I supposed to do?” (Foster, 2007, p. 1). Mrs. Carruthers avidly suggested, “If there is a problem, tell me about the problem right away otherwise weeks later, my son has forgotten what he did. Also, give me advice on how to help my child” (Foster, 2007, p. 11).

During the dialogues the researcher also asked each family to share their thoughts about the amount of parent-teacher contacts and the types of contacts they felt were effective. The answers varied between weekly to monthly depending on the situation. Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, parents of a first grader remarked, “If the problem is serious, you can contact me everyday. If it’s just an update and to let me know how to help my child, then contact me weekly or monthly” (Foster, 2007, p. 48). All of the parent(s)/guardian(s) suggested: phone calls, emails, notes home, and post cards as various forms for maintaining the lines of communication open between home and school.

Yeah, the teacher and the parents are a team. This is what we’re doing in the class... can you help him with this at home..we’re taking it at home, and she’s doing it during the day, those are the kind of notes or phone calls I want to hear or see. When I don’t hear anything, I’m assuming everything’s okay. (Foster, 2007, p. 17)

The parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study also expected their child/children’s teachers to develop positive rapport. As Mrs. Cuff, a parent of both a first grade child and a second grade child stated:

I expect them to be engaged with my kid and develop a bond. I expect my kid’s teachers to know my kid, their strengths, their challenges, and to know me as a parent. To be engaged in the successes of our kids. Not putting any limits or boundaries but helping to reinforce my belief that my kids can be the best. (Foster, 2007, p. 40)

Each child has different home and school experiences. Each child enters into the classroom with different backgrounds and each child learns differently (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002). Another theme which emerged during the dialogues with the parent(s)/guardians dealt with getting to know each child's strengths and weaknesses and learning how to help each individual child. As Mrs. Smith explained, "If you take learning from where the child is, then the child will open up and it will help the child to want to succeed as well" (Foster, 2007, p. 25). As Mr. Burton stated, "What isn't working is trying to create a cookie cutter kid" (Foster, 2007, p. 33). Many of the participants described their child's teacher as trying to fit each student into the ideal mold of what they thought a student should look like, act like, and the manner and time in which they should achieve. All of the parent(s)/guardian(s) mentioned the detrimental effects not differentiating instruction could have on their children. During the group meeting, some of the parent(s) discussed the fact that every child is not going to be on the same level at the same time. As Mr. Merrida, one of the guardians stated, "That's why our kids start to act out and end up in the office because our kids feel dumb. It may take some kids longer than others to grasp information" (Foster, 2007, p. 51). Mr. Burton added, "Teachers have to meet my child where he is and give him time to finish" (Foster, 2007, p. 51). When the researcher asked him to explain, he continued:

I need teachers to respect my son as an individual. They need to see him as the bright light that he is and all the kids are. When they don't take the time to know the kids because of assumptions or stereotypes, then they aren't going to take the time to try to figure out how to help our children." (Foster, 2007, p. 50)

*Question #3: How can parents, schools, and students work together to promote student academic success and parent involvement?*

Keeping the communication open and honest about each child's progress or about possible concerns is important to the African American population (Hale, 2001). The 11 families who participated in the study supported their child/children in whatever way they needed to ensure their child/children reached their fullest potential. However, only 2 of the 11 families were involved in school related activities and associations at the time of the study. As one of the participants explained:

I don't think the schools are doing enough. I think a lot of African American families don't feel comfortable and they feel disconnected. They feel as though this whole setting is not for them.. they feel excluded. It's like a child...he's either going to act out, or back off and become withdrawn and many African American families become withdrawn. (Foster, 2007, p. 11)

During the first dialogues with the parent(s)/guardian(s), the researcher asked each participant to express their opinions about the low African American parent/guardian involvement within the schools. The researcher also asked the families to provide possible suggestions they felt would promote African American parent/guardian involvement in school related activities and associations.

Many of the families attributed the low African American parent/guardian involvement to the fact that many African American women are single parents, working more than one job, or they are guardians who are taking care of the grandchild. Some of the other participants attributed the lack of African American family involvement to the fact that both of the parents within the home work. Lack of time, appropriate resources, and lack of positive, welcoming experiences when they were visiting the schools were also cited as common causes for low African American parental involvement.

Sadly, many administrators and educators develop assumptions or stereotypes based on low parent involvement (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Instead of developing new ways to reach the African American community, too often, administrators and educators stop trying to reach out to them when their attempt to involve the community was not received well. Research has proven that when administrators and educators continue to reach out to the families, helping to make things accessible and easy for parents to become involved in ways that work for them, parents will eventually become involved (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

One of the grandmothers who participated in the study, Mrs. Jackson, she attributed low parental involvement to her age and her lack of energy. She mentioned that by the time her granddaughter arrived home from school, she would not feel like returning back to the school for a meeting or a school function. She suggested, “Just call parents or families that don’t have the time or the energy. Whatever you do, maintain the contact with parents like that” (Foster, 2007, p. 5). Ms. Lowe discussed her frustrations with raising her son alone, as a single mother. She explained about the difficulties she encounters with balancing work, spending time with her son, and attending school related functions. She justified her lack of school involvement on working two different jobs and returning home too late from the jobs. She added: “I barely have time to help my son with his homework.” (Foster, 2007, p. 27). As Mr. Burton shared in disgust:

Schools think... why do we have to spend money to bring in the Black parents when other races are ready and willing to participate. I think we have to impress upon the school board that funds need to be allocated to reach the African American community. (Foster, 2007, p. 33).



The parent(s)/guardian(s) admitted that certain strategies that work to involve parent(s)/guardian(s) in school related functions do not work for all families. For example, some of the families agreed that simply sending home flyers and expecting the parent(s)/guardian(s) to participate would not work as well for the African American population as it may for other races. Lack of time, both parents working, or single parents trying to provide for their child/children are factors that contribute to low family involvement in school related activities and functions. Schools must reach the African American population by implementing various strategies. Ms. Lowe, a single mother explained:

I just don't think that what works for other races, will work for African American families. Teachers have to be willing to get help from families in however manner will work for that particular family... allow parents to write notes to include their thoughts and opinions for the different associations within the school. But just because we're not involved, doesn't mean we don't care. (Foster, 2007, p. 90)

#### *Parental Summary*

The findings of the study revealed the personal concerns, fears, and suggestions the 15 parent(s)/guardian(s) had toward their child/children's school environment, administrators, and teachers. Each participant in this study shared common experiences and opinions about the causes for the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population. In addition, the parent(s)/guardian(s) discussed strategies they felt administrators and educators could use that would possibly help to promote African American student achievement and parent involvement within the school system.

The responses demonstrated that the parent(s)/guardian(s) expected their child/children to succeed academically. They are fully aware of the advantages a quality

education provided toward achieving lifelong success. They acknowledged the fact that administrators, teachers, parent(s)/guardian(s) must all work together to help ensure that their child/children reached their fullest academic potential.

### *Family Summary*

Each family candidly discussed their experiences with educators and administrators and provided strategies they felt would help to involve more African American parents/guardians in their child's academics and help to improve African American student achievement. Although many educators often affiliate African American families with not being involved in the school and unwilling to attend functions at the schools (Banks & Banks, 2005, Baugh, 1999, Hale, 2001), all of the families who participated in the study were ebullient, and ready to finally have their voices heard about the current situations within the school systems which are failing our African American student population.

The last chapter further discusses the findings from the study and the relationship between the findings of the study and the literature review. The final chapter further discusses the causes for the academic achievement gap and the possible solutions toward helping to narrow the academic achievement gap between African American students and that of their European counterparts.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The final chapter of this dissertation reiterates the statement of the problem and briefly reviews the theoretical rationale for this study. In addition, this chapter summarizes the results of the study, discussions and conclusions about the findings, and recommendations for further research.

The purpose for the study was to listen to the voices of African American elementary school students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) about their perceptions of the possible causes for the academic achievement gap and strategies they felt administrators and educators could implement into the classroom that would promote academic excellence as well as parental involvement. The aim of the research, in dialoguing with this population, was to identify, from the voices of young African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s): (a) the elements which they felt contributed to the academic achievement gap, (b) the strategies they felt would promote academic excellence, and (c) to identify the strategies they felt would help administrators and educators better include African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) in school related functions and decisions.

The findings of the study related to the statement of the problem because 7 out of the 11 student participants were or had experienced academic difficulties, the majority of the African American boys in the study frequented the office, and a few of the participants were beginning to develop low self-esteem toward school. All of the students who participated in the study perceived teachers who were not enthusiastic about teaching,

uninteresting, did not provide challenging assignments, and who did not provide adequate support and care as the causes for their academic difficulties and negative experiences in school. The parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study also perceived lack of enthusiastic teachers coupled with boring and unchallenging curriculum as the causes for the academic achievement gap.

The review of the literature showed that historically, the African American population has been denied access to equal educational opportunities since slavery (Turner-Sadler, 2006). As Noguera and Wing (2006) stated, “For African Americans, obtaining access to education has been a life and death struggle” (p.x). During slavery, the African slaves were forced to learn to speak the language of the slave masters, learn to read, and to write the language of the slave masters all on their own (Bennett, 1993; Turner-Sadler, 2006). The history of inequality in granting equal access to education continued with the Civil Rights movement and has continued today (Carson, 2003). Now, the African American population is forced to face inequalities within the educational system by attending run down facilities, receiving less qualified teachers, and experiencing teachers with preconceived assumptions and low expectations of their learning abilities (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Research showed that far too often, the African American student population entered Kindergarten ready and excited to learn (Kuykendall, 2004) but that the longer they stayed in school, the more the excitement decreased (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

The theoretical rationales which helped to guide the research were Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive Teaching. Critical race theory recognizes that race is a factor in the structuring of schools and of schooling practices (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001)

thus, the race with the most power received the most educational advantages (Hale, 1986). Critical race theory provides educators with the rationale and the need to reflect on their own biases, stereotypes, and assumptions and begin to understand how their biases, consciously or subconsciously, impact their teaching methods and their attitudes toward particular groups of students.

Culturally responsive teaching provides teachers with the knowledge and the tools to understand the importance of incorporating their student's culture, home language, and home experiences into the curriculum and the classroom and use them as a bridge between home and school (Gay, 2000). By implementing a culturally responsive teaching style in the classroom, educators can ensure that they embrace all students' culture, experiences, and talents.

Based on the findings of the study, elementary school aged African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) both desire caring and reflective teachers who are willing to develop the necessary relationships and bonds with each student and her/his family. As Rich (2006) stated, "children need a school life that shows respect for them and demonstrates caring about them and where everybody knows their name" (p. 325). The student participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) both yearned for teachers who understood the importance of learning about each student and the best way to ensure that each student reached his or her fullest academic potential.

The results of the study illustrated that the children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) are more likely receptive toward administrators, educators, and their child's school needs when their thoughts, opinions, and concerns are well received and validated. It was also evident that the students who participated in the study desired to achieve academically

and that their parent(s)/guardian(s) were willing to do whatever they could to help their child/children succeed.

A few of the student participants had begun to develop apathy toward school and learning. Unfortunately, some of the parent(s)/guardian(s) did not have the tools or the resources to adequately help their child with academics. In some of the cases, the parent(s)/guardian(s) did not feel comfortable approaching the teacher or the administrator for assistance. The study demonstrated the undeniable need for administrators, educators, and parent(s)/guardian(s) to work together to provide all students with equal opportunities to achieve academic excellence regardless of uncontrollable circumstances.

### Discussion

Using participatory research, nine families and the researcher dialogued about their personal experiences, concerns, and suggestions regarding the academic achievement gap in the African American student population. The dialogues centered on three main research questions. The participants identified the challenges they were confronted with as African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) of African American children. In addition, the student participants discussed the challenges they faced in schools and the impact those challenges had toward their desire to learn and their attitudes toward administrators and the teachers.

As the dialogues unfolded with each of the participants, the children, and their parent(s)/guardian(s), a number of generative themes were revealed, discussed, and analyzed. The findings of the study revealed that the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the student participants equated similar reasons for the low academic achievement amongst

the African American student population. The parent(s)/guardian(s) and the student participants also provided similar suggestions for administrators and educators. Finally, the parent(s)/guardian(s) provided suggestions to administrators and educators about effectively involving the African American student population and their families in school related activities and decisions.

*What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the elements that contribute to or affect the academic achievement of African American students?*

The findings of the study revealed that lack of positive school climate, low teacher expectations, coupled with uninteresting and irrelevant curriculum were the elements the student participants and the parent(s)/guardian(s) perceived as the causes for the academic achievement gap. The findings of the study collaborated with the literature review. Both the findings and the literature review suggest that the key elements which contribute to or affect the academic achievement of students are based on the school, the teachers, and the parents.

Although the sample size of the study was small, the findings of the study were significant. The fact that the parent(s)/guardian(s) did not dialogue with the researcher at the same time, in the same setting, but revealed similar reasons for the academic achievement gap was critical. The fact that the student participants ranged in ages 6 to 10, first to fifth grade, but even the youngest participant understood the effects of negative surroundings and lack of teacher support and knowledge was also of note. The study demonstrates the dire need for elementary school administrators, educators, parent(s)/guardian(s), and elementary school-aged students to work together to find solutions toward promoting academic success. When our African American students

decide early in their academic career apathy toward school, it is harder to reclaim their interest. If administrators and educators are sincere about focusing on raising the academic achievement and developing effective strategies that will help to narrow that academic achievement gap between African American students and European students, they must begin to listen to our young students and their parent(s)/guardian(s).

*What do African American students and parent(s)/guardian(s) perceive are the key elements to help to provide a solution to narrow the academic achievement gap amongst the African American student population and to promote academic excellence?*

The findings of the study were significant because all of the participants provided practical suggestions and advice to administrators and educators that can help to promote academic excellence amongst the African American student population. The findings also filled the void of the lack of research related to dialoguing with elementary school aged students and their needs from administrators and educators. As shown in the literature review, educational statistics have proven that the gap begins as early as the fourth grade (Fashola, 2005; Hale, 2001). The researcher's personal experiences with students who have mentally "dropped out" of school by the second grade corroborated with the literature review and the findings of the study. The study revealed that African American students mentally "drop out" of school at young ages because of insensitive teachers and boredom. Administrators and educators need to actively seek the advice of Kindergarten, first, second, and third grade students to excogitate strategies that will promote an enthusiasm toward academic learning and academic success.



This study aimed to include the voices of the African American student population and their parent(s)/guardian(s). Developing and implementing fun and interactive curriculum, responding to the needs of every student, and demonstrating patience were the perceived requisites for promoting academic success. Both the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the student participants expressed a need for passionate, patient teachers who were willing to listen to each child, meet each child at his or her academic level, and challenge each child accordingly.

In addition, the results of this study also revealed that students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) desired caring administrators and educators who were willing to take the extra time to develop relationships and provide support. The most important factor that makes students like school is “care” (Rich, 2006, p. 345). The researcher found that students are more likely to academically achieve and parent(s)/guardian(s) are more receptive when teachers sincerely demonstrate and express compassion, care, and concern.

*From the perceptions of the parent(s)/guardian(s), how can parent(s)/guardian(s), schools, and students work together to promote student academic success and parent involvement?*

Although the parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study did attribute the lack of African American parental involvement to lack of time, lack of resources, and low level of comfort between the teacher and the parent, the participants provided suggestions and ideas they felt would promote parental involvement. All of the participants agreed that maintaining positive communication between home and school was essential. Often, educators begin the school year with a positive phone call or a

positive note home, however; as the school year progresses, the notes and the phone calls decreases. The findings mark the importance of maintaining positive communication between the home and school, regardless of parental involvement or parental reciprocity. As Ms. Lowe stated, “Sometimes I have to warm up to the teachers. Especially if I have had bad experiences with teachers during my child’s previous school years. I don’t just trust that you have my child’s interest in mind” (Foster, 2007, p. 28).

The parent(s)/guardian(s) also suggested that administrators and educators implemented various methods to help include and reach out to the African American families. Although sending home flyers may not effectively promote parental involvement, calling a parent to provide updates on school and classroom activities, mailing post cards, and providing a suggestion box in the office for both the students and the parent(s)/guardian(s) are a few of the recommendations they felt would help provide alternative parental involvement methods .

### Conclusions

Throughout the process of dialogue, the participants were empowered by having their voices heard and by realizing that they were not alone; that other African American families were experiencing the same feelings, thoughts, concerns, questions, and fears. All participants, children and adults, were able to reflect upon their feelings and the strategies they knew, whether young or old, would help to raise academic achievement.

As Baugh (1999) stated, “Parents know what works. They feel powerless to influence the local and state bureaucracies” (p. 17). However, dialoguing with each of the parent(s)/guardian(s), made it clear that they had gained the confidence and the strength to become more involved toward helping to raise awareness about the African

American student population. During the group meeting, all of the parent(s)/guardian(s) began to discuss and organize an African American forum. They decided that the African American forum would provide a positive atmosphere that would allow African American families the opportunity to interact with one another and discuss the issues and concerns about their African American children.

The parent(s)/guardian(s) and the student participants, along with the researcher, also took action by speaking to the staff from the elementary school where the study took place about the findings of the study. The researcher and the participants met together in an agreed upon location and planned the two and a half hour workshop. During the workshop, the researcher and the participants worked together to ensure that the staff left the workshop with a better understanding about how to effectively reach African American students and their parent(s)/guardian(s).

Two major conclusions were drawn from the findings of the study. Regardless of the stereotypes and the perceived opinions that may have been derived from lack of parental involvement, the African American parent(s)/guardian(s) who participated in the study recognized that they were their child's advocate. Many of the parent(s) agreed that they would fight for their child's equal opportunities for academic success. They mentioned that if they did not defend their child's educational rights, too often, no one else would. Regardless of circumstances, academic experiences, or lack of teacher and parent connection, the children and the parent(s)/guardian(s) were willing to fight for their equal rights to an equal educational opportunity. As one proud parent stated, "I am my son's biggest advocate. I am going to make sure that his teachers treat him the way he should be treated and provide him with the tools he needs to succeed" (Foster, 2007, p. 9).

During a second dialogue with a single mother, she commented, “We have to succeed to prove them wrong. To help the other generations under us. Our children have to latch on to the people who will give them positive feedback and believe in their abilities” (Foster, 2007, p. 91).

The second major finding from the study revealed that the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the students yearned for a support system. The parent(s)/guardian(s) recognized their need to be supported by the administrators and the educators at their child/children’s school. As one of the guardians stated:

Teachers have to realize that some of us parents don’t know how to help our children because we’ve been out of school for a long time. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t want to help them. We need advice from the teachers. That’s why we all need to work together. (Foster, 2007, p. 4)

The children in the study also identified a need to feel part of a team. The students wanted to know that the administrators and the teachers had their best interest in mind. One of the children explained, “If I feel like the teacher really isn’t on my team, I’m not gonna wanna be on her team” (Foster, 2007, p. 94). As Darling Hammond (2002) stated, “high quality education starts with relationships” (p. 4).

### Recommendations for Further Research

Although this study captured the voices of the children and their families, it is recommended that a mixed method, quantitative study follow the qualitative study that was already conducted. A quantitative, sequential procedures study could track the comments and suggestions of a larger number of participants. Questionnaires could be distributed to a larger population of African American students and their families. The

results of such a study may be of great use in potentially learning from a larger population of African American children and their parents.

A qualitative study, participatory action research method, could also be conducted within one elementary school, using the entire African American student population and their families from that school, dialoguing with the parents(s)/guardian(s) over a school year. Such a study could aid educators and administrators in effectively including the African American population and ensuring that various methods are used to raise the achievement of the African American student population.

A comparative study could be conducted between two schools within the same school district. This will help administrators and educators to learn from one another about what is and is not working for each school.

It is also recommended to conduct a longitudinal study, Phenomenological research method of tracking the same students over a period of time and dialoguing with each of the 11 students. The results of such a study could help to track progress from the child's perception for progress or failure.

#### Recommendations for Professional Practice

It is imperative that administrators and educators are truly dedicated to reaching and teaching African American students, accumulating and implementing engaging and fun resources, and seeking appropriate training that will help to support learning within the African American student population. Given that administrators and educators play an important role in a child's life (Nieto, 2004; Rich, 2006), they both must have an insatiable appetite for helping all students regardless of family background, family

experiences, or family structure. “It is our job as teachers to recognize and capitalize on each student’s strengths to motivate and enable him or her to learn” (Rief & Heimburge, 2006, p. 18).

As research stated:

The cultures of schools and different ethnic groups are not always synchronized. These differences can interfere with students’ academic achievement, in part because how students are accustomed to engaging in intellectual processing, self-presentation, and task performance is different from the processes used in school. (Gay, 2000, p. 45)

When African American families and educators do not share the same “hidden rules” the chances of misunderstandings and assumptions are at a greater risk (Banks & Banks, 2005). Teachers often view behavior problems, lack of school preparedness, and lack of family involvement as the key factors which have contributed to the academic achievement gap (Rich, 2006). Furthermore, when African American families do not fit the ideal mold, assumptions and misunderstanding can interfere with the teacher’s desire to connect with the family.

As the findings from the study revealed, lack of time, single parent homes, the parent(s)/guardian(s) hectic work schedule, and the parent(s)/guardian(s) lack of comfort and trust in the school can all conflate and contribute to low parental involvement. Regardless of parental involvement, it is an educator’s responsibility to continually attempt to build positive relationships with the students and their parent(s)/guardian(s). It is imperative that the African American community, the administrators, and the educators work together, dialogue with one another, and reflect on the practices and strategies that are and are not working to help narrow the academic achievement gap. In order to create better schools for more children, we all must come together to talk about the schools we

have as well as the schools we need (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Administrators and educators have to be more accountable for their actions and more aware of the results and impacts of their actions.

The findings of the study indicate the dire need for the African American community to come together and share their thoughts and have their voices heard about what is and what is not working for them within the school systems. Superintendents, administrators, educators, custodians, cafeteria workers, parent(s)/guardian(s), children must all come together to listen to each other's voices about effective practices and strategies that will help to promote academic excellence amongst the African American student population.

#### Reflections of the Researcher

The researcher did not expect the amount of excitement and relief all of the parent(s)/guardian(s) shared as they dialogued about their child's school experiences. The amount of time that was required from the participants and the obvious lack of time the participants had, could have possibly prohibited each of the families from participating in the study. However, the 15 parent(s)/guardian(s) were eager to have their voices validated about their opinions of the causes of academic achievement gap and their thoughts about what schools could be capable of doing to narrow the gap.

The students and the parent(s)/guardian(s) were relieved to have someone they could trust and felt comfortable sharing their frustrations and concerns. "Parents give more to the school when they trust and when their needs are met" (Hale, 1986, p. 174). The parent(s)/guardian(s) did not have any more time than they usually had but they made the time to meet with the researcher and share their perceptions of the causes of the academic achievement gap and possible solutions toward promoting academic excellence. The

level of comfort and trust the participants and the researcher had, allowed for honest and sincere conversations.

As the researcher sat with each family for two to three hours each session, the researcher recalled the negative comments she had heard about the African American families from various educators. For example, one teacher suggested, “give up on trying to help that family (African American family) because they were poor, had too many kids, and the parents didn’t help them with anything.” The study proved that effective educators do not give up on the parent/guardian or the student. They are dedicated to their profession and dedicated to making a positive difference in as many children’s lives as possible.

As each family shared their heartfelt experiences with the educational system, the researcher realized that all the participants yearned to have their story heard. By listening to the participants, the researcher obtained valuable information and grew as an elementary school educator. The researcher was able to reflect upon her own classroom practices and she incorporated many of the strategies that were suggested by the participants into her classroom.

In conclusion, the dialogic research process gave the participants and the researcher the opportunity to learn and grow from one another. Together, they reflected on the strategies the school administrator and the teachers were and were not incorporating into the classroom practices and they took action by dialoguing and discussing with the other educators from the elementary school where the study took place.

The African American population has fought hard for their equal rights for equal educational opportunities. Unfortunately, the issues dealing with the African American



population has changed since slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, but acquiring equal educational opportunities to succeed has remained a constant struggle (Willoughby, 2004). It is the researcher's hope and dreams that this study will inspire researchers, administrators, and educators to take the time to listen to the students and the parent(s)/guardian(s) they serve and to do whatever it takes to ensure that all students are provided equal opportunities to achieve academic excellence. The more African American students academically "lose" during the elementary grades, the less African American graduates our society will produce. As effective educators, let us work together to ensure that our young African American student population has received equal opportunities to succeed regardless of outside circumstances.

During the group dialogue, the researcher asked the parent(s)/guardian(s) participants to describe an effective educator. This chapter will conclude with the group definition of an effective educator:

An effective teacher is one who takes quality time with my child, isn't quick to send them to the office, energetic and patience. An effective teacher is loving yet strict, isn't afraid to lay down the rules. An effective teacher teaches to each individual student, meets them where they are and doesn't worry about meeting the state standard. Effective teachers realize that when you meet each child where they are, you will not only meet the standard in the end, but you will also be a positive influence. (Foster, 2007, p. 50)

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
AND PARENTAL CONSENT FORM  
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

1. You and your child are being asked to participate in a research study.

2. Purpose and Background

Ms. Bweikia Foster, doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, is conducting a study on students and parents' perspectives about the strategies you perceive teachers should use that could effectively close the academic achievement gap within the elementary grades amongst the African American student population. The research for this study will serve as a framework with which educators can use toward promoting academic excellence and helping to close the academic achievement gap.

My child and I are being asked to participate in this study because my child is an elementary school student in the designated school district. My child is also of African American descent.

3. Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, the following will happen:

1. I will participate in an initial dialogue with the researcher where I will complete a questionnaire about my family background and my child's school experiences.
2. My child and I will participate in our first taped dialogue.
3. My child and I will be given a transcript of the taped dialogue to read and comment/make corrections on.
4. My child and I will participate in a second dialogue with the researcher and asked follow-up questions based on the first dialogue and additional questions or comments.
5. My child and I will be given the transcript of the taped dialogue to make any corrections or additions.
6. I will be given generative themes which emerged from the two dialogues

7. I will be asked to comment on the themes and suggestions toward developing an action plan.

The dialogues will occur in a mutually agreed upon location.

#### 4. Risk

1. It is possible that some of the questions may make me and/or my child feel uncomfortable, My child and I are free to decline to answer any questions that we do not wish to answer or that make us feel uncomfortable.
2. Confidentiality will be maintained as I participate in the study. Study records and used tapes will be kept confidential and no individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this study. Study information will be kept in locked files at all times. Only the researcher will have access to the files.
3. Children may become tired and uninterested.

#### 5. Benefits

Participants will gain empowerment from participating in the study, knowing that they were co-researchers on a body of knowledge that will be available for educators to read, ponder, and learn from.

#### 6. Cost

There will be no financial cost to me as a result of taking part in this study.

#### 7. Compensation

There will be no compensation for participating in this research study.

#### 8. Questions

I have talked to Ms. Bweikia Foster about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may contact her by email at [bweikia@aol.com](mailto:bweikia@aol.com).

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with Ms. Bweikia Foster. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with my protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, or by emailing [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu), or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94511-1080

## 9. Consent

I have been given a copy of the “Research Subject’s Bill of Rights” and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as a student or employee at the University of San Francisco.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate and to allow my child to participate in this study.

---

Parent/ Guardian Signature

Date

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

## APPENDIX B

**Release Form for Audio Tapes and Transcripts**

I agree to have my dialogues and my child's dialogues with Bweikia Foster audio taped and transcribed into written form. I realize that it is the responsibility of both Bweikia Foster and me to ensure the accuracy of these transcriptions.

I am also aware that the original audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a safe, secure place in Ms. Bweikia Foster's home for a period of three years, after which they will be destroyed. The transcribed copies I receive will be destroyed or not, at my discretion.

---

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Signature

Date

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date



Subj: **Fwd: IRB Application # 06-074 - Application Approved**  
 Date: 10/15/2006 7:42:28 A.M. Pacific Standard Time  
 From:  
 To:  
 CC:

Appendix D

-----  
 Forwarded Message:

Subj: **IRB Application # 06-074 - Application Approved**  
 Date: 9/28/2006 7:51:54 A.M. Pacific Standard Time  
 From:  
 To:  
 CC:

*Sent from the Internet*

September 28, 2006

Dear Ms. Foster:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #06-074). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
 Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

IRBPHS – University of San Francisco  
 Counseling Psychology Department  
 Education Building - 017  
 2130 Fulton Street  
 San Francisco, CA 94117-1080  
 (415) 422-6091 (Message)  
 (415) 422-5528 (Fax)  
 irbphs@usfca.edu

<http://www.usfca.edu/humansubjects/>

Monday, October 16, 2006 America Online: Bweikia



## New Haven Unified School District

UNION CITY • SOUTH HAYWARD • (510) 471-1100  
34200 ALVARADO-NILES ROAD • UNION CITY • CA 94587



<b>BOARD OF EDUCATION</b>	Jonas Dino, Member	<b>SUPERINTENDENT</b>
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Kevin Harper, Clerk	Gertrude Gregorio, Member	

### Appendix E

March 1, 2007

Ms. Bwekia Foster, Teacher  
Kitayama Elementary School  
New Haven Unified School District  
Union City, CA 94587

Dear Ms. Foster:

This letter confirms in writing the District's approval of your research project on promoting academic achievement and excellence within the African American student population from the perspective of parents and/or guardians and their children. The project was approved via e-mail in November 2006, and this letter confirms that approval.

We wish you the best as you pursue this important topic, and will be interested in the results of your study.

Yours truly,

Craig Boyan  
Director of Assessment and Evaluation

cc: Carnell Edwards

## APPENDIX F

## Questions that Guided the Dialogue

1. Students- Tell me about yourself. How old are you? What grade are you currently in?  
Parent(s)/Guardian(s) - Tell me about your family
2. Students – What have been your experiences in school? What do you like most about school? What do you like least about school? Why?  
Parent(s)/Guardian(s)- Tell me about your child’s experiences in school? Tell me about your experiences with your child’s school and teachers.
3. Students- Tell me about your experiences with your teachers. What do you think they have done really well? What do you think teachers should do to Help students enjoy learning? What is the best thing a teacher has done for you? What is the worst thing a teacher has done?
4. Parent(s)/Guardian(s)- Tell me about your child’s school and your child’s teachers. What is working for you and your child? What isn’t working? What changes would you like to see be made at your child’s school and with teachers?
5. Parent(s)/Guardian(s)- What qualities do you think help to makeup an “effective teacher?”