The Educational Experiences of African-American Males

in Special Education Through Counter-stories

by

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Dedication

This is dedicated to all the students whose voices have been silenced or ignored.

Through time and space, you have been heard.

"It is easier to build strong children than it is to repair broken men."

Frederick Douglass

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To my mother and father, Susan and Dennis Bennett. Thank you for all the love and support you have shown me throughout the years. You instilled in me a love of learning and have been instrumental in my educational journey. Without you, this would not be possible.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

The current study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by using counter-storytelling, through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, to explore the historically poor educational outcomes and disproportionate representation of African-American males in special education. Firsthand accounts of African-American male students' experiences within special education and parents' experiences with their children's education were collected. Findings suggested that African-American males in special education take responsibility for their behavior and learning and that their parents play an essential role as advocates. A sharp contrast was also found between parents and their children as parents saw a broken system while students saw themselves as the problem. Furthermore, findings showed that despite students' and parents' belief that the current educational placement was appropriate, the achievement gap between white and African-American students still persisted. The study's findings indicate that educators need to be conscientious of the potential for students to readily internalize both negative and positive interactions within their environment, that schools engage students and parents more deliberately when planning curriculum and instruction, and be receptive to both student and parent voices in order to help shape curriculum and instruction, and be reflective of how their own culture may positively or negatively influence curriculum and instruction in the classroom. It is clear how critically important these factors are in impacting the quality of programs and services African-American males in special education receive, and thus should be at the forefront of educators' minds when designing curriculum and instruction.

Chapter I: Introduction

The world is comprised of a multitude of cultures, ethnicities, and languages, and as the population of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students increases in U.S. classrooms, there are implications for teaching and learning. Diverse classrooms will challenge many educators who will be teaching students whose cultures differ from their own. The proliferation of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students, then, requires an increased awareness and understanding of their backgrounds to deliver curriculum and instruction that align to their specific and individual needs (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2018). This increase in student diversity will require educators to actively listen to their students and families, and to be conscientious and reflective of how their own attitudes, beliefs, and biases can inhibit student learning and achievement (García & Ortiz, 2006). Scholars (Banks, 2004; Gardner, 2006; Gay 2018) have promoted culturally responsive teaching as an effective instructional practice to address the underachievement of African-American students because it builds upon students' prior knowledge and connects to their daily lives and experiences. Culturally responsive teachers appreciate their students' cultures, experiences, and viewpoints, and use the students' cultural capital to deliver high quality curriculum and instruction (Gay, 2018). They are open to learning about the various cultures and individual differences of their students and use this knowledge and understanding to transform their classrooms into empowering learning environments (McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez, 2001). Conversely, curriculum and instruction used in today's educational system is often unresponsive to the

cultural, ethnic, and linguistic needs of diverse students leading to a lower quality education, higher special education referrals, higher rates of school disciplinary action, and higher dropout rates (Gay, 2018).

Statement of Problem

Research reveals that the disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American male students in special education has been an ongoing problem for over four decades (Morrier & Gallagher, 2012). African-Americans are more likely to be identified eligible for special education, and labeled as specific learning disabled (SLD), intellectually disabled (ID), and/or emotionally disturbed (ED), compared to all other racial and ethnic groups (California Department of Education, 2019; Salend, Garrick, & Montgomery, 2002; Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brown, 2007; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). The Office of Special Education Program's (OSEP, 2018) Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) reported that African-American students, ages 6 through 21, under IDEA, Part B, were significantly more likely than white students, in particular, to be identified for special education as specific learning disabled (SLD), intellectually disabled (ID), and/or emotionally disturbed (ED) than when comparing to any other ethnic/racial student group. OSEP's (2018) report is similar to Holzman's (2006) findings who discovered that African-American males were found intellectually disabled (ID) at a rate 300% higher than their overall student population. Furthermore, the Council of Exceptional Children (2002) found that African-American males were twice as likely as white students to be found eligible as emotionally disturbed (ED). Findings like these concerned Noguera (2005), who believed that special education had become the preferred intervention or curriculum for poor, African-American males in urban areas. Once eligible for special education,

African-American males spend more time in restrictive placements, receive remedial instruction, have less accessibility to general education settings, general education curriculum, and their non-disabled peers (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Blanchett, 2009). Noguera (2005) was equally concerned about these findings as they revealed that special education is moving toward a stratified system based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Blanchett (2009) further asserted that special education had become a vehicle for segregating African-American students again after the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision.

Delpit (2013) and Blanchett (2006) suggested that the lack of culturally, ethnically, and/or linguistically responsive curriculum in the classrooms noted above is another subtle, yet destructive example of racism and white privilege. From their perspectives, whites dominate the school curriculum and determine what is essential. As a consequence, African-American males significantly struggle to access a curriculum that represents them, provides them a voice, and connects to their daily lives and experiences (Delpit, 2013; Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). To provide a balanced and quality education, African-American males require a comprehensive, rigorous, and responsive curriculum, in addition to classroom teachers who are highly skilled in content, and effective in delivering instruction that connect to their daily lives and experiences (Delpit, 2013; Blanchett, 2006, 2009). To challenge these and other forms of white privilege and racism, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) advocated that educators utilize a critical race perspective when examining their curricular and instructional practices. They asserted that race matters, and a critical understanding of its effects is instrumental in promoting equity and excellence in education. They also asserted that the high rate of African-American poverty and the state of their schools and schooling are the results of systemic and institutionalized racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Kozol (2012) illustrated the effects of

systemic and institutionalized racism in his book, *Savage Inequalities* where he repeatedly showed that minority students are subjected to overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded schools, in which they are forced to accept an inferior education. In reality, the wide disparity between the academic achievement of African-American and white students continues to persist today (NCES, 2017).

African-American males continue to be at a much greater risk of school failure than white students (Gay, 2018). According to the most recent assessment results from the National Center of Education Statistics (The Nation's Report Card, 2017), 19% of fourth-grade African-American students were at or above proficiency compared to 51% for white fourth grade students in mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Proficiency (NAEP) (The Nation's Report Card, 2017). In eighth-grade mathematics, 13% of African-American students were at or above proficiency compared to 44% of white students (The Nation's Report Card, 2017). The gap in reading performance between African-American students and white students is 26 points in fourth grade and 26 points in eighth grade (The Nation's Report Card, 2017). In twelfth grade, the most recent NAEP results in reading revealed a gap of 29 points between African-American students and white students' overall performance (The Nation's Report Card, 2017).

The most recent NCES statistics also indicated that 16% of African-American students, ages 3-21, compared to 14% of white students ages 3-21, received special education services in 2015-16 (The Nation's Report Card, 2017). Thirty-eight percent of African-American students between the ages of 3-21, compared to 31% of white students within the same age range, are more likely to be identified as Specific Learning Disabled (SLD), as well as Intellectually Disabled (ID), 10% to 6%, respectively. Conversely, white students between the ages of 14-21 receiving special education services are 17% more likely than African-American students within

the same age range receiving special education services to graduate from high school with a regular diploma (72% to 55%, respectively). Overall, African-American students ages 14-21 receiving special education services are more likely to drop out of school (24%) than white students (15%) within the same age range receiving special education services (NCES, 2017). Statistics from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS, 2018) revealed that African-American students, compared to white students, are more likely to be identified for special education under the eligibility areas of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Intellectual Disability (ID), and/or Emotional Disturbance (ED). However, African-American children, compared to white children, are less likely to receive early intervention services, with 2.7% of African-American children receiving early intervention services, compared to 3.3% of white children (OSERS, 2018).

A longitudinal study of 71 high poverty schools, conducted by the United States Department of Education, revealed that African-American students in urban schools compared to white students in the same setting, achieved below levels in all years and grades tested (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Studies, like the one noted above, along with the most recent NAEP (2017) scores have led researchers, like Gay (2018), to conclude that too many African-American males are not achieving academically commensurate to their true abilities and that our nation's schools are not adequately addressing their needs. Gay (2018) further explained that African-American males can achieve academically equal to white students if provided curriculum and instruction that meets their individualized and specific needs. Delpit (2013) pointed out that there is no achievement gap at birth and that all students, regardless of culture, race, and/or ethnicity have an innate ability to learn and achieve if given the right opportunities. Delpit (2013) and Gay (2018) encouraged educators to use a critical race perspective to construct

and deliver culturally responsive teaching. They asserted that most instructional practices promote white culture, which alienate and marginalize African-American males. They believed that it is critical for African-American males to feel included in the curriculum and instruction, and ultimately to see the relevancy of school (Delpit, 2013; Gay, 2018). It is incumbent on teachers, then, to develop positive rapport with their African-American male students and deliver engaging curriculum and instruction that meets their individualized and specific needs, as well as connects to their daily lives and experiences. As our nation's schools become increasingly more diverse, it is critical that the educational system address the challenges of constructing and delivering curriculum and instruction that meets the needs of all students and is characterized by equity and excellence (Delpit, 2013).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the firsthand accounts of students' educational experiences and parents' experiences with their children's education, through counter-stories, to identify specific factors that could result in greater learning and achievement for African-American males in special education. To date, no study has been conducted to examine both students' and their parents' voices though counter-stories, using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory. It was believed that greater understanding through counter-storytelling could identify specific factors that could reduce the over-referral and identification for special education services in the first place. This study used counter-storytelling, through the theoretical framework of critical race theory, to explore the historically poor educational outcomes and disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American males in special education.

Research Questions

Answers to the following research questions were designed to add to the current research literature:

1. What do African-American male students in special education think about their educational experiences?

2. What do parent(s)/guardian(s) of African-American males in special education think of their child's educational experiences?

3. How do the thoughts of African-American males in special education about their educational experience compare and contrast to their parents/guardians' thoughts regarding their educational experience?

Chapter II: Literature Review

Empirical Studies using Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive Teaching

This case study examined student and parent or guardian voices through counter-storytelling to identify specific factors that could result in greater learning and achievement for African-American males in special education. After an extensive examination of the current research, no single study employed the voices of both African-American males in special education and their parents/guardians. This study collected firsthand accounts of special education experiences to inform the field how to increase learning and achievement and provide greater accessibility in the general education setting for African-American males in special education as well as reduce the over-referral and identification for special education services in the first place. Specifically, this study wanted to answer the following questions:

1. What do African-American male students in special education think about their educational experiences?

2. What do parent(s)/guardian(s) of African-American males in special education think of their child's educational experiences?

3. How do the thoughts of African-American males in special education about their educational experience compare and contrast to their parents/guardians' thoughts regarding their educational experience?

Schools that effectively serve African-American males are grounded in critical race

theory (CRT) and use student voice to develop and deliver culturally responsive instruction (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). In order to address the problem through this study, the following sections describe how CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and student voice (Howard, 2008) can address the disproportionate and overrepresentation of African-American males in special education.

Critical Race Theory

To address the disproportionality and overrepresentation of African-American males in special education, an examination of (CRT) is needed. CRT originated during the mid-1970s in response to the perceived failure of Critical Legal Studies to address the impact of race and racism in the U.S. Legal System. CRT evolved from the writings of legal scholars: Bell (1987), Barnes (2016), Delgado and Stefancic (2013). It focuses directly on the effects of race and racism, as well as the systems that perpetuate white supremacy (Crenshaw, 2005; Dalton, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda, 1987, 2018). CRT promotes social action and change to address the inequity and inequality of marginalized peoples through social justice (Crenshaw, 2005).

CRT asserts that people hold many false assumptions regarding race. First, CRT asserts that race is not biological, but a social construct created and reinforced by society. Second, race does matter, and by ignoring its existence or saying it does not matter only affirms its importance. Lastly, racism affects everyone in society because of the social advantages and/or disadvantages associated with it (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006).

Additionally, CRT is critical of the supposed impact of the Civil Rights Movement towards people of color, as well as legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy (Matsuda, 1987, 2018). It asserts that racism has contributed to all group advantages

and disadvantages in society. CRT examines and is concerned about how people of color are portrayed by society. It promotes the daily lives and experiences of people of color. Its main goal is eliminating all forms of racial oppression (Matsuda, 1987, 2018). The following section identifies and summarizes the common themes of CRT that emerge in the research literature. To be specific, the five themes that are illustrative of CRT are: permanence of race, whiteness as property, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, and counter-storytelling.

Permanence of race. CRT acknowledges that racism is a pervasive problem in U.S. society. Bell (1987) posited that racism is a permanent part of U.S. society and that it is important that CRT scholars adopt a realist view of the American societal structure in order to understand the role racism has played and continues to play in society. The permanence of race, then, influences all societal structures on behalf of whites, including education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) believed that the stark disparity between whites and African-Americans' school achievement should not be surprising but is the logical and predictable by-product of race and racism. They maintained that race matters and must be considered when examining the causes of inequity in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). According to Kozol (2008), the achievement gap between white and African-American students steadily declined for three decades through the late 1980s, as school segregation decreased. However, in the early 1990s, as the federal courts began segregating schools again by disassembling the mandates of the Brown decision, that gap started to widen again. To reiterate, CRT scholars assert that racism is pervasive and deeply embedded in U.S. society, and that the high rate of African-American poverty and the state of their schools and schooling are the results of systemic and institutionalized racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). CRT scholars begin with the notion that racism is normal; they state that racism has become a fundamental, widespread, and normalized

way to organize society (Delgado & Stefanic, 2013). Kozol (2005) stated that many educators of inner-city public schools do have realistic views and recognize that equality is not an actuality for their schools and must instead look for adequacy, a legal term simply meaning having sufficient means. CRT scholars further assert that whites created race and racism to serve their self-interests and have employed it to appropriate land and subjugate other humans. Although racism has shifted and taken new forms in contemporary society, it continues to benefit whites and results in their disproportionate access to jobs, wealth, housing, and quality education. Rather than have every city provide some form of social housing, for example, many wealthy suburbs in the Chicago area intentionally misstate deadlines for affordable housing plans (Badger, 2015). So, even in predominantly white communities, the subject of race is never truly absent and in order to maintain homogeneity, African-Americans and other minorities are intentionally excluded (Roediger, 2007).

According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), whites are often unaware that their actions are racist, and generally believe racism is a thing of the past. Therefore, they tend to ignore racial disparities that are evident to minorities or attribute them to something other than racism. In response, CRT scholars study implications of racism rather than race. In other words, they highlight that race is not biological, but socially constructed, and that it has been used to exclude, dominate, exploit, and at times, even used to eradicate populations of people (Darder, Baltodana, and Torres, 2009). Darder et al. (2009) explained that it is nonsensical to use pseudoscience to make sense of people's lives and daily experiences. They stated that racism needs to be examined from an ideological and sociological lens, rather than a biological one, to improve the lives of African-American males. In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol (2012) asserted that racism is the main reason that urban schools did not receive the funding and/or resources needed

to deliver high quality instruction. He stated that it was easier for policymakers, departments of education, and wealthy districts to blame the victims, and cite poor teaching, lack of parental involvement, and unmotivated students as the main reasons urban school districts are failing. If questioned about the disparity between urban and suburban school funding, these entities cited the reasons above as justification for inadequately funding urban school districts, which, in turn, allowed inequalities to continue (Kozol, 2012). This was reaffirmed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), who asserted that the oppressor is often unaware of their oppressive behavior.

Employing CRT, then, is a first step in resisting oppression in education and in society (Bell, 1992). According to Bell (1992), CRT is neither a theory of hopelessness or submission, but more accurately, a theory of resistance and a reclamation of humanity for all marginalized persons. With these images in mind, CRT is an important framework to prepare teachers to effectively instruct diverse classrooms. It is fundamentally important for African-American males to begin to gain access to high quality and rigorous curriculum and instruction, and for those in power to acknowledge that racism is pervasive and longstanding within U.S. society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

Whiteness as property. According to Harris (1993), property ownership has bestowed particular rights and privileges to whites that African-American students have typically not had. Historically, whites have taken advantage of these rights and privileges to access resources and opportunities to serve their self-interests (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman, 2011). Harris (1993) asserted that whites have accumulated and maintained property rights through overt racism and manipulation of the legal system. She argued that on the surface, the laws supposedly proclaimed to defend everyone, but in reality, whites' monopoly of property, privilege, and power has been used to subvert the laws in their favor. For example, in special education, white

parents, in general, due to opportunity, are more knowledgeable of the rules and resources available to them as parents of students with special needs. White parents tend to come into Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings well informed and are able to secure programs and services that will provide educational benefits for their children. Conversely, minority parents are typically less aware of the rules and the resources available to them, so they are not able to effectively advocate on behalf of their children (Howard, 2010; Lavine, 2010; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Whites' monopoly of property, privilege, and power has led to a longstanding and destructive effect of racism—the construction of whiteness as the ultimate property, which Harris (1993) argued has been used to transform the conception of race from something abstract to concrete. Whiteness as property suggests certain privileges/rewards for behaving white. It normalizes white behavior and sets it as the standard, while at the same time minimizing non-white behavior. To imply someone or something as non-white is diminishing its reputation and/or status.

Whiteness as property exists on three levels: "the right to transfer or alienability, the right to use and enjoyment, and the right to exclude other" (Harris, 1993). Harris (1993) described that these rights have historically been employed by whites to serve their interests. Whiteness as the ultimate property enables whites to determine who has access and who is excluded. In public education, the right to exclude has been both pervasive and destructive (Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT scholars assert that one of the most substantial benefits whites have derived from racial exploitation is wealth through educational opportunity (Zamudio et al., 2011).

Blanchett (2006) believed that whites overlook how the educational system benefits them at the expense of minority students. She asserted that whites dominate the school curriculum to

determine what is essential. Specifically, she cited master scripting, which is the practice of muting and/or erasing minority stories if they challenge the authority and power of the dominant race, to describe the monopoly whites have on the curriculum and instruction in schools (Blanchett, 2006). For example, in the social studies curriculum, Rosa Parks' preemptive and deliberate decision not to give up her seat to a white man, a plan that was coordinated by the NAACP, has been reduced to a story of a stubborn woman who refused to give up her seat out of sheer fatigue (Ladson-Billings, 2009). As a consequence, African-American males may struggle to access a curriculum that represents them, provides them a voice, and/or connects to their daily lives and experiences. This exclusion is further compounded when African-American males' families are led to believe special education services are a vehicle to provide access to quality curriculum and instruction for their children (Blanchett, 2009). In reality, however, that is not the case because once they do access special education, African-American males spend significantly more time in special education classrooms, receiving remedial instruction, and have less access to their non-disabled peers, which further contributes to the widening achievement gap between African-American and white students (Blanchett, 2009; Moore et al., 2008).

Through education, white communities have enjoyed accumulated wealth, and access to higher status jobs, housing, and resources (Zamudio et al., 2011). Zamudio et al. (2011) argued that because the daily lives and experiences of African-American students have not aligned to the self-interests of whites, urban schools have lacked the status and reputation of suburban white schools, and suburban schools quickly lose their status and reputation when minority students begin attending there. For instance, the amount of money spent on students in various New York areas differs greatly. In the 1997-98 school year,

New York's Board of Education spent approximately $8000 to educate a third-grader in a

New York City public school . . . $12,000 per third-grader in a typical white suburb of

New York, and $18,000 per third-grader in New York's wealthiest white suburb. (Kozol,

2008, p. 68)

In 2004, New York City public schools were spending $11,700 per student, almost the same

amount an affluent white suburb was spending on each student in 1987. In 2004, this same

suburb, Manhasset, Long Island, was spending over $22,000 per student (Kozol, 2005).

Education, like U.S. society then, is based on property rights rather than human rights,

and the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool to understand inequity. CRT

scholars emphasize that human rights have a symbiotic relationship with property rights, and

those whose who own better property feel entitled to better quality schools. This results in

affluent white school districts often having better facilities, technology, resources, and human

capital. It also results in a more varied curriculum, accessible to white students as compared to

African-American students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) stated that affluent white school

districts have intellectual property or hegemony over what is taught. Conversely, school districts

that serve African-American students are less likely to have access to resources, and as a

consequence, students have less opportunity to learn and achieve. In education, Ladson-Billings

and Tate (2006) argued that the school curriculum and high quality, rigorous instruction have

been specifically developed to benefit white students. They believed the advent of gifted

programs and advanced placement courses are examples in which schools have become re-

segregated (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) explained that these

programs generally exclude membership to African-Americans students, which deny them

access to high quality, rigorous instruction that would otherwise better prepare them for college and/or post-secondary careers.

Interest convergence. According to Bell (1987, 1992, 2006), racial equity and equality will only be pursued when they converge with the interests, needs, and ideas of whites. Bell (2006) asserted that whites' support of racial justice is limited and can be withdrawn at any point in which the policy does not align with their self-interests. He illustrated this concept of interest convergence in his analysis of Brown vs. The Board of Education where he stated that the success of the Brown ruling signified more than the country's desire to desegregate the nation's schools. He argued that the passing of Brown was the result of interest convergence between African-Americans and whites. Specifically, he revealed that the Brown ruling served the interest of both the NAACP and the U.S. Government who, at the time, wanted to portray democracy as promoting racial equity and equality to the international community during the Cold War Era rather than actually live up to its democratic ideals or moral sensibilities (Bell, 2004). According to Bell (2004), the Brown ruling, beyond being a symbolic victory, did little to promote the real interests of African-Americans. Conversely, he argued that the desegregation of schools had negative outcomes for African-Americans, including funding being directed from black to white schools to support desegregation, and white teachers being hired to replace black teachers in an effort to appease white parents (Bell, 2004). Although the Brown ruling may have given African-American students greater accessibility to white students, it gave less accessibility to high quality curriculum and instruction that represented them and connected to their daily lives and experiences. The Brown ruling highlights how policies purportedly designed to provide equal access and opportunity to African-American students, but in reality, benefited whites. Bell (2004) concluded that the Brown rulings, as well as other events where whites' and African

Americans' interests appear to converge, only occur when they do not disrupt the quality of life for most whites.

Donner (2005) applied Bell's (1992) interest convergence concept to describe African-American males' participation in collegiate sports. According to Donner (2005), African-American males' presence on major college campuses serves an economic, rather than altruistic end to address past injustices. He stated that few colleges and universities demonstrate a real commitment to academic excellence and degree attainment for African-American athletes. These institutions appear more motivated to fill stadiums and arenas, satisfy boosters and alumni, and make their campus a desirable location for prospective students. African-American athletes' worth is predicated on their ability to perform, and when they can no longer perform, they are no longer needed. CRT scholars state that interest convergence can be used as a proactive strategy, in this example and others, to help African-Americans align their educational interests with the self-interests of others (Donner, 2005). While African-American athletes, theoretically, have access to high quality curriculum and instruction, few are able to maximize these opportunities (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). If CRT promotes the notion of social action and change, then it is critical that African-Americans males mobilize to demand high quality curriculum and instruction that represents them, connects to their daily lives and experiences, and is not contingent on their ability to perform on a football field, or basketball court (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Critique of liberalism. As noted above, CRT scholars believe that civil rights laws have generally been ineffectual and have, in reality, benefited whites more than minorities. CRT challenges the assumption that the law is impartial and color-blind (Zamudio et al., 2011; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). It is critical of the liberal narrative of meritocracy and argues that individual

political rights have not resulted in equality for historically disenfranchised people (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). For example, government officials introduced standardized tests as an equalizer that would measure student proficiency throughout the nation, in effect comparing all schools to each other with the intention of identifying low-performing schools and providing necessary interventions or technical support. However, these standardized tests have not been the great equalizer they were purported to be, and test scores have consistently shown the discrepancies in achievement between whites and African-Americans.

Although the national percentage of students at or above proficiency levels measured through standardized tests has improved throughout the years, the gap in proficiency levels between African-Americans and whites has considerably widened (The Nation's Report Card, 2017). Specifically, according to The Nation's Report Card (2017), the average percentage of all fourth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels in 1990 was 13%, and in 2017 was 40 percent. The percentage of white fourth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels in 1990 was 16%, while in 2017, was at 51 percent. Conversely, the percentage of African-American fourth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels was 1% and 19% in 1990 and 2017, respectively. Similarly, the national average percentage of all eighth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels was 15% in 1990 compared to 34% in 2017. The percentage of white eighth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels was 18% and 44% in 1990 and 2017, respectively, while the percentage of African-American eighth-grade students at or above mathematics proficiency levels was 5% and 13% in 1990 and 2017, respectively. As the numbers suggest, the achievement gap between white and African-American fourth-grade students have actually widened in the last 30 years, with a 15% gap in 1990 and a 32% gap in 2017, more than double

than in the year 1990. Similarly, for eighth-grade students, there was a 13% gap in 1990 and a

31% gap in 2017, which was also more than double than in the year 1990 (The Nation's Report

Card, 2017). These statistics support Delpit's (2013**)** assertion that African-American students

are not being properly prepared for the rigors of post-secondary schooling and career readiness.

CRT challenges the idea that laws and institutions are racially neutral, arguing that claims

of neutrality and color blindness mask white privilege and power. Gotanda (1991) criticized the

U.S. Constitution and legal system as promoting color-blind ideologies that maintain white

privilege in U.S. society. He stated that color-blind constitutionalism ignores the realities and

implications of race by ignoring race altogether, yet allowing racial discrimination to continue

(Gotanda, 1991). Gotanda (1991) asserted that constitutionalism is to communicate the proper

attitude toward race, and that color-blind constitutionalism will only end when race becomes

irrelevant. However, even today, race is not irrelevant, and still matters. This is exemplified by

the segregation that continues to exist in our nation's schools and the marked disparity in school

performance between white and minority students, including African-Americans (Kozol, 2012).

It is further exemplified by white ideology that attributes individual disparities to talent and

effort, while attributing racial disparities to the lack of those same factors, since whites hold the

perception that U.S. society is based on equality and meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). They

have been resistant to governmental programs that promote equal access and opportunities to

minorities. Bonilla-Silva (2001) revealed that whites evade racist rhetoric by employing racially

neutral explanations to justify why African-American students should be denied access to these

programs. Whites cite cultural deficiencies, including laziness, lack of values, and dysfunctional

families to disqualify minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). As mentioned above, it is easier to blame

the victims by citing poor teaching, lack of parental involvement, and unmotivated students as

the main reasons urban schools are failing to justify not adequately funding them, and allowing

inequalities to continue (Kozol, 2012). Bonilla-Silva (2001) stated that this new form of racism is

more covert, racial neutral, and color-blind, yet is as equally destructive as blatant racism,

underscoring this practice's deleterious effects.

In education, such color-blind ideology has inhibited cross-race teacher-student

relationships (Wrigley & Rist, 1978). To study this phenomenon, Schofield (1997) observed

educators who adopted a color-blind approach in an attempt to eliminate discriminatory

instructional practices. She believed this color-blind approach yielded mixed results. In the short

term, she indicated that the promotion of parity and asserting that race does not matter alleviated

racial and ethnic conflict. However, in the long run, not recognizing the significance of race had

negative consequences on both students and educators. Schofield (1997) discovered that the

more educators ignored race, the less reflective they were on how policies and practices, such as

suspension/expulsion rates and special education referrals, impacted African-American students.

Again, the more staff ignored race and its significance, the more patterns of discrimination went

unnoticed and continued (Schofield, 1997).

Counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling has been an essential tenet of CRT (Matsuda,

1987, 2018). CRT scholars employ counter-storytelling to challenge the presupposition and

stereotypes about race, which invariably relegates African-Americans to inferior positions in

society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). They use parables, stories, and narratives to contend that

the U.S. legal system continues to serve the interests of whites (Barnes, 1990). Counter-

storytelling, then, is an effective medium to interpret and make sense of the realities and

everyday experiences of African-Americans through the lens of racism. Many CRT scholars

have used counter-stories to highlight how race and racism function in certain contexts, such as

classrooms (Barnes, 1990). In education, counter-storytelling can be essential in addressing the underachievement of African-American students (NCES, 2007).

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), counter-storytelling is a method that "aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (p. 144). It becomes a means of challenging discourse that perpetuates racial stereotypes and is also an important method to dismantle the racism that exists in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling gives a voice to marginalized groups and communicates what life is really like for those living beyond the periphery of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, CRT scholars assert that people who best understand and can articulate racism are those who are routinely victimized by it, rather than those who do the victimizing.

Whites are often unaware that their actions are oppressive and construct narratives to justify their treatment of minorities, while maintaining their privilege in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) suggested it is critically important that African-Americans communicate their experiences and realities in a way that whites will hear them. They believed stories of the oppressed can serve as a catalyst to incite cognitive dissonance within whites and reveal the impact of their behaviors. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) also believed that counter-storytelling is essential in making the link between CRT and exposing the shortcomings of the educational system. CRT challenges white privilege and asserts that the school curriculum overwhelmingly silences, ignores, and distorts the realities and shared experiences of African-Americans (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Not only is counter-storytelling a powerful vehicle for African-Americans to share their experiences with racism, but it also challenges the dominant belief system. It redefines and reinterprets reality, as well as honoring the voice and the point of view of African-American

students (Barnes, 1990). Further, it empowers African-American students by reconstructing popular beliefs, which in turn challenges racism inside and outside the classroom. An example of counter-storytelling is Howard's (2008) study on underachievement of African-American males in primary and secondary schools. Howard (2008) was concerned that there was a dearth of educational research focusing on African-American achievement. Through observation, he suggested it was critical that researchers understand African-American males' daily lives and experiences, specifically through the lens of racism, before any meaningful interventions could be developed. Howard (2008) employed counter-storytelling to examine the school experiences of ten African-American males. He discovered that they were all very conscientious of the negative racial stereotypes applied to African-American males and that these negative stereotypes significantly impacted the quality of instruction they received in the classroom, as well as how teachers and other students perceived them. He documented many instances of racial micro-aggression, which are subtle, yet harmful forms of racism. They included backhanded comments, ignoring students' accomplishments, and/or treating African-American students as incompetent. Counter-storytelling, then, can challenge these racial stereotypes by revealing what life is really like for African-American students, gives them a voice, and uses their words to deliver to them rigorous, high quality curriculum and instruction.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

If CRT provides a foundation for understanding the disproportionate and overrepresentation of African-American males in special education, then culturally responsive teaching should be examined as possible way of effectively addressing it. Since whites represent the majority of teachers and administrators in U.S. education, it is imperative that they possess the relevant content knowledge, experience, and ongoing professional development to address

the instructional needs of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Au, 2009; Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, and Roth, 2013; Cummins, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2009), Gay (2018), and Banks (2004) have promoted culturally responsive teaching as critical to addressing the underachievement of African-American students. Culturally responsive teaching is an effective instructional practice because it builds upon students' prior knowledge and connects to their daily lives and experiences (Gardner, 2006). Culturally responsive teachers appreciate their students' cultures, experiences, and viewpoints, and use them as resources to improve their instructional practices and increase student learning (Gay, 2018). They are open to learning about the various cultures and individual differences of their students and use this knowledge and understanding to transform their classrooms into empowering learning environments (McIntyre et. al, 2001).

Nieto (2018) indicated that understanding of students' lives and daily experiences is greatly underemphasized, and at times, ignored in public education, which has had negative consequences on student learning and achievement. She advanced that teachers must take a vested interest in learning about the lives of their students to customize the type of instruction that will increase learning and achievement (Nieto, 2018). Gay (2018) believed that culturally responsive teaching is an approach that helps facilitate this understanding and address underachievement in African-American students. Culturally responsive teaching promotes classroom environments where everyone is welcomed and appreciated, and receives instruction that meets their unique needs, regardless of culture, ethnicity, and/or language. Teachers cultivate these classroom environments by promoting learning opportunities that are intellectual, social, emotional, and political. Such instruction increases student learning and develops and/or maintains cultural competence, as well as a critical consciousness that challenges the status quo

(Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers, then, become a bridge that connects high quality instruction to students' cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2018; Gay, 2018). They solidify this bridge by knowing themselves, how their own culture might affect student learning, and use this understanding to construct high quality instruction that meets the needs of all students in their classroom. Gay (2018) and Nieto (2018) stated that culturally responsive teachers use this self-awareness to align their instructional strategies to meet the cultural needs of their students. Sullivan (2009) examined the impact culturally responsive teaching had on the achievement of 25 African-American seventh- and eighth-grade male students. The study revealed that when teachers promoted caring relationships with their students, appreciated their cultural identities, and aligned instructional strategies to their specific needs, their academic achievement and overall attitudes toward learning and school were positively influenced.

Culturally responsive teaching is empowering, instills self-efficacy, cultivates critical-thinking, and promotes social action (Au, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2009). It validates students' cultures and is responsive to how culture can affect students' attitudes toward school and their ability to learn (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching honors all cultures and believes all students should be included and represented in the formal curriculum (Gay, 2018). It bridges home and school experiences and incorporates a multitude of instructional strategies that connect to students' varied learning styles. Culturally responsive teaching teaches students to appreciate their own culture and the culture of others. It also incorporates external resources and materials, in all subjects, that enable students to receive content from a multitude of perspectives. Consequently, culturally responsive teaching is a critical instructional practice as classrooms become increasingly more diverse. It is also critical that U.S. educators have the mindset and skills to meet the needs of all the students they serve.

Student culture. Gay (2018) asserted that the role of culture is highly influential to student learning and achievement in school. She stated that it is critical that teachers expand curriculum to include students' homes and communities, in addition to school (Gay, 2018). Monkman, McGillivray, and Leyva (2003) believed employing this approach helps students develop inclusive, rather than divided, perspectives on life by linking school to their daily lives and experiences. Delgado-Gaitan's (2006) ethnographic study examined the effect that employing the cultural perspectives of the students and their families, as well as teachers, in the classroom had on students' daily instruction, and capacities to learn. Specifically, Delgado-Gaitan (2006) wanted to know how teachers' instructional practices promoted culturally responsive classrooms, believing that culturally responsive teaching was an effective instructional practice to address inequity in the classroom. She closely examined the overall classroom environment, including classroom management techniques, discipline procedures, and special education status. Additionally, Delgado-Gaitan (2006) observed classroom policies, curriculum, and literacy and math instruction. The teachers, then, adopted the perspectives of the students and their families to structure the classroom to mirror the structure of the students' homes. Subsequently, teaching and learning became linked with students' cultures. In order to respect the cultural diversity of their students, teachers adopted the following practices: (a) delivered instruction that promoted the diversity of all students, (b) used students' ethnic languages to teach literacy skills, (c) stressed the importance of English, (d) promoted gender equity in math and science, and (e) developed an interdisciplinary curriculum that connected to students' lives. Teachers were able to make curriculum and instruction relevant and meaningful by employing these approaches, while at the same time expanding their cultural perspectives (Delgado-Gaitan, 2006).

McKinley (2004) identified effective culturally responsive teaching strategies by studying 29 teachers in an urban school district. She developed a framework of 42 common strategies that teachers could use to increase the learning of African-American students. McKinley (2004) discovered that teacher-student interaction improved when teachers provided students with culturally responsive curriculum and materials; employed a constructivist approach to teaching and learning; delivered rigorous and responsive curriculum; used cooperative learning strategies; were responsive to students' individual needs and learning styles; established clear expectations and held high standards; scaffolded instruction; and built positive rapport with students inside and outside the classroom. McKinley (2004) observed that teachers' effectiveness was largely due to their ability to create inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

Student engagement. Student engagement is critical to student learning and achievement (Chapman, 2003). Student engagement, however, is a highly complex and multifaceted topic that has, and continues to challenge researchers. Generally, researchers have agreed that student engagement falls into three categories: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Chapman, 2003; Yazzie-Mintz's, 2009). Cognitive engagement refers to the intellectual effort students use to accomplish an academic task/assignment. Behavioral engagement is a student's level of willingness to participate in the learning process. Emotional engagement refers to a student's attitude toward school and/or learning, in general. Cognitive engagement is the category most aligned to student learning, however, behavioral and emotional engagement does promote cognitive engagement. There are many factors that influence students' interests and engagement in school, which teachers are unable to control (Lumsden, 1994). However, there are certain

practices that teachers can utilize to increase student motivation and engagement, and Yazzie-Mintz (2009) identified such strategies.

In Yazzie-Mintz's (2009) study on student engagement, four out of five students surveyed reported they were often bored in the classroom. Students indicated a main reason they were bored was because the instruction, along with the resources/materials being used, were not interesting. Similarly, one out of three students reported that they were less engaged in instruction because they had no interaction with their teachers (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). Students reported that the instruction they found most engaging involved working with peers in collaborative/cooperative groups. Students also reported that they were more engaged in instruction that included them as active participants (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). The results of the student survey revealed the existence of an engagement gap. For students to achieve academic success, then, they need to be engaged in meaningful and challenging instruction (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

According to Chapman (2003), student engagement refers to the relationship between motivation and learning. Engaged learners are attentive to instruction, self-confident in their abilities, and believe that they can achieve at a high level of success (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Taking Bandura's (1997) definition of self-efficacy, engaged learners believe they will be academically successful and will be persistent on difficult tasks until they achieve success. It is interesting to note, however, that in previous studies, Yazzie-Mintz (2007, 2009) found that white and Asian students reported higher levels of engagement than students of other races/ethnicities. This could be due to the lack of connection between the available curriculum and minority students' daily lives and experiences, possibly causing African-American and other minority students to disengage in the classroom (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007, 2009).

Social justice. According to Cochran-Smith (2004), a major responsibility for culturally responsive teachers is to get their students to think about the social and political challenges faced by society, communities, and individuals, and identify proactive ways to address these challenges. More specifically, culturally responsive teachers must continually address the sociopolitical context of white supremacy that occurs within education to promote student learning and achievement, as well as cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Gay (2018) suggested that culturally responsive teaching is an important tool in achieving this because it focuses on curriculum and instructional practices that is centered on students' cultures. It also provides an active process for students to be socially aware, allowing for greater chance to address the social inequities that exists in their communities and society, in general. Ladson-Billings (2009) indicated that culturally responsive teachers deliver explicit instruction to cultivate their students' cultural competence and make students aware of social, political, and economic inequities that inhibit their success. They included a social justice perspective in their daily instruction through which they help students identify and confront the social, political, and economic inequities that result in the unfair distribution of power and privilege in society. Nieto and Bode (2018) asserted that culturally responsive teachers promote and instill in their students a sense of agency, action, and a will to foster change.

According to Hackman (2005), culturally responsive classrooms are learning environments that promote engaged, critical, and empowered thinking. She believed that equity and excellence must transcend rhetoric and become everyday practice (Hackman, 2005). Similar to Hackman (2005), Bell (1987) asserted that students must take an active role in their educational experience, and to achieve this, educators must promote democratic learning environments that engage empowered and critical thinking. He stated that schools serving

African-American students must foster empowerment, equity, social/civic responsibility, democracy, and student-centered instruction through critical analysis and discourse of power and privilege (Bell, 1987). Bell (1987) indicated that educators must deliver curriculum and instruction that enables students to critically examine the systems of power and privilege that promote the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. He believed through critical analysis and discourse, students could take their ideas and transform them into social action and change (Bell, 1987). Hackman (2005) further explained that content mastery was a vital aspect of social justice education, which equipped African-American students with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in positive, proactive, and social change. She asserted that content mastery was an important step in transforming classrooms into equitable and empowering learning environments (Hackman, 2005). Loewen (2010) illustrated in his study of history textbooks that students needed to be exposed to a multitude of sources, ideas, and perspectives to engage in critical analysis and discourse. He cautioned that exposing students, including African-American students, to sources, ideas, and perspectives representative of solely the groups in power would foster a skewed view of history and inhibit critical analysis and discourse (Loewen, 2010). According to Gay (2018) and Nieto and Bode (2018), once students are exposed to a multitude of sources, ideas, and perspectives, it is important that educators help them connect classroom content to their daily lives and experiences. They believed this understanding was critical for students to engage in social action and change by being able to formulate their ideas in concrete ways (Delpit, 2013; Gay, 2018; Nieto & Bode, 2018). Culturally responsive teachers are essential in helping students understand how classroom content connects beyond the classroom and their communities. As Hackman (2005) has noted, in culturally responsive classrooms, there

is the continual interplay of content at the macro and micro levels, which help students understand the phrase: "think globally, act locally" (Hackman, 2005, p. 105).

      Critical thinking. Another important element of culturally responsive classrooms is cultivating students' abilities to think critically. For students to become agents of social action and change, they must demonstrate the ability to think independently, critically, and apply reason and logic to solve important problems (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Culturally responsive teachers, through daily instruction, teach students how to think critically by integrating their cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic experiences. When it comes to the subject of history, for example, Loewen (2010), in his study of popular history textbooks, concluded that history textbooks are, generally, predictable, exclude conflict, and do not challenge students to analyze history critically. He further illustrated that history textbooks hardly use past events to illuminate the present, or present events to illuminate the past. Therefore, students receive a biased and skewed perspective of history. Loewen (2010) indicated that textbooks tend to overgeneralize the achievements of the dominant groups in society and overemphasize their accomplishments. Conversely, the achievements of historically disenfranchised groups were generally minimized and, at times, ignored altogether in textbooks. Loewen (2010) concluded that history textbooks were overladen with information, which promoted the memorization of facts, rather than independent thinking and critical historical awareness. He believed that students were left with a skewed belief that history is merely a list of facts to be learned, compared to an examination of controversial issues and struggle between groups of people with opposing ideas and interests (Loewen, 2010). Loewen (2010) and Hackman (2005) both believed students need a balanced representation of history, so they can examine and analyze it through a critical lens. Students need resources that link classroom content—whether it be in the subject of history, math, or even

science—to their lives and daily experiences, so that they may better connect micro-level implications to macro-level problems (Delpit, 2013; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2018). Classrooms, then, need to engage students in taking classroom content and applying it to their everyday lives. Students must see the symbiotic relationship between micro and macro issues, specifically global issues that can impact local issues, and vice versa (Hackman, 2005). Students will not become agents of social action and change if they do not possess a narrow and critical lens to the information they receive. Hackman (2005) believed that in contemporary society, with the proliferation of the Internet and social media, students must possess the ability to filter through high volumes of information and discern what is accurate and important. African-American students must be given the opportunity to analyze and discuss all content, regardless of the source. To empower and engage students, educators must encourage them to be critical thinkers and challenge systems that promote inequity and inequality in society. Culturally responsive teachers assist their students in identifying the effects that inequity and inequality have had on disenfranchised populations and seek alternatives to the dominant view of reality (Hackman, 2005). Hackman (2005) indicated that by not cultivating critical thinking skills in poor and minority students and exposing them to a multitude of divergent content, they will continue to feel marginalized, hopeless and powerless in enacting social action and change.

Culturally responsive teachers' perceptions and beliefs. Culturally responsive teachers ensure that their instruction aligns to the cultures of the students in their classrooms (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). It is critical that teaching and learning align to the cultural diversity of the classroom, or risk inhibiting student achievement (Au, 2007; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers understand that their students' thoughts and actions are

closely connected to factors such as culture, race, language, and ethnicity. For example, African-American students often find that classroom instruction is disengaging and does not stimulate their attention or creativity. As a consequence, many intelligent and highly capable African-American students do not achieve their true potential and are labeled underachievers (Jackson, 2003).

Jackson (2003) stated that teachers must challenge their perceptions of race to deliver African-American and other minority students' high quality and engaging curriculum and instruction. In addition, they must continually be reflective of their own experiences and how those experiences influence their instructional practices (Milner, 2003). Sleeter (2017) believes that teachers' decisions are often shaped from their own life experiences, which often results in biases and misperceptions. These biases and misperceptions inhibit teachers from developing strong relationships with their students and delivering instruction that aligns with their students' needs when they come from different cultures. Milner (2003) recommended that to overcome this barrier, teachers must be aware of their own beliefs and examine how their cultural beliefs might promote or prevent student learning. Toney (2009) examined how teachers' beliefs were challenged through their experiences using culturally responsive instructional practices for African-American students. He discovered that the teachers he examined demonstrated cultural sensitivity that enabled them to align instruction to the needs of their students. They had high expectations for all students and promoted mastery learning. Lastly, each teacher was self-reflective and continually examined how their own culture and experiences influenced their instructional practices. Toney (2009) discovered that teachers were committed to delivering meaningful and engaging curriculum and instruction that promoted student learning and achievement. He learned that teacher' beliefs and experiences do, in fact, influence instructional

practices, but through self-reflection, it can lead to improved teaching and learning. Similarly, Honaker (2004) examined how the beliefs and experiences shaped the instructional practices of two Title I teachers who worked with African-American students. Through extensive observation and interviews, Honaker (2004) concluded that both teachers believed that all students could learn to read and write with mastery. They connected instruction to students' prior knowledge and experiences. They demonstrated a deep content knowledge and could identify strategies to make instruction more meaningful and engaging. The teachers provided students instructional materials and resources in which stories were relatable, and where characters looked like them. They aligned instruction to meet the individual needs of the students. Lastly, the teachers told students they were strong readers to build their confidence, which helped them become strong readers. In conclusion, culturally responsive teachers are reflective, and aware of how their influences and experiences guide their instructional practices. They have affirming views of their students' cultures and experiences, develop positive relationships with their students, and construct curriculum and instruction that is meaningful, engaging, and aligns with their students' specific and individual needs.

Characteristics of culturally responsive teachers. According to Banks (2004), Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Nieto (2010), culturally responsive teachers are distinguished by the following nine characteristics: they validate students' cultural identities through their instructional practices; acknowledge students' similarities and differences; promote fairness and mutual respect amongst students; promote critical thinking; challenge students to fulfill their maximum potential; make students aware of diversity; promote positive interrelationships among students, families, and the community; use valid assessments to measure student learning and achievement; and instill within students social consciousness.

Culturally responsive teachers, furthermore, demonstrate a deep social awareness, value diversity amongst students, are change agents, and help students construct their own knowledge and understanding of the school curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2009). They recognize the historical impact racism has had on African-Americans and particularly how it affects expectations of African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The implementation of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom has been proven to increase student learning and achievement in African-American and other minority students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Jones's (2008) study on the effects culturally responsive teaching had on African-American students' academic achievement in the areas of English Language Arts and Mathematics revealed that students who received culturally responsive teaching were 53% more likely to receive a passing grade in English Language Arts and 65% more likely to pass Mathematics than African-American students who did not receive culturally responsive teaching. The study further concluded that successfully implementing culturally responsive teaching required extensive time, skill, and commitment of staff (Jones, 2008). Ladson-Billings (2009) determined that culturally responsive teachers were effective because they encouraged African-American students to be academically successful, validated students' cultures, and cultivated critical thinkers who challenge the status quo. Ladson-Billings (2009) investigated characteristics that exemplified culturally responsive teaching practices and discovered that culturally responsive teachers overwhelmingly believe that all students are capable of academic success, that teaching and learning are a symbiotic process between the teacher and student, that teachers' impacts transcend the classroom and can positively influence the community and beyond, and that they are facilitators that help students construct their own knowledge and meaning from instruction.

Culturally responsive teachers cultivate positive classroom environments that enrich African-American and other minority students' learning. They achieve this by connecting families and the broader community to classroom instruction and invite families and the community to share their cultural capital as a way to provide greater insight into the lives, daily experiences, abilities, and preferred learning styles of their students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Civil and Khan's (2001) examination of the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching in teaching mathematical concepts to low income, Latino English learners concluded that culturally responsive teaching had a profound impact on student learning and achievement. What was particularly significant and notable in the study is that researchers used a "garden theme" to connect curriculum and instruction to the students' daily lives and experiences (Civil & Khan, 2001, p.400). The theme tapped into the students' and families' prior knowledge of gardening, while simultaneously teaching them the requisite concepts and skills outlined in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' (NCTM; 2000) Principles and Standards for School Mathematics. During the study, students and families observed and measured the growth of potted plants. The researchers noted students' participation was personal and meaningful because the instruction connected to their daily lives and experiences. Students' participation resulted in their developing critical observational skills, writing skills, since they were required to maintain a journal, and through the development of their gardens, mathematical knowledge of measurement, volume, perimeter, and area. Civil and Khan (2001) determined that the study resulted in students having a deeper knowledge and understanding of mathematical concepts. They concluded that culturally responsive teaching, in connecting students' and families' previous knowledge and experiences, is an effective instructional practice. They observed that culturally responsive teaching resulted in more rigorous mathematical lessons, which allowed

students to develop a deeper conceptual knowledge of mathematics by applying it to something

they were familiar with and central in their everyday lives. Civil and Khan's (2001) study

identified ways teachers can connect instruction to students' everyday experiences. Their

findings are important because it informs teachers that they, too, can construct curriculum and

instruction that connects students, families, and the community, while also building conceptual

knowledge and understanding by relating that knowledge and understanding to students'

everyday experiences. Villegas and Lucas (2002) established six characteristics that distinguish

culturally responsive teachers and what guides their instructional practices, which include

culturally responsive teachers who: are socially aware and acknowledge students' perceived

reality through various lenses that are influenced by culture, environment, and experience; value

diversity and use it as a resource to develop meaningful instruction; are responsive to the

learning of all students; demonstrate a deep knowledge of pedagogy, how students construct

knowledge and understanding, and can apply this knowledge to promote student learning and

achievement; learn about students' lives and daily experiences, including their communities; and

encapsulate their knowledge of students to deliver high quality instruction. Villegas and Lucas

(2002) stated that culturally responsive teachers apply these characteristics to create classroom

environments that communicate respect, promote inclusion, and provide learning opportunities

that enable students to construct their own knowledge and understanding of the curriculum that is

personally meaningful. It is a combination of these characteristics and skills that enable teachers

to develop classroom environments that promote achievement for all students (Villegas and

Lucas, 2002). Overall, a culturally responsive classroom sets high expectations for all students

and values and communicates respect to their families and communities (Villegas and Lucas,

2002). Unfortunately, this has not been the reality for African-American and other minority

students, which has resulted in school underachievement, and disproportionate and/or overrepresentation in special education.

   Using student voice to address disproportionality and overrepresentation. Finally, both critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching emphasize the relevance of student voice as way of addressing disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-Americans and other minority students in special education. The disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American and other minority students in special education has been an ongoing problem for over four decades. Data consistently reveals that African-Americans and other minorities are disproportionately represented in special education (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). According to Morrier and Gallagher (2012), the Office of Civil Rights has been tracking disproportionality in special education since 1960 but has been ineffective in reducing the number of culturally, ethnically, and/or linguistically diverse students identified as needing services. To date, the research literature is replete with studies identifying that there is a widespread problem of disproportionality and/or overrepresentation, but offer limited solutions, with equally limited success. Moore et al. (2008) and Blanchet (2008) asserted that when African-Americans are identified for special education, they spend more time in restrictive placements, receive remedial instruction, and have less accessibility to the general education setting, the general education curriculum, and their non-disabled peers, compared to white students. García and Ortiz (2006), Jasper and Brouck (2013), as well as Ford (2014) advocated that educators develop cultural competence to minimize the disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of minority students in special education. They believed educators should have a deeper awareness of their own cultures and the cultures of their students to deliver curriculum and instruction that aligns to their individual and specific needs.

However, despite the multitude of research focusing on disproportionality and/or overrepresentation, few studies have examined the problem by actually capturing the voices of African-American and other minority students, through the lens of CRT. A common theme in the research literature focusing on students' voices suggests that a major cause of the disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American students in special education is due to disconnect between African-American students and their classroom teachers (García & Ortiz, 2006; Jasper & Brouck, 2013; Ford, 2014). Specifically, the researchers indicate that white, middle-class, teachers, who represent the majority of teachers in the U.S. educational system lack the cultural competence to develop curriculum and instruction that aligns to the specific needs of African-American students (Ford, 2014). As a consequence, because students and their teachers' cultures and life experiences differ, there is potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This misunderstanding and misinterpretation, then, can lead to educators concluding that there is a problem, which in reality does not exist, and results in African-American students being referred and identified for special education beyond reasons of disability. In response, a deeper examination of the disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American students in special education is needed by examining this longstanding problem through the lens of the persons most affected by it: the students and their families.

While few studies have attempted to address the problem of disproportionality and/or overrepresentation through the lens of students and their families, McHatton (2007) did capture the perspectives and experiences of Latina single mothers of students with disabilities. The researcher employed a five-year mixed methods study involving 250 mothers with children diagnosed with cognitive disabilities and/or developmental delays. Data were collected through interviews, consisting of 160 open-ended or Likert-style questions. Results of the study were

analyzed utilizing a grounded theory method. McHatton's (2007) study revealed that these

mothers felt discrimination at varying degrees due to culture and/or their child's disability. She

highlighted the challenges faced by mothers from culturally and linguistically diverse

backgrounds trying to secure needed services for their families and children with disabilities.

McHatton (2007) believed her study was important in engaging teacher candidates in examining

how their own cultures and experiences might lead to inequity in the classroom. She stated that

when teachers demonstrated a deeper awareness of their culture, and the culture of their students,

it enabled them to be more responsive to the needs of their students and families, as well as to

deliver instruction that connects to their daily lives and experiences.

Lavine (2010), who is a mother of a student with disabilities, shared her experience with

the special education process. She highlighted the different opportunities afforded to children

depending on their socioeconomic status and/or ethnic group. Lavine (2010) asserted that

African-American students are disproportionality poor, compared to white students, and as a

result, are often faced with challenges, such as poor health, family stressors, and even inferior

schools, which inhibit learning and achievement, and are typically not faced by white students.

She believed that white teachers do not consider these extrinsic factors, and attribute African-

American academic and/or behavior challenges to intrinsic factors, which require special

education referral and identification. Lavine (2010) stated that African-American students are

disproportionately referred and identified as needing special education services. She believed

that special education had become a vehicle for educators to remove troubled and/or challenging

students from the general education setting, and argued that, unlike white students, African-

American students receiving special education services are less likely to have access to quality

programs and/or services to address their educational needs to help them succeed in life. Lavine

(2010) asserted that African-American students are often unnecessarily identified, and that parents, who are integral team members, are often excluded from the evaluation process. She indicated that educators are not interested, or do not respect the input of minority parents. Lavine (2010) believed minority parents and their children stories needed to be told and heard to influence positive change. She stated that special education has been ineffective, wasteful, and discriminatory toward poor and minority students. She advocated for a reconceptualization of special education with a focus on race, systems, and moral and ethical behavior. Lavine (2010) envisioned an education system in which educators practice cultural competence and partner collaboratively with parents to deliver quality educational programs and/or services to all students.

Zion and Blanchett (2011) argued in their analytic essay that inclusive education has not been truly inclusive because it never addressed the issues of race, class, and privilege, or incorporated these issues into practice. The authors contended that inclusive education has not been responsive to the needs of African-American students because it focuses primarily on placement and ability and does not consider the intersection of ability/disability with race, class, culture, and language. They asserted that the inclusive education movement benefitted white students with disabilities and their families, while punishing African-American students and their families by placing them in the most restrictive, segregated education settings. The authors promoted a broader commitment to educational equity and addressing all forms of exclusion. Like Lavine (2010), Zion and Blanchett (2011) advocated utilizing social justice and CRT to re-conceptualize special education and inclusive education.

In his qualitative research study, Connor (2009) challenged traditional research that addresses disproportionality, which he perceived as disempowering people of color. He

questioned the utility of special education, and believed it was a disservice to the needs of African-American and Latino students. Connor (2009) employed personal narrative, through the lens of CRT, to illustrate the first-person accounts of eight, urban, African-American and/or Latino students labeled as learning disabled (LD). The study revealed that participants overwhelmingly felt a sense of containment. They reflected that special education and being labeled LD inhibited their education and limited their mobility. Participants indicated that their special education placements were highly segregated and often characterized by non-responsive instruction that did not meet their individual needs. Through counter-stories, participants were able to recognize that they were not alone, and that they possessed the power to challenge pre-existing belief systems through their own values, beliefs, and actions. Their stories illustrated the lived experiences of African-American and Latino students labeled LD and highlighted how the quality of special education services vary according to race, ethnicity, and social class. Connor (2009) argued that the label of LD results in advantages for white students by providing intensive, systematic, and specialized instruction, while creating disadvantages for African-American and Latino students through restrictive, segregated educational settings, which promote school dropout. Connor (2009) advocated culturally relevant research to address the inequity that pervades special education. He believed that counter-storytelling, through personal narratives, can significantly influence educational research, practice, and public policy on behalf of African-American and Latino students labeled as LD.

Connor (2006) believed that the voices of African-American students in special education are conspicuously absent from the research literature. Again, like Blanchett (2006), he asserted that African-American students in special education are often placed in more restrictive settings, separate from the general education curriculum and their non-disabled peers, unlike white

students in special education. Connor (2006) employed personal narrative through poetry, to capture the counter-story of "Michael," who portrayed his experience in special education as segregated and restrictive. Michael's counter-story illustrated the intersection of race, disability, and class. He was acutely aware of the low expectation placed on him by the education system, and society at large. He understood that substandard instruction received through special education would limit his educational opportunities, career options, and social mobility. Michael saw parallels between his placement in special education and his neighborhood, both of which he views as highly segregated and restrictive.

Connor (2006) also believed special education, along with its labels, is highly punitive, and undermines students' rights. Michael advocated that the education system discontinue special education. He perceived special education as a microcosm of larger society, which promotes inequity, and maintains the status quo. A pervasive theme communicated throughout Michael's counter-story is of "low-level/remedial work, disintegration of student behavior, increased levels of violence, and limited educational options" (Connor, 2006, p. 162). He believes that African-American and minority students have not received quality services through special education but feels his counter-story communicates hope to others, and a belief that they, too, can achieve by working harder than middle class, white students, to transcend the constraints placed upon them. According to Connor (2006), Michael's counter-story challenges the notion of meritocracy in society by having to overcome formidable challenges on multiple fronts.

In another study, Moore et al. (2008) studied the perceptions of ten African-American males in special education toward school counselors and school counseling services. The researchers were concerned that African-American males have a higher likelihood of being referred and found eligible for special education. Moore et al. (2008) believed that school

counselors can assist and advocate on behalf of African-American males in special education and can play a major role in determining academic placements, which, in turn, affects career readiness. They employed CRT to enable students to voice their concerns, specifically regarding race and race relations, and communicate to school counselors how they can improve their services. An important theme illustrated in the study was that African-American students often felt uncomfortable utilizing school counseling services, and communicated they felt a sense of mistrust and/or hesitancy to disclose personal information to educational personnel. They also expressed a skepticism that meritocracy and neutrality exist in education and felt that school counselors addressed other students' needs first, and their needs were secondary or not considered at all, leading to a sense of alienation, and belief that they were not welcome at their own school. In response, Moore et al. (2008) recommended that all educators, including administration, play a more active role by being conscientious of their own cultural experiences and how it impacts student learning and achievement, developing meaningful relationships with African-American and other minority students, and empowering them to use their voice to articulate the curriculum and instruction that aligns to their cultural and personal experiences.

Decuir and Dixson (2004) employed CRT to study the experience of African-American students attending a predominantly white, affluent, private school. The researchers utilized counter-storytelling to reveal the pervasive, yet subtle forms of racism that African-American students experienced while attending the school. Decuir and Dixson (2004) conducted a deeper examination of CRT by analyzing the permanence of race, whiteness as property, critique of neo-liberalism, interest convergence, as well as counter-storytelling, and demonstrated how African-American students experienced each. An important finding from the study was how pervasive acts of racism were and how readily it was accepted and/or excused by teachers and

administrators at the school. Decuir and Dixson's (2004) study highlighted the pervasiveness and normalization of racism in U.S. society and how divergent perspectives are sanctioned, or worse, excluded, when they go against dominant discourse and ideology. The use of counter-storytelling, then, challenged this discourse and ideology by giving a voice to students who have historically been without one.

Berry, Thunder, and McClain (2011) also utilized counter-storytelling to capture the perceptions of African-American males who were successful in mathematics. They believed the research literature was replete with studies examining African-American males' failures in mathematics, and that by studying students who achieved academic success, and by identifying the strengths and skills attributed to their success, they could provide a framework for other African-American males in developing a positive mathematical identity. Results of their study concluded that four factors positively contributed to mathematics identity, which are: (a) computational fluency by third grade; (b) extrinsic recognition, such as grades, standardized test scores, advanced placement programs, etc., which provided students tangible evidence of their abilities and academic success; (c) relational connections between teachers, families, and/or out-of-school activities, which reinforced students' ability to achieve and make positive connections with mathematics; (d) and engagement with the unique qualities of mathematics, which instilled in students the complexity and significance of mathematics, and how the skills associated with it connect to other subjects and disciplines. Berry et al. (2011) asserted that African-American males could achieve math success when teachers hold high expectations, and believe they are capable of learning challenging and complex mathematics.

Similarly, McGlamery and Mitchell (2000) employed counter-storytelling to study the recruitment and retention of African-American males in upper level mathematics classes. The

students in this study indicated that they were most successful when teachers developed positive rapport with them and engaged them as active participants in the classroom. They stated that positive rapport with teachers, in turn, promoted more positive interactions with peers, which resulted in them feeling more included and confident to participate in classroom instruction.

Lastly, Howard (2008) used counter-storytelling to examine the school experiences of African-American males in PreK-12 schools. He was concerned that African-American males significantly underachieved in all academic areas and were more likely referred for special education, compared to white students. Howard's (2008) study sought to reveal how African-American males believe race and racism influence their school experience. According to the results, students felt that teachers and administrators held negative attitudes toward them due to their race, which, in turn, influenced the quality of the curriculum and instruction they received. Conversely, the students wanted to challenge negative stereotypes held by educators, which they believed inhibited their academic success. The students used counter-storytelling, through the lens of CRT, to deconstruct these negative stereotypes and provide insight on what educators can do to improve their educational experience (Howard, 2008).

Conclusion

Since the Brown decision, very little has changed in the achievement gap between African-American students and white students. White students continue to significantly outperform African-Americans on standardized tests that measure reading and mathematics performance. The curriculum and instructional practices delivered in contemporary classrooms overwhelmingly align to the preference, interests, and needs of white students compared to African-Americans, which leave the latter feeling disconnected and without a voice. Conversely, all students, not just white students, need to feel engaged in the classroom and with curriculum

and instructional practices that connect to their daily lives and experiences, or risk not fulfilling their true potential.

To close this achievement gap, educators must be committed to creating an inclusive curriculum, and an inclusive school wide culture. CRT, which brings awareness to the thoughts and practices that result in inequity and inequality in society, should be on the forefront of educators' minds, especially administrators. By being aware of the inequities and inequalities present in society, administrators can take action to ensure that the district, and the schools within them, promotes inclusion of all students, regardless of culture, ethnicity, and/or language, so they are represented and engaged in the core curriculum. One such measure administrators can take is to continually develop their teachers to effectively employ culturally responsive teaching, which are instructional practices that meet the cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic needs of African-American and other minority students, and ensure they achieve academic excellence, in their classrooms and beyond.

This is certainly not a feat that can be accomplished by a single educator or even a small group of educators. On the contrary, creating an inclusive curriculum and culture requires a collective effort from all educators committed to continual learning, experimenting, reflection, and personal growth, and who model and instill the same in their students. African-American students deserve curriculum and instruction that gives them a voice, and it is the responsibility of all educators to deliver curriculum and instruction that gives them one.

Overall, these studies highlight the importance of employing students' and their parents'/guardians' voices in improving African-Americans' overall educational experience. CRT researchers believe that counter-storytelling is an effective method to challenge dominant ideology by giving a voice to students and their parents/guardians who have historically been

without one. They indicate that it empowers African-American students to use their voice to articulate the curriculum and instruction that meets their individual and specific needs and aligns to their cultural and personal experiences.

Counter-storytelling also challenges educators to examine their own cultures and experiences, and how they might result in inequitable services for minority students. As indicated above, when educators demonstrate a deeper awareness of their culture, and the cultures of their students, it will enable them to be more responsive to the needs of their students and families, as well as deliver instruction that connects to their daily lives and experiences.

A shortcoming of the studies above was that the researchers highlighted the problem and promoted student voice through counter-storytelling, but did not, overall, provide tangible recommendations to the reader to improve curriculum and instruction, nor specifics on how to apply them in the classroom and/or school-wide. Moreover, the researchers offered limited evidence of the recommendations' effectiveness they did suggest. Future studies, then, should more clearly demonstrate how recommendations can be applied in the classroom and/or school-wide, and prove their effectiveness.

As noted above, none of the studies examined students and parents'/guardians' voices through counter-stories and compared them for their similarities and/or differences. It is theorized that studying the voices of students and parents/guardians might reveal the specific factors that result in the division between African-American students, parents/guardians, and the educators responsible for teaching them. It is believed that this new understanding could lead to increased learning and achievement and greater accessibility to the general education setting and curriculum for African-American in special education, and/or reduce the over-referral and identification for special education services in the first place.

Chapter III: Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the firsthand accounts of students' educational experiences and parents'/guardians' experiences with their children's education to identify specific factors that could result in greater learning and achievement for African-American males in special education. Counter-storytelling, through the theoretical framework of critical race theory, was used to explore these factors. It was hypothesized that counter-storytelling could lead to greater understanding of African American males' educational experiences and identifying specific factors that result in greater learning and achievement for African-American males in special education.

After a thorough examination of the research literature, it was determined that few studies, to date, had employed the voices of both African-American males and their parents/guardians, through counter-stories, to collect their firsthand accounts of factors that might increase the learning and achievement for African-American males in special education. Research revealed that schools that effectively serve African-American male students are grounded in critical race theory (CRT) and use student voice to develop and deliver culturally responsive instruction (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). The study, then, aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What do African-American male students in special education think about their educational experiences?

2. What do parent(s)/guardian(s) of African-American males in special education think of their

    child's educational experiences?

3. How do the thoughts of African-American males in special education about their educational

    experience compare and contrast to their parents/guardians' thoughts regarding their

    educational experience?

Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a K-12 special education program located in a

metropolitan/urban area within the state of California. The county where the program is located

serves approximately 177,000 students, 9% of which are African-American (California

Department of Education, 2019). According to data from California Department of Education

(2019), 21,322 students received some form of special education services in the 2017-2018

school year, approximately 15% of whom were African-American.

African Americans comprised, by approximate percentage, the following disability

categories: 20% of Intellectually Disabled (ID; $N = 957$), 8% of Hard of Hearing (HH; $N = 289$)

,< 1% of Deaf ($N = 67$), 9% of Speech and Language Impaired (SLI; $N = 4605$), 18% of Visually

Impaired (VI; $N = 113$), 21% of Emotionally Disturbed (ED; $N = 695$), 13% of Orthopedic

Impaired (OI; $N = 338$), 15% of Other Health Impaired (OHI; $N = 2398$), 18% of Specific

Learning Disabled (SLD; $N = 8756$), <1% of Deaf-Blindness (DB; $N = 0$), 12% of Multiple

Disability (MD; $N = 139$), 12% of Autism (AUT; $N = 2857$), and <1% of Traumatic Brain Injury

(TBI; $N = 13$).

Students and parents/guardians. The study collected and examined counter-stories

from African-American males in special education and parents/guardians of African-American

males in special education. Parent/guardian participants did not have to be the parent/guardian of

a student participant but had to be a parent/guardian of an African-American male currently receiving special education services to ensure that they could adequately reflect on their experiences with the special education process.

All student participants were African-American males who had been determined eligible and were, at the time of study, receiving special education services as defined under the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and the California Education Code. Selected student participants were between the ages of 13-17, had received special education services for a minimum of two years, and had been determined eligible under a primary eligibility as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or other health impaired. These variables had been selected to ensure that the participants demonstrated the developmental and intellectual ability to understand the purpose of the study, be able to comprehend, and respond appropriately to the questions asked. Both student and parent/guardian participants were recruited by sending an invitation to participate in the study to the parents/guardians of prospective student participants, as well as prospective parents/guardians. If students' parents/guardians chose not to participate in the study, students could still be enrolled in the study with a parent's/guardian's consent.

Introduction Letter

The principal investigator initially contacted the school district via an emailed introduction letter (Appendix A) to provide an overview of the proposed study and to seek the administration's consent to conduct the study at the school site. The principal investigator followed up with a phone call to the district's executive director of special education to confirm receipt of the introduction letter, determine whether the district was interested in allowing this study to be conducted, and to answer any questions. The principal investigator did not initiate the

study until district and site administrative permission was granted in writing. Both the director of special education, and the principal of the school site where the research was conducted granted the principal investigator written permission to access FERPA records for the purpose of recruiting research participants for the study (see Appendix B).

Screening

The principal investigator is an administrator in the district where the research study was conducted. As a district administrator, the principal investigator had access to student data, without restrictions or required written consent. Therefore, he was exempt under FERPA regulations and restrictions, and could access student data at any time, and was able to access data for the purpose of screening and recruitment, to support his doctoral research. The principal investigator accessed students' cumulative school files, which included demographics, health, academic, and special education data to screen potential student research participants. Only students who were between the ages of 13-17, had received special education services for a minimum of two years, and had been determined eligible under a primary eligibility as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or other health impaired were considered for participation in the current study. The parents/guardians of potential student research participants were considered for recruitment as potential research participants. A total of 10 students met the screening criteria and they, along with their parents, were recruited as research participants.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants in the study. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Saldaña, 2015). Convenience sampling is useful in documenting that a particular phenomenon occurs within a given sample. It is also

useful for detecting relationships among different phenomena. The advantage of using convenient sampling in this study, then, was that it was relatively easy to collect a sample, it was inexpensive to conduct, and participants were readily accessible to the principal investigator. Of the 10 students and 16 parents who were invited, 4 students and 6 parents agreed to participate in the study.

Parent/guardian recruitment. The recruitment of research participants occurred in a metropolitan area in the state of California. Parent/guardian research participants were recruited through an invitation letter, sent via email, that provided information about the study, a description of the forms included with the invitation letter, and a notice to alert them that they would be contacted via telephone about the study (Appendix C). Included with the invitation letter, the principal investigator attached the consent forms and the student interview. The invitation letter requested that the parent/guardian not show their child the student interview. Moreover, the letter indicated that to help reduce and/or avoid any perceptions of undue influence or coercion on the student, the principal investigator is not employed at the site where the study was being conducted, nor did he have regular interactions with the students who may be participating in the study. The invitation letter also provided contact information for the individual to opt-out if she/he did not want to receive a phone call or further contact. The invitation letter in the form of an email, along with the informed consent forms and student interview, as attachments, were sent electronically to the email the school district had on file. In addition, the invitation letter, informed consent forms, student interview, and a self-addressed posted envelope were sent via regular U.S. mail to resident address the school district had on file.

The principal investigator contacted the prospective parent/guardian research participants via telephone approximately one week from the time of the initial email/mailing. A script was

followed when speaking to each to each prospective parent/guardian research participant to ensure consistency and completeness in the information they received about the study. The telephone script included the following information: The principal investigator provided an introduction that gave the name and affiliation of the person calling (i.e. Matt Bennett, doctoral student, Department of Education at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The principal investigator also provided a reason for the call: to invite them to participate in a research study being conducted by (Matt Bennett). The principal investigator then stated why they were being contacted about the particular study (e.g. "You're being invited to participate because you are the parent/guardian of an African-American male student currently receiving special education services;" see Appendix D).

The principal investigator provided a brief description of the purpose of the study and what the prospective parent/guardian research participant needed to do if s/he decided to participate. At this point, the principal investigator disclosed to the prospective parent/guardian research participants that participation was voluntary and there were no consequences for not participating. In addition, the principal investigator disclosed that if s/he chose to participate in the study and decided to withdraw later, s/he could do so without consequences to him/her or his/her child.

The principal investigator, then, gave prospective parent/guardian research participants an opportunity to ask questions. After all questions had been answered, the principal investigator asked the prospective parent/guardian research participant if s/he was interested in proceeding to the next step by providing written consent to participate in the study. If the prospective parent/guardian research participant indicated s/he was interested in participating, then the principal investigator asked him/her if s/he could review with him/her the informed consent

forms that were attached to the invitation letter. If the prospective research parent/guardian participant agreed, the principal investigator reviewed the informed consent forms with him/her and answered any questions she/he might have. After reviewing the informed consent forms, if the prospective parent/guardian research participant indicated interest in participating, along with his/her child, and was willing to provide written consent, the principal investigator requested that s/he sign and date the informed consent forms (see Appendix E and F), and return the forms in the self-addressed, posted envelope. The principal investigator, then, told the prospective parent/guardian research participant that once he received the signed consent, he would send a copy of the signed informed consent forms to him/her for their records. If the prospective parent/guardian research participant indicated s/he would like the principal investigator to review the formal consent forms in person, the principal investigator scheduled a meeting with him/her at a mutually agreeable date, time, and location. In the event that the prospective parent/guardian research participant did not answer the telephone, then the principal investigator delivered the following message:

> Hello, I am calling to talk to (person's complete name) about a research study. My name is Matt Bennett and I am doctoral student from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. At your earliest convenience, please give me a call back at (Bennett phone number). I look forward to hearing from you. Have a nice day. Goodbye.

In the event that another person other than prospective research participant answered, the following message was delivered:

> Hello, I am calling to talk to (person's complete name) about a research study. My name is Matt Bennett and I am a doctoral student from the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Please let them know that at their earliest convenience, they can give me a call at (Bennett phone number). Thank you for your help. Have a nice day.

Student recruitment. Student research participants were recruited once parent/guardians had given permission for the principal investigator to seek their child's assent to participate (see Appendix G). Student research participants were recruited with the support of the site administration at the student's school of attendance. The principal investigator coordinated an appointment either before or after school with the student's special education teacher and the student. At the scheduled appointment, the special education teacher escorted the student to the school's main office. The principal investigator introduced himself and informed the student that his parent/guardian had given the principal investigator permission to recruit him for a research study. At this point, the teacher left the room, so the principal investigator could speak to the student directly about participating in the study. First, the principal investigator informed the student that he could decline participating in the study, without any consequences. The principal investigator asked the student if he could tell him about the study? If the student replied yes, the principal investigator would tell the student about the study. After giving an overview of the study, the principal investigator asked the student if he was interested in participating in the study. If the student replied he was interested in participating in the study, the principal investigator would schedule a time, during non-instructional activities, to review the informed assent with the student.

Consent

Ten potential parent/guardian research participants were invited to participate in the current the study. Of the ten parents/guardians, nine responded, and six agreed to participate.

Four potential student research participants were invited to participate in the current study. Of the four students, all agreed to participate in the study.

       Parent consent. The consent process occurred in the late summer and early fall of 2018. The principal investigator obtained written consent from prospective parent/guardian research participants. The principal investigator attached and sent to the prospective parent/guardian research participants two informed consents, the "Parent/Guardian Consent of Self" (Appendix E) and "Parent/Guardian Consent of Child" (Appendix F) forms, as well as the student interview when the invitation letter was sent via email and U.S. mail. Following the email and mailing of the invitation letter, the two informed consent forms, and the student interview, the principal investigator contacted the prospective parent/guardian research participants via telephone approximately one week from the initial mailing. The purpose of the telephone contact was to answer any questions s/he may have had about the study. If prospective parent/guardian research participants indicated s/he was interested in participating in the study, the principal investigator asked whether s/he would like to review the two informed consent forms over the phone and/or in person.

       If the prospective parent/guardian research participant preferred to speak over the phone, the principal investigator made sure s/he had a copy of the Parent/Guardian Consent of Self form, and, then, he completely reviewed the form and answered any questions. Upon completion of reviewing the Parent/Guardian Consent of Self form, if the individual indicated s/he would like the participate in the study, then the principal investigator requested s/he sign and date the informed consent form, and return the form in the enclosed self-addressed, posted envelope. If the prospective parent/guardian research participant did not want their interview to be audio-

recorded, s/he was told s/he could still participate in the study but were informed that their interview responses would be recorded by hand.

The principal investigator completely reviewed the Parent/Guardian Consent of Child form with the parent/guardian of the prospective student research participant. The Parent/Guardian Consent of Child form is the document in which the parent/guardian provided written consent to enable their child to participate in the study. Upon completion of reviewing the Parent/Guardian Consent for Child form, the principal investigator indicated to the parent/guardian that if s/he wanted their child to participate in the study, s/he needed to sign and date the form. The parent/guardian was also informed that his/her child's interview would be audio-recorded. If the parent/guardian did not want his/her child's interview to be audio-recorded, s/he was told they could still participate in the study but were informed that their interview responses would be recorded by hand. The principal investigator requested the parent/guardian return the signed form in the self-addressed, posted envelope. The principal investigator indicated to the parent/guardian that a copy of both forms would be made and sent via regular US mail to the parent's/guardian's address for his/her records. The principal investigator closed the telephone call by informing the parent/guardian that although s/he had given written permission for his/her child to participate in the study, her/his child, as a prospective student research participant, would also need to provide written consent to participate. The principal investigator also communicated to the parent/guardian that even though s/he chose to participate in the study, his/her child still had the right to decline to participate.

If the prospective parent/guardian research participants requested the informed consent form be reviewed in-person, then principal investigator scheduled with the individual a date, time, and location that was mutually agreeable. Similar to phone conversation, the principal

investigator completely reviewed the Parent/Guardian Consent of Self form with the prospective parent/guardian research participants. Upon completion of reviewing the Parent/Guardian Consent of Self form, if the individual indicated s/he would like to participate in the study, then the principal investigator requested s/he sign and date the informed consent form and return the form in the enclosed self-addressed, posted envelope. The prospective parent/guardian research participant was also informed that her/his interview would be audio-recorded. If the prospective parent/guardian research participant did not want her/his interview to be audio-recorded, s/he was told s/he still could participate in the study but was informed that her/his interview responses would be recorded by hand. Lastly, the prospective parent/guardian participant was informed that s/he would be issued a one-time $50.00 gift card when his/her participation in the study ended, and that compensation was not contingent on s/he completing the interview.

The principal investigator completely reviewed the Parent/Guardian Consent of Child form with the parent/guardian of the prospective student research participant. The Parent/Guardian Consent of Child form is the document which the parent/guardian provided written consent that enabled their child to participate in the study. Upon completion of reviewing the Parent/Guardian Consent of Child form, the principal investigator indicated to the parent/guardian if s/he wanted their child to participate in the study they needed to sign and date the form. The parent/guardian was also informed that her/his child's interview would be audio-recorded. If the parent/guardian did not want her/his child's interview audio-recorded, s/he was told they could still participate in the study but was informed her/his interview responses would be recorded by hand. The principal investigator requested the parent/guardian return the signed form in the self-addressed, posted envelope. The principal investigator indicated the parent/guardian that a copy of both forms would be made and sent via regular US mail to the

parent/guardian address for their records. The principal investigator closed the in-person meeting by informing the parent/guardian that although s/he had given written permission for their child to participate in the study, her/his child, as prospective student research participant, would also need to provide written consent to participate. The principal investigator communicated to the parent/guardian that even though s/he chose to participate in the study, their child still had the right to decline to participate.

Student consent. The consent process began after the student indicated he was interested in participating in the study during the recruitment meeting. The potential student participant was provided with the assent form and a follow-up meeting was scheduled to give the student sufficient time to review the form. The principal investigator informed the student that on the scheduled date, the principal investigator would request the student come to main office, so he could review the form in the conference room. On the day of the scheduled meeting, the principal investigator asked the main office staff to request the prospective student research participant come to the main office. When the student arrived at the main office, the principal investigator reintroduced himself to the student, and escorted him to the conference room. Once in the conference room, the principal investigator reminded him that his parent/guardian had given permission for him to be recruited for participation in a research study. The principal investigator also reminded the student that they could decline participating in the study, without any consequences. The principal investigator then asked the student if he was still interested in participating in the study. If the student said he would like to be in the study, the principal investigator reviewed the informed assent form with the student. After reviewing the informed assent form, if the student still wanted to participate, the principal investigator requested the student sign and date the form. Note: To help reduce and/or avoid any perceptions of undue

influence or coercion on the student, the principal investigator was not employed at the school where the study was conducted, nor had regular interactions with the students participating in the study.

Data Collection

   Open-ended interviews. The primary method of data collection was open-ended interview questions (both semi-structured and informal in depth). The open-ended interview format enabled all participants to be asked predetermined questions for uniformity yet allows participants latitude to provide valuable information from the context of the personal experiences. Separate interview protocols were developed for student and parent/guardian participants, which can be referenced in Appendix H and Appendix I. The interview sessions were conducted at a date, time, and location that was convenient to participants. The principal investigator was cognizant that student interviews must occur beyond regular school hours, so as not to interfere/disrupt educational services. Therefore, dates, times, and locations for student interviews were scheduled during non-instructional after the school day ended. Similarly, parents/guardians have work schedules and/or other obligations that must be respected. Interviews, then, for parents/guardians were scheduled at a convenient date, time, and location. The only contingency the principal investigator requested from the participants was that the interview location be minimally intrusive and promote privacy and confidentiality.

   The principal investigator served as the interviewer and delivered all interview questions orally. Prior to asking the interview questions, introductions were established, and participants were thoroughly informed of the interview topics and process, including the purpose, format, and lengths of the interview. Participants were informed that the interview and their personal identifiable information are confidential and would not be shared with anyone. Participants were

provided the opportunity to express any concerns and/or doubts they have regarding the interview.

Both student and parents' interviews were completed in one session. The duration of the interviews ranged from ten minutes to thirty-five minutes, in length. An audio-recorder was used during all interview sessions, with participant consent, to ensure accuracy of responses.

It should be noted that the interview sessions were piloted with one member from each population of research subjects (i.e. students and parent/guardians) before officially beginning the study. Each of the participants invited to participate in the pilot interviews met the study's participant criteria and were invited from the initial dataset of eligible students. The purpose of the pilot interviews was to help the principal investigator determine the approximate the length of each interview session; determine that each interview question was clearly stated and understood by the research participant; determine if any interview question were leading and/or biased; and to revise and/or remove interview questions that appeared to lack clarity and/or inhibited the flow of the interview sessions. Piloted interviews also provided preliminary feedback to the principal investigator regarding his ability to facilitate interview sessions and administer interview questions to elicit quality data. Research participants for the pilot interviews were recruited using the same process that was used to recruit other potential research participants. Upon completion of the pilot interview sessions, no changes were made to the interview questions or the method of delivery. The data from the student and parent/guardian pilot interview sessions were included in the study's overall findings per Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Developing positive rapport. Developing positive rapport with the research participants is essential to collecting accurate data (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007). According to Bodgan and

Biklen (2007), establishing positive rapport is often a major challenge in developing trust with

research participants, especially when the participants are students, which can inhibit accurate

data collection. The principal investigator was cognizant that the goal of the study was for

students and parents to share their lived experiences, so as to gain a deeper understanding of how

those experiences could positively impact either their or their children's educational experience.

To reach that goal, the principal investigator demonstrated patience and willingness to actively

listen to the students and parents. To establish rapport, prior to the first interview, the principal

investigator started with small talk about light topics as an icebreaker. During this stage, the

principal investigator refrained from asking participants direct questions, and injected elements

of humor in the conversation to reduce any tension. The principal investigator also avoided

passing judgment, using jargon and/or technical language, and presenting himself to participants

as authoritarian (Leach, 2005). Throughout the study, the principal investigator practiced active

listening through verbal cues (e.g. hmmm, yes, right, etc.) and non-verbal encouragers, such as

eye contact, nodding, and leaning forward to establish and promote rapport (Hull, 2007). Active

listening demonstrated to the participants that the principal investigator was interested in what

they were saying and at the same time, encouraged their contribution. To establish and maintain

rapport, the principal investigator was responsive to the participants' needs and attempted to

make a connection with participants through empathic moments (Prior, 2017). Prior (2017)

indicated that empathy is critical in establishing and maintaining positive rapport. In general,

people are drawn to people they believe associate with and are similar to them. The principal

investigator, to establish and maintain positive rapport, also adopted the same posture and

gestures as the participants. Knight (2009) recommended that researchers pay close attention

how the participant communicate, and identify any significance his/her behavior, body language,

or verbal communication. The principal investigator was sensitive to participant's appearance, behavior, and verbal/non-verbal communication. If the participant's dress code is casual, the principal investigator aligned his dress code accordingly. During the study, the principal investigator attempted to match participants' body language by sitting like them and trying to mirror the participants' verbal volume, cadence, and tone. Eye contact is also crucial is communicating sincerity, and establishing and maintaining positive rapport (Reiman, 2007). During the interviews, the principal investigator maintained appropriate eye contact to communicate attentiveness. When participants spoke, the principal investigator demonstrated active listening by looking them in the face, maintaining eye contact, and occasionally tilting the head to the side to indicate interest, while nodding at appropriate moments (Reiman, 2007). Reiman (2007) defined this approach as listening with the whole body. In addition, the principal investigator strived to establish positive rapport and develop rich relationships with participants, while at the same time, maintaining appropriate boundaries out of respect for participants' privacy. Thus, simply being sensitive to the patterns of participants and showing sincere interest in them as people encouraged and promoted positive rapport.

Member checking. During each interview, the principal investigator restated and summarized participants' responses to verify their accuracy. Member checks enabled participants to confirm that their responses reflected their views, feelings, and experiences. If participants confirmed the accuracy and completeness of the data being recorded, then it better ensured the credibility and overall integrity of the study. Additionally, the principal investigator reviewed each audiotaped interview again before initiating subsequent interviews. If the principal investigator had questions and/or concerns regarding any of the participants' responses, they

were clarified and confirmed for accuracy and completeness before proceeding to the next interview.

Transcription. All interviews were transcribed verbatim upon completion. Transcription means that all participants' responses were recorded verbatim using word processing software prior to coding. A transcription service, selected from an approved list of companies available on the University of Michigan-Dearborn's site, was used to transcribe all interviews.

Artifacts. The artifacts collected were obtained from the current educational placement. Information about the school were obtained from the school's publicly available brochure. The school's brochure communicated the: school's vision and mission, goal of the school, professional makeup of the staff, school's curriculum, population it serves, and method of delivering programs and services.

In addition, individual student artifacts were obtained by reviewing each participant's school file. Information collected included IEP goals, health reports and grades and credits earned. The purpose of collecting IEP goals was to determine if students were making progress on goals outlined in their special education programs. A student was determined to be benefitting from special education services if he was making measurable progress on his IEP goals and would be reasonably expected to achieve these goals based on the annual IEP timeline (365 days). Health reports-The purpose of collecting health reports was to determine any health-related variables that might impact student learning and achievement. Grade and credits earned-The purpose of collecting these data was to determine if high school students were earning credits and progressing toward high school graduation.

Security and confidentiality. The principal investigator minimized the risk of a breach of confidentiality of research data by taking the following steps: All electronic data collected and

storage devices used were password protected with a strong password only known to the principal investigator. Physical records were kept in a locked cabinet, in which access was restricted to the principal investigator. Access to identifiable data was limited to the principal investigator and faculty advisor. No identifiable data were linked back to individual research participants. All interview data were collected on a portable recording device and were transferred to encrypted password protected audio files immediately after collection and deleted from the portable device. The service that transcribed the interview data was required to sign a confidentiality agreement before receiving the audio files. The principal investigator maintained the confidentiality of research participants' identity from the risk of inadvertent disclosure by taking the following steps: Research participants' names and other identifier information (e.g. address, telephone number, etc.) were stored separately from the research data. The principal investigator replaced research participant's names with a unique code (i.e. Student 1=S1, Parent1=P1, etc.), and used these codes to refer to the subject data. As noted above, there was no link between participants' identifiable information and the interview data collected.

Research participants were coded based on the order in which their interviews were scheduled. Data collected from parent(s) and student(s) from the same family were not linked. During the data analysis and findings stage, student and parent participants were assigned pseudonyms. Upon completion of the study, all electronic data were erased, and physical records were shredded/destroyed.

Data Analysis

Introduction. Once all of the data had been collected and transcribed, they were analyzed through coding. Coding is a process that involves identifying and grouping data accumulated during the study into categories and/or themes (Saldaña, 2015). Data were then

analyzed to identify pervasive, or recurring, topics and/or words/terms, which were sorted into coding categories (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). According to Bogden and Biklen (2007), there are multiple categories that can be created by identifying pervasive topics and words or terms through data analysis. They include: setting/context codes, situation codes, event codes, activity codes, method codes, participants' perception codes, participants' ways of thinking codes, and relationship and social structure. The data were coded using emerging categories. Once data were coded, they were further analyzed to gain insight and conclusion of the participants' narratives. Specific codes used were: school history, previous educational placement(s), current educational placement, current instructional practices, school culture, staff beliefs and/or characteristics; parent concerns, student concerns, student future vision, parent future vision, and future challenges.

In vivo coding. This study employed in vivo coding as a first cycle method of coding. During in vivo coding, the principal investigator examined each line of the interview transcript and assigned a label by using words or short phrases taken directly from the participants (Saldaña, 2015). Saldaña (2015) indicated that in vivo coding is an effective method in research studies involving students, because children and adolescents' words are typically marginalized, and "coding with their actual words enhance and deepens adult understanding of their culture and worldviews" (p. 74). During in vivo coding, the principal investigator read each line of the interview transcript and coded salient words or phrases. All in vivo codes were placed in quotations marks next to each line of transcript, and each line received its own code (Saldaña, 2015). Salient words or short phrases were attributed features like impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases, similes, metaphors, etc. (Saldaña, 2015, p. 74). During in vivo coding, if something in the data appeared relevant to the

study then the principal investigator applied a code to it, even if it was not part of the original coding structure.

Analytic memo writing. Analytic memo writing was done concurrently throughout the coding and the data analysis process. The purpose of analytic memo writing was to document and reflect upon the coding process and the emerging categories, sub-categories, themes, and concepts taking shape from the data, and ultimately leading to a theory (Saldaña, 2015). Analytic memos served to provide deeper reflection and internal dialogue of the data collected. Analytic memo writing, throughout the coding and data analysis process, was an opportunity to reflect on and write about the following (Saldaña, 2015):

- How the researcher personally relates to the participants and/or phenomenon being studied

- The research question(s) being studied

- Code choices and the operational definitions

- The emergent patterns, categories, themes, and concepts

- Possible links, connections, and/or overlaps, among the codes, patterns, categories, themes, and concepts

- An emergent or related existent theory

- Any problem with the study

- Any personal or ethical issues with study

- Future directions for the study

- The analytic memos generated

- The final report for the study

Analytic memo writing, then, served as a transitional process from coding to the formal write up of the study. Saldaña (2015) believed that analytic memo writing improves the quality of analysis through continual reflection of the data collected. In this study, analytic memo writing was an important tool to connect principal investigator to the participants being studied. Specifically, it will serve as an impetus to sympathize and empathize with the participants as well as understand their perspectives and worldviews (Saldaña, 2015).

Coding and categorizing analytic memos. Analytic memo writing in this study was coded and categorized according to their content. Descriptive titles were given to enable the principal investigator to group related specific memos by reflection of emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, etc. Subtitles functioned as sub-codes or themes, to enable the principal investigator to subcategorize the content into study-specific groupings (e.g. analytic memos on specific participants, specific codes groups, specific theories in progress, etc.).

Second cycle coding. After the first cycle of coding, codes were categorized and themes generated based on relationship between codes, code frequencies, and underlying meaning across codes. Specifically, the principal investigator wanted to answer the following questions:

- Reference: Are a group of codes making a reference to a specific concept?

- Occurrence: How does a group of codes happen?

- Sequence: Does one code or group of codes come before or after another?

- Frequency: How many times does a specific code assigned to parts of the data?

- Essence: Is there an underlying meaning among a group of codes?

Axial coding. The study employed axial coding as a Second Cycle coding method. The goal of Second Cycle coding was to develop categorical, thematic, conceptual and/or theoretical organization from the first cycle of coding. During Second Cycle coding, First Cycle codes

identified from each interview, and their associated coded data, were reorganized and

reconfigured to develop a smaller and more select list of broader categories, themes, and/or

concepts (Saldaña, 2015, p. 149). Axial coding consisted of identifying relationships among open

codes collected during First Cycle coding. Through Axial Coding, the principal investigator

reviewed the data from First Cycle coding and identified core and related categories by

examining the characteristics and dimensions that create and maintain a particular category.

More specifically, the principal investigator examined the conditions, causes, and consequences

of each category. The goal of Axial Coding was to refine a code to achieve its best fit (Saldaña,

2015, p.160). Once the principal investigator refined the codes from the First Cycle, he

determined which categories were most relevant and connected to one another. The principal

investigator, then, described the connection between the categories. These categories and

connections became the main results of the study, which represented new knowledge from the

perspective of the participants.

Triangulation. Qualitative studies conducted with integrity require the researcher to

continually check and verify the data by comparing it to the research design and implementation

of the study. An effective method to aid in verifying the integrity of a study is triangulation.

Triangulation is a strategy that involves cross-checking data from multiple sources to establish

regularities in the research data (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). This strategy assists in validating

the data and ensuring the integrity of the research design and outcome of the study. During this

stage, each participant's interview was coded. Once all student and parent interviews had been

individually coded and artifacts collected, the principal investigator looked for patterns across all

interviews and artifacts, analyzing for similarities and differences among the collected data. The

principal investigator triangulated the data across all interviews, artifacts, analytic memos to identify clear themes that appeared in all data sources.

Results and discussion. After triangulation, the principal investigator post coded the data to integrate key words and phrases into narrative form to see how they might link together. The codes and categories from the study were then examined to ensure they represent key concepts. Next final codes were transformed into themes. Then the principal investigator organized codes, concepts, and/or themes into heading or sub-headings. During the findings phase, the principal investigator wrote an analysis of data, describing categories and how they are connected. Finally, the principal investigator interpreted the findings and results and made recommendations for future research.

Principal investigator's role and limiting research bias. The principal investigator in this study was an internal researcher because he is an administrator in the district where research study was conducted. The principal investigator was conscientious that the research study was implemented with validity and fidelity, and that all collected data were accurate, and the results measured what the study intended to measure. A potential threat of this study was research bias, which is seeking out and finding data that confirms what the researcher wants and expects to find. In response, the principal investigator practiced reflexivity throughout the study by constantly thinking about his biases and minimizing their effects. During the interview process, the principal investigator was conscientious and reflective that the interviewer did not lead and/or influence the research participants' responses. Leading can result in unwitting bias, which occurs based on how the questions are framed, their order, interviewer's tone, cadence, and volume of interviewer, interviewer's level of interest, etc. Unwitting bias can invalidate the research data and the entire study. To limit unwitting bias, the principal investigator was aware

of their bias and prejudices prior to conducting the interviews, to mitigate their occurrence while interviewing the participants. The principal investigator also used interview best practices, to promote open-mindedness and to limit leading. The principal investigator, too, understood how to use stimulus materials as well as techniques that helped maintain moderator neutrality, while eliciting comprehensive data. Additionally, the research applied interpretive validity strategies, specifically member checking, to ensure the collected data accurately portrayed the research participants' thoughts and feelings. Member checking, discussed above, is a strategy in which the principal investigator discusses the findings of the collected data with the research participants, to confirm agreement and, if not, make revisions.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational experiences of African-American males in special education from the perspectives of the students and their parents. Both student and parent interviews were completed in one session each. The duration of the interviews ranged from ten minutes to thirty-five minutes in length. It was observed that the student interviews were much shorter than the parent interviews. However, this is to be expected as parents have a better recollection regarding their child's earlier years in previous placements while students focused on more recent educational experiences and post-secondary goals.

The findings reflect factors that might increase the learning and achievement of African-American males in special education, increase their accessibility to the general education setting and curriculum, and reduce their identification as needing special education services. Findings from this study are presented in three sections: The first section describes the current educational placements of the students. The second section provides an introduction of the student and parents. The third section presents the findings from the parent and student interviews, which are organized by their identified themes.

Current Educational Placement

At the time of the study, the four student participants attended a special day program operated by a county office of education. The school serves approximately 110 special education students, from kindergarten to 12th grade, who have been identified as struggling with internalizing behavioral disorders and needing support in meeting their academic, social-emotional, and behavioral goals. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 53% of the student population

was white, 23% was African-American, 15% was Hispanic or Latino, 4% was Asian, 1% was Filipino, 1% was multiracial, and 3% was not reported (California Department of Education, 2019). Regarding staff, 77% was white, 8% was Hispanic of Latino, 4% was African-American, 4% was Filipino, and 7% was not reported (California Department of Education, 2019).

The goal of the school is to help students understand and modify their behavior and actions; improve their decision-making skills; develop positive behavior, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills; and strengthen social and academic skills that will enable them to return to a less restrictive education environment or community setting. To achieve this goal, the school delivers a counseling-enriched education program that emphasizes academic and social-emotional learning standards and is aligned to meet the individual needs of each student; promotes group learning and collaboration; and focuses on personal, interpersonal, and social skills development. The school's curriculum is organized into thematic units of study, based on the core values of the school (i.e. trust, friendship, honesty, leadership, etc.) as well as the state's social-emotional learning (SEL) standards. There are limited course offerings for high school students, but they are able to meet graduation requirements through an alternative school track and can petition for a diploma through their resident school district upon completion. When high school students transition back to their resident high school prior to graduation, they are subject to their resident high school's credit requirements. However, the special day program employs highly qualified special education teachers and instructional support staff to implement curriculum through individualized instruction in a small classroom setting, with student to staff ratio of 8:2. Instructional staff recognize and respect each student's individual learning style; employ multiple learning and assessment modalities; and monitor behavior and academic progress on a daily basis.

In addition to special education teachers, the school staff consists of a professional support team which includes a school psychologist, school social workers, school nurses, occupational therapists, and speech therapists. These professionals work together to provide case management, group counseling, educational planning, behavioral intervention, transition services, as well as inter-agency coordination and other related services (e.g. physical therapy, individual counseling, adapted physical education, etc.). All services for students who attend the school are individualized according to their IEPs.

Despite parents' and students' perceptions that current staff make an effort to provide individualized learning, there is still a marked gap in achievement levels between African-American and white students, just as there is on the national level. Specifically, when comparing the performance of students on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), which is a standardized test that assesses the Common Core Standards, African-American students at this school performed considerably worse than their white counterparts (California Department of Education, 2019). In the 2017-2018 school year, for example, 9% of African-American students met or nearly met ELA proficiency standards on the SBAC, compared to 42% of white students (see Table 4.1). Furthermore, 0% of African-American students at this school met or nearly met

Table 4.1

2017-2018 SBAC English Language Arts/Literacy Achievement Scores by Percentage of African-American (AA) and White (W) Students

Standard Level	Overall		Reading		Writing		Listening		Research/ Inquiry	
	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W
Exceeded	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	7	0	10
Met or Nearly Met	9	42	18	40	10	27	18	53	18	43
Not Met	91	58	82	57	90	73	82	40	82	47

Mathematics proficiency standards on the SBAC, compared to 17% of white students (California

Department of Education, 2019; see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

2017-2018 SBAC Mathematics Achievement Scores by Percentage
of African-American (AA) and White (W) Students

	Overall		Concepts		Problem Solving		Reasoning	
Standard Level	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W
Exceeded	0	6	0	7	0	7	0	7
Met or Nearly Met	0	17	0	10	18	17	18	27
Not Met	100	77	100	83	82	76	82	66

Student and Parent Participants

Student participants included four African-American students, of whom one was age 14

and three were age 17 (see Table 4.3). At the time of the study, one student was in ninth grade,

one in eleventh, and two students were in twelfth grade. The student participants were each

determined eligible for special education in 2015, 2007, 2008, and 2004, respectively. Each

student had been placed in other educational placements before being placed in their current

educational placement, with students attending two previous placements, three previous

placements, four previous placements, and six previous placements, respectively. Lastly,

students have been at their current educational placement for three years, ten years, one year, and

five years, respectively.

Six parents (see Table 4.4) of the four African-American males receiving special

education services were also interviewed. Mr. Henry and Ms. Susan, both age 45 at the time of

the study, are the parents of Jason. Ms. Jane and Mr. Ethan, age 50 and 57, respectively, are the

parents of Eric. Ms. Mary, age 47, is the parent of Mark. Ms. Elise, age 46, participated in the

study without her son as he exceeded the age limitation for the study.

Table 4.3

Student Demographic Data

Student	Grade	Age	Initial Eligibility (Year)	Number of Previous Placements	Years in Current Placement
Daniel[1]	9th	14	2015	2	3
Eric	11th	17	2007	3	10
Jason	12th	17	2008	4	1
Mark	12th	17	2004	6	5

Table 4.4

Parent Demographic Data

Parent	Age	Child
Mr. Henry[1]	45	Jason
Ms. Susan	45	Jason
Ms. Jane	50	Eric
Mr. Ethan	57	Eric
Ms. Mary	47	Mark
Ms. Elise	46	N/A

Daniel. Daniel is a 14-year-old, ninth grade student, who has attended his current educational placement for three years. He lives in a community nearby his current educational placement with his maternal aunt and uncle and is transported by district transportation to attend school. He has lived with his aunt and uncle since birth and they have legal and physical custody of him, along with educational rights. Daniel reported that he enjoys school. He stated that science is his favorite subject and he really enjoys learning about the solar system and the brain. Daniel indicated that learning activities that enable him to work with peers really motivates him. He reported that he would like to attend a college/university after he completes high school to

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[1] Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

pursue a career in neuroscience. When not attending school, Daniel enjoys spending time with neighborhood peers, engaging in various activities like sports, video-games, and playing tag. At the time of interview, he indicated that his maternal aunt was sick, and it was causing additional stress at home.

According to Daniel's school records, he was found eligible for special education in spring 2005 when he was in sixth grade. In seventh grade he was reassigned from his resident school district to his current placement. He was referred to his current educational placement by his resident school district due to significant behavioral issues and inability to access the general education curriculum and setting alongside non-disabled peers. He is currently eligible for special education services under a primary eligibility of emotional disturbance (ED). Review of academic transcripts and special education progress reports, since starting his current educational placement, indicates that Daniel has earned passing grades in all his academic subjects, and has achieved his special education goals.

Jason, Mr. Henry, and Ms. Susan. Jason is a 17-year-old, twelfth grade student, who has attended his current educational placement for one year. He lives with his parents, Mr. Henry and Ms. Susan, both 45-years-old, in a community approximately 20 miles from his current educational placement and is transported by district transportation to attend school. Jason has four siblings, a brother and three sisters. Mr. Henry and Ms. Susan, who both participated in the study, are college educated and currently have careers in education and finance, respectively. They reported that they moved to their current community when Jason was in elementary school, because they were seeking better educational services for their son. Jason, as well as his parents, indicated that his school experience has been a struggle, even with special education services and supports. He was determined eligible for special education in fall 2008, when he was in third grade, and attended his resident district's elementary, middle, and high school, before being

referred to his current educational placement in the 11th grade. He currently is eligible for special education services under a primary eligibility of emotional disturbance (ED) and a secondary eligibility of other health impairment (OHI) due to attention deficit disorder (ADD). Review of Jason's academic transcripts prior to his current education placement indicated failing grades in all academic subjects and an overall grade point average (GPA) of 0.76. He was referred to his current educational placement during the fall of 11th grade due to severe emotional issues that resulted in hospitalization thus inhibiting him from successfully attending his resident district's counseling enriched special education program. Jason reported that he likes his current educational placement and enjoys the small classes and group learning. He also reported that he was significantly behind in high school credits and likes that he has been able to catch up on credits, so he will graduate at the end of senior year. Jason likes music and is currently learning to play the electric guitar. His parents, too, like the small learning environment at his current educational placement, opportunities to learn with peers, and staff who understand their son's needs. During their interviews, Jason and his parents expressed a desire to attend a college/university upon completing high school, and all foresaw him pursuing a career where he could use his creative talents, such as music, designing, or fashion.

Eric, Mr. Ethan, and Ms. Jane. Eric is a 17-year-old 11th grade student, who has been attending his current educational placement for ten years. He lives with his biological father, Mr. Ethan, 57-years-old, in a suburban community approximately 15 miles from current his educational placement and is transported by district transportation to attend school. Ms. Jane, 50-years-old, is Eric's biological mother and lives approximately 30 miles from where Mr. Ethan and her son reside. Mr. Ethan and Ms. Jane divorced several years ago, but are both active in their son's education, and advocate on his behalf for the services he needs. Eric said he does not always like school, but indicated he needs to be at his current placement place because of his

behavior issues. He enjoys reading and participates in class more when he has background knowledge of a topic/subject. At home, Eric takes long walks and goes to the gym with his dad. He also enjoys cooking and is close to getting his driver's license. Both Mr. Ethan and Ms. Jane indicated that they want to help Eric foster more positive relationships with friends and family.

Eric was determined eligible for special education services in fall of 2007, when he was in first grade, and attended his district's elementary school and a non-public school before being referred to his current educational placement in second grade. He is currently eligible for special education services under a primary eligibility of emotional disturbance (ED) and a secondary eligibility of autism (AUT). According to his mother, he was physically restrained at his last placement, which prompted/drove them to find a new school for him. Review of IEP reports from his time at his district elementary school and the non-public school indicates that Eric displayed verbally and physically aggressive, like throwing desks and chairs, pushing, and leaving class. His current academic transcripts and special education progress reveal he is passing all his academic subjects, earning credits toward graduation, and is working at achieving his IEP goals. Eric states that he intends on going to college after completing high school and wants to pursue a career in film-making. Both Mr. Ethan and Ms. Jane support his desire to attend college as well as pursue film-making as a career and indicate that his family will support him achieving his goals.

Mark and Ms. Mary. Mark is a 17-year-old 12th grade student, who has attended his current educational placement for four years. He lives with his biological mother, Ms. Mary, 47-years-old, in a community adjacent to his current educational placement and is transported by district transportation to attend school. Ms. Mary and Mark's biological father divorced several years ago, and she primarily attends IEP meetings and advocates on behalf of her son's education.

Mark indicated that he likes school and enjoys interacting with peers. His favorite subject is history because he enjoys learning about past events. During his free time, Mark likes playing video games and football. He participated in the summer employment academy the past two summers where he particularly liked learning how to stock shelves at a local grocery store.

Mark was determined eligible for special education services in spring 2004, when he was in pre-school, and is currently eligible for services under a primary eligibility of other health impairment (OHI) due to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He was initially referred for special education evaluation by his mother due to significant issues with expressive language. Ms. Mary stated that his severe behavior problems started at the approximately the same time when his expressive language issues were identified. Mark attended a special day classroom from kindergarten to third grade at a district elementary school. During third grade he transferred to a special day classroom at a non-public school and displayed defiance and aggressive behavior. In fifth grade, his mother removed Mark from the school and requested a new education placement, due to lack of progress. In sixth grade, he was placed at another non-public school and attended until spring of seventh grade, when his mother again removed him due to concerns with the school's lack of organization, facilities and treatment of her son by school staff. He briefly attended his resident district's middle school but was referred to his current educational placement in winter 2015 due to severe behavioral challenges, including physical aggression towards staff and peers, use of profanity and leaving his classroom without permission. Mark continued to display challenging behaviors that impeded his learning for about six months after starting at his current educational placement until he started making academic and behavioral progress. Review of his IEP reports prior to his current educational placement indicates that he significantly struggled to make progress academically and behaviorally and consistently did not attain his IEP goals in these areas. Review of his academic transcripts at his

current educational placement reveals that Mark had made steady progress, generally earning C's and D's during ninth grade, and B's and C's in tenth and eleventh grade. Moreover, review of his IEP reports since starting his current educational placement shows that he is making progress toward his academic and behavioral goals. Mark stated that he would like to join National Guard after completing high school or work with his father as a landscaper. Conversely, Ms. Mary would like her son to attend college or junior college but admitted that as long as he is doing something productive and he is happy, she will be happy with his decision.

Ms. Elise. Ms. Elise is 46-year-old mother of an African-American male receiving special education services. Her son was unable to participate in the research study because he had already turned 18 when the study began, exceeding the age limitation of 17 for the study. Ms. Elise lives in the community in which her son's current educational placement is located, and reports that he has a driver's license and drives himself to school. She indicated that she is supportive of his current educational placement and believes the small-setting and responsive staff has had a positive impact on his academic performance and has alleviated the severe anxiety he experienced attending his resident district's middle and high school. According to Ms. Elise, her son is well liked by peers and staff, is a responsible student, and can work independently or with peers in a small group. It has been reported to her from his teachers that when called upon, he contributes insightful comments during group discussions and is beginning to voluntarily do so as well. Ms. Elise stated that history and science are her son's favorite subjects, but he also enjoys art. During his free time, her son listens to music, lifts weights, runs, spends time with his older brothers, and plays video games.

Ms. Elise reported, and confirmed by file review, that her son was determined eligible for special education services in spring 2012, when he was in fifth grade. He was referred for a special education evaluation by his mother due to his severe anxiety, which was adversely

impacting school attendance and academic performance. Prior to special education, he was on a 504 plan through his resident school district to address anxiety and work completion. Ms. Elise indicated that he attended a district middle school during sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, but overall, was unsuccessful due to frequent absences and failing grades. He started ninth grade at a resident district high school but transitioned to Home and Hospital services in fall 2015 because of severe anxiety. According to Ms. Elise, he did not earn high school credits while on Home and Hospital services and was referred to his current educational placement in summer 2016, just prior to 10th grade. Review of his school records indicate that his attendance has improved (over 90%) while he has attended his current educational placement. His academic transcripts reveal that he receives A's and B's in his academic subjects and is on track to graduate at the end of his senior year. His most recent psychological educational evaluation, which included teacher and parent input, recognizes that the quality of his school functioning is dependent on the support, structure, and familiarity of the school program. Ms. Elise stated that although he has made significant improvements academically and socially, he is still highly anxious and can become socially withdrawn. According to his most recent IEP report, there has been discussion from district representatives about his attending some classes at his resident district high school, but he has expressed that he does not want to attend another school, other than his current educational placement, even for part of the day. In response, the IEP team, including the parent and student, have explored other options, such as work experience, that would increase his opportunities to socially interact with others. In the future, Ms. Elise stated that her son plans on attending junior college after high school graduation and would eventually like to join the Navy.

Findings and Themes

The following section provides a comprehensive summary of the findings discerned from the parent and student interviews. Eight salient themes were identified from both the parent and

student interviews (see Table 4.5). Of the eight salient themes, two included subthemes to better

present findings from the interviews. The themes are presented in chronological order, where

themes linked to previous staff and placements are presented first, themes linked to current staff

and placement are presented second, and themes linked to parents' role in their child's education

and students' current and future thoughts on their educational experiences are presented last (see

Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

Salient Themes and Subthemes

Salient Themes	Subthemes
Previous Staff Not Responsive to Student's Needs	N/A
Students saw Themselves as the Problem in Previous Placements	N/A
Previous Placement(s) Negatively Impacted Students	N/A
Current Staff Instrumental to Student Success	– Current Staff Understand Student Needs – Current Staff Create Safe and Positive Learning Environment – Current Staff are Effective Communicators
Current Placement Addresses Student's Needs	N/A
Current Structural Aspects Support Students	– Small Classroom and Individualized Attention – Group Learning
Parents as Advocates	N/A
Students Responsible for Present and Future Success	N/A

Note. N/A denotes no subtheme associated with salient theme.

Previous staff not responsive to students' needs. A repeated concern of parents, when

recounting their children's previous educational placements, was that school staff did not know

how and/or were not interested in educating students with special needs. Therefore, school staff

could not meet their children's individual and specific needs.

> Ms. Jane, when recalling Eric's district's second grade elementary classroom, asserted:
>
> In my opinion, they [i.e., teachers] were not capable of handling students with his
>
> disability. Therefore, the instruction, the way they handled him, their interactions with
>
> him, and his interactions with other students was a failure. They brought people into the
>
> classroom to support him, and even a classroom aide, but like I said, it was not successful

Mr. Ethan, too, expressed his concerns about the inability of one of Eric's former teachers to

meet the needs of students with special needs. "Nothing done seemed to help . . . even with the

additional help, he continued to struggle." According to Mr. Ethan, it became clear that his son's

teacher "did not know how to handle his needs. She had a lot of students and struggled to

manage the class, let alone my son. It was a horrible experience."

> Ms. Susan, when recounting why things got more challenging for Jason in fourth grade,

stated:

> [It] is when I realized that . . . teachers [weren't] communicating with each other [and]
>
> there's miscommunication because [they] didn't know he had an IEP. I just don't think
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> they were trained to handle children who had more [learning] challenges. I believe it is a
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> partnership, but it felt like it was becoming more of a problem for the teachers. They
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> didn't want to make the accommodations or modifications, [which] made it a lot more
>
> challenging.

Later, when asked, what grade was the most challenging during his education, Ms. Susan

asserted, "Freshmen year was the roughest." When probed why freshmen year was so

challenging, she asserted: "Number one was the lack of training the staff had . . . dealing with

children with special needs. Not being trained . . . to work with children with special needs and what that means was a big issue." Ms. Susan also indicated, in addition to lack of training, Jason's teachers did not demonstrate a positive attitude participating in IEP meetings or the amount of additional effort required to support students with special needs. She stated:

> Honestly, only one teacher . . . really got it. A lot of the other teachers said, 'Oh, we're just too busy.' I felt they saw it as a hindrance to their typical day. I think some teachers were actually outright angry they had to even participate in the [IEP] meetings. It felt like we were encroaching on their time. I get it, it's high school and there are so many students, but at the end of the day, you're there to teach all of the children. I just felt a lot of resistance. I didn't feel like they were helping us create the path he needed to be successful.

Mr. Henry, too, recognized that increasingly the inability of Jason's teachers to meet his needs helped contribute to his academic failures and social-emotional issues:

> You know, in third and fourth grade there were more academics and it became more challenging. They were pulling him out more, but we didn't see any improvements. It felt like he was being told how to do things, but not shown how to do them. They just allowed him to do things that didn't seem to help him. Specifically, in math, they would let him write all over the paper, whereas we wanted them to help him organize his work and thoughts. It kind of bothered me because I wanted him to improve his planning, and had it been more structured, he and his teachers could have identified the mistakes sooner. We would meet with his teachers and point stuff like this out and give suggestions, but they didn't seem to get it.

Later, he relayed that Jason's struggles became significantly worse in middle school:

He struggled a lot in middle school, to the point where we were always with teachers

trying to figure things out. We had so many meetings and came up with so many plans. I

really don't think they were equipped to meet the needs of kids' more significant

disabilities.

Mr. Henry, too, reflected:

The way the system's set up I feel kids, like my son, have to fail so many times before we

get them to place where they can be successful. That's a hard thing, because year after

year after year they're failing, and you get these team [sic] together and they say, let's try

this first, then this, then this. Well, that didn't work, so they keep going on to this, until

hopefully, they get something that works. It's frustrating, but I think that everything is

geared toward one type of student, so there is going to be a lot of failure.

Reflecting on his son's educational experience, Mr. Henry expressed that it has been extremely

difficult on him and his wife watching him struggle and lamented that it was most difficult

knowing that "the adult supposed to teach him could not find a way to meet his needs."

Ms. Elise recounted that it was a relief when he was initially identified and started

receiving services but felt there was never any benefit until he got to his current educational

placement. When asked why she did not believe he received any benefit previously, she said:

He was placed in a classroom for students who acted out, and he didn't do that, so he

flew under the radar, and did not receive the type of attention that he needed. It was hard

for him to get into a program that met his needs.

Ms. Elise, when discussing her son's high school teacher's inability to recognize the anxiety he

experienced due to the large classrooms and how overwhelmed he felt because of the amount of

assignments he was expected to complete stated:

It was hard for them to understand that the school and expectations placed on him weren't meeting his needs. I think because he wasn't acting out, he wasn't seen as a priority. He [sic] issues were more internal. Again, he kind of flew under the radar, and was overlooked by his teachers. The classrooms were huge, and he was expected to complete a ton of work each day. He couldn't keep up. His anxiety became severe and his attendance suffered. I just think they didn't know how to handle it.

Ms. Mary, when discussing Mark's significant behavioral struggles in the first grade, recounted: "The principal wasn't really accepting of special education kids. I felt like she just wasn't educated on his needs." She believed that the principal's negative attitude toward students with special needs adversely impacted the quality of services Mark received in the classroom. Ms. Mary asserted, "Because she wasn't educated on students with disabilities, I feel it wasn't a priority to educate the teachers."

In second grade, Mark attended another placement, but like his previous placement, Ms. Mary felt the staff did not know how to meet his needs or make an effort to understand his needs. "Again, I felt like staff there didn't know how to work with someone with his disability." Ms. Mary expressed that she was repeatedly frustrated that the majority of his previous teachers and administrators did not demonstrate the ability or desire to educate students with special needs. She reported that Mark was placed in multiple placements throughout elementary and middle school with each time her pulling him from the placements due to staff's inability to meet his needs. By the end of middle school, Ms. Mary indicated that she had lost her patience with their resident school district. He had been sent to placement after placement. Whatever they were doing was not working for him. He was already frustrated. I was frustrated too. Basically, it was just a daycare, so pretty much from first all the way through seventh grade, he was just in a

daycare funded by the school district. When asked what she would have liked of the staff from Mark's previous educational placements, she responded: "More educated on his disability at the time. We felt that he just wasn't getting the helped he needed. Even with the one-on-one aide and the additional support, nothing was working. I feel it just wasn't getting addressed properly."

A repeated concern reported by parents was that staff at their children's previous educational placements did not demonstrate the ability or desire to educate students with special needs. According to the parents, the lack of staff support had a negative impact of their children's educations. Student struggled to receive services that met their individual and specific needs and experienced repeated failure at multiple educational placements.

Students saw themselves as the problem in previous placements. In contrast to the parents seeing the teachers and administrators as the problem, the students, when asked about what they remembered about their previous educational placements, recalled they struggled academically and/or behaviorally, but unlike the parents, who believed their children's previous educational placements did not meet their needs, they attributed their lack of success to their behavioral issues, rather than the educational setting not being responsive to their needs. Daniel recognized that his behavior was a major challenge in his previous educational placement: "I was aggressive, violent, and rude. I would swear at and push teachers and get into fights with other kids." Similarly, Eric and Mark indicated that they, too, had significant behavioral challenges in their previous educational placements. Eric related, "I had terrible blow-ups in class. I would throw desks and chairs and would run out of the class. Because of my anger, I was sent here." Mark said, "I wasn't behaving right" and that he "wouldn't focus, listen to teachers [and] would run out of class." He remembered, "I was kicked out of my elementary school and put in a

behavior classroom but was kicked out of there, too. I was then put in special education school but ended up getting kicked out and came here."

Students, unlike parents, attributed their behavior as the major reason their previous educational placements were unsuccessful. Whereas parents identified problems in the educational system, namely untrained and unsupportive staff as the main reason their children struggled in their former placements, students identified their disruptive behavior as the problem. Specifically, where parents saw their children's negative behavior as a response to a negative system, student saw themselves as the problem.

Previous placement(s) negatively impacted students. Both parents and students reported that the previous educational placements had a negative impact on their children. Mr. Ethan recalled that in Eric's previous placement, staff significantly struggled to meet his needs. He indicated that "he was just not able to function in a regular school setting and staff were unable to meet his needs." Mr. Ethan stated that Eric had sensory issues and was hypersensitive to sounds and touch:

> He would have outbursts to loud sounds and unexpected touches. He would scream, punch at other kids and staff, throw objects or run out the class. Staff did not know to how to deal with that. There were too many days they had to restrain him, and we just didn't like that.

Ms. Susan recalled how Eric was affected right after they removed him from his previous educational placement:

> He was in a rough spot. He had to get out all of the negative things out of his system from the negative experiences he had in his last school, which were inhibiting him from being successful. It took him about year being acclimated in a caring environment to where he

began to thrive. He definitely wasn't successful prior to coming here [current educational

placement] and there were still residuals we had to deal with before things got better.

Mr. Henry described how Jason's self-esteem was negatively impacted when instruction became

more difficult in fourth grade:

> That's when . . . he lost confidence in himself, [which] made it more challenging. He was
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> just overwhelmed from the beginning. At the same time, he began to say things like, I'm
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> different from the other kids and the way they learn. And I think inside he saw himself as
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> being different.

Later on, Mr. Henry asserted that high school became the breaking point in Jason's education.

"He got to high school and . . . it was horrible. It was failing, failing, failing. So, he went

through years of . . . constantly failing and believing he was a failure because the results was

failure."

Ms. Susan and Mr. Henry revealed that the continual school failure eventually attacked

Jason's self-esteem to the point that he began to see himself as a failure. They indicated that he

spiraled into a depression, and even spoke of suicide, which culminated in multiple

hospitalizations due to the severity of his mental health issues. When Jason was asked what he

remembered about his previous educational placements, he said:

> I failed several classes and was falling behind in credits. There was a lot of work to do at
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> once and the teachers kept handing out assignment after assignment after assignment. It
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> felt like I didn't have enough time to do them all and I'd be playing catch up all year. It
>
> made me feel discouraged, like what's the point? He also recounted, too, how the class
>
> sizes at his resident district's high school affected him: 'The classes were huge too, which

gave me a lot of anxiety. I kind of shut down a fell further and further behind. It just felt

like whatever I did, it wasn't good enough.'

Ms. Elise reported the negative impact attending their resident district's high school had on her

son:

He had severe anxiety about attending school and his attendance was terrible. The classes

were huge and made him anxious. He was overwhelmed with the amount assignments he

was expected to complete. They attempted to modify the work, but it didn't help. School

was torture for him.

Overall, parents indicated that their children's previous educational placement had a deleterious

effect on their children. They reported that these negative experiences affected their children's

self-esteem, contributed to mental issues, such as anxiety and depression, prompted aggressive

behaviors in some, and at its most extreme, and culminated into a hospitalization for one student.

For all students, their previous educational placements inhibited their ability to learn and

achieve.

Current staff instrumental to student success. Parents reported that staff were

instrumental to their children's success at their current educational placement. They cited that

staff understand their children's needs and create a safe and positive learning environment for

them. In addition, the parents indicated that staff are effective communicators, who frequently

communicate their children's progress, which helps keep them involved in their children's

education. Overall, staff actions promoted an educational setting where students could learn and

achieve.

Current staff understand student needs. Parents reported that staff at their children's

current educational placement understand their children's needs. Ms. Susan, when asked if she

was satisfied with the support Jason was receiving at his current educational placement, responded:

> I think the teachers are doing a great job with him. They understand his needs, are very patient, and gives [sic] him the time he needs to get his assignments completed. The staff, honestly, more than anything, is what makes me feel secure with him being there. That gives me a lot of peace of mind, because I know they understand his need, help him stay focused, and know when to implement [the] accommodations to support him. It's not just what's in the IEP, and I think they recognize that.

Ms. Mary, too, recognized that Mark is "getting the help he needs" at his current school and that it is an appropriate educational placement. She expressed her frustration that "it's been a struggle up until he got here," and continued by saying:

> I think it comes down to proper placement and he was misplaced the whole time before coming here. He's in a great setting now, with teachers and counselors [who] understand his needs. Everyone here is educated on how to work with kids with disabilities. There is a lot of knowledge and experience here and it makes a difference. He had a lot a behavior issues when he first got here, and because they understood his needs and supported him, he was able to stay in school and will now graduate.

Ms. Mary went on to contrast Mark's previous educational placements to current educational placement:

> I think if his other schools hadn't been so bad, I don't know if we would've even had this opportunity to be at this great school. There are a whole bunch of families who need services like these, but don't know this school exists. I'm not saying this school is the answer for every child, but it was the answer for mine.

Mr. Ethan, when explaining how Eric has been doing since attending his current educational placement, stated: "It was rough at first, but it was clear they knew how to work with him. They would call us if there was an issue, but they handled it. It was a completely different experience." When asked what Eric's current educational placement did differently than his previous placement, he responded:

> They saw a different kid in my son. They knew how to work with him [and] had classrooms where he could be successful. I think what really helped was their ability to understand his disability and him being in a place where he could be himself. Later, Mr. Ethan reiterated that staff at Eric's current educational placement know how to interact with students like his son. The teachers here really know him. He has wonderful verbal skills [and] they use this strength to really push him. They talk to him and ask him a lot of question. They also know when to take a step back and give him space, when he's having an off day. They have taken a lot of time to get to know him. I think with him, if they get him to talk and be him, he feels a lot closer to [his] teachers and is more willing to open up. He's more willing to say what's going on inside.

Ms. Jane, too, attributed the skill and experience of the staff when asked how they helped Eric develop coping skills when he started at his current educational placement. She indicated:

> They're trained professionals, who understand disabilities, and know how to work effectively with students. When he started here, he had a hard time dealing with frustration, even with simple tasks, like learning the alphabet or writing his name. There was a lot acting out, like screaming, yelling, and being physical. [Although] he looked violent, he was extremely remorseful afterward, because he wanted to do better academically, but it was hard for him to do at the time. They took the time with him,

though, and worked closely with me and his father. They recognized that he hadn't

developed coping skills prior to coming here. When those coping skills were put into

place, then we could see the progress, and that was a really big transition for him.

Ms. Elise also recognized that the staff at her son's current educational placement is responsive

to his needs. She reported:

He's getting the help he needs here, and the staff know how to work with him. He had

severe anxiety when he started [here], and the teachers were really patient with him and

made him feel safe. He feels more comfortable participating in class now and work they

with him, so he doesn't feel overwhelmed with completing his assignments. It was a

struggle until he got here. I think it comes down to proper placement.

Parents believed that staff at their children's current educational placement are responsive to

their needs. They felt that staff demonstrated the knowledge and skill to work effectively with

students with special needs and helped them successfully transition from their previous

educational placement. Parents recognized that the staff was a major reason why their children

were successful in their current educational placement.

Current staff create safe and positive learning environment. A prevalent theme

generated by parents is that staff at their children's current educational placement create a safe

and positive learning environment. Ms. Susan, when describing staff at Jason's current

educational placement, stated:

I trust them, which . . . to me [is] the biggest issue when it comes to my kids, [since]

they're with my child all day. I have to be able to trust and know that they're doing right

by my child. I do trust them [and] feel like feel like they care about my son. When you

care about someone, you're not . . . going to discard them [or] ignore them. You're

actually going to connect with them . . . even if they're not telling you what's going on. They're going to find a way to help you vocalize and to feel confident . . . and be part of the classroom.

Mr. Henry recounted how staff made Jason feel safe when he first started at his current educational placement:

He has a good connection with the teachers and staff. When he started, it was a very vulnerable time for him. He was just having a rough day and one of his counselors . . . pulled out the guitars, [which] was all he needed to redirect him. That's not going to happen at a regular high school. Teachers are more aware of him here. It's not just the grades, but who he is, and what it's going to take for him [to be] successful. I think that makes a difference. He feels safe. He feels that he's being given a chance to work to his potential, and that makes him motivated to do it.

Ms. Ethan expressed how teacher promoted more positive relationships with students at Eric's current educational placement:

Students genuinely seem happy here and the teachers seem to care. They [the students] seem to want to be there and seem like they're in the right atmosphere. There is a lot of positive interaction between teachers and students. You know that's not happening in a regular school. There are too many students for them to have those type of relationships.

Ms. Jane reflected that the positive relationship created between the staff, student and family has been important to her son's success at his current educational placement:

It's not just the educational support, but the emotional support given, and the camaraderie between staff, students, and families. When there is a bond, and everyone is focused on what the child needs, and the child feels it, then there's greater chance of success. She

continued by recognizing staff for the time they have taken to develop a positive

relationship with Eric, to where he feels comfortable, safe, and will willing to express

himself: They have taken a lot of time to get to know him. They got him to open up and

be himself. I think because he feels a lot closer to [his] teachers and is more willing to

open up, he's more willing to say what's going on inside, which is really important.

Similarly, Ms. Jane felt it was extremely important for anyone working with her son to

take time to develop a positive relationship and get to know him. Just remember that he's

a person first. Do not stereotype him and [instead] treat him as an individual. Keep in

mind he's his own person, with his own personality. Learn about him first and do not

make assumptions because you've worked with students similar to him, but not exactly

him. Get to know him and talk to him. You'll learn he's a fun and loving person. He just

has some things he's got to work through, but he is learning to work through them. Get to

know him as an individual . . . not lump him with everyone else [which is] what you

should do with every student.

Ms. Elise, too, recognized the positive relationships promoted by staff at her son's current

educational placement recognized

This has been very safe environment for him here. It is the first time he's been able to

foster positive relationship within the classroom. It also the first time he feels comfortable

voicing his opinions and participating in the classroom activities which is huge for him.

It's taken a long time to get there but he's finally feels safe to participate.

Overall, parents felt that staff at their children's current educational placement created a safe and

positive learning environment. They reported that staff seemed to genuinely care about students

and took effort to make positive connections with them. Students then felt safe and more comfortable to be themselves.

     Current staff are effective communicators. Parents reported that staff at their children's current educational placement are effective communicators and that frequent communication enables parents to be more involved in their child's education. According to Mr. Ethan, "Everybody at [Eric's] school, teachers, administrators, counselors, communicate to about my son. They'll let us know regularly how he's progressing, where he's being successful, and what he needs to improve in." When asked if he found the communication helpful, he responded:

> Yes, I find the communication extremely helpful. It gives me the information I need to help him at home. We're all one team, and they understand that. Constantly communicating with one another allows us to address issues immediately and helps him be as successful.

Ms. Jane, too, acknowledged that staff at Eric's current educational placement were communicative. She stated:

> Everyone who's involved in his education, communicate regularly how he's doing in school. If I need to speak to someone, whether it is a concern or not, there is always someone accessible I can reach. It's good to know that I can almost immediately speak to someone about my son's education.

Mr. Henry recognized a counselor whom his wife and he continually speak to regarding Jason's progress. When asked if they found the communication helpful, he responded:

> It is really helpful to have someone to talk to discuss our son's progress. With this particular counselor, we're able to get immediate updates on how he's doing, which is huge for us. It gives us peace of mind knowing we can reach someone at his school

almost immediately or get a callback. With his school history and us feeling so out of the loop in his education, it's nice to know we can pick up the phone and get an immediate response, rather than wait until his next IEP meeting.

Ms. Susan, too, acknowledged that ongoing communication from staff helped support Jason's education.

For me, they're talking to me ongoing, which is a big difference from his previous schools. His teacher and counselor will text me and give me updates on how he's doing and how his day went. Just communicating and giving me updates helps us talk to him more effectively, because knowing the background of his day or if there's things going on gives us a sense of what he may be thinking or feeling, which is huge.

Ms. Elise also reported that the ongoing communication was helpful and enabled her to communicate better with her son.

The staff reach out to me a lot, which is helpful. They provide me updates and take the time to explain how he's progressing or if there are any issues. In the past, I didn't always know if there was something going on with him until it was often too late. Now, someone is immediately contacting me to let me know if something is wrong, [which] helps me talk to him and support him more.

Parents expressed that staff at their children's current educational placement are effective communicators, whose frequent communication helps keep them involved in their children's education. They report that staff's frequent communication allows them to more effectively communicate with their children as well as strengthens their relationship with them. Moreover, parents indicated that staff are easily accessible and responsive when they have concerns.

Conversely, they state that they did not receive regular communication from staff in their children's previous educational placement.

Current placement addresses students' behavior. Students recognized that their current educational placement was an appropriate one, but unlike parents, who attributed the appropriateness of the placement to staff, who understand their children's needs, are effective communicators, and who create safe and positive learning environment, students reported that their behavior was the major reason they attended their current educational placement. Daniel indicated that he before he attended his current educational placement, he was "violent and disrespectful toward my teachers and other students" and that his behavior had improved, he felt supported and stated, "I am getting the help I need." When asked what else he likes about his current school he said, "They have people who help me with my behavior." Similarly, Jason acknowledged that his current placement was an appropriate one and he was getting the help he needed. "He observed, "We're all here for a reason . . . getting the help we need." He continued, "There are kids who need special education, but cannot get it in their regular high school. It's gonna be super hard for him or her to get their education because they're not in the right setting." Eric recounted that he hated his current educational placement when he started, and it took about a year to get adjusted to the setting. He continued, "I remember I used have terrible blowouts where I would throw desks and chairs." When asked what he thought about his current placement now, Eric responded, that he liked being in special education and that his "issues make it hard to learn stuff." When asked why it is hard, he stated, "it is hard to explain [but] issues are always on my mind, making things hard to deal with. Mark, too, expressed that he felt his current placement was appropriate because of "all the behavior problems" he had in his previous placements.

Students believed that their behavior was the major reason they were attending their current educational placement. They reported that they were either verbally and/or physically aggressive toward staff and peers in their previous educational placements. Students expressed that their current educational placement was an appropriate one and believed they were receiving the help they needed to address their behavior issues.

Current structural aspects support students. Both parents and students reported that structural aspects of the current educational placement had a positive impact on student success. Parents recognized that small classrooms and individualized attention were important structural aspects that support student learning and achievement. Students stated that they were engaged in instruction and learned more when they participated in group learning activities with peers.

Small classrooms and individualized attention. Parents repeatedly reported that the small classrooms and individualized attention their child received at their current educational placement are major factors that support their children's education. When asked if there is something important Eric's teachers should know to support his learning, Mr. Ethan responded:

> He learns best in smaller classrooms, where there is more individual attention. I think him being in a place where he feels comfortable, can be himself, and receive attention when needed is huge. I mean some of the junior high school and high schools have 45 students. If you put a student in a classroom where there are 45 other students, it will be difficult to meet their needs. Here, they have a teacher and an instructional assistant in each classroom. Students get their needs met here and have a greater chance to thrive, compared to a resident high school.

Ms. Susan, also, recognized smaller classrooms and individualized attention were main factor supporting Jason's learning at his current educational placement.

> I like the smaller classrooms, where he receives more individual attention. He has struggled in large classrooms and fell significantly behind. We had previously requested if there were any smaller classrooms in the district he could attend, so he be able to receive more one-to-one attention, but we weren't given an option prior to here. Since coming here, he has thrived with the smaller classroom and the one-to-one attention he's received has really helped his grades and earning credits.

Mr. Henry, too, acknowledged that the smaller classroom and individualized attention he received were instrumental to his success.

> They have small class sizes and one-to one attention and are able structure instruction to the specific way he learns. I think that is a major reason he started to feel some sort of success, to where the failing grades turned to B's and C's and he's earning credits. He still struggles here and there, but this setting has really helped and he feels good about himself and is productive, which is a major change.

Ms. Elise believed that the smaller classrooms and individualized attention at her son's current educational placement helped alleviate his severe anxiety and supported his academics.

> This school has been a blessing. Some students, like my son, need extra help . . . and a lot of individualized attention. The smaller has really helped a lot. He had a such severe anxiety before at his previous school with the large class sizes that it reached a point where he didn't want to attend school. He's supported here with a counselor, small classrooms, and one-to-one attention. I think that a major reason why he feels comfortable here and is participating more in classroom activities.

Ms. Mary, too, felt the smaller classrooms and individualized attention had a positive impact on Mark's learning and enabled the staff to align instruction to meet his needs.

He learns in a setting with small classrooms and more one-to-one help. That's how they found out that he learns better on computers and using technology. They adjusted his instruction so he would have more opportunities to work on computers, and receive instruction at his level, which has really work for him. That wouldn't happen at a regular high, where there's a lot of students in the classroom. You're just not going to get that one-to-one attention. They've been able to notice problems faster and make needed changes, which didn't happen in his last schools. He's still behind, but now he's on the right track and doing what he's supposed to be doing to be successful in the classroom.

Group learning. Students reported that they learned more and were more engaged when they and their peers learned together through group learning. Jason, when how he learns the best he responded, "I feel like when other students are talking about something, it sticks in my mind more." Later in the interview, he stated, "When I hear other students discuss what they wrote, it helps us learn about how others are thinking and how they see the world."

Eric, too, acknowledged that learning with his peers made instruction more interesting and enjoyable. He recounted that his class had been studying a play titled *Hamilton's America*. Eric stated:

Well, the play is historical fiction based on the life of Alexander Hamilton. It is pretty interesting because it goes over his life and accomplishments. I enjoyed acting out the play with other students in the class, and us learning new vocabulary and listening to the songs from the Broadway musical, which actually are pretty good.

Daniel also indicated that he enjoyed learning with peers in the classroom and related that they especially enjoy instructional activities that allow them to use technology.

We enjoy doing online learning games and quizzes together. Some sites have games

shows that allow us to play against one another. Our teacher can upload questions, so we

can test what we've learned in class, and compete against one another to see who can

win, which is pretty fun. It motivates us to read our textbooks and complete our

assignments, so we'll know the answers.

When asked how he learns best, Mark answered, "I like activities where we learn how things

work, and where I can be around my friends and we can learn together."

Both parents and students recognized that structural aspects of the current educational

placement contributed positively to student success. Parents reported that the small classrooms

and individualized attention their children received helped align instruction to their specific

needs, which promoted increased learning and academic achievement. Students indicated they

were more engaged in instruction and felt they learned and achieved more when they could work

with peers during classroom activities.

Parents as advocates. A pervasive theme from the parents was that due to teachers and

administrators' perceived inability to educate students with special needs and the adverse effect

it was having on their children's education, they felt they needed to advocate for more effective

educational services. Most reported that it took repeated school failure, several ineffective

educational placements, and multiple advocacy attempts on their part before their child was

placed in an effective setting. In addition, parents believed their children have an equal chance to

be successful as other students but would continue to need their parent and family's support to

help achieve their goals.

According to Ms. Jane and Mr. Ethan, by the middle of second grade, they had enough of

what they considered the ineffective services their son Eric had been receiving through their

resident district. In response, they contacted an advocacy group who could help them secure better educational services for their son. Ms. Jane indicated that one of the advocacy groups recommended Eric's current educational placement. Ms. Jane, Mr. Ethan and the advocacy group then worked with their resident district to get them to agree to place Eric at his current educational placement, which they ultimately did during second grade. Ms. Jane and Mr. Ethan both indicated that since starting at his current educational placement he has received effective services and they are satisfied with the progress he has made.

Ms. Susan recalled advocating for a teacher she believed would be more effective in working with Jason and implementing his special education program. She stated, "I specifically asked for a teacher who I thought would be a better fit for him than the teacher assigned to him. We had meetings, we had communication, but things weren't happening." According to Ms. Susan, Jason continued to significantly struggle academically and emotionally, and believed the IEP developed had no utility and was, in effect, ineffectual. She felt his teachers were not implementing the accommodations and modifications outlined in his IEP and which he needed to access the curriculum. She requested several IEP meetings and reported that she faced continual resistance from staff when she asked for evidence that they were implementing his accommodation and modification. She asserted, "I had to actually fight for those accommodations and modifications."

Mr. Henry, too, recognized that if Jason continued in his educational placement at the time, he might spiral back into a depression and fall further and further behind, not only academically, but emotionally, too. During the start of his 11th grade year, his parents strongly advocated for a new educational placement. Mr. Henry acknowledged that it was the first time that he and his wife felt like they were part of the decision-making process. When asked to

clarify why, he explained, the school district this time came to the IEP meetings with options of different placements that they could choose, whereas in the past they felt they had to accept the district's placement. Mr. Henry stated:

> With his previous placements, we were told, this is where he needs to be. If we made a suggestion, it was like there was no other option. Actually, there was an option. It was either try this or he gets no support. It was good they were finally listening to our concerns, but frustrating that his problems had become so bad for them do something.

Mr. Henry indicated that they were also allowed to tour the different placements before making a final decision, which was different from the past. Ultimately, Ms. Susan and Mr. Henry, along with the IEP team, selected his current educational placement. They indicate they are both satisfied with his current educational placement but are frustrated that it took so long for their son to attend a program that meets his needs. Ms. Susan, when recalling her son's education to this point, stated:

> Our picture wasn't just rainbows and butterflies. It was a lot of peaks and valleys, and peaks and valleys and frustration and tears. And it's like we had to really fight for everything we got. We had to fight for it. I just don't think we should have had to fight for it.

According to Ms. Elise, she had to repeatedly tell the district that his placement was not working.

> With all the meetings, I would tell them that this isn't really working, especially with the classwork and homework. School was just like just torture for him. I had to advocate for him and tell them that school is hard enough for him due to his anxiety, and that he's not in the right school. I finally told them it was not the right school for him.

She recalled that it was a struggle getting him into an appropriate placement, and that she had to continually advocate for better services during middle school and the start of high school. Ms. Elise indicated that it was not until his sophomore year that someone actually reviewed his case and acknowledged that his placement at the time did not align to his needs. She stated, "I felt it was the first time someone actually took a really hard look at his record and needs to realize he was in the wrong setting." Ms. Elise indicated that their school district finally validated the concerns she had been expressing over the years, and which lead to him being placed at his current educational placement.

Ms. Mary asserted that she had to continually advocate for appropriate educational services for Mark throughout elementary and middle school. During eighth grade, Ms. Mary indicated that she was ready to pull him out of school. She stated, "We had to run out of options and me constantly fighting to finally get him to the right placement." She said soon after, the resident district agreed to place Mark at his current educational placement.

Parents also believed their children had an equal chance to be successful than other students but felt they would need continued parent and family support to achieve success beyond high school. When asked whether he thought Eric had the same chances as other students to be successful, Mr. Ethan responded, "Yes, I do, so long as we're all working together. He has all the tools to be successful, and we [staff and family] have worked hard for him to be successful." However, he recognized that his son would have greater challenges after high school ended.

> I know there's going to be greater challenges since he won't have the same services he
>
> has here, but his family will be there to support him. His sister and brothers all had that
>
> college experience [and] he should have that experience, too. He's starting to say what he

wants . . . where he wants to go . . . and it's always college. I think, because everybody being focused on that goal, he knows that he has the opportunity.

When Ms. Jane was asked if she thought Eric had an equal chance to be successful as other students, she said he did, so long as he had supportive parents.

> I believe if parents are involved in a positive way, then the child has a good chance to be successful. I'm his mom, so he's going to have the same chance as others, because he has a voice. He has a voice, I'm his voice as well. His father also has a voice. His sisters have voices too, and we're all rooting for him to use his voice. We're all going to help him achieve whatever he wants to do, point him in the right direction, and connect with individuals who can also help him. We want to help him because we genuinely love him and want him to do well. Yeah, he does have a chance.

When Ms. Susan was asked whether she thought Jason had the same chances as other students to be successful, she responded:

> He has the same chance as anyone to become successful but doesn't have the same chance with going to a university at this stage. He's the type who will figure out a way to get things done [though] and his father and I will be there to help him. If there's something he wants, there's nothing you or I could tell him. If he wants it, he'll get it, and he's willing to work for it. That's my son. I know he'll be successful. I don't doubt he'll be successful at whatever makes him happy and we will support that.

Mr. Henry was more tempered in his response when asked if he believed Jason had the same chances as other students to be successful.

> I would say that he has the same determination and he's definitely capable, but I wouldn't say he has the same opportunities, unless he receives more education. The way I see it,

the more education he has, the more opportunities that will open up for him. I definitely

think once he figures that out, he can achieve anything. I would say my son is fortunate

because he has myself and my wife. He has parents willing to advocate for him. The

unfortunate thing is most parents aren't willing to advocate for kids. There are so many

hurdles out there and the hurdles are higher when you're poor or because the color of

your skin. My son is fortunate because has two parents who are willing do everything for

him, instill confidence in him [and] and help him along the way.

Ms. Mary expressed that she wanted Mark to attend a junior college after graduating high school.

When asked if she thought that would happen, she felt it would, but expressed concern that he

would have as many services available to him that he had in high school. When asked if he at the

same chance to be successful as other students, she asserted:

Yes, and he's gonna make it because he has family who will help him make it, and not

everybody has that. He has me, his father, and older siblings that are going to push him.

I'm not gonna see him fail and neither will his father. So, he's lucky because he's got

family that is going to support him.

Parents reported that due to ineffective services at their children's previous educational

placement and the negative impact it had on them, they had to advocate on their child's behalf

for more effective services. For several parents, though, it took repeated school failure, several

ineffective placements, and multiple advocacy attempts before their child was placed in an

effective placement. Most parents believed their child had an equal opportunity to be successful

as other students, but for them to achieve success, they were still going to need the support of

their parents and family.

Students feel responsible for their present and future success. A common theme from students was that they were responsible for their present and future success. In addition, each expressed they expected to pursue higher education and/or a career upon completing high school. Students reported that they would like to do better in school and achieve success after graduation, but the responsibility was on them to make it happen. Daniel, when asked how he could improve in math and his other subjects, stated, "I need to try harder . . . not give up when it gets too hard . . . and let my teachers know when I need help." He recognized that teacher could help him do better in school, but asserted, "It's really on me to get it done." When discussing post-secondary plans, Daniel stated that he would like to attend a college/university, to study neuroscience. To achieve his post-secondary goal, he indicated that he would have to "study harder . . . complete work at home, rather than play video games . . . ask for help when I need it." Daniel believed that he had the same opportunities that non-disabled students had to be successful and asserted that "the only obstacles to my success is me."

Similarly, Jason, when asked about his improved grades, attributed his performance to "stepping it up" and "taking my classes more seriously." Still, he indicated that he would like to do better in school, but it was his responsibility to "stay organized, set goals, and focus on school work." Jason recognized that teachers could help him do better, but asserted, "teachers can only do so much to help… it really is my responsibility to get it done and turn it in." When asked why he thought it was his personal responsibility to improve, he asserted, "Teachers and counselors aren't gonna be there in the long run, so when you're at a job and doing something constantly wrong, you're gonna have to work on yourself, so you can do better." When asked about his post-secondary plans, Jason stated that he would like to attend a college/university, and ultimately pursue a career in either music or designing clothes. He believes he has the same

chance to be successful as non-disabled student after high school. Similar to school success, he stated that post-secondary success is responsibility, and will be the result of "staying motivated," "setting goals," and "working to toward my goals".

Mark, too, when asked about his grades, expressed that he would like to do better in school. He believed that in order to do better in school he needed to "stay focused in class and complete his work." He acknowledged that teachers could help him do better in school, but felt it was more his responsibility to "stay focused . . . participate in class [and] turn work in." Mark reported that he would like to join the National Guard upon completing high school. When asked whether he thought he had an equal chance to be successful as other students, he responded that he had the "same chance" as other students to be successful after high school. When asked why he felt this way, he indicated that it was on him "to get it done", and that he needs to "keep working on my goals, and not quit."

When discussing his grades, Eric reported that it was "sometimes a struggle to keep up with my work," and that "I have to work hard [to complete assignments]." He recognized that falling behind in his work would affect his grades, but he was motivated to complete them, so he did not have to go to summer school. When asked if he would like to do better in school, Eric stated that he wants to do better, and that to accomplish this, he would have to "pay more attention in class . . . keep on top of my work [and] turn missing assignments in." When asked who could help, he acknowledged teachers could help, but doing better in school was "something I need to deal with." When asked to give some examples of how he could do better, Eric responded that it was important that he "stay organized . . . remind myself when assignments are due . . . check in with teachers about missing assignments [and] taking work home on the weekend to complete." He stated that he would like to attend college to study filmmaking, once

he completed high school. When asked if he thought he had an equal chance than other students of being successful after high school, he responded, yes, but he believed it could be challenging if "others cannot see past our past issues." When asked what he could to be successful, Eric stated, he needed to "stay focused [and] work on my goals."

Students indicated that they were responsible for their present and future success. They expressed that they would like to be more successful in the present and future, but felt it was their responsibility to make it happen. Students believed that to be successful they have to be motivated, stay organized, set goals, and work toward achieving their goals.

Conclusion

Overall, giving African-American male students in special education and their parents/guardians a voice brought to light several issues that either confirmed or added to the current literature. A repeated concern reported by parents were that staff at their children's previous educational placement did not demonstrate the ability or desire to educate students with special needs. According to parents, the lack of staff support had a negative impact of their children's educations. Students, then, struggled to receive services that met their individual and specific needs and experienced repeated failure at multiple educational placements.

Students, unlike parents, attributed their behavior problems as the major reason their previous educational placements were unsuccessful. Whereas parents identified problems in the educational system, namely untrained and unsupportive staff as the main reason their children struggled in their previous placements, students identified their disruptive behavior as the problem. Specifically, where parents saw their children's negative behavior as a response to a negative system, student saw themselves as the problem.

Parents indicated that their children's previous educational placement had a deleterious effect on them. They reported that these negative experiences affected their children's self-esteem, contributed to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, prompted aggressive behaviors in some, and at its most extreme, culminated into a hospitalization for one student. All parents believed their children's previous educational placements inhibited their ability to learn and achieve.

Parents reported that due to ineffective services at their children's previous educational placement and the negative impact it had on them, they had to advocate on their child's behalf for more effective services. For several parents, it took repeated school failure, several ineffective placements, and multiple advocacy attempts before their child was placed in an effective placement. Moreover, most parents believed their child had an equal opportunity to be successful as other student, but for them to achieve success, they were still going to need the continued support of their parents and family.

Parents reported that staff at their children's current educational placement were instrumental to their success. They cited that staff understand their children's needs and create a safe and positive learning environment for them. In addition, the parents indicated that staff are effective communicators, who frequently communicate their children's progress, which helps them involved in their children's education. Overall, staff actions promoted an educational setting where students could learn and achieve.

Students, unlike parents, believed that their behavior was the major reason they attended their current educational placement. They reported that they were either verbally and/or physically aggressive toward staff and peers in their previous educational placements. Students

expressed that their current educational placement was an appropriate one and believed they were receiving the help they needed to address their behavior issues.

Students, unlike their parents, who believed they would continue to need additional support, indicated that they were responsible for their present and future success. They expressed that they would like to be more successful in the present and future, but it was on them to make it happen. Students felt that to be successful they have to be motivated, stay organized, set goals, and work toward achieving their goals.

Both parent and students reported that structural aspects of the current educational placement had a positive impact on student success. Parents recognized that small classrooms and individualized attention were important structural aspects that support student learning and achievement. Student stated that they were more engaged in instruction and learned more when they participated in group learning activities with peers.

This chapter highlighted the themes generated from the interviews of African-American males in special education and parents of African-American males receiving special education services. Through rich, descriptive details, student and parents in this study gave voice to either their child's or own educational experience. In Chapter V, the principal investigator will present an analysis of the data through a discussion of the themes, followed by practical implications, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

The Office of Special Education Program's Annual Report to Congress (OSEP, 2018) on the Implementation of IDEA reported that African-American students, ages six through 21, under IDEA, Part B, were significantly more likely to be identified for special education as specific learning disabled (SLD), intellectually disabled (ID), and/or emotionally disturbed (ED) than any other ethnic/racial student group. To identify specific factors and provide tangible recommendations that could result in greater learning and achievement for African-American males in special education, this qualitative study examined the firsthand accounts of four, African-American males' educational experiences and six parents' experiences with their children's educational experiences through counter-stories. Current literature supports counter-storytelling as an effective medium that could identify specific factors that might reduce the over-referral and identification of African-American males for special education services. However, actionable recommendations, such as how teacher education programs and school districts can realistically and effectively address learning and achievement for students of all backgrounds, are notably absent from the current literature.

The current study used counter-storytelling, through the theoretical framework of critical race theory, to explore the historically poor educational outcomes and disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American males in special education, as well as provide useful recommendations for teaching education programs and current education administrations. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What do African-American male students in

special education think about their educational experiences? (b) What do parent(s)/guardian(s) of African-American males in special education think of their child's educational experiences? (c) How do the thoughts of African-American males in special education about their educational experience compare and contrast to their parents/guardians' thoughts regarding their educational experience? Semi-structured interviews and student artifacts were utilized to collect data and served as a basis to develop themes from students' and parents' responses. Analysis of the data resulted in the following findings:

African-American Males in Special Education Take Responsibility for Their Behavior and Learning

The first question the current study attempted to address what African-American male students in special education think about their educational experiences. A common theme among the student participants was that they felt responsible not only for their past failures, but also for their present and future success. Specifically, students attributed their disruptive behavior as the reason their previous services were ineffective. They used phrases like, "I was aggressive, violent and rude" or "Because of my anger, I was sent here [current placement]." The students crediting their disruptive behavior as a major reason their previous placements were ineffective suggests that they may be internalizing their environments. Specifically, in previous placements, students appeared to blame themselves for their repeated failures and the non-responsiveness of staff. It also appears that instead of focusing on what they could control—themselves—the internalization produced poor educational outcomes, thus leading to the belief that they were the failures rather than the staff responsible for educating them. The current study's finding is consistent with Casey's (2014) study, who found that students with emotionally disturbed (ED) manifest their issues either through externalizing and/or internalizing behaviors. In other words,

students with ED may internalize issues as they may lack the coping mechanisms necessary to self-regulate their emotions in prosocial ways, and instead, manifest their internal dissonance through externalizing behaviors (e.g., verbal aggression, physical aggression, destruction of property, etc.) (Casey, 2014).

This issue of self-blame has been a decades-long problem, where African-American students, in particular, take responsibility for both their successes and failures (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985). However, Fordham and Ogbu's (1985) study focused solely on students in general education settings, while the current study focused on students in special education settings. Regardless, very little research, to date, has highlighted the educational experiences of African-American students, whether in general or special education settings. One such study includes Connor's (2006), who relayed a story about Michael, an African-American male student in special education. Michael believed his poor educational outcomes were due to low expectations and substandard special education services, rather than intrinsic shortcomings, which completely differs from statements of the current study's student participants. Furthermore, unlike Howard's (2008) study on African-American achievement, where the negative stereotypes applied to African-American males and the discrimination that followed were a salient theme of their counter-stories, students' counter-stories in the current study did not speak of these factors inhibiting their education. In fact, students did not mention being stereotyped or discriminated against at all. Rather, as noted above, they solely blamed their problematic behavior for their educational failures.

According to the parents in the current study, staff at the current educational placement demonstrated characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, as promoted by Gay (2008), by actively listening and appreciating their students' viewpoints. Parents also expressed that

educators in the current placement took a vested interest in their children's lives and worked to develop trusting relationships with them, which is critical in establishing a positive learning environment, as well as making classrooms equitable and inclusive for all students By establishing trusting relationships, students are more willing to open up and express their needs, and staff use their students' counter-stories to construct curriculum and instruction, along with behavioral strategies that meet those needs. All students acknowledged that staff were a reason for their success, with statements such as, "They have people who help me with my behavior" or "I am getting the help I need" or "There are kids who need special education, but cannot get it in their regular high school . . . because they're not in the right setting."

These findings show that not only did students in the current study take responsibility for failures, but successes as well. Students reacted positively to the responsiveness of staff at the current educational placement, who, according to parents, actively listened to the students, reflected on their practices, and adjusted instruction, accordingly, aligning to Villegas and Lucas' (2002) findings. Students also began to experience repeated success, to which they too reacted positively, and led to improved behavioral, socioemotional, and academic outcomes for them. Further, this has led to a belief that they can, indeed, be successful. It can be argued that the students in the current study now feel a sense of agency and a belief that they have the same opportunities as other students due to effective services. Based on the information provided by both the students and their parents, it can be suggested that employing culturally responsive teaching practices, as Ford (2014) and McHatton (2007) advocated, is effective in empowering students and instilling in them a belief that they can, and will, achieve through curriculum and instruction that honors their cultures and aligns to their daily lives and experiences.

Essential Role of Parents of African-American Males in Special Education as Advocates

The second question the current study attempted to address was what parent(s)/guardian(s) of African-American males in special education think of their child's educational experiences. Based on the findings from the current study, parents can play an essential role in their child's education as advocates. Parents in this study overwhelmingly described staff at their children's previous educational placements as noncommunicative and nonresponsive to their children's needs. Specifically, they reported that staff were not educated on their children's disabilities and did not demonstrate the skills or desire to work with students with special needs. Moreover, parents related that staff expressed outright anger for being required to participate in the special education process and did not value parents' input regarding their children's education. It can be argued that such a response from educators regarding the special education process does not instill much confidence in parents that services will actually be implemented, which was the case for students in the current study as parents stated that staff were mostly resistant to implementing the accommodations, modifications, and services outlined in their children's IEPs. They believed this inhibited their children's ability to learn and achieve and led to years of school failure.

Parents felt that despite increased efforts to advocate for more effective educational services for their children, their voices were ignored by teachers and administrators. They believed that educators did not make a concerted effort to develop positive relationships with their children, understand how they learned, or deliver curriculum and instruction that aligned to their needs. Their experiences resonate with Smith and Kozleski's (2005) findings who reported that minority and low-income parents were less likely to be included in IEPs or their children

provided with opportunities that could lead to successful outcomes compared to wealthier non-minority parents.

Parents' reports of lack of responsiveness from previous staff also resonated with Lavine's (2010) study, who, from personal experience, felt educators were neither interested in nor respectful of her input. The current study found that parents wanted collaborative partnerships with school staff at their children's previous placements who would work with them to develop effective IEPs and implement them through high-quality curriculum and instruction that meets their needs. Unfortunately, collaborative partnerships between parents and previous staff did not occur as students struggled to receive services that aligned to their specific needs and experienced repeated failure and multiple educational placements.

Some parents recalled how they even had to fight for implementation of accommodations and modifications that were already written in their child's IEP. Parents went on to say that these negative experiences affected their children's self-esteem, contributed to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, prompted aggressive behaviors in some, and at its most extreme, culminated into a hospitalization for one student. These findings show that there was a clear disconnect between the students and staff in previous educational placements. As the students reacted to non-responsive staff and unmet needs with intensified behavioral issues and poor academic outcomes, staff responded by suggesting that students needed increasingly more restrictive educational settings, supporting Blanchett's (2006, 2009) claim that African-American students, once in special education, are more likely to spend more time in special education settings apart from their non-disabled peers. Specifically, Blanchett (2009) believed that special education had become a vehicle for resegregating African-American students after the Brown

decision and that seems to be the case for the African-American male students in the current study.

Rather than employing characteristics of culturally responsive teachers by reflecting internally to see what they can do differently to meet the needs of their students, according to the parents, previous staff placed blame on the students for not responding to the standard curriculum and instruction. That is, the students were expected to meet the requirements of the program, rather than the program meeting the needs of the students. Staff who resist implementing accommodations, modifications, and services has been an ongoing issue in education with staff arguing that it is unfair to provide accommodations or modifications for some students and not others (Welch, 2000). When staff react in this manner, it resonates with the liberal narrative of meritocracy that all students should receive the same treatment regardless of need. In reality, every student has divergent needs and educators need to understand the difference between fairness by need (i.e., equity) and fairness by merit (i.e., equality; Welch, 2000). In other words, all students, whether in the general or special education setting, have varying starting points and if all students are treated the same in the name of equality, some will inevitably fall behind. In order to ensure that all students are able to reach the same successful outcome, educators must be willing to give students what they need when they need it. In the case of students in special education, accommodations and modifications do not disadvantage non-disabled students, but instead are the bridge between the disability of students with special needs and the ability to access quality curriculum so they can learn and achieve along with their non-disabled peers. It is the researcher's position that parents in the current study should not have had to fight as hard or as long for programs and services that provided educational benefit for their children. It is also the researcher's belief that had effective services been delivered early

on in their education, students' needs would have been addressed sooner, which may have resulted in less intensive services needed later on.

Parents went on to report that staff at the current educational placement have been instrumental in their children's success., which was evident in that all the students in the study were passing their classes and earning credits toward graduation.

Unlike staff at their children's previous educational placements, parents reported that staff at their children's current placement know how to work with students with special needs and helped them to successfully transition from their previous placements. According to the parents, staff are a major reason they feel their children's current placement is now successful. Parents felt that current staff took the time to get to know their children and develop positive relationships. It seems that current staff looked beyond their children's disabilities and saw them as individuals, with individual needs, which has been integral in connecting with them. Parents believed these connections between staff and students improved educational outcomes by aligning instruction that met their individual needs. Further, parents believed that current staffs' knowledge, skills, and patience has enabled their children to feel included, supported, and comfortable to be themselves, and have noticed greater confidence in their children, along with a newfound belief that they could achieve their true potential.

The parents reports that current staffs' knowledge, skills, and patience enabled their children to feel included, supported, and comfortable to be themselves are supported by Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2009) who asserted that safe and positive classroom environments resulted in greater learning opportunities and experiences for students. Nieto and Bode (2018) also stated that effective teachers take a vested interest in connecting with their students, learning about their lives, and promoting classroom environments where all students feel welcomed and

appreciated. The positive relationships developed between staff and students are further supported by McGlamery and Mitchell's (2000) study, which concluded that African-American students were most successful when teachers develop positive relationships with students. Because of this, parents believed their children have gotten to a point where they are willing to open up and express how they are feeling, which has been key to their progress and success.

Although parents focused on the student-educator relationship, they also recognized that the staff in the current placement actively listened and valued their input, which is, then, used to align curriculum and instruction to the needs of their children. Parents also acknowledged that current staff are effective communicators who engage students in conversation, genuinely listen to them, and allow them to use their voice, which Gay (2018) described as characteristics of culturally responsive teachers. Parents stated that not only do educators make it a priority to communicate with their children, but with them as well. Parents found that unlike staff in previous placements, current staff are easily accessible and responsive when they have concerns. Current staff also continually update them on their children's progress, which helps keep them involved in their children's education. According to parents, this instilled in them trust and peace of mind that their children were being served by educators who truly cared and promoted an environment where they felt safe.

Parents reported that staff's frequent communication also allowed them to more effectively communicate with their children, which strengthens their relationship with them. Specifically, they felt knowing how their children's days were going and how they were progressing at school was instrumental in strengthening their relationship and necessary to effectively communicate with and support them. Though not specifically addressed by parents in the current study, the clear and frequent communication from educators to parents implicitly

suggests that staff at their children's current educational placement value parents as important members of the special education process. Just as Civil and Khan (2001) connected curriculum and instruction to home life, which allowed parents to better connect with their children, parents in the current study find the frequent communication from educators a necessary component in strengthening their relationship with their children.

Finally, all parents agreed that despite finally receiving what they perceived as effective services, they believed that their children would continue to need their support to achieve their present and future goals. In other words, parents would continue to be engaged in the process and remain conscientious of their children's needs, advocating for services as needed. It can be argued that had parents not continually advocated for their children, they may have never received the appropriate services they needed. Although previous research has focused more on student voice, this study's findings show that it is necessary to also focus on parents' voice through their advocacy efforts for their children, most notably in special education. Since parents have the most knowledge about their child, it is critical to give them a platform to express their hopes and voice their concerns as it relates their child's education in order to provide educational services that best meets their needs.

As described by Gay (2018), Honker (2004), Nieto and Bode (2018), current staff behaviors demonstrate characteristics of effective educators who employ culturally responsive teaching practices by aligning instruction to the individual needs of students. Current staffs' behaviors also support McGlamery and Mitchell's (2000) findings, who concluded that students are more successful when teachers develop positive rapport because students feel more included and confident in the classroom. Although previous research did not directly highlight effective communication as a key characteristic of culturally responsive teachers, Banks (2004), Gay

(2018), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Nieto (2010) promoted developing positive relationships

with parents and families, which can only be done through effective communication. Effective

communication with parents and families, in turn, would positively impact student learning by

connecting to their daily lives and experiences. These connections between school and home

better enable teachers to construct curriculum and instruction that is more meaningful to their

students and results in increased learning and achievement, which is another main tenet of

culturally responsive teaching (Civil & Khan, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 2006). Again, for parents

in the current study, the clear and frequent communication created a stronger link between

school and home, which enabled them to feel more engaged in their children's education. It is

incumbent, then, that educators follow Losen and Orfield's (2002) suggestions, and engage

parents as active members in the special education process and consider their input, because

parents are important team members whose voices should be heard to enact positive change and

develop special education programs that address all areas of need.

Parents See a Broken System as the Problem Whereas Students See Themselves as the

Problem

The third question the current study attempted to address was how the thoughts of

African-American males in special education about their educational experience compared

and/or contrasted from that of their parents/guardians' thoughts regarding their educational

experience. A sharp contrast in perspectives was observed between parents and their children.

Parents saw their children's negative behaviors as a response to a broken system, while the

students saw themselves as the problem. Specifically, parents identified problems with the

educational system, like untrained and unsupportive staff. But, at no point during the interviews

did any of the students ascribe blame to the educational system or felt the disintegration of their behavior was due to inappropriate and ineffective services.

There was also a difference in perspectives regarding the appropriateness of the current educational placement. Parents attributed the appropriateness of the current placement to staff and small class sizes that allowed for individualized attention. Alternatively, the students suggested the current placement was appropriate because it directly addressed internal factors—mainly their problematic behavior. They also felt they learned best through group learning; however, the students did not emphasize the individualized attention they received that their parents believed was important to their success in the program.

These findings highlight the different perspectives that parents and students had while dealing with the same educational experience. They also emphasize the importance of educators who seek input and listen to both parents and students while shaping curriculum and instruction that will meet the needs of the student. It also stresses the importance of parents taking on the role of advocates when children are at an age when they cannot advocate for themselves. Parent advocacy is critical because of the negative impact the previous placements had on the students. The students were not aware that the services they were receiving in their previous educational placements were not adequately meeting their needs. Conversely, their parents were aware of the ineffective services and advocated on their behalf to get them the services and instruction that aligned to their specific and individual needs, just as Lavine (2010) advocated for her own children.

Persistence of Achievement Gap Between White and African-American Students in Spite of Improved Educational Placements

A review of the artifacts, which included academic grades, high school credits earned, and IEP goals, showed that all students in the study were passing their academic classes, earning credits towards graduation, and were making progress towards their IEP goals. The overall perception of both parents and students was that they were doing well academically and were benefitting from educational services at the current placement. However, review of the 2017-18 SBAC results of both white and African-American students at the current educational placement indicated that white students considerably outperformed African-American students in both Mathematics and English Language Arts (California Department of Education, 2019). These findings support research that African-American students are at a higher risk for school failure than white students (Gay, 2018), suggesting that even when African-American students attend educational placements where both they and their parents believe they are achieving and have access to curriculum and instruction that meet their needs, there is still considerable work that needs to be done in the classroom to close the gap between white and African-American school achievement. The achievement gap between white and African-American school achievement further emphasizes the need for curriculum and instruction that better represents African-American students, provides them with a voice, and connects to their daily lives and experiences, which is not readily available to them. The need for curriculum and instruction that represents African-African students supports statements by Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), as well as Blanchett (2006), who argued that the school curriculum and high quality, rigorous instruction have been specifically developed to benefit white students, in both general and special education settings. It is also important to note that the majority of the staff members at the students' current

educational placement are white, and although they employ practices of culturally responsive teachers, including developing positive relationships with students, actively listening to them, and using student feedback to align instruction to their needs, it is still not enough to close the gap between white and African-American school achievement.

The persistence of the achievement gap between white and African-American students suggests that there may be more at play. Upon reviewing the research literature and reflecting on the current study's findings, it is possible that we have been focusing on the wrong problem. Rather than focus on the achievement gap between white and African-American students in reading and math, perhaps greater focus should be directed toward the systems that maintain and reinforce the achievement gap. Moreover, by limiting our lens to a single score or set of scores, we minimize other contextual factors that might be equally or more important in explaining why the achievement gap exists. Achievement gaps based on race/ethnicity/gender are not normal or inevitable nor are scores neutral because, as noted above, they exist in context.

Put simply, race has mattered and still matters in the context of education. Researchers and educators, alike, need to recognize whose story is being told, and help disrupt the negative myths/stereotypes perpetuated about minorities by offering counter-stories from those most impacted by them. It is important that educators also focus on developing curriculum that is relatable, representative, and accessible to all students.

Ultimately, society needs to stop using white students as the standard that African-American students are compared to and understand that achievement scores are not the only measure of student learning. As a society, it is imperative that we finally give a voice to those who have been historically marginalized and silenced. Giving the students and their parents in the current study a voice has given insight into the problem. By focusing on the problems they

highlighted, and providing a solution (i.e., developing curriculum that is relatable, representative, and accessible to all students, and aligning instruction to meet the needs of all students), educators may finally start making progress in narrowing the achievement gap between white and African-American school achievement.

Limitations

A limitation in this study was the small number of parent and student participants, who were chosen from a convenience sample, rather than a randomized representative sample. Because of this, the results cannot be generalized to the population. Another limitation was that the researcher was limited by the IRB to collect only parents' and students' firsthand accounts and could not collect firsthand accounts from educators to compare them with parents and students. The principal could not include educators as research participants due to the concern that educators would be apprehensive to answer honestly to the researcher, who was an administrator in the district, in fear that their responses might result in retaliation or could compromise their job status. A third limitation was that the principal investigator was an administrator in the district where the study was conducted, and his position may have directly/indirectly influenced student participants' responses because they were speaking to a person in a position of authority. A fourth limitation was that student participants received all their educational services in a special education setting and their firsthand accounts were currently limited to their interactions with special education staff. As a result, these findings are not generalizable to students who receive special education services in a general education setting. Despite these limitations, the findings in this study are determined relevant considering the need for effective educational services for African-American males.

Implications for Practice

As U.S. classrooms become increasingly more diverse and as higher standards in teaching and learning impact curriculum and instruction, it is critical that educational outcomes improve for African-American males. It is incumbent on educators to construct and deliver curriculum and instruction that is responsive to the culture of African-American males, but, at the same time, addresses each student's individual and specific needs. To achieve this, educators need to be conscientious of the tendency for students to readily internalize both negative and positive interactions within their environment, be receptive to both student and parent voices in order to help shape curriculum and instruction and be reflective of how their own culture may positively or negatively influence curriculum and instruction in the classroom.

Developing positive relationships. Where current staff really distinguished themselves was in their ability to develop and sustain positive relationships. According to parents, the positive relationships promoted by staff instilled trust in students, which enabled them to feel safe at school. Students, then, were more willing to open up and express themselves and their needs, suggesting that they responded positively to positive interactions. Current staff, for their part, were there to genuinely listen to students. Staff, then, by genuinely listening were able to construct academic and behavioral supports that met students' needs and promoted a school environment that felt safe and positive. This finding suggests the importance of developing positive relationships with students and genuinely listening to them as a critical step in constructing curriculum and instruction that meets their needs.

In response, teacher education programs should include coursework dedicated to cultivating aspiring educators' skills in developing positive relationships. The following strategies can be used to promote positive relationships with each student: communicating

positive expectations with students, correcting students in a constructive manner, calling on all students equitably, actively listening to students and responding with interest and care, etc. Utilizing these strategies will not only lead to positive classroom climates, but promote a positive school-wide culture, as well. Such coursework should teach aspiring educators how and when to use these strategies, the strategies that would work best when developing positive relationships with students of any ethnic background, along with the psychology behind positive interactions between children and adults.

For current educators, administrators need to make it a priority to continue cultivating their staffs' skills in developing positive relationships by offering continuous job-embedded professional development and opportunities to attend conferences that cultivate this set of skills. Educators should also take it upon themselves to continue developing their skills throughout their careers through daily practices. It is also critical that educators become comfortable with being uncomfortable when discussing matters of race and ethnicity. Educators must be given opportunities, during staff meetings, to discuss the strategies that worked and did not work with students, overall, but also the strategies that worked and did not work with students from different ethnic backgrounds. Doing so will give educators a better sense of what might work best with students of all backgrounds so that positive relationships can be developed much more quickly. Furthermore, these skills should be expected of all educators on a district-wide level so that every school setting, from elementary through high school, within the district promotes a positive school culture with high expectations for all of its students and educators.

Respecting parents' role as student advocates. Another important finding was that parents took on the role of advocates. Parents were a voice for their children when their children did not have a voice, and continually advocated for appropriate special education services that

aligned to their children's individual needs. Regardless of their efforts, however, parents often felt their voices were ignored by teachers and administrators. As a consequence, students experienced years of ineffective programs and services that did not address their educational needs. The years of ineffective programs and services, arguably, could have been mitigated by parents and educators working more collaboratively to develop and deliver special education programs and services that more closely aligned to the students' needs, which based on parents' accounts, was what was occurring at their children's current educational placement. From the parents' perspective, the close collaboration with staff at the current educational placement has been having a positive impact on their children's learning and achievement.

Developing effective curriculum and instruction, and programs and services should be a dynamic process that involves parents and educators continuously working together to ensure the changing needs of students are continually met. It is the responsibility of educators to give parents the opportunity to voice their input so that they may better inform curriculum and instruction, as well as programs and services. It is critical that both teaching education programs and school administrators emphasize and cultivate aspiring, and current educators' skills in developing ongoing collaborative relationships with parents.

Actively listening to students and parents. Findings from this study revealed that counter-storytelling is a medium that has the potential to contribute to the improvement of educational experiences for students like those in the current study who were underachieving before being placed in their current educational placement. By giving them a voice and using their firsthand accounts, educators were better able to deliver to them rigorous, high quality curriculum and instruction. According to parents, what differentiated the current educational placement from their children's previous placements was the knowledge and skill demonstrated

by current staff and their responsiveness to the needs of students and parents, alike. Educators must be aware that although they are experts in their fields, they must respect the fact that parents are the experts on their children and allow them the opportunity to share their knowledge regarding their children. Furthermore, educators must authentically listen to African-American students and their families on factors they say will increase student learning and achievement, and subsequently, apply that feedback to better align curriculum and instruction to their needs.

In order to cultivate educators' skills in using counter-stories to better align curriculum and instruction to student needs, teacher education programs should add coursework that focus on CRT, cultural competency and utilization of student voice. It is important that aspiring educators are made aware of the struggles that African-Americans have experienced in the context of education. It is equally important that aspiring educators are aware that African-Americans' voices have been historically silenced and/or marginalized, which has led to poor educational outcomes. Through a series of courses, aspiring educators should also be given the opportunity to cultivate their knowledge of various cultures and develop skills to connect with students and actively listen to their needs to promote learning and achievement for students of all backgrounds. This coursework should also bring greater awareness to aspiring educators of how their own cultural backgrounds and biases can positively or negatively influence curriculum and instruction. It is my belief that with this knowledge, educators will be more cognizant when they approach African-American students and their families regarding their educational needs.

Just as awareness is built among aspiring educators, the same should be done for current educators. Administrators should provide opportunities, through regular professional development, for current educators to learn about CRT and the consequences that silencing and/or marginalizing African-Americans has had on their educational outcomes. Moreover,

administrators should promote cultural awareness and competency, as well as professional learning communities within and between schools. Through professional learning communities, educators can bring awareness to curriculum and instruction that has increased achievement for students from various cultural backgrounds and continually develop curriculum and instruction that is accessible to students of all backgrounds.

Exhausting general education services and supports before referral. It is critical that educators exhaust general education services and supports before referring African-American males for special education. Administrators, with the collaboration of staff, should be implementing multi levels of supports that provide targeted instruction and interventions for all learners, including African-American males, by systematically assessing and monitoring student learning over time and using data to adjust classroom instruction as well as provide timely and targeted interventions. Site-based teams should ensure, before considering evaluating African-American males for special education that, to the maximum extent, students have received timely and targeted instruction and interventions within general education and, through ongoing data analysis, have demonstrated they have not sufficiently responded to needed supports. Although attempting to exhaust general education supports cannot circumvent or postpone a necessary or parent requested special education evaluation, delivering timely and targeted supports can help schools differentiate between students who have not received quality instruction and those who truly need special education services. For African-American males, it is critical IEP teams demonstrate that students have received timely and targeted supports delivered with fidelity and that general education services have been exhausted before considering a special education evaluation. Consequently, if African-American males are evaluated, evaluators and ultimately IEP teams, will not rely solely on a set of test scores, but will have a multitude of data sources to

examine, including response to instruction, which will help teams delineate whether it is a disability or not. The goal should be to identify students who truly need special education programs and/or services and minimize unnecessary and unneeded identification of all students, including African-American males.

IEP teams working collectively and collaboratively on behalf of students. If an IEP team determines that an African-American male is eligible for special education, it is essential that the IEP, in all areas, aligns to the student's specific and individual needs. A student's present level section should address all of their needs, be data driven, and should serve as a basis in developing goals that have a direct relationship to the disability. Moreover, goals should focus on critical skills students will need within and across the curriculum. To the maximum extent, goals should link to and build off one another to better ensure mastery, generalization, and maintenance of skills. Further, service providers should develop goals that promote collaboration and overlap of services, rather than providers working with students in isolation. IEPs should have utility and afford students opportunities to learn and apply skills in multiple settings and with multiple providers, including general education teachers. In addition, accommodations, modifications, and supplementary aids should be carefully considered, selected, and should serve as the bridge between the student's disability and their ability to access the general education curriculum. A greater emphasis should be made on everyone working collectively and collaboratively together to ensure that students' IEPs have a significant and positive impact on student learning and achievement.

Focus on positive behavior supports. To minimize the potential deleterious effects of school suspension, particularly for African-American males, administrators, in collaboration with school staff, should implement positive interventions and supports, including alternatives to

suspension. From experience, as an administrator and former classroom teacher, out of school suspension generally has had negligible impact on deterring the problem behavior from recurring. School suspensions serve as a missed opportunity to teach alternative, pro-social behaviors. In addition, students miss out on invaluable instruction and usually return to school behind, which results in students feeling frustrated and disinvested in learning and increases the likelihood of a problem behavior occurring again. Instead, schools need to adopt practices that teach and model pro-social behavior and expectations to students. Educators must model the behaviors they want their students to demonstrate and find opportunities to reinforce students when they display desired behavior. Educators, too, need to rethink school suspension and, to the maximum extent, consider alternatives to school suspension, which provide students interventions that teach them how to effectively manage their problem behaviors and to resolve conflicts in a productive and pro-social manner.

Race still matters. An interesting observation from the study were that the students did not reference race as a major factor inhibiting their education. In retrospect, perhaps this is not all that surprising of an observation, seeing that the researcher was a white male. Generally, people are more comfortable opening up to persons that represent and look like them. Considering that all the participants were African-American and the researcher was white, perhaps the topic of race was beyond their level of comfort, despite the researcher's efforts to establish positive rapport with the participants during the interviews. Regardless, the participants' counter-stories provided a rich narrative on the educational experiences of African-American males in special education. Despite the fact that participants in the current study only briefly touched on the issue of race, the current literature shows that race still matters in education and educators must remain cognizant of this as they interact with students from all backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, I would recommend including firsthand accounts of educators, while employing a counter-story methodology, to compare the experience of educators to that of African-American males in special education and their parents. This research would be beneficial in exploring the similarities and differences in experiences that exist between African-American males, their parents, and their educators. Greater knowledge in this area could lead to more effective special education programs and services that align with African-American males' individual and specific needs.

Future research should also focus on collecting the firsthand accounts of African-American males in general education, along with the firsthand accounts of their parents and educators. Research in this area might also identify factors that could help reduce the referral and/or over-identification of African-American males needing special education services. Not only should these studies focus on educational outcomes of African-American males in special education and/or general education, but also on factors, such as self-esteem, self-worth, anxiety, and depression, since findings from the current study found that inadequate educational placements had an adverse impact on their mental health.

Additionally, future research should compare both white and African American males— in both general and special education settings—and their families and educators. This research could illuminate differences in educational experiences that could be leading to the achievement gap between white and African-American students. Just as with the recommendation above, focusing on factors, such as self-esteem, self-worth, anxiety, and depression, is necessary so that researchers are better able to ascertain whether the achievement gap between white and African-American students is due to external or intrinsic factors, or both.

After examining the firsthand accounts of African-American males in special education and their parents, it is evident that there is still a great deal of work that needs to be done to improve their educational outcomes. Parents reported that their children experienced many years of school failure and it took repeated parent advocacy before they were placed in an appropriate educational setting that met their needs. It pains me to think what educational progress these students might have achieved had they received appropriate programs and services earlier. African-American males deserve high quality curriculum and instruction, regardless of whether they receive special education and/or general education services. This study demonstrated that they and their parents have a powerful message to deliver and it is incumbent on educators to give them a voice, but also to listen and be responsive to that voice.

Final Thoughts

Overall, it is clear how critically important communication, collaboration, positive relationships, advocacy, and cultural competence has been in impacting the quality of programs and services African-American males in special education received in this study. Together, all of these factors had an impact in students being placed in an appropriate educational setting, and once there, receiving services that aligned to their individual and specific needs. Although the study's findings do not solve the disproportionate and/or overrepresentation of African-American males in special education, they do suggest factors that educators can practice to positively impact the quality of education services this student population receives, not only in special education, but general education, too.

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Appendix A: Site Authorization Letter

Date: (affix date
Mr./Mrs./Dr. (affix surname)
Title (affix)
Address

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Mr./Mrs./Dr. (affix surname)

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study within your respective school district. I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and am in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. The study is entitled The Educational Experiences of African-American Males in Special Education

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit 5 African-American male students currently receiving special education from the school district to complete a one-to-one interview (copy enclosed). Due to the nature of the study, I hope to recruit (the mother, father, or guardian) of African American males in special education to complete their own one-to-one interviews (copies enclosed).

To participate in the study, research participant must meet the following criteria:

- Student research participants must be African-American, male, between the ages of 13-17, and have currently received special education services for two or more years
- Parent or guardian research participants must be the legal parents or guardians of an African American male in special education, who is current a student attending the district

Prospective student research participants will be recruited for the study once their parents or guardian give permission. If students would like to participate in the study, they will be asked to sign and date a student assent form (copy enclosed). Parent/guardians who volunteer to participate will be given consent forms to be signed and returned to the primary researcher (copies enclosed). Participation in the study is voluntary and consent to participate can be withdrawn at any time without consequences.

If approval is granted, student participants will complete the interview during non-instructional times at a mutually agreeable time, date, and location between the parent/guardian and researcher or a quiet setting on at school site. The interview process should take approximately one hour to

complete. Parent participants will complete their interviews at a date, time, and location that are mutually agreeable to participants and the researcher. Researcher will analyze the data collected from the interviews and the results will be presented in a doctoral dissertation. The names of the research participants will be coded, and pseudonyms applied during the final write-up, to maintain participants' confidentiality. There will be no costs incurred by either your school district or the research participants to participate in the study.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: mtbennet@umich.edu

If you agree, please sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study within your school district.

Sincerely,

Matt Bennett

Doctoral Student

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Enclosures

cc: Dr. Martha Adler, Faculty Advisor, UMD

Approved by:

_____   _____   _____

Print your name and title here   Signature   Date

Appendix B: Site FERPA Waiver

Date:

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter will verify and validate that Matthew Bennett is a Student Programs' Administrator at the (name of district). Student data are accessible and available to administrators, teachers, counselors, related service staff, and support staff without restrictions or required written parental consent. Given that Matthew Bennett is a Student Programs' Administrator, and can access student data at any time, he is able to access this data for the purpose of screening and recruitment, to support his doctoral research at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and is therefore exempt under FERPA regulations and restrictions.

Sincerely,

Name
Title
School
District

Appendix C: Invitation Letter to Parent or Guardian

(Date)

Dear (affix name):

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study. This is study is being led by Matthew Bennett, a doctoral student, from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. This study will gather input from parents and students on the educational experience of African-American males in special education. It is anticipated that the information learned from this study may be used to improve the educational outcomes of African-American males. You are being contacted because you have been identified as the parent of an African-American student receiving special education services in (insert district). Participants in the research study will participate in a one-to-one interview. Parent participants will receive a $50 gift card upon completion of the study.

Included with this letter are the following documents:

- Parent Consent for Self
- Parent Consent for Child
- Student Interview

I politely request that you do not show the student interview questions to your child.

Additionally, I want to disclose that the researcher is an administrator in the district your child attends. To minimize or avoid any unnecessary influence on your child, the researcher will be conducting the research study at school site which is not his primary site of employment, and which he does have daily interactions with students who might participate in the study.

It is my intention to follow-up to this letter with a phone call. If you would like to opt out of the phone call and/or future contacts, please feel free to contact me at: xxx-xxx-xxxx or mtbennet@umich.edu

If you are interested in participating and/or would like additional information about the study, please feel free to contact at either telephone number or email above.

Please note: Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study.

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Matthew Bennett
Doctoral Student
University of Michigan-Dearborn
mtbennet@umich.edu

Appendix D: Recruitment: Telephone Script

Purpose

The principal investigator will contact prospective parent/guardian research participants via telephone approximately one week from the time of the initial email/mailing, to determine if they meet eligibility and are interested in participating in the study.

The telephone script below will be delivered to each prospective research participant to ensure consistency and completeness in the information they receive about the study.

The telephone script includes the following:

Principal Investigator (PI): Hello, my name is Matt Bennett and I'm a doctoral student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

PI: "My reason for calling is to invite you to participate in research study being conducted by myself."

PI: "You're being invited to participate because you're the parent/guardian of an African-American male currently receiving special education services."

PI: "The purpose of the study is to collect firsthand accounts from African-American males and their parents regarding their educational experience. It is hoped that information from study can be used to improve the learning and achievement of African-American males in special education."

Continue by saying:

PI: "Participation in the study involves participating in an interview that take approximately 45-60 minutes."

PI: "Participation in this study is voluntary and there are no consequences for not participating. Also, you can choose to participate and decide to withdrawal later without any consequences."

PI: Do you have any questions up to this point? (Allow opportunity to ask and answer questions)

Once all questions have been answered, ask the parent/guardian:

PI: Are you interested in participating in the study?

If no, say:

PI: "Thank you for your time. Have a good day/night?"

If yes, ask them:
PI: "Do you mind if I review the informed consent forms that were attached with the invitation letter, I sent you in the mail/email?"

If the parent/guardian agrees, completely review the Parent Consent of Self (Appendix E) and Parent of Consent of Child (Appendix F).

Give parent/guardian opportunity to ask any questions they might have regarding the respective forms.

PI: If after completing reviewing, ask the parent/guardian:

PI: "Are you interested in your child and you participating in the research study?"

If no, respond:

PI: "No problem. Thank you for time and have a good day/night."

If yes, respond:

PI: "Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. Please sign and date the informed consent forms (Appendix E and F) we've just reviewed and return them in the self-addressed, posted envelope."

The principal investigator will continue by saying:

PI: "Once I've received the signed consents, I will mail you a copy of them for your records."

Ask the parent guardian:

PI: "Do you have any additional questions?"

 If yes, answer any questions they might have. Once completed, respond:

PI: "Thank you for your time and have a good day/night."

If they have no questions, respond:

PI: "Thank you for your time and have a good day/night."

If the parent would like the principal investigator to review the forms in person, respond:

PI "I would be happy to review them in person. Is there good date, time, and location that is agreeable to you?

Have calendar available and review to confirm that date, time, and location are mutually agreeable.

If it is an agreeable date, time, and location, respond:

PI: "This date, time, and location works. So, we will meet on (date), at (time), at the (location)."

Once the parent has confirmed the above information, respond:

PI: "Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting you soon. Have a good day/night."

In the event that the prospective parent/guardian research participant does not answer the telephone or someone other than the prospective parent/guardian research participant answers, then the principal investigator will deliver the following messages:

Parent/guardian does answer the telephone:

PI: "Hello, I am calling to talk to (name) about a research study. My name is Matt Bennett, and I am from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. At your earliest convenience, please give me a call back at (Bennett's number). I look forward to hearing from you. Have a nice day. Goodbye".

In the event another person answers the phone:

PI: "Hello, I am calling to talk to (name) about a research study. My name is Matt Bennett, and I am from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Please let them know at their earliest convenience to give a call at (Bennett's number). Thank you for your help. Have a nice day".

Appendix E: Parent Guardian Consent of Self

The University of Michigan-Dearborn
PARENT GUARDIAN CONSENT OF SELF

Title of the Project: The Educational Experiences of African-American Males in Special Education

Principal Investigator: Matt Bennett, Doctoral Student, University of Michigan-Dearborn
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Martha Adler, Associate Professor, University of Michigan-Dearborn

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Purpose of the study: Matt Bennett invites you to participate in a research study about the educational experiences of African-American males in special education. The purpose of your participation will be to seek your input regarding their educational experience to find ways to improve their learning and achievement in school.

Description of Subject Involvement:
If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. You may skip or refuse to answer interview questions without any consequences. Your interview responses will be audio recorded. The recordings will be erased when the research study is completed.

Benefits: Although your child may not receive direct benefit from your participation in this research study, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained in the study. As a participant in this research study, the researcher believes the information produced will improve the learning and achievement of African-American males in special education.

Risks and Discomforts: The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in the study. The researcher has minimized the risk by taking steps to securely store all data.

Compensation:
Parent/Guardian will receive a $50 gift card, when their participation in the research study has ended. The $50 gift card is not contingent on parent/guardians completing the interview.

Confidentiality: All participants will be given pseudonyms so that no one can be identified. No one outside this study will have access to the data. Once the data is analyzed, all audio recordings will be destroyed.

Storage and future use of data:

The data you provide will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop, which will be password protected, and kept a locked office.

The researchers will dispose of all data collected upon completion of the study.

The researchers will erase electronic data and shred physical data upon completion of the study.

The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study.

Voluntary nature of the study: Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, your child and/or you may change your minds and stop at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study before its completion, all electronic and/or physical data collected will be either erased and/or destroyed.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Mr. Matt Bennett at mtbennet@umich.edu or Dr. Martha Adler at maadler@umich.edu.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss concerns with someone other than the researcher(s), You may contact the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084. Written questions should be directed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2066 IAVS, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Evergreen Rd., Dearborn, MI 48128-2406, (313) 593-5468; the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084, or email Dearborn-IRB@umich.edu.

Please note that participation in the research study involves a one-on-one interview. If you do not want to be audio-recorded, that's okay, the researcher will take takes notes of your responses.

If you agree to participate in this study, please print and sign your name in the space provided below; you will be given a copy of this consent form for you to keep. If you would like to learn the findings of this study, please email me at mtbennet@umich.edu and I will be happy to forward that information to you. Thank you for your participation in this study.

_____
Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

Please sign below if you are willing to have the one-on-one interview audio recorded.

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

Appendix F: Parent Guardian Consent of Child

The University of Michigan-Dearborn
PARENT GUARDIAN CONSENT OF CHILD

Title of the Project: The Educational Experiences of African-American Males in Special
Education

Principal Investigator: Matt Bennett, Doctoral Student, University of Michigan-Dearborn
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Martha Adler, Associate Professor, University of Michigan-Dearborn

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Purpose of the study: Matt Bennett invites your child to participate in a research study about the
educational experiences of African-American males in special education. The purpose of your
child's participation will be to seek their input regarding their educational experience and to
learn ways to improve their learning and achievement in school.

Description of Subject Involvement:
If you agree to have your child be part of the research study, they will be asked to participate in a
one-on-one interview. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may withdraw from
the study at any time without any consequences. Your child may skip or refuse to answer
interview questions without any consequences. Your child's interview responses will be audio
recorded. You may also choose to withdraw your child from the study at any time without any
consequences. The researcher will not disclose whether your child chooses to participate in the
research study.

Benefits:
Although your child may not receive direct benefit from their participation in this research study,
others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained in the study. As a participant in this
research study, the researcher believes the information produced will improve the learning and
achievement of African-American males in special education.

Risks and Discomforts:
The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. There are no foreseeable
risks to your child's participation in the study. The researcher has minimized the risk by taking
steps to securely store all data.

Confidentiality:
All participants will be given pseudonyms so that no one can be identified. No one outside this

study will have access to the data. Once the data is analyzed, all audio recordings will be destroyed.

Storage and future use of data:
The data your child provides will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop, which will be password protected, and kept a locked office. All data collected will be destroyed upon completion of the study, including the electronic data, which will be erased, and physical data, which will be shredded. The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study.

Voluntary nature of the study:
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if your child decides to participate now, they may change their minds and stop at any time. If your child decides to withdraw from the study before its completion, all electronic and/or physical data collected will be either erased and/or destroyed.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Mr. Matt Bennett at mtbennet@umich.edu or Dr. Martha Adler at maadler@umich.edu.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss concerns with someone other than the researcher(s), You may contact the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084. Written questions should be directed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2066 IAVS, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Evergreen Rd., Dearborn, MI 48128-2406, (313) 593-5468; the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084, or email Dearborn-IRB@umich.edu.

Please note that participation in the research study involves a one-on-one interview. If you do not want your child to be audio-recorded, that's okay, the researcher will take takes notes of your child's responses.

If you agree for your child to participate in this study, please print and sign your name in the space provided below; you will be given a copy of this consent form for you to keep. If you would like to learn the findings of this study, please email me at mtbennet@umich.edu and I will be happy to forward that information to you. Thank you for your participation in this study.

_____
Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

Please sign below if you are willing to have the one-on-one interview audio recorded.

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

Appendix G: Student Assent Form

The University of Michigan-Dearborn
STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Title of the Project: The Educational Experiences of African-American Males in Special
Education

Principal Investigator: Matt Bennett, Doctoral Student, University of Michigan-Dearborn
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Martha Adler, Associate Professor, University of Michigan-Dearborn

Dear Student:

Purpose of the study: Matt Bennett invites you to participate in a research study about the
educational experiences of African-American males in special education. The purpose of your
participation will be to seek your input regarding your educational experience to find ways to
improve the learning and achievement in school for students like yourself.

Description of Subject Involvement:
If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one
interview. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time
without any consequences. You may skip or refuse to answer interview questions without any
consequences. Your interview responses will be audio recorded. The recordings will be erased
when the research study is completed. The researcher will not disclose whether you choose to
participate in the research study.

Benefits:
Although you may not receive direct benefit from your participation in this research study,
students, like you, in the future may benefit from the knowledge obtained in the study. As a
participant in this research study, the researcher believes the information produced will improve
the learning and achievement of African-American males in special education.

Risks and Discomforts:
The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. There are no foreseeable
risks to your participation in the study. The researcher has minimized the risk by taking steps to
securely store all data.

Confidentiality: All participants will be given pseudonyms so that no one can be identified. No one outside this study will have access to the data. Once the data is analyzed, all audio recordings will be destroyed.

Storage and future use of data:
The data you provide will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop, which will be password protected, and kept a locked office.
The researchers will dispose of all data collected upon completion of the study.
The researchers will erase electronic data and shred physical data upon completion of the study.
The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study.

Voluntary nature of the study: Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your minds and stop at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study before its completion, all electronic and/or physical data collected will be either erased and/or destroyed.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Mr. Matt Bennett at mtbennet@umich.edu or Dr. Martha Adler at maadler@umich.edu.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss concerns with someone other than the researcher(s), You may contact the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084. Written questions should be directed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2066 IAVS, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Evergreen Rd., Dearborn, MI 48128-2406, (313) 593-5468; the Dearborn IRB Administrator at (734) 763-5084, or email Dearborn-IRB@umich.edu.

Please note that participation in the research study involves a one-on-one interview. If you do not want to be audio-recorded, that's okay, the researcher will take takes notes of your responses.

If you agree to participate in this study, please print and sign your name in the space provided below; you will be given a copy of this consent form for you to keep. If you would like to learn the findings of this study, please email me at mtbennet@umich.edu and I will be happy to forward that information to you. Thank you for your participation in this study.

_____
Printed Name

_____　　　　　　_____
Signature　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Date**

Please sign below if you are willing to have the one-on-one interview audio recorded.

_____　　　　　　_____
Signature　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Date**

Appendix H: Student Interview

1. Tell me about school. Do you like it? Why or Why not? Give me an example. Do you

   remember when you first started in special education? Tell me about that.   Do you like

   being in special education? Why or why not (probe for examples).

2. What do you like about school? Why do you like it?   What don't you like about school?

   Why don't you like it?

3. What things do you enjoying learning about? Why do you enjoy learning about those things?

   Do you have a favorite subject? Why is that your favorite subject? Tell me about that.

4. What kinds of grades to you get in school? Why do feel you receive those grades? Would

   you like to do better? How do you think you could do better? Who can help you do better?

   Why? Give me an example when you are learning the most? Tell me more.

5. Tell me some classroom activities that help you learn most at school. Why do you feel those

   activities help you learn?

6. What do you want to do when you finish high school? What will you need to do that? Do

   others know that this is what you want to do? How do you know? Do you think it's

   important that they know this? Why?

7. Do the other students know that you're getting special education services? How do you

   know this? Does it matter? Do you feel different in class? Why? Can you give me an

   example? Tell me more.

8. Tell me when you feel least included during classroom instruction. Why do you feel this

   way? Give me an example. Tell me more.

9. Tell me when you feel most paid attention to in the classroom. Why do you feel this way?

    Give me an example. Tell me more.

10. Tell me when you feel least paid attention to in the classroom. Why do you feel this way?

    Give me an example. Tell me more.

11. Tell me what you think can prevent you from doing well in school. Why do you feel this

    way? Do you think this is the same for other kids? How so? Give me an example.

12. Do you think all students have an equal chance to do well in school? Why do you think that?

    Give me an example. Tell me more.

Appendix I: Parent Interview

1. Can you tell me a little about your son's schooling? (The research should be ready to prompt for the following): When did special education services begin? Were you part of that decision? Tell me about how your son has been doing since he started services. Are you satisfied with the support? Why? Can you give me an example?

2. Over the time your son has been in special education, how often have you talked to his teacher(s) about his progress? (Probe for more with examples.). Have you offered suggestions to his teachers on how to work with him? Can you tell me about a time when you thought his education was successful? Tell me more. Can you tell me about a time when it was not?

3. Tell me something important about how your son learns that you would like his teacher(s) to know? Why is that important? Do you feel your son's teacher(s) try to understand how your son learns? Why do you feel that way? Give me an example? Tell me more.

4. Do you know if your son feels included with the other students during classroom instruction? How do you know? Give me an example. Tell me more.

5. Who communicates with you about your son's academic progress? (Probe for general classroom teacher, SPED teacher, or both.). How often does he/she communicate with you? Can you give me an example of the type of communication? (If there is communication, follow up with, do you find this helpful, why or why not?)

6. (If the response to question above is negative, then ask the following question.) Tell me some things that your son's teacher(s) could do to make them feel more included during classroom

7. instruction? Why do you feel this way? What are some things your son's teacher might do to make them feel less included in the classroom instruction? Why do you feel this way?

8. Does your son's teacher(s) seek your concerns and questions about your son? What suggestions would you give your son's teacher(s) to allow you to communicate your concerns and ask questions more easily?

9. Does your son's teacher(s) include you on decisions regarding your son's education? What would work best for you to be included on your son's education?

10. How is your son doing in school? (Is he improving academically?) Why or why not? Why do you feel this way? Do you think this is the same for other kids? How so? Give me an example. Tell me more.

11. Do you think children like your son have an equal chance to do well in school than other students? Why do you feel this way? Give me an example. Tell me more.

12. What do you see your son doing once he graduates from high school? Do you think this will happen? Why or why not?

13. Do you think he has the same chances as the other students? Why or why not? Can you give me an example? Tell me more.