SILENCED VOICES: RETHINKING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the experiences of African American parents engaging in their children's education in a medium-sized mid-western community. More specifically, the project examined African American parents' perceptions of education and how these perceptions were related to their participation in home, community, and school activities. This study was based on a three-year-long participant-observation project in a predominantly low-income and African American elementary school, Woodson Elementary. The participants were the parents and/or guardians of Woodson Elementary School students. Participants were chosen based on Woodson staff's and parents' nominations of parents/guardians who were perceived to be involved or uninvolved in their children's education. Almost all participants were African American and female between the ages of 25 and 76-years-old. Ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and survey data were used to identify the origin (e.g. parents' perceptions of education, prior school experiences, school norms) and nature of parents' participation in their children's education. Results indicate that African American parents/guardians, regardless of demographic characteristics (e.g., age, educational attainment, socioeconomic status) value education and actively participate in their children's education. Most parents participated in their child's education predominantly in the home and community as compared to their participation at Woodson Elementary School. However, two forms of parental engagement in schools (e.g., proactive and reactive patterns) were identified, which differentially impacted parents' ability to fully participate in their children's education. Results suggest that incorporating and valuing parents' unique ways of knowing and interacting in their children's education will facilitate parental engagement that is informed, builds relationships betweens teachers and parents, and meets the needs of students and families.

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CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

<u>Project Overview</u>

For several decades, a growing and extensive literature has documented the

important role parents play in their children's academic and social development. Parental

involvement in education has been associated with numerous outcomes from

improvement in students' attitudes, achievement, mental health, and attendance to higher

aspirations and decreases in discipline problems (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown &

Lynn, 2003; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). These favorable outcomes appear to hold regardless

of the socioeconomic status of families and prior student academic achievement (Oakes

& Lipton, 2003). Many states along with the U.S. Department of Education require that

parental involvement become a part of the daily operations of schools. The parental

involvement section of the <u>No Child Left Behind Act</u>[1] (2002) mandates that parents

become involved in school activities including "improving the academic quality of

schools, identifying barriers to greater participation by parents, and designing strategies

for more effective parent involvement" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Given the importance of parental involvement for children's development (e.g.,

cognitive, social and psychological), in addition to federal and state mandates to increase

parental involvement in schools, it is disturbing that many families, especially minority

and low-income, are reported to be uninvolved in their children's schools (Epstein,

1990). An inherent limitation of this finding is that many studies investigating parent

involvement use survey methodologies, which impose behaviors on parents (i.e. parents

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[1] The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) is a federal act signed into law by President Bush which outlines
the steps the federal government should take to close the achievement gap and ensure that all children have
a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at a minimum,
proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.

must perform certain behaviors in order to be considered "involved parents"). Parents who fail to engage in traditional forms of parental involvement as defined by others (e.g., schools, teachers, researchers) are considered to be "uninvolved parents." Such assignment of parents to groups based on pre-determined categorizations of parental involvement in the absence of examination of contextual factors (e.g., culture, social class) and parents' histories (e.g., school, personal, community) can overlook and devalue the alternative ways parents become involved in their children's education. The present study utilized ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and survey data to highlight how African American parents are already involved in the lives of their children. More specifically, this study examined the activities (i.e. what parents do) that parents engaged in with their children and parents' perceptions (i.e. what parents think) of their experiences engaging in their children's education.

While the vast majority of low-income and minority families are observed to be less involved in their children's education, almost all parents, even those from the poorest communities have been found to be committed (intellectually and emotionally) to their children's education (Epstein, 1990; Lopez, 2001; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Parents want their children to succeed and want to be a part of a process to support their success; however, they could benefit from assistance from schools and teachers to become "knowledgeable partners" in their children's education (Epstein, 1990). For example, parents have been observed to engage in schools utilizing different perspectives about how best to help their children (e.g., "I have a right to be involved in my child's education," or "It is the school's responsibility to educate my child"), which can promote or inhibit parents' participation in monitoring and intervening in their child's education

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(Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Through partnering with schools (e.g., teachers and other school personnel), parents can identify the meaningful and beneficial ways they can participate in their children's education (both inside and outside of the school) to ensure success. Parents, however, are not alone in their desire to become more involved in their children's education. A poll taken by the National Education Association found that 90% of teachers across the country at all grade levels thought more home-school interaction would be beneficial (Moles, 1982). Additionally, teachers have been found to be supportive of forming partnerships with parents to increase students' academic success (Lawson, 2003). Thus, both parents and teachers appear to desire parental involvement; however, several barriers prevent the two groups from working together to put their desires into practice.

In theory, both parents and school staff believe parental involvement and home-school partnerships are important; however, few public schools successfully integrate parents fully into their daily operations. The disconnect between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices has been attributed to several factors: differences in perceptions of the meaning of parent involvement in schools, unequal power relations among parents and teachers, and the inability of teachers to translate their beliefs about parent involvement into their daily practices (Fine, 1993; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Lewis & Forman, 2002). For the most part, the voices of school staff have been privileged and heard over and above those of parents in discussions of parent involvement. Fewer studies frame this issue in terms of parents' perceptions and desires, in context, regarding how they would like to participate and/or the barriers to their participation. Similarly Lawrence Lightfoot (1975) suggests, "one does not hear the story of parents who are in

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the process of trying to communicate their concerns and cope with the complexities of the school system. Parents ... remain nameless and powerless- always described from the position of the middleclass institution, never in relation to their own cultural style or social idiom" (p. 12). The voices of parents need to be brought to the forefront of discussions on parent involvement if we are to engage their concerns and garner their involvement in meaningful ways. Moreover, the stories of African American parents, who are reported to have less direct contact with their children's schools and may participate in activities that are outside of the conventional understandings of parent involvement, are less likely to be heard and acknowledged. Thus, their stories and experiences of participating in their children's education were explored to reveal a different perspective on their involvement.

The Myth of Parental Involvement in Schools: Which Parents are Involved?

Most parental involvement activities can be described as time-limited and infrequent contacts with schools where the defined role of the parent is a cooperative participant or non-expert in school operations. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2001) found 78 percent of students in kindergarten through twelfth grade had parents who attended a general meeting, 73 percent had parents who attended a scheduled meeting with a teacher, and 65 percent had parents who attended a school event. Just over a third (37%) of students had parents who participated in activities that required parents' expertise and sustained involvement in schools, such as volunteering or serving on a school committee (NCES, 2001). Hispanic and non-Hispanic black students had fewer parents attend school events or volunteer their time compared to white parents (NCES, 2001).

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Given the NCES (2001) findings, parents of all ethnicities (e.g., including European Americans, Asian Americans) and socio-economic statuses (including middle-class) appear to be only occasionally involved in their children's schools; however, there has been a tendency to over-emphasize or question the quality and adequacy of involvement of minority (e.g., African American, Latino) and low-income parents in their children's education. In contrast, Eccles and Harold (1996) found that there are families in all types of neighborhoods (lower class, middle class, upper class) that are highly involved and families (in all types of neighborhoods) that are disengaged from their children's education and schooling. These findings support a more contextualized/qualitative analysis of parental involvement to unpack which parents become involved and the activities that define their participation. Perhaps, the over-emphasis on the lack of minority and low-income parents in their children's education can be attributed to national statistics reporting that African American and Latino students are disproportionately represented in special-education classes and referred more for behavioral infractions (suspensions, detentions) compared to white students, which may indicate to school officials and teachers a greater need for the involvement of these "at risk" families. Nevertheless, the findings of similar patterns of involvement across ethnicity and social class can provide a counter to research suggesting the low rates of parental participation in schools can be attributed primarily to the demographic characteristics of families (e.g. race- being African American, socio-economic status-being poor), and shift attention to the perceptions, practices, and contextual factors that influence parental involvement in schools. As this review illustrates, the factors that are key to parents' involvement in their children's education are parents' perceptions of

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education and school staff, opportunities available to participate in their children's education, parents' perception of their role in education and parents' cultural and social class backgrounds.

Barriers to Parental Involvement in Schools: Why Aren't More Parents Involved?

Environmental, relational, and structural factors have been identified as powerful barriers distancing parents from schools including: changing demographics of schools and communities, school norms that do not support partnership, limited school resources to support parental involvement, parents' work schedules, poor home-school communication, parents' prior negative experiences in schools, and cultural dissonance between parents and the school (Lietch & Tangri, 1988; Comer, 1980). While these barriers are important in investigating predominantly societal and school influences on parents' involvement, fewer studies have examined parents' own understandings of their roles in their child's education or their actual experience of being involved in their children's education. Such questions as: what is the meaning of parent involvement from the perspective of parents? Are the types of parental involvement that schools promote congruent with parents' perceptions of their role in their child's education? and How do parents make choices about being involved in their child's education? need further examination. This study provided the opportunity for African American parents to discuss their experiences of being involved in their child's education. In this regard, this paper discusses the meaning and experience of parental involvement from the perspective of parents and how these perceptions and experiences influence parents' decision-making about participating in their children's education.

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Origins of Parental Involvement Programs

Prior to the 1960s, parental involvement in schools was not a widely discussed educational issue. Historically, a child's education was seen as the responsibility of the parents. Parental duties included and still include teaching basic self-help skills, work skills, ethics and values, as well as discipline. These educational activities were taught to children and engaged in privately within the confines of families' homes, rather than publicly through use of public education institutions (Berger, 1981; Berger, 1991). Gradually with the forming of public schools, establishing of compulsory education, and reporting of national statistics revealing difficulties in educating low-income, minority and recent immigrant students (who were more likely to experience low academic achievement and higher drop out rates), the need for schools to find ways to formally support and integrate parents into their children's education became an important publicly discussed issue (Berger, 1991). Additionally, the steady decline in the Standardized Assessment Test (SAT) scores of college-bound students along with reports from comparative international studies that revealed American children were not competing effectively with students from many other developed countries also spurred the increased emphasis on parental involvement (Berger, 1991).

In conjunction with the declining achievement of students, parental involvement was also encouraged by research that discussed the positive influence parent involvement and parent education had upon student achievement in schools (Hiatt-Micheal, 1994; Berger, 1991). It should be noted, however, that while the activities of parental involvement are related to a variety of positive educational outcomes, this relationship has not been proven to be causal (White, Taylor & Moss, 1992). Nevertheless, concern

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with parental involvement grew out of the pressing need to improve the academic standing of students. As such, the focus on parental involvement as a way of improving students' academic success and other related educational outcomes (i.e. suspensions, mental health, attendance) continues to play a role in shaping the way in which schools and policymakers approach working with parents.

The Evolution of Parent Involvement in Schools: Key Moments in Educational History

Head Start and Follow Through Programs

The implementation of formal parental involvement programs in schools began with the federal initiatives, Project Head Start and Follow Through programs, in pre-school and early elementary grades. These programs were designed to give children from low-income families an early start or a "head start" so they could be successful in school. Both programs embraced the belief that for changes to occur in the life of the child, "changes must take place in the family itself" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1970, p. 1). Head Start therefore recognized parents as having a critical influence over their children's development and included them in roles as advisors, paid aides, and tutors in the home (Epstein, 1984). Follow Through programs continued support for Head Start children and their families in primary grades 1-3 in similar roles and activities. While parents were required to become involved in their child's education due to the belief that parents' positively influenced their child's development, outcome data from the Head Start research program have found modest positive gains in children's language and cognitive development at the age of three (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2002). Alternatively, Head Start has been proven to have a greater impact on children's health outcomes (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2002).

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Several characteristics of families (e.g., parental attitudes, resources, stress, parental satisfaction with school programs) have been investigated to account for the minimal gains of parental involvement on children's academic development (Robinson, 2002; Mantzicopuls, 2003). However, fewer studies investigate factors such as the impact of the organizational configuration of Head Start on parents and their children's outcomes. Questions such as what is the relationship between parents' contextualized experiences of being a part of the Head Start program (impact of policies and procedures, roles constructed for parents, interactions with staff) on outcomes should also be examined. For example, the members of the Head Start planning committee viewed families as clients for social and psychological services rooted in their belief that poverty resulted from cultural deprivation (Lu Beck & deVries, 2000). According to this framework, poor parents lacked the skills necessary for parenting and so it became important to provide services (e.g., education, workshops and training) to parents (Lu Beck & deVries, 2000). Handler (1990) suggests an organization's pattern of intervention is crucially shaped by the staff's moral evaluation of the client. Thus, from the planning stages of Project Head Start parents were constructed as vulnerable, morally and culturally deficient, and disempowered. Such pre-conceived notions of parents played a role in shaping parental involvement opportunities more along service-oriented programming (which may be different from what parents view as their role) in lieu of joint decision-making or collaborative activities.

Attending to the local ways that parents make sense of their involvement can create the opportunity to build, refine and expand parental participation in ways that are meaningful to parents. Families contain funds of knowledge, or indigenous resources,

that maintain their well-being (Velez- Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992; Abdul-Abdil & Farmer Jr., 2006). Such funds are evidenced in their daily activities and skills that are rooted in their contextual and historical experiences (Velez- Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Legislating parental involvement threatens and devalues local understandings of involvement that are rooted in cultural values and norms, which shape parents' interactions and perceptions of their children's education. Parents' funds of knowledge with respect to how they were involved in their children's education and/or would like to be involved in their children's education were not integrated into Head Start or Follow Through programs. Such practices, which do not seek to incorporate local knowledge into programming, work to maintain the power of agencies through their control of information, resources and services (Handler, 1990). In the educational arena, this process manifests itself when parents' roles are constructed as the recipients of services and/or supporters of the institution (attending meetings, consuming knowledge about their child). As parental involvement becomes regulated and detached from the lived experiences of parents, it gradually de-emphasizes the agency of parents in utilizing their own skills to help their child, which may deter them from fully participating in schools and impacting their children's education.

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act

Additional parental involvement legislation in the form of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which required teachers and parents to cooperate in setting educational and developmental goals for children, follows the same bureaucratic processes (e.g., parents were not actively involved in constructing their roles). Parent involvement consisted of parents giving consent to changes in their child's educational

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program and being present during placement team meetings. An amendment to the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1986) further defined parental involvement as services given to the family in which parents were expected to participate or follow-through in services recommended by the school. Such programs represented another attempt to increase parental involvement in children's education; however, parents of special education children increasingly report obstacles to their active participation in their child's school (Sculz, 1982).

Biomedical frameworks (i.e. expert/child model) for interacting with and conceptualizing clients appear to underlie the opportunities available for parents to participate in their children's education. Accordingly parents are similar to children (or non-experts) who should cooperate with schools in an accepting and supportive manner. Many teachers and other school personnel view the role of the parent as a passive one, in which the parent provides information to the assessment or planning team, but is not expected to participate actively in decision-making (Sculz, 1982; Lareau & Horvat, 1996, Lewis & Forman, 2002). Thus, parents' participation is seen as "temporary and peripheral" to the classroom experiences of children; they become observers rather than participants (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1975). Aggressive parents are perceived to be hostile, insensitive to teachers, dominating, and uncompromising (Gleeman & Roth, 1980). Parent involvement is sought, but within narrow and circumscribed boundaries, which ultimately limits the meaningful participation of parents.

Several other federal programs (i.e. Title 1 Programs[2], No Child Left Behind Act[1]) have also continued to mandate parental involvement with minimal increases in parental participation. Similar to Head Start programs, the limited success of parental involvement in these programs can be attributed, in part, to the imposition of a set of behaviors or activities on parents, which constitute parental involvement in lieu of collaborating with parents to define their role in their child's education. According to Lewis and Forman, (2002), most parent involvement programs are more accurately "school involvement programs" in which school staff invite parents to become involved in the school and home to teach parents how to do their jobs (expert/child model of training and managing parents). The position that parents should support and acquiesce to the beliefs, values, and practices of schools rather than become active partners and collaborators with school staff (integrating their funds of knowledge into school practices) continues to dominant parental involvement activities. Accordingly, parents have been systematically defined by others and subsequently prevented from participating in schools based on their own understandings of the meaning of their involvement in their child's education. Such practices may ultimately work to inhibit rather than promote more parent involvement in schools.

The Professionalization of Education: Changing the Roles of Teachers

The professionalization of education, which separated the roles of teachers and parents, can also be viewed as another contributing factor shaping the course of parental involvement in schools. In theory, parents' and teachers' roles and activities (e.g.,

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[2] Title 1 programs provide financial assistance to schools with high numbers or high percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Funds provide additional academic support and learning opportunities to help low-achieving children master challenging curricula and meet state standards in core academic subjects.

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interactions, communication) in the education of children should be complementary and collaborative (Bloch & Tabachnick, 1994). However, in reality, the nature and quality of parent-teacher interactions is frequently one of un-equals interacting and often becomes competitive rather than collaborative (Bloch & Tabachnick, 1994). With the specialization of skills, in which teachers predominantly provide school training and parents provide home training, sets the stage for creating a divide between professional and local knowledge. Teachers and the administration become the experts in the educational domain while parents are relegated to supporters or cooperative participants. Important in the shift from local to professional knowledge is also a change in authority/power (e.g., decision-making), responsibility, legitimacy of voice and interaction between parents and teachers (Epstein, 1990). Moreover, as school staff became the official experts and educational authority figures, the range of potential relationships school personnel formed with parents declined and perpetuated narrow, school-defined ways of involving parents in their children's schools. Given the literature that suggests lower class parents are hesitant to enter schools because of perceptions that schools belong to the middle and upper class (Hiatt-Michael, 1994), such separation in the status of teachers and parents based on professional expertise can further limit the participation of families who already feel marginalized from schools due to cultural and socio-economic status differences.

Models of Parent Involvement

The growing interest in parent involvement has produced several frameworks to describe parents' pattern of involvement in their children's education. Research suggests there are a variety of influences on parent involvement including: characteristics of the

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family and parents (e.g., parents' efficacy beliefs, parents' ethnic identity, parents' perception of their child), community characteristics (e.g., social networking, resources and opportunities, social disorganization), and characteristics of the child (e.g., age, sex, child's previous academic experiences and personality) (Eccles, 1996). Even more important, school factors (e.g. school and teacher characteristics) are believed to be the primary influence on parent involvement including the physical and organizational structure of schools in addition to the beliefs and attitudes of school personnel (Epstein, 1990).

Similar to human service organizations, like Head Start, schools are also moral and bureaucratic systems, which promote and adhere to specific cultural values (e.g., value an educated populous, productivity) and ritualistic ways (via policies and procedures) of engaging with families that shape their interactions with parents, students, and the surrounding community. When schools have belief systems, policies and practices that are different from the community of families they are serving, they can limit opportunities for parents to actively and meaningfully engage in their children's education. This appears to be especially true in low-income and minority schools and neighborhoods where parents may be seen as part of the problem in educating their children rather than as a resource (Comer, 1980). The studies presented in this section will focus on how school and family factors influence parent involvement in schools.

Influences of Schools' and Family's Beliefs and Practices on Parent Involvement

Several investigations have found low levels of parental involvement in schools regardless of students' age, socio-economic status, and/or ethnicity (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Bauch, 1994; Comer, 1980; Epstein, 1986; Leitch & Tangri, 1988). For many,

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these observations could perpetuate the notion that parents do not value education or have little to contribute to their child's education. However, an alternative perspective would examine school factors on parental involvement (e.g., are schools creating opportunities to support parent involvement?) A study conducted by Eccles and Harold (1996) found teachers made few requests for parents to become involved in their children's education (e.g., attend meetings, monitor their children's homework) and many parents (44%) believed teachers did not want them to visit their children's classes. In addition, the majority of parents agreed schools should do more to get parents involved and endorsed the scheduling of school events during parents' workday (school structural factor) as a significant barrier to parental participation. The findings from this study suggest school staff did not view parents as knowledgeable partners in their child's education leading them to implicitly undermine parent involvement in schools. Parents were neither invited regularly to participate in school or home activities nor given opportunities to participate during parents' available/free times. Without creating roles and norms for parent involvement in the schools, the pattern of parent-school interaction described distanced parents from participating in the school (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

In contrast to their involvement in schools, parents were much more likely to become involved in their children's education at home (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parents reported helping their children with homework more often than any other single activity except discussing current events. Moreover, African American parents were found to be somewhat more involved at home than European American parents. As found in previous reviews, the family practices and beliefs which supported parental involvement in the home and school included parents' confidence in their ability to influence their

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children's academic performance and school experiences, and the importance parents attached to being involved in their children's schooling (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). These findings highlight work suggesting parents value education and view themselves as important resources in their child's education despite their levels of participation in their children's schools. Informal school practices and policies that position parents as passive supporters or receivers of information instead of knowledgeable and active participants in their children's education worked to distance parents from schools. When parents were not supported to be involved directly in the school, they used their funds of knowledge to construct meaningful roles to participate in their child's education in their homes. Moreover, these findings suggest parental involvement programs which focus on structured activities performed at school, may mask the other legitimate ways parents are involved in their children's education in the home and community. These findings are consistent with previous research (Epstein, 1990) illustrating school policies, and teacher and family practices are important predictors of parental involvement.

Re-Envisioning Parent Involvement: Models of Collaboration and Participation

Research on parental involvement has begun to examine the roles schools might encourage to increase parental participation in education. Such programs address integrating families' and communities' cultural strengths (e.g. funds of knowledge) into the school creating opportunities to bridge the divide between communities and schools, and professional and local knowledge. Epstein's (2002) model of parent involvement fosters collaboration and partnerships through overlapping schools' and families' goals, resources, and practices to influence children's learning and development. The model

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focuses on teaching parents about engaging in the work of the school and integrates

community resources in ways to improve schools, strengthen families, and assist students

to succeed in school and life. Collaborating with the community, not solely parents, is

vital to bridge divides between the community and school, and allows for opportunities to

address educational problems that demand resources beyond the scope of the school and

most families. While Epstein's community collaboration model promotes partnering

with families and the community, it has been critiqued for viewing schools and agencies

as maintaining the roles of experts (Bauch, 1994). In this sense, while schools may

support collaborating with families and communities, at the same time, they can continue

to retain authority and power by deciding what the problems are and how problems

should be solved in lieu of diagnosing and remedying problems in a mutually

participatory way.

Comer's (1980) school development program (SDP) focuses on changing the

organization and management of the school away from a hierarchical (expert/non-expert)

approach to a more participatory approach through fostering a climate where staff and

parents work together. The SDP model places relationships among staff and parents at

the center of parental involvement programming. Previous models and/or programs

fostering parent involvement were primarily focused on managing and training parents at

the expense of ignoring the quality and nature of relationships between staff and parents.

The SDP model works to reduce power inequalities between staff and parents by having

parents serve as equal partners on a School Planning and Management Team in addition

to creating a board solely for parents.

Based on observations of parent participation in schools, the SDP model supports a three-tiered program of parent involvement. Level one involvement consists of a group of parents who are elected to the School Planning and Management Team, which enables parents to feel ownership and a stake in the outcome of the school. Level two involvement consists of parents participating in day-to-day classroom and school activities and joining parent organizations. Level three involvement consists of attendance and participation by parents at general school activities. Overall, Comer's school development program is distinguished from other parental involvement models because it not only builds on the indigenous ways parents are involved in their children's education, and institutes a formal mechanism to sustain various forms of parent involvement in the school, but most importantly allows parents greater access to decision-making and leadership roles in their child's education and builds relationships between parents and teachers. Comer's model suggest parental involvement programs must do more than provide parents with resources or more opportunities to participate in their child's education, but must also redistribute power (decision-making) (Fine, 1993). Parents are invited and encouraged to use their funds of knowledge (cultural, community) to benefit the school and community. According to Fine (1993) parental involvement requires a commitment to organizing parents, to restructuring schools and communities, and to inventing visions of educational democracies of difference. Comer's SDP model appears to be an example of a model that is working to achieve these goals.

<u>Championing Democratic Participation</u>

The models presented above have taken key steps in changing the nature of parent involvement from helping families to actively integrating parents and communities into

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the daily functions of schools. Such models do not view parents as the source of the problems but as knowledgeable partners in their children's education. As such, the course of parental involvement is slowly evolving into the democratic participation of families in schools. Democratic participation in schools involves parents' rights and ability to participate in some meaningful way in their children's school (Levin, 1994). In practice, this would mean parents' increased participation in decision-making, governance, and the daily operations of the school. Parents are constructed as active agents, experts, partners, and collaborators with teachers in their child's education. Parents and teachers share resources, work toward common goals, and supply valuable information to one another eventually culminating with parents being able to independently advocate for their children inside and outside of the school. As partners, parents and teachers recognize their shared goals and responsibilities for children, and work together to create better opportunities for students (Epstein, 2002). Concerns in the school are addressed through discussion and dialogue with all parties (e.g., parents, teachers, students, school officials) instead of mandates from school officials and consider what is best for school and community life as opposed to what is best for an individual child (Levin, 1994). Thus, a democratic participation approach would address both relational and structural barriers to parents' participation.

Social Class and Cultural Influences on Parent Involvement

While models of parent involvement have produced several ways of integrating parents into schools, low-income and minority parents continue to have lower rates of participating in their children's schools compared to other parents. Researchers have suggested the forms of parental involvement in schools are often unreflective of the ways

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minority and low-income parents are involved or would like to be engaged in their children's education (Lopez, 2001). More specifically, it has been posited that the culture of schools differs from the home environment of many low-income minority children due to social class and cultural differences in the ways parents relate to schools. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) theory of cultural capital, parents (e.g. middle and upper class families) with more valuable cultural capital are more involved and successful at getting their concerns met than parents with less valuable social and cultural capital (Lareau, 1989; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Examples of cultural capital include parents' large vocabularies, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, and time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day (Laueau & Horvatt, 1999). As such, those parents who are able to communicate and interact with school staff in a manner that is consistent with school morals and values are more involved in the education system and the daily operations of the school. Social capital can also influence parental involvement and includes social networking with other parents in the school community who provide informal information about teachers (Coleman, 1988; Lareau & Horvatt, 1999; Terrion, 2006). African American parents living in low-income neighborhoods have been found to be less likely to rely on social relations/networking (e.g., many are separated from their kin networks, neighbors, church, public institutions) and have fewer resources to influence their child's schooling (Fine, 1993; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Thus, the culture of schools can perpetuate implicit codes of behavior and conduct that may be inconsistent with the beliefs and practices and/or outside of the cultural repertoire of

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minority and low-income parents leading to their social isolation and alienation from schools.

Social Class and Cultural Influences on Parent Involvement: Parent-Teacher Relationships

Beyond the intangible culture of schools, more specific observations of social class and cultural differences can be manifested in the school setting through the relationships between parents and teachers. The relationships among teachers and parents can be influenced by social class position (Lewis & Forman, 2002). For instance, teachers can share different social class positions from the specific communities they serve (e.g., some are in higher-status positions relative to working class parents or parallel or even lower status positions relative to high income families) (Lewis & Forman, 2002). The differences and similarities between parents' and teachers' social class positions have been found to have an impact on how parents and teachers understand one another, and each others' roles and responsibilities-- influencing teachers' and parents' level of openness with one another, styles of engagement, and mutual expectations (Lewis & Forman, 2002). In this sense, social class (e.g., middle class status) can become a signifier of acceptable ways of communicating and interacting with school staff.

Similarly, cultural differences have been found to influence the interactions between parents and teachers. An ethnographic study by Lareau and Horvatt (1999) on parent participation, including African American and white families, found while educators enthusiastically welcomed parental involvement, in reality, teachers selected a

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narrow range of acceptable behaviors. Teachers wanted parents to be positive, supportive, and trustful of their judgments and assessments and liked parents who were deferential, expressed empathy with the difficulty of teachers' work and had detailed information about their children's school experiences (Lareau & Horvatt, 1999). However, the expected standard that parents should be positive and supportive was difficult for black families to meet. African American parents' display of parental concern and involvement through anger and criticism was viewed as unacceptable and destructive by educators (i.e. it undermined teachers' authority by making it difficult to educate children) (Lareau & Horvatt, 1999). Alternatively, white parents were found to be less suspicious, distrustful and hostile towards the schools. White parents were able to form relationships with the school with more comfort and trust than did black parents. Thus, the roles and expectations teachers created for parents to participate in their classrooms, which ignored the social class and racialized experiences of minority families, led to strained interactions between staff and parents and less parental involvement amongst minority families.

Social Class and Cultural Influences on the Meaning of Parent Involvement

Beyond school factors, parents may have different shared meanings of what constitutes parent involvement based on their social class, racial and cultural positions in the world. For some parents, involvement in their child's education may include participating in the school setting as a teacher's aide, tutor, and assisting with fundraising activities (Finder & Lewis, 1994). Other parents may feel adequate parent involvement includes providing a place for their child to study, helping with homework, monitoring the quantity and quality of such activities as watching television or socializing with friends (Finder & Lewis, 1994). Such differences in perceptions of appropriate parental

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involvement become more apparent when parents' social class is examined. More specifically, middle class parents have been found to be more likely to see themselves as having shared responsibility for schooling, while working class parents appear to place responsibility for education on schools (Lareau, 1989). Lareau (1989) found middle-class mothers (1) often initiated calls to educators, (2) defined it as well within their right to raise questions and criticize teachers and (3) were more outspoken in their interactions. By contrast, working class and lower class parents followed a pattern of monitoring their children's education without intervention (Lareau, 1989).

As discussed above working and lower class parents had different perceptions of their rights or responsibilities compared to middle class parents. They had a very limited sense of their professional expertise and ability to intervene (Lareau, 1989). According to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the more parents share the same standards of institutions, the easier it is for them to engage in a process to facilitate the success of their children. The mismatch between the values and practices of low-income families and the middle class culture of schools creates a distancing of these parents from schools. Accordingly, ethnically diverse families living in poor socioeconomic conditions often face sustained isolation from the school culture, which can lead to resentment, apathy, alienation, and miscommunication between parents and schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Schools can play a role in facilitating the exclusion of students and parents by creating activities that require specific culturally-based knowledge and behaviors (e.g., knowledge of one's right to intervene) about schools. Low-income parents' absence of appropriate socio-cultural knowledge prevents their acceptable participation in formal school activities, resulting in isolation from schools for many parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Knowledge of the differences in perspectives on the meaning of parent involvement based on parents' social class/ethnicity may promote an acceptance for understanding alternative forms of parent involvement. Lopez (2001) suggest parental involvement has come to be defined by certain legitimate acts within schools that have the potential to ignore the roles parents have defined to participate in their child's education. Such narrow roles in schools may be difficult for minority parents to engage in due to not only lack of knowledge of these "legitimate" acts, but also due to social and structural barriers (i.e., employment, language barriers, educational attainment), or not being valued by parents. Given that parents possess different levels of skill and comfort when engaging in their children's education, it is critical that educators consider these factors as they promote parent involvement activities.

Parents' Beliefs about Education

The above review suggests parent involvement figures centrally into national goals for improving education and is an integral component of many school programs. Additionally this review posits that most parents value education and are involved in their children's education in the home and/or school. However, less is known about the source of parents' participation in their child's education. Researchers have hypothesized that parental beliefs are important precursors to parental involvement. In particular, parents' beliefs that they can affect their children's education (i.e. parental efficacy), parents' perception of their role in child development (i.e. parental role construction), parents' beliefs that the school desires their help, and parents' comfort with the school have all been suggested as important predictors of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

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Influence of Parents' School Experiences

Parents' educational background and school experiences have been found to influence their beliefs about schooling. For example, in a qualitative study of parent involvement, including African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander families, Smerkar and Cohen-Vogal (2001) explored thirty working class parents' ideas and attitudes about education. The study's findings suggest parents' experiences of formal schooling (e.g., I couldn't go to school because I had to work in the fields, my parents did not stress the role of schooling), influenced their subsequent wishes for their children. Parents, who as children, were unable to go to school due to work commitments or did not have local schools in their communities wanted their kids to have "more [opportunities] than [they] did." Many parents believed schools were a means to financial success, social skills (e.g., respect, self-discipline), and the acquisition of academic subjects. However, while parents' valued education as a route to economic and social success, their actual involvement in schools fell below the expectations of school staff (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001). The authors suggest the discrepancies between parents' beliefs and practices can be attributed to the distinction parents often drew between the moral training (local knowledge) they could provide and the academic instruction (professional knowledge) they believed the schools could and should deliver. Moreover, in the absence of parents' direct involvement in the school (e.g. staff do not have knowledge of parents' home involvement or beliefs), school staff often perceived parents as apathetic and that these attitudes were linked to the low performance of children (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001).

The most common activities parents engaged in to support their children's schooling were being present and providing support (e.g., being there for child, giving the child whatever he/she needs, preparing ahead for the child). However, the consistency with which parents regarded these two roles as important in their child's education suggested that such activities were perceived to be the legitimate forms of involvement endorsed by the school (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001). In this sense, the ritualistic roles and pattern of interaction between parents and school officials shaped parents' beliefs of how they should be involved in their children's education (e.g., namely being present and providing support). The only reported barriers to parents' participation in their child's education were parents' perceived beliefs that their child did not need help because he/she was already doing well or limitations in the parents' ability to help their child. Overall, low-income and minority parents themselves echoed what previous research has postulated that parents value education and would like to be involved, but their involvement is limited in part by a sense that their roles are distinct from those of the schools in addition to patterns of engagement with school staff that do not facilitate or develop parent involvement opportunities.

Cultural Influences

Not all research has found similarities in the beliefs and practices of families in their children's education. Some studies have suggested that cultural norms may play a role in parents' beliefs about teaching and learning. In an ethnographic study of parent participation, Lareau and Horvatt (1999) compared twenty-four families of twelve white and twelve black third-grade children in a small Mid-western town. Although white and black parents had many common experiences with their children and teachers (e.g. bus

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schedules, homework, report cards), they varied, however in their level of information about the school and their involvement in school activities. White and black parents also appeared to have different levels of generalized trust towards the school, particularly in the area of race relations. White parents generally, but not always, had positive dispositions towards teachers and schooling, did not worry that their child would be treated unfairly nor were they concerned about race relations at the school. Black parents, however, had a different view. Many were concerned about race relations and that their children may be discriminated against by educators.

For black parents, social class did not appear to be connected to their beliefs (beliefs did not differ based on differences in class), although class shaped how parents interacted with teachers (Lareau & Horvatt, 1999). Among working class black families, their concerns about race relations and their criticisms of teachers' actions had negative consequences for their relationships with teachers. Rather than appreciate the interest and concern of parents, school officials found their involvement unhelpful. The concerns about racial discrimination were also present in lower class black families; however, the impact on parent-school relationships differed. In these homes, parents were somewhat less informed and less actively involved in schooling than parents in upper-middle and some working class homes. Lower class mothers placed more responsibility for education with the teachers, which led to fewer contacts with the schools. Overall, these findings suggest that parent involvement is a complex phenomenon and that parents' pattern of involvement in schools can be partly influenced by their social positions, cultural positions, or both. These positions can inform their styles of interacting with the school and with each other, which can promote or inhibit parent involvement. Given such

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differences in parents' beliefs about education, experiences in the educational system, styles of interacting with school staff and social and cultural positions, it should be expected that diverse parents would construct varied roles in their child's education.

Summary

This review suggests educators have defined a very narrow range of parent behaviors as legitimate and helpful in schools. This historical standard, whose origins began with the implementation of the first federal parental involvement programs, placed a priority on parents assuming a passive and cooperative role in monitoring and supervising their children's education. Schools continue to create and promote these scripted and ritualistic forms of engagement that do not allow for real contact (i.e., forming of relationships), mutual decision-making, partnering or challenging of current systems/programs in place (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1975). The objective of increasing parent involvement was not about promoting the democratic participation of parents or incorporating their funds of knowledge to improve children's education, but creating programs and roles to manage and train parents. In this environment, the voices of parents can easily be silenced. Moreover when the opinions of the very population whose involvement is desired are ignored, the interactions between parents and schools can be negatively compromised (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001.) In this sense, parents and more generally parent involvement becomes peripheral, and a secondary source of support to children's education. Interactions and communications between parents and teachers become rudimentary instead of genuine opportunities for collaboration and partnering.

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While some parents are able to comply with the acceptable roles for parents in schools, a disproportionate number of minority and low-income parents have withdrawn from the school system leaving their voices and contributions unheard. To reach parents, schools must create meaningful interactions between parents and schools through acknowledging parents' funds of knowledge, accepting cultural and socio-economic differences, and working to build relationships. It is not merely parents' presence in the school that is needed to increase parent involvement, but a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers that will encourage mutual respect and dialogue leading to democratic participation in schools. Throughout the remainder of this paper, the term "parental involvement" will not be used due to the narrow, scripted, and school-defined behaviors it currently represents. I will replace the term parent involvement by describing parents' behaviors or use terms such as participation, collaboration or partnerships, which are helpful in re-envisioning and promoting new activities and ways parents engage in their children's education. A first step to building such relationships between parents and teachers is to understand parents' views on education and the meaningful roles they believe they can play in their child's schooling. What follows next is a description of my efforts to explore parents' activities and perceptions related to their children's education in a mid-western community.

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CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXT FOR CURRENT STUDY

The current study explored the meaning and act of parent involvement to give voice to the experiences of African American parents' participation in their children's education. Specifically, the origin (culture/family, community, school factors), nature of parents' perceptions, and pattern of school engagement were investigated.

Three central questions were posed:

1. What are African American parents' perceptions of education and their own experiences in the educational system?

2. How are African American parents engaged in their children's education in the school, home, and community?

3. What are African American parents experiences of participating in their child's education?

This study proceeded from the position that African American parents were involved in various ways in their children's education and thus this project highlighted how they were already involved (from the perspective of parents) in their children's education.

Local Context: Demographics and History of Woodson Elementary School

The current project emerged from my sustained involvement with a local elementary school located in a medium-sized midwestern community, Korbel[3]. Approximately 70,000 residents live in the Korbel community, excluding approximately 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students attending the local University. The areas surrounding the town are primarily farmlands that produce corn and soybean crops. In addition, a large factory is also located in Korbel that employs a number of residents. Korbel's housing patterns can be described as both racially and economically segregated.

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[3] Korbel is the pseudonym for the Midwestern town where this study was conducted.

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Low-income families (e.g., poor and working class families who are predominantly African American) live in the northern section of Korbel. Families who are middle to upper income live in the southwest area of Korbel and are predominantly European American.

Woodson Elementary School[4] is one of eleven public elementary schools in the Korbel school district. Woodson was opened in 1998 and was built to house 550 students. The new school replaced an older elementary school in the district. Woodson Elementary is geographically situated in an area consisting of predominantly working class African American families in the northern part of Korbel. Historically, Woodson Elementary has had a higher percentage of African American students (74% of students attending Woodson in 2000 were African American) compared to other elementary schools in the district based on state school report cards[5]. In 2006, Forty-nine percent of children attending Woodson Elementary were reported to be African American as compared to the overall school district average of thirty-five percent. An additional 29% of students attending Woodson Elementary were European American, 9% Hispanic, 9% Asian American and 1% were Native American. Approximately 67% of students attending Woodson Elementary (during the 2006 school year) were reported to be low-income compared with 41% of students overall in the district.

According to some community members, Woodson Elementary has had a tumultuous past from its inception. The current superintendent of Korbel schools stated

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[4] Woodson Elementary is the pseudonym for the elementary school where the study was conducted.
[5] Woodson Elementary demographic information obtained from the Illinois State Board of Education. The Better Schools Accountability Law of 1985 (Section 10-17a of the School Code) requires all public school districts to report on the performance of their schools and students through school report cards. This report card includes information about student characteristics, the instructional setting, the finances of the school district and student performance on state assessments.

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Woodson's "precipitous start put it at a disadvantage" as school staff/officials did not have adequate time to plan and choose personnel for the school (News Gazette 8/24/04). As such, historically, Woodson Elementary has been viewed by the district as a failing school. Within two months of Woodson's opening, it was placed on the state's early academic warning list[6] (News Gazette, 10/20/98). Four months later the school was taken off the state's early academic warning list (News Gazette, 2/5/99). Five years from its opening, Woodson was the only elementary school in East Central Illinois on the State Board of Education's watch list during the 2003-2004 school year due to failure of its students to meet academic testing standards (students performed very low on standardized tests) set by the federal No Child Left Behind law (News Gazette 8/8/03). Additionally, during the same year, Woodson Elementary was reconstituted[7] in an attempt to revamp the school and improve student achievement. Woodson Elementary School has also held the local distinction, amongst the other elementary schools in the district, for having the most changes in school principals in a span of ten years. At the time of the study, seven school principals had worked at Woodson Elementary over the past decade. The last principal during the time of the study had led the school for approximately five years.

Woodson Elementary School has also had the reputation for being an environment where parents were perceived (by community members, staff) as being uninvolved or unconcerned about their children's education. Further, some would

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[6] State laws provide that schools are placed on the AEWL if less than 50% of their students meet state standards for two consecutive years. Schools are removed from the AEWL when more than 50% of their students are meeting or exceeding state standards.

[7] Reconstitution is an administrative term that means vacating all staff positions at the school and accepting applications from all over the district to fill them.

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suggest that Woodson families did not teach their children to respect teachers and were often unemployed or involved in illegal activities (Kurlakowsky, 2005). Woodson students were perceived to be "misbehaved, wild, un-teachable, dirty, dangerous and all around unlikable by many community members, very few of whom had ever stepped foot inside the school" (Clark and Kurlakowsky, 2003). During the reconstitution of the school, the previous school staff (e.g. those that were relocated to other schools in the district) were perceived as ineffective, not willing to "go the extra mile" with students, and unable to connect with students and their families. Staff members often spoke about students in terms of their "behavior problems" (Kurlakowsky, 2005), which influenced how staff interacted with students focusing more on behavior management interventions at the expense of academic instruction. Accordingly, Woodson Elementary School was historically "under chosen[8]" by non-African American families despite the district's efforts to entice these families to attend the school. Given the history of Woodson Elementary School, marked by school failure, changing school staff, and negative perceptions of students and families, a school climate was created that actively discouraged parent involvement (e.g., school PTA was dissolved for several years, parents were not involved in school decision-making) and/or over-regulated parent involvement in the school (e.g. parents can only be involved in specific school activities and capacities).

Several changes were implemented at Woodson to re-invent the school and improve its reputation within the community. During the 2000 school year, program

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[8] Controlled public school choice was implemented in the Korbel School District during the 1998-99 school year under a federal consent order. School choice requires parents of elementary school children to choose one of eleven schools in the district for their children to attend regardless of where the family resides.

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changes at Woodson included: a new year round/balanced calendar[9], uniforms, and a new

format for teaching students called project based learning (e.g., teachers have children

work on a project surrounding a single topic) (News Gazette, 7/23/00). Despite these

changes, during the 2003-04 school year, only about half of the school was occupied

while other elementary schools had waiting lists with overpopulated classrooms (News

Gazette, 8/24/03). During the reconstitution (2003-2004), under the direction of the new

principal (at the time of study), additional changes were implemented to increase the

academic performance and overall image of Woodson elementary including: hiring new

staff (including two enrichment specialists), extending the school day by an extra hour to

allow for creative learning activities and extra study time, offering professional staff

development trainings to teachers and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, and

setting higher educational standards/expectations for all students (News Gazette,

8/24/03). Such changes in programming, leadership of the school principal, and support

from school district officials worked to gradually improve the reputation of Woodson

elementary families and students. A Woodson parent was quoted to have said, "you hear

all this negative stuff, but if you go in, that's not the case (News Gazette, 8/24/03). In

addition, increases in students' academic achievement were acknowledged such that

during the 2003, 2004, and 2005 academic years, Woodson Elementary had the

distinction of winning the State Academic Improvement[10] award. More notably, during

the 2005 academic year, Woodson also received the State Spotlight award, which

recognizes schools making adequate yearly progress where at least half the students are

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[9] Students attend school year round. Students have a six week summer vacation and three-week breaks after each quarter.
[10] The Academic Improvement Awards honors schools for substantial gains in performance over the academic year.

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from low-income families and at least sixty percent must pass state achievement tests. While the image (academic achievement, school staff) of Woodson Elementary has improved over the years, the participation (lack of involvement) of parents in these processes or in the school in general has remained unchanged.

In the larger context of the school district, Woodson Elementary and the remaining fifteen public schools within the district are under a federal court consent decree. In 1996, community members filed complaints with the United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), on behalf of certain African American students alleging racial disparities in access to school programs and educational outcomes. After a proactive compliance review by OCR, which examined minority over-representation in special education, minority under-representation in upper level courses, and within school segregation of students on the basis of race, amongst other issues, the African American community's concerns were substantiated. Subsequently, a group of African American families filed a lawsuit with the federal district court.

Following the charges filed by the community and OCR's findings, the school district and the plaintiffs entered into a consent decree that outlined the actions the district should take to ensure African American students are provided equal access to high quality education and rigorous educational standards under the law. The district commissioned an equity audit and school climate survey to determine "its responsibilities and priorities in ensuring that a quality education be made available equitably to all students."[11] The findings from the equity audit indicated African American students

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[11] Cited from Education Equity Implementation Plan: Closing the Achievement Gap" adopted by Champaign Community Unit 4 School District 4 Board of Education, June 12, 2000.

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were underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, over-represented in special education programs and received disproportionately more suspensions compared to white students (Peterkin & Lucey, 1998). Additionally, the school climate survey found African American students and staff had more negative perceptions of the school climate compared to white students and staff (Aber, 2000). Given such glaring racial disparities in student achievement, discipline and climate perceptions, several changes were made across the school district (e.g., hiring of a new superintendent, principals reassigned to different schools, changes in curriculum and pedagogy). Many of these reform efforts were initiated without the full engagement and active participation of parents or concerned community members and suggest the lack of school support for parental and community participation is not an individual school issue, but a larger systemic district problem.

A recent review of the Korbel school districts' implementation of goals outlined in the consent decree by the federal judge monitoring the case revealed slow progress in achieving agreed upon goals. Moreover the monitor stated that the Korbel school district was "largely unresponsive" to his order and did not address how they would accelerate their progress (News Gazette, 10/20/2006). The court monitor requested that the district submit a revised plan addressing all of the issues outlined in the consent decree. Following the directive from the judge, the school district has developed a series of initiatives designed to improve the performance of minority students including establishing an alternative school program, conducting a second climate study, adding two hundred student seats in northern Korbel, and increasing parent and community involvement in consent decree issues (News Gazette 3/23/07). At the time of this project,

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the Korbel school district was awaiting the federal court monitor's decision on their revised proposal.

Overview

The current project evolved from an ongoing partnership between a local University and Woodson Elementary School designed to improve the educational experiences of Woodson students through increased community and parental participation. The project can be viewed as occurring in roughly three phases. The first phase consisted of my participant observation at Woodson Elementary School over the course of three years (beginning in the fall of 2002). The data collected during the first phase was utilized in the present project to understand parents' and teachers' global perceptions of parental participation at Woodson Elementary (e.g., what parents in general are doing?), but is not a primary focus of this study. Gradually my role shifted from observing to collaborating with the parent coordinator at Woodson to increase what she referred to as "parental involvement." Through this relationship, I was able to survey and conduct brief interviews with parents about their participation, barriers to participation, and ways they would like to increase their participation in the school. Such data enhanced my understanding of the activities parents were engaging in with their children in the school, home, and community in addition to their perceptions regarding why they were involved. The third phase of the project consists of semi-structured interviews that examined parents' perceptions of education, activities that define parent participation, and parents' perceptions of their experiences participating in their children's education. The multiple methods employed in this study allow for an in-depth

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and contextualized understanding of the activities of Woodson Elementary School parents.

Participant Observation

In order to contextualize the current research at Woodson Elementary, I will first provide a general description of my participant observation over time. During my involvement at Woodson I was provided with several opportunities to interact with students, staff and parents. I engaged in Woodson Elementary in a variety of consultation roles which included working with a kindergarten teacher experiencing behavioral problems with students in her classroom, participating as a member of the family service team, and assisting the parent-coordinator with several initiatives at Woodson. Such experiences allowed me opportunities to become privy to the important educational issues/tensions within the school, one of which concerned the perceived lack of parent participation in school activities.

Exploring the involvement activities of parents became of interest to me due to the different perspectives teachers and parents held about how parents were engaging in their children's education at Woodson. In general, teachers perceived that parents were uninvolved in their children's education, which they connected to students underperforming academically, misbehaving in school, and the overall pervasive negative perception of Woodson Elementary School in the local community. Teachers offered several explanations for parents' un-involvement that primarily emphasized the demographic characteristics of parents (e.g., single, low-income, uneducated, young) and/or perceived negative attitudes/behaviors of parents (e.g., parents did not have the time or did not care to be involved in their children's education). However, few teachers

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questioned either school/societal structural barriers (e.g., school involvement opportunities, work schedules, transportation) on parents' ability to participate. It appeared that the pervasive attitude that parents were apathetic and uninvolved was also embraced by the school leadership as the principal indicated to myself and another member of the partnership committee that she would not post a school district sponsored meeting that was to be held at Woodson on the school's marquee because it would essentially be a "waste of time" and that parents would not attend the meeting.

Teachers had also informed me that parent participation was not a high priority for the school principal (and subsequently the teaching staff) because the principal was extremely focused on and had been hired specifically to improve the school's academic image (e.g., test scores) across the district. In contrast, conversations with parents revealed a story of parents who perceived they were actively involved in their children's education in the home and school; however, interestingly parents also perceived that other Woodson parents were not involved in their children's education (e.g., I as a parent am involved in my children's education, but other Woodson parents are not involved). Thus, some parents had also internalized the negative narrative about Woodson parents. Parents would offer similar reasons given by teachers for the lack of other Woodson parents' participation in their children's school. At this stage in my participant observation, I chose to pursue opportunities to unpack and explore parents' perspectives of their engagement and understand parent-school dynamics and interactions.

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During the fall of 2003, I shifted my efforts in the school to assist the parent coordinator at Woodson Elementary School with increasing parent participation activities. The role of the parent coordinator was to facilitate parent participation activities at Woodson and to serve as a liaison between parents and school staff. I helped to plan and organize school-sponsored involvement activities, and created, administered, and analyzed the Woodson Parent Interest Survey (i.e. a parent participation survey, See Appendix A). Other participant observations will be integrated throughout the report.

Unpacking Parent Involvement: Interview Data

In addition to my role as a participant observer, I pursued collaborative roles with staff to gain insight into how parents were involved at Woodson. Given my interest in parent participation in their children's education, I approached the parent coordinator about conducting interviews with Woodson parents about their involvement activities as a way of connecting their interests with formal opportunities offered through the school. The interviews focused on exploring parents' perceptions of their participation, the activities that define their participation, and potential barriers to their participation (see Appendix B for parent protocol). Parents were recruited for the interview study based on 1) my knowledge of specific parents at the school 2) interactions with parents who attended school-sponsored events or school board meetings and 3) staff recommendations (i.e., teachers, support staff, parent coordinator) of parents who appeared to be more or less involved in their children's education. Most interviews were conducted by telephone while some interviews were conducted at Woodson Elementary. Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour. Notes were taking during each interview.

<u>Woodson Parents' Perceptions of their Participation (Interview Data)</u>

During the summer of 2003, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with thirty-two Woodson Elementary School parents. Twenty-eight of the parents interviewed were African American, three were European American, and one parent was Hispanic. Most parents reported having children enrolled in kindergarten through third grade. Contrary to the perceptions of Woodson staff, findings revealed that Woodson parents overwhelmingly reported being involved in their children's education. Several reasons were given for being involved in their children's education as evidenced by statements such as: "education is important to me," "it takes a village to raise a child and teachers can't do it alone," "my involvement shows I care," "I pay taxes and have a right to be involved in my child's school," and "it makes education important to kids." More than half of parents (N= 18) endorsed some version of these statements and/or stated that they valued education. Interestingly, parents reported being involved in their children's education because it communicated moral standards and values (i.e., education is important, my involvement shows I care) compared to their involvement serving a more concrete functional purpose (e.g., higher grades, fewer suspensions).

Another important reason parents gave for being involved in their children's education communicated their perception that they were experts on the lives of their children. Most (n = 26) parents believed they possessed valuable knowledge, resources, and talents that could benefit the Woodson School community (not solely their individual children) and therefore desired a more collaborative and active role within the school. Parents discussed several ways they would like to participate in the lives of other Woodson families including: (1) forming support groups for families with foster children,

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special needs children, and single parents (2) helping children with homework, and (3) creating specialty/hobby clubs including sewing, gardening, cooking, quilting, carpentry, and various other artistic talents and abilities. Woodson parents' reports acknowledged their recognition of themselves as active resources in their children's education, as opposed to passive observers. In addition, Woodson parents' reports suggest they are not solely interested in helping their own children individually succeed, but are concerned with supporting and uplifting the entire Woodson community.

A major barrier to parents networking and supporting other parents and families was their disconnection from other parents. All parents (N=32) interviewed, reported having little to no contact with other parents. At the time of the interviews, no formal opportunities existed for parents to collaboratively work with one another to achieve mutually agreed upon goals. Such activities and/or positions as the PTA, room mothers, or formal opportunities to volunteer in classrooms did not exist. Parents also complained about receiving late notice about school events, which limited their ability to arrange time off from work and/or find transportation to attend school events. In addition, many parents were often unaware of the position of the parent-coordinator whose role was to facilitate such opportunities. Such an isolated environment may have caused parents to believe the issues they encountered in the school and home were unique, which led to inaction or to advocating individually for their own children. The interview data indicated parents believed connecting with other parents would enable them to (1) serve as a resource and support system to Woodson families (2) connect them to the ideas and values of Woodson families, (3) foster relationships, and (4) promote a sense of belonging. Beyond the instrumental purpose of connecting with other parents (i.e.

providing services to one another), forming relationships with other parents was seen as an additional benefit in and of itself.

Most parents believed the best way to increase parent participation activities and connect families were to (1) strengthen families and the surrounding community and (2) utilize the gifts and talents of parents and the community within the school. According to this framework, many parents believed the school was not only an educational center for children, but could also be a place for parent education and participation. Parents expressed the desire to attend classes or workshops at Woodson not only to help their children develop academically, socially, and emotionally, but to also build their own capacities and strengths. The workshops parents were interested in attending at the school ranged from: effective parenting strategies, homework tips, knowledge of student/parent rights in schools, to General Education Development (GED) training and introduction to computer courses.

Woodson Parents' Participation in their Children's Education in the Home

Most parents (N=27) reported being individually involved in the education of their own children in the confines of their home, compared to their involvement in the school. Parents believed their involvement supported and supplemented school activities, school curricula, and helped their children remain ahead. Parents discussed several ways they were involved in their child's education in their homes consisting of: (1) monitoring their child's homework, (2) reading to their child, (3) taking their child on educational trips (e.g. library), and (4) supplementing information learned in school through computer games and educational books. These findings suggest parents are involved in their child's education in less visible ways (e.g., individually, outside of the school, away from

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the supervision of school staff) and have defined their own ways of participating in their children's education which are perceived to be beneficial and show that they care. In addition to the parental activities which reinforced the material their children learned in school as one outcome of their involvement, parents believed parental involvement was not only about doing something physically (e.g., hands-on activities) with children. Parents believed promoting the value of education and being educated through conversations emphasizing the importance of school or advocating for the needs of their children were additional forms of their involvement. In summary, creating a space with children to support learning, either in doing things physically or communicating with children were the primary ways parents reported being involved in their children's education in the home.

Woodson Parents' Participation in their Children's Education in the School

While most parents interviewed reported being involved in the home with their children, fewer parents (n=5) reported direct and/or consistent involvement in the school building. Parents' participation in the school consisted of occasionally: (1) volunteering in classrooms, (2) chaperoning trips, and (3) attending monthly social events and/or bi-yearly parent-teacher conferences. Thus, most of parents' participation in the school can be described as time-limited where their role is one of a cooperative participant (i.e. non-expert), consumer (consuming the knowledge of teachers about their children) or as a supporter (supporting/reinforcing staff). While all parents interviewed expressed a desire to be more involved in the school, they discussed several structural and relational barriers that prevented their active participation directly in the school. In terms of the structural (or organizational) barriers, most parents stated (1) short notice about school events, (2)

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lack of onsite child care for school events, (3) scheduling of events (i.e. time and day) and (4) transportation difficulties prevented them from attending school events. The relational barriers which prevented parents from attending school events included: (1) feeling uncomfortable at Woodson, (2) feeling as if their involvement did not matter, and (3) the lack of perceived parental input/decision-making into social/school events. Parents' consistent reports of structural and relational barriers may cause them to believe their involvement is unimportant and/or that they do not belong, which may account for their lower rates of involvement in the school compared to the home.

Unpacking Parental Participation: Survey Data

Given the preliminary results from the interview study in addition to the select sample of families who were interviewed (e.g. based on staff nominations and my interactions with parents), I proposed to the parent coordinator that we create a parental participation survey for Woodson Elementary School to reach a broader segment of parents and/or guardians. During this phase, the school principal was also interested in gathering data on how parents were involved at the school and therefore supported our efforts and offered resources to create the survey. In collaboration with the parent coordinator and school social worker, the Woodson Parent Interest survey was created (see Appendix A for Parent Interest survey). The initial plan for administering the survey to parents involved the parent coordinator making an announcement to parents about the survey and its purpose during the first parent-teacher conference of the school year. In reality on the evening of the parent-teacher conference, after a steady stream of announcements were made by the principal and other school staff, the parent coordinator quickly mentioned that a "survey" was available for parents to complete in the Family

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Service office before leaving the building. The actions of the parent coordinator were problematic for two important reasons: (1) parents did not have a complete understanding of the purpose of the survey and (2) parents were unaware of where the Family Service office was housed in the school. Parents completed few surveys (approximately 20) on this night and several surveys (approximately 10-15) were lost by a school staff member in charge of collecting the surveys. When this staff member was approached regarding locating the surveys, she originally indicated that she could not find the surveys and later (on a subsequent visit to the school) stated that she did not have the time to look for the surveys. I offer this description of events surrounding the administering of the survey to illustrate how staff members publicly verbalize their desire to increase parent participation opportunities; however, in practice, they passively resist following through with these opportunities. This example is one of several acts of passive resistance by school staff. The remaining thirty surveys were collected from parents by the interviewer during school events, parent-teacher conferences, and/or daily school dismissals. Survey respondents consisted of a convenience sample of parents attending school events (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, school assemblies, family nights) and willing to complete the survey. A total of fifty surveys were collected and analyzed.

Parental participation was defined broadly in the survey and consisted of activities that parents were involved in with their children both inside and outside of the school. The distinction regarding the location of parental participation activities was made to highlight the ways parents were involved in the school as defined by school staff and/or ways parents defined for themselves to participate in their children's education outside of the school. Overall, the results of the survey were consistent with the findings of the

interview data discussed above. The data suggest parents perceived that education is important, were attending to the needs of their children in various ways inside and outside of the school, and wanted to connect with other Woodson families. No demographic data was asked on the survey at the request of the school principal to maintain the anonymity of the participants; however, the sample is predominantly composed of African American women.

How are Woodson Parents Involved in their Children's Education?: Home Activities (Survey Data)

An overwhelming majority of parents reported active involvement outside of the school. Seventy-six percent of parents (n = 38) reported sustained involvement in their children's education through the daily monitoring of their children's homework. Fifty-eight percent of parents reported being involved by reading to their child (n =29). In addition to the physical activities that parents participated in with their child that demonstrated their involvement, seventy-six percent of parents (n = 38) reported being involved in their child's education by stressing the importance of school and advocating for the needs of their children. Overall these results support the findings of the interview data and suggested parents were actively involved in their child's education although in less visible ways. Most parents were involved with their children on a daily basis outside of the school and worked individually with their children. These findings were also consistent with parents' report that they had limited or no contact with other Woodson parents regarding their child's education.

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How are Woodson Parents Involved in their Children's Education?: School Activities (Survey Data)

Parents reported being involved in the school in several ways ranging from their physical presence inside the school building, attendance at social events and conferences, and direct involvement within classrooms. Of the families who reported being involved directly in the school, sixty percent (n = 30) of parents sustained contact with the school consisted of attending monthly social events at Woodson. Forty-eight percent (n = 24) of parents reported being involved through attending bi-yearly parent-teacher conferences. Notably, only a handful of parents reported involvement directly in classrooms. Eighteen percent (n = 9) of parents reported involvement in the classroom through volunteering while thirty-two percent (n = 16) of parents reported involvement through observing their child in class. Consistent with these findings, few parents (18%) reported attending their child's school on a daily basis (n = 9). The barriers parents reported which limited their involvement in the school were similar to those of the interview data and included: (1) lack of communication about school events, (2) parents' work hours (e.g. scheduling of school events), (3) lack of onsite child care, (4) feeling as if their involvement did not matter, (5) lack of input into the agenda, and (6) a perceived unwelcoming school atmosphere.

Consistent with the finding that many Woodson families had limited contact with each other, most parents expressed a desire for events that would help them network, meet and support other Woodson parents. Thirty-four percent of parents reported wanting more social events (n=17) in addition to parent support groups (n=16) to help them connect with other families. Approximately thirty percent of parents also expressed

interest in resources that would help to foster the academic, social, and emotional development of their children though effective parenting classes (n=13) and homework help tips (n=15) from teachers. Notably, fifty percent of parents (n=25) were interested in democratic engagement/participation in the school as reflected in their interests in learning their rights as parents within the school/school district and how to effectively navigate these structures. Parents were also asked to indicate the skills and talents they would be interested in sharing with the Woodson community. Parents listed several talents including: computer web designing, coaching athletic teams, dance, fiberglass art, cooking, sewing, and other similar crafts or hobbies.

Following the interviews and surveys, a summary report of findings on the current status of parent participation at Woodson Elementary was given to the school principal, staff and parents at Woodson Elementary (See Appendix C for Parent Interest Survey Summary Report). Data from both the interviews and surveys were used to develop topic areas for the phase three interview protocol.

In-depth Interviews

During phase three of the study, a second-wave of in-depth qualitative interviews was conducted with parents. These interviews are an extension of the phase one and two data collection periods, which primarily focused on the ways parents were currently involved in their children's education and barriers to parental participation. The phase three project develops a more comprehensive view of parent participation not solely focusing on the activities parents engage in with their children, but explores the origin, meaning, experience and outcomes of parent participation. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed around four areas (see Appendix D for parent interview

protocol). The core clusters included (a) parents' history and school experiences (b) parents' perceptions about education (c) parents' decision-making about their school involvement and forms of involvement and (d) outcomes of parent involvement. Interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in parents' homes or other identified locations. Each parent was informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants completed and were given a copy of the informed consent form.

Procedure

Participants in phase three of the study were the parents and/or guardians of children attending Woodson Elementary School (grades K-5). The parents were selected from the population of African American families attending Woodson Elementary School. Parents were identified for inclusion in the study based on teachers' and parents' nominations of parents. Respondents were purposively chosen (based on teachers' and parents' reports), to sample the different ways parents were involved or uninvolved in their children's education using two criteria, traditional and non-traditional forms of involvement. For example, parents' forms of involvement could range from traditional school-based involvement (e.g. parent involvement in school sanctioned functions and school defined ways) where teachers would be knowledgeable informants on such parents, to non-traditional forms of involvement (e.g. parents define their own ways of being involved with their children in the home and community) where parents themselves would be knowledgeable resources, and/or a combination of traditional and non-traditional forms of involvement.

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Teachers' perceptions of parent participation in the school were used to identify a first *wave* of parents who were perceived to be involved or uninvolved in their children's education (See Appendix E for teachers' nominations of parents). With the assistance of the parent coordinator at Woodson Elementary, in the spring of 2004, all classroom teachers (grades K-5) were given a list of students in their classes for the 2003-2004 academic year. Teachers (n=14) were asked to indicate the children whose parents were perceived to be active or inactive in their child's education during the school year. Teachers were not given definitions of what constituted parental participation and were asked to use their own understanding of parents' activities to select parents. In most cases, teachers stated how they defined parent participation and then proceeded to identify those parents who did or did not met their definition. Teachers' definitions of parental participation ranged from parents' attendance at parent-teacher conferences or school social events, observation and/or volunteering in classrooms, provision of school supplies/snacks for classrooms, communication with teachers through returning and signing notes, and availability for phone or school conferences with teachers. Many of the teachers' definitions of parent participation incorporated more than one of the behaviors listed above. Interestingly, teachers definitions of parent participation consisted of activities that were supportive of teachers'/schools' agendas in lieu of activities that fostered parents' decision-making or initiative in the home or community (e.g., attendance at PTA meetings or participation in home or community activities).

Given that teachers are knowledgeable informants on parent participation occurring in the schools and may support more traditional forms of parent participation, other non-staff Woodson community members were identified to ensure a wider range of

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forms of parent participation (e.g. home and community involvement) were represented in the study. A second source of informants, parents, were sought after to identify parents who may not be actively involved directly in the school or classrooms, but may be involved in "non-traditional ways" in the home or community. A snowball technique[12] was used to identify a second wave of parents who were not nominated by teachers. After each interview with a parent nominated by a teacher, the parent was asked to give names of Woodson Elementary School parents who they perceived were involved or uninvolved in their child's education (See Appendix E for parents' nominations). It should be noted that the intended method of asking parents to nominate parents who they felt were involved or uninvolved parents was unsuccessful. The majority of parents reported that they did not know other Woodson parents. Thus, the majority of participants interviewed for the project were nominated by teachers. No pre-determined number of participants was identified to interview for the study. When the information obtained from parents became redundant, peripheral, and/or added little to what I already knew about parents, the interview/data collection process was ended (Weis, 1994). Parents were paid ten dollars for their participation and time. A total of thirty parents were interviewed for the Phase three project. All interview transcripts were coded. The text only uses the data from twenty of these parents to illustrate these findings as all thirty participants came to similar conclusions about their participation in their children's education (See Appendix F for Parent Demographic Data of the 20 participants. See Appendix G for demographic data of parents not utilized in the study.)

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[12] Snowballing technique- getting to know some informants and having them introduce you to others (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

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Data Collection

The research methodology developed for phase three of this study involves a series of in-depth, semi-standardized interviews with parents. This research methodology was selected because it allows for describing the process of parental participation, understanding parents' perceptions and the meanings attached to parent participation, and exploring the interactions and exchanges between school staff and parents (Berg, 1998). A set of open-ended questions was asked of each parent to elicit their perceptions, stories and experiences of parent participation. Interview questions were not always asked in the same manner in order to give myself the freedom to digress from the interview protocol as interesting topics emerged from conversations with parents and to follow the interests of parents. Apart from a set of standard questions addressed to all parents, the interviews were unstructured which allowed parents to discuss the issues they believed were important and allowed me to address and clarify related topics as they appeared.

Interviews took place over the course of one to two meetings, most commonly in the parent's home; however, interviews were also conducted in the community (e.g., library, shopping mall food court, restaurants), or at Woodson Elementary School. All interviews and observations were performed by the author. Audiotaped interviews were transcribed by the author. Interview excerpts are presented verbatim in order to represent the experiences of parents as accurately as possible. This is particularly important in the present project as the ways in which parents engage in their children's education have often been silenced and/or ignored by school personnel. The research design facilitated co-occurring data collection and analysis, which permitted the data and data analysis to

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continuously inform one another. Interview questions were formulated and reformulated based on prior responses and interpretations.

Data Analysis

Issue focused coding was used to discover patterns among parents and the topics of interest. Such analysis focused on what could be learned about specific issues, events, or processes- from all respondents (Weis, 1994). Transcripts were coded, which involved linking what parents discussed in their interviews to concepts and categories that were to appear in the report. The coding of material from interviews constituted a statement of what the material told me. Initially, coding categories were developed as an effort to capture the interview material (e.g. material will be coded based on what I am learning about or seeing instances of). Next, the reading and coding of interviews shifted to reading and coding excerpt files. Excerpt files are collections from many interviews of excerpts dealing with the same issue. Some coding categories were brought to the study before knowing what the interviews would produce based on my experience working at Woodson and review of the literature (e.g., lack of staff commitment for parent involvement, lack of parental voice in school). Along the way, coding categories were developed and defined through my interaction with the data (e.g., proactive engagement, reactive engagement, parent advocacy, networking). Before making any assertions regarding a pattern, I searched for data that opposed or were inconsistent with these conclusions. Coding ended when the interviews produced fewer important themes/patterns that significantly extended or deepened my understanding of existing coding categories.

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The next step in data analysis involved finding a way of organizing and integrating the observations and understandings in each section of the report known as local integration. This process involved summarizing each excerpt file and its coding (e.g., Here is what is said in this area, and this is what I believe it to mean). More specifically, mini-theories whose aim was to make sense of the material dealing with specific issues were developed (Weis, 1994). Lastly during the inclusive integration phase of analysis, a framework was developed that included all the analyses that were to be reported, moved logically from one area to the next, and led to some general conclusion (Weis, 1994).

Description of Parents Sampled

Parents were selected based on the sampling criteria described above. They were all contacted by telephone to invite their participation. Parents were informed about my role in Woodson Elementary (e.g., work with teachers, length of involvement in the school), my affiliation with a local university, the purpose of the project, and a small monetary payment for their participation. Several parents asked follow-up questions regarding how the data would be used to improve the school, who would have access to the data, and/or my role in the school before making a commitment to participate in the study. Most parents contacted were willing to engage in conversations about their involvement in their children's education. Parents who agreed to participate were scheduled for an interview either the same day or within the next week at a location of their choosing. Most interviews took place in parents' homes, which gave me an opportunity to observe the surroundings in which their involvement took place and their interactions with their children. I felt comfortable and welcome in every parent's home.

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It should be noted that I am an African American researcher. The implications of my racial position and how it may have influenced the data collection process is discussed in the Discussion section.

Non-participants

Only three parents who were initially selected based on the sampling criteria decided not to participate in the present project after being contacted by phone. The reasons parents gave for deciding not to participate included not being interested in the study, perceiving that they did not have anything to discuss about their involvement, or not having the time to meet for an interview. In addition, two parents who had originally scheduled an interview did not attend their appointments and did not call to cancel or re-schedule their appointment. These parents were subsequently pursued to re-schedule their interviews; however, I was unsuccessful at re-connecting with these parents before leaving the Korbel community.

Below, I provide a description of the twenty parents whose data was utilized in this project. In addition, throughout the discussion of the results of the phase three project, I provide a brief description of the parents who participated in the interviews. This allows readers to interpret the findings within a broader familial framework. Summaries of this information are provided in table format (see Appendix F for Parent demographic information) that can serve as a guide for the reader to refer to while reading the remainder of this project.

The study sample captured a diverse segment (although not representative) of Woodson parents across a variety of demographic characteristics. Participants were primarily African American (N=29) with one parent who self-identified as being bi-racial

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(i.e., African American and European American). Most participants were female (N=29). Participants were predominantly female because potential male participants (males who answered the initial phone call) reported that their child's mother was the more knowledgeable parent for the project. The age range of participants varied with parents ranging in age from 25-years-old to 76-year-old (Mean age = 39 years). Parents from diverse socio-economic statuses were also interviewed. In this study, lunch status was used as a proxy for parents' income as indicated by their child's eligibility to receive federal free or reduce priced lunch. Overall, Forty-five % of participants (N=9) reported that their children were receiving free lunch, thirty % of participants (N=6) reported their children received reduced lunch, and twenty-five % of participants (N=5) reported that they paid for their children's lunches. Educational attainment also varied as forty % of parents (N=8) reported receiving a high school diploma or GED, thirty percent % of parents (N=6) reported taking college level course, and thirty % of parents (N=6) reported receiving an associate, college, or graduate degree.

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CHAPTER THREE

PARENTS' VIEWS ON EDUCATION: "WHAT YOU PUT IN, IS WHAT YOU GET OUT."

The purpose of this project is to understand African American parents' participation in their children's education. This is a group whose voice has been silenced and ignored in the local Korbel schools and community. As discussed above, the existing parent involvement literature suggests African American parents are less involved in their children's education as compared to the involvement of other racial/ethnic groups. Moreover the citizens (e.g., parents, school personnel, teachers) of Korbel perceived that parents at Woodson (who historically have been predominantly African American and low-income) were un-involved. In this chapter, parents' discussion of their perceptions of education and past school experiences is presented as a foundation for understanding their educational decision-making and participation in their children's education. Overall, most parents interviewed not only reported having positive educational experiences in schools as children, but were also committed to instilling in their children the value for educational attainment and achievement.

Instilling a Commitment to Education: Direct Approaches used by Parents

Conversations with Woodson parents overwhelmingly revealed that parents want their children to succeed and receive an education. This belief is a unifying commonality across all the parents interviewed. In fact, underlining many of the conversations with parents is a sense of urgency for their children to "do better" than their parents. Parents not only recognized that receiving an education was important, but were also knowledgeable of the social benefits and/or ramifications that co-occur with having an advanced or limited education. Parents held a generally positive attitude toward education

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regardless of their opinions and feelings toward Woodson Elementary School or their personal educational experiences. While parents utilized different methods to communicate their thoughts about education to their children, the underlining message was the same, education is important.

Sheila, a food service worker, part-time student, and mother of four, directly expresses her views about the importance of education through daily conversations with her children about school. Sheila uses her own life experience of returning to college and the experiences of relatives as personal examples of the benefits of having an education.

> Wow, if anything I stress to them, you need it, you really need it. I give them example of their uncles. They are so high strung on their uncles but you know that's cool. You like your uncles and everything but your uncles quit going to school and look where they are now, okay. They may have jobs. They may keep jobs and every thing but you know, they stuck. They are really stuck. I said if you want to use somebody as an example use mommy, mommy. I may not be in school consistently, consistently but they can see the time when mommy is in school. She is doing her homework. She's doing this with her work you know. I'm actually paying attention. I'm utilizing my personal time to study and you know I just try to get them to understand. There is no way around school. I try to give them no other option. You may as well find a way to deal with school in a comfortable way that you want to deal with school because school is not going to go away. This is not a childhood disease. This is not something that is going to go away. You are going to need school for the rest of your life until you get to that point your going to need it. And I just try to encourage them with how important it is. You know I let them know, hey if you didn't never go to school. If I let you leave school in first grade when you got so frustrated trying to learn these spelling words just think. I put them in the situation, where would you be right now at nine-years-old? Where would you be if I didn't let you go to school because you didn't want to then? You would not know how to read. You wouldn't even know how to go to a public bathroom because you wouldn't know where the men sign was. You know you I just really make it personal for them. Giving them real life examples of their little bitty childhood life.

Sheila's conversations with her children show her level of commitment to their education. Her conversations focus on the consequences of having a limited education based on her family's personal experiences as motivation for her children to continue

their education. While Sheila does not emphasize a minimal level of performance (e.g., high grades) for her children, she does underscore the benefits of receiving an education on multiple levels: learning basic life skills, having choices in life, and applying school knowledge to various situations across one's lifetime. Sheila's value for education is also reflected in her decision to continue her own education (a community college), model of appropriate school behaviors for her children, and request that her children graduate from school.

Similar to Sheila, Sandra, a substitute teacher's aide in the local school district, mother of four biological children and several foster children, also had direct conversations with her children about receiving an education. Sandra communicates the value she places on schooling by emphasizing that her children "do their best" in school, engage in appropriate behaviors at school and graduate from high school. Sandra not only emphasized that her children's education was important to them in reaching their full potential, but was also intrinsically important to Sandra in fulfilling her role as a parent that her children are educated.

> I tell him point blank. I don't want him clownin and acting a fool in school because his education is very important to him and he is going to finish school. And I don't think I can be more positive than that. And Darius knows that that means a lot to me. That education means a lot to me. I tell both of my boys you have to be the best in every thing that you do. Don't settle for anything. Make sure that if you take on a task that you can be the best that you can be. You know when you are working on that task. So I let him know that school is not to be played with. You are not going to school to clown around and socialize with your friends. You are going to school to get your education.

Sandra's conversations take a somewhat different approach to expressing the value for education to her children. Sandra sets clear expectations for her children's

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performance and behavior and connects her personal goals for her children with her children's goals.

Vanessa, a married mother of three and worker's compensation coordinator, directly expresses her commitment to her children's education by connecting their academic success to important life goals/achievements like receiving better employment and an opportunity for her children to do better than their parents.

> Boy, they could go to college and do anything. I don't care if they do arts. I don't care what they get, just to go to that next level, better than what I did. I didn't go to college. High school, that was it. Been working ever since. I've thought about going back and I have taken a couple of classes through my employer, medical terminology and things like that to improve my existing job. But definitely want my kids to go to school and just to be their own individual and not rely on anybody else. It's all about you, so hopefully they will do that.

Kim, an office building janitor and mother of two children, also emphasizes the pursuit of academic excellence in conversations with her children; however, Kim was the only parent to frame receiving an education as a child's primary role and responsibility. From this perspective, the accumulation of knowledge becomes the sole purpose of childhood and places the onus on the child to fulfill their role until he/she can transition into adult roles and responsibilities.

> I tell my son, 'my job is my job, school is your job.' And that's how I teach him. School is your job. You go and do the best that you can. Because basically it is. I have things that I have to do on my job, whether I want to or not but that's part of my job. Whether you want to or not that's part of your job. So, I say what is your job? and he says school. Some of the kids in his class know that too.... His main goal is to get an education so that he can take care of himself because no one else is going to do it. Yeah, I could be at home and wait and let Section 8 pay my bills, but you don't feel as good about yourself when you are dependent on somebody else. So trying to teach him to be independent.

Underlining both Kim's and Vanessa's conversation about education is the value for personal and social sufficiency evidenced in one's ability to provide and take care of

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one-self, being independent of government assistance programs and feeling good about oneself.

Vera, mother of one child and an employee at a local library, discusses having conversations with her husband about their daughter's educational future before she was eligible to enroll in school. Such early planning and setting of educational goals for children was consistent across many interviews with parents.

> I wish I had in my mother what my daughter has in me. Because I do have goals for her higher education and we have been talking about it since before she could talk. So you know what you put in is what you get out, so.

Vera's conversation touches on a very personal topic, as she appears to have wanted more support and involvement from her own mother. Her early planning and preparation for her daughter's future seems to be a reaction, in part, to her perception that her mother was less involved in her education as a child. It appears Vera wants to do more than her mother to ensure her daughter's educational success and that she connects her active engagement to her daughter's future achievement.

April, a graduate student and employee for a local university, mother of six children, had a less optimistic perspective about the education her children were receiving in Korbel schools. In fact, it is her critique of the school system that motivates her ongoing communication with her children about education.

> I'd like to see her uh survive the school district until I can get her out of here and uh hopefully go on and go to graduate school. That's what I would like to see happen to her.... Based on my experiences here in the school district because this is nothing I ever told my children, my three adult children when we were in Chicago, 'you are going to go to college' and I expect they just did it. I see here I have to motivate my children even more. Uh, my sixteen year old even just to go to school because of the dynamics in the community.... I think we talked about it just the other day. Some how it came out that I have expectations for her [youngest daughter] going to get a Ph.D. And I mean for my youngest child I think because she has been in this academic environment and because I have

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come back into the academia as well, I think that she will probably have a better chance of that plus my oldest daughter is the one that has the law degree and she acts as a motivator for her younger siblings. To see her and her successes.

April demonstrates her beliefs about education through daily motivating her children to do basic things like attending school, which she perceives is more difficult for African American children in the local district due to community dynamics. Additionally, April discusses her hopes and expectations about education with her children, which serve as additional motivating forces. Interestingly, April notes a change in her parenting practices upon moving to Korbel to incorporate explicit conversations about education after noticing her children were less motivated to attend local schools. April's conversations about education are reported to be initiated by perceived differences in the experiences of African American youth in the local school system compared to the experiences of African American students in other communities (e.g., Chicago). Similar to Sheila's discussion, April believes her current experience as a graduate student and those of an older successful daughter will act as additional indirect communications about the importance of an education.

Instilling a Commitment to Education: Indirect Approaches utilized by Parents

Other parents like JoAnn, a retired teacher's aide currently raising two adopted children and two teenage grandchildren, utilized indirect approaches to communicate their feelings about education. JoAnn's metaphor of a leaf finding its way to the bottom of a riverbank illustrates why she believes a more subtle approach is necessary in communicating expectations to children about education.

> You don't have to talk to a leaf if you want a leaf to end up at the end of a riverbank. You don't have to say to the leaf 'now I am putting you in the water and your gonna.' All you have to do is put it in the water and the current is going to take it down there whether it wants to or not. See, so the thing about it with the

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kids is you don't have to tell them about all of these expectations. They will automatically meet them if they start out right. See, you start listening to the teacher, and you learn to listen and apply yourself. They might not know, they might know if I say apply yourself but do what you are told. Now if you do that this year and next year and next year, you see it's going to follow you and you are going to end up. Nobody has to tell you to graduate, your going to do it.

For JoAnn, placing children in the right academic environment early in their schooling is key to teaching the importance of education. In addition she notes that encouraging and slowly shaping children's behaviors to conform to the rules of the school setting is important and fosters their matriculation through school.

Similarly, Diane, a food service worker and grandmother raising two granddaughters, and Ernestine a secretary and grandmother raising a grandson, were also cautious regarding making their expectations explicit about education.

Diane reports,
> I mean I push you to a certain extent that you don't know that I'm pushing. But I'm not the type of person that you gotta do this, you gotta do this, and you gotta do this and you gotta do that, because I think if you push them too hard they gonna push back.

Ernestine comments,
> like Charles for instance he is telling me what he wants to be like a fireman, or maybe he wants to be a teacher or maybe he wants to be a policeman, or maybe a bus driver, this is the type of conversation that we have. And now the only thing that I let him know is that you have to stay in school to do any of these things that you want to be. He said okay so, well um I'm thinking he will be okay if I can just stay focused on him and with him…. see I don't want to emphasize college as much but I am pushing the part, you got to finish your high school education and if you choose, he talks to me about college now like I say I have a nephew on his way to college and he says well maybe I want to go to college when he grow up and I tell him 'well just stay smart and stay in school.' I would love to see him go to college Erica, but I would like for that, for Charles to bring to me. I don't want to just push it on him. If I can just keep him in school and let him get to the twelfth grade by then I think he should've been made his own decision on if he wants to go to college. Cause if you push him he only going to want to go because this is what momma want me to do so I'm going to go ahead and do it. So that's my outlook on that. I want him to go as far with his education that he can but I don't want to push him. I want him to be able to say, okay momma this is what I am ready to do when he gets older.

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For Diane, her cautious approach stemmed from wanting to avoid children's efforts to resist expectations placed on them by adults. Dianne stated during the interview that she makes "recommendations" about what her granddaughters could do to complete homework assignments/projects; however she reported that she does not insist that they follow her advice. Ernestine's indirect approach stemmed from wanting her grandson to achieve educational goals that he set for himself. While utilizing indirect approaches, both women demonstrate their value for education by setting a minimum level of education attainment (e.g., receiving a high school diploma), offering support to their grandchildren and keeping abreast of their children's school progress.

In summary, all of the caregivers interviewed emphasized the importance of education with their children either directly or indirectly. For these families, receiving an education through "finishing school" and obtaining a high school diploma was not optional. These families recognized that an education will give their children basic life skills, choices, independence from government agencies, a sense of self-worth, opportunities for advanced learning via college and/or graduate school, amongst other benefits (intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes). Parents used their personal life experiences, experiences of relatives, perception of community issues, and personal philosophies about life to support their views about education. Notably, for many of these parents, keeping their children and grandchildren focused and motivated to attend school was perceived to be a significant accomplishment in and of itself. In fact, less emphasis was placed on achieving high grades and attending college as compared to stressing the importance of school attendance and receiving an education. While emphasis on attending school may seem like a basic expectation for all students, for these parents,

their children's perceived lack of intrinsic motivation to attend school was a significant obstacle to their receiving an education requiring parents to spend additional time encouraging this behavior. It should be noted that the grandparents, who were caregivers for their grandchildren, were the subgroup of parents to use more indirect approaches.

<u>Parents' Educational Experiences</u>

Consistent with parents' strong feelings regarding the importance of education, most parents discussed having positive experiences in school as children. For these parents, their most salient school experiences (positive and negative) were relational (i.e., involved interactions with teachers and other school personnel) in nature. Most parents described teachers as "caring," "motivating," "supportive," figures who spent additional time with them to ensure they succeeded. The experiences parents had with their teachers motivated them to attend school, engage in appropriate school behaviors, perform above their own expectations for themselves, and to ultimately graduate from high school. Out of the twenty parents interviewed, only five parents discussed perceived negative experiences with teachers resulting from their perception that teachers had low expectations for them and/or perceived instances of racial discrimination.

<u>Parents' Interactions with Teachers: The Impact of Positive School Experiences</u>

JoAnn, who was raised and educated predominantly in the northeast almost seventy years ago, recalls positive interactions with teachers whose commitments and activities with students extended outside of their daily work schedules.

> JoAnn: Good experiences. Back then those, the rules and things were different and so uh we had principals that walked around with the paddle you know, on the playground and all that. And they would use, but um, it was, the school systems were, huh, (exhales) we got along.

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Interviewer: Did you think that teachers wanted you to succeed? That they cared about you?

JoAnn: Well, they were more, we come from a different era. Everything was different when I was younger. You know parenting as well as schooling and yes they were definitely set on you achieving as opposed to they got a job and they making some easy money. They [teachers] think its easy money. ... See those teachers back there then uh, they would come to you. They wouldn't wait to send all these notes and then wait till the semester is uh, and then say you got to do this. They would come to you and say you know, "John, I think you better sharpen up on this. Now take this home and read this." And they would give you assignments to make sure that [you] read what they said. It wasn't strenuous, but uh they they stayed on you more than uh just writing you up and sending you to the office. You went to the office to take papers and notes. But you didn't uh, children didn't, were not sitting around offices like, it's a different time. It's a different time, and it's just like comparing ourselves to the Pilgrims, you know and uh so now a days comparing to children to us, but then we only know what we've been taught like they are only going to know what they've been taught you know. So I feel like I'm the root of um. I'm the root of them. But with my schooling, it was, it was very easy. Children fought and they went to the principal's office and they got a paddle and they went on skipping on back. And they stayed after school and you, we did the, we did the, because we didn't have, you don't have too much staying after school now because when school is out these teachers are ready to book and see but you would have to stay after school and do work. And this work was accounted for and uh, the people were more concerned then, but life is more different now. They have so many other concerns that we didn't have. See on your plate, you've got more on your plate then anything we had on our plate so you really can't compare. But basically I, I say that the educational system, yeah, the education system is basically the same. It's the teachers.

For JoAnn, her positive school experiences were marked by teachers showing that they cared for students by: giving timely feedback to students about their performance, giving students extra homework assignments to improve their grades, holding students accountable for completing schoolwork, and remaining after school to tutor students. JoAnn's descriptions show her perceptions of teachers' level of commitment to their students by having high expectations for all students and holding students accountable for reaching those standards. While JoAnn is able to positively reflect on her childhood school experiences, she is quite critical of the current public schools in Korbel, as are

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many other parents. JoAnn reports a decline in teachers' level of commitment to students and the quality of interactions between students and teachers, which motivates her involvement in her foster and grandchildren's education.

Keisha, mother of four children and two stepchildren, and a part-time student, was educated in the Korbel community. Keisha's recollection of her interactions with teachers focused on their efforts to counsel students having academic problems and/or intervene to mediate student altercations. Such actions on the behalf of teachers showed Keisha that they were interested in the success of students.

> Oh, yeah, teachers were really involved with students when I was there. We had, we had when I was going to school we had the teachers. You had your own dean and you had your own counselors that people that were immediately during like grade reports or report cards or when they seen that you made a certain drop maybe not a couple of points but something just too drastic or sometimes something that they thought you should be aware of. They would like call you or summons you just like use a little slip that someone that another student you know passed around for class or whatever and they would like bring it to you like you have this summons. It was like either or yellow slip or a green slip and it was like the green slip was for a dean, the yellow slip was for a counselor. And you just you knew. And then you would go down and they would just say 'I was trying to you know tell you that you might want to keep your eye on this. I see you dropped two points from last quarter.' It was just kind of something that they stayed on top of. So I thought that was really involved because sometimes you know some schools you go from here to there and nobody really cares. Nobody really mentions it so they were really involved. They also had um, I can't remember his name but he was like a, I wouldn't say a mentor, it was Mr. Pete. I can't remember what his name was but he was like um, I don't know if he was a social worker or just what his title was while he was there but you know if he seen like something brewing in the hallway you know like little cat things between girls you know how it goes. So whatever it was he usually had the two students one at a time um he would have them. He would mediate them and once he thought you guys were through the mediation parts where you could be in the classroom together, then he would have you in there kind of what to know what she does to set you off or what you to do to set her off. It was kind of something like that so you know I think they were pretty involved.

Keisha offers a very descriptive account of the steps teachers took to assist students with academic or behavioral problems. Keisha's recollection and appreciation

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for her teachers acknowledges their ability to quickly identify and manage students' concerns before they became larger problems.

Margaret, mother of three children and a hair stylist, who grew up in a town east of the Korbel community, recalls interactions with teachers who were supportive of her despite the academic difficulties she encountered in school.

> Margaret: I was always a teacher's pet, so yes I loved my teachers. Mrs. Brewer, Mrs. Jameson, Mr. Coleman, I will never forget them. They always pushed me. You know I was always a slow learner and um I didn't really have good comprehension skills. Um, I was a more hands-on learner. So I did have some problems in school, but my teachers were very supportive of me. Um, I was intimidated a lot in school because there was a lot of information that I did not know and I did not know how to learn that information so it is very important to me that my children are not intimidated, not scared, and that they are not pushed through, not really understanding and um.
>
> Interviewer: And so was it always like that, elementary through high school? Were there any changes?
>
> Margaret: I'm trying to think of my elementary, yep Lithia School, that was it. It was like that and even at Western my teachers were pretty nice to me and um, my mother was very sick when I went into junior high and so my teachers were really supportive of me and tried to help me as much as they could.

Margaret reported teachers continued to "push her" and were "supportive" despite her awareness of her own academic limitations. Teachers also showed concern for Margaret by helping her through difficult family situations. Margaret is one of a few parents who reported feelings of intimidation in school; however, it appears that positive interactions with school staff may have negated the effects of her learning problems. In fact, Margaret reports her past school experiences give her insight into how she can support her children in school so they will not experience the feelings of intimidation she felt.

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Cassandra, mother of three children and a research coordinator, who was educated in the South, reported schooling experiences that are somewhat different from those of parents previously discussed. Teachers' efforts to motivate and support Cassandra were initially resisted. It was not until Cassandra became an adult that she realized the positive impact of teachers on her education.

> Um, there was a Mrs. Karen Marshall that was my math teacher that seemed to know every move I made. When I said my first cuss word in study hall she was there, she knew about it. She told my parents about it. I think I said "shit" or something and she knew about it. She was a teacher I think that was on me the hardest and I think she tells me later on, she passed away, she told me "I saw something in you. I saw you had talent. You had skills." And I was like wow. And sometimes like you said it does take that one teacher, or that one somebody that's teaching you to really put that vision in your head. You may reach back years later you know and grab it back, but I was like wow and I had some administrational staff at uh Jacobson state community college in Texas as well. I went to community college because my mother passed away. I couldn't go off to a four year, I had to stay home and be big mom, big sister, but I was in the school system in community college and I was on the dean's list and I was skipping class to play spades [a card game] in the student center with everybody else, but I could still keep my grades up. I could still go back to class and get what I had to get. And if I thought that class wasn't benefiting me, I wasn't going. So administration kinda pulled me aside and said 'you can't do that. People are watching you and doing what you are doing and you are setting a poor example and you really can't do that. And we really would suggest, you know strongly encourage you to be in class because people are watching you.' And I was like 'I'm only enrolled for one person. I'm getting a grade for one person you see what I'm saying. What's the problem? I'm not accountable for these other people, they don't go to class you know.' And I didn't see the impact of it then. I just took it very personal. 'Why you picking on me? I'm here to have fun like they are. If they can't get it oh well sweetheart.' As a child I thought why are they always picking on me? Dang. You know every time I look around they call my name and I'm like oh God what did I do now? You know as I think you know now as I look back on my life its like wow they saw some things in me that I wasn't trying to see. So I can say I had a lot of teachers who were like you know what I'm saying, you can do this and you gotta press on and have no excuse you know and be on time for school and be where you are supposed to be with your lesson so, yeah.

Cassandra's experiences are something that former students can relate to in school. A student who is comfortable with her performance; however, she has an

instructor who challenges her complacency with mediocre school performance. Cassandra discusses that her teachers not only pushed her to do well, behave appropriately, and attend classes, but also placed her in the role of a model for her peers, which she reluctantly assumed. It appears that many of Cassandra's teachers were invested in her school success. For Cassandra, her teachers' efforts to "push" her and hold her to a higher standard were viewed as teachers "picking" on her and were initially viewed negatively. As Cassandra matured, reflected on her school experiences and communicated with past instructors, she realized that her teachers' actions were designed to promote her success. Cassandra is one of three parents interviewed to have graduated from college and received an advanced degree.

Similarly Tamika, mother of one child and unemployed (due to becoming pregnant), who was educated in a town bordering Korbel, reported teachers took a special interest in her performance as a student over and above their expectations for other students. Tamika recalls an experience in which one of her teachers' interventions re-instilled the motivation in her to continue attending school.

> Well my mom taught too so, it's like, and they know your mom so you had no other choice but to do well you know (laughs) … my mother had because my teachers knew my mother had high expectations for me. …therefore they had high expectations for me and they didn't let me slack off…. Um I graduated like early but I didn't really graduate early because I didn't finish my PE class you know, like stupid stuff. And I knew I was going to graduate early so I didn't go to school and then I had this one teacher Mr. Lewis (laughs) and he sent a message by one of my friends and he said 'tell Tamika to bring her ass to school.' You know and that's like that's not that what you expect to hear from your teachers. So of course I blew to school and I was like 'Oh my God you cursed in front of the whole class,' you know. I mean, but, those are the kinds of things that obviously he cared enough to take time out of teaching the class to tell me to come to school you know um. So, I had a lot of teachers like that and back then I think teachers actually did care if you came to school. You know if they knew if you were trying they tried a little more to help you.

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For Tamika, her teacher's expression to her classmates that she return to school communicated to her that he cared. Such a small act of publicly recognizing that she was not attending school was all Tamika needed to return to school. Interestingly, while Tamika discusses her perception that teachers "cared" for her and had high expectations for her performance, Tamika's interpretation of her teachers' behaviors suggest perceived differences in teachers interactions with students based on the characteristics of students and parents. For example, Tamika attributes her positive experiences with teachers to external factors like: teachers' awareness of her mother's high expectations, her mother's employment as a teacher in the community, and Tamika's own motivation to do well in school, rather than a teacher's general expectation for all students. Tamika recognized that other students in her class did not receive the same support and encouragement from teachers. Also, implicit in Tamika's discussion is some acknowledgement that teachers are currently less involved in children's schooling compared to past years.

Many of the remaining parents (who identify themselves as high school graduates) interviewed had school experiences similar to those described by Ernestine who was born and raised in Korbel. For these parents, attending school and making good grades were not their highest priorities. It was the efforts of teachers who helped these students matriculate through school.

> We had Mrs. Stark was like one of the Deans at Cambridge at the time that I was at the school and she gave us her all. Well all my teachers was like they stayed on me, but you know I was growing up being hard headed I think so. So I had no time (for school) but like I said I did get my education so that's the plus part of it.

Parents like Ernestine generally had positive experiences in school; however, they also recognized that external factors such as peer pressure, at times, caused them to engage in inappropriate school behaviors (e.g., skipping school, associating with negative

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peers, using drugs.) Despite such distractions and a weaker internal motivation to attend

and excel in school, these parents view their schooling as an overall positive experience

because they graduated from high school, an accomplishment most of their parents were

unable to achieve.

Parents' Interactions with Teachers: The Impact of Perceived Negative Experiences

Only a few parents reported a mixture of positive and negative interactions with

teachers while attending school. Kim, who was raised in Korbel, discussed mostly

positive experiences with teachers; however, she also recalled a salient negative

experience with a teacher.

> Kim: I always thought that the teachers that I respect the most were the ones that I
> thought were the meanest teachers. They always called on you. I didn't raise my
> hand. I didn't want to answer a question, but they always called on you and
> always stayed on you. I had one teacher, Ms. Kimbly, seventh grade. I thought
> she was the meanest teacher. She, it was like they were always picking on me,
> but it's like they saw the potential and they were not going to let me be lazy.

> Interviewer: And so were most of your experiences with teachers like that where
> teachers were pushing you to do your best?

> Kim: In second grade no, it wasn't and my mother did something about that. If I
> see my child and I think they are not doing to the potential that I think they should
> be doing I'm going to say something. She had me, because I was comfortable,
> you don't go to school to be comfortable. You go to school to learn and advance.
> She was like she is [in] this reading group because she is comfortable. Yeah I was
> getting all the work done, but I was not being challenged. I mean you have to
> challenge kids.

While Kim's experiences with teachers were mostly positive and are similar to

those of other parents interviewed (e.g., teachers "pushed" and "stayed" her), she does

recall one instance in which it appears a teacher had low expectations for her

performance by not testing the limits of her abilities. Kim is the only parent to report

family members intervening on the behalf of their children when they perceived teachers

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were mistreating their children. Similarly, Kim takes on the role of an advocate for her son at Woodson Elementary School (based on the interviewers own observations) when she perceives he is not being challenged academically.

Vera, who grew up in a town east of Korbel also reported variable experiences with teachers. However, she reports that both negative and positive experiences with teachers encouraged her to do better in school.

> Of course I had a quirky teacher who pissed me off and so when she would say to me [mimicking the teacher's voice] "you are not going to get such and such a grade in my class" and of course she was black [meaning teacher was African American]. I said um hmm and then I got an A. So that was the way I dealt with people who were negative to me, I needed to show them.

Vera's ability to overcome and surpass her teacher's low expectations for her performance is a unique accomplishment for a grade school student and is illustrative of her determination to do well in school. Vera's interaction with this particular teacher was more of an anomaly than the norm of her school experiences. Most of her interactions with her teachers were marked by teachers who motivated her to succeed beyond her own expectations for herself.

April, who was educated in a neighboring Midwestern state, reported having some negative interactions with white teachers in school; however; she credits being raised in an African American community and having supportive family members as influences that helped her navigate difficult school experiences.

> April: Uh, I always had positive experiences. I went to the neighborhood school which um I may have had um some white teachers there but because it was a predominantly black community, the whatever negative effects are kind of held in check and I was you know I wasn't a problem student.

> Interview: So did you feel that teachers had high expectations for you, were supportive of students' success or were you self-motivated?

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April: I was self-motivated so I'm probably not the best person to answer that question because I was motivated. And I think in looking back there was just that uh maybe even in my family just that incentive to push forward because of the six children. I have two siblings with advanced degrees and um one other has a college degree as well.

April is one of a few parents to discuss the impact of the local community and positive family role models that supported her school success beyond the involvement of teachers. A combination of several factors appeared to have led to her success in school including: a strong motivation to do well in school, positive family role models and teachers, and supportive community members and/or friends who helped to foster her positive school experiences.

Diane, who attended Korbel schools, reports not fully understanding the nature of some of her interactions with teachers until she became an adult. She initially reported perceiving that her interactions with teachers were predominantly positive; however, when she was questioned further about the quality of these interactions, she describes a change in her perceptions of teachers as she grew older.

Diane: Oh, that they cared.

Interviewer: How did you get that impression?

Diane: Well see I lived in a mixed neighborhood and then when I got to school they tried to separate us.

Interviewer: Separate you within classrooms?

Diane: With kids, not within the classrooms. You were pretty with the classrooms, but if you were playing with your friend and they white they tried to make you, they separated you. They told you to go over here and all that stuff.

Interviewer: So you didn't feel that they had good expectations for you or cared about you?

Diane: Um, hmm, but I only figured this out when I got older.

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Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Diane: You know when you a kid and somebody do you like that you just sort of wonder okay, what is going on? As you get older than you know what they were doing.

Interviewer: You figure it out. As a kid you just felt something was wrong.

Diane: Right because I was raised in a mixed neighborhood. I was raised up in a German/Black neighborhood and then when I got to school they put us, they separated us, like on the playground. Um, things that you wanted to do they said you couldn't do, you know.

Interviewer: Like job stuff, if you said I want to do this?

Diane: Well, no like okay they had a brownie group and you know like the kids that I played with were in the brownie group so when I wanted to go in the brownie group they said you can't go in the brownie group. I got in but that's what they told me at first.

Interviewer: So, but there were other black students there or you were probably?

Diane: There were other black students there but they made sure we were to ourselves a lot. You could do what you wanted to do in your neighborhood, but once you got to school it's different.

Interviewer: And so was it like that all the way to high school?

Diane: No, things got a little better by then. And then you see when you a kid you didn't pay a lot of attention to that. But I told you I thought about it as I got older just how things were when I was younger but you didn't pay any attention to that.

Interviewer: So how were things better, when you got to high school? You could basically do what you wanted and people didn't tell you to do certain things?

Diane: Right. It was sort of on the sly. People didn't come out and tell you this like when I was younger.

Interviewer: What were some positive experiences in school, if any?

Diane: Well I did get educated (both laugh).

Diane was the only parent to report perceived overt and covert racist interactions

between teachers and students. Interestingly, despite having racist experiences with

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teachers in school, she still frames her school experiences in a positive light and is similarly optimistic about the education of her grandchildren.

Fonda, mother of four children and owner of a home daycare center, who was raised in Korbel, also reports having some negative interactions with teachers; however, unlike most parents, she was able to move to a neighboring school district where she had more positive interactions with school staff.

> I don't know. I grew up going to Korbel schools and to me the teachers were intimidating. In Sumpter the teachers were more one on one. They got to know you better. They talked to you instead of everybody. You know what I mean. It was easier for me to learn in Sumpter because I was more into and I just got to know the teachers better, I don't know why.

For Fonda, the individualized attention she received from her teachers in addition to their efforts to get to know students on a personal level made the difference in showing her that they cared.

Summary

Most Korbel parents interviewed reported primarily positive school experiences. However, five parents (those with both positive and negative experiences) also discussed negative experiences in school. Despite reporting such varied school experiences, all parents conveyed a perspective that valued education. Parents emphasized relationships with "caring," "concerned," and supportive teachers as important to their educational success. Their interactions with teachers helped them to remain motivated about receiving an education, attend school, and achieve beyond their own expectations for themselves. Parents also reported utilizing their school experiences as a guide for interacting in their own children's education. Overall, for these parents, an education offers their children the opportunity to have unlimited choices in employment, promotes

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personal and social sufficiency, fosters the opportunity for their children to do better than their parents, amongst other benefits. Parents expressed these values to their children using a variety of approaches often calling upon their personal struggles and school experiences. The question of how parents' strong value for education translates into specific activities with their children will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR
PARENTS' VIEWS OF THEIR TASKS: "YOU HAVE TO HELP YOUR [CHILDREN]"

<u>Overview</u>

Parents' past educational experiences were presented above as a foundation for understanding their current decision-making and participation in their children's education. Parents generally held a positive attitude towards their children's education and wanted their children to "do better" than them. Parents set reasonable expectations for their children's education as they emphasized that their children attend school, maintain a minimum level of academic performance, and graduate from high school. In addition, most parents also reported having positive educational experiences as children. Parents highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships with teachers and other school staff as the most salient aspects of their own educational experiences.

This chapter explores the ways in parents engage in their children's education without consultation from schools. Three types of parental participation were described by parents and included involvement in the school (or traditional forms of parental involvement), home and community. Parental participation often occurred as an outgrowth of parents' expectations and goals for their children's education (i.e. to enhance the educational experiences of their children), or to remedy perceived instances of mistreatment of their child (i.e. reactive engagement) by school staff. In addition, some parents were following the traditions of their parents who were perceived to be actively involved in their children's education and hoped to pass on a legacy of advocacy in education to ensure each generation reached their potential.

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Parental participation in this study is broadly defined to capture the multiple ways African American parents with a variety of educational levels engage in their children's education. The interviews with parents demonstrate that parents participated in their children's education in a variety of ways. Parental participation in this study consists of traditional and non-traditional activities performed in schools, homes and community settings.

Non-traditional Forms of Involvement (Home Involvement)

All Woodson parents were engaged in non-traditional forms of participation in their children's education. They became involved in their homes and communities. Such forms of involvement took place away from the supervision and/or observation of school staff. Parents engaged in their children's education in multiple ways including having conversations with their children about their education, assisting with homework, taking their children on educational trips and purchasing supplemental materials to support their children's education. In addition, parents invited the participation of family members and friends to support their child's education. The narratives presented below illustrate how Woodson parents translate their value for education into concrete activities with their children.

Parents' Conversations with their Children: Encouraging and Supporting their Children

Sheila, a parent and student at a community college, discusses having daily individual and family conversations with her children about school. Her conversations with her children appear to be an effort to support and encourage them. In the first excerpt, she describes a conversation with her oldest son regarding completing

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schoolwork. In the second excerpt, she describes nightly family meetings she and her husband have with their children about their education.

> You know I have to tell him, 'look, I have way more homework than you do.' I'm like Deon 'this is not going to get any better. The homework is going to get larger and larger and larger and I guarantee you that if you deal with the little homework now and have a plan in your mind how you are going to do your homework, and what time you are going to set aside for it, it will be easier once the rest of this piles and piles of homework because it's only going to get bigger.' The higher your grade is. So I think me encouraging him helps him. ... He's a, he's a, he's a boy and he's real easy to get his feelings hurt. And once his feelings are hurt he's blocked off. You know he don't want, he, he, his self-esteem goes down a little bit so I think it is the parent's job to you know keep their child's self-esteem up you know. If nobody else is, the teacher isn't, the parent has to do that. Cause if they don't their thinking you know well if mom don't think I can do it I probably can't do it cause mom knows me better than anybody so. You know I think the parent needs to you know on a consistent basis just make sure they are encouraging the kid. Yeah.

Given that Sheila attends a local community college, she is able to understand the educational experiences and pressures of being a student. While Sheila does reflect on her personal experiences when communicating with her children about school issues, the primary purpose of many of her conversations about education is to motivate her children. Many parents, including Sheila, were unable to hands-on assist their older children with completing school assignments; however, what they could not provide in actual direct assistance, they were able to devote their efforts to teaching their children practical skills (time-management and organization skills) and/or find resources for their children (e.g. tutoring, internet searches, library visits). Moreover, for some parents, encouragement and a sense that their problems were manageable was all they could offer to their children. Sheila's conversation also recognizes the emotional distress, described as loss of self-esteem that can occur when students become overwhelmed with schoolwork and are not supported/encouraged by teachers or their parents. Thus, it

appears conversations with children aimed at assisting with practical skills, encouraging children, and increasing self-esteem was very important for Sheila's family.

However, Sheila's conversations with her children are not solely focused on solving the immediate problems of her individual children. Sheila also engaged in family meetings with her entire household on a daily basis to process school experiences as a group.

> I've, I even though I don't want them up past 10, 11 o'clock but because we come in so late we have that first half an hour of you know family regrouping. Discussing what's been happening all day. How have you been feeling? You know what's been going on in school? We at least have to have that no matter how late it is. Although it's cutting into your sleep time I even let them know. I know yall tired and I know yall ready to go to bed, but this is something you need to do as a family at night before we lay down and go to sleep. We need to cause I need to know what's going on. I don't want two, three days going by and then I'm just hearing about a situation you had on Monday. You know I need to know what's going on so.

Sheila's conversations with her entire family about school not only communicate to her children that school is important and valued in her home, but shows her commitment to her children's education. The family discussions are also an attempt to keep abreast of her children's concerns and daily activities. Sheila has created a proactive process to engage in her children's education before problems occur or become exacerbated. It's also noteworthy that these conversations involve the entire family in discussing and problem-solving around school issues, which potentially can give the children the opportunity to learn from and assist each other in solving problems. Sheila is one of a few parents interviewed that discussed having family meetings about school. Sheila's husband was reported to be an active participant in these conversations.

Beverly, a teacher in the Korbel school district, also reported having similar family discussions with her children after school. However, she emphasizes a difference

in the nature of the conversations she has with her children, focusing on both the content

and quality of the discussions.

> We have "level 5" conversations all the time. Every now and then we joke, and they tell 'yo momma' jokes, one or two, but most of the time when we have family discussions, it's a very high level discussion. A lot of theorizing, a lot of philosophy, spiritual stuff. We just analyze life that way. We're all real philosophical and my children have turned out this way too.... For the most part, we have a very serious spin on life. Any incident that occurs at school, they bring it home, and we discuss it and try to put it in perspective and say how you can either learn from it or how you need to address it. That's the way we operate as a family.... Every now and then I will say to my children 'what you are talking about is non-productive.' That is the word I will use. Or 'that's not going any where.' That's like empty words, useless time. It's a waste of time or level one conversation. I say things like that all the time to my children. What I mean by that is, is that I want them to bump it up a notch. Like don't waste a lot of their time doing silly, not going anywhere types of things.

Beverly's conversations with her family, while addressing school issues, appear to

also have the intent of challenging her children to think critically and problem-solve

about issues drawing upon and/or integrating different knowledge sources (e.g.,

academic, philosophical, and spiritual perspectives). Beverly's family discussions appear

to be designed to facilitate her children's ability to question their experiences and

thoughts about particular issues. For Beverly, finding an answer to a problem is as

important as the method one utilizes to reach the answer and the manner in which one

communicates the response to others. Of note is that Beverly not only challenges her

children to be reflective about their experiences during the scheduled family time, but

encourages them to actively explore and think critically about issues throughout the day.

What is striking about both Sheila's and Beverly's conversations with their children is

that they respect and support their children's agency in figuring out what questions need

to be asked to address a particular problem and encourage them in finding their own

solutions to their problems as opposed to the parent solving the problems for their

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children. Also of note is that although Beverly and Sheila come from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, they have similar educational goals and ways of engaging their children. Several of Beverly's children are in the Gifted and Talented programs in different schools throughout the district. She attributes their achievement partly to their school-based education, but also to their ability to critically think about situations and apply knowledge in novel ways (a skill taught in the home).

Cassandra's conversations with her children about their education were rooted in her personal life struggles. Several Woodson parents like Cassandra had less traditional educational paths, many returning years later to complete their GED, high school diploma, or college degrees. As a result, parents utilized their own experiences as cautionary tales to their children of situations to avoid and/or the consequences of specific choices. The candor with which parents exposed their vulnerabilities and mistakes to their children was consistent throughout many interviews with parents. Cassandra is a single parent raising three children in the local community. She recently took a leave of absence from a Ph.D. program at a university to devote more time and attention to her children's education.

> Um, for me I give them an example. Um to the degree that when I was in junior college I got pregnant. I came out of high school in 85. I went to junior college um 85 that fall. I got pregnant in 86, was it 86, 85? So she'll be 18 this year so it must have been 87. Got pregnant in 86, dropped out in 87 and had her in October of 87. Um worked in the workforce for a while then in 96 got laid off from General Motors. Went back to finish my associates, went on to my bachelors, went on to my masters type of thing. All with being a single parent and with them with me. And they got to see me struggle through that. So to me that is like the best example I could give them of what not to do. Go to school. Be young and free. Explore the world. You know what I am saying. Get the world by the tail, you know what I am saying. Try, if you fall down, just try. Um, for me as a parent what I think they need from me um is definitely always my encouragement and definitely my dialogue. Dialogue not so much as telling them what they will and won't do so much which I do do that. But, some kind of dialogue, ask them

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questions so that they can think for themselves. What do you think about that? Well if you would have had this, would that have happened? Well, you know, what if the situation were different? And it helps them think about, wait a minute, ok, so they need that.

Similar to other parents, Cassandra's conversations about past mistakes are like personal testimonies to her children of situations to avoid and of what can be accomplished with perseverance and determination. Specifically, Cassandra shares her experience of dropping out of school and getting pregnant, a decision and/or experience many teenagers currently face. However, Cassandra's story is not one of broken dreams but is one of success. It offers encouragement and hope to her children even when they fail. Cassandra's conversations with her children were broader than addressing everyday school problems and like most parents were geared toward helping her children become critical thinkers and pursue their personal dreams.

Vanessa's and her husband's conversations with their children appear to be rooted in wanting their children to accomplish more than their parents. The parents discuss with their children the consequences of having a limited education and the current implications on the family's present day circumstances. Vanessa's husband currently works two jobs while Vanessa works a part-time job to ensure that their children will not have to work to supplement the family's income and can devote their free time to their studies.

> And my husband and I are both have been working since we were sixteen-years-old (laughs) and we have just never stopped. That's just what you do when you become of age and you want your own things. You want to stop asking mom and dad for things, you know. So you wanta kind of get out and get your own, that's what we are teaching our kids. We want you to get good grades, that comes first, no matter what. You get grades so you can have a better job. You don't want to do a factory job for your life. I mean this is what my husband does, and he's proud of it, but I mean all he thinks about is boy I could go to school. I could really do this. I could do that. I'm really interested in this, but now I have a family. You know I need money now. I have to pay bills now. I have kids they are getting ready to start driving you know shoulda, woulda, coulda. You know it

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doesn't do any good when you and I think my kids have high expectations of themselves too. They see the NBA players, the computer people, they say things like that and they are interested and we want to keep them involved in that so they can not just settle for what you can have right now. Just with getting out of high school.... They know that already we are not going to have the money to send you to a all great school. We are not going to go broke sending you to school. You're going to get good grades, you are going to get the grants that are out there for you just reach out and grab them. But you have to bring home those grades. They're not going to be handed to you. Our kids know that nothing is for free. We don't live for free. We pay for things so you need to go out there and do what you need to do to accomplish that and it's not just a given that you are going to go to college. You are going to have to work for it so and you start now. It's important right now. It's just going to get harder. So we talk about that all the time.

Vanessa and her husband also reveal to their children their personal struggles with completing their education. Unlike Cassandra, Vanessa and her husband were unable to achieve their personal dreams for a variety of reasons, which appears to promote their active engagement in their children's education. Vanessa's direct discussion of what the family can offer their children with regards to receiving advanced education as well as emphasizing the value of hard work are designed to serve as motivators for her children to continue their education.

In contrast, JoAnn's conversations with her adopted sons could be characterized as serving the interest and functions of schools. Specifically her conversations with her children taught them how to comply with school rules without any critique or reflection of the appropriateness of rules. Her conversations were also usually in reaction to problems identified by school staff.

Yeah, I tell them. I say when you go to school you're not going to learn anything if you don't listen. You've got to listen and do as you are told. It's not what you think. It's not what you want to do. It's what you are told to do. You have to listen and I don't want to hear anything except that you listened and I don't want you talking back to the teacher telling her 'no.' I don't want to. Nobody is worried about that. You do what she's told, what you're told, just like you have to do at home.

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Such conversations with her sons support the agenda of schools by teaching appropriate classrooms behaviors and also communicating a level of respect for teachers. Unlike Beverly and Sheila, JoAnn rarely invited the participation of her children in solving problems or questioning decisions. Often teachers' perceptions of her children were accepted and supported without input from her children.

Thus far parents' conversations with their children have focused on encouraging/supporting their children, teaching problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and complying with the rules and regulations of schools (e.g., completing school work, behaving appropriately). For these parents, schools as an institution were considered legitimate settings where the best interests of children were served, thus their efforts were geared toward helping their children adapt and assimilate to the school setting. However, a subgroup of parents' conversations with their children were less supportive of specific practices of schools and focused on teaching children how to critique the educational system and larger community issues.

Parents' Conversations with their Children: Critiquing the Educational System

Sandra's conversations with her son also teach him to respect his teacher's classroom and to follow school rules. However, Sandra's conversations also teach her son about certain situations in which he is allowed and supported to disobey certain school rules.

> Sandra: That's not his classroom, I let him know that point blank. That's not your classroom that is your teacher's classroom, so therefore why you in the classroom your teacher is in authority there so whatever issues or whatever problems you run into while you are in that classroom you take it to the teacher because that is not your classroom. So which means if you get into another altercation with a student you tell the teacher. But I've only instructed him to tell the teacher twice.
>
> Interviewer- oh, ok.

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Sandra: Because if after you told the teacher two times and she ain't done nothing about then you clock whoever that is beside the head that is bothering you and then I'll deal with it. You know, but you have to go to that teacher first and if that teacher doesn't do anything about it, and hey if you kick a dog even he is going to bite you back. I don't teach my kids to fight. I don't send my kids to school to fight but if somebody hits him and he tells the teachers and she does nothing about it he ain't going to keep telling that teacher because I'm not going to have it. And I've had situations not with Kareem but with my other son when he was at Woodson and I knew for a fact that he told that teacher several times

Interviewer: That he was having problems?

Sandra: That he was having problems and then he didn't do anything about it and when he wrestled and grabbed that student and mopped him up side his head a couple of times they want to suspend my son. Nope, I'm not settling for that because I even wrote a note.

Sandra's seemingly contradictory statements to her children regarding school rules appear to be rooted in Sandra's perception that teachers do not always respond appropriately or efficiently to students' requests. Sandra is a substitute teacher's aide and reported having first hand knowledge of how teachers minimize students' concerns leading students to handle situations on their own. While Sandra gives her children permission to disobey school rules, she accepts personal responsibility for their behaviors and advocates for having their school punishments reduced or fully expunged.

April, a graduate student, reported her conversations with her daughter focused on addressing issues of "social justice" in the community. While April does communicate with her daughter about school concerns, she reports connecting her daughter's individual concerns to larger systemic and community issues. In addition, April is the only parent who reported taking on personal responsibility to actively address social issues in the community through creating alternative settings for youth.

I think that just based on the experiences that she has there [Woodson Elementary School] and I talked to her about you know what is going on, what my take is,

what I've done about those things so now she is uh becoming more aware and but I believe in children being involved in social justice issues you know. I have run a Saturday program before where I worked with school children, arts-based activities with social justice as the key component or social issues are a component of that so I always want to actively get kids involved because a lot of times right they don't come from families where uh activism or even or knowing how to critique problem-solve without being aggressive and violent you know how to see it, articulate it and figure out okay so how do we resolve this. I work with my nine-year-old, actually she does a better job of doing that then my sixteen year old does at this point so.

April gives an example of a situation in which she discussed her daughter's

school problems in terms of larger systemic issues.

> April: In this school district all I ask for is being fair. And um my daughter is in the gifted program here, but I see that the two teachers that she has had at Woodson I would not say are fair. I think that they have personal biases that uh come through uh. Stacey has stated certain things that she has observed as far as differential treatment.

> Interviewer: Are you talking about in terms of gender, race?

> April: Race MmHmm. Differential treatment based on race.

> Interviewer: So there is a lack of general fairness in the schools?

> April: I think because if she is treated fairly and she understands that she's being treated fairly she knows that success and failure is directly related to her. If she is not being treated fairly

> Interviewer: (interrupting) She can't see it.

> April: Yeah. She might not be succeeding because of how the teacher perceives her.

For April, teaching her child how to analyze school problems and larger

community issues in terms of socio-political issues was very important. April not only

teaches her children about issues of social justice, but actively involves her daughter in

arts activities (with a social justice orientation) throughout the community. Often, April's

daughter must be absent from school to participate in these activities; however, April

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believes her daughter's participation is integral to her social development and education in general.

Beverly, a teacher in the school district, also recognized that some of the policies and practices of schools as well as school staff can have negative impacts on students' performance and behavior. Beverly openly shares with her children her own disenchantment with school practices and policies that she believes can become obstacles to students' growth. In the discussion below Beverly gives her children a framework for viewing their academic successes and failures.

> And so I just don't place a lot of value in a letter grade on a paper and somebody can give you an A or a D because so often it is subjective and I hate that and I tell my kids please don't let that make or break you. Don't let that affect you, affirm or reaffirm you or make you feel that you can't do anything because half of these people are not smart enough to teach you. That's the same thing my parents used to tell me. They don't know you. They don't know anything about you. They don't know how you made, how fearfully and wonderfully your brain is made. They can not handle you. So whatever they put down just take it with a grain of salt and keep on in your journey to press to the higher mark because you are going somewhere great. And that's why I tell my kids that I am the motivational speaker in my house. For my husband and my children. I am always trying to motivate them. ... And so I try to tell my kids that if you happen to get a bad teacher. All of my children have had at least one bad teacher that they have had to suffer throughout the year. And I say take whatever good you can get out of the situation and know that in the real scheme of things I don't even remember my third grade teacher. So I tell them this is like a moment in time for them and I teach my kids if I allowed someone to keep me stuck at a certain place then I could not have gone on and graduated from high school and graduated from college and have my own family. I couldn't let her get me off course. She was just a little tiny splash in the pan.

Beverly communicates to her children that she doesn't always accept their teacher's assessment of their academic performance or behavior as accurate. However, she still challenges her children to achieve beyond teachers' perceptions and expectations for them. She also teaches her children how to view the relative impact of a low letter grade or a "bad" teacher in the grand scheme of their lives. Beverly's conversations,

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while challenging the practices and policies of schools also teaches her children how to continue engaging in a perceived aversive setting to achieve their dreams.

As can be seen, parents' conversations with their children were an important and consistent part of their daily activities with their children. Parents' conversations with their children served several purposes including: encouraging children (e.g., teaching them how to work through problems), teaching skills (e.g., problem-solving, critical thinking, practical skills), communicating social and moral values, supporting or challenging school policies and practices. Moreover, such conversations communicated to their children that education was valued and important in the home. For a subgroup of parents, the school conversations were also an opportunity to bring the family together to support, problem-solve and learn from one another. Each participant was a valued and contributing member to the family. Parents' conversations with their children were a proactive approach to engaging in their children's education and remaining abreast of their concerns and needs.

Assisting with School-based Activities

Other common ways parents engaged in their children's education were through assisting with school-based activities in the home. Similar to the impact of parents' conversations with their children, assisting with school-based activities brought families closer together, communicated the importance and value of education, and showed that parents cared for their children.

Roberta's, a certified nurse's assistant and mother of two children, description of her decision to change her work schedule which allows her to be available after school to assist her daughter with her homework illustrates her commitment to education.

I hate getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning and I still hate it. But the number one reason I did it is so I can be at home with my children you know at night and at evening time so if they need me to help with homework, or if they need me to explain something, read to them, you know and do whatever you know, I am here to help them as much as I can. To help her learn.

While Sheila is unable to directly assist her older children with their assignments due to the complexity of their work, she reports being hands-on involved with her youngest child. Sheila and many other parents' level of involvement with their children appeared to differ depending on the parents' perception of their level of competence to assist with the material and their perception of their children's individual needs at a given time point. For Sheila, creating a home environment that was an extension of school-based learning whether through discussing academic problems as a family or using naturally occurring events as teaching opportunities was very important and shows her commitment and value for education. In addition, Sheila notes fostering an environment where learning is fun as opposed to punitive that supports her children's engagement in their education.

What I do is because I know that my five-year-old can't sit in one sitting and try to understand what's going on in this picture (shows me son's homework assignment). What we do is one day they have like four days to do it and turn it in. So each day things will get gradual. I'll you know I'll encourage him to tell me what he will sit down and do first. They need to understand they need to put their name on it. You are not going to get credit for it unless your name is on it and a lot of kids do not put their name on their homework. And it's unbelievable how that can cause a whole nother confusion so you know I get him to understand just tactics when you sit down and do any kind of work. I try to build them up with you know how do you do this? How do I go about doing something I don't know how to do? So I you know go over with him what everything is. I try to get him to tell me what he already knows about the picture and then we just do it day by day. One day we'll go over you know what animals are these? And maybe where they live? And then the next day you know we will review that and then we will move on to let's answer one or two questions yeah.

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Sheila's participation in her younger son's education focuses on teaching him practical strategies to organize and complete school assignments. She also reports teaching her son how to generalize the process of preparing oneself to complete school assignments to other non-school related activities. Sheila's involvement also respects her child's ability to find the answers on his own by asking him questions that will lead to the final answer. In addition to assistance with completing homework assignments with her children, Sheila has general academic goals for all of her children, especially around reading that she describes below.

> So at home we're doing a lot of reading. He has um, my older kids it's more of at night it's a bedtime story. It's moved from mommy reading a bedtime story to now two of them can read. They read to each other the bedtime story so they read to each other. And my youngest son comes home with his galaxy of reader sheet. He comes home every Monday with a book. And I mean we have a, I'm trying to build our library over there (points to bookcase underneath television unit). We um we build our library with books that's on everybody's level so everybody can try to read. You know at some point. And so we read. Um we could stand to read a little bit more but I think with the time that we come in the house we just try to read around our schedule which gives us enough time. You know once a week he is reading a hundred and twenty minutes so. That's awesome. Well, he's not necessarily reading because he is only five. He can't read yet. But between me reading, they let you do a whole thing whether it's his brothers or his sisters reading to him. You know long as there is a reading thing going on so. We do that and you know like I said they are with the reading around the room thing. They like to you know just look around and read everything so you know I just encouraged them and let them know that this is not punishment. This is actually fun. We could play games to have fun with these words and you know we have flash cards that we do so it's a lot of, I try to relax learn at home. You know it's not so much of a structured environment. You can relax, you can giggle if somebody say something funny trying to say a word you know you can relax a little bit. But I want you to understand that wow you are learning. You are learning. You just learned how to spell that whole word. My daughter what was the name? It was some sandwich that was on tv. Now I couldn't pronounce the word if I just looked at it. But she said mommy what's that word and since the tv pronounced it I pronounced it. And she said well how do you spell it? And I, well I asked her how do you spell it? And because I was pronouncing each letter right, she understood that these letters make these sounds so 'f' must be first, 'r' must be next. And it amazed me that she spelled all but two letters of that whole word and I couldn't even spell it. And I'm like you see that Jenelle she cause she

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stumbled in the middle and said I can't. But I said "you can." You know when that is the kids worse, they need to remove that word from the dictionary, "can't." I do not like that word. That has got to be the first word that a kid says when they feel that they are stuck. 'I can't.' 'I can't.' And all I do is show them how they can. 'Yes you can.' It's not the impossible. You really can do this. And then once they do this and they see that they just did it. They feel a whole lot better. Their ego is just skyrocketing so if the ego can skyrocket you wouldn't get tired of school like they do you know. Kids wouldn't think of school as some negative place. You know so. I don't know it's just keeping them involved. Keeping them happy about learning and not so much a punishment thing so.

Sheila's discussion of reading in her home demonstrates how she has changed a school-based educational activity into a fun learning experience for her children in her home. She openly discusses her frustration with the structured nature of schools, which she perceives fails to motivate or spark the interests of students. Sheila's approach to making learning fun incorporates multiple methods to support her children's interest in reading (e.g., visual, auditory and written stimuli). She also invites her children to serve as peer tutors for one another. Sheila aptly notices a connection between supporting her children's potential (e.g., showing them that they "can" do things) and an increase in self-esteem, which is one of the frameworks she utilizes in assisting her children with their schoolwork.

JoAnn's participation in her children's education involved monitoring of their completion of school assignments, without direct hands-on assistance. Again, JoAnn is a 76-year-old grandmother whose school-based education occurred decades ago and perhaps was somewhat different from the educational practices/strategies taught to current students. However, what she cannot provide in direct hands-on assistance, she remedies by ensuring that homework is completed with minimal editing or discussion of answers.

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I let them do their homework. And I look at it after. And uh sometimes Jacob will come to me, 'I can't spell this.' I say well go into the kitchen until you learn how to spell it. Then all of a sudden it comes to him. See that's to get all this baby, get all up to you you know and get all mushy and then their going to lose sight on what they are doing. Do what you gotta do.... Most of the learning is done in the house but they go without me. I mean I've taken them (to the library) but when I have more than those two, it's hard so I just ordered me a van. I've gotta get me a van so everybody can go because they like going … I don't see [going to] in the library, I got books in the hallway. They got books. I used to I buy books. I've given away cases and cases of books and uh so they have periods of time here, I don't let them do nothing but get the boxes of books, get on the floor and read. Read to me. I make Jacob read out loud so I know he is reading. Greg, he's he's looking.

JoAnn also shows her value for education by ensuring that her children complete school assignments and have a quiet space in the home to engage in such tasks. JoAnn also reports creating a library in her home to foster reading and structuring specific times for her children to engage in reading. JoAnn's commitment to her children's education is also evidenced in her purchase of a van, which will enable her to take her four grandchildren to various educational and social activities in the community.

Like other Woodson parents, Ernestine demonstrates her commitment to her grandson's education by ensuring that he completes homework assignments and other educational tasks before engaging in other recreational tasks. In sum, engagement in educational activities supercedes all other activities.

I think you know for me and his papa we work with him on that [homework]. My papa, which is my fiancé, he uh work with him on his spelling and we do homework with them everyday, Monday, well Sunday evening through Thursday he do not play with like toys or any thing like that or we get like, you got cartoons on tv that learn you things. You let him watch that. When he first get home from school we do homework and he used to that. So when he get home he know well I gotta get this homework done and then we can do whatever. Like tonight he'll be like they out of school for these fourteen days but Ms. Wright and she is a good teacher, she actually sent home books for them to read these two weeks they out of school, but we got books. And like I say we just, I got so many activities in the house for him that he know that he got to study, let me get this (Phone rings. Answers phone.) Stuff like, (pauses) every day I ask him what he do in class?

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What are we working on? What can mama help you to do? When me and his papa, he like papa to help him with homework because papa give him all the answers and I sit down to homework he be like but mama it's hard. No, it's not hard we have to do it the right way. Just give him you know the right way of doing his work and letting him know that someone giving him the answer is not going to take you far. So this is what I push with him and I have to go one on one with him after papa is out of the room. Like what did you do today? Tell me what you and papa just done. So I know for sure he understood. So that's how we do it at our house, that's what we do with him at home. Deran knows school nights is school nights you know when weekends comes he does basically what he wants to the extreme, but basically my goal, that's my goal with him is to give him all the learning that and help him and when I don't understand something the next morning I will go in and ask Ms. Wright if we did it right yeah, cause it's been a while since I have been in school and I would love to go back but after I took Deran on I've been trying to take courses over the internet and stuff like that so I am really trying to work on it cause I need to brush up some so I can stay up to date cause I can imagine what it's gonna be like by the time he gets in high school and I'ma need somebody else. That's when my niece and them come in but uh.

Ernestine describes an interesting scenario in which she openly reports her fiancé gives her grandson the answers to homework problems in an attempt to help Deran with schoolwork. Ernestine uses this opportunity to not only teach her grandson how to solve specific homework problems, but also discusses the value of her grandson being able to complete schoolwork using his own abilities. Similar to other Woodson parents, Ernestine is adept at generalizing school-based learning problems to real world situations (e.g., the effects of cheating). Ernestine also appears to be committed to ensuring that her grandson understands school materials by her decision to take online courses to increase her academic skills. Ernestine recognizes that in the future she will be less able to assist her grandson (as he matriculates to higher grade levels) however, it appears that she has a plan for assisting him by enlisting the help of older relatives to tutor her grandson.

Similar to other Woodson parents, Cassandra describes multiple ways that she is involved in her children's education including providing assistance with homework and access to resources to complete assignments. However, she reported spending most of

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her time teaching her children "accountability and responsibility" as integral to their overall development.

> Teaching accountability and responsibility. Teaching about planning goals, goal planning and reaching those goals. You have a paper due in six weeks ok what do you do everyday to get that paper? Because I never had that, to me goal setting is empowering thing for them to see kinda what's going on. In the summer time we do two hours of math, two hours of reading every day, even the weekends to try to teach them a breadth of what's happening so they don't lose what they get. So I think that role is critical. So I would describe my role as paramount in their involvement.... Its homework monitoring, it is um, assessing your accountability level. Are they accountable for doing what they say? Uh, a lot of it is even doing projects with them. We go on the internet and find different things to cut out or whatever. Try to give us some structure, so a lot of it definitely homework monitoring and participation and having where they have access to a library card and the internet those to me are very critical.... I monitor their homework every day even if I am at work I am on the phone. I gotta see it when I walk in the door type of stuff.

Given that Cassandra's children are older (5th grade, high school) and can independently complete assignments on their own, Cassandra focuses her attention on teaching her children more advanced skills including time management and goal setting to complete school tasks. Cassandra is engaging in a process of shifting responsibility from herself to her children to ensure that their assignments are completed. Cassandra also reports holding her children accountable for the goals they set for completing assignments. Cassandra is the only parent to specifically label her participation in her children's education as "teaching responsibility"; however, it is evident from the narratives of other Woodson parents that they have similar goals for their children.

For some parents, hands-on involvement in their children's education was not an option due to their limited educational skills. However, parents' perceptions of their competence (or lack of) to assist their children directly did not prevent them from

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participating in their children's education in other ways. Dianne describes finding human resources to assist her children in completing their schoolwork.

> Diane: You HAVE to help your kid at home because you don't know how much they are getting at school because there are so many kids. So you gotta help them. Like I, Kim has a tutor, yeah, plus, cause she has a reading problems, and math problems, and you got to know your child, know your child, you know your child to know that they are having problems that you gotta help them, you gotta help them, you know.

> Interviewer: So are you talking about helping them specifically with their homework?

> Diane: Yeah, well help them with their education period (with emphasis)! Homework true, you gotta um, you know if they run into a problem or something help them as much as you can and if you can't, get them that extra help ... I make sure they get to school every day because I work every day. So you gotta go to school. When they come home I ask them how was your day? And do they have any notes for me and was their any problems? And we work on it that way.

Dianne takes a somewhat different approach to assisting her grandchildren. Due to her own limited education, basic forms of participating, (which are often overlooked by school staff as parent participation), like checking for notes sent home by teachers, asking questions about their day, and sending her grandchildren to school become very important. Through this process she is able to remain abreast of her grandchildren's concerns, identify their problem areas and find resources to meet those needs. Dianne's motivation to supplement her children's education also appears in part to be based on her perception that schools are overcrowded and can not address the individuals needs of every child leaving parents with some responsibility to participate in their children's education.

Margaret describes several difficulties she faces in trying to support her children's education as a single mother of three children. While having a limited education has prevented her from being able to directly assist her children with their schoolwork, she

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places value in her ability to financially provide for her children so they can attend school and have a place to complete their studies.

> The majority of the parents care. The majority of the parents are doing what they can do. And if they are not coming into the school, you know, they are trying to mentor that child at home and expecting the teacher to do and educate their child. Because I'm not a teacher. I don't know, you know what I'm saying, most parents we don't have the first clue about teaching and a lot of times it's hard to teach your own children because they feel like this is mommy. So it's kind of hard you know in having the patience. A lot of times kids like "well mommy can I get up, can I do," so it's a I think it's an atmosphere that you have to have when you are learning and studying.... The parent is working to make sure that child has a home to come to when he leaves school and food to eat and clothes to wear to come to school. So, I can't, the parent can't be in two and three places, you know what I'm saying.

Margaret identifies several barriers that limit her ability to participate in her children's education in more traditional ways. Barriers identified include: having the time to participate in educational activities; limited or no flexibility on one's job to attend school events; and perceived lack of competence to assist with school tasks. Despite having limited resources, human as well as financial, Margaret shows her commitment to her children's education by engaging in supportive activities (e.g., providing food and shelter) to ensure they are prepared for school.

Assisting with School-based Activities: Indirect Approaches to Assisting Children

Similarly, Carl a teacher's aide and father of two children, took a less hands-on approach to assisting his children with their schoolwork. Carl participated in his children's education at their request or the request of school staff. For Carl, informing his children that he was available to assist them without structuring how or when he became involved showed that he was committed to their education.

> We do homework together, um, ...whenever he needs something done he always comes to me and says I need help with this and could you do this, could you do that and if he has a problem at school I ask him. He'll come home and I will say

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what happened. You want to talk about it, if not I'm upstairs, I'm here or there, talk to me, I'm here ... We have a lot of friends that are involved with the school system so if he needs something he got it, regardless of what it is.

Beverly also did not actively structure her involvement in her children's school assignments. Beverly reports supporting her children's efforts to complete homework assignments independently by encouraging and motivating them; however, she reports initiating involvement in their studies when she perceives they have become overwhelmed by a specific project.

> I don't do much with my children other than motivate them, encourage them to get you know, that it doesn't help you if I do your work for you. And every now and then when I feel like my children are under too much pressure, too much stress, I'll do some things that I don't feel like benefit them as much as if they did it themselves. So I will help them do research on the internet, or I'll pull together something that I know we have in the house as opposed to making them go on a scavenger hunt themselves. ... But I don't like to do any of their work for them if I can help it. And then sometimes like my daughter had to read eight chapters or something because she is in a book club and she missed a day and was a day behind and now she needs all these chapters. But what I'll do sometimes is read out loud to them to make up some of those chapters. You know reading out loud is so much more focused. A lot of times you know my daughter would read Watson Goes To Birmingham and I'll read like three chapters and when she gets tired again I will read three more chapters. So things like that I do. But for the most part I don't even know when they have things due. When they are working on major projects, book reports, and different things. They show it to me as a like a finished project like mom what do you think of this?

Beverly's primary role in her children's projects serves a supportive rather than a didactic purpose. She distinguishes between the organizational or more mundane aspects (including finding resources, supplies) of homework assignments versus the academic aspects of projects, and prefers assisting her children with the former. Beverly's role includes giving her children constructive feedback on the quality of completed assignments. Beverly's children appear to value their mother's comments and advice and often invite her participation on projects.

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Beverly's describes an incident at school that illustrates the pride her children have in completing assignments on their own.

> And my kids have worked on projects where, my son complained and said this boy's mom and her boyfriend did their project. That he was over there all evening, and he was in tears, and he said 'we didn't get to do any of it. Our whole thing on New Orleans.' The mom had been there and she had a bunch of stuff and artifacts and stuff. The boyfriend is an artist so he designed our drawing and everything. He said so I could have came home. And then when it came time to present it to the class, my son would not participate in it and he got an F on that project. It was like a big milestone, one of those stories that we go back to a lot. And sort of like the example we use of parents who do their kids' homework because they have been in gifted. So they say so and sos dad does all of his math or so and so mom wrote her report, all she had to do was type it. But you know, I would say to them all the time and I would say to their teachers whatever you get from my children it's 100 percent them. I haven't even edited it. Robin writes papers all the time, she's in high school. She will write a paper and type it and everything and maybe on the last run she'll say mom can you read this. And I will just skim over it. I don't edit it or anything like I could do and sometimes I might tell her you know you should go back and edit this or I will circle some words that I question the spelling and she will go back. Or I'll look at a sentence and I will say well this doesn't sound right to me or she'll go back and change it or she might not. Like she might say even when I have one or two sentences off, I'm still way above the other kids in my class so I am not going to change it. I'm just not going to bother, I just stayed up all night, I'm not going to do it. But, so I don't do that. And sometimes with my younger children, I will ask my older children to help them do stuff which is the same way. I'm a product of that in my own family. I'm the youngest of nine. I had four older sisters and four older brothers and I benefited from them helping me learn to read, do math, from them quizzing me, holding me to a higher standard and saying this is unacceptable, look at your handwriting or something like that. So I have benefited from them and my younger children show signs of that too. You know the work that they produce is much better than the work that my older children produced at their age. So it's at a higher level.

Beverly's description of her son's decision to refuse credit for a project he did not complete shows his integrity and his value for completing his own work. Beverly's involvement in her children's education not only teaches her children how to become good students but also how to be good citizens. Beverly also reports inviting the participation of her older children to assist their younger siblings with homework as an

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effective strategy to support their education and hold them accountable for ensuring their siblings' success.

Based on the above discussions with Woodson parents, it is evident that they are active in their children's education in a variety of ways. Parents assisting with school-based activities took multiple forms (e.g., assistance with homework assignments, teaching organization and time-management skills, motivating children to complete schoolwork, identifying problem areas) and occurred at different levels (e.g., direct and indirect.) Woodson parents' discussion of their activities illustrate that their decision to participate took into account various factors including parents' perception of their competence to assist their children, the individual needs of their children, parents' perception of the education their children were receiving in school, and resources and time available to work with their children. While several barriers also influenced the ways parents participated in their children's education, no obstacle appeared too overwhelming to deter parents from finding a way to participate in their children's education.

<u>Engaging in Community Activities</u>

In addition to working with their children in their homes, many Woodson parents also supported their children's education through engagement in community activities. Such activities were designed to supplement school-based knowledge in addition to developing the social and moral education of children.

For Sheila, going to the library was a weekly fun activity that the entire family could engage in together while also serving educational purposes. Library trips not only

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involved finding books and videos, but Sheila also taught her children how to effectively

use the library to find information and learn about the roles of library staff members.

> We go as a family. Yeah we um everybody uses their own library card. I point
> them in the direction well my oldest son and my daughters knows which books
> they can and can not read because they can just pick it up and figure out if they
> can read it or not. But my youngest son I just direct him to the area of books that's
> on his level and tell him to pick out books. They pick out whatever they want
> whether it's a video or book. We actually go from books to videos. We do the
> book thing first and then we move on. They may get a video or something. Yeah I
> try to encourage them to do the reading thing. You know how to use the library
> because even though I know they learn it in school I know when I learned it in
> school it wasn't enough information to where once I got out of high school I
> literally still did not know how to go to a public library and use the catalogue
> system to look up a book. So I think that is important for the parents at home to
> reinforce how to use the library you know how to even go about asking questions.
> You know it surprised me that they didn't even know who the lady was sitting at
> the little round desk in the middle of the desk. And I'm like that's the librarian.
> And I'm thinking like shouldn't they have learned that at school? But they
> couldn't and I'm like that's where you realize as a parent you have to be teaching
> them too. You can't just be leaving it to them. Cause they may forget the simple
> things such as this is what we call a librarian. ... So yeah it's an encouraging
> thing to have to go to the library. They love going to the library. I don't know
> what it is, but they love it ... I try to keep them going once a week ... I try to
> make sure that you know the kids didn't just get the book you know because it has
> nice pictures in them. I actually make them sit down and you know hey, show me
> what you have learned. Did you try to read the book? You know I don't want
> them just going to the library getting books because it is something fun to do. I
> want you to get something out of it. So yeah we you know make sure you know
> that they are reading something out of the books.

Sheila's library outings with her family are another opportunity that she has

created to support her children's reading skills. While Sheila recognizes that the library

is a fun activity for her family, she ensures that the educational component of this activity

is realized by asking her children questions about the books they have read or videos

watched. Similar to the comments of other Woodson parents, Sheila's visits appear to

serve a "checks and balances" function by addressing aspects of their children's school-

based learning that were not perceived to be adequately taught or fully understood by her children.

Lisa, a teacher and mother of two children, reports participating in her son's education by finding ways to incorporate school-based educational objectives with learning opportunities in the community. Lisa's ability to coordinate such activities with her child's school learning involves a more proactive approach and ongoing communication with her child's teacher. Lisa's employment as a staff member at the school that her son attends facilitates this process.

> So I just think that it is good to work on all aspects of a child. I mean I don't want, if all you do is work, read, you do homework, homework, homework, you never get to experience life itself. I mean you can experience it through a book, we talk about you can jump inside a book. That's great but if I'm always reading about somebody playing baseball in the book and I never get to experience it myself its kind of a cheat. So, what's the benefit in reading about it, if some of the things I read about I can experience, your not going to experience everything you read or we learn about. But I think if I can we can do it. Like they were doing a unit on the aquarium. Perfect opportunity for us to go to the Aquarium. We went to the Aquarium before the unit. We saw the fish. We took pictures and brought a slideshow back for his classroom. So that they could see what he saw. We took pictures of the different fish and stuff and then we put it on a slide show. And so he got to show it to his classroom. Well he got to see the fish up close and personal they just got to see pictures of it, but it's still good so. I just like to do things.

Lisa's description of her participation in her child's education shows her value for exposing her son to the experiences he learns about in school. For Lisa, these experiences reinforce school-based learning objectives and give her child a hands-on perspective and perhaps a fuller appreciation/understanding of topics discussed in school. It is also of note, that Lisa shared their Aquarium experience with her son's classmates. Most Woodson parents interviewed appeared to focus the majority of their efforts on

ensuring that their individual children were learning without active attention to the learning experiences of other Woodson students.

Vera's vision for her daughter exceeded traditional forms of involvement that directly connected community activities to school educational goals. For Vera, focusing her attention on ensuring that her daughter was a well-rounded student across several domains (e.g., academics, social skills and athleticism) was very important. Below, Vera discusses making opportunities for learning possible through exposing her daughter to diverse activities as an integral form of her participation in her daughter's education.

> She really doesn't need that much help. Um, at this point it's just a matter of making sure she gets in the right school to further her education. I'm already looking at what are we going to do for junior high, you know what's out there. Um, and I and I make sure that she gets into activities that you know teach. You know and that teach good sportsmanship, that she can swim if she wants to swim just because there is nobody else black (meaning African American) swimming doesn't mean that she can't be a swimmer. Doesn't mean that she can't be on the swim team. You know her outside activities like during the summer, I make sure that she doesn't have to have a friend going in to whatever. I want her to learn how to go into a situation and acclimate herself and not be afraid and so I just set up things so that she can do that. You know we belong to um the children's museum um we've gone to different programs at the University, different churches, different things like that. So, in that way I make sure the possibilities of learning other things are to her.

Vera's description succinctly illustrates the planning and purposeful nature in which she structures her daughter's activities to promote learning. Vera's efforts show her value not only for building the academic skills of her daughter, but also her recognition of the social and moral education that is an integral part of being a good student and citizen, which is not actively developed in schools.

Similarly, Tasha, a customer service representative and mother of five children, describes a variety of ways that she is involved in her children's education broadly that supports their development as future contributors to society. In the conversation

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described below, Tasha reports tapping into the resources of friends and their family's own personal situations to promote learning opportunities for her children.

> They need to see more than what is in their house. I think that children need to meet a wide variety of people and see people in different business situations ... I think mentoring is important, but I think in mentoring programs you kind of lose something in the translation there. Not to say anything against mentoring programs because you go there and it's too uptight where you can't get to know. ... Like I have a friend who runs a business in Korbel and um I take my daughters and stuff and they go around and do odd jobs there and their in there to see the inner workings of the business rather than just meeting with them and say well oh, ok I have this business. You can say ok I have a business I run this but how do you go about doing it? How did you go about acquiring that business, getting that loan, getting started? What's the start up cost?, How do you go about doing things like that? And I think it is more important for children to learn things like that at an early age. ... And I also think it is important for children to get involved in everyday financial life. Um, I know that in home-ec, when I was in home-ec we taught cooking and sewing. Um, but in other home-ec classes they teach you how to balance a checkbook, and how to arrange your financial life and how to start a budget and stick to it and things like that and I think that is important for children to learn early on. I know my dad taught us that when we were six and seven years old. We had to pay the bills. He would give us some money and say ok here are the bills, you separate this and if you give them too much they are going to say oh thank you and if you don't give them enough they are going to shut your stuff off.

Tasha's participation in her children's education in the community and her home exposes them to the real life and practical implications/benefits of their education (e.g., starting a business, managing their finances). Tasha's focus on finding experiences that are both beneficial and meaningful to her children and with staff that are supportive and take a genuine interest in her children shows her value for their education. While such activities may not directly parallel what her children are currently learning in school, it shows her children the opportunities that are available once they receive an education. Like other Woodson parents, Tasha draws upon the human resources of family and friends to support her children's education.

Engagement in community activities represents another form of involvement Woodson parents have identified to participate in their children's education. Similar to assisting with homework, Woodson's parents decision to take their children on community outings were designed to support the development of the whole child, educationally, morally and socially. Such activities also brought families together. Parents used their limited resources (e.g., finances, human, time) to support their children. In light of having limited resources to fund such activities, families drew upon the resources of friends and relatives in addition to free or discounted activities in the community. Such engagement is another example of the active planning and coordination on the part of parents to support their children's education.

Purchasing Supplemental Materials

Woodson parents also supported their children's education by supplementing their school-based learning with educational materials. Parents purchased materials for their children based on their knowledge of their children's academic needs as well as to support other social/historical/moral goals for their children.

Ernestine's and Sandra's report of purchasing books to support their children's learning reflects the experiences of all of the interviews with Woodson parents.

Ernestine reports, "Yeah, we have, I just went out and bought books from Wal-Mart, adding, subtraction, and all of this."

Similarly Sandra reports,
> Yeah, I bought them a set of encyclopedias. He's learning how to use the encyclopedia and he is nine-years-old. And he is doing excellent. He is doing really good. I went over here to um, is it Barnes, Barnes and Nobles? and I buy him different books. I'm really on him about Black history. So I teach him a lot about that.

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In addition to purchasing educational materials, many Woodson parents reported creating "libraries" in their homes to allow their children access to resources to complete homework assignments and/or to supplement their education in the home. For some parents, home libraries consisted of an assortment of books in boxes, on bookshelves, to rooms filled with books.

Regardless of the size, location, or variety of reading materials, parents spoke with pride about building their children's libraries. Due to a class assignment, Beverly's children engaged in a process of counting all of the books in their home library and were surprised by the number of books they had collected over the years.

> Because we have over a thousand books in our home, it just turned out that way because I find out it was that many because one of my kids had a project once in the gifted program. They had to count all the books in the house. They counted miscellaneous books in the house. We have a bookcase that goes from one part of the wall to the other end of the wall. We have a library in our house. We call it the library. It has that in there, and a desk and a computer, and a telephone in there. So when we mean the library we mean all those books, my books from when I went to the University, some of my books from high school. You know I majored in English and Language Arts so I have all the different collections of Shakespeare and stuff. So all those different books are in our house.

Due to having over a thousand books, Beverly was able to devote an entire room, called the "library" to their collection of reading materials. She has also placed furniture and additional educational tools in the library to foster her children utilizing the room to complete assignments and study for exams.

Although some parents had limited resources, Woodson parents found ways to purchase additional materials for their children. However, for some parents, wanting the best for their children and being able to purchase the best for their children forced parents to make difficult decisions. Tamika's account of her experience trying to purchase

educational materials for her daughter offers a vivid description of some of the challenges

Woodson parents face as they try to support their children's education with limited funds.

> Yeah. I wanted to buy Hooked on Phonics (laughs). Like fourteen months, she knew her name, her address, her phone number. She could spell her name you know stuff like that because when you are poor you kind of have nothing else to do (laughs). Then I wanted to buy Hooked on Phonics. I thought it would be a good thing to get Hooked on Phonics and she was only like two which is when we started to work on having her actually read. She knew letters, and she had word recognition and stuff like that. So, I'm like if she knows this then she can start to read. So I was going to buy Hooked on Phonics and then I called and they were like well yeah it's like 350 to 400 bucks. I was like ok well we won't be getting Hooked on Phonics so we had to. These are things we had to do for ourselves because if you can't afford it, then what else is there.... Yeah, instead of going to Disney World, we learn Spanish, you know what I mean (laughs). It's like we can't go anywhere, we don't have any money to do anything so let's just read a book. And that's like I don't know if um, I guess that's kind of a good thing. It's not a good thing to be poor but, you know that's just one of those things and it brings us closer together, um, cause we do get to spend a lot more time together and stuff like that...You know, um, we go a lot, but um if we go it's still, she's got a book in the back seat and she can read to me while we are on our way. You know if we go and stay in a hotel, we are going to still read our book before we go to bed or um you know we're going to do something that some how stimulates your mind. Not just watch the stupid DVD player the whole time because its necessary.

Tamika's description of her decision not to purchase Hooked on Phonics offers

insight into the financial struggles and barriers Woodson parents face as they try to

support their children's education. Despite having limited funds to purchase a pre-

packaged program to teach her daughter how to read, Tamika uses her own resources

(e.g., books) and knowledge to assist her daughter with her goal of reading. It appears

that one benefit of not having pre-packaged programs or videos that teach children how

to read independent of their parents is that Tamika can spend more time with her

daughter teaching these skills, which brings them closer together. In addition Tamika

reports finding ways to integrate her daughter's educational learning into activities

outside of their home, which shows her value/commitment to her education.

Similarly, Rosalyn relied heavily on educational shows on the television and books to support her children's education due to having limited financial resources. She also reports extending her children's daily study time by purchasing educational books and workbooks for her children to complete after finishing their homework.

> I mean at home we um, we watch different little shows, especially for the baby we watch Dora Dora or other little shows you know that work on counting, colors, all the Sesame Street type stuff plus we have books and we work on all types of things, different sounds a pig goes "oink" something like that for the young ones. For the older two, they have these different workbooks to work on so when they are done with their homework, um I used to do it more during the beginning of the school than towards the end, they would have a couple of pages to do after their homework.

The above accounts overwhelmingly illustrate the variety of ways Woodson parents participate in their children's education in their homes and community. More specifically, daily conversations about school, assistance with homework, educational trips in the community and the purchase of educational materials were the predominant ways parents supported their children's education. Parents' decision regarding the types of ways they participated in their children's education appeared to consider several factors including the parents' competence in their ability to instruct their child, parent's perception of their child's needs, time and flexibility to engage in their child's education, financial resources available, and access to human resources. For the most part, parents' participation in their children's education was individualistic and designed to support the needs of their children without broader concern regarding the needs of Woodson students as a whole. Parents became involved because they felt it was important, in and of itself, to support their children's school based-education/needs, and due to some skepticism about the quality of education their children received in school.

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CHAPTER FIVE

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL: "MY VOICE WILL BE HEARD."

Overview

While most Woodson parents actively participated in their children's education in their homes, a subgroup of parents also reported participating directly in their children's school. There were several ways parents participated in their children's education; however, overall their participation can be described as either a proactive or reactive form of engagement. Proactive forms of engagement are defined in this project as patterns of behavior or activities in which parents assist their children on a relatively consistent basis to maintain or improve their children's current academic or behavioral performance. Such forms of involvement are often performed in collaboration with school staff and support the school's perception of the child. Reactive forms of engagement often took place during crisis situations and occurred sporadically over the course of the school year. Such behaviors and activities consisted of parents engaging in their child's education after a disagreement with school staff's decision-making and were not supportive of the school's perception of the child. While the ways in which parents participate (proactively or reactively) are qualitatively different, both forms of involvement have the same goal of supporting their child's education. In the excerpts below, both reactive and proactive forms of engagement will be discussed.

Reactive Forms of Engagement

Most Woodson parents' participation in their children's school can be characterized as reactive forms of engagement. Under such circumstances, parents entered school buildings after a problem was exacerbated to address perceived problems

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in their children's education. Parents engaged in a variety of behaviors to voice their opinions including: scheduling meetings with teachers (parent-teacher conferences), visiting their child's school (unannounced), communicating (verbal and email) with the school principal and school officials, in addition to sending letters to interested parties outside of the school. Unfortunately many parents believed their attempts to address their child's concerns were resisted. They were listened to, but actively ignored.

Margaret discovered that her child could not read and began engaging in a process of advocating for more services for her son in school. Unfortunately, she did not have only one son, but two sons, whom she perceived were being mis-educated by the public school system. She describes their collective experiences as being "passed through" the school system also known in the Korbel community as "falling through the cracks." Margaret's understanding of her child's problems combined with her larger awareness of disparities in access to education for African American males fuels her personal commitment to addressing her children's needs. Like many other Woodson parents, she brought her concerns to the school and other interested parties for assistance in remedying problem areas.

> Through me sitting down and telling him to read things and I was so disappointed to see that my child really cannot read. And it was so frustrating too, my child cannot read. So now we are working and I am glad I caught it now you know before he was moved on any further. So hopefully we are going to get him squared away here, find out, get to the root of it. I've even checked into the University. I've had one of my clients (Margaret is a hairdresser), he was a doctor at the University, paid for my child to be tested so that's a blessing. While I am working toward him learning and getting the education that he needs and to learn how to learn. ... My son is so bright when it comes to math, but that reading and his English, it's just like a block there. So, I'm thankful that we are looking toward you know finding out what the problem is. I just can't believe that the teacher ... didn't tell me and when I went to the parent teacher conference, "Oh he is doing ok." (mimicking teacher in a pleasant voice). But my child can't read! There is a problem here! And it's not like I wasn't aware. It wasn't like I wasn't

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telling them and it wasn't like I didn't have him in special education classes. So what are you guys doing that you can't see that he can barely say 'the.' And he can't read 'the,' there is a problem with that you know. Same thing with Deshon [older son], he was just being passed through, couldn't read. I found out, seen what was going on, you know, I did not want them to hold him back but I did allow them to hold him back. I don't think that is what he needed. I think he needed to be educated. Taught, but not held back, because now he has a complex about being a grade behind you know what I'm saying. So it's working against him now that he is getting older and now he is above average in his classes. You know so I'm trying to see what I can do about that even now. Because they was like "we can't put him up," but you can put him back. You see what I'm saying. I can put you back, but I can't put you in your right grade. Something is wrong with that picture. I'm going to get to the bottom of that too because I'm not just going to sit back and watch my children be railroaded. Just not! And my voice will be heard ... You know I think they are like, it'll go away, she'll go away.

Margaret's account discusses her dissatisfaction with the educational services both of her sons were receiving though Korbel public schools. It appears that Margaret initially had confidence in the school's ability to educate her child appropriately (special education services) and was less hands-on involved with her son; however, due to recent changes in her family circumstances (marriage) she was able to devote more time and commit more resources to her children's education. While Margaret was aware that her son had reading problems and had enrolled him in special education services, she was discouraged that he had made little to no progress with the additional school supports in place. She was also surprised to learn that she had different (higher) expectations for her son's performance compared to his teacher. Moreover, her son's teacher did not express a similar level of concern regarding the urgency of addressing his low academic performance. Margaret's concerns were listened to by the teacher but not quickly acted upon by school staff (e.g., reconvening IEP team to make modifications). In addition to expressing her concerns to school staff, Margaret expressed her frustration about her son's education on her job and was able to find a valuable resource in one of her clients

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who paid for educational testing through a local University. Armed with these external test results and her knowledge of her son's problems, Margaret was confident that she could make changes in the education her son was receiving despite the slow engagement of school personnel in this process. At the time of the interview, Margaret was still waiting for changes in services for her son.

Margaret's discussion of her younger son's educational problems led her to reflect on similar problems with her older son. Given her older son's experiences and her dissatisfaction with decisions that she made for his education, she is motivated to intervene earlier in her younger son's education based on her own knowledge of her son's best interest. It should also be noted that Margaret's pattern of involvement is initially supportive of the school's assessment and intervention with her children until she perceives their efforts are not working and are actually hindering her children's progress.

Unfortunately, the above description of Margaret's involvement in her son's education at Woodson was not an insolated event. Below, she describes an incident that occurred during the previous school year in which she was dissatisfied with the type and length of punishment her son received for engaging in alleged inappropriate behaviors with other students at school.

> Margaret: I experienced some thing last year with Mark, my 8-year-old. He was kicked out of school for three days for sexual harassment. And I'm still having gotten anywhere with that. Uh, I met with I can't remember the lady's name at the Mellon Building or the supervisor of the schools is supposed to be calling me, never called me back. They've been giving me the run around about trying to find out you know what actually took place. I really did not get the reception that I wanted from Ms. Henderson [Woodson school principal] when the incident occurred. And I basically feel like I was treated like I was nobody and I was very concerned about that because I understand that (husband enters the room) kids are um labeled. They start getting labeled at that age because they are African American children, boys maybe, and I do not want that and wanted to be able to

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voice my opinion and find out different ways to handle a situation like that because it was totally I don't believe...

Interviewer: Believe what they said happened?

Margaret: No, ahah. I'm not saying that they wasn't playing around, him and the kids on the play ground, but it sounded more like tag to me, what we used to play when we were kids. But they put all these new things in play and it's making it hard for the parent and the children. So I was disappointed with that. Was not going to put my child back in Woodson because I don't feel like my concerns were addressed and only

Interviewer: Did Ms. Henderson direct you to someone else? You said you didn't feel like you got what you wanted?

Margaret: She basically didn't talk to me you know in the way I felt she should talk to me. The day that I went in to talk to her and before I went in to talk to her she said we've already addressed that and this is the punishment and this is the way it is and basically. And then when I talked to her, when I went in to have the meeting for him to come back to school she basically was talking down to me, which I was offended by. You know and I just said whatever place we get in in life we should be um humble and that we should be, we should not be in a place of judgment because you don't know each family's circumstance or situation. That was my only thing. I like her as a person, you know.

Interviewer: So was it her tone or the words she used?

Margaret: It was specific words and to me she was talking down to me and um, so I was disappointed with that and I wanted to go further with that because I didn't feel that my son should be labeled as sexual harassment. Sexual harassment to me is something that is repeatedly done. This was a one time occurrence and this was kids in the play ground touching each other you know and I feel like they should have did maybe a conference with the parents and the students and the boys and girls that were involved. Explain to them what this is. How this affects them and you know what I'm saying because they are so young. You know what I'm saying. I don't know too many parents that are sitting around talking to their kids about sexual harassment at eight-years-old.

Margaret's account is another description of her attempt to become involved in her child's education when she was dissatisfied with the school's treatment of her son. In the scenario described above, Margaret was dissatisfied with the punishment her son received for engaging in "sexual harassment" acts with other children. She appears to be

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particularly upset with not fully understanding the nature of her son's acts, the process for assigning various consequences to behaviors, and the poor reception she received from school staff. Based on her description, it appears her concerns were not adequately addressed and were ignored by school personnel at multiple levels (e.g., principal, school district officials). Margaret describes several forms of perceived disrespectful treatment on the behalf of school staff: unreturned phone calls from school staff, mistreatment (talked down to) by school officials, and final decisions made in the absence of consulting with parents. Such behaviors appear to serve the purpose of silencing Margaret's voice and limiting her engagement in her child's education. Due to such actions on behalf of school personnel, Margaret was unable to effectively engage in her children's education. Margaret's discussion also raises another important issue about how parents'/students' concerns were addressed at Woodson Elementary as she questions why parents and students involved were not brought together in a meeting to understand the nature and consequences of sexual harassment. Her comment brings to light how school problems at Woodson are historically addressed and treated as isolated events instead of addressed as issues that the larger community could become educated and involved in finding solutions to address problems, a more preventative approach.

Similar to Margaret, April describes her experience of intervening in her child's education after noticing problems in the educational services her daughter was receiving in school. It should be noted that April's engagement initially took a proactive approach; however, her behaviors changed to a reactive form after her concerns were ignored and school staff continued to engage in perceived inappropriate ways with her daughter. The

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theme amongst Woodson parents of being listened to, but ignored is especially evident in April's report.

> I think I had just gotten back in the country, first day of school. I was off to kind of a rocky start and the school year was off to rocky start for Stacey. So I had to email the teacher to kind of let her know that uh you know I understood that she didn't get some things done but we would be on that. And uh, weeks later she [teacher] used my email. I had never said that that was Stacey's email address or that it was okay to email Stacey. But she had sent home some corrected homework sheets with uh that had exclamation points behind the 'Well get all your homework done exclamation point' or 'do this' exclamation point. Nothing like 'good job' exclamation point. And then when she sent me the email it was like 'Stacey you forgot your such and such.' 'Did you at least do such and such?' And there was no acknowledgement that this was my email address or that uh uh 'Mrs. Thomas could you please give this email to?' and so I had told her that I was very concerned about her communication style. That, that she was uh and I was not prepared to let Stacey be undermined, have her confidence be undermined by someone who was not sensitive to those kinds of things. But when I met, I told her that via email and when I met with her during the parent-teacher conference and related that to her it was like she was telling me and she was eager to tell me the things that Stacey was not getting done and not doing well. And so after I let her finish that I said and I wanted to still address you about the comments, your written communication. I can only imagine about your verbal, but I said those uh exclamation points are really problematic for me. And she stood and sat there just like you are nodding. She just looked at me like, are you finished? and when I finished she went back to what she was saying about Stacey. So it was a very very obvious uh uh you know you really, your words have no legitimacy with me and so I'll let you say that because I am supposed to as a teacher let you say those things.... I emailed Mrs. Henderson (school principal) and said again these were some of the things that I wanted to address during the parent teacher conference could she please maybe monitor her when she came back and so she never came back.

In the above discussion, April reports being dissatisfied with the communication style of her daughter's teacher towards Stacey and April. April reports initially using a proactive approach by contacting her daughter's teacher to alert her that she was aware of missed assignments and would assist Stacey in remedying the problem. April received no acknowledgement or response that her daughter's teacher received the communication, which sets the beginning stage of barriers between April and her daughter's teacher.

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Weeks later (after the problem had exacerbated) April reports being overwhelmed by negative notices sent by her daughter's teacher to address a problem April had requested assistance with at the beginning of the school year. April was also dissatisfied with the manner and quality of communication of her daughter's teacher. Such perceived inappropriate and negative feedback from the teacher combined with initially being ignored by the teacher changed April's actions from being proactive (or preventative) to reactive. Unfortunately, April reports that her attempts to address her concerns in written and face-to-face communication with the teacher were heard but ignored. Refusing to allow the teacher to limit her participation in her daughter's education, April expressed her concerns to the school principal. April's concerns were never resolved as Stacey's teacher resigned from her teaching position after a maternity leave before any intervention could be put in place.

April describes another incident below in which her activities were discouraged by school personnel within weeks of enrolling her daughter at Woodson Elementary. April's description and the reports of other parents highlight that school staff at all levels (school district staff, principal, teacher, secretaries) engage in activities (whether intentional or not) that hinder parents' communication with the school and limits their overall participation in their child's education.

> When I first came into the office they were telling Stacey, we lived way west and uh W.E.B. Dubois didn't start till 8:45. I work on campus, the health sciences campus, which is near W.E.B. Dubois and I never wanted her to leave there and um that worked perfectly with our schedule. Because Woodson and all the reconstitution problems that they had, they went to a longer day, that's not my problem. And uh I can't get her there. I told them that uh well if the bell rings I'll try to get her here around 8:15. I told them that when we first enrolled her there. But uh she came to me one day and she said to me 'please momma can you start getting me there to school on time.' I said, 'Stacey I've already addressed that with the school.' She said, "well in the office they are telling me ˥ need to get to

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school on time,' you know really on her. So the next morning I went into the office to say, I, there were two women sitting there I said Stacey 'which one is the one that said it?' So maybe in my, by me saying that in front of them I wanted to know which one do I curse out because that's what they are used to and I just wanted to address the right person. And uh she told me that. I was saying well your statements to her assumes that she's in control of getting herself here. I said she has, she doesn't have that agency she has to wait for me. I have to drop off another daughter. I don't have to be to work until 8:30 and one of the other secretaries hears me saying this to her and she interjects "well if you don't do it you could go to jail" or when 'we can get the truant officer and you'll have to go to court.' And I'm like you know what, is someone else available for me to speak to? Even Ms. Henderson (school principal) wasn't available at the time uh so that was my first contact with Ms. Henderson. I had emailed her to tell her that I thought that the comments were out of order because I was trying to handle it and trying to let them know just what the situation was. But I think because they have been used to dealing with a certain kind of person, they generalized and um that is totally unacceptable. And so again I think that is happening in all of these quadrants that teachers are generalizing instead of dealing with an individual students and whatever their problems, strengths, whatever they are. They just generalize and lump and that's what happened in the office that day.

April's account illustrates the manner in which parents' participation activities are resisted by school staff at Woodson Elementary. In the scenario described above, April again reports using a proactive approach by alerting school staff about potential problems with getting her daughter to school on time. Her concerns were initially ignored. April's second attempt to have a conversation about the problem in person with school staff members was also suppressed and culminated with school staff threatening to take legal actions against her if she failed to follow school rules. Based on April's experiences and the experiences of other parents, it appears that any perceived challenge to the operations of the school (policies, practices, teacher's behaviors) by parents is openly resisted. Moreover, April suggests that it is perhaps school staff's interpretation of parents' engagement as negative, hostile and unsupportive of the school's agenda that could also fuel their resistance and punitive actions towards parents. April's account also highlights a lack of effective communication (indirectly communicating with parents through

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children, waiting until problems become crises) between staff and parents that could also promote misunderstandings between the two parties. At Woodson, there appears to be no formal process (beyond communicating with the principal) to address parents' grievances and so parents' voices continue to go unheard/unaddressed.

Beverly, a teacher at Woodson, was also able to recall situations in which she became involved in her children's school to address their concerns. Like other Woodson parents, Beverly modeled a proactive approach to engaging in her children's education via communicating her concerns to teachers (her colleagues). In the absence of any noticeable changes in their education or her concerns being adequately addressed, Beverly decided to use her own knowledge and resources to ensure her children received an appropriate education.

> My two daughters who were here at Woodson were in 3rd and 4th gifted and 5th and 6th gifted and their teacher Dr. Murphy uh, didn't get along well with them at all and they did not get along well with her. And so I, lot of times I would just go on over and say I have another concern and I would talk to her and she would talk to me. And it would never get to where I had to go to the principal and complain. I did at one point take them out of her class and sent them back to W.E.B. Dubois gifted. And normally I know for sure if I had not been working in the school district I probably could not have pulled it off. I probably could not have had them reconsidered and put in another bldg. It is just too much of a hassle and the gifted program is so touch and you know just, not temperamental, but it's just a sticky situation because so many parents fight to get their children in gifted and it's so competitive.

Beverly's account illustrates that parents, regardless of education and/or affiliation with the school, encounter problems with school staff addressing their concerns. Beverly's dissatisfaction with school staff's inaction to her concerns forced her to enroll her children in a different school. Beverly was able to accomplish switching her children's school due to her position and contacts as a school district employee and her knowledge of her rights as a parent (the right to switch child's teacher). More

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importantly her efforts show the level of commitment she has to ensuring that her

children are properly educated. The next situation described below by Beverly illustrates

how her involvement evolves over time as she encounters more difficulties with her

children's school and begins communicating with knowledgeable parties outside of

school personnel about her children's problems.

> I have a lot of informal communication [with teachers] and on occasion I have
> had to write a letter or some formal interaction with them. I think I told you about
> the time with my son when he got into a fight in the third grade and they tried to
> give him a police record. When he was in third grade, my son Jermaine, got into
> a playground squabble with one of his friends over who was going to pitch for
> kick soccer or something. Anyway they got into a push and shoving match. And
> the teacher came and she grabbed the other boy from behind to try to break it up
> and Jermaine was still swinging and he barely brushed her arm, which they call
> hitting a teacher, which is a level 3 offense in the district. For that you get a
> police record. They actually would normally come and take you out of the
> building in handcuffs for fighting a teacher. And so they didn't do all that but they
> had a police officer to come and write a report and it did go into the computer and
> said he committed a violent crime against a teacher. And it would have to stay on
> there for seven years.

> And low and behold I was taking a sociology class at the University, a graduate
> course and our instructor had just gone over a report that said most African
> American males will have their first encounter with the law by age ten. Well,
> Jermaine was nine. With me I was like my son is getting ready to be a statistic.
> Out of all the kids, everything almost the poster child for the model family, and
> my son is about to be a statistic. I can't believe it. Well I was irritated and I talked
> a lot about it like I normally do. What prompted me to go ahead and push it was I
> work at the Boys and Girls Club and almost all of my friends are white, white
> women. And I started explaining to them you know that Jermaine had this police
> incident and they were about to give him this police record. And they said, oh my
> God, my son actually pushed a teacher down the stairs and nothing ever
> happened. Nothing ever came of it. My son beat up a girl in third grade and she
> had to have her face reconstructed and nothing happened. They called us in but
> nothing was written. All my white friends were saying that. Well, when I went to
> choir rehearsal and I was saying Jermaine got into a situation at school and I
> wanted a prayer request blah, blah, blah. Almost every black mother in choir
> rehearsal had the opposite story. Well you know that happened to Charlie and he
> had a police record and almost didn't get into the military. Well that happened to
> so and so, he got a police record. And after I heard the flip-flop, I was like oh, no,
> no, no. Now if it is just the way they do things then I can accept it, but if my son
> is going to go down that route because he is a young black male in America, it

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ain't happening. So I wrote a letter to every body on the school board to the Urban League, to the NAACP and I think there were some people starting an Operation Push thing here. I wrote it to the Ministerial Alliance and the Operation Push people. And it got the wheels turning and it got to be a big mess. The principal was caught in a lie. And the short version they had it expunged. Taken out of the computer, off his record like nothing ever happened. And whatever it takes to make that family happy, meaning us. And so that got resolved in that way.

Then the incident, and I'll just say this for the sake of your tape recorder, the incident that happened just a couple of days ago with my son Jermaine again and he's in 8th grade, and his teacher told a racist joke about Dr. King and he came home and repeated the joke and said several of his friends started making up their own jokes similar to hers following the same pattern. But that none of us thought that this was funny and neither did we think this was funny for some white teacher to say why do black people do whatever [Why do black people have nightmares? A: Because their dream was shot.] and then come up with a joke. So anyway I thought about it for a while and after talking to some people and thinking about it and hashing it over in my brain. I know it's not going to settle in my spirit and will be with me all summer. So I have written a letter to that teacher. I'm also going to send a copy to her boss, that is Laura Ferguson at Mitchell and to Laura Ferguson's boss, that is Mr. Hall at the Marcus bldg and I'll again send it to Terry Wilson.

If it's not even addressed, hopefully that teacher will be better for it. Because my point that I made in that letter is a sincere point that she may not even know better but now she will be informed and I hope she will stand corrected. Because she is in the wrong. And if nothing else happens I hope it will improve the way she interacts with children in the future. My kids know that whatever they say, it's alright with mommy. But in this way, it's modeling a proactive response to something they don't like. As oppose to coming home and discussing it, letting off steam, but actually taking that next step. You know write a letter of complaint, file a grievance you know like I said those of us that have grown up in Korbel we have all been discriminated against on jobs and in restaurants, and we very rarely you know take it to the next level where we complain to the manager or put something in writing or go to the news media or whatever. Now, I don't know sometimes I think that's how things should be handled. That we should just go to the media and blow it way out of proportion and make a big deal out of it and be on the front page. But, maybe sometimes that would make the changes in this town and in this district that we want to see if people would be a little more progressive I guess is the word.

Beverly's account offers a vivid description of the impact of her parent

participation and how it has evolved based on her previous experiences. As Beverly

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became more involved, she learned more effective ways of engaging in her child's education. It is important to note that once Beverly began working with interested parties outside of the school bureaucracy, positive changes began happening for her children. Secondly, through communicating with other parents who encountered similar situations with their children, Beverly was further inspired to work to have her son's record expunged. Unfortunately, as I learned during my participant observation work, few Woodson parents communicate with one another, which has the effect of perpetuating the idea that their problems are isolated events. Beverly's conversations with parents exposed her to a larger community of parents who had similar experiences like her son, but appeared to have different outcomes based on their ethnicity. Thirdly, Beverly's advanced education, which exposed her to readings/discussions about racial disparities in police contact between white and black students also motivated her participation. Thus a combination of personal, historical, and community events, knowledge of one's rights as a parent and of racial disparities, and collaboration with groups outside of the school were important in shaping Beverly's participation and the final outcome of her son's situation. Given Beverly's success at addressing her son's situation, she is more motivated to tackle school problems using similar approaches to get her children's needs addressed. Interestingly, Beverly recognizes that there are several potential outcomes to her engagement and that sometimes raising a person's consciousness (regarding incident with teacher who made racist joke) about a situation is just as important as more punitive actions (e.g., suspending teacher). Beverly also reports purposely engaging in her children's education to teach them proactive ways of making their voices heard and getting their needs addressed.

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Sandra also describes a situation in which she was initially dissatisfied with the punishment her son received for misbehaving at school. However, Sandra's participation shifts from being reactive to more accepting of the school's decision-making after she felt heard and understood by school staff. Through effectively communicating with the school principal, Sandra and the principal were able to come to a better understanding of the problem and some degree of agreement on the consequences for her son's actions.

> Sandra: Well we weren't in agreement with everything but we worked it out. It was about the incident I was telling you about with the other kids. Like I told her they put something on my child.
>
> Interviewer: Oh, it went on his record?
>
> Sandra: She [school principal] took it off. Yeah, she took it off because she said that it was just more or less just a letter it wasn't actually on his record. Like I told her I don't know about nobody else, but I have plans for my son and I don't want any of this garbage to follow him on to high school or to college. Because I don't want anyone else to be able to say well he done this or he done that at this grade because to me they have a tendency to punish the kid over and over again for the same thing. Like now he's being punished for three days for something he honestly feels like he didn't do. I honestly feel like he didn't do it but we'll take the consequences for who he associates with. Because there are always going to be consequences but I don't want to see this as we are going down the line. So she said well I agree with you. She says "I like the fact that you know you took off work to come and tell me that you didn't like that and you don't want it on his record but actually it's not on his record it's just a letter.
>
> Interviewer: It's just a letter in his file?
>
> Sandra: I don't want it there period! I want it gone! Because if I accuse you of something and you didn't do it, it shouldn't follow you. That was my point I was trying to make with her. And then after that um, I felt like she was encouraging up afterwards.

Sandra's concluding comments indicate that she was not fully satisfied with the final outcome of her son's behavior (letter was not removed from son's file); however, her perspective on the situation changed after communicating with the principal. Unlike other Woodson parents described above, Sandra developed a less negative view of her

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interactions with school staff and accepted the consequences for her son's behavior after she felt heard and understood and supported in raising questions about the incident. She subsequently decided not to pursue her complaint further. It appears that effective communication between Sandra and the school principal evidenced by (1) the principal's show of respect for Sandra's opinions (without necessarily agreeing with her), (2) the non-confrontational/non-judgmental interaction evidenced by the principal, and (3) the principal's support of Sandra's efforts to advocate for her son allayed misunderstandings between Sandra and the principal. Sandra's account is important not because it shows how parents can be made to submit to school staff's request by listening and acknowledging their concerns, but because it shows how some misunderstandings between staff and parents can be resolved through open and honest communication and respect for one another's position.

Cassandra was unable to report specific parental involvement activities that involved direct communication/interaction with staff at Woodson Elementary (her son transferred to Woodson during the current school year); however, she describes several examples of her involvement at other schools within the Korbel school district that offer insight into how and when she becomes involved.

> I told them that that they couldn't kind of baby him. They couldn't use that preschool tone with Travis because Travis could get away with murder and that's exactly what he did. So when he got ready to transgress I had to um, there were grades that they thought he was not ready so it became a whole issue and he was in school acting out and doing things and um during one of the parent teacher conferences one of the teachers was like you know I think it wouldn't do any good if I call Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). And for me, my son is very anal retentive. If he has to go the bathroom to go bm (bowel movement) he'll take off all his clothes cause he didn't want to get dirty. So that's what he was doing in class, taking off all of his clothes and going to the bathroom. So ofcourse they thought well he must be being sexually molested dadadadada without looking at the fact that maybe he is just anal. Maybe he is just an anal

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child, which is what the case is. Um and for her to make the comment in a parent-teacher conference with a single parent, uh, to me, you know I feel myself to be a little strong and I kinda take charge of the parent-teacher conference anyway. But, to me I was outraged at what if I wasn't a single parent that was not strong minded or that had high self-esteem. What if I had been another parent that really thought of that as a threat or that really did intimidate them. And so I just kind of snapped out. I was really very appalled at why you would make any type of bullshit, I said 'if you need to call DCFS that's your job you've been mandated to do so by all means do your damn job!' But telling me, making that kind of idle comment I said I feel is very unnecessary. I don't want to ever meet with you alone again. Anytime we talk about my son for any reason, for any occasion, you need to have back-up and I will have a witness do you understand? So, that kind of outraged me but then you want parents to be involved. With that kind of statement why would a parent even trust the teacher? So to me it's a cultural barrier that is invisible but present.... I knew what he wasn't getting at (refers to another elementary school) and I saw it a long time ago but not being as educated about the school system and the processes as I am now I knew I could have asked him to be pulled out of the classroom then. And a lot of times parents don't know what their rights are. I could have asked for him to be pulled out. Now I know and I try to educate other parents as well, I can ask him to be pulled out.

Similar to the experiences of the parents discussed previously, Cassandra reports initially using a proactive approach to ensure her son's success in school by discussing with his teacher effective ways (e.g., using a firm tone) to communicate with her son. Based on Cassandra's account, her funds of knowledge regarding how to interact with her son were not valued or implemented in the classroom setting. As Cassandra's son's behaviors became more extreme and less resistant to the teacher's interventions, she was consulted about addressing the problem. Similar to the experiences of Woodson parents discussed above, the teacher threatened Cassandra with punitive/legal actions via a DCFS investigation to address inappropriate behaviors. While the exact purpose of the teacher's comment is unknown, it shows how a misunderstanding on the behalf of the teacher set the stage for erecting more barriers between Cassandra and the teacher. Cassandra also astutely notes the connection between such negative comments made by

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the teacher and the perceived lack of parental participation in schools and overall distrust of school staff. Cassandra also reports that as she became more aware of her rights as a parent she was better able to advocate for her son and also share her knowledge with other parents.

Below Cassandra describes another contentious experience with her son's teacher regarding enrolling him in special education services. Cassandra's account illustrates the lack of shared understanding about students' problem areas, differences in perspectives parents and teachers have regarding how best to help children, and the lack of effective communication between parents and students. Such factors hinder collaboration and partnering between parents and school staff to provide an appropriate education for children. When asked to discuss perceived negative experiences in school, Cassandra discussed an incident in which her son's teacher recommended that he receive special education services for problems with his speech.

> Cassandra: The pre-school tone (imitates sons voice with a high pitch). Oh, ok he was barely whispering so of course his tone but I understand enough to know that if they tested him for tone that they would label him for special education and so schools get more money who have a child in special education. So, you can't do it and I totally you know screamed and hollered and resist. No, you're not going to do that! So for me they were like you know he meets the income requirements you know it's a really good idea you should catch it now before it gets to be a huge problem (imitates teachers pleasant voice). Your trying to pacify me and I'm just like the poor black kid is not about to be tested for pitch. Period! So they gave me papers to decline you know or say yes and I put on the paper HELL NO! across the whole page so there was no misunderstanding you know in case you know, no you ain't fittin to do this. So, you know for me if I were a weaker parent or a parent that has not been where I been as far as life experiences I can imagine.

> Interviewer- Teachers think they are the experts?

> Cassandra: Right, or we have no rights or we can't ask questions or you have to do what they say do and I think a lot of the single parents, a lot of parents period get intimidated when you go to what they call BST meetings, a building support team meeting. You're called to a meeting. You are a single parent. You're called

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to come to a meeting with at least four or five educators that have degrees to talk about your child. And then when you come into the room they are all sitting there like they you know the jury board execution and you sitting in the middle of the room, you know what I am saying, somewhere like you are on trial. So those meetings for me, I come in, take over the meeting, ask everybody what their name is, what their credentials are and how much time during a day they spend with my child. So, they were like, wow. So yeah, I go in there with a black suit on like I own the meeting, like I own the school, and that's how I (inaudible portion of tape) you are not going to intimidate me. And I'm empowered and I understand my rights so um.

Cassandra's actions illustrate that she does not always accept school staff's assessment of problem areas for her children as accurate or their interventions as helpful. While Cassandra recognized that her son was not using age appropriate speech, she did not agree with the school's assessment of how to remedy the problem and/or see the connection between his pitch and potential school problems (low academic performance, increased behavioral problems). For Cassandra, she perceived her child's problems were not significant or severe enough to warrant special education services. Based on Cassandra's account, her concerns were not acknowledged and alternative solutions were not offered which served to fuel her resistance of the school's solutions. This example is one of two examples of Woodson parents' ability to successfully advocate for a specific outcome for their child that was in direct opposition to the school's perception of what was best for the child. Similar to Beverly's experience, Cassandra was able to resist the school's decision about what constituted an appropriate education for her child because of her knowledge of her rights as a parent. Cassandra's description of the building support team meeting also illustrates her knowledge of her rights as a parent and the actions she takes to engage in her children's education on an equal level to school personnel.

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Vera describes a different form of parent involvement that was not initiated due to dissatisfaction with the school staff's behaviors but nevertheless was not supported by school staff. Unlike the prior experiences of other parents, Vera's ideas were heard and acknowledged; however, they were subtly resisted.

> I really would like to see us be able to do more as a community. It would be nice if if she [principal] would allow. She says go ahead and she said go ahead for me to, we were all going to go skating at the roller skating rink so I opened it up to the whole school. I asked them what dates are available and I gave them two or three dates. Any one of them. So I picked one then a week before, I find out the school fair is the very next day. So then you have to choose which one you want to spend money on (raises voice)! I couldn't believe it. I was so disappointed because I you know so you know you try to go by the rules and they still seem to undermine you.

Vera's account illustrates that even ideas that appear to be supportive of the school's agenda (building community among students and parents) or that follow school rules are not supported by school staff. She also appears to recognize how school staff passively resists parent led opportunities to participate in their children's educational/social development.

Proactive Engagement

A smaller group of Woodson parents reported positive experiences working with school staff to meet the needs of their children. Parents who were able to partner with school staff were primarily supportive of teachers' assessments and interventions with their children, pursued collaborative relationships with teachers, and/or became involved as a result of the teacher's recommendation. In addition, these parents and teachers developed ways of effectively communicating with one another where both parties felt respected, heard, and understood. Parents participated in their children's education in a variety of proactive ways including observing and/or volunteering in classrooms,

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attending parent-teacher meetings, communicating by telephone and attending school events.

<u>Parents' Participation in Classrooms</u>

Ernestine reports initial apprehension about school staff's assessments of her grandson's behaviors. In lieu of directly challenging/questioning the teacher's decision-making using a reactive approach, Ernestine decided to volunteer, observe, and communicate regularly with her grandson's teacher to investigate how she operated her classroom and how punishments were assigned to students. Through such consistent participation in her grandson's classroom, Ernestine developed a better understanding and appreciation for the teacher's decision-making and was able to work more effectively with the teacher to meet the needs of her grandson.

> I found out if you go in and ask them questions she will give you answers, but if just go in and sit you think every thing is okay. But I just ask, 'Where is he at?' 'Where does he need to be?' and you know she let me know all that so I am impressed with all that. I know one other parent that our kid has been in the same room since kindergarten and uh she's not too impressed because she feel like if uh her baby get in trouble she don't think it's real reason to get in trouble because they [teachers] don't have control over the classroom. Well like I told her, I feel different because I am there and you know I'm not saying Deran is an angel. I know he have good days and bad days at school too but it just so happen my days there and his is good. I just think like I told the other parent you probably just need to come in. And I used to get bent out of shape because Ms. Wright sends out a folder for the month and each day she will write a smiley face or a sad face and then she will write on there well you know he had a sad face today and she explain to you why he had a sad face. And you know I wait a couple of days then I go in and I bring it to her attention. And then you know, first I go in and I observe to see now how did these kids get these sad faces and I see how they got them ... And I didn't know that at first until I actually sat in and watched it. ... what I was trying to tell the other parent you just can't because her baby be coming home crying and she believe everything he says. I says "don't get caught up." I won't get caught up like that. Deran know if they said he did it, I say okay if you said you didn't do it we will go to school Monday and we will talk about it. She tell me what happened and it will be my decision.

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Ernestine discusses engaging in a process of informed decision-making to understand the dynamics of her grandson's classroom (teacher's interaction with students, decision-making) before challenging the teacher's behaviors. Through her involvement on a weekly basis, she was able to understand how various consequences were assigned and began forming a relationship with the teacher (a bi-product of her weekly contact). Given their consistent contact and agreement on goals for her grandson, when Ernestine questions the teacher's decision-making, it is not perceived or reacted to negatively by the teacher. Unlike parents who engage in reactive forms of participation, Ernestine is allowed to voice her opinion and have it acknowledged due to a mutual understanding/respect between her and the teacher. Given Ernestine's success at working with her grandson's teacher and her greater understanding of how classrooms operate, she encourages other parents to become involved in their child's education in similar ways to allay any misunderstandings. Ernestine does note that she has to initiate conversations with the teacher regarding her grandson's performance and/or advice on strategies she can engage in to assist him.

Parents' Conversations with Teachers

Other Woodson parents reported purposely forming relationships with teachers and other school staff throughout the school year to support their children's education. These parents report communicating (via phone conversation, conferences at schools, unannounced visits to school) their expectations and goals for their children to staff at the beginning of the academic year and following-up with the teacher about their child's progress throughout the year. Such parents appeared to have more positive experiences engaging in their children's education and working with school staff.

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Tamika: Um, well from the beginning we went in and we told her you know, I know how my kid is (laughs) so you don't have to sugarcoat anything. Um, basically it was just be honest with me and I will be honest with you so. And that I think works best in any situation. So, that's just the relationship that we have. There was no, um, you know, well she could do a little better with this. Nothing was sugarcoated and I liked her, and I respect her a lot for that. Um, she told me things the way they were and that was the way I accepted it. ... I know some people who are teachers and um, I think lack of parent involvement does a real disservice to a student because the teachers know, the teachers kind of go on that. I mean some of the teachers that I know really go on that. It's like some of them have said well if the parents don't care, why should I? You know I've actually heard this from teachers and it's not just, I know teachers that teach in elementary school, I know people who teach in high school and I have heard it all through out you know elementary, middle, and high school. ... it makes them more apt to actually (pauses) be more active and like take more interest in one child specifically because they know that the parents is there, that the parents are involved and that the parents care.

Beverly: A lot of time before I became a teacher and see how the inner workings of a school are like that I would just automatically go to the principal. ... I tried to have some rapport with the teachers. ... I would go in and they would speak to me, everybody knew me. Oh that's Johnson's mom. My husband even worked in the building for a period of time so they knew the whole family and really liked our family. So I felt very comfortable with the principal if it was something serious. Something minor like a concern about a field trip or a food allergy like that my husband would probably mention it to a teacher or say something like that. We've always had the luxury of knowing all the teachers by name and having them know who we are.

In contrast to the Woodson parents who utilized more reactive approaches with teachers, these parents used the word "relationship/rapport" in discussing their interactions with their child's teachers. From the beginning of the school year, these parents purposely worked on establishing and maintaining a relationship with their child's teacher to support his/her education. Tamika's initiation of a relationship with her child's teacher at the beginning of the school year appears to serve multiple purposes including (1) setting expectations with the teacher regarding her daughter's behavior/performance in school and (2) developing a process for the teacher to honestly communicate (not minimize poor performance or misbehavior) with Tamika. She also

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acknowledged to the teacher that she was aware that her daughter was not perfect, which could also convey to the teacher that it is appropriate to discuss problem behaviors with Tamika. Interestingly, Tamika also discusses her knowledge (whether accurate or inaccurate) of how teachers interact with students whose parents are perceived to be more involved (take more interest in them) which also influences her participation. For Beverly, it appears that she and her husband valued forming relationships and being known by school staff in and of itself. A bi-product of forming relationship with school staff is that they feel welcome entering their children's school and communicating with staff. As a result of forming relationships and interacting with staff on a consistent basis, these parents were able to communicate to teachers their wants and expectations for their children in a manner that was perceived to be non-threatening and showed their willingness to work with teachers to support their children.

The vast majority of parents' participation in their children's school consisted of conversations (parent-teacher conferences, conversations before or after school, via phone) with their child's teacher. Such conversations were primarily initiated by teachers and were mainly focused on addressing the student's academic areas of weakness or behavioral problems. Under such circumstances, parents were invited to participate in their children's education as supporters of the teacher's assessment and/or intervention.

> Fatima (a home daycare owner and mother of four children) reports: Yeah, the conversations that I have had with Mark's teachers are pretty much focused around his reading. Just making sure that the reading don't stop at school. Making sure that when he comes home he's getting books and that he is practicing on his writing especially during the summer. Since this is his weakness in order to strengthen it and make sure he is getting that instruction all around.

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Carl reports: Most of the time when there was a problem the teacher called here. Um they'll let us know if there was a problem with Eric or whatever and uh she'll tell us what she did and we would tell her what we would like done and stuff like that if the situation pops up again. And it was like that pretty much this school year while he was there. We would come to the school, when school starts we would come to the teacher and let them know what we expect and what we expect from Eric and everything like that so. And they understood and they did their best to um keep us in touch with everything so it was pretty good. … Most of the time when they called, it was because either Eric did not do his homework or he got into a fight with somebody over something stupid and we talked to them about three or four times about it and towards the end of the school year, it started to calm down because he has a temper on him and I told the teacher we have to work with him. Even though he gets mad or whatever, tell him what he's doing and if something happens to him first tell somebody, and we worked on that with him and I think it worked out pretty good because he calmed down toward the end of the year. Um, she called whenever it was a problem and even if it wasn't a problem she would tell us or she would call and let us know how he is doing, his progress, if he is missing homework or if he is just being himself and we really appreciated that.

Both Fatima and Carl report positive experiences interacting with their child's teacher. Several factors discussed by the parents appear to distinguish their positive experiences from the experiences of parents who had primarily negatively interactions with school staff including: teachers' initiating conversations with parents about problem areas and inviting parents' assistance, parents' accepting teachers' assessment and/or interventions for the student as accurate, and consistent communication between parents and teachers about problem areas or areas of strength. Their account highlights that parents who support the school's assessment and interventions with their child are invited and encouraged to participate in their child's education.

More specifically, Margaret's interaction with one of her child's teachers is a direct example of how she believes teachers perceive and interact with parents who are compliant with teachers' requests. It also offers insight into the lives of parents and how they make decisions about participating in their child's education.

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I've been in the school where I have heard comments ... from teachers. I actually heard a parent [means teacher] this summer when my son was in summer school say um, I came in to bring in treats and and to something else, and she [teacher] was like 'Oh thank you so much. We have so many parents that don't care.' ... And I so just like so wanted to really you know say to her you know because I am a parent you know what I am saying and I make up the other parents, so for you to say that to me that makes me think what do you say about me when I'm not here or if I don't meet your expectations as a parent. You know what I am saying. Are you going to mistreat my child? or feel like ... Yeah, because there were times when I wasn't there. There were times when I couldn't bring treats. There was time when I didn't have the money to bring treats. And it's still hard so. That to me, I don't like that attitude in schools. I don't like the attitude when teachers are judgmental about kids being late because it's so much stuff going on in the household in the morning and you just don't know what that parent is going through. And I think if the school take out more time to be concerned about the whole family you know and just don't be judgmental, you know the parents don't care or whatever that we can really just start transforming the kids, the teachers, and the parents.

Margaret's account underscores her view of the lack of understanding some Woodson teachers have for the challenges and decisions families must make to support their children. In this account, it appears the teacher had a negative perception of parents who did not comply with her request as uninvolved and further that these parents did not care about their children's education. Moreover, Margaret's account should illustrate that any type or form of parent involvement should be appreciated and valued by staff due to the financial struggles and complexity of Woodson parents' lives. The teacher's remark instantly changed Margaret's perception of the teacher and reaffirmed her previous perceptions of teachers and school staff as outsiders in the lives of the Woodson community.

Only one parent, April, reported finding ways to engage in her children's education outside of the school community. Initially, she reports finding a connection with local community groups whose purpose was to address the inequities and problems in public schools. However, April quickly became dissatisfied with the slow rate of

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progress such groups made as they attempted to work with the school system. For April, there was no other decision but to create her own program to address the problems she perceived were plaguing schools.

> I got involved when I first moved here and saw some things my older children were going through here. I have a nineteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old so they were maybe seven or nine or around that age when we moved here. And I didn't notice it at first but after my child went to middle school I started noticing some of the problems here. So I tried to get involved with someone dealing with the school issues and uh was actually put off by some of the people, the key people in this community who are working on it. Maybe it's territorialism, not wanting uh to bring in other people to get involved in it. And so uh yeah I was actually steered away from those areas at first and then I just kept pushing and you know [a school board member] before she left told me about the (refers to a school district administrative committee) and I wound up going to the meetings with …with the (refers to a community group) and being involved with it for a minute and then I decided that it wasn't worth uh really continuing to butt your head against the wall. We had to do for ourselves and so I started a after school program for the children. So I was motivated to do that based on the fact that uh I felt like the school district wouldn't, was non-responsive and some of the things that I felt like my children and other children needed most it wasn't up to them to provide like the culture and the history lessons.

For April, the immediacy of the problems plaguing children in schools forced her to find her own solution to the problems and to be a part of the change she was seeking in schools. Using her own resources and talents, April created a program designed to address what she perceived were the primary concerns for African American students, knowledge of history and culture, issues that she felt were not high priorities for the school district or for other community groups addressing school problems. April is one of a few parents interviewed who discussed a more collectivistic approach to engaging in schools where the entire community benefited. Interestingly, April also reports some opposition from a community group to her participation in their efforts to address school issues, which also motivated her to create her own program.

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Summary of Parent Participation in Schools

Woodson parents' experiences in their children's schools highlight that parental participation is not easy or straightforward; however, with persistence and motivation parents can eventually make a difference in the education of their children. Parents discussed several barriers to their participation by school personnel at all levels. One of the major barriers discussed by Woodson parents was a lack of effective communication between parents and staff. More specifically, parents reported communicating their concerns to teachers but being ignored, receiving feedback about their child's problems after the issue had exacerbated, and being threatened with punitive actions if parents did not comply with teacher's request. Parents' concerns were also treated as individual and isolated events. Another perceived barrier discussed by Woodson parents was school staff's negative perception of parents as evidenced by their interactions (punitive actions, ignoring parents concerns) and communication (critical comments) with parents. Such barriers fostered misunderstandings between parents and staff, prevented the formation of relationships between the two groups, and silenced the voices of parents. Despite such obstacles to their participation, over time Woodson parents have developed ways of participating in their children's education. The parents who were the most successful at engaging in their children's education displayed several characteristics: understood their rights as parent of a public school student, discussed their concerns with outside community groups and other parents about their concerns, developed an awareness of the racial disparities in the local community and broader society, persisted in their efforts despite resistance from school personnel, and had a keen awareness of what was best for

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their child. Collectively, their experiences show that Woodson parents are active agents in their children's education.

CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION

Overview

The goal of this project was to understand African American parents' pattern of involvement at Woodson Elementary School. "Parental involvement" was an important educational issue at Woodson at the time of the study. A perceived lack of parental participation was associated (in the minds of teachers, parents and community members in Korbel) with negative outcomes throughout the school, including misbehavior and low academic performance. This subsequently led to the overall negative perceptions of Woodson students and parents. As a participant observer engaged in this elementary school, I became aware of the differences in perceptions of parent participation (e.g., what parents are doing, what parents think about education) amongst school staff and parents. This project gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of African American parents at Woodson Elementary School in the context of the existing parent involvement literature, and illustrates some of the ways in which they are challenging and/or reinventing the course of parent participation (e.g., through their behaviors and perceptions). By more fully understanding their experiences engaging in their children's education, they are understood in a more complex way. Although not primarily the aim of this study, this enhanced understanding has implications for parent participation interventions in schools, homes, and communities.

Parental Engagement: Parents' Beliefs about Education

As discussed in the introduction, parents' beliefs about education are hypothesized to be an important precursor to parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In the current study, all Woodson parents reported positive perceptions

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about education. Parents believed receiving an education was important and wanted their children to succeed in school regardless of their socio-economic status, educational background, or family composition. Such findings are consistent with previous research suggesting almost all parents, even those from the poorest communities, are committed (intellectually and emotionally) to their children's education (Epstein, 1990; Lopez, 2001; Smrekar& Cohen-Vogal, 2001). Woodson parents communicated a sense of urgency in their interviews as they expressed the desire for their children to "do better" than their parents and discussed the limitations of their own education on their family's present well-being that supported their commitment to education. Similarly, the literature suggests parents' former experiences of schooling influenced their subsequent wishes for their children (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001).

Parents communicated their value for education through conversations with their children about the importance of education, model of appropriate behaviors (e.g. parents' returning to school), and exposure of their children to role models within the family who earned advanced degrees. Parents attributed many positive outcomes to the attainment of an education that promoted their growing child's personal and social sufficiency including: the ability to have choices and independence, freedom from government institutions, ability to support oneself, knowledge of basic life skills, access to advanced education, and better employment options (e.g., intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes).

Interestingly, while parents believed an education was important and "wanted more" for their children, their approach to communicating (the content of their conversation) these values and goals to their children did not focus primarily on traditional school-based outcomes such as attaining high grades, acceptance into

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honors/advanced placement classes, or attending college. Their interactions focused primarily on teaching their children practical skills (e.g., time-management, organization, problem-solving), school rules, and the value of an education. In addition, a few parents focused on teaching their children social and moral values such as good citizenship (recall Beverly's account of her son's refusal to receive credit for an assignment he did not complete (see page 104)) and/or worked to build their child's self-esteem through consistent support and encouragement.

Moreover, such basic issues as emphasizing school attendance and maintaining a minimal level of performance were very important to all Woodson parents and showed their value for education. While these issues may seem like rudimentary expectations of all parents, the frequency with which parents reported emphasizing such issues with their children suggests for these African American families this was perceived to be a significant barrier to their children's success in school. Most parents were unable to fully articulate why their child had difficulty attending and engaging in the school setting with the exception of reporting that they were "tired" or "bored." However, a few parents discussed perceived aspects of the school culture/climate such as racial unfairness, lack of support/encouragement from teachers, and a punitive environment, as obstacles to their children receiving an education. As such, the perceived cultural or racialized experiences of their children in school may have influenced parents' expression of their value for education on school attendance opposed to attending college and achieving high grades. These findings are consistent with research suggesting parents' beliefs about teaching and learning are influenced by cultural norms (Lareau & Horvatt, 1999).

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Given parents' goals for their children's education which focused on attaining practical and social/moral skills (local knowledge) which are different from the school's primary goals which focus on academic achievement and prosocial behaviors (professional knowledge), it is not surprising that parents are predominantly involved with their children in their homes and the community. These findings are consistent with the work of Smrekar and Cohen-Vogal (2001), who found that while parents valued education as a route to economic and social success, their actual involvement in schools fell below the expectations of school staff. These authors suggest and the present research also supports that the discrepancies between parents' beliefs and practices can be attributed to the distinction parents often drew between the moral training (local knowledge) they could provide and the academic instruction (professional knowledge) they believed the schools could and should deliver.

Parents' limited educational skills and/or level of comfort with teaching academic skills likely influenced their involvement in their children's education more along teaching practical skills versus direct academic instruction (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Many Woodson parents reported calling on the services of older siblings, tutors, and/or taking classes to improve their own academic skills as a way of helping their children with school assignments. Such behaviors suggest parents' perceived lack of competence in their ability to individually instruct their children with school assignments. However, a lack of perceived competence in academic instruction did not prevent parents from finding appropriate supports/resources for their children. Moreover, it did not appear that teachers expected/invited parents to work with children on specific academic skills beyond reading with their children in the home and monitoring homework.

Consistent with the findings of Smrekar and Cohen-Vogal (2001), in the absence of parents' direct involvement in schools, staff often mistakenly perceived parents as apathetic and linked these attitudes to the low performance of children. Similarly, during my participant observation at Woodson, teachers perceived the lack of parental participation led to student underperformance and misbehavior. Overall, while parents may be unaware of the best practices to participate in their child's education and may feel less competent to intervene in specific areas of their child's education, they appear to be doing whatever they can with their limited knowledge and resources.

Parents' Educational Experiences

Parents' views of their personal educational histories can also provide insight into their engagement in their children's education (Smerkar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001). Because the lived/contextualized experiences of parents are highlighted in the present study, salient aspects of parents' own childhood educational experiences were considered in the context of their thoughts about education and patterns of engagement in their children's education. When asked about their childhood educational experiences, most parents in this study responded positively.

Parents' prior school experiences played a role in their perception of education and their current interactions in their children's education. Parents' most salient school experiences involved their interactions/relationships with teachers. Most parents described their own teachers as "caring," "supportive," and "motivating" individuals. Such actions on the part of teachers were reported to encourage parents to attend school, engage in appropriate school behaviors, graduate from high school, and achieve beyond their own expectations for themselves.

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It is interesting that parents regarded their experiences in schools as mostly positive given the documented negative experiences of African American students in the Korbel school system. As discussed above, in the mid 90s a group of African American community members expressed concern about the treatment of African American students (e.g., one-way busing of African American students, disproportionate rates of student discipline and special education referrals for African American students) in schools. Their complaints were substantiated after an investigation conducted by the United States Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and an independent evaluation conducted by the Korbel district's consultant (Peterkin & Lucey, 1998). The fact that the majority of Woodson parents' experiences did not reflect the narrative of the school district's treatment of African American students is noteworthy. Perhaps, their recognition of the researcher as an African American working in the Korbel schools to increase the involvement of African American families led to an implicit understanding that I already understood the negative experiences of African American students. Moreover, many of the parents interviewed had a limited understanding of the consent decree and did not connect their child's or their own personal experiences to issues discussed in the consent decree, which could suggest a lack of awareness of the larger struggles of African Americans in the Korbel community. They may have perceived any negative experiences encountered during school as isolated and individual events that were not truly reflective of their overall experience.

As such, few parents reported negative interactions with teachers as children (recall the experience of Vera whose teacher told her she could not achieve an A in her class (see page 78) or Dianne who reported teachers separated children based on race

(see page 79). Of those parents who reported negative interactions, such situations did not distract parents from receiving an education. Parents reported that having a strong sense/belief in their own abilities and receiving encouragement from family and community members helped them to overcome negative experiences. Overall, parents reported their interactions with teachers gave them a positive outlook on their education and informed how they currently support their children in school.

Parents emphasized relational interactions with teachers as opposed to socializing with peers, involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, clubs), or learning about specific subjects, as their most salient school experiences. Such focus on relationships suggest a tendency to value interpersonal outcomes in schools. Parents' emphasis on relationships with teachers can be similarly observed in how and when they currently become involved in their children's education. For parents who engaged in a reactive manner, their conversations regarding engaging in their children's school emphasized how their children or the parents themselves were treated (e.g., being talked down to, ignored, disrespected) by school staff. Similarly, parents who engaged proactively in their child's education often used the word "relationship" in discussing their interactions with teachers. Such emphasis on forming relationships was also present in parents' conversations with their children as they emphasized acquiring social skills (e.g., listening to teachers and following school rules) as opposed to teaching academic skills. In addition, relational barriers (e.g., feeling uncomfortable at Woodson, feeling as if their involvement did not matter) were identified during the phase one interview project as important impediments to parents' engagement in school activities (See Appendix C). Parents who base involvement decisions on relationships with others may be less likely to

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become engaged in their children's schools if they can not establish or feel supported to form mutually beneficial relationships with individual teachers. Moreover, parents who lack appropriate cultural capital and social networking skills have been found to be at a disadvantage in forming positive relationships with teachers and other parents (Lareau, 1989; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Alternatively, if forming relationships with teachers will facilitate positive outcomes, as they appeared to have been for several of the participating parents, the parents with more solid relationships with their child's teachers may have an advantage in effectively advocating for their children.

While forming relationships with teachers is important due to its potential to facilitate parental participation in schools and the home, it can also limit how parents become involved in their children's education. For example, many of the parents interviewed focused their advocacy efforts on intervening directly with teachers to address the problems of their individual child (e.g., focusing on addressing perceived mistreatment/disrespect by teachers). However, fewer parents (beyond April) focused on larger systematic issues that impacted the entire Woodson community. Through such individualistic motivations, change occurs and benefits one child/one parent at a time in lieu of addressing larger school issues. The pattern of focusing individually on a child's problem is also consistent with the manner in which Woodson staff addressed parents' problems as isolated events as opposed to examining/remedying the potential impact on the entire school community. In contrast, parents who confront larger community issues might be inclined to present their problems to the principal, school board, or state officials to seek change for all families and address broader issues (e.g., minority under representation in gifted and talented programs, having a culturally informed curriculum).

Types of Participation

As mentioned in the introduction, African American and low-income parents have been documented to be less involved in their children's education compared to middle class and European American parents (Epstein, 1990; NCES, 2001). Similarly at Woodson Elementary, both parents and teachers perceived Woodson parents were uninvolved in their children's education. Moreover, across the Korbel community and within Woodson Elementary, the lack of parental participation was associated with poor student and school outcomes (e.g., student misbehavior, poor test scores), which contributed to negative perceptions of students and families. Thus parental participation was not only valued because of its link with better academic achievement (Oakes & Lipton, 2003) but also for its social currency (parents who are involved are positively viewed) within schools. The findings from the present study offer an alternative perspective on the involvement of African American parents at Woodson and invite a critical examination/re-thinking of the activities that constitute parental participation and the legitimate places parental participation can occur.

The findings from survey and interview data overwhelmingly revealed that parents are more involved with their children's schooling in their homes and communities compared to their involvement in Woodson Elementary School. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating minority parents are less involved in their children's schools (Epstein, 1990; Lopez, 2001; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogal, 2001); however, it adds to the literature by suggesting that parents are involved with their children outside of the school setting. Parents were involved in numerous ways in the home and community including: assisting with homework, supplementing their children's

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schooling with educational resources, engaging in conversations with their children, and taking their children on educational trips. These activities, away from the supervision and observation of school staff, communicated parents' value and commitment to their children's education. Overall their participation in the home and community was not predominantly focused on improving their children's academic performance but was an expression (through their verbal and hands-on communication) that education is important. Receiving good grades might be considered a bi-product of parents' activities, not a specific goal. In fact, conversations with their children were the most frequent activity performed in the home. Through daily conversations, parents passed on their funds of knowledge as well as personal testimonies about education. Similar to the work of Lopez (2001) their conversations communicated social and moral values, taught their children practical school and life skills, helped parents identify and address problems their children were having in school, and most importantly supported and encouraged their children. As discussed previously, for many parents their emphasis on attaining an education was rooted in their urgent desire that their children "do better" than their parents as evidenced in reaching their true potential (academically, socially), having more employment choices, and independence from government institutions.

Parents also engaged in activities in their local communities to support their children's education. For example, parents took their children on visits to the library, museum, and the aquarium. Such activities served multiple purposes including connecting school-based learning objectives to activities in the community and supporting parents' perceptions of their child's needs (e.g., increase academic, social, historical, cultural skills/knowledge). For some parents engaging in community activities

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served as a checks and balance process to ensure that their children were being adequately educated in school. Other parents participated in community activities as a way of creating family bonding opportunities. Moreover, some parents were interested in building their children's social and moral development in addition to practical daily life skills to develop their whole child. Recall the experience of Vera who purposely enrolled her daughter in activities where she initially did not have friends to build her social skills and exposed her to activities such as swimming to teach her daughter good sportsmanship (see p 109). In addition, Tasha exposed her children to a friend's business to allow them to observe the inner workings of managing a business and understand the practical implications of having an education (see page 109). Overall parents' participation in the home and community appeared to be a function of their perception of their competence to teach academic skills, perception of their child's needs, and parent' time, resources and availability to work with their children. These findings are consistent with the research of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) which found that the family practices and beliefs which supported parental involvement in the home and school included parents' confidence in their ability to influence their children's academic performance and school experiences, and the importance parents attached to being involved in their children's schooling.

In addition to conversations, parents also engaged in their children's education in the home by supplementing their schooling with educational materials. Most parents purchased books for their children and created libraries in their homes to support their children's education. Reading activities were the predominant school-based skill that parents engaged in with their children, beyond assisting with homework. Parents also

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structured their children's television viewing by exposing them to educational programs designed to build academic skills. Parents purchased or exposed children to materials based on their perceptions of their child's needs. Tamika's description of her experience trying to purchase the Hooked on Phonics educational program for her daughter illustrates some of the financial limitations imposed on parents as they try to purchase supplemental materials for their children (see page 112).

It's important to note that many parents engaged in these activities in the home and community without input from their child's teachers. Consistent with the work of Lareau (1989) these parents followed a pattern of careful monitoring without intervening directly in their children's school. Given parents' limited level of education and lack of communication with teachers it is not known how accurate parents' perception of their children's weakness and strengths were and/or the effectiveness of their interventions other than communicating to children that education is important. However, if parents do not have access to accurate information about their child, they are limited from making informed decisions about how they should engage with their children in the home and community. In addition the benefits of their time and participation may be minimal if not aligned directly to their child's needs. Through communicating and sharing information with schools, parents can identify the meaningful and beneficial ways they can participate in their children's education (both inside and outside of the school) to ensure success and become knowledgeable partners in their children's schooling (Epstein, 1990).

School Participation

As discussed above, interesting patterns emerged with respect to why and how

parents became engaged in their children's education. Given the history of Woodson Elementary and the negative perceptions of parents and students, it is not surprising that parents are less involved directly in their children's school. Margaret's recount of her experience at Woodson where a teacher thanked her for her participation in a class activity; however, she disparaged other parents who were not present is an important illustration of staff's perception of "uninvolved" parents and how such perceptions are communicated within the Woodson community (see page 138). Unfortunately Margaret, like other parents and staff, did not challenge the teacher's negative perception of parents which suggests how such perceptions become long standing narratives about Woodson parents. Despite the negative perceptions of parents and students, parents participated in their children's schools using proactive or reactive forms of engagement (or both). Both forms of engagement, while qualitatively distinct, represented parents' attempts to support their children's education.

Woodson parents engaged in their children's education in a variety of ways and for different reasons in the school. Proactive involvement in this study referred to engagement in which parents participated in their children's education on a relatively frequent basis and was designed to support or improve their child's academic and/or behavioral performance. Such engagement supported teachers' perceptions of students and often occurred in collaboration or with the support of teachers. Reactive involvement in this context referred to engagement that occurred due to parents' perception of mistreatment by staff towards their child and occurred sporadically throughout the year. Such actions questioned/challenged school staff's assessments of children's problem areas and were not well received by school staff. Interpreting several of the current

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findings within the context of differences in power and legitimacy of voice (e.g., funds of knowledge) helps to organize the experiences of participating parents with respect to parental engagement in schools.

Parents who engaged in proactive activities consistently in Woodson Elementary were generally positively received by teachers. Such parents participated in the school in a variety of traditional roles including: observing or volunteering in their children's classrooms, attending parent-teacher meetings, and communicating in-person or by telephone with their children's teacher. In addition, findings from the phase two survey and interview projects also indicated that parents were engaged in their children's school through chaperoning trips and attending school social events. It should be noted that only those parents who were involved in traditional roles (e.g., supportive of teachers' work, cooperative) in the school were accepted and valued. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests teachers and other school personnel view the role of the parent as a passive one, in which the parent provides information, but is not expected to participate actively in decision-making (Sculz, 1982; Lareau & Horvat, 1996, Lewis & Forman, 2002).

Such parents can be generally described as cooperative participants (i.e. non-expert) wherein they consumed knowledge from teachers about their children and were generally supportive of school staff's work with their child. As reported in their interviews, many of these parents spent more time and energy forming relationships with teachers to support their children compared to parents who were more involved in the home. Through their consistent contact with the school, these parents were able to develop intimate working knowledge of the school and their child's classroom (e.g., how

to communicate with staff, how to remedy problems), which facilitated their child's progress. Their actions mirrored Woodson staff's perceptions of how parents should be involved and thus these parents were invited and encouraged to engage in their children's education in the school.

These findings suggest that parent involvement (in its traditional sense) in schools can serve as a stand in for cultural capital. According to Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of cultural capital, the more parents share the same standards of an institution, the easier it is for them to engage in a process to facilitate the success of their children. The Woodson parents who had the resources to attend school functions during the day, knowledge of the inner workings of their child's school (e.g. effective ways of communicating with school staff), and sense of entitlement to intervene directly in their child's classroom were more successfully involved in their child's school and welcomed by school staff. These families across socioeconomic status, age, or education level learned how to adapt to the implicit codes of conduct of the school to successfully advocate for their children.

Moreover, school staff's support/encouragement of those parents who have learned appropriate ways of engaging the school setting appears to facilitate parent involvement as an index of cultural capital in schools and perpetuates the categorization of parents as "involved" or "uninvolved." Alternatively, those parents who lack appropriate cultural capital are systematically prevented by staff from participating in more authentic ways (ways that matter to parents) in their child's education in the school setting. Successful parent participation in this sense (as an index of cultural capital)

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becomes more than parents' knowledge of school activities but also their knowledge of the nuances involved in engaging the school setting.

While many of the parents who actively interacted with their children's teachers were supportive of teachers, for some parents their decision to become involved was rooted in some skepticism of teachers. Recall the experience of Ernestine who became involved in her grandson's classroom because she initially questioned how various punishments were assigned to students (see page 134) or Tamika's report of becoming involved due to a perception that teachers are more actively involved with children who they perceive had involved parents (see page 135). Such parents, while seemingly supportive of teachers, were also carefully monitoring teachers' behaviors with their children to increase the likelihood that their children were treated fairly and receiving an appropriate education. These findings are consistent with the work of Lareau and Horvatt (1999) that suggested African American parents enter schools with a greater level of suspicion and distrust as compared to white parents. However, due to forming relationships with teachers, these parents were at an advantage (compared to parents who were more involved in the home) when they questioned a teacher's actions because of their decision to partner with school staff and their knowledge of school operations and classroom dynamics.

Only one parent envisioned parent participation as something that could occur outside the constraints of the school, home, or established community organizations. Recall the experience of April, who initially reported working with community groups and then decided to create an after school program (see page 140). This parent, who is college educated, challenged traditional notions of parent participation by focusing her

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efforts on benefiting a community of parents and students utilizing her own funds of knowledge to tackle problems. Her efforts show she passionately refuses to allow parents and children to remain passive recipients of schools' and the local community's agendas by interjecting her own decision-making power and funds of knowledge into the educational arena.

Differences in power between parents and teachers were more apparent for parents engaging in reactive forms of involvement. These parents were often responding to negative assumptions about their children, or to perceptions of mistreatment. Many of the parents interviewed, had not one, but multiple instances of perceived mistreatment by staff towards several of their children or the parents themselves. Such negative exchanges occurred with different school staff (at all levels), which suggests the pervasiveness of the perceived occurrence of these behaviors within Woodson Elementary. Overall, parents became engaged (reactively) in their children's education because they questioned the legitimacy/accuracy of school staff's perceptions of their children's problems. Their actions were an assertion or reclaiming of their voice/influence/right in their child's education.

Often parents called upon their funds of knowledge based on their cultural and/or local understandings and histories, and in some cases academic knowledge to interject their perceptions of what would serve the best interest of their children. However, in their attempts to exercise their rights as parents, they also indirectly challenged school staff's power and authority. Moreover, parents' communication of their concerns to school staff in an angry and confrontational manner also can be perceived as undermining staff's authority. Findings from previous work on parental involvement indicate that

aggressive parents have been found to be perceived as hostile, insensitive to teachers, dominating, and uncompromising (Gleeman & Roth, 1980). Thus parents' concerns not only highlighted differences in opinion about the nature of the problem but also blurred established roles between parents and staff. While I did not interview teachers for this project, it appears that based on teachers' response to such patterns of engagement (e.g., ignoring and criticizing parents) and my own participant observations, they felt threatened by parents' assertion of their rights. An additional factor that contributed to the divide between parents (who were reactive engagers) and teachers is that they did not have relationships with one another. Their relationship can be described as two outsiders forced together to discuss a problem versus two partners working together to solve a problem. Their view of one another as an Other influenced how they negatively interpreted and responded to each other's behaviors (e.g., communication, actions). These findings are consistent with the work of Lewis and Forman (2002) who posited that differences and similarities between parents' and teachers' positions have an impact on how parents and teachers understand one another, and each others' roles and responsibilities-- influencing teachers' and parents' level of openness with one another, styles of engagement, and mutual expectations.

In contrast, parents who engaged in proactive forms of involvement in the school constructed more positive relationships with their children's teachers. These parents entered schools as supporters and collaborators with teachers. They generally accepted teachers' assessment of problem areas for their children as accurate and valid. Recall the experience of Tamika and Carl who reported discussing their expectations with their child's teacher at the beginning of the school year and continued monitoring their child's

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progress through consistent communication with the teacher which supported their relationship with their child's teacher (see pages 135 and 137 respectively).

These parents were also concerned about their children's progress and wanted a voice in their children's education; however, they were able to exercise their rights in a manner that was perceived by teachers to be non-intimidating. Key to their ability to balance their concerns while also maintaining/respecting the teacher's authority was a pattern of behavior marked by forming and valuing relationships with teachers, consistently communicating with teachers, and being supportive of teachers' work with their children. These parents were able to partner with teachers and develop a mutual understanding of their child's strengths and weaknesses. Any questioning of the teacher's decision-making was rooted in an established relationship of respect and genuine concern for the best interest of the student. These findings are consistent with research indicating that teachers want parents to be positive, supportive, and trustful of their judgments and assessments and like parents who are deferential, express empathy with the difficulty of teachers' work and have detailed information about their children's school experiences (Lareau & Horvatt, 1999). These parents were able to adapt to the implicit standards and codes of conduct of the school to get their concerns addressed.

The manner in which these African American parents addressed issues and interacted with teachers was more consistent with the traditional middle-class culture of schools. It should be noted that parents who engaged in reactive forms of involvement with teachers did initially proactively communicate with teachers before problems were exacerbated; however, their lack of forming a relationship with teachers, lack of consistent communication with teachers until the problem worsened, and manner in

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which they interacted with teachers to address problems may have prevented and/or delayed them from effectively advocating for their children.

Outcomes of Parental Participation

While research suggests that teachers would like increased parent participation, the results of this project highlight that not all forms of parent participation are equally valued. Consistent with the findings of Lareau and Horvatt (1999) on parent participation, teachers select a narrow range of acceptable behaviors (e.g., being supportive of teachers, accepting their assessments and recommendations, complying with teachers request for involvement). In fact, Woodson school staff was seen as engaging in several behaviors designed to suppress parent participation that did not meet their expectations. Both Cassandra and April reported that school staff threatened them with punitive actions (calling truancy officer and DCS) if they failed to comply with the school's request (see pages 123 and 129 respectively). Margaret reported feeling as if she was being "talked down" to when communicating with the principal about her concerns, based on her perception of the principal's tone of voice and the words she used during the conversation (see page 119). Moreover, the predominant pattern in which teachers passively resisted parents' request for action was by listening to but either ignoring or not adequately addressing parents' concerns. Teachers' decision not to act was another way they exercised their power over parents. For some parents, such strategies worked temporarily as they waited for staff to address their concerns while other parents continued to advocate for their children by communicating their problems to other parents and or interested community partners.

Interestingly, the parents who were most successful at getting their child's needs met (when encountering resistance from school staff) were able to work outside of the school bureaucracy. Recall the experience of Beverly whose son was charged with hitting a teacher and had initially received a police record (see page 125). Beverly communicated her concerns to parents within and outside of the Woodson community and also made her concerns known to local community groups interested in the educational experiences of African American children. Through making her concerns known beyond the confines of the school (which had a tendency to individualize students' problems), Beverly's son's charges were subsequently dropped and accommodations made for the family. Similarly, Margaret was able to receive educational testing for her son through the services of a local university when the slow pace at which staff at Woodson Elementary addressed the needs of her son was made known (see page 117). What appeared to separate these parents' experiences from those of other parents who were unable to successfully advocate for their children was a greater knowledge of their right to participate, persistence in their efforts in the face of obstacles, and solicitation of support and feedback from friends, family and community members.

The patterns described above are again consistent with theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) such that parents who engaged in schools in ways that were supportive of teachers (appropriate form of communication, communicate consistently with teachers) and complied with teachers' requests subsequently had more knowledge of their students concerns and progress, were invited to participate in their children's education and able to meet the needs of their children. Moreover, these findings suggest that it is not only the manner (e.g., being supportive,

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appropriate vocabularies) in which parents interacted with teachers that made their experiences more positive and beneficial, but the formation of relationships with teachers was also an asset. These findings are also consistent with the work of Handler (1990) who suggest that organization's pattern of response is influenced by staff's moral evaluation of clients. If teachers and parents perceive one another as partners, not clients or experts, they are more likely to see their shared interests and work to resolve differences. In the absence of forming relationships with teachers, parents who collaborated with organizations and concerned citizens outside of the school community were able to effectively advocate for their children. In the following section, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the present study are described, followed by a brief summary of implications and future directions.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The qualitative methodology used in the current study is one of the strengths of this research. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, Woodson parents were given a relatively unstructured opportunity to discuss their experiences and perceptions of participating in their children's education. Parents were able to define for themselves what parent participation meant rather than have it imposed on them by the researcher. This worked to uncover the non-traditional ways these parents were involved in their children's education, the barriers, and outcomes of their participation. An additional strength of the present research is that it gives voice to the experiences of African American families who have been depicted in the literature as uninvolved in schools and in the literature and in the local community. One underlying value of this research was to avoid reinforcing the tendency to engage in victim-blaming, which can occur when the

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context of marginalized groups are ignored. In the present study, explicit attempts were made to obtain a more contextualized understanding of families' experiences and how they negotiated becoming involved in the home, school, and community. Further, by listening to parents whose perspectives are less represented in the literature, information that may otherwise be unknown or misinterpreted is available to better understand parent participation activities and inform future interventions.

Because the present study was aimed at obtaining in-depth information about the Woodson Elementary community, several methods were utilized to gain information about the school including participant-observations, surveys, in-depth interviews, and review of records (newspaper articles) to inform aspects of the research including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This knowledge base provides important insight into understanding how the local climate of the school and community can influence perceptions of parents and parent participation activities.

Several of the findings in the present research are interesting and worthy of future studies. However, it is difficult to generalize these findings to the larger Woodson community or African American parents, in general, due to the small sample of parents interviewed. The present sample was problematic in other ways as well. For instance, the majority of parents was nominated by teachers and thus represents teachers' perceptions of involved and uninvolved parents. Future studies might seek out other informants (e.g., parents, other school staff) to access a wider range of parents' activities. In addition the sample is predominantly female, thus our understanding of African American fathers' participation in their children's education is limited. Another weakness of the present research is that teachers' perspectives on parent participation at

Woodson were not addressed. If both parents and teachers would like more parent participation, it would be important to understand the perspectives of both parties regarding what parental participation means and ways of supporting these activities inside and outside of the school.

Lastly, my identity as a single, childless, African American doctoral student raised in a middle-class home likely facilitated and limited the connections I formed with parents during the interviews. As discussed previously, I felt comfortable in all parents' homes. Parents introduced me to their families, invited me to remain for dinner/lunch, (after the interview) and inquired about my personal experiences as a graduate student. Parents expressed a sense of pride about my educational attainment as an African American woman and my work, which examined issues important to the African American community. In addition, parents often used the term "our community," "our people," "you know how black folk are" or "one of us" over the course of the interviews which suggested they perceived me to be a part of their ethnic community or that I understood their experiences. For some parents, my status as an African American allowed them to openly discuss their family's personal experiences of racism (housing and job discrimination) living in the Korbel community and their critique of the local white community.

In contrast, being African American also filtered the information parents discussed. Parents rarely discussed negative experiences encountered in Korbel schools, which is inconsistent with the historical experiences of African American students in this community. Perhaps, parents assumed that I already understood their negative experiences (and thus did not have to educate me) given my work at Woodson and my

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interest in increasing parental participation and improving the experiences of African American families. In addition, my position as a graduate student and connection to a local university initially caused some hesitance about my motives amongst parents as they inquired about how the data would be used and who would have access to the data.

<u>Summary</u>

Overall this project illustrates that African American parents, regardless of their socio-economic status, educational background, family composition, and age, care about their children's education. While their tactics are not all sanctioned by school officials, the idea that these parents do not participate in their children's education is false and a stereotype. This stereotype has been utilized throughout Korbel schools and the community as a code (e.g., uninvolved parents) to depict these parents as neglectful, apathetic, and the source of their children's problems. It has also worked to depict the children of these parents as behavior problems and "unreachable." School staff, community members, and parents themselves have all been complicit in the perpetuation of this stereotype or caricature of parents as "uninvolved." It has prevented both professionals and non-professionals from seeing one another as knowledgeable and contributing partners in the education of these children. Interestingly, this project found that while teachers openly voiced that parents were uninvolved in their children's education, when they were asked to identify parents who were uninvolved in their children's education, teachers had difficulty identifying more than one or two parents who were perceived to be uninvolved. This could suggest that teachers are generalizing their perceptions of parent participation based on a few cases of parents who do not comply with their requests.

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Moreover, the findings suggest that parent participation, in all of its forms, matters. While the goals of parents' participation did not focus predominantly on improving academic outcomes, it appears to be beneficial for supporting students' moral and social development, increasing students' motivation to attend school, bringing families together in activities, and learning practical life skills. Woodson parents illustrated that they are doing whatever they can with limited resources, which communicates to their children that education is important. These findings suggest the need for new processes, language and practices that support and recognize parents' full engagement in their children's education and that establishes meaningful and real connections between schools and families. Schools must work collaboratively with parents to develop a process that will facilitate and support parents' engagement. Parent participation can no longer be coordinated solely to fulfill solely the school's needs (e.g. improving test scores).

Recommendations

Since my involvement with this project, I have come to understand that "parent involvement" is a socially loaded term. For the most part, the use of this term in the school setting primarily functions to pre-determine and/or restrict the potential ways parents can participate in their children's education. Parents are essentially placed into two categories, involved or involved. Given the scripted roles the term parent involvement delineates in the minds of school staff and parents, it is difficult for both parents and teachers to view parents as engaging in other critical and valuable activities in their children's education. In addition, the term "parent involvement," as it gets performed in schools can perpetuate power inequalities between teachers and parents.

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Parent involvement has become an activity school staff perceive all parents should do (meaning it has a high social value in schools/represents cultural capital) and with school staff's support and monitoring of parents' activities. Under such circumstances, school staff (as the expert) is placed in the position of providing guidance on how parents should support their children's education, soliciting participation, and also evaluating the quality of parents' interactions (involved or uninvolved) with their children. Moreover, parent involvement has come to be construed as an individualistic activity performed between a parent and child without greater awareness/attention to larger school issues impacting all families.

Given the complexity of the term parent involvement, new language should be utilized to re-frame our understanding of parents' activities. A language that fosters collaboration between parents and staff, eliminates power inequalities, seeks to incorporate indigenous and traditional forms of parent participation, and addresses the concerns of all students and families. Throughout this project, I have used the term parent participation in lieu of parent involvement to give parents the freedom and opportunity to discuss the various ways they participate in their children's education. Other terms such as collaboration or partnership might be useful in this regard. In addition to creating a new language to represent parents' activities, new roles and opportunities must be created and staff and parents must agree on such roles. Renaming parent involvement with another term will not lead to changes in parent participation without redefining the relationships between parents and teachers. A paradigm shift is needed in schools away from the expert/child model towards a democratic participation model. Parents' and teachers' contributions should be equally valued and supported in

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schools. Parents and teachers should become partners and work toward common goals, share resources, and engage in dialogues to address problems. The needs of the school community should be at the forefront of parent participation initiatives versus the individual issues of families. Inherent in a democratic participation framework, is also the fostering of interconnected relations between parents and teachers that are valued and developed over time. Establishing relationships between parents and teachers appeared to facilitate partnering between parents and teachers at Woodson and also leveled barriers based on race, education level, and social class position.

It is likely that contextual (e.g., school and community histories) and demographic factors (race, ses, education level of parents) may also condition how parents and school staff envision parent participation. Thus parent participation (its meaning and function) across schools might look different depending on the histories and experiences of parents and teachers. Rather than defining new activities that should constitute parent participation based on this project, a few parameters for designing parent participation programs are suggested: Parent participation programs should (1) promote values and foster activities that are important to both parents and staff (e.g. educational decision-making, promoting moral and social development of children), (2) create roles that neutralize inequalities in power (e.g., building relationships between parents and teachers, creating joint parent-teacher school advisory board), and (3) develop a process to support collaboration/partnering between parent and teachers (i.e. parent participation is an on-going activity). The goals of parent participation should also be expanded to include making schools more accountable and accessible to the communities they are serving and increasing the voice and visibility of historically marginalized families. It is not simply a

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matter of mandating approaches; rather parent participation must make sense in the context of family, school, and community perceptions and practices. Meaningful parent participation can occur when parents and teachers develop shared commitments to parent participation and shared understandings of the meaning and function of parent participation.

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APPENDIX A: PARENT INTEREST SURVEY

Name (optional) _____

Student (s) Name_____

Woodson Elementary School Parent Interest Survey

Family and community involvement are important to the success of our children, and thus, Woodson Elementary School would like to encourage families to share and learn new skills within our school environment. The following survey will be used as a resource to develop parent-centered programs that are geared toward strengthening their families. Please indicate the activities you are currently involved in at Woodson. You may circle more than one answer.

Parent-Teacher Conferences
Chaperoning trips
Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
Advocating for your child's needs
Stressing the importance of school
Parent Advisory Boards
Other (please indicate below)

Monitoring your child's homework
Reading to your child
Volunteering in the classroom
Attending school event/meetings
Attending school board meetings
Observing your child in class

How often are you in your child(ren)'s school? Please circle one answer.

Daily   Weekly   Monthly   2Xyear   Never
Other ---

Please indicate the activities that you would like to be more involved in at Woodson. You may circle more than one answer.

Parent-Teacher Conferences
Chaperoning trips
Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
Advocating for your child's needs
Stressing the importance of school
Parent Advisory Boards
Other (please indicate below)

Monitoring your child's homework
Reading to your child
Volunteering in the classroom
Attending school event/meetings
Attending school board meetings
Observing your child in class

Which of your talents/skills would you be willing to share with the Woodson community? (e.g., gardening, exercising, and cooking)

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What types of children's activities would and/or do you participate in with your child(ren)? You may circle more than one response.

Art   Music   Drama   Science   Tutoring
         Reading
Other (please indicate below)

Please indicate the types of activities/workshops you would be interested in attending at Woodson. Please circle all that apply.

GED training   Introduction to Computers   Parent Support Groups
Effective Parenting Strategies   Budgeting   Social Events
Homework Help Tips Student/parent Rights in School   Home Buying
Health & Nutrition   How Your School District Works
Other (please indicate below)

What would make it easier for you to participate in your child(ren)'s school? You may circle more than one response.

Transportation   Knowing that my involvement counts
Better communication   Parents have input in the agenda
Meals provided   Childcare provided
Different work hours   Welcoming atmosphere

What types of resources would you like to see in Woodson's Family Center? For example: books, computer access, informational videos, and community resource information.
Please list below:

How often do you talk to other Woodson parents about your child(ren)'s education? Please circle one response.

Always   Often   Sometimes   Seldom   Never

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

APPENDIX B: PHASE II- PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Overall, how have your experiences of being involved at Woodson been?

2. How are you currently involved in your child's education (in the school, home, community)?

3. Are there ways you would like to be involved at Woodson that are not currently available to parents? Are there any talents, skills, or resources that you have that could be utilized in the Woodson community?

4. What are some of the barriers to parent involvement?

5. Do you have any ideas of ways that parent involvement could be increased at Woodson?

6. What are your concerns for the Woodson community given the current reconstitution?

7. Are there any parents within the Woodson community with whom you discuss your concerns?

APPENDIX C: WOODSON PARENT INTEREST SURVEY RESULTS

What is the purpose of this survey?
- To understand how Woodson parents are currently involved in the education of their children.
- To identify the resources and skills of parents.
- To identify ways in which parents can be enriched through parent centered programs.
- To strengthen the home-school connection.

Why is a better understanding of parental participation in education important?
According to parents,
- We are involved in multiple ways in our child(ren)'s education. Given the different ways we participate in our child(ren)'s education inside and outside of the school, all types of parental participation should be recognized and nurtured.
- Parental participation encourages us to view ourselves and other parents as sources of knowledge and support in our child(ren)'s education.
- Parental participation integrates our skills and talents into school practices/curricula which treats us as experts on the lives of our child(ren).
- Parental participation fosters collaborative relationships between parents and school staff.
- Parental participation strengthens and supports the capacities of our families, which builds and develops the resources of our local community.
- Parental participation creates a sense of belonging and ownership within the school.

How were the data collected?
This report summarizes the findings from thirty-two interviews and 50 surveys completed by Woodson parents. Both the surveys and interviews asked parents to discuss their current involvement in their child(ren)'s education in addition to ways parents would like to be more involved in their child(ren)'s education. The results presented reflect parents' reports of their participation (i.e. what they actually do) in their child(ren)'s education and are not based on opinions.

Results
1. How are parents participating in their child(ren)'s education at home?
- Daily monitoring their child(ren)'s homework
- Taking their child(ren) on educational trips (i.e. library, museum, zoo)
- Reinforcing information learned in school through supplemental materials (i.e. buying computer games, books)
- Stressing the value of education
- Advocating for the needs of their children (i.e. attending school board meetings, arranging meetings with their child's teacher)

Parents are much more actively involved in their child(ren)'s education than we recognize. This finding may not only be of interest to school staff, but also to parents.

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The majority of parents interviewed reported active involvement in their own child(ren)'s education, but few believed other Woodson parents were involved in their child(ren)'s education. Given that the majority of parents report participating in their child(ren)'s education individually, in their homes, and away from the supervision of staff, it's not surprising that parents and perhaps school staff may perceive parents as being less involved. However, parents have defined their own ways of participating in their child(ren)'s education. Parents' believed their involvement (1) supported and supplemented school activities and (2) helped their children stay ahead. Additionally, parents believed their involvement was not limited to doing structured activities with their child(ren), but emphasized creating opportunities in their homes to discuss the value of being educated. Ultimately, parents' believed creating the opportunity and a physical space within their home to support learning, in doing or knowing, as the primary ways they are involved in their child(ren)'s education in the home.

2. How are parents involved in their child(ren)'s education in the school?
- Volunteering in classrooms
- Chaperoning trips
- Attending social events and bi yearly parent/teacher conferences

Fewer parents report active participation in the school building, despite their desire to be more involved. Given the lack of parental participation within the school, which traditionally has been one of the most important and recognized forms of parental participation, it may appear as if parents are uninvolved in their child(ren)'s education. There are several reasons for the reduced presence of parents inside the school building including the increase in two-income families; however, parents have identified what they understand as barriers to their active participation within the school.

Barriers
- Ineffective notice about school events (i.e. method and timing of notice)
- Lack of onsite childcare for school events
- Scheduling of events (time and day of events)
- Lack of transportation for school events
- Unwelcoming school atmosphere
- Believing their involvement did not matter
- Lack of parental input into school events

Parents' consistent reports of barriers within the school may make them feel as if their involvement is unimportant and that they do not belong. Such experiences may account for their lower rates of involvement in the school compared to the home.

3. *How can Woodson increase the home- school connection?*
- Utilize the gifts and talents of parents and the community within the school
- Provide classes, workshops, after school programs, and onsite services to enrich families and the community
- Foster good working relationships between staff and parents
- Provide opportunities for parent networking

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Overall, parents want their school to create circumstances that enable and support parents. Parents believe they possess valuable knowledge, resources, and talents that could be beneficial to the Woodson community. They believe the school is not only an educational center for children, but could also be a place for community services (i.e. full service school). Parents want to attend classes or workshops at Woodson not only to help their children develop academically, socially, and emotionally, but to also build the skills and resources of parents. While parents are individually working with their own child and helping them get ahead, parents were also interested in the experiences of other Woodson families, but felt there were limited opportunities to explore these opportunities inside the school.

Recommendations

Overall these findings suggest parents are actively participating in their child(ren)'s education, although in less visible ways. Parents want to be more involved in their child(ren)'s education so, what can we do to help?

Given the different ways parents are involved in their children's education, multiple solutions are needed to support and increase parental participation at Woodson.

- Increase parental input and decision making through the creation of a Parent Advisory Board. The purpose of the board would be (1) to assist the school in decision-making and the planning of school events and (2) to express the needs and concerns of Woodson families to school staff. The intention of this board should be the diverse representation of Woodson parents' interests and concerns. Board members could be rotated on a yearly basis to ensure diverse representation of parent interests.

- Reduce barriers to parental involvement. The school should provide: effective notice to parents about school events, onsite child care for school events, coordination of transportation for school events, increase parental input into school events, foster a welcoming school atmosphere, etc.

- Parent Networking. Monthly social events should be created to help parents connect, network and serve as resources to other Woodson parents.

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APPENDIX D: PHASE III- PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. As you may know I have been working with the parent coordinator at Woodson to increase parental participation at the school. So far I've conducted interviews with parents about how they are involved in their children's education in the home and school in addition to surveying parents (e.g. Woodson parent interest form, which you may have filled out) on the ways they are involved in their children's education. After having conversations with parents and analyzing the results of the survey data, I have become interested in parents' perceptions of education and parent participation (so their thought, beliefs, attitudes) in addition to how parents make choices (or decisions) about being involved in their children's education. So I'm not only interested in what parents do with their children, but how they think about their involvement and what their involvement means to them? The interviews I'm conducting with parents like yourself seek to address these questions. Do you have any questions or comments? Would you be interested in participating?

Here is written information detailing the purpose of the study and explaining what your participation would require. (At this point, I will go over the informed consent form and ask for parent's signature). Do you have any questions or comments?

Thanks. We can get started with the interview.

Parents' past history and school experiences
In order to get a better understanding of your involvement with your child, I would like to discuss your experiences of school and how your parents were involved in your education. To begin,

Purpose- to get a general description of parents' school experiences

1. Would you talk with me about your experiences of school as a child? [Probes: what are your memories of school (fondest and worst)?, Can you remember your first day of school? , What were your thoughts?, What were your feelings?, Was there a point when your thoughts about school changed?, What happened to produce this?]

Purpose- to understand family's involvement in school

2. Would you describe the key people who played a role in your education? [Probes: What role did they play in your education (activities in the home and school)? Could you describe any obstacles to their participation?]

Purpose- to understand more specific school experiences/relationship formation with school staff

3. Could you describe your relationships with school staff? [Describe your favorite teacher?, What made her your favorite?, Describe your worst teacher?, What made this teacher the worst?, Which experience with the two teachers just described would be the most typical of the relationships you had with teachers?, Did your parents have relationships with your teachers?, Could you describe them?]

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Purpose- to understand parents' belief about school and parent involvement

4. Can you describe some of the conversations your parents had with you about school? [probe: What were your parents' expectations for you in school?, How did you feel about these expectations? What conversations did your parents have about their role in your education]

Parents' current history and school experiences with their children

Purpose- to understand family's beliefs about school/education/parent involvement. What is the cultural ideal parents have for their kids and whether or not they are reaching this goal/vision?

Thinking about your involvement in your child's education,

1. What do you believe is the role of schools? What do children need to do well in school?

2. What do you think about the education your child is receiving at Woodson? [Probe: how are they doing in school, good and bad experiences]

3. How would you describe your role in your child's education? Why do you believe it is important to be involved in this way?

4. What are your expectations (hopes, dreams) for your children? What are your educational goals for your child? What would you like for your children to learn?

5. What conversations have you had with your child about school?

6. When you think of parental involvement, what does it mean to you? Do you think it is important? In what way?

7. What do you believe is the purpose of parent involvement?

8. What are the possible ways that parents can participate in their children's education?

Parents' decision-making about their school involvement and forms of involvement

Purpose- to understand processes- ways parents relate to their children and school, connect what parents are doing to what parents think they should be doing, understanding of scripted roles, decision-making

1. Can you describe some of the ways that you participate in your child's education to help them succeed in school? [Probes: What made you decide get involve in these

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specific ways? Are there any obstacles (school, family) that prevent you from participating in your child's education as you've described?]

2. How have your experiences of being involved at Woodson been? [Probe: Positive or Negative? What ways do you feel the school would like for parents to be involved? How do you feel about these roles? Are their certain types of parent involvement the school discourages?]

3. What role do teachers play in promoting parent involvement? [Probes: How have your experiences been working with teachers to support your child's learning? What conversations have you had with teachers about working with your child?]

Outcomes of parent involvement.

1. Why is parent involvement important for parents?

2. What would you like to accomplish by being involved in your children's education? 3.

3. How do you think you are reaching these goals?

4. How has your involvement in your child's education made a difference in your family?

Well being of child? Relationship formation with teachers and other parents?

5. What are the drawbacks of parent involvement?

This concludes our conversation. Do you have any questions for me? Are there any

questions that I have not answered that you feel are important to our discussion? Thanks

again for your time and participation.

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APPENDIX E: TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' NOMINATIONS OF PARENTS

Teachers Nominations	Active Parents	Inactive Parents
Sheila		*
Sandra	*	
Vanessa	*	
Kim	*	
Vera		*
April		*
JoAnn	*	
Dianne	*	
Ernestine	*	
Keisha (also nominated by parent)	*	
Margaret	*	
Cassandra	*	
Tamika	*	
Fonda		*
Beverly	*	
Roberta	*	
Carl	*	
Lisa	*	
Tasha	*	
Rosalyn	*	

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APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT PARTICIPANTS

Parent's Pseudonym Name (N=20)	Race	Age	Highest Level of Education Completed	Employment	Family Composition	Time lived in Korbel	Child's Lunch Status**	Child's Grade Level (for children attending Woodson only)
Sheila	African American	25	1 Year of College	Food Services	Mother, Father, 4 children	7 years	Free	Kindergarten, 1st and 4th grades
Sandra	African American	51	2 Years of College	Substitute teacher's aide	Mother, 4 Children, Several foster children	14 years	Reduced	5th grade
Vanessa	Biracial	33	High school Graduate	Work Compensation Coordinator	Mother, Father, 3 Children	Lifetime	Reduced	1st grade
Kim	African American	32	High school Graduate	Janitorial services	Mother, 2 children	Lifetime Resident,	Free	2nd grade
Vera	African American	46	High School Graduate	Library Employee	Mother, daughter	15 years	Full	4th grade
April	African American	50	M.A.	University Employee	Mother, 6 children	9 years	Reduced	4th grade
Joann	African American	76	2 years of community college	Retired teacher's aide	Grandmother, 2 adopted children, 2 grandchildren, adult daughter	36 years	Reduced	kindergarten, 2nd grade
Diane	African American	70	High school Graduate	Cook	Grandmother, 2 grandchildren	Lifetime	Free	2nd and 5th grades
Ernestine	African American	50	High school Graduate	Administrative Assistant	Grandmother, fiancé, 1 grandchild	Lifetime	Full	Kindergarten
Keisha	African American	28	High school Graduate	Dept. of Rehabilitation	Mother, Father, 6 children	Lifetime	Free	Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 4th grades
Margaret	African American	37	GED	Hair Stylist and Labor Coach	Mother, father, 3 children	15 years	Free	2nd grade
Cassandra	African American	38	M.A.	Research Coordinator	Mother, 3 children	5 years	Free	5th grade
Tamika	African American	36	Some college	Unemployed	Mother, husband, 1 child	Lifetime	Full	Kindergarten
Fonda	African American	30	High School Graduate	Home Daycare owner	Mother, 4 children	Lifetime	Free	Kindergarten
Beverly	African American	40	B.A.	Teacher	Mother, father, 5 children	Lifetime	Full	5th grade
Roberta	African American	34	Associates Degree	Certified Nursing Assistant	Mother, father, 2 children	4 years	Reduced	1st grade
Carl	African American	32	Some college	Teacher's aide	Mother, father, 2 children	5 years	Free	5th grade
Lisa	African American	33	M.A.	Teacher	Mother, father, 2 children	4 years	Full	Kindergarten

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Parent's Pseudonym Name (N=20)	Race	Age	Highest Level of Education Completed	Employment	Family Composition	Time lived in Korbel	Child's Lunch Status**	Child's Grade Level (for children attending Woodson only)
Tasha	African American	31	Some College	Customer Service Representative	Mother, father, 5 children	10 years	Free	2nd grade, 5th grade
Rosalyn	African American	30	College Graduate	Administrative Assistant	Mother, father, 2 children	8 years	Reduced	4th

**Formula for Lunch status is based on annual household income and household size. For example a family of four who earns 26,000 qualifies for free price lunch. A family of four who earns 37,000 annually qualifies for reduced price lunch.

Parent's Pseudonym Name (N=10)	Race	Age	Highest Level of Education Completed	Employment	Family Composition	Time lived in Korbel	Child's Lunch Status**	Child's Grade Level (for children attending Woodson only)
Angela	African American	26	High School Graduate	Customer Service Representative	Mother, 2 daughters	Lifetime Resident	Reduced	2nd grade
Renee	African American	38	High School Graduate	Assistant Minister	Mother, 2 sons	Lifetime Resident	Free	4th grade
Pam	African American	28	Associate Degree	Certified Nurse's Assistant	Mother, father, daughter, son	4 years	Full	3 rd grade
Taneesha	African American	31	GED	Home Daycare Owner	Mother, son, daughter	Lifetime Resident	Free	3rd grade
Kia	African American	28	High School Graduate	Collections/Customer Service Representative	Mother, daughter	11 years	Free	2nd grade
Sabrina	African American	34	B.A.	Teacher's Assistant	Mother, father, 3 daughters, son	Lifetime Resident	Reduced	4th grade
Andrea	African American	36	Associate Degree	Certified Nursing Assistant	Mother, son	23 years	Reduced	5th grade
Yolanda	African American	42	B.A.	Teacher	Mother, father, son, daughter	3 years	Full	3 rd grade
Nikki	African American	34	Some College	Secretary	Mother, son	Lifetime Resident	Reduced	1st grade
Stephanie	African American	30	High School Graduate	Daycare worker	Mother, 2 daughters	30 years	Reduced	5th grade

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Erica D. Mattison was born in Newark, New Jersey, on November 25, 1978. She graduated from Spelman College, in 2000, with a bachelor's degree in psychology. In 2000, she moved to Champaign, Illinois, to pursue a degree in Clinical/Community Psychology. She obtained her masters in psychology from the University of Illinois in 2003. Following the completion of her doctorate, she began a post-doctoral program in clinical psychology at Emory University.