

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT, INVOLVEMENT, AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS: PERSPECTIVES OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED  
CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

Purpose: The largest academic achievement gap in the U.S. is between African American and White students. Parental engagement and involvement are two key factors that influence academic success and may help reduce the achievement gap; however, traditional definitions and strategies used remain highly racially biased. The research supported two papers with aims of exploring (1) definitions of parental engagement and involvement and (2) barriers to and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement among African American single parents of elementary and middle school students. Methods: Employing a phenomenological design, this qualitative study used purposive sampling to recruit 15 African American single parents of elementary and middle school-aged children for participation in semi-structured interviews that explored participants' definitions of parental engagement, the relationship of parental engagement to academic achievement, and barriers to and facilitators of parental engagement. Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Results: Data analyses revealed four salient themes related to participants definitions of engagement and involvement: racist ideas and racist engagement, counternarrative development as an engagement strategy, effective parent-teacher communication, and cultural representation and inclusion. Data analyses revealed six salient themes related to barriers and facilitators: racism, intersectional stigma, single parent stress, African American representation, supporting diverse family forms, and accessible and equitable resources. Implications: The research findings suggested that school administrators and staff not only improve their lens of antiracist school practices, but also improve the parent-teacher communication process. In addition, schools should be intentional on integrating social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in policy development and school wide practices.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Andrea Renee Williams. She was an amazing Black single mother who raised me to value education and understand all the places that academic excellence could take me. As her legacy, I also dedicate this work to my son, Jeremiah David. May you rise and soar to great heights, young king. This research is for all of the Black, single parents that I am in community with and have served over the past 19 years in the social work field. I am truly inspired and grateful for the 15 powerful parents that took the time to share their deepest and often times painful experiences with supporting their children in elementary and middle school. The resilience and ability to face opposition with grace and dignity is astonishing. My heart's desire is that this dissertation will bring elevation and centering of your voices while also providing guidance and direction to better experiences for parents and all of our children.

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## INTRODUCTION

Defined as the sum of a person's school performance in terms of grades, standardized tests, and behaviors and attitudes about school, academic achievement is highly valued in the United States (U.S.) (Wilder, 2014). This value is evidenced by federal and state education policies designed to increase academic achievement such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, No Child Left Behind, and local state School Report Cards (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Despite these societal investments, large racial disparities in academic achievement persist among students across the U.S., with children of color and those in lower socioeconomic status homes frequently performing at lower levels on standardized tests and report cards when compared to their White and more affluent peers (American Psychological Association, 2017; Brookings Institution, 2019). Worse, racial disparities between African American and White students' academic achievement increases by one-tenth of a standard deviation each year of school they advance (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Ladson-Billings (2006) highlighted urgency of promoting equity and justice by closing the achievement gap by describing it as an *education debt* that has increased over time for families of color that not only includes disparities in education, but also health, finances, housing, and criminal justice.

In recent years, schools across the U.S. have made efforts to close the achievement gap through the curriculum and programming (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008). Yet these efforts continue to yield poorer outcomes for African American children relative to their White counterparts (Brookings Institution, 2019). These negative outcomes (e.g., lower literacy rates, lower standardized test scores, lower grades in reading and mathematics) are likely attributable to racial

disparities in opportunities in education, economic and social arenas that have pervaded U.S. society for centuries (Latunde, 2017).

Parental engagement and involvement (i.e., communication with teachers, awareness of and support with school assignments, and participation in school activities and events) is a demonstrably salient predictor of academic achievement, yet many schools have difficulty engaging parents and nurturing a healthy relationship between home and school (Christenson et al., 2005; Comer & Haynes, 1990; Epstein, 1995, 2011; Hourri et al., 2019). A substantial body of research indicates the positive impact of parental involvement on school success (Bandura et al., 2001; Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Klein, 1988; Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Many scholars (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 2000) note the importance of developing shared responsibility for improving student academic success and a culture of achievement by better connecting homes and schools. Indeed, other research has found that parental engagement that encourages learning in the home environment was most positively associated with children's academic achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al., 2003).

At the same time, the definitions of parental engagement and involvement deployed in this research are highly racially biased, as they were developed from studies of White middle-class families that did not represent the perspectives of African American families. Notably, they exclude the perspectives of African American single parents – a family structure represented in over 30% of Black families – nearly all of whom are mothers (U.S. Census Bureau/Statistical Abstract, 2015). Given that promoting parental engagement and involvement is critical to closing the racial academic achievement gap, the aims of this study are (1) to explore African American single parents' definitions of parental engagement and involvement and (2) to understand their perspectives of barriers to and facilitators of engaging with K-8 school staff. By bringing into

focus African American single parents' understandings of and experiences with parental engagement and involvement, this research seeks to enhance policies and practices in school settings in ways that facilitate parental engagement and involvement.

### **Definitions and Models of Parental Engagement and Involvement**

*Parental engagement* comprises communication with teachers, awareness of class assignments and activities, and access to resources and relationships with school staff (Houri et al., 2019). *Parental involvement* includes parenting style, supporting learning at home, communicating with school personnel, volunteering at school, participating in school decision making, and utilizing resources and community collaboration (Epstein, 1995). These definitions of parental engagement and involvement in their children's education have evolved over time, following seminal work by Epstein and Sheldon (2006) recommending that the term *parental involvement* be replaced with the term *school, family, and community partnership* to foreground the collective responsibility for children's academic success and expand conceptions of parental involvement and engagement to involve school and community. A more nuanced definition of parental involvement has emerged, underscoring the resources parents invest and behaviors in the home and school as key factors that can support children's education (El Nokali et al., 2010; Grolnick & Slowaiczek, 1994; Larocque et al., 2011).

There are varying definitions and conceptualizations of parental engagement. It has been posited that parent engagement is grounded in schools' efficient support of parents in nurturing their children's academic experience (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). Houri et al. (2019) identify two levels of parent engagement: *direct communication* and *parental relationship engagement*, the latter of which focuses on the quality of the parent-teacher relationship. The common themes across the definitions include direct communication, relationships, sensitivity, and positiveness.



In general, most existing definitions of parental engagement are highly racially biased, as they were developed based upon middle-class White families, that lack fluidity and consequently do not recognize diverse forms of parental engagement across cultures. Indeed, the even recent definitions still fail to acknowledge single African American parents' different forms of engagement and the barriers they face to traditional forms of engagement. Further, the unconscious ethnocentrism informing popular definitions of parental engagement may result in administrators and school staff misestimating levels of participation and engagement as traditionally defined in parent-focused programs (Latunde, 2017).

### **Parental Engagement and Involvement as Predictors of Academic Success/Achievement**

Academic achievement is highly influenced by the degree to which parents are involved in the school experience of their children (Wilder, 2014). An extensive body of research has demonstrated a positive association between parental engagement in the home and school and multiple successful academic outcomes (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007). Generally, studies found that parent attendance and participation in school activities, parental expectations for achievement, and parents providing homework assistance all had positive impacts on academic achievement.

At the same time, the variability in these studies' definitions and measurements of parental engagement and involvement may explain some of the race-based differences they observed in associations between parental engagement and academic achievement. For instance, one study found that among middle school students, the positive association between parental involvement (i.e., communicating with children about school, communicating with the school, attending and participating in activities, being involved at home, and having expectations about their child's academic achievement) and academic achievement was more pronounced for White families than for their African American counterparts (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Jeynes' (2005)

meta-analysis of research on the positive association of parental involvement with the academic achievement of urban elementary school children also observed differences between race and gender groups. Parental involvement was defined as communicating with children about school, communication with the school, attending and participating in activities, reading regularly and parent expectations about academic achievement. Similar to Hill and Tyson (2009), results indicated that parental involvement was positively associated with achievement among urban students across gender and ethnicity, yet the disparities between African American and White families still exist.

An extensive body of research has demonstrated a positive association between parental engagement in the home and school and multiple successful academic outcomes (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2016). Similar to findings on the impact of parental engagement, substantial research has documented the impact of parental involvement on academic achievement across various grade levels and ethnicities. For instance, Wilder (2014) performed a qualitative research synthesis of the results of nine meta-analyses that found positive relationships between parental involvement and academic success among diverse student populations ranging from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **The Impact of Racism on the Achievement Gap**

The impact of the historical oppression of African American people continues to manifest in many ways in the present day. Given that African American family structures are defined by systems and institutions (i.e., wealth inequality, segregated neighborhoods, unequal access to health care), that adversely affect the academic success of their children (Franklin & James, 2015), it is imperative to explore how slavery and present-day racism in America manifest psychosocially among African American families (Vaughans, 2017). African American people

have experienced over 500 years of racial oppression in North America, including slavery from 1619 through 1865. At least 11 million Africans were brought by force through the Middle Passage to the Americas, where they were dehumanized through the practice of slavery (Vaughans, 2017). When legalized slavery ended, African Americans endured legalized racial segregation from 1865 through 1954 and had to navigate Jim Crow laws that were intentionally created to keep them separate from White people. U.S. law limited their access to public buildings and schools and denied their right to vote until 1965 (History.com Editors, 2022). The laws speciously declared that African Americans had civil rights and the right to vote while landmark cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) further marginalized African American people by ruling that providing African American and White people with “separate but equal” services (which were never equal in practice) was constitutional.

Despite the advances made during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, African American people continue to experience institutional and interpersonal racism across the criminal justice, health, child welfare, and education systems. Although education is often viewed as the great equalizer of people’s opportunities regardless of personal and socioeconomic factors, barriers to academic achievement persist, including public misperceptions, false narratives, and forms of institutional discrimination that place blame on African American students for racial disparities in academic achievement. When the assumption is perpetuated that education inequality results from deficits in African American students, the larger systemic and structural drivers of that inequality remain hidden and found to be without fault (Browne & Battle, 2018).

Racism also magnifies the academic achievement gap through several school-level factors that function as barriers to African American parental engagement and involvement. In

their exploratory study of school engagement and achievement among African American freshman and sophomore high school students, Miller-Cribbs et al. (2002) found that schools often make unrealistic demands of African American parents who are already overwhelmed and overloaded. This unfairly puts African American parents and families at a disadvantage, contributing to the disparities. Similarly, White and Levers (2017) found that minoritized parents experienced power differences between teachers and themselves, that they desired empathy from the teachers when feeling intimidated by school staff in meetings, and that they experienced a lack of community and connection within the school, and even felt unwelcome when entering the building. These concerning findings suggest that some schools struggle to create open lines of communication, community, and celebratory activities that promote parent involvement of minoritized parents (White & Levers, 2017).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The proposed research was informed by theories of ecological systems, intergenerational trauma, and intersectionality. The first offered a macro-level conceptual framework for mapping and analyzing salient contextual, interpersonal, and personal factors affecting parents and students; the second explained the wounds of unique experiences and history of African American people; and the third provided a framework for observing varying dimensions of diversity that could (sometimes simultaneously) impact parental engagement and involvement and students' academic success (Latunde, 2017).

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, children develop within the context of multiple surrounding systems: the microsystem (i.e., the immediate environment), the mesosystem (i.e., interpersonal connections), the exosystem (i.e., community

and social systems), the macrosystem (i.e., social and cultural values), and the chronosystem (i.e., environmental changes over time). Notably, all five systems influence academic performance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017). The proposed research employed an ecological systems theory to place African American students and families in the context of neighborhoods and schools that are themselves embedded within social and cultural contexts.

Strategies for enhancing parental engagement and involvement can be deployed across the levels identified in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. Building on the connections among parents, children, school staff, and community allows space for collective engagement and investment in African American students. Latunde (2017) has built on Bronfenbrenner's framework by showing ways the family, school, and community interactions increase the likelihood of improved outcomes for African American students. Ideally, teachers are equipped to educate students while collaborating with engaged parents in working toward positive academic outcomes for students.

The context of racism and culture is very important when understanding the impact of parental engagement and involvement on academic performance among African American people. Goings et al. (2022) recently traced the ways in which systemic and interpersonal racism are ignored in many studies, even as the historical impacts of racism places African American families at greater risk of experiencing circumstances (e.g., poverty, lower income homes) that contribute to lower academic achievement. Increasing school staff awareness and understanding of racism and oppression while supporting students' cultural strengths, practices, and values enhance the relationships between parents, students, and teachers and promotes better academic outcomes (Waites, 2009).

## **Intergenerational Trauma**

African American families have endured centuries of intergenerational trauma in the U.S. Intergenerational trauma posits that historical and cultural trauma is transmitted across generations and can have biological and psychological consequences for people living today (Barlow, 2018). For African American people specifically, the institution of slavery resulted in the collective memory of trauma passed down from those who endured enslavement (Vaughans, 2017). Specifically, African American people pass down the mental representations, traumatized self-images, feelings, and interpretations of the traumatic past that are often unresolved (Vaughans, 2017).

The historical trauma experienced by African American people and the trauma that many single African American parents still navigate and manage today causes some parents to feel invisible, dismissed, and undervalued when attempting to engage with educational institutions, affecting their self-concept (Sotero, 2006). African American people often experience this sense of invisibility as “an inner struggle with the feeling that one’s talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism,” (Vaughans & Spielberg, 2014, p. 14). Vaughans and Spielberg (2014) further note that African American people experience psychological and emotional distress while navigating the sociopolitical elements of society where racism influences the rules and often excludes them. In schools, the ways that parental involvement and engagement are typically defined minimizes the ways that African American people have been socialized to engage and manage power differentials with educational institutions in the context of structural racism.

When exploring the social dimensions of families, African American people experience microaggressions as attacks that contribute to cumulative trauma. Dovidio and Gaertner’s (1996)

study showed the challenges for people born in America to avoid having racial bias given that they may inherit unconscious beliefs, which can in turn result in racially biased actions towards others such as microaggressions. As Sue (2010) noted, “Countless examples of microaggressions are delivered daily without the awareness of the perpetrators. And while these actions may appear harmless or innocent in nature, they are nevertheless detrimental to recipients because they result in harmful psychological consequences and create disparities” (p. 15). In other words, both racism and the trauma it produces have long, intergenerational consequences.

The salience of intergenerational trauma informs the selection of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides an approach to understanding lived experiences through individuals’ descriptions and interpretations (van Manen, 1990). Further, it gives voice to participants and foregrounds how they make meaning of their experiences. This study will reflect the commitment of the researcher to investigate lived experiences, reflect on themes, and describe the phenomenon while maintaining a strong relationship and equitable balance of power with participants throughout the process (Arminio, 2001). This research’s analysis necessitates recognizing the historical trauma that African American people have experienced. This study’s hermeneutic phenomenological methodology utilizes the researcher’s interpretations of experiences through both reflective questions and by recognizing that the explanations of the activities and experiences come from socio-historical contexts (Chessick, 1990).

### **Intersectionality**

This study design is also influenced by the theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) developed this theory to describe the ways systems of oppression overlap and create distinct experiences for people with multiple identities. In other words, intersectionality offers a lens for

analyzing the ways in which different systems of power collide and intersect. Collins and Bilge (2016) identified six core elements illuminated by intersectional analyses: power, social justice, relationality, complexity, social context, and inequality. Intersectionality integrates respect for a group's culture, traditions, and adaptive behaviors into inclusive practices (Henderson et al., 2017).

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender is essential to this study given the significant impacts that disparities in each category have on African American single parents. For instance, 53% of African American female-headed households experience poverty compared to 15% of African American male-headed households (Aulette, 2009; McAdoo, 2007). While a lack of access to resources may be compounded by the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and class, it may be mitigated with the embrace of the different intersections (Anthias, 2005). The disproportionate poverty faced by many African American single mothers is rooted in several circumstances. Black women experience pervasive gendered racism that challenges their parenting skills and work ethic (Collins, 1999). In addition, African American single mothers are more likely to be poorer than African American single fathers because women tend to have lower incomes than men (Cherlin, 2012). Further, many African American parents face challenges stemming from cycles of poverty and lack of access to social capital. In sum, as Browne and Battle (2018) have noted, "persistent inequalities produced by race, class, and gender have a pernicious effect on Black families, as they shape family structure, income, residential patterns, wealth, and educational opportunities" (p. 81).

### **Rationale for Current Study**

Much quantitative research has focused on the impact of parental involvement and engagement on academic achievement from kindergarten through twelfth grade. However, this



research typically defines parental engagement and involvement in ways that align with views of White middle-class parents without taking into account African Americans' historical and current experiences of racism and oppression as well as the unique strengths of and barriers to engagement faced by African American single parents. To improve parental engagement and involvement generally, schools must take deliberate steps to deepen teachers' and administrators' understanding the of lives of parents with varying social capital (Bartel, 2010).

Employing elements of Latunde's (2017) approach to promoting parent engagement (discussed earlier), this study will explore (1) how African American single parents define and operationalize parental engagement and involvement and (2) ways for school systems to create environments that build on African American family's strengths and mitigate barriers to parental engagement and involvement. This study will focus on parents of children in kindergarten through eighth grade in order to explore relationships between parental engagement, involvement, and academic success, as parental involvement is a more robust predictor of academic achievement and success at the elementary school level relative to the high school level (Jeynes, 2007). This study will also build upon initial investigations by Yull et al. (2018) and White and Levers (2017) to understand ways in which African American single parents conceptualize parental engagement and involvement and their perspectives on the relationships of these concepts to their children's' academic success. This study thus furthers the work of both White and Levers (2017) and Yull et al. (2018) by proactively identifying barriers to parental engagement and involvement uniquely experienced by parents of color. Finally, this study extends the work of Latunde (2017) by identifying ways in which schools can build trust with African American single parents in order to facilitate parental engagement and involvement.

In pursuit of these goals, the study will answer two central research questions: (1) How do African American single parents define parental engagement and involvement and its relationship to educational outcomes for their elementary- and middle school-aged children? And (2) What are the barriers to and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement among African American single parents?

## PAPER ONE

**Abstract**

Introduction: The largest academic achievement gap in the U.S. is the disparity between African American and White students. Parental engagement and involvement are two key factors that influence academic success and may help reduce the achievement gap between African American and White students; however, traditional definitions of engagement and involvement and the strategies used to promote them in U.S. schools remain highly racially biased and exclude the experiences of African American single parents resulting in less engagement and poor academic achievement outcomes. Given gaps in research, the research explored definitions of parental engagement and involvement and their relationships to academic achievement among African American single parents of elementary and middle school students. Methods: Employing a phenomenological design, this qualitative study used purposive sampling to recruit 15 African American single parents of elementary and middle school-aged children for participation in semi-structured interviews that explored participants' definitions of parental engagement and involvement in the relationship of parental engagement to academic achievement. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Results: Data analyses revealed four salient themes related to participants' definitions of engagement and involvement. These themes included essential integration of cultural humility and anti-racist practice, counternarrative engagement, effective parent-teacher communication, and cultural representation and inclusion. Conclusions: Understanding African American single parents' definitions of parental engagement and involvement and the relationship to academic achievement is vital in supporting children's academic success. Study findings suggest that school administrators and staff not only improve their lens of antiracist school practices, but also improve the parent-teacher communication

process. In addition, schools should be intentional on integrating social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in policy development and school wide practices.

### **Introduction**

Academic achievement, defined as the sum of a person's school performance in terms of grades, standardized tests, and behaviors and attitudes about school, is highly valued in the United States (U.S.) (Wilder, 2014). This value is evidenced by federal and state education policies designed to increase academic achievement, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, No Child Left Behind, and local state school report cards (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Despite these societal investments, large racial disparities in academic achievement persist among students across the U.S., with children of color and those residing in lower socioeconomic status homes frequently performing at lower levels on standardized tests and report cards when compared to their White and more affluent peers (American Psychological Association, 2017; Brookings Institution, 2019). Worse, racial disparities between African American and White students' academic achievement increases by one-tenth of a standard deviation each year of school they advance (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Ladson-Billings (2006) highlighted urgency of promoting equity and justice by closing the achievement gap by describing it as an education debt that has increased over time for families of color that not only includes disparities in education, but also health, finances, housing, and criminal justice.

In recent years, schools across the U.S. have made efforts to close the achievement gap through curricula and programming (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008). Yet these efforts continue to yield poorer outcomes for African American children relative to their White counterparts (Brookings Institution, 2019). These negative outcomes (e.g., lower literacy rates, lower

standardized test scores, lower grades in reading and mathematics) are likely attributable to racial disparities in opportunities in education, economic and social arenas that have pervaded U.S. society for centuries (Latunde, 2017).

Parental engagement and involvement (e.g., communication with teachers, awareness of and support with school assignments, and participation in school activities and events) is a demonstrably salient predictor of academic achievement, yet many schools have difficulty engaging parents and nurturing a healthy relationship between home and school (Christenson et al., 2005; Comer & Haynes, 1990; Epstein, 1995, 2011; Hourri et al., 2019). A substantial body of research indicates the positive impact of parental involvement on school success (Bandura et al., 2001; Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Klein, 1988; Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Many scholars (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 2000) note the importance of developing shared responsibility between parents and teachers for improving student academic success and a culture of achievement by better connecting homes and schools. Indeed, other research has found that parental engagement that encourages learning in the home environment was most positively associated with children's academic achievement (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Sylva et al., 2003).

At the same time, the definitions of parental engagement and involvement deployed in this body of research were developed from studies of predominantly White middle-class families that did not represent the perspectives of African American families. Notably, most definitions operationalized within this body of research exclude the perspectives of African American single parents – a family structure represented in over 30% of Black families – nearly all of whom are mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Given that promoting parental engagement and involvement is critical to closing the racial academic achievement gap, the aims of this study are (1) to explore African American single parents' definitions of parental engagement and

involvement and (2) to understand their perspectives of barriers to and facilitators of engaging with K-8 school staff. By bringing into focus African American single parents' understandings of and experiences with parental engagement and involvement, this research seeks to enhance policies and practices in school settings in ways that facilitate parental engagement and involvement.

### **Definitions of Parental Engagement and Involvement**

*Parental engagement* comprises communication with teachers, awareness of class assignments and activities, and access to resources and relationships with school staff (Houri et al., 2019). *Parental involvement* includes parenting style, supporting learning at home, communicating with school personnel, volunteering at school, participating in school decision making, and utilizing resources and community collaboration (Epstein, 1995). These definitions of parental engagement and involvement in their children's education have evolved over time. Following seminal work by Epstein and Sheldon (2006) recommending that the term *parental involvement* be replaced with the term *school, family, and community partnership* to foreground the collective responsibility for children's academic success and expand conceptions of parental involvement and engagement to involve school and community. A more nuanced definition of parental involvement has emerged, underscoring the resources parents invest and behaviors in the home and school as key factors that can support children's education (El Nokali et al., 2010; Grolnick & Slowaiczek, 1994; Larocque et al., 2011).

There are varying definitions and conceptualizations of parental engagement. It has been posited that parent engagement is grounded in schools' efficient support of parents in nurturing their children's academic experience (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). Houry et al. (2019) identify two levels of parent engagement: *direct communication* and *parental relationship engagement*,

the latter of which focuses on the quality of the parent-teacher relationship. These levels of parent engagement include communication with teachers, awareness of class assignments and activities, and access to resources and relationships with staff. White and Levers (2017) conducted six individual interviews (three parents and three teachers), one focus group with teachers ( $n = 8$ ), and one focus group with parents ( $n = 9$ ). They found that parents and teachers tended to define parental engagement as a connection facilitated by communication, empathy, and hope for children's school success. Both teachers and parents in this sample agreed on the importance of communicating with each other about the student/child. The common themes across the definitions include direct communication, relationships, sensitivity, and positiveness.

In general, most existing definitions of parental engagement do not recognize diverse forms of parental engagement across cultures. Further, the unconscious ethnocentrism informing popular definitions of parental engagement may result in administrators and school staff misestimating levels of participation and engagement as traditionally defined in parent-focused programs (Latunde, 2017).

### **Parental Engagement and Involvement as Predictors of Academic Success/Achievement**

Academic achievement is highly influenced by the degree to which parents are involved in the school experience of their children (Wilder, 2014). An extensive body of research has demonstrated a positive association between parental engagement in the home and school and multiple successful academic outcomes (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2016). Further, a meta-analysis of 21 studies that examined the impact of parental involvement on academic success for children of color – including over 12,000 African American, Asian, and Latinx students in kindergarten through twelfth grade – found that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement is generalizable across grade levels and ethnic groups (Jeynes, 2007). Across these

studies, parental involvement was variably defined and measured, including as parent communication with children about school (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012), checking homework (Erion, 2006; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Patall et al., 2008), parent expectation for academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001), encouragement of outside reading (Jeynes, 2012; Senechal & Young, 2008), parent participation in school functions (Hill & Tyson, 2009), household rules regarding school and leisure activities (Jeynes, 2003), and parenting style (Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Generally, studies found that parent attendance and participation in school activities, parental expectations for achievement, and parents providing homework assistance all had positive impacts on academic achievement.

At the same time, the variability in these studies' definitions and measurements of parental engagement and involvement may explain some of the race-based differences they observed in associations between parental engagement and academic achievement. For instance, one study found that among middle school students, the positive association between parental involvement (i.e., communicating with children about school, communicating with the school, attending and participating in activities, being involved at home, and having expectations about their child's academic achievement) and academic achievement was more pronounced for White families than for their African American counterparts (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Jeynes' (2005) meta-analysis of research on the positive association of parental involvement with the academic achievement of urban elementary school children also observed differences between racialized and gender groups. Parental involvement was defined as communicating with children about school, communication with the school, attending and participating in activities, reading regularly and parent expectations about academic achievement. Similar to Hill and Tyson (2009), results indicated that parental involvement was positively associated with achievement among



urban students across gender and ethnicity, yet the disparities between African American and White families still exist.

Jeynes (2007) completed a second meta-analysis of 52 studies including of 300,000 participants to explore the impact of parental involvement on the academic success of urban students in sixth through twelfth grades. This study defined parental involvement as parents' participation in the school experience, which, across studies was variously measured as parental involvement through various studies of parents' expectations for achievement, attendance and participation in school functions, communication about school activities, checking homework, and providing a supportive parenting style. Results revealed that parental involvement yielded positive effects (ranging from .74 to .01) on educational outcomes for both White children and children of color, with parental expectations for achievement having the strongest positive relationship with academic achievement outcomes. Jeynes (2007) found that, relative to their Asian American counterparts, higher parental expectations for achievement yielded greater gains in academic achievement outcomes among African American students. Importantly, he concluded that this finding reflected Asian and Asian American culture emphasis on education, whereas parental involvement may be more important and impactful for African American students because a large number of these students are from single-parent households.

Similar to findings on the impact of parental engagement, substantial research has documented the impact of parental involvement on academic achievement across various grade levels and ethnicities. For instance, Wilder (2014) performed a qualitative research synthesis of the results of nine meta-analyses that found positive relationships between parental involvement and academic success among diverse student populations ranging from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Findings largely indicated a positive relationship between parental involvement and academic

achievement when involvement was defined as expectations for achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Patall et al., 2008), and that this relationship was weaker when engagement was defined as homework assistance (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Patall et al., 2008). As expressed, the research supports the positive influence of parental engagement and parental involvement on academic success. Furthermore, these two key elements continue to have varying definitions and approaches to measuring their impact across varying race and ethnicities.

### **The Impact of Historical Trauma and Present-Day Racism on the Achievement Gap**

Given that African American family structures are defined by systems and institutions (e.g., wealth inequality, segregated neighborhoods, unequal access to health care), that adversely affect the academic success of their children (Franklin & James, 2015), it is imperative to explore how enslavement and present-day racism in America manifest psychosocially among African American families (Vaughans, 2017). African American people have experienced over 500 years of racial oppression in North America, including enslavement from 1619 through 1865. At least 11 million Africans were brought by force through the Middle Passage to the Americas, where they were dehumanized through the practice of enslavement (Vaughans, 2017). When legalized enslavement ended, African American people endured legalized racial segregation from 1865 through 1954 and had to navigate Jim Crow laws that were intentionally created to keep them separate from White people. U.S. law limited their access to public buildings and schools and denied their right to vote until 1965 (History.com Editors, 2022). The laws speciously declared that African American people had civil rights and the right to vote while landmark cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) further marginalized African American

people by ruling that providing African American and White people with “separate but equal” services (which were never equal in practice) was constitutional.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, African American people continued to pursue social justice. The movement’s efforts brought about new Supreme Court rulings that advanced the interests of African American people, such as the 1954 *Brown v. The Board of Education* ruling that segregation in public schools was illegal (Belgrave et al., 2022). During the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Power Movement promoted political and social advocacy for Black people and those of African descent. With the assassinations of prominent leaders and innocent lives lost along with the violent but non-physical injuries suffered by African American people, the Black Power Movement made a shift in their approach to justice from integrating into White-dominated society to self-determination and autonomy of creating Black economic, social and political power (Odlum, 2015).

Despite the advances made during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, today, African American people continue to experience institutional and interpersonal racism across the criminal justice, health, child welfare, and education systems. Although education is often viewed as the great equalizer of people’s opportunities regardless of personal and socioeconomic factors, barriers to academic achievement persist, including public misperceptions, false narratives, and forms of institutional discrimination that place blame on African American students for racial disparities in academic achievement. When the assumption is perpetuated that education inequality results from deficits in African American students, the larger systemic and structural drivers of that inequality remain hidden and found to be without fault (Browne & Battle, 2018).

Economic hardship also interferes with parental engagement in some African American families. Historically, African American workers have experienced unemployment at twice the rate of White workers while also facing racial earning gaps (Darity et al., 1998; Wilson, 1996). African American people are also overrepresented among those living in poverty, which makes it challenging for some parents to be active and invested in their children's academic experience (Duncan & Rogers, 1991; McLoyd et al., 2007, McLoyd, 1990). For these reasons, many African American parents – and especially single-parents – experience stress related to their ability to provide for their families. The compounding effects of stress on this family structure matters when exploring aspects of parental involvement (Jeynes 2011, 2005, 2003). Findings from Bartel (2010) corroborate this point, as they underscore the need for schools to acknowledge and address many African American parents' lack of access to resources in order to produce adequate opportunities for all parents to be involved in their children's education (Bartel, 2010).

### **Rationale for Current Study**

Much quantitative research has focused on the impact of parental involvement and engagement on academic achievement from kindergarten through twelfth grade. However, this research typically defines parental engagement and involvement in ways that align with views of White middle-class parents without taking into account African Americans' historical and current experiences of racism and oppression. To improve parental engagement and involvement generally, schools must take deliberate steps to deepen teachers' and administrators' understanding of the lives of parents with varying social capital (Bartel, 2010).

This study will build upon initial investigations by Yull et al. (2018) and White and Levers (2017) to understand ways in which African American single parents conceptualize parental engagement and involvement and their perspectives on the relationships of these

concepts to their children's' academic success. Employing elements of Latunde's (2017) approach to promoting parent engagement , this study will explore how African American single parents define and operationalize parental engagement and involvement. This study will focus on parents of children in kindergarten through eighth grade in order to explore relationships between parental engagement, involvement, and academic success, as parental involvement is a more robust predictor of academic achievement and success at the elementary school level relative to the high school level (Jeynes, 2007).

In pursuit of these goals, the study will answer the central research question: How do African American single parents define parental engagement and involvement and its relationship to educational outcomes for their elementary- and middle school-aged children?

### **Methods**

This qualitative study is guided by a phenomenological approach that explores how African American single parents of elementary and middle school students define and operationalize parental engagement and its relationship to academic success. Qualitative research allows depth in data themes and enables researchers to recognize elements and new themes relevant to understudied and excluded groups (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996; Patton, 2002).

### **Procedures**

#### **Sample Size, and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

A total of 15 individuals participated in this study. Prior studies have recommended that qualitative studies have a sample size of at least  $n = 12$  in order to reach data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Fuguard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006), and 15-45 interviews for theoretical sampling (Butler et al.,2018). Criteria for inclusion were (1) self-identify as African American,

(2) single parent of elementary or middle school student, (3) English speaking, (4) age 18 or older, and (5) residing in North Carolina at the time of the interview.

### **Recruitment and Enrollment**

This study received Institutional Review Board approval through the University of Pennsylvania. Participants were recruited from the state of North Carolina using convenience and purposive sampling. Parents were employed from social media affinity groups for African American parents and social workers. The researcher posted ads weekly in late July 2022 through September 2022 on three African American parents' Facebook private groups. This included the researcher answering questions in the comments section and responding to private messages sent to Facebook inbox. In total, the researcher posted ads 21 times via social media. The researcher sent private messages to 10 single African American parents in the local community whom the researcher shared space with in other single African American parent meetings and events. In addition, four weekly ads were posted on one North Carolina social worker Facebook group and two therapy agencies were sent flyers for recruiting interested parents monthly. The researcher passed out 25 flyers directly to African American parents in parks playing with their children on two weekend days and handed flyers directly to parents in grocery stores with children to promote the study. All potential participants were screened over the telephone by the researcher verbally asking questions from the telephone screening form (Appendix A) to ensure that participation inclusion criteria were met. All 15 parents agreed to participate and signed an informed consent form prior to participating in any data collection activities.

**Data Collection.** After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic survey comprised of four questions about gender, income, education and

employment. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire. A total of 15 qualitative interviews were conducted via Zoom between July 28, 2022, and September 25, 2022. Data collection took the form of 60-minute semi-structured video recorded and audio recorded interviews. The questions of the interview guide were based on interview guides previously developed and utilized by Bartel (2010), White and Levers (2017), and Yull et al. (2018) to explore the lived experiences of African American single parents. In addition, questions clarified each parent's definition of engagement and involvement while revealing the strengths and challenges associated with the parents' experiences of engagement and involvement in their children's academic careers. Participants were invited to share ways that their experiences are unique and culturally different from other families. Interviews concluded with asking participants to offer advice to school administrators including principals and superintendents on ways to engage and involve African American single parents to help students be more successful. The interviews were guided by these initial questions accompanied by a series of follow up probes designed to gather detailed and context-specific information from the participants. In each virtual interview, the researcher utilized a HIPAA-compliant Zoom account to record video, record audio, and professionally transcribe the parents' answers. Participants were compensated with \$50 gift cards to a local store.

### **Positionality**

The positionality of the researcher is a major aspect of the qualitative research process that affects data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Jones et al., 2006). The research was conducted by an African American woman who was raised by a single parent and is also a single parent of one child. The researcher brings to this study a deep understanding and awareness of the impact of race and institutional racism in educational institutions. The researcher has

experienced education settings as a student, educator, and parent, which allows her to build trust and a strong connection with participants and to understand their shared experiences.

**Data Analysis** The researcher used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze parents' definitions of parental engagement and parental involvement. This reflexive approach reflects the researcher's interpretation and analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During this process, the focus is on discovering multiple interpretations and meanings of the data through the process (Byrne, 2021). Thematic analysis involved six phases: observing the data, developing initial codes, exploring themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and constructing a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher transcribed the interviews using computer-assisted technology and reviewed the data from the interviews to collect initial ideas. The second phase included creating initial descriptive codes of interesting features. In the third phase, the researcher combined codes into possible themes for analysis. During the fourth phase, the researcher named themes and consulted with a colleague with substantial experience with phenomenological research to mitigate discrepancies. The fifth phase involved further analysis to define and create themes from the interviews. The final phase of thematic analysis included producing a report of specific findings and examples that relate to the initial research question and literature. The researcher's positionality is connected to reflexive thematic analysis through engaging in ongoing reflexivity through note taking of participants comments along with the researcher's thoughts during the interview and making memo notes as soon as possible after the interview. This involved navigating subjectivity while many themes and responses resonated with the researcher.

## **Results**



Of the 15 participants, six parents had elementary aged students, and nine parents had middle school aged children. Fourteen of the participants identified as female and one participant identified as male. Five (33%) parents completed high school and some college and nine (67%) completed undergraduate and graduate school. Four parents reported working part-time and eleven parents had full time employment. The parents' reported income ranging from 10, 000 to 160, 000 dollars per year. Please see Table 1 located in Appendix B.

Data analyses revealed four salient themes related to participants' definitions of engagement and involvement. These themes included essential integration of cultural humility and anti-racist practice, counternarrative engagement, effective parent-teacher communication, and cultural representation and inclusion, and they are described in detail below. In general, interview participants did not make distinctions between engagement and involvement. During the interviews, parents shared examples of the ways they are engaged and involved with their elementary and middle school children's school process. Participants described their perceptions of the school's expectations along with positive and negative experiences with the school. Taken together, themes illustrate how parents, through their experiences and space to define parent engagement involvement, generated effective ways to engage and involve themselves in their children's academic careers. Please note that all participants have been given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality of their identity.

### ***Racist Ideas and Racist Engagement***

Some parents in this sample shared concerns about the ways some school staff perceive African American single parents level of engagement. Oprah explained two examples of the stereotypes of African American single parents and children of single parents. She included,

I think one thing that comes to mind is single Black parent households are just as engaged. No, don't make the assumption that because it is a single Black household that

parents don't care about their children's educational opportunities, advancements, and all that other kind of stuff. Don't make the assumption that we are not involved or don't want to be involved. We can't always come up there with the cookies and brownies every day ... We have to work. But we are just as invested and intentional with our child's learning as any other household composition.

Oprah continued with her second example that spoke to the tendency of school staff to pathologize African American children. She shared her concerns about teachers being quick to diagnose her child rather than using varied teaching engagement approaches,

People learn differently. Not everybody is going to sit still in a chair and watch you or listen to you talk to them. I'm 51 and I will zone out and not be interested. That's not my learning style. So as a single Black parent, don't make the assumption that if my child can't sit still and listen to some teacher going on and on and on and on that they have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and all this other kind of craziness and behavioral issues and all this other kind of stuff. No, they just are not interested in the way that they are teaching it. And you as a teacher need to find more creative ways to meet your students where they are.

Ella acknowledged the impact of race in the classroom through naming that the majority of the teachers and school leaders are White. She expressed the ways that some African American people experience discrimination without opportunities for feeling comfortable and validated.

She shared:

And it's funny because in my sociology class this past summer, it was Sociology of Race, and we talked about education and how that over 70% of teachers and staff and principals are White. And it also sometimes showed a reflection of how sometimes we are judged based off of our race or our class. And sometimes teachers put children in a box.

In addition, Nina shared a concerning experience from meeting with her child's teacher. She explained the unjust and prejudicial treatment she observed with the teacher,

So, it was actually during parent-teacher conferences. And she was saying that, "Oh, [child name's] incredibly smart and all of these things. But there are times where I'll ask her to do something, and she won't do them. And I'll give her a consequence and she doesn't care." And she said, "I just don't think she cares about behaving. Well, I don't think she cares. She just doesn't seem to care about things." And so, my response to her was, "I know my child cares. She has feelings. She may not exhibit them here because she may not feel like it's a safe place to do so, but she certainly comes home and talks to me about things that have happened. And she expresses herself. And sometimes she

cries." So, it's like, yes, she does care. And so that was really problematic for me. ... And I was like, "How do you say that about a five-year-old, they just don't care. You made up your mind about that?" And I did tell her that I was concerned about her putting labels on [child] at such a young age. She definitely got a little defensive and not like, overly defensive and kind of like, "Oh, no, no, I would never want to do that, I would never try to do that," ... I think, moving forward. I didn't hear her use those labels. And she seemed to be more committed to supporting [child] in being her unique individual self and using her skill set in a positive way.

Nina had to take time to communicate with the teacher about the ways her child is human while sharing that her child in fact cares and experienced emotional harm from school. When speaking truth to power about the racist behavior of the teacher, Nina observed immediate denial from the teacher of the behavior rather than acknowledgement. Nina shared her efforts of providing advocacy toward preventing long-term negative impacts of incorrect assumptions and potential stigmatization of her child.

Similarly, another parent shared an example of the ways that school staff made assumptions and judgements about her marital status and socioeconomic status. Lettie was a new parent at her child's school and needed to enroll her child in after school care due to her work schedule. She described her encounter with a school staff member during enrollment here:

So, I'm at the registration desk and the woman is asking for his information. First, I gave her the name, the date of birth. And so, she gets to me, and she said, "Okay, I already have the last name. How do you spell your first name?" And I was like, "I didn't give you my last name." And she was like, "You did when you gave me your son's name." I was like, "Well, my last name is different." And the woman never made eye contact with me. She was headed down the whole time, just typing away, handed me forms. The moment I said that she looks up, she goes, "Oh, let me hand you this financial assistance package so you can fill it out, and then you might not have to pay the monthly fee."

Lettie felt that her high level of socioeconomic status would disqualify her and when she questioned the process, she was given the response,

"Oh, I don't know. Just fill it out, honey. Most single parents, they get approved." ... And sure enough, the woman didn't waste any time. 30 minutes later she called me back and was like, "You don't meet the criteria." And I was like, "Put management on the phone now. I got a whole lot to say." And I gave them that feedback of you just don't make

those types of judgment calls just because someone presents a certain way or names are different.”

Parental engagement is an important factor to support academic success. The parent-teacher relationship and communication are paramount. Racist ideas and racist encounters impede effective parental engagement. Overall, many participants in this study yearned for intentional efforts of the school to increase awareness and commitment to self-evaluation of racist behaviors and the negative impacts on parent engagement.

### ***Counternarrative Development as an Engagement Strategy***

Many African American single parents within the study expressed an awareness of the racist ideas that some school staff have about single parents who are viewed as disengaged and uninvolved. Informed parents of the dominant narratives in this study were intentional about engaging the school staff in ways that disrupt majoritarian narratives. Andrea shared ways that she initiates communication to upend potential preconceived notions about single parents and potential impacts to her child’s academic experience. She explained, “in order to make sure that they get fair treatment, I go to the open houses before the school start. I'm looking at the schedule, and since I am a working parent, and I can't always be available in person, I'm usually the first one to send out an email.”

Similarly, Maya included,

As an African American mother of a child that is in an area where we are minorities, sometimes I worry that teachers will automatically assume or judge something about my child solely based on his race. He has not had any teachers of color except for his AIG (Academically or Intellectually Gifted) teacher last year ... So that always sort of worried me because I am fully aware because I do work in the schools, so I know sometimes how teachers will already have preconceived notions before they've even met the child or learned who the child was. And so, I think that's always one of the reasons why I've definitely tried to meet a teacher.

Instead of approaching the beginning of the school year with excitement and anticipation of a great year for their child, many parents in this sample like Andrea and Maya are nervous and fearful about impressions. Parents make additional efforts to oppose the stereotypes and myths with intentional behaviors that push against the dominant culture narratives that lack the insight into the African American experience. The two parents from above appeared to apply efforts that have a positive impact on the ways their children are perceived and treated as students.

Some parents also described intentional efforts that occurred in the beginning of the school year with assertive advocacy for their right to be engaged and treated with dignity and respect. Gwen shared her experience upon moving to North Carolina, and her encounter when enrolling her child at the new school. She revealed,

So basically, I had to make that a big deal. I don't know what you expected just because I am like a Black single mother. No, I still care about my child too. Just because that's the case, it's not like, "Oh, I got to go to work, and I don't care. I'm just going to drop them off." No, at this point, forget work, I'll get there when I get there. I need to know who's teaching my child. So that was one situation that I felt personally, which maybe wasn't the case, but I felt like that was the way they responded to me, requesting to meet the teacher. I felt like that was because of obviously my race, because the principal was like real rude or whatever. But me, I guess she expected to become this angry Black female so she can call the cops. And I'm like, "No ma'am, you don't have to talk to me like that. I'm not talking to you like that." So, I explained to her that you can kindly go sit with the class and ask the teacher to come up to the office. I don't have to go to the teacher's classroom, but I'm not leaving my child here if I can't meet the teacher.

Gwen described the ways negative experiences with the school staff are compounded when considering the impact of race. She was faced with opposition and rude interactions, while internally dealing with the awareness of the negative stereotypes and managing a mix of emotions to remain calm, communicate, and exercise her rights as a parent in the school.

Maya recounted her experience in a parent-teacher conference where she confronted assumptions from her child's teacher. She described the back and forth of the conversation while she presented information about her child to the teach. She noted:

So [child's] kindergarten teacher, during my first conference with her, said that he was not reading. ...And I said to her, I said, 'Oh.' I said, '[child] can read.' And so, I was a little Black mama, and she didn't know who I was at first. So, she said, 'What makes you think [child] can read?' I said, 'Well, because I read with [child], and I taught him to read.' And she goes, 'A lot of parents think their kids can read, but they just memorize the words of the book. He's not actually reading.' So, I said to her, I said, 'No.' And then I let her know who I was. I was like, 'Actually, I'm an occupational therapist, and I've worked in the school system the last 20 years. I know my son can read.' And I asked her, I said, 'Who tested him and how?' And she tells me some random teacher that my child has never met before pulled him out of the classroom and set him in the hallway and tried to test and I said, 'Have you ever noticed that [child] is severely shy?' I'm like, 'That means [child] probably doesn't talk to somebody he don't know.'

Maya appeared to recognize the power differential in the meeting when the teacher made the presumption that the child not read. Maya then revealed power that she has as professional and her confidence that her child could read. This parent went on to explain what she observed as judgement instead of curiosity when assessing the child's ability.

As noted in the first theme, racist ideas and behaviors negatively impact African American parent engagement in the school experience. The counternarratives discussed in this theme demonstrate the ways that some of the parents in this sample made intentional efforts to provide a different experience than the assumptions and myths about single parents and their children. These efforts appear to create additional burden for single parents who are already overtaxed with navigating many barriers and stressors. Many parents in this study sought to disrupt the harmful narratives and the potential negative impacts on parent engagement and academic success.

### ***Effective Parent-Teacher Communication: Strengths-Based Feedback***

Participants also expressed the desire for ongoing communication of the areas where their children are doing well academically, not just when challenging situations that need attention arise. Parents shared examples of utilizing texts or sending notes home with the child to maintain

ongoing communication and engagement. Felicia shared an effective experience she had with her child's teacher:

Well, I'll say specifically last year we had one teacher that was-- she texts a lot. And that to me was good because it was a difficult time. And it was good to get those updates. And she didn't just text when things were going bad, she texted when they were well also. So that was very helpful. I mean, we'd spoken, but it was on her own that she started providing that-- those updates.

Denise explained the ways that receiving balanced communication helped assure her that her child had a positive connection with the teacher. When her child was having some challenges in school, she described the helpfulness of sustained communication: "towards the end of the school year, things really turned, and did like a-- because at first, I thought the teacher hated him, but then it turned into-- she started giving praises, she start sending home with notes saying, "Oh, my goodness, he's doing so good, and he's doing this good, and he's doing that good.

Ella shared appreciation for regular and authentic communication with her child's African American teacher. She observed that the teacher that she shared common racial and ethnic identity was the only teacher that honored her request of continued impressions of her child's academic progress. She included,

I think for me its accountability as well as transparency. My daughter's most favorite teacher on an adult level was the Black teacher. ... And she was very transparent and very real. And she kept me in contact. She kept me involved. I let her know, "I want to know what's going on. I want you to keep me updated. I know with a class full of first graders you can't contact me every day, but if something's going on, don't hesitate to contact me or let me know ... And out of all the teachers I've told that to - all the other ones were White females - she took me the most sincerely.

As noted in the theme, parents defined engagement with parent-teacher communication as an essential element in the school experience. The examples discussed illuminate the desires of some parents to have feedback about their children when they are excelling. These aspects of communication support African American parents in efforts to disrupt deficit only based

communication with teachers to embrace and support strengths. This theme allowed some extension of the counternarrative experience mentioned in the second theme to support nurturing positive impacts on parent engagement and academic success.

***Effective Parent-Teacher Communication: Early Awareness and Intervention***

African American single parents defined this second sub-theme of effective parent-teacher communication engagement as timely communication from teachers about areas of concern with their child early on so that resources and interventions can be applied to support areas for improvement. Ella shared the importance of knowing about challenges and areas for growth in enough time to give the necessary attention to the issue. She explained her presence and investment in her child's success with her example:

No, I'm here. I care about my child's academic success, and I'm not just one that's going to let my child coast through. Like, no, she's going to academically excel. You let me know early on if you see something where she's struggling. Don't wait and put it on a note on the progress report when you noticed it four weeks ago.

Similarly, Bande echoed sentiments of receiving notice of things that her child is struggling with in school. She added the suggestion of a weekly frequency for teachers.

If things are happening, negative and positive, even if it's just a weekly update, Hey, your child has been asleep all week in the class, help us correct that now versus waiting five months, three months to tell me that he comes to-- all you are telling me he comes to class and goes to sleep. Let me know that the first week it happens instead of three months later.

Oprah provided an example of when she initiated communication with her child's teacher after learning from him that the class had completed some testing and he didn't finish the items. Oprah told the teacher about the challenges her child has with performing on standardized tests. She perceived in the response that the teacher failed to notice and inform her that her child was unable to complete all of the items. She included,



So, I then reach out to the teacher to say, "Hey, just want to give you a heads up. Sometimes he has a little testing anxiety. We're working on building his confidence and working on sometimes his speed. He's a very detail-oriented, attention-to-detail kind of child. He wants to figure it out. However, we're trying to help him understand sometimes you may not have time to figure it all the way out, so do as much as you can and keep going." And she was like, "Oh, okay." I'm like, you don't see that he was behind? Why, I got to tell you? You should have called me and told me where he was. So, it's being proactive. Don't wait till the last minute. If you see maybe he's not tracking or something's up, I need you to ask me because I'ma have a problem if you come trying to say my child didn't get this or-- what? You just finding out? Why I didn't know?

Parents in this study defined engagement as parent-teacher communication early on to have the ability to intervene. The examples in this theme discussed some parents' need for early awareness of challenges. African American parents in this sample expressed ways that issues can compound and difficult to change the trajectory when left unattended over time. This theme also offered an extension of the counternarrative experience mentioned in the second theme to support cultivating positive impacts on parent engagement and academic success.

### ***Cultural Representation and Inclusion***

Many participants in the study expressed that culturally relevant representation in school activities increased feelings of inclusivity. Two parents provided examples of the ways they were involved with initiating school programming to honor African American heritage and culture. Bande beamed with pride and was very emotional when speaking about in the Black History program for her child's middle school,

My favorite experience was when I developed and produced the first Black history program. That was in 2018. And it was awesome. It was an awesome program... I spent a couple of months working with teachers to produce this program that involved everyone or most classes from the elementary school and different extracurricular activities and even classes from the middle school. And so, it was like an all-school assembly. ... I still got so emotional watching it because I had had them start with singing the Black national anthem and to see that these kids-- the choral director at the elementary school worked on what the kids get to know the lyrics of the song, even though we put the lyrics also in the brochure in the program, so everyone would have it and be able to get up and sing. But seeing that, that just made me emotional. And then all the different programming that we

put together to celebrate Black Excellence and not in the same way that you typically see it celebrated, that was my favorite. That was my favorite moment.

Bande described the collective efforts of the school along with the incredible and innovative approach to embrace African American history. Julissa added another example of the ways she was very integral in leading efforts to celebrate cultural diversity in the school. She shared the manner in which the Latinx and African American people offered a path to unite the groups in the school community. She explained,

It was a huge Spanish population at this school. And so, they would do different workshops with Black and brown parents where we were helping break their language barrier. And we would have programming that supported the Hispanic community and celebrated things that they celebrated. And we, I mean, the Black History program, was centered around Motown, right? And it was just that merge of really not letting our different cultures divide us but bring us together.

Participants mentioned leading efforts to include not only school programming, but also creating spaces for parent affinity groups within the school community. Nina mentioned her work with creating a community of Parents of African American Children (PAAC). In her experiences, she noted,

I think one thing that has been really helpful is the goal of PAAC is actually to increase Black parents' engagement in schools that PTAs aren't typically the most inviting space for Black families to be a part of. And so how can we create kind of culturally relevant ways and relationships that might lead to people to be more involved and engaged in the school. So, I will say one of the great benefits is parent engagement. So, when we did the Read In, and I mean so many parents volunteered. And these are parents that had never been and probably never will go to a PTA meeting but were fully on board for making sure our kids are having good experiences in the school system. I think it also was wonderful. It was very much supported by the principal and the assistant principal. They often would attend our PAAC meetings. And they wanted to hear feedback from parents. They took the feedback seriously.

In addition to representation in the school building with school staff, Andrea noted the desire for representation in the curriculum,

So, I think that, for instance, for ELA, using different text that are by authors of color. ... We're not just focusing on our story of slavery, but also how we triumphed, how we

actually, added to the country, what good things we've done. And don't just gloss over our contributions for science. There are so many scientists of color that have contributed and invented. And we need to feature them.

These parents mentioned the impact of seeing African American administrators and teachers. In addition, representation went further with books, curriculum and programming that was inclusive of the African American experience. African American single parents in this sample valued representation widely and were prepared to contribute to seeing this in their child's school.

While most parents reported that they initiated efforts to improve representation and inclusion, some did observe positive developments in school staffing and protocols. For example, Kayla reported included the desire for diverse teacher representation in the schools. She shared a piece of the conversation she had with her child,

So, then I have to explain to her that you don't have this privilege that these kids at your school have. You have to understand the difference between the color of your skin and the color of theirs. Luckily, her principal is Black. And her teacher this year is Black, ... So, I was excited just to see that. But the fact is they don't have enough Black teachers in the school. I may have seen three. And so, I'm looking at it like I really wish she has that opportunity, but I'm just not sure that she's going to get the opportunity. But she'll see the difference between her Black teachers and her White teachers. She'll know that I can relate to my Black teachers more. I'm happy to see a Black teacher.

Similarly, Nina shared the importance of schools recognizing varying family forms. She shared an example from her child's school,

I have seen a lot of progress in schools with respect to not making assumptions about family structure. So that's been good. And I've also seen some efforts in the school, like when they-- when kids draw their family tree or whatever, their family chart, or who they live with. My daughter is pretty good at saying, "Well, can I draw two houses," or-- but it would be nice if the teachers kind of offer, "Hey, draw where you live. Some of you live in one house. Some of you live in two houses. Some of you may live in more houses than that. So, whatever you want to draw, this is how you draw. Additionally, some parents suggested that recognition of varying family forms may be an important way to address the harmful effects of stigma.

Parents in this sample defined engagement and involvement as cultural representation and inclusion. The examples in this theme demonstrated some parents participate in school wide events to increased awareness, understanding and appreciation of African American culture and history. African American parents in this sample described inclusion extending to value literature, curriculum and the presence of African American school staff. Finally, some parents expressed inclusion allows recognizing and respecting various family forms to support positive influences on parent engagement and involvement with academic success.

### **Discussion**

This study is the first of its kind to explore experiences of parental engagement and involvement exclusively with 15 African American single parents. While a substantial body of research has quantitatively investigated aspects of parent involvement and engagement and achievement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hourri et al., 2019; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Wilder, 2014) and some studies have underscored the need for including culturally specific factors to enhance traditional White middle-class definitions of parental engagement and involvement (Latunde, 2017; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Yull et al., 2018), to date, this is the only study that has specifically explored the ways in which single African American parents define parental engagement and involvement.

African American single parents in particular encounter unique barriers to parental engagement and participation related to race, class, and gender. Single parents enter the school space with this awareness and reminder daily while some school staff engage parents and children with stereotypes and biases. Parents expressed the additional efforts of having to share their professional expertise and be assertive in questioning school staff when engaging with staff about their children. There appeared to be experiences in which parents were not believed when

asking school staff to revisit statements and language that negatively labeled their children and false hypotheses and biased conclusions about behaviors. White and Levers (2017) found that minoritized parents experienced harm in the power differences between teachers and themselves, the lack of empathy from the teachers when feeling intimidated by school staff in meetings, and the lack of community and connection within the school. Further harm is committed when assumptions are perpetuated that education inequality results from deficits in African American students, rather than examining the larger systemic and structural drivers of that inequality (Browne & Battle, 2018). Findings from this study demonstrated that use of exclusionary language related to student observations and family form/structure matters and can have negative impacts on families. The awareness of the historical contexts and operating and engaging parents and students accordingly is important. Several harmful experiences shared by participants in this study score the recommendation of schools understanding the historical and sociopolitical context when engaging African American single parents and students in the school.

Overall, findings from this sample indicate that African American single parents do wish to be involved in their child's academic trajectory and engage with school staff regularly. At the same time, most participants reported that they must frequently contend with dominant – and harmful – narratives that portray them as uninvolved or under-involved. To combat these narratives, parents in this sample demonstrated resourcefulness, employing a variety of strategies such as engaging and connecting with school staff, contributing time and resources toward advocacy, organizing African American parents, and implementing culturally inclusive programming to create effective counternarratives that exhibit engagement and involvement dispelling myths and stereotypes. In addition, parents also generated a number of suggestions that could promote engagement/involvement, as well as equity and inclusion.

Understanding African American parents' definitions of parental engagement and involvement and their understandings of the dynamics of teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships will inform fresh recommendations for new and improved practices to increase single African American parental engagement and involvement in schools. Further, the results have the potential to disrupt stereotypical and false societal narratives about single African American parents. Although some research has explored school-based strategies designed to increasing parental engagement and parental involvement (Williams and Bryan, 2013), this research illuminated the approaches single African American parents use to support their children in receiving fair and just treatment and access to academic success. Specifically, this research found that African American single parents are intentional on creating a presence and connecting with teachers to ensure fair treatment of their children. Historically, African American people have endured significant experiences and impacts of oppression that continue to manifest in many ways in the present day, while African American people continue to experience racism at institutional, personal, and interpersonal levels (Jones, 2000). African American people face many disparities and disproportionalities related to adverse childhood experiences, the school-to-prison pipeline, health outcomes, and the criminal-legal system.

Existing research shows the importance and significant benefits of cultural and racial representation. Latunde (2017) introduced non-traditional approaches that were culturally inclusive and employed to increase parental engagement and involvement were completed in community spaces with high levels of trust and connection that benefitted African American parents. Inclusive practices and effective parent-teacher connections are elements that promote equity in school settings. In addition, findings from this study showed the dire need for schools to have intentional efforts of developing and nurturing cultural humility and anti-racist practices.

Increasing school staff awareness and understanding of racism and oppression while supporting students' cultural strengths, practices, and values enhance the relationships between parents, students, and teachers and promote better academic outcomes (Waites, 2009).

There is an additional defined element of balanced communication of children's progress in school. With the historical oppression and focus on deficits especially when it comes to the institutional racism that often makes Black and Brown people feel less than, school staff are complicit in furthering these beliefs when they only contact single African American parents about academic challenges and delay notification and intervention on concerns to give time for action and changing the trajectory. These practices place students at risk to perpetuate the preschool-to-prison pipeline for African American children. When parents receive varying levels of feedback, it's helpful for engagement and working against structurally racist practices.

Findings from this study also highlight the importance of representation and inclusion and the ways in which these factors impact parental engagement and involvement. This study's results will have implications for parental engagement and involvement practices and programs that support schools, parents, and students. Aceves (2014) and Alfaro et al. (2014) have suggested that schools collaborate with culturally diverse families to identify their values, hopes, and priorities for their children. Stacer and Perrucci (2012) recommended that schools develop ways to integrate parents into school activities and schedule those activities in ways that respond to the varying availability of families. Findings from this study illuminated the need for an increase in African American administrators, faculty and staff, culturally relevant curriculum integrated in the classroom, and celebratory and cultural activities within the school community. When a school community is intentional on embracing and making children and families feel welcome and appreciated, it is a success for engagement and involvement.

Findings from this research also suggest that embracing engagement efforts characterized by cultural humility and treating single parents with dignity and respect are critical. Cultural humility invites an ongoing and continual process of personal development. It “takes into account the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges individuals and institutions to address inequalities,” (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p171). Engaging in anti-racist practices within the school takes cultural humility further. Adopting practices include naming the largest barrier that impacts African American single parents as racism. Dr. Ibram Kendi defines racism as “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produce and normalize racial inequities, (p.17-18, 2019).

This research parallels with the mission and values of social work regarding advocacy for social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in program and policy development and effective social work practice. Best practices include school-wide interventions when creating systemic change within communities. It is imperative that administrators and school leaders engage in ongoing quarterly trainings and consultation regarding anti-racist school practices. The structural racism and oppression that has occurred over many years will take ongoing efforts to dismantle and disrupt.

Findings from this study confirmed the requirement for growing representation of African American administrators, faculty and staff, culturally relevant curriculum integrated in the classroom, and celebratory and cultural activities within the school community. Students and families feel a sense of community and belonging when schools are intentional on embracing and including diverse people. It positively impacts parental engagement and involvement. Schools can effectively engage African American single parents through incorporating their perspectives



when developing school wide programming to enhance parental engagement and child academic achievement.

An understanding and increased awareness of African American single parents' experiences informs relevant and innovative recommendations for improved school social work practices to increase parental engagement and involvement in schools. School student support teams can focus efforts on ways to mitigate barriers and enhance parent and family support with relevant resources within the school. Schools are encouraged to develop opportunities to cultivate community among parents to invite inclusion and ways to build community and connection.

These results should be taken into account by principals, administrators, superintendents and school boards when encouraging school staff to complete personal and collective reflection of their engagement approaches and practices. School staff can effectively engage African American single parents when they are able to present an inclusive and welcoming environment that excludes stigma related to being African American and a single parent family. Such work requires partnering with African American parents to understand and support their voices and bringing these understandings into school settings. School staff are recommended to use language that is inclusive of various family forms. In addition, exploring ways that different family forms can be viewed as an alternative rather than deficit or less than an idealized family form. The recommendations for practicing cultural humility and treating parents and students with dignity and respect are active ways that schools can be anti-racist in practices that break the cycles of institutional racism and bring harm to Black and Brown families.

*Limitations.* This study has several limitations that are important to consider when interpreting the findings. The study did not have an equal representation of gender with one of

the fifteen participants being a single African American father while the other fourteen were single African American mothers. This may add to the false narrative that African American single fathers are not involved. In addition, the selection of the participants allowed space for bias in the parents not being reflective of the greater group for generalizability. Future research involving direct experiences of single parents could allow for a comprehensive view of the group with a larger sample size and adding quantitative methods to the research design as well as a longitudinal aspect to view change over time. In addition, because this research relied on retrospective personal accounts, parents' recall of the experiences had potential for inaccuracies. Last, there was an unforeseen occurrence of a health and racial pandemic that began in March 2020 that impacted children and parents being able to attend school in person and meet with teachers in the school building, which likely impacted the experiences of this study's participants. As virtual school options may continue, further research on increasing African American parental involvement in this space is needed.

Future research should include using a cultural-variant community-based participatory research (CV-CBPR) model and strengths-based perspective that discourages the focus on deficits (Henderson et al., 2017). The CV-CBPR model supports an understanding of sociopolitical, historical, economic and contextual factors influence individual, family and community development. This model includes intersectionality and integrates respect for culture, traditions and adaptive behaviors for groups into inclusive practices. The results and findings from this study lead to the need for implementing this model in developing parental engagement strategies with African American single parents in the school settings. The cultural variant-model builds on the nine principles of community based participatory research: observing community and membership of a group, building on strengths and resources, supporting collaboration,

integrating knowledge and action for the benefit of all stakeholders, encouraging learning together and empowerment regarding equity, utilizing a continued process of interrogating and discussion of next steps, focusing outcomes on positive and ecological perspective including risk and protective factors, sharing results with all parties involved and maintaining an ongoing long-term relationship with partners and the community (Israel et al., 2013; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Understanding African American single parents' definitions of parental engagement and involvement and the relationship to academic achievement is vital in supporting children's academic success. This research provides valuable insight into the experiences of single parents when engaged and involved in elementary and middle schools. Study findings suggest that school administrators and staff not only need to improve their lens of antiracist school practices, but also improve the parent-teacher communication process. In addition, schools should be intentional on integrating social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in policy development and school wide practices.

## PAPER TWO

**Abstract**

Introduction: Academic achievement is highly influenced by the degree to which parents are involved in the school experience of their children. Parental engagement and involvement are key elements that influence academic success. The current research explored barriers to and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement among African American single parents of elementary and middle school students. Methods: Employing a phenomenological design, this qualitative study used purposive sampling to recruit 15 African American single parents of elementary and middle school-aged children for participation in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results: Data analyses revealed six salient themes related to barriers and facilitators to parental engagement and involvement. These themes included three barriers: racism, intersectional stigma, and single parent stress, and three facilitators: African American representation, supporting diverse family forms, and accessible and equitable resources are described in detail below. Conclusions: Understanding the unique barriers to parental engagement and involvement that are experienced by African American single parents in conjunction with effective facilitators that circumvent these barriers is essential in supporting children's academic success. This research provides valuable insight into the experiences of single parents when engaged and involved with elementary and middle schools. These experiences are critical to consider when developing initiatives that are designed to promote parental engagement and involvement.

## **Introduction**

The largest racial achievement gap in the U.S. is the disparity in *education debt* between African American and White students. By describing the achievement gap as an *education debt* that has increased over time for families of color, Ladson-Billings (2006) highlighted the urgency of promoting equity and justice by closing it. African American students are greatly impacted by the achievement gap and experience unique systemic challenges within schools. Boykin and Noguera (2011) describe the achievement gap as an opportunity gap that exists due to inequities in students' circumstances and school policies and practices. Carter (2009) noted that the opportunity gap will continue if school staff fail to address the racial inequities within the school wide community. Closing this achievement gap is critical, as education can function as an equalizer in efforts to increase equity and break cycles of poverty.

With the help of curricula and programs, schools across the U.S. have been working to reduce the achievement gap (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008). However, African American children continue to face worse outcomes than White children (Brookings Institution, 2019). As a consequence of racial disparities in education, economic, and social arenas that have pervaded U.S. society for centuries, these negative outcomes (e.g., lower literacy rates, lower standardized test scores, lower reading and math grades) are probably attributable to racial disparities in opportunities for education, economic, and social advancement (Latunde, 2017).

## **Parental Engagement and Involvement as Predictors of Academic Success/Achievement**

Academic achievement is highly influenced by the degree to which parents are involved in the school experience of their children (Wilder, 2014). An extensive body of research has demonstrated a positive association between parental engagement in the home and school and

multiple successful academic outcomes (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2016). Jeynes (2007) completed a second meta-analysis of 52 studies including of 300,000 participants to explore the impact of parental involvement on the academic success of urban students in sixth through twelfth grades. Results revealed that parental involvement yielded positive effects (ranging from .74 to .01) on educational outcomes for both White children and children of color. Importantly, he concluded that this finding reflected Asian and Asian American culture emphasizes education, whereas parental involvement may be more important and impactful for African American students because a substantial number of these students are from single-parent households.

Parental involvement appears to be a better predictor of academic achievement in elementary school than secondary school (Jeynes, 2016). Similar to findings on the impact of parental engagement, substantial research has documented the impact of parental involvement on academic achievement across various grade levels and ethnicities. For instance, Wilder (2014) performed a qualitative research synthesis of the results of nine meta-analyses that found positive relationships between parental involvement and academic success among diverse student populations ranging from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. As expressed, the research supports the positive influence of parental engagement and parental involvement on academic success.

### **Barriers to Parental Engagement/Involvement**

Racism is a barrier that has heavily impacted African American families' experiences of fair and equal access to rights and opportunities. Throughout American history, African American people have suffered racial oppression, including over 500 years of enslavement. Vaughans (2017) found that the institution of enslavement profoundly affected African American people and resulted in the collective memory of trauma passed down from those who endured. Intergenerational trauma includes historical and cultural aspects transmitted across

generations that have potential biological and psychological effects (Barlow, 2018). These experiences impact African American single parents navigating the school process with their children in the present day. White and Levers (2017) found that minoritized parents experienced power differences between teachers and themselves, that they desired empathy from the teachers when feeling intimidated by school staff in meetings, and that they experienced a lack of community and connection within the school, and even felt unwelcome when entering the building.

Another structural barrier that impacts some African American families is economic burden. Financial challenges can interfere with parental engagement in some African American families. Historically, African American workers have experienced unemployment at twice the rate of White workers while also facing racial earning gaps (Darity et al., 1998; Wilson, 1996). African American people are also overrepresented among those living in poverty, which makes it challenging for some parents to be active and invested in their children's academic experience (Duncan & Rogers, 1991; McLoyd et al., 2007, McLoyd, 1990). Demanding work schedules can add an additional barrier that conflicts with school-based expectations of parental involvement.

In addition, many African American parents – and especially single-parents – experience additional barriers of stress related to their ability to provide financially for their families. Amidst the sociopolitical elements of society in which racism influences the rules and excludes African American people, Vaughans and Spielberg (2014) report psychological and emotional distress experienced by African American people. Williams-Washington and Mills (2018) included how historical trauma of enslavement, racism, and discrimination can remain and flow through generations resembling Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and resulting in persistent states

of hyperarousal and hypervigilance. The compounding effects of stress on this family structure matters when exploring aspects of parental involvement (Jeynes 2011, 2005, 2003).

The school staff's lack of awareness and insufficient support of families poses a barrier for parent engagement and involvement. In their exploratory study of school engagement and its association with achievement among families of African American freshman and sophomore high school students, Miller-Cribbs et al. (2002) found that schools often make unrealistic demands of African American parents who are already overwhelmed and overloaded. This unfairly puts African American parents and families at a disadvantage, contributing to the disparities. Findings from Bartel (2010) corroborate this point as they underscore the need for schools to acknowledge and address many African American parents' lack of access to resources (i.e., tutoring, childcare, summer camps) in order to produce adequate opportunities for all parents to be involved in their children's education (Bartel, 2010).

### **Culturally Responsive Facilitators to Parental Engagement and Involvement**

Epstein and colleagues (2001) identified six strategies for increasing parental involvement to strengthen school success: (1) school support for families through parenting classes; (2) communications between school and home; (3) parents volunteering and helping the school; (4) increased parent engagement in learning activities at home; (5) participation in school advocacy and decision making; and (6) collaboration and partnerships with the community (Olivos, 2012). Problematically, the aforementioned approaches to promoting parental involvement in schools employ a cultural deficit approach that does not consider how parental involvement may vary across diverse families, or that minoritized parents may not be able to meaningfully participate in their child's academic career until their family's social, economic, and physical needs are addressed (Lopez et al., 2001). Notably, research with African American



parents has shown that positive beliefs in and perceptions of their roles and teacher-initiated connections to parents are associated with increased parental volunteering at school, reading to children, and participation in Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and advisory boards (Bartel, 2010). White and Levers (2017) observed parent-teacher relationships in particular “to be a protective factor that positively affects parental involvement in children’s academic performance and behavior” among African American parents (p. 21).

A small but growing body of research has begun to explore the ways in which culturally responsive strategies can reduce barriers to parental engagement and involvement in African American single parents. Culturally responsive strategies include addressing unjust school practices, culturally inclusive approaches, strengths-based approaches, and using community based participatory research. Examples of the strategies include proactively addressing discrimination, embracing cultural assets and developing tailored programming that includes parental input.

Addressing discrimination, oppression, and mistrust in parent-teacher relationships is a demonstrably effective strategy for increasing African American parents’ engagement and involvement. Hourii et al. (2019) recognized that the impact of oppression and discrimination significantly affected minoritized parents’ level of trust of elementary school teachers and staff. Their study used the parent-wise feedback relational technique that communicates high expectations from one person to another while creating a nurturing space for dialogue to increase trust. The researchers observed the impact of parental behavioral and relational engagement on the behaviors of 51 students (predominantly African American and Latinx) in third through fifth grade whose parents exhibited low levels of engagement. Results showed greater increases in parental engagement for African American parents compared to White parents in the study,

indicating that focusing on nurturing relationships and building trust between parents and teachers that heeds key historical contexts that affected African American families increased parental engagement.

White and Levers (2017) focused on designing strategies to increase parental engagement that included specific attention to the family, school, and neighborhood cultures of historically marginalized populations. Specifically, through a focus group with teachers, a focus group with parents, and individual interviews with parents and teachers, this hermeneutic phenomenological-existential study explored the experiences of parents and teachers of kindergarten through sixth grade students drawn from an urban elementary school with a student population that is 70% African American and predominantly White teachers. Findings identified the need for communication with parents, empathy with family challenges, and understanding the oppression that families experience when evaluating the school culture and the ways that school staff are involving African American parents.

Non-traditional approaches that both employ culturally inclusive definitions of parental engagement and involvement and proactively address mistrust between parents and school staff also hold promise as means of promoting parental engagement and involvement. For example, Latunde (2017) completed a multi-site mixed methods study using a skill-building program for parental engagement with 107 families over 12 months. Participating families were predominantly African American and Latinx with school-aged children in grades K-12. The researcher introduced non-traditional approaches that were culturally inclusive and employed an expanded definition of parental engagement that encompassed engagement in community partnerships and churches. Findings showed that when trainings designed to increase parental engagement and involvement were completed in community spaces with high levels of trust and

connection (e.g., churches, race-based organization settings), African American parents benefited more due to convenient location, accessibility, and high hospitality of these spaces.

Similarly, Bartel et al. (2010) conducted a study of 40 African American parents of elementary school-aged children who completed an interactive homework program in an urban southeastern Title I elementary school. Designed to increase students' math and reading scores, the interactive homework program conceptualized parental involvement/engagement as attending three hours of classes a week on subjects spanning parenting skills, computer skills, cooking, and exercise. By measuring engagement through different activities for students and parents to complete together and return to the school in a homework folder, parents in the study were able to engage without coming to the school and expressed appreciation for knowing more about what their children were learning.

In their qualitative multiple case research study of eight African American high school graduates from low-income single parent families, Williams and Bryan (2013) found that African American single mothers' involvement was essential to academic success when students and their families faced adversity. The researchers determined that school, community, and home elements and activities contributed to students' academic achievement and identified salient themes related to parental engagement and involvement, including high and realistic expectations, praise for excellent grades, monitoring progress in school, and supervision and help with homework. Recommendations to enhance parental engagement and involvement included identifying overlooked strengths, increasing support and resources, building forward momentum for student success, and treating African American families and communities with respect and esteem when supporting school-related parenting practices, positive mother-child relationships, extended family networks, and supportive school-based relationships (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

In another study, Alameda-Lawson (2014) developed programming tailored to increase African American single parent engagement, specifically through a collective approach with parents of elementary school-aged children. Through a quasi-experimental design, the researcher completed a pilot study of a novel intervention that offered an alternative to conventional parent involvement school programs with 32 (primarily African American) single mothers of third through sixth grade students. Namely, the study redefined parent engagement through a newly developed Collective Parent Engagement (CPE) program. In contrast to the conventional parent engagement strategies, CPE's 40-hour outreach parent training focused on psychological empowerment based upon the model created by Zimmerman (1995) for building parents' social networks to collectively improve students' academic success.

In a study which used a community-based participatory approach, Yull et al. (2018) expanded the definition of parental engagement by taking intentional steps to understand barriers to engagement for parents of color and by redefining parents' role in the school to promote educational equity. To make the learning community of the school more inclusive, this study included parents as collaborators by recruiting four African American single mothers to participate in a parent mentor program, which was comprised of 20 hours of training on topics such as confidentiality, teachers' perspectives, cultural competence, family engagement, professionalism, and trauma-informed practice. The parent mentor program also used a race- and class-conscious framework to redefine the parents' role in the school and bridge cultural divides between White teachers and students of color. These studies provided promising results of understanding the impact of facilitators, strengths, collectivism and a race-and class-conscious framework with the traditional definitions of parental engagement and involvement with single African American parents.

### **Rationale for Current Study**

Much quantitative research has focused on the impact of parental involvement and engagement on academic achievement from kindergarten through twelfth grade. However, this research lacks exploration of the unique strengths of and barriers to engagement faced by African American single parents. To improve parental engagement and involvement generally, schools must take deliberate steps to deepen teachers' and administrators' understanding of lives of parents with varying social capital (Bartel, 2010).

Employing elements of Latunde's (2017) approach to promoting parent engagement, this study will explore African American family's strengths and barriers to parental engagement and involvement. This study will focus on parents of children in kindergarten through eighth grade in order to explore relationships between parental engagement, involvement, and academic success, as parental involvement is a more robust predictor of academic achievement and success at the elementary school level relative to the high school level (Jeynes, 2007). This study will also build on the work of both White and Levers (2017) and Yull et al. (2018) by proactively identifying barriers to parental engagement and involvement uniquely experienced by parents of color. Finally, this study extends the work of Latunde (2017) by identifying ways in which schools can build trust with African American single parents in order to facilitate parental engagement and involvement. In pursuit of these goals, the study will answer the central research question: What are the barriers to and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement among African American single parents?

### **Methods**

A phenomenological approach was used in this qualitative study to examine the barriers and facilitators of parental involvement and parental engagement of African American single

parents of students in elementary and middle school. Qualitative research allows depth in data themes and enables researchers to recognize elements and new themes relevant to understudied and excluded groups (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996; Patton, 2002) such as single parents.

## **Procedures**

### **Sample Size, and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

Fifteen participants participated in the current study. In order to reach data saturation, qualitative studies should have at least 12 participants (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006), and 15-45 participants for theoretical sampling (Butler et al., 2018). Inclusion criteria were (1) self-identify as African American, (2) single parent of elementary or middle school student, (3) English speaking, (4) age 18 or older, and (5) residing in North Carolina at the time of the interview.

### **Recruitment and Enrollment**

Parents were recruited from social media affinity groups for African American parents and social workers. Participants were recruited from North Carolina using purposive and convenience sampling. The researcher posted advertisements week by week in late July 2022 through September 2022 on three African American parent's Facebook private groups. This included replying to questions within the comments and reacting to private messages sent to Facebook inbox. The researcher posted advertisements 21 times through social media. The investigator sent private messages to 10 single African American guardians within the neighborhood community whom the investigator shared space with in other single African American parent gatherings and occasions. In expansion, four weekly advertisements were posted on one North Carolina social workers' Facebook group and two community mental health treatment offices were sent flyers for enlisting interested parents month to month. The researcher

passed out 25 flyers straightforwardly to African American people in parks playing with children and in local stores with children to recruit interested participants. All potential parents were screened over the phone by the researcher verbally inquiring questions from the phone screening form (Appendix A) to guarantee that inclusion criteria were met. All 15 parents agreed to participate and signed the consent forms earlier to taking part in any information collection interviews.

**Data Collection.** This study received Institutional Review Board approval through the University of Pennsylvania. After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic survey comprised of four questions about gender, income, education and employment (please see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire). A total of 15 qualitative interviews were conducted via Zoom between July 28, 2022, and September 25, 2022. Data collection took the form of 60-minute semi-structured video recorded and audio recorded interviews. The interview guide was based on questions previously developed and utilized by Bartel (2010), White and Levers (2017), and Yull et al. (2018) to explore the lived experiences of African American single parents. Interview questions sought to clarify each parent's barriers and facilitators of engagement and involvement while revealing the strengths and challenges associated with their experiences. Participants were welcomed to share ways that their experiences are distinctive and culturally different from other families. Interviews concluded with asking participants to offer guidance to school administrators, principals, and superintendents on ways to collaborate and incorporate African American single parents to help students be more successful. While interviews were guided by these initial questions, they also included a series of follow up probes designed to gather detailed and context-specific information from participants. In each virtual interview, the researcher utilized a HIPAA-

compliant Zoom account to record video, record audio, and professionally transcribe the parents' answers. Participants were compensated with \$50 gift cards to a local store.

### **Positionality**

The researcher's positionality is an important characteristic of the qualitative research process that affects data collection, examination, and interpretation (Jones et al., 2006). This study was conducted by an African American woman who grew up with a single parent and also has one child as a single parent. A deep understanding and awareness of race and institutional racism are brought to this study by the researcher. Experience in education settings as a student, educator, and parent, allows the researcher to build trust and a strong connection with participants and to understand their shared experiences. Research positionality is related to reflexive thematic analysis through notetaking of participants' comments and taking memo notes immediately following an interview. This included exploring subjectivity whereas numerous subjects and reactions resounded with the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze parents' barriers and facilitators of parental engagement and parental involvement. The researcher's data interpretation and analysis are reflected in this reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Through this process, multiple interpretations and meanings are discovered about the data (Byrne, 2021). Thematic analysis involved six phases: observing the data, developing initial codes, exploring themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and constructing a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a first step, the researcher transcribed and reviewed the data to collect initial ideas. The second phase included creating initial descriptive codes of interesting features. During the third phase, the researcher combined codes into possible themes.



As part of the fourth phase, the researcher identified themes and consulted with a colleague who possessed substantial phenomenological research experience. The fifth phase involved further analysis to define and create themes from the interviews. The final phase of thematic analysis involved producing a report with specific findings and examples related to the research question.

### **Results**

Of the 15 participants, six parents had elementary aged students, and nine parents had middle school aged children. Fourteen of the participants identified as female and one participant identified as male. One person reported their highest level of education as high school, five (33%) reported some college, and nine (67%) completed undergraduate and graduate school. Four parents reported working part-time and eleven parents had full time employment. The parents' reported income ranged from 10,000 to 160,000 dollars per year. Please see Table 1 located in Appendix B.

During the interviews, parents shared that their desires to be engaged and involved with their elementary and middle school children's process was often thwarted or enhanced by varying circumstances. They described their challenges and resources along with positive and negative experiences with the school. Data analyses revealed six salient themes related to barriers and facilitators to parental engagement and involvement. These themes included three barriers: racism, intersectional stigma, and single parent stress, and three facilitators: African American representation, supporting diverse family forms, and accessible and equitable resources are described in detail below. Barriers illustrate how African American single parents contend with racism and stigma that compounds single parental stress, whereas engagement and involvement were enhanced with African American representation, supporting diverse family forms and creating accessible and equitable resources. Taken together, these themes illustrate

how parents endure barriers and generate examples of effective ways that African American single parents engage and involve themselves in their children's academic careers. Please note that all participants have been given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality of their identity.

### **Barriers to Parental Engagement and Involvement**

Parents identified several ways that they experience barriers to parental engagement and involvement, yielding three salient themes of contending with racism, intersectional stigma, and single parent stress. These themes highlighted facing injustice and unfair treatment in the forms of microaggressions and punitive discipline. In addition, the data showed ways that parents experience shame, strain and tension in varying areas of life. Collectively, these barriers on multiple levels prevent parents from being as engaged and involved with their children in school.

### ***Racism***

Parents reported encountering and dealing with racism in the systems of the schools, often in the form of internal stressors about the dominant narratives and microaggressions to both their children and them. Participants noted ways that these experiences impacted the tone and nature of the conversations with school staff. In addition, parents attend additional meetings to understand and intervene for their child. When discussing the unique experiences of being an African American single parent, Andrea noted,

I think that as a woman of color, as a single mom, our experiences, like I said before, we always have to look the part. So just having so many societal pressures on us in terms of showing up, we have to show up every day. You can't have a day where you don't show up. So, you have to show up every day. You have to look the part. You have to be able to face opposition and resistance with grace. Because if you are mad or whatever, then you're labeled one way and you're unreasonable and so on. You have to like—I'm so big on you have to advocate for yourself but it has to sound right has to sound right for them to even listen.

For parents in this study, internal effects of racism can be exhausting. The pressures from the societal levels of racism and direct impacts in the school setting adds pressure and discomfort to

engaging with school staff. Andrea shared an experience of needing to navigate communicating with staff and being cautious while advocating for her child against systemic issues.

Bande noted ways that the students and parents experience racism in the school setting. She included an example of her child,

There was a time in my youngest's first grade when he was experiencing some microaggressions that I ended up kind of experiencing, too, with a particular family, and it got to a point where I had heard from the teacher that—I don't remember what my son was referred to as—but it was racist, basically. And I think I confronted the mom about it, and I felt very hurt by it, and I needed to have a conversation.

Bande shared meeting with the parent through a facilitated discussion with one of the administrators of the school. As a single parent, she brought a person from the community for her personal support. She was met with defensiveness from the parent of the student who caused harm. Bande explained that she had to take required additional time taken away from her personal and work schedule to attend to the meeting along with her expressed hurt and pain from the experience.

Julissa has professional expertise in advocacy for not only herself, but also other parents. She shared her observations of racism on a systemic level from the school meetings she attended with other African American parents. Julissa has a student with special learning needs and noticed the ways that her child along with other children of color were being disciplined and treated. She summarized her observations,

I saw the lack of supply for the demand when it came to those lessons or insurances. So, to my point about, "Let's not suspend this White student over here," but they will put it in the name of — because he has supportive services to help proceed moving forward and working through these challenges. But you suspend—nine times at a time, some will say, "We should support a parent," but most of the children that were poor were Black, right, or Hispanic. And you're suspending them because it now puts them in a tunnel. Some would call it the prison pipeline.

Julissa shared at length the ways that children of color were suspended for the behaviors exhibited when there are special learning needs. She included the barriers that she and some other parents faced in getting education plans, resources, and supports in place for their children of color based upon race and socioeconomic status. This level of racism prevents parents from being able to access resources that would help their children be academically successful. Julissa articulates the school to prison pipeline of punishments versus resources.

Parents in this sample shared examples interpersonal, internalized and institutional racism. African American single parents were often providing advocacy for their children in the face of opposition with the historical impacts of racism and oppression. As a result, parents may feel hurt, emotional fatigue, exhaustion, and distrust over time when dealing with racism on multiple levels on an ongoing basis. Some parents may decrease engagement and involvement to protect themselves from aforementioned experiences while other parents may not be aware of each and every incident.

### ***Intersectional Stigma***

African American single parents described an added burden mix of shame and unwelcoming feelings that included intersections of race and marital status. The following examples included experiences in the school environment and when communicating with school staff. Felicia shared her experiences of moving to North Carolina and being a new parent in the school. She expressed the things she noticed about the atmosphere when taking her child to school for meetings or events,

I watch; that's my personality. I watch the different things going on in the room. I don't speak much, but I watch, I observe. And like I mentioned, the greetings, the enthusiasm in the voice during the greeting, and I've noticed a lot of closed-- I'm not sure if it's, maybe-- I mean, most likely it's because these kids have known each other for a while. The families know each other, so they kind of stick together, but it's just not as

welcoming when you go into the different-- if it's for events as far as art performances or things like that. It's not as welcoming here.

When Lettie reflected on her experience as an African American single parent, she spoke about feeling stigma in her experience with the school. She noted her feeling about the label of single parent specifically,

It is a stigma to it because for me, it's no other parent has to announce an adjective before or some kind of qualifier before parent. But if you're not married, then it's automatically a single parent. It's like, why do you have to know that? And then there is the stigma of that you either probably don't have resources or you'll have all of these barriers to and from work and all of these things. And I laugh because in the work setting, you hear more so from the married people, the barriers than you do, the single people, because we're showing up trying to prove that we can be there, be present and available to work, etc. And then you're sitting in the middle of a meeting where someone is going, "I gotta go pick up Joey from soccer practice." And you got a whole entire spouse. I've made arrangements, actually. I've hired someone to go pick my child up from school or to take them to school so that I didn't have to be the one saying, "I need to leave at this time."

Lettie shared ways that she felt her single parent status comes with assumptions and judgement about parents needing resources and doubts that parents will not be able to attend meetings. In her example, she explained the ways that she has to make additional preparations and spend additional finances for childcare while observing a parent from a two-partner household need to leave a school meeting early to attend to childcare.

When asked about some of the barriers she experienced, Ella added some specific things for schools to consider about the stigma of being an African American single parent,

I would definitely want to say something about the stigma surrounding single parents. I would definitely want to say that just because somebody is a single parent doesn't mean that they are uncaring, uninvolved, anything like that, and that we just also need to recognize that single parents need different support than people who are not single parents and what that would look like and how I would want them to really take that into consideration that it's not a one-size-fits-all, not everybody's from your perfectly nuclear family.

Ella spoke about ways single parents are viewed as deficient in concern and involvement with their children. The stigma can be a barrier if differences are viewed as weaknesses or

shortcomings. This parent explained the ways the lack of awareness and consideration of the varying family forms negatively impacts engagement.

Similarly, Ian shared concerns about the negative perceptions of two single parents who coparent in separate homes. He explained the ways that he and his former spouse navigate parent engagement and involvement with their two children. He included their collective goal,

We need to present a unified family front as we engage with some of these things. We need to make sure the girls feel supported on both sides. We need to be able to go to things-- parent-teacher conferences, performances, presentations, whatever, and be able to, again, portray a, for lack of better term, 'normal' relationship. That was something I think that both their mother and I could agree upon, which was paramount because it would keep the girls healthy. It would keep them made sure they never felt uncomfortable.

These parents expressed how the school environment and atmosphere can contribute to barriers to being engaged and involved. In addition, parents provided ways that the single parent status implies negative stereotypes and myths of single parents being inferior or globally experiencing deficits.

### ***Single Parent Stress***

For parents in this sample, single parent stress manifested as feeling overwhelmed, lacking the financial resources and time, and managing varying work schedules. The parents in this study shared the impacts of these stressors on their ability to be engaged and involved in areas of supporting their children. Bande shared her experience of the ways parental stressed intensified during the pandemic. She expressed,

I can give an example of COVID. So, when we had to go-- when they had to go to virtual learning for COVID, it was just me here, and they were both in middle school. And I was working from home, too. So, I had to not only try to do my deliverables but also be a counselor and the cafeteria lady and all the things, to tutor, teaching assistant, all the things to make sure these kids do what they were supposed to do for school. I was literally going to pick up-- because fortunately, the school was providing lunches for the kids, but you had to come pick them up. I think it was like once or twice a week. So, I was going to do that. I took advantage of that just so that would be one thing I wouldn't

have to do, even though I had to travel to get it. ... So, it was a lot. It felt like a lot. I had this guilty feeling like I was dropping the ball at different points, whether it was with work or with them. And especially with my, at that time, 8th-grader, I just felt like I could have been more hands-on, or he needed me to be more hands-on to get through that year better and have a better transition to high school. But it was just me, so I couldn't do it.

Bande explained the impact of the pressures to work while supporting her two children at home with her on her own. She illustrated the difficulty in playing multiple roles to fulfill her employment responsibilities and help her children. She shared feeling overwhelmed and at fault for experiencing the limits to her abilities as the sole parent in her home.

When asked specifically about the barriers experienced as single parents, two parents shared additional complexities of the stressors. For example, Ella shared: "there are definitely barriers to some of this. There's time barriers, there's resource barriers, there's all kinds. There's mental health barriers because being a single parent is hard." Maya added her answer to the same question with her experience, "I just know, for me, sometimes it is exhausting, and it is overwhelming to have to do everything on your own. There rarely is splitting of duties, but I kind of have accepted the cards. That's just how it is. Just keep rolling with the punches." The two parents spoke about the ways that multiple layers of stressors can impact their ability to support their children in school. The sole responsibilities leave parents navigating challenges, emotions, resources and time.

A few other parents noted that time affected their ability to participate in supporting their children in school. Carol shared her thoughts about the scheduling of the parent-teacher association meetings:

It was just the time constraints really. Time constraints. I will say that sometimes they would have their PTA meetings after school, and I'm like, "I've had a long day working with people. The very last thing that I feel like going in here and doing is going to a PTA meeting." Stuff like that. It can just be draining. And then, yeah, that's definitely, definitely, barriers were definitely time constraints and just my own energy level.

Similarly, Kayla added,

But at the same time, if I'm going to use my time, it's going to be for something. So just when you look at the-- they have the two-parent households, they have the marriages and those two incomes, so it's completely different. I won't say that anything that the school does really towards me or towards them is any different. But it's just the outlook that they have is that I should be able to do the same things that they're able to do when in actuality it's like, yeah, I'm not though. They'll be sitting in the carpool line 45 minutes before school ends to pick their kids up and 45 minutes before school starts to drop their kids off. And I'm like, I'm not afforded the opportunity because I have to work. So, then I have to pay for my child to go to aftercare, whereas they don't.

These two parents provided examples of the ways that time is a precious commodity for single parents. Varying work schedules and exhaustion make it challenging for some parents to be as involved in the school community and poses a financial burden for some parents who have to secure after school care for their children until the adult workday ends.

### **Facilitators to Parental Engagement and Involvement**

Parents identified several ways that schools could facilitate parental engagement and involvement, yielding three salient themes of representation and cultural assets, welcoming diverse family forms, and collective and supportive resources. These themes highlighted the importance of diversity, inclusion and celebrating African American culture. In addition, the data showed ways that parents highly encouraged schools to embrace varying family forms and connect parents with programs and services. Collectively, these facilitators of integrating culture, diversity, inclusion, and access enhance single parent engagement and involvement with their children in school.

#### ***Representation and Cultural Assets***

Many parents in this sample expressed the importance of having diverse people in the school and placing an intentional value of the contributions of African American people. For example, Andrea shared her recommendations for school leadership,



“We need different voices. You have to and that's something that just is not going to just happen. You have to actively seek out, attracting and retaining educators, diverse educators, letting parents feel like they have-- parents of black and brown children, letting them feel like they have a voice, actively trying to get them onto your PTA in the community. We really, really need that because we come with a different set of experiences, like I said, that will benefit all families.”

Importantly, some parents have experienced ways that schools have been effective with including African American parents' voices. Nina shared,

I think one thing that has been really helpful is the goal of PAAC [Parents of African American Children] is actually to increase Black parents' engagement in schools that PTAs aren't typically the most inviting space for Black families to be a part of. And so how can we create kind of culturally relevant ways and relationships that might lead to people to be more involved and engaged in the school. So, I will say one of the great benefits is parent engagement. So, when we did the Read In, and I mean so many parents volunteered. And these are parents that had never been and probably never will go to a PTA meeting but were fully on board for making sure our kids are having good experiences in the school system. I think it also was wonderful. It was very much supported by the principal and the assistant principal. They often would attend our PAAC meetings. And they wanted to hear feedback from parents. They took the feedback seriously.

Intentional actions and organizing to include diverse voices were identified as important, as well as sustaining ongoing efforts at a systems level. For example, Nina reflected specifically on her experiences with and observations about the North Carolina (NC) public school system,

I actually really respect [NC public school system] in a lot of ways. And so, I would say continue your commitment to equity. And please don't lose sight of the work that you're doing or fall victim to trying to keep White children in schools by changing access and opportunity for students of color.

While Nina acknowledged an observable commitment to equity within the school system, she, like other parents in this sample, noted several areas for improvement that would likely require state-level systemic change, including teacher compensation and supply. She went on to state:

I would say do what you can to raise teacher's pay. They deserve to be paid a living wage and if they-- when they get to that point, they will be able to live more fulfilling lives doing the work that they love. They shouldn't have to have multiple jobs to be able to do this important job of educating our children. And I would say keep advocating to the state

because we need more teachers. And we need smaller class sizes so that our students can get the individual attention that they deserve.

She also reiterated the importance of ongoing conversations and school-initiated efforts that provide opportunity for parents to participate in such advocacy initiatives. For Nina, school-based efforts to create space for parental participation signaled respect and communicated that the school valued parental perspectives, opinions, and contributions. While not typically conceptualized within traditional definitions of parental engagement and involvement, opportunities for participation in shared efforts directed at large scale system-wide change emerged for some parents as an important aspect of parental engagement and involvement.

And I would say keep these conversations going. Keep creating spaces for us to give you feedback and to congratulate and celebrate the things that you're doing. But let's keep these relationships developing so that we can all do our part to continue to grow our education system for our children.

Parents in this study provided such powerful and passionate ideas about the ways that representation matters and the ways that embracing cultural assets help to increase parent engagement and involvement along with the academic success with children in elementary and middle school.

### ***Welcoming Diverse Family Forms***

Several parents shared that a school's ability to recognize diverse family compositions and varying circumstances functioned as a facilitator to increasing parental involvement. Ella encouraged schools to release negative assumptions about single parent and accept that students will have different experiences. She expressed,

I would love to say let go of those stereotypes. Don't walk into every school year and just put kids and don't label them and put them in this box because sometimes you're putting them in the box and they get stuck there and that's not fair to them in their development here in this area especially, I don't think she's had one teacher that looked like her. So, another thing that I would say is be open minded. Not all of your students are going to have the experiences and opportunities that you did. And also try to be more flexible. I

don't know if it's just the area we're in, but I feel like there's not much consideration for single parent families and trying to get places. So just be a little bit more flexible with planning and getting communication. Know whether someone would like to carpool or need help with transportation, that consideration.

Ella suggested recognizing and understanding the racial and cultural differences between the teachers and students within the school. She added that parent engagement and involvement would benefit from a variety of coordination through the ways that schools share information and supporting community among parents with transportation.

Bande provided specific examples of ways the charter school her child attends supported her engagement and involvement in the school. In addition to the examples that she provided about the school welcoming her ideas about integrating opportunities to celebrate African American history and culture and providing meals while the students were in virtual school during the pandemic, she added:

I think it was a Black parent, but it could have been-- I don't know, just giving my perspective as a parent at a charter school. So, I definitely felt very comfortable at this charter school. It has become my family. It's stepped in to be a mini village for me and my family.

Ian also described ways in which the teachers-initiated efforts to engage parents could facilitate a welcoming environment for families who coparent but are not married. In particular, he noted the importance of timing of such efforts, and the importance of initiating efforts at the beginning of the school year. He shared, "I think meeting people where they are and arguably taking some time at the beginning... and this is probably a responsibility for the teachers a little bit, but I would say maybe more broadly too, is to talk to parents about, yeah, what are some of their challenges."

Similarly, Nina shared the impact of welcoming diverse family forms in schools and extending into the larger extended levels beyond the elementary community level. She invited

school staff to balance understanding the different capacity of single parents and believing that single parents care and yearn to be involved with their children's academic process. She noted,

I would say-- I guess the only other thing I would say is I think we as a society just have to be okay with different family structures and supportive of it and respectful of it and considerate of it, recognizing that as single parents, we don't necessarily have the same flexibility as two-parent households or multi-adult households. But we care about our children [laughter] just as much. We want to be active and engaged. And so, continuing to create spaces for bidirectional communication is just-- is really important.

She also highlighted the important element of communication in supporting parent engagement with diverse family forms. In her example, she illustrated the common experiences that single parents and teachers have to bring more connection and understanding when engaging parents. When she and her coparent encountered some personal challenges, Nina shared the supportive discussion she had with the teacher:

I reached out to the teacher after and said, "Hey, for future meetings, I think I would like to kind of speak with you individually." And she was like, "Oh, I totally--" she had been divorced as well, so she got it. And since then, we have had joint parent-teacher conferences and haven't had those types of issues. But I do remember that. So, I think as a single parent, it's like the child is living-- for us, our situation, she's living in both households but with very different parenting styles and also very different kind of values.

Parents in this study provided such insightful and relevant ideas about the ways that welcoming diverse family forms support parent engagement and involvement along with the academic success with children in elementary and middle school.

### ***Collective and Supportive Resources***

Parents in the study expressed the ways that creating community among parents and development of relevant resources for African American single parents facilitated parent engagement and involvement. For many parents, a recognition of common experiences and needs of single parent families was an important first step. For example, Denise noted that it

would be helpful if schools could proactively anticipate and address barriers with concrete resources. For example, if schools could operate from the viewpoint of:

“Well, I know she's a single mom and maybe we offer more resources. We have this kind of help after school, or that or that.’ I mean, I'm just thinking what it could be, because I believe if I had a male figure at home, it'd be a little different... So, it's just the support, I think, them having more support, being more supportive and not judgmental.

Felicia suggested ways the school could be supportive in providing access to in-school services to support learning that would help with the financial burdens that can be a barrier for some single parents.

I'd say like tutoring, more information on tutoring, more information on more social, emotional activities or resources would be good as well. ... And also more, you know, she's in middle school and maybe it's too soon, but more of an introduction into, "Okay, what's next?" This is school, what's next after that? More talk of that part of life I think would be helpful as well to help her prepare. In addition to the things that we talk about, it would be good as well at school if they had different conversations about that as well.

Parents in this sample who were able to avail themselves for free or affordable school-based academic enrichment materials and programs viewed these supports very positively. For example, Kayla shared examples of her child who benefitted from tutoring. She mentioned,

So last year she was having issues with math. She was writing her numbers backwards and it would be like the 10s and the 20s and stuff like that. She would write the zero first or write the number and then the one or something like that. So, her teacher was like, "Well, we're having tutoring after school." And it was free. ... So of course, they were like, "Can she come?" Of course, she can come. Because I tried to sign her up for Sylvan Learning Center. They wanted \$500 a month. I paid \$100 for her to get tested and to see where she was. This was before she started school. And then they were like, "Basically, you have to pay \$500 a month," because they have to come twice a week. And I was like, "I don't have that kind of money." And they was like, "Well, you can apply for a credit card." No, I can't though. What in the world? So, when her school offered free tutoring, then I was like, "Yeah, that works." If our school didn't provide tutoring, how would I get her a tutor if I can't really afford it?

For parents in this sample, pertinent resources promoted more engagement and involvement for parents. The parents' specific requests for help with transportation, tutoring, and

orientation offers closer access to resources for academic success which can address many of the above-mentioned barriers involving finances and access.

### **Discussion**

This is the first study to explore the barriers and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement among a sample of African American single parents. While past research has linked parent involvement and engagement to academic achievement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hourii et al., 2019; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Wilder, 2014) and some studies have recommended the need for including elements related to culture and race to enhance parental engagement and involvement (Latunde, 2017; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Yull et al., 2018), to date, no studies have explored barriers and facilitators that may be specific to African American single parents. African American single parents in this sample encountered unique barriers to parental engagement and involvement that are primarily systemic. These barriers included racism, intersectional stigma and single parent stress. At the same time, parents in this sample identified a number of strategies that could circumvent these barriers, including racial and cultural representation in the school, inclusion and support for diverse family forms, and equitable relevant resources that are accessible to their families.

African American single parents in particular experience distinct barriers to parental engagement and involvement. This research found that many parents experience injustice at the internal, interpersonal, and systems level. The historical trauma experienced by African American people and the trauma that many single African American parents still navigate and manage today causes some parents to feel invisible, dismissed, and undervalued when attempting to engage with educational institutions, affecting their self-concept (Sotero, 2006). The findings of this study support earlier research noting that African American people often experience this

sense of invisibility as “an inner struggle with the feeling that one’s talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism,” (Vaughans & Spielberg, 2014, p. 14).

Similarly, parents in this study expressed ways that school staff and the environment can be a barrier to engagement when staff make assumptions and place negative views about their family forms being inferior and focusing on deficits. A study conducted by White and Levers (2017) found that minority parents were adversely affected by power imbalances between teachers and themselves, the teachers' lack of empathy, the lack of community and lack of connection within the school system. African American single parents experience not only universal stressors common to many families, but also experience stresses that are unique to their experiences. As the only parents in their homes, they often feel overwhelmed, work extended hours to provide financially for their families, and often have to make difficult choices and sacrifices with their time. As a result, African American parents may experience exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and harm that causes them to disengage. Contending with racism compounded with stigma and parental stress makes it more difficult for single parents to be involved with their children in school experience.

This research also identified a number of facilitators to parental engagement and involvement, which include representation and cultural assets, welcoming diverse family forms, and collective and supportive resources. These findings are consistent with prior research that highlights the ways in which cultural and racial representation and inclusion can function as a facilitator to parental engagement and involvement. Latunde (2017) found that African American parents were more engaged when culturally inclusive approaches are used by the schools. Such approaches included nurturing trust and meeting in community spaces, in convenient locations

with high levels of accessibility. Similarly, findings from this study highlight the importance of acknowledging positive and significant contributions of African American people. Coleman (2016) noted the “need to better understand the amazing resilience and protective factors that African Americans display in light of the repeated traumatic events that have occurred,” (p.574).

In addition, findings from this study showed acknowledging diverse family forms within the school as a facilitator of parent engagement. This process includes eliminating stereotypes and assumptions, while also adding flexibility for varying family forms. Findings from this study also highlight effective practices that invite collectivism and support with relevant resources for single parents. Since some families may be experiencing barriers with finances and time, schools that offer built-in resources can be very supportive to children's academic success. Alameda-Lawson (2014) found ways to utilize the cultural aspects of collectivism with African American parents in observing the impact on student academic achievement. Schools that provide families access to resources support academic achievement and a commitment to social justice. The availability and access to additional resources also provide interventions to counter the systemic issues of lack of access and equity equitable resources.

This study's results have implications for future research, policy and practice. Further research is needed to understand the diverse family forms of African American single parents. Research on parental engagement and involvement could build on the different definitions of single parents (e.g., sole parents, coparents in different homes) and the varying parents in urban and rural areas and varying levels of socioeconomic status. In addition, further qualitative research with school staff using semi-structured interviews and focus groups would offer a more expanded view of engagement and involvement from school staff's perspective.



This research aligns with social work's hallmark values of advocacy for social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in program and policy development and effective social work practice. The recommendations from this research should be considered by administrators, principals, school boards and superintendents when providing professional development on effective engagement practices. Vaughans and Spielberg (2014) included the need for competence training of school staff to increase empathy and consciousness of the history of oppression while including systems of accountability for school administrators and staff through effective engagement techniques and consequences. It is imperative that administrators and school leaders engage in ongoing quarterly trainings and consultation regarding anti-racist school practices. The structural racism and oppression that has occurred over many years will take ongoing efforts to dismantle and disrupt.

Findings from this study illuminated the need for an increase in African American administrators, faculty and staff, culturally relevant curriculum integrated in the classroom, and celebratory and cultural activities within the school community. When a school community is intentional on embracing and making children and families feel welcome and appreciated, it is a success for engagement and involvement. Schools can effectively engage African American single parents through presenting a welcoming and inclusive environment that reflects racial and cultural representation and supportive resources. In addition, schools should incorporate perspectives of single African American parents when developing school wide programming to enhance parental engagement and child academic achievement.

Increasing awareness of African American single parents' experiences have the potential to inform relevant and innovative recommendations for improved school social work practices to increase parental engagement and involvement in schools. School student support teams can

focus efforts on ways to mitigate barriers and enhance parent and family support with relevant resources within the school. Schools are encouraged to develop opportunities to cultivate community among parents to invite inclusion and ways to build community and connection.

*Limitations.* The research presented originated from one exploratory study of African American single parent experiences with barriers and facilitators of parental engagement and involvement. Therefore, this study has several limitations that are important to consider when implementing the findings. First, this study had an overrepresentation of women. There was one father in the sample along with 14 mothers. Unfortunately, this potentially contributes to the false narrative that African American single fathers are not involved. The selection of the participants allowed space for bias in the parents not being reflective of the greater group for generalizability. Future research involving direct experiences of single parents could allow for a comprehensive view of the group with a larger sample size that focuses on comparisons and contrasts with rural and urban areas as well as understanding lower socioeconomic households. In addition, integrating quantitative and longitudinal methodology to the research design would increase impact and generalizability while exploring data over time. Because this research relied on the retrospective personal experiences, the participants' memory recall of their experiences had potential for inaccuracies. Finally, during March of 2020 there was a health and racial pandemic that impacted children and parents and being able to attend school and meet with teachers in person within the buildings. With virtual school options continuing, further research on barriers and facilitators with increasing African American single parent involvement is needed.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the unique barriers to parental engagement and involvement that are experienced by African American single parents in conjunction with effective facilitators that circumvent these barriers is essential in supporting children's academic success. This research provides valuable insight into the experiences of single parents when engaged and involved with elementary and middle schools. These experiences are critical to consider when developing initiatives that are designed to promote parental engagement and involvement.

## CONCLUSION

This study is the first of its kind to explore experiences of parental engagement and involvement exclusively with 15 African American single parents. While a substantial body of research has quantitatively investigated aspects of parent involvement and engagement and achievement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hourii et al., 2019; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Wilder, 2014) and some studies have underscored the need for including culturally specific factors to enhance traditional White middle-class definitions of parental engagement and involvement (Latunde, 2017; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Yull et al., 2018), to date, this is the only study that has specifically explored the ways in which single African American parents define parental engagement and involvement as well as explored barriers and facilitators. African American single parents in this sample encountered unique barriers to parental engagement and involvement that are primarily systemic. These barriers included racism, intersectional stigma and single parent stress. At the same time, parents in this sample identified a number of strategies that could circumvent these barriers, including racial and cultural representation in the school, inclusion and support for diverse family forms, and equitable relevant resources that are accessible to their families.

African American single parents in particular encounter unique barriers to parental engagement and participation related to race, class, and gender. Single parents enter the school space with this awareness and reminder daily while some school staff engage parents and children with stereotypes and biases. Findings from this study demonstrated that use of exclusionary language related to student observations and family form/structure matters and can have negative impacts on families. The awareness of the historical contexts and operating and engaging parents and students accordingly is important. Several harmful experiences shared by

participants in this study score the recommendation of schools understanding the historical and sociopolitical context when engaging African American single parents and students in the school.

Overall, findings from this sample indicate that African American single parents do wish to be involved in their child's academic trajectory and engage with school staff regularly. At the same time, most participants reported that they must frequently contend with dominant – and harmful – narratives that portray them as uninvolved or under-involved. To combat these narratives, parents in this sample demonstrated resourcefulness, employing a variety of strategies such as engaging and connecting with school staff, contributing time and resources toward advocacy, organizing African American parents, and implementing culturally inclusive programming to create effective counternarratives that exhibit engagement and involvement dispelling myths and stereotypes. In addition, parents also generated a number of suggestions that could promote engagement/involvement, as well as equity and inclusion.

Specifically, this research found that African American single parents are intentional on creating a presence and connecting with teachers to ensure fair treatment of their children. Historically, African American people have endured significant experiences and impacts of oppression that continue to manifest in many ways in the present day, while African American people continue to experience racism at institutional, personal, and interpersonal levels (Jones, 2000). African American people face many disparities and disproportionalities related to adverse childhood experiences, the school-to-prison pipeline, health outcomes, and the criminal-legal system.

This study's results have implications for practice, policy and future research. Best practices include school-wide interventions when creating systemic change within communities.

This research parallels with the mission and values of social work regarding advocacy for social justice, inclusion, and respect for diversity in program and policy development and effective social work practice.

Findings from this study showed the dire need for schools to have intentional efforts of developing and nurturing cultural humility and anti-racist practices. Increasing school staff awareness and understanding of racism and oppression while supporting students' cultural strengths, practices, and values enhance the relationships between parents, students, and teachers and promote better academic outcomes (Waites, 2009). It is imperative that administrators and school leaders engage in ongoing quarterly trainings and consultation regarding anti-racist school practices. Findings from this research suggest that embracing engagement efforts characterized by cultural humility and treating single parents with dignity and respect are critical. Cultural humility "takes into account the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges individuals and institutions to address inequalities," (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p171). Engaging in anti-racist practices within the school is vital in efforts to disrupt and dismantle the structural racism and oppression that has occurred over many years in school settings.

Findings from this study highlight the impact of representation and on parental engagement and involvement. This study confirmed the requirement for representation of African American administrators, faculty and staff, culturally relevant curriculum integrated in the classroom, and celebratory and cultural activities within the school community. Students and families feel a sense of community and belonging when schools are intentional on embracing and including diverse people. It positively impacts parental engagement and involvement. Aceves (2014) and Alfaro et al. (2014) have suggested that schools collaborate with culturally diverse families to identify their values, hopes, and priorities for their children. Stacer and Perrucci

(2012) recommended that schools develop ways to integrate parents into school activities and schedule those activities in ways that respond to the varying availability of families. Schools can effectively engage African American single parents through incorporating their perspectives when developing school wide programming to enhance parental engagement and child academic achievement.

An understanding and increased awareness of African American single parents' experiences informs relevant and innovative recommendations for improved school social work practices to increase parental engagement and involvement in schools. School student support teams can focus efforts on ways to mitigate barriers and enhance parent and family support with relevant resources within the school. Schools are encouraged to develop opportunities to cultivate community among parents to invite inclusion and ways to build community and connection. School staff can effectively engage African American single parents when they are able to present an inclusive and welcoming environment that excludes stigma related to being African American and a single parent family.

Future research involving direct experiences of single parents could allow for a comprehensive view of the group with a larger sample size and adding quantitative methods to the research design as well as a longitudinal aspect to view change over time. Additional research is needed to understand the diverse family forms of African American single parents (i.e., sole parents, coparents in different homes, etc.) and the varying settings of urban and rural areas and varying levels of socioeconomic status. Future research includes using a cultural-variant community-based participatory research (CV-CBPR) model that supports using a strengths-based perspective and discourages the focus on deficits (Henderson et al., 2017). This model prompts the use of culture-sensitive and inclusive practices in research and an

understanding of sociopolitical, historical, economic and contextual factors influence individual, family and community development. This model includes intersectionality and integrates respect for culture, traditions and adaptive behaviors for groups into inclusive practices. The results and findings from this study lead to the need for implementing this model in developing parental engagement strategies with African American single parents in the school settings (Israel et al., 2013; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).



## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix B: Telephone Questionnaire

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Appendix E: Table 1

**Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer**

Are you an African American single parent of a child in elementary or middle school?

Help researchers learn how parent engagement and involvement impacts academic achievement in African American families.

Participate in a 60-minute interview as part of research for a doctoral dissertation studying the way parental engagement is associated with academic achievement.

All participants will receive a \$50 Target gift card.

Who can participate?

African American single parents, guardians or primary caregivers of elementary and middle school aged children.

What's involved?

One 60-minute Zoom interview

Participation is voluntary, and you will not be penalized for any reason should you choose not to participate. If you have any questions or concerns or you would simply like to know more about the study, you may contact the researcher directly:

Tauchiana Williams

[tjvw@upenn.edu](mailto:tjvw@upenn.edu)

**Appendix B: Telephone Questionnaire**

Greeting: Hi. My name is Tauchiana Williams. Thank you for emailing!

I'd like to tell you about this study. I'd also like to ask you a few questions to make sure you are eligible to participate in the study. At the end of our conversation, if you decide to participate, we can schedule an interview time.

I am conducting interviews with African American single parents of elementary to middle school aged children. I am interested in learning about your experience with parent engagement and parent involvement and connections to academic success.

Some of the questions I ask may seem very private. You may decline to answer any question or simply stop participation and exit the study if you feel uncomfortable at any time.

Are you willing to answer a few questions at this time?

**Questions**

**Demographics**

Are you 18 years or older?

**Yes / No**

Are you a single parent of an elementary to middle aged child?

**Yes/No**

Do you identify as African American?

**Yes / No**

Do you speak English?

**Yes/No**

Do you live in North Carolina? **Yes / No**

**Follow up**

If you agree to participate, I will ask you questions about your engagement and involvement with your child(ren) in their school experience, their academic achievement, and challenges and resources with raising your child(ren). The interview will take no more than one hour.

Do you have any questions about any of this? **Yes / No**

Do you have any other questions for me at this time? **Yes / No**

Are you interested in participating? **Yes / No**

Would you be willing to schedule an interview with me? **Yes / No**

What is the best way to contact you for confirmation prior to the date of our interview? (email, phone) \_\_\_\_\_

*If participants meet inclusion criteria...*

**Demographic Information**

Before we conclude our call today, may I ask you a few demographic questions?

What is your salary range? \_\_\_\_\_

What gender do you identify as? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest level of education? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current employment status? \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: Informed Consent Form****UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA  
RESEARCH SUBJECT  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Protocol Title:** PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT, INVOLVEMENT, AND ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS: PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE  
PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED  
CHILDREN

**Principal Investigator:** Jacqueline Corcoran, PhD  
Professor, Director, DSW Program  
703-405-3254

Tauchiana Williams  
919-423-3341

**Emergency Contact:** Tyra Moore  
571-247-8039

**Research Study Summary for Potential Subjects**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you should only participate if you completely understand what the study requires and what the risks of participation are. You should ask the study team any questions you have related to participating before agreeing to join the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a human research participant at any time before, during or after participation, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (215) 898-2614 for assistance.

The research study is being conducted to learn about the experiences of African American single parents of elementary and middle school age children, with specific focus on parental engagement and involvement and the impact on academic success.

If you agree to join the study, you will be asked to complete the following research procedures:

- complete one 60-minute interview over zoom
- speak via phone with follow-up questions

Your participation will last for one year.

Parental engagement has important influences on academic performance in closing the achievement gap for students of color. The most common risks of participation are none.

Please note that there are other factors to consider before agreeing to participate such as additional procedures, use of your personal information, costs, and other possible risks not discussed here. If you are interested in participating, a member of the study team will review the full information with you. You are free to decline or stop participation at any time during or after the initial consenting process.

***Why am I being asked to volunteer?***

You are being invited to participate in a research study because you are an African American single parent or caregiver of an elementary to middle school aged student.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to learn more about

- African American single parent engagement and parent involvement to student academic performance with African American families.
- This study is being conducted for the researcher's doctoral dissertation.

**Why was I asked to participate in the study?**

You are being asked to join this study because academic achievement of African American elementary and middle school students is an important concern. The proposed study is seeking to understand the experiences of African American single parents about the ways they support their children.

**How long will I be in the study?**

The study will take place over a period of one year. This means for the next 12 months we will ask you to spend 1 day participating in this study. Each session will last approximately 1 hour.

**Where will the study take place?**

You will be asked to complete the study virtually in your preferred location.

**What will I be asked to do?**

- Complete a one-hour virtual interview via HIPAA compliant zoom.

**What are the risks?**

- One potential risk is that participants may experience emotional discomfort when discussing any negative experiences they have had with school staff. If these feelings become unmanageable or unpleasant, the researcher will offer to stop the interview. The interviewer is a licensed clinical social worker with experience in assessment and crisis intervention. Participants may also request the interviewer pause or terminate the interview at any time.
- Risks are minimal, and the most common risk of participation is breach of confidentiality. In the unlikely occurrence of a breach of confidentiality, you will be informed of the nature of the breach and how your information may have been compromised.

### **How will I benefit from the study?**

This study will have no direct benefit for participants. Participation in this study could be of potential benefit to other parents, school staff and students and inform parental engagement and involvement practices and programs. Findings from this study will provide important information that can highlight new ways in which schools can develop programs that empower and provide targeted support to African American single parents of elementary to middle school aged youth.

### **What other choices do I have?**

Your alternative to being in the study is to not be in the study.

### **What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?**

You may choose to join the study, or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary.

There is no penalty if you choose not to join the research study. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you or would come to you in the future.

### **When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?**

The study is expected to end after all participants have completed the interviews and the information has been collected. The study may be stopped without your consent for the following reasons:

- The PI feels it is best for your safety and/or health-you will be informed of the reasons why.
- You have not followed the study instructions
- The PI, the sponsor or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania can stop the study anytime

You have the right to drop out of the research study at any time during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so. Withdrawal will not interfere with your future care.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Tauchiana Williams, at 919-423-3341 and take the following steps: express your desire to discontinue the study.

### **How will my personal information be protected during the study?**

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania will have access to your records.

- Demographic information will be collected and stored separately from the interview data.
- Demographic information will be noted on a word document within a password-protected computer.
- Participants will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used to protect their confidentiality.
- All digital recordings and other study related electronic documents such as transcribed interviews will be maintained on a password protected computer as well with only Tauchiana Williams and the principal investigator, Jacqueline Corcoran, PhD having access.
- All identifying information and study recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study.

An exception to confidentiality is if you report child or elder abuse or neglect, or if you report suicidal or homicidal ideation or intent to the research team. Any information about child or elder abuse or intent to harm yourself or others will be reported to the authorities, as required by law.

### **What may happen to my information collected on this study?**

#### ***Future Use of Data***

Your information will not be stored or shared for future research purposes.

### **Will I have to pay for anything?**

- There are no costs associated with participating in the study.

### **Will I be paid for being in this study?**

- Participants will receive a \$50 Target gift card.

### **Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with



Tauchiana Williams. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the IRB at (215) 898 2614.

When you sign this form, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide**

#### **A. Definitions of Parent Engagement and Involvement**

1. Describe how it feels to enter the school and speak with school staff.
2. Can you give an example of a positive experience with the school? (Yull et al., 2018)
3. Describe the ways you support your child's learning.
4. As an African American single parent, what are your concerns about engaging with the school system? (Yull et al., 2018)
5. What does the school expect parents to do throughout the year?
6. If you could talk with the principal or superintendent and you knew that they would really listen and not judge you, what would you want to say? (Yull et al., 2018)

#### **B. Relationships to Academic Achievement**

1. What hopes and dreams do you have for your child related to school? (White & Levers, 2017)
2. What do you need from your child's school to help them be successful in school? (White & Levers, 2017)
3. What are your child's scores from the most recent report card?

#### **C. Barriers and Facilitators**

1. Tell me about the ways your experience as a Black single parent is different from others.
2. Describe what it is like raising a child in your community? (Yull et al., 2018)
3. What barriers to parental engagement and involvement do you face? (Yull et al., 2018)

4. Can you describe a difficult experience with the school? (Yull et al., 2018)
5. What resources do you use to help with being engaged with your child's process?  
(Bartel, 2010)

**Appendix E: Table 1**

Parent	Salary/year	Employment	Highest EDUC
1. Andrea	40-50K	Full time	Masters
2. Bande	40-50K	Part-time	Masters
3. Carol	40-50K	Full time	Some college
4. Denise	10-20K	Part-time	Some college
5. Ella	60-70K	Part-time	Some college
6. Felicia	30-40K	Full time	High school
7. Gwen	25-35K	Full time	Associates
8. Hollee	40-50K	Full time	Masters
9. Ian	150-160K	Full time	Masters
10. Julissa	10-20K	Part time	Some college
11. Kayla	70-80K	Full time	Masters
12. Lettie	100-110	Full time	PhD
13. Maya	80-90K	Full time	Bachelors
14. Nina	80-90K	Full time	PhD
15. Oprah	100-110K	Full time	Masters

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