ABSTRACT

WALKER-DEVOS, DINA CAROL. At the Intersection of Can and Can’t: Parental School Involvement from the Perspective of the Low-SES African-American Mother. (Under the direction of Dr. Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby).

There is general agreement in the relevant research literature that parental involvement in home- and school-based educational experiences leads to positive academic, social/emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children. More specifically, low-income African-American children have shown to benefit the greatest when their parents are involved in their educational experiences. There is also general agreement that to the extent trust and collaboration between parents and teachers are developed and maintained, the more likely parents are to become and remain involved. Trusting relationships between parents and teachers, however, are not always easily acquired. Race and social class have been shown to impact levels of trust within the relationship. Through semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study examined the lived experiences of 7 low-SES African-American mothers who participated in a year-long, faith-based program designed to assist them in creating more stable lives. Interviews with case managers familiar with the mothers’ school-based experiences were also conducted. Utilizing the critical race concept of intersectionality, this study examined (1) participants’ conceptualization of the role of parent, teacher, community, and student within the realm of education; (2) how differences in race and SES influence the parent-teacher relationship; (3) participants’ perceived levels of home- and school-based involvement and the barriers that may exist that negate involvement; and (4) the strategies participants’ recommend schools and teachers use to increase their levels of school-based involvement.
At the Intersection of Can and Can’t: Parental School Involvement from the Perspective of the Low-SES African-American Mother

by
Dina Carol Walker-DeVose

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APPROVED BY:

_______________________________
Dr. Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby
Committee Chair

_______________________________
Dr. Heather Davis

_______________________________
Dr. Jocelyn D. Taliaferro

_______________________________
Dr. Marc A. Grimmett
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the amazing women who took part in this study. Thank you for your time, your voice, and your honesty. I am proud to have you as partners in this work. I hope this research inspires educators to think differently about families and their role in their children’s education.

This work is also dedicated to my children, Quiera, Delton II, Xavier, and Kennedy DeVose. I hope one day you will understand why this work was so important to me and why I allowed it to take me away from you so many times. Even if you never read one page of this document, I hope it will always remind you that all things are possible to those who dedicate themselves to the task.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

If you ask a group of diverse parents about their relationships with the schools their children attend, you are likely to get a myriad of responses. Some parents will report positive relationships where parents and teachers are collaborative partners who trust each other and have formed a productive partnership. Others will report a somewhat distant relationship with separate spheres of influence (parents influence the home; teachers influence the schools) and surface interactions. Still others will report relationships marred by miscommunication, mistrust, and missed opportunities to connect. Despite the varied responses parents may give, there is general agreement in the relevant research literature that parental involvement (PI) in children’s school experiences leads to positive academic, social/emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children (Epstein, 1986; 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Doan Holbein, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Pena, 2000; Seefeldt, Denton, Galper, & Younoszai, 1998). More specifically, low-income African-American students have shown to benefit the greatest when their parents are involved in their educational experiences (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; De Civita, Pagania, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Eamon, 2002; Meidel & Reynolds, 1999). Some research suggests that increasing PI may be one way of reducing the educational achievement gap between White and racial minority groups (Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

There is also general agreement that to the extent trust and collaboration are developed and maintained, the more likely parents are to become and remain involved in
their child’s school experiences (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Christenson, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). But trust is not always easily acquired by all parents. Race and social class have been shown to impact levels of trust between parents and teachers (Beard & Brown, 2008; Goodard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Murry, Kotchick, Wallace, Ketchen, Eddings & Heller, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; Williams & Barber, 2007). Low-income African-American parents may enter the school setting with a disposition of suspicion and lower levels of trust than White, middle-class parents. When White parents enter the school setting, they do so with more trust and less suspicion in the motives of the school and teacher. Therefore, they acquire more value (capital) in a setting that stresses positive, affirmative, and supportive family-school relationships. Lack of trust on the part of the African-American parent often results in lack of collaboration and lower levels of PI (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

This study attempts to examine how low-SES African-American parents see themselves in the parenting role, how differences in race and SES influence their trust in teachers, and how they make their decisions about their home- and school-based involvement activities. In the forefront of this study is the intersection of race, income, and gender, which informs not only how study participants view themselves, but also how they are viewed by others.

Statement of the Problem

Parent Involvement. Studies conducted over the last two decades have attempted to determine the actual benefits of PI to student academic achievement. The vast majority of studies have successfully linked PI to child educational outcomes (e.g., Barnard, 2004; Fan &
Chen, 2001; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Marcon, 1999; Powell, Son, File, San Juan, 2010; Stylianides & Stylianides, 2011) while a few others have failed to uncover a significant relationship (e.g., Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry & Childs, 2004; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, Kayzar, 2002; Miller & Kelley, 1991). Among the research, Ginsburg-Block, Manz, and McWayne (2010) identified methodological issues as possible reason for the inconsistencies. She and her colleagues note several problems including: (a) use of a single survey item to assess the complex construct, (b) the inclusion of multiple confounding variables (e.g., child age, culture, SES, etc.) with no attempt to understand findings given these differences, and (c) the correlational nature of the majority of these studies that report only strength and direction of the relationship, but nothing about the intervening variables does more to explain student academic achievement (e.g., poverty status) than family involvement.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming evidence points to the fact that parents can and do make a difference in their children’s education (Epstein, 1986, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In a 2001 meta-analysis, Fan and Chen examined 25 studies that reported empirical findings from which Pearson’s correlations between the PI indicators and the achievement outcome variables could be obtained. They found an overall medium effect size \( r = .25 \) and concluded that PI does have a positive influence on students’ academic achievement. Most notably, the strongest relationship found was between parents’ aspiration and expectation for children’s educational achievement and students’ actual achievement \( r = .40 \). Parents’ supervision of children at home (e.g., home rules for watching television, for doing school work, etc.) had the weakest relationship \( r = .09 \).
Jeynes conducted two meta-analyses, one examining PI on urban elementary school children (2005) and the other on urban secondary school children (2007). The results of both studies indicate that PI had a positive impact on children’s academic achievement. The elementary study (n=41) produced a fairly large effect size (0.8) and a positive association between PI programs and elementary children’s academic achievement. The secondary school study (n=52) reported overall effect sizes of .46 for studies that examined all minority children and .53 for those studies that included mostly minority children. In this study, Jeynes also found that specific components of PI were more influential to student achievement than others. Parenting style (the extent to which parents demonstrated a supportive and helpful parenting approach) yielded an effect size of .40; communication (the extent to which parents and their children communicated about school activities) yielded an effect size of .32; and parental expectations (the extent to which student’s parents maintained high expectations of the student’s abilities to achieve a high grade) yielded the highest results with an effect size of .88. These correlations generally held across race. In both studies, Jeynes suggests that PI may be one way of reducing the achievement gap between White and racial minority groups.

Other findings from the literature include positive long-term benefits for including parents early in children’s education. Barnard (2004), examining the association between PI in elementary school and success in high school, found that even after controlling for background characteristics (race, gender, income, parent education, employment status), PI was significantly associated with lower rates of high school dropout and increased on-time high school graduation. Positive academic outcomes have also been found when parents
participate in homework (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Other benefits include regular school attendance, good behavior, and improved teacher efficacy (Epstein & Salinas, 2001). Research also shows that the physical participation in educational activities is not the only way that parents can positively influence their children’s academic outcomes. Both Lee & Bowen (2006) and Feuerstein (2000) found that parents’ higher educational expectations for their children were associated with higher academic achievement. This finding held true across racial and social groups.

There is evidence that the benefits of PI also hold true for African-American and children considered low-SES. In a 2003 meta-analysis, Jenyes examined the effects of PI on the academic achievement of African-American, Asian-American, and Latino children. The analysis included almost 12,000 participants and was conducted using data collected from 20 studies that examined the impact of PI on academic achievement. Specific components of the PI indicator included: (a) the extent to which parents communicated with their children about school, (b) whether parents checked their children’s homework, (c) parental expectations for the academic success of their children, (d) whether parents encouraged their children to do outside reading, (e) whether parents attended or participated in school functions, (f) the extent to which there were household rules regarding school and/or leisure activities, (g) parenting style and warmth, and other specific measures of PI. The results indicated that PI positively affected the academic achievement of minority groups in all of the studies analyzed with the greatest benefit shown for African-American and Latino children and the least benefit shown for Asian-American children. Jenyes found that PI affects all levels of academic achievement including GPA, standardized test, and other measures including
teacher ratings. Jenyes also noted that when there is involvement from the parents of African-American students, on the average, these children benefit more than their average Asian-American counterparts.

In another study utilizing a largely African-American and low-SES student population, Stylianides & Stylianides (2010) found that higher levels of parent-child interactions contributed to higher academic achievement in kindergarten in all major school subjects (e.g., mathematics, reading, science, and social studies). Parent-child interactions was defined as: reading to the child, telling the child stories, helping the child do art, building things with the child, teaching the child about nature, playing games with the child, and participating in sports activities with the child. Other research on the benefits of PI for African-American and low-SES students include higher levels of student-rated school engagement, school competence, and standardized achievement in reading (Murray, 2009); improvements in children’s social behavior and peer-to-peer interactions (Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000); higher levels of rule compliance and sociability at school (Adams, Ryan, Ketsetzis & Keating, 2000); and better emotional adjustment, communication, and social skills (Marcon, 1999).

In spite of the many challenges facing African-American and low-SES families, research shows that PI in even the most poverty stricken homes and schools can improve the psychological climate for learning and children’s academic performance (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996). Unfortunately, the school building is not always a welcoming space for all families. Many families carry with them feelings of distrust due in part to the historical experiences of betrayal and broken promises by the very system charged with
helping them and their children excel (Rotter, 1967). Given the overwhelming amount of research indicating the importance of parental involvement both in the home and in the school, understanding how parents experience trust in their relationship with the teacher and the school is worthy of exploring.

**Trust.** Trust in the family-school relationship is of critical importance. The responsibilities conferred on schools to care for children require a high level of trust on the part of the parent (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Conversely, the increasing demand to actively involve families in the decision-making process of the school requires that teachers trust families as well (Clark, Sheridan & Woods, 2010). While several studies have established trust as a key factor that influences the extent to which parents and teachers develop collaborative relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2003), there is surprisingly little research on outcomes of trust and the family-school relationship. Of the extant research, studies have shown that trusting relationships between parents and teachers yields positive outcomes for students and schools.

Trust between parents and teachers have been shown to correlate with students’ credits earned, GPA, school attendance, and to predict student achievement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2003, & Goddard, et al., 2001). Forsyth, Barnes & Adams (2006) found that parent trust of schools contributed significantly to the school’s overall effectiveness defined as collective teacher efficacy, enabling school structure, and student academic performance. Strong levels of parent trust also make it more likely that reform efforts initiated by schools are less likely to be rejected (Clark, et al., 2010). In low-SES schools trust seems equally critical. Meier (2002), an educational reformist credited with
helping to revitalize public schools in New York City’s East Harlem district cited the building of trust as a key component in the success of the schools she created. James Comer, of the Comer’s School Development Project, also recognizes the importance of a community of trust and the active involvement of parents (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

A few studies have linked parents’ level of trust directly to their level of PI. Lake & Billingsley (2000) found that parents with higher levels of trust in the parent-teacher relationship held more positive attitudes with regard to the value of their involvement in schools, are more engaged in their children’s learning, and are less likely to attach undue significance to occasional negative events, demonstrating greater tolerance and a willingness to forgive. Mapp (2002) studied why economically disadvantaged parents got involved with their children’s education. She found that parents’ desires to be involved in their children’s education was linked to the level of effort schools engaged in to build trusting relationships with parents. Feelings of mistrust toward schools by African-American parents impact the family-school relationship and may influence the nature of PI. Lareau (1987) found that African-American parents monitored the school and teachers more so than actively engage with teachers. Rather than working with teachers, minority parents often find that they must defend their children against their teachers and advocate with great difficulty for the basic academic needs for their children (Hill, 2010).

Research in the fields of both PI and trust support the importance of both constructs to overall positive outcomes of students. For low-SES and African-American families, the research seems even more critical and much more complex. The social relationship between the parent and teacher contributes to the parents’ perceptions of the school and their desire to
become involved. The social barriers of race and SES present challenges to educators in developing and fostering relationships with low-SES African-American parents, challenges that may not exist in their relationship with middle-class White families. To that end, this research was designed to amplify the voice of the low-SES African-American mother in hopes that her story will shed light on how she experiences trust in the parent-teacher relationship and how it influences her decision to become involved in her children’s school experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a qualitative methodology was used to understand the lived experiences of low-SES African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their decisions to become involved in their children’s educational experiences. The overarching goal of this study was to amplify the voice of the study participants and to identify ways in which parent-teacher relationships can be improved in order to enhance parental school involvement and subsequently, academic outcomes for African-American students.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens through which to examine how race, class, and gender intersect in the lived experiences of low-SES African-American mothers. CRT allows for the examination of the social and environmental contexts important to understanding the trust-relationship between the study participants and their children’s teachers. Because the voice and the experiential knowledge of the study participants is crucial to our understanding, CRT positions itself as a useful, if not necessary, tool to
examine this issue.

Grounded in the work of critical legal studies (CLS), CRT emerged in the 1970s following the Civil Rights Movement and an overall failure of CLS to address the effects of race and racism in the U.S. legal system (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). It was described as both an outgrowth and a separate entity from the earlier CLS. Lead by Derrick Bell, a law professor and activist, CRT began with the notion that racism is so enmeshed in American society that it has become a natural part of the culture. Because of this enmeshment, CRT argues that the long, slow, upward pull of change as seen in the civil rights movement is no longer effective. Rather, racism requires sweeping changes if real gains are to be made (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These gains, according to Bell (1980) are highly unlikely unless they are in the best interest of Whites. According to Bell (2004):

The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm. (p.69)

Bell further asserts that even if the interests of Whites converge with the interests of African-Americans to form an effective remedy for racial problems, at the point in which that remedy threatens “the superior societal status of whites” (2004, p. 69), it will be rescinded.

The influence of CRT in education began in 1995 with the seminal work of Ladson-Billings and Tate who became frustrated with the under-theorized utilization of race in educational scholarship (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). In education, CRT is described as a multi-epistemological form of scholarship focused on the complex and
multiple ways in which race is connected to create predictable outcomes in the education of students of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yossa, 2001). Solorzano (1997) identifies five characteristics that describe CRT in education:

1. CRT in education centers its analysis on race and racism with attention to how race intersects with other forms of oppression (gender, class, etc.);
2. CRT in education challenges customary notions such as that of meritocracy, objectivity, color-blindness and equal opportunity;
3. CRT in education is committed to social justice;
4. CRT in education recognizes the critical role of the experiential knowledge of people of color in theorizing about race (counter-storytelling);
5. CRT in education utilizes inter-disciplinary methods to provide historical contexts in its analysis of race and racism.

Solorzano (1997) posits that the overall goal of CRT in education is to:

develop a pedagogy, curriculum and research agenda that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as a part of the larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination in education. (p. 7)

The application of CRT is particularly relevant to my research. Three elements resonate in particular: race and its intersection with other forms of oppression, focus on experiential knowledge and voice of low-SES African-American mothers, and the action-orientation of the research.

CRT asserts that racism is pervasive and that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains. This structure supports the privileging of Whites
and the lessening of the value of others in all arenas, including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The current model of education and PI provides an example of how both race and class provides a privileging of some. PI in education has been socially constructed to privilege White middle-class norms and expectations (Lareau, 1989). Certain “legitimate acts” such as helping with homework, attending open houses, and chaperoning field trips have been set as the norm. Because teachers place a higher premium on school-based involvement, low-SES African-American parents who are less likely to come to the school are assumed to not care about their children’s schooling. These assumptions, rooted in deficit thinking, perpetuate the myth of the uninvolved minority parent (Auerbach, 2007) and further disempowered the African-American family.

Issues of power are also seen between middle- and working-class parents. Middle-class parents exert considerably more influence over schools and decisions about their children’s schooling, whereas poor and working-class parents have less power and more ambivalent relations with school staff. These class-based constraints in PI result in opportunities for more “customized” education for higher-SES children versus more generic ones for low-SES children (Lareau, 1989). A final example of how both race and class create power dynamics in schools is seen in Cooper’s (2007) qualitative examination of African-American mothers and their involvement practices addressed differences in power and the relational dynamics between White and African-American mothers:

Compared with African-American mothers, however, White middle-class mothers have increased power, privilege and resources, such as influential social networks and increased access to educational leaders that facilitate their involvement efforts
(Fields-Smith, 2005; Holme 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Even low-income White mothers who have economic struggles do not to contend with racism. Moreover, White mothers as a whole do not have to confront educators’ race-based notions of them being uncaring, angry or dysfunctional. As Lareau and Horvat (1999) explain, ‘Whiteness represents a largely hidden cultural resource that facilitates white parents’ compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parental involvement in school,’ (p. 4) and it also facilitates educators’ positive reaction towards them. (p. 495)

Cooper’s comments above speak to the added burden experienced by low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s schools. Being non-white and non-middle class form an intersection of disadvantage for parents who may desire to be involved, but do not know how. Or, whose involvement in the school building may be too emotionally painful to handle. This research seeks to examine the multiple ways that the study participants’ identities (e.g., low-income, African-American, single mother) intersect and create additional burdens for them as they attempt to engage teachers and schools. Allowing the multiply-burdened to share their stories (referred to as the counter-story in CRT language) is a way to begin building bridges between parents and schools who might otherwise remain on opposites sides of the river.

Counter-storytelling is a methodological tool with a history in communities of color that use oral interpretations to convey stories and struggles often not validated by the dominant culture. It draws explicitly on experiential knowledge so that the voice of the marginalized can be in focus (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). Matsuda (1995) argues that those
who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) assert that the “use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups” (p. 27). It is the stories that provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

While on an upward trend, the PI and trust literature has historically been lacking in its representation of the voice of low-SES, African-American mothers. With some exceptions (e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Williams & Barber, 2007, etc.), they are often talked about, but less often talked to. Missing from the scholarly literature is first-hand, detailed accounts from low-SES, African-American mothers about how they view their relationships with teachers and schools, and how those relationships have influenced their efforts at PI. The value in this experiential knowledge may offer opportunities for new conversations between parents and teachers.

Lastly, Matsuda (1995) posit that CRT is a reflective and active process aimed at ending oppression. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) emphasize that CRT is not just a theoretical stance, but also a commitment to change. “In addition to uncovering the myriad ways in which race continues to marginalize and oppress people of color, identifying strategies to combat these oppressive forces and acting upon those strategies is an important next step within CRT” (p. 23). What attracts me most to the theoretical framework of CRT is its action-orientation. The opportunity to translate the voices of the study participants into a call for action for other marginalized people is extremely appealing. Researchers utilizing CRT as a framework are not just passive producers of knowledge; they must become active in the
struggle for social justice within education (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in their children’s education?

2. How do differences in race and SES influence low-SES African-American mothers’ relationships with teachers, specifically their levels of trust?

3. How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s educational experiences and what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?

4. What strategies do low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of parental involvement?

**Definition of Terms**

*Cultural Capital* – forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that are valued by a society. Closely linked to social capital, the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of essentially institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Intersectionality* – term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and used to describe the various ways in which race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation combine and are played out in various settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

*Parental Involvement* – the dedication of resources by the parent to the child in a given domain including but not limited to financial, physical, emotional, and temporal resources (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).
Role Construction – beliefs about what one should do in a given role and the behaviors characteristically associated with performance of the role (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, 2007).

Self-Efficacy – a person’s belief that he or she can act in ways that produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977).

Trust – the confidence that another person (the teacher/school) will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for students (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of low-SES African-American parents as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their decisions to become involved in their children’s school experiences. A wealth of research exists on the benefits of parental involvement for the academic outcomes of young children and the importance of trust in the parent-teacher-school relationship. However, much less research exists on how low-SES African-American mothers’ experience the parent-teacher relationship and how that relationship contributes to their involvement in their children’s educational experiences. It is anticipated that the knowledge gained from this inquiry will afford new insights to teachers, teacher education programs, school administrators, and parenting and family support programs of the importance of building trusting relationships between parents and schools, particularly low-SES African-American parents. In the future, I hope that this study will serve as a catalyst for new, holistic models of PI that recognizes the importance of building respectful, reciprocal relationships with all parents, and that views the parents’ decision to
become involved in their children’s education as a complex decision involving many varied components and sometimes competing demands.

Subjectivity Statement

As in many qualitative research studies, my professional and personal background largely impacted my understanding and the decisions I made with regard to this research. Most importantly, my decision to utilize the women of RHM for this study was predicated on my prior experiences with them and their children. As a doctoral student at North Carolina State University, I served as a teacher assistant for a class whose students interned at RHM. Part of my role as the assistant was to supervise students in this field site experience. Having spent 14 weeks in the Children’s Program at RHM during the Fall 2010 semester gave me a sincere appreciation for the commitment of the participants towards improving their lives. After that experience, I continued to volunteer in the adult program. Week after week, I heard about individual experiences of personal struggles, triumphs, and their individual goals for their children and families. It became apparent to me that their stories of substance abuse and addiction, felony arrests and incarceration, and financial hardship were not the whole of their experiences. Rather, these individuals spoke of redemption, gratefulness, and a desire to learn new skills for their new lives. I would regularly reflect upon how misinformed much of the research was about this population and how I could assist in changing the landscape of the deficit-based research that was so prevalent. That was the beginning of my interest in utilizing the courageous women at RHM for my research. In May 2012, I was asked to join the staff at RHM as the coordinator of one of their programs. In this role, I was able to further connect with participants as I helped them to reach their individual goals.
My past experience with my study participants has allowed me to recognize the similarities we share and the differences that exist. On a personal level, we share both a racial and maternal background. I am an African-American mother of two biological children (12 year-old son; 7 year-old daughter) and two stepchildren (19 year-old stepdaughter; 16 year-old stepson). I place a high value on my children’s education and their overall learning experiences both in and out of school. Perhaps like the study participants, I do not always know the best way to involve myself in the process of academically assisting my children, and trust of my children’s teachers and schools is often a choice I have to make prior to even getting to know any of them. Unlike the study participants, my middle-class background affords me with a certain cultural capital valued by the school system and that makes developing a trusting relationship with the middle-class teachers easier to obtain. Although, I have to admit I am somewhat hyper-vigilant to the interactions between children and teachers, particular African-American children and White teachers.

Professionally, I am first and foremost an educator. I have spent most of my career teaching young children in preschool settings, teaching pre-service teachers at the university-level, and more recently, teaching and facilitating parent education groups. I have been an advocate for parents and families for most of my professional career. In my earliest teaching experiences, even prior to my own experience of motherhood, I found myself wanting to support the parents of the children I taught. I would create newsletters including educational activities that parents could engage in with their children at home. In my later experiences with pre-service teachers, I found myself passionately dispelling the myths of the uninvolved African-American parent and the dysfunctional African-American family. My background in
education is very different from that of the study participants. What we have in common is a belief that parents can and do play a critical role in the overall development of their children, including their education.

In my heart, I am a right-fighter. I tend to be sensitive to the plight of those individuals who are marginalized in society, as in many ways I too have been. I would like to believe in an ‘ideal world’ where resources are shared equally, people are treated fairly, and a high quality education is available to all. My experiences in life and in the classroom have taught me that that world does not exist. At present, I teach the same class that introduced me to RHM a few years prior. In this setting, I have encountered White, middle-class teacher education students who are stuck in the belief that low-SES students and those from other cultural backgrounds should ‘pick themselves up by their bootstraps’ and ‘not make excuses for their own failure’. These students are not willing to see or consider the context of growing up poor and/or non-White in the United States. They regularly dismiss relevant research that points to the inequities in education and shut down when we discuss the privilege that our shared middle-class background affords. The few African-American students in the class seem afraid to speak up, share their experiences, or challenge the hurtful statements of their classmates. Some of them, based on their written reflections, fail to see race as a factor in their relationships.

In many ways, I can relate to these African-American students. I too have been educated in primarily White institutions and have often felt the need to silence myself when the classroom conversations turned to issues of race. I remember feeling conflicted. On the one hand, it felt like a personal attack when teachers and college professors would discuss
issues related to education and African-American children from a deficit-perspective. On the other hand, most of the conversations revolved around low-SES African-American families. Since I did not identify as low-SES I was able to disassociate myself from this group. I now recognize this as a survival skill. In an effort to preserve my self-esteem in a setting that was designed to promote the White middle-class agenda of the schools, I had to distance myself from the group that research consistently pointed to as less capable of succeeding, and adapt a more colorblind mentality. This was coupled with the fact that my parents, both of the civil-rights generation, appeared to adopt a more integrationist perspective. We lived in predominately White neighborhoods and attended predominately White schools. My brother and I were discouraged from using race as an excuse for our difficulties inside and outside of school. Even when the evidence pointed to race as a factor, we were taught to work harder to overcome. This, for me, translated into self-silencing in the classroom and allowed me to downplay the role of race in my life, much like the African-American students in my class. It was only when my doctoral advisor pushed me to examine CRT as a possible theoretical lens through which to examine my participants’ experiences (and ultimately my own experiences) was I given the motivation to delve deeper into my own experiences with race and the language with which to speak about it.

As a novice critical race theorist, my journey has only just begun. I have moved away from the self-protective cover of a colorblind mentality to view the world in a more realistic way. I see race and racism in many areas of life that I had previously overlooked. This causes a significant amount of anger and frustration in my life, but I see it as necessary for my continued growth as an educator and researcher. With this research, I hope to not only
amplify the voice of the marginalized and silenced, but also to provide one more source of information from which teacher educators can utilize to support change and reconceptualization in the minds of future teachers.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Parent Involvement: Operationalization & Conceptualization

A vast body of literature exists which attempts to operationalize and conceptualize the construct and process of PI in children’s education. What was once thought to be a unidirectional construct is now widely recognized as one that is multidimensional and multifaceted encompassing a variety of different types of involvement (Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997) worthy of further exploration. Research has examined the complex decision-making process parents engage in as they make their involvement decisions (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). It has also explored the complicated dynamics of power and social capital (Lareau, 1987, Lareau & Horvat, 1999) between the parent and the teacher. Studies have also uncovered compelling evidence that PI yields positive outcomes for children (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Marcon, 1999; Powell et al., 2010; Stylianides & Stylianides, 2011). Moreover, research has uncovered that PI is a complex social phenomenon that is complicated by a multitude of sociological variables such as social class, race, parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and the relationship parents form with their children’s teachers. What follows is an attempt to define and clarify this dynamic construct.

The definition of PI has changed over the years from an exclusive focus on specific activities and roles played by parents to a more inclusive emphasis on a wide range of home- and school-based parental activities that support children’s learning (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). The current emphasis on PI is situated in the belief that the home, the school, and the
community all play a critical role in children’s intellectual and social development. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) provide a widely used definition and conceptualization of the construct. They define PI as the “dedication of resources by the parent to the child in a given domain” (p. 238). More specifically, in the context of schooling, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) describe three types of involvement: (a) cognitive-intellectual, (b) personal, and (c) behavioral. The cognitive-intellectual aspect of PI includes exposing the child to intellectual stimulation, such as museums, cultural events, books, and the like. Exposure to cognitively stimulating materials would presumably bring the home, community, and the school closer together and help the child practice skills that may be useful in schools. The personal aspect involves maintaining knowledge of the child’s academic life and school activities. It also includes expressing interest and enjoyment in the interactions with the child about their school learning and experiences. The behavioral aspect of PI originally included participation in school-related activities such as attending conferences, assisting with homework, and chaperoning on field trips. In 1997, Grolnick et al. redefined the behavioral category to include both school- and home-based activities. In the 1997 study, the three dimensions of this typology were found to contribute independently to the PI construct and were associated with children’s motivational resources in sixth through eighth grade students’ school performance.

Another widely used typology of PI comes from Epstein (1995). Using an ecological framework, she describes a six-level model of various types of involvement including: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community. In this model, Epstein focuses on the shared
responsibility of the parent and the school, especially the critical role of teacher practices and
attitudes that encourage and motivate parents’ active and continued engagement. Table 1
(Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Involvement For Comprehensive Programs of
Partnerships and Sample Practices) describes each level of involvement and provides sample
practices in which teachers might engage to ensure greater amounts of parental involvement.
Because there are many possible activities for each type of involvement, both parents and
schools must choose which practices are likely to produce specific goals and how to
implement the selected activities effectively (Sheldon & Epstein, 2010).

Epstein’s typology is thought to be important for school policy and practice.
Consistent with the emphasis on schools’ responsibilities for inviting and supporting
families’ engagement in all types of involvement, Epstein and her colleagues have also
focused strongly on building school systems’ capacities for offering diverse and effective
approaches to establishing productive family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2005; Epstein &
Salinas, 2001; Sheldon & Epstein, 2010).
Table 1

*Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Involvement For Comprehensive Programs of Partnerships and Sample Practices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Involvement</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample practices</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>Help all families establish home environments to support children as students</td>
<td>Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Workshops, videotapes, phone messages on parenting for each age and grade level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children’s progress</td>
<td>Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Language translators assist families as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Recruit and organize parent help and support</td>
<td>School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, resources for families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning at Home</td>
<td>Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.</td>
<td>Information for families on knowledge and skills required for students in all subjects at each grade</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives</td>
<td>Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with Community</td>
<td>Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development</td>
<td>Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another line of thought in the conceptualization of PI asks the question, “How do parents make the decision to become involved in their children’s schooling?” Grolnick et al. (1997) proposes an ecological, hierarchical model specifying three levels of factors: (a) individual, (b) contextual, and (c) institutional. At the individual level, parents’ decisions may be influenced by qualities of the parent-child dyad in three ways. First, parents differ in how they define the parental role. To the extent that they feel the parent has a place in the teaching-learning process, they may be more likely to become involved. Second, the parents’ sense of efficacy is likely to impact their behavior. Parents who believe they can make a difference are more likely to be involved. Lastly, Grolnick et al. (1997) explain that parents use their children’s behavior as regulators of their own behavior. Research has demonstrated that parents who saw their children as more difficult were less involved with them (Grolnick, Weiss, McKenzie, & Wrightman, 1996).

At the contextual level of the model, the focus is on the parent as a member of the family unit. The researchers suggest that the social context of the parent is a key contributor to the way resources are allotted to the child. If parents perceive themselves to have inadequate resources (time, money, social supports, and high levels of stress) their involvement with their children’s school will most likely be disrupted. Having such support and lower levels of stress may provide the parent with the time to be involved.

At the institutional level, the connection between home and school are thought to be important. Teachers are the parents’ primary contacts within the school. When teachers make PI a regular part of their teaching practices by including parents in classroom decisions, soliciting parental support or skills, and the like, parents are more involved and feel more
positive about their abilities to help (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Research conducted on this model underscored the complexity of understanding factors associated with parents’ involvement decisions. For example, Grolnick and colleagues (1997) found that mothers who headed single-family homes were less involved on all three dimensions than those in two-parent families. The researchers hypothesize that involvement at school may be most difficult for mothers from single-parent families who often experience a lack of financial and social supports. Teachers and schools may find it useful to consider targeting other types of involvement that do not require daytime availability.

Within the framework of a larger model, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) also attempted to answer the question, “Why do parents become involved in their children’s education?” Their work suggests that specific variables create patterns of influence at critical points in the parents’ decision-making process. In their original work, the model included five levels of influence including: (a) parent’s basic involvement decisions, (b) parent’s choice of involvement forms, (c) mechanisms through which PI influences child outcomes, (d) tempering/mediating variables, and (e) child/student outcomes. Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) revised the original model and more fully developed the first level focusing on psychological and contextual contributors to PI. The figure below represents Level 1 of the revised model:
Figure 1

Level 1 - Why Parent’s Become Involved in their Children’s Education (Walker et al., 2005)
The first level of the model describes three categories of motivators: (a) parents’ motivational beliefs, (b) parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, and (c) parents’ perceived life context. The ways in which parents construct their roles as parents and their sense of self-efficacy make up their motivational beliefs. Role construction for PI is influenced by parents’ beliefs about child rearing, child development, and appropriate home support roles in children’s education. In general, parents who hold an active role construction are more involved in their children’s education than parents who hold less active roles (Green et al., 2007). Self-efficacy, defined as a person’s belief that he or she can act in ways that will produce desired outcomes, is a significant factor in shaping the goals an individual chooses to pursue and his or her level of persistence in working toward that goal (Bandura, 1994). Positive personal beliefs about efficacy for helping one’s children succeed in school are associated with increased PI among elementary, middle, and high school students (Grolnick et al., 1997).

The second category describes parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others. General school invitations are observable in the welcoming and responsive atmosphere of the school, practices that ensure parents are well informed about student progress, and practices that convey respect for and responsiveness to parental questions and suggestions (Green et al., 2007). Teacher invitations appear to also be an important motivator of parents in part because they underscore the teacher’s valuing of the parents’ contributions to students’ educational success (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Lastly, specific child invitations can prove to be a powerful motivator of PI. Parents generally want their children to succeed and are motivated to respond to their child’s needs (Walker et al., 2005). As is
true of all types of invitation for involvement, invitations from the child may be increased by school actions to enhance family engagement in children’s schooling (Green et al., 2007).

The last category of motivators is parents’ perceptions of life context variables. The model suggests that parents’ understanding of their own skills and knowledge influences their thinking about the kinds of involvement activities they may reasonably take on. When parents believe that students’ or teachers’ requests for involvement fits their skills, they are generally pleased to help and believe that their responses are likely to contribute to their children’s learning (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010). The model also suggests that parents’ perception of the time and energy they have available for involvement influences their decision to become involved on a practical level. For example, when parents are constrained by non-negotiable work hours or low levels of support for meeting multiple family obligations, school involvement is likely to suffer (Green et al., 2007).

As simple as it may first appear, a parent’s choice to involve themselves in their children’s educational experiences is far less than simplistic. There are multiple variables that influence the decision making process. Stressful living situations and events may take time from parents, usurp energy and attention, and make parents less psychologically available or aware of involvement activities (Grolnick et al., 1997). In addition, different cultural patterns often reflect different preferences in the types of PI that parents choose to perform (Pena, 2000). The following section reviews the relevant literature on the sociological variables that influence PI. Specifically, social class, race, parental self-efficacy and role construction, and specific characteristics of the parent and the child will be discussed. While they will be
reviewed individually, it is important to note that most of the variables are interrelated and may help to explain each other.

**Variables That Influence Parental Involvement**

**Social Class.** Parenting behaviors, like all other behaviors, occur within a context. The social context of parenting is a key contributor to the way resources are allotted to the child and appears to be a highly relevant determinant of parenting behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Grolnick et al., 1997). Social class is thought to create distinctive parenting styles that influence how parents define their role in their children’s lives (Lareau, 2002). For example, Lareau (2002) contends that middle class parents, both African-American and White, conform to a cultural logic of childrearing she calls ‘concerted cultivation’. Middle-class parents enroll their children in more organized activities that often dominate family life. This ‘cultivation’ approach results in children with a wider range of experiences, a greater sense of individualism within the family, and an emphasis on children’s performance. On the contrary, working-class and poor parents put more emphasis on natural growth. Their belief is that as long as children are provided with love, food, and safety, they will grow and thrive. These children tend to have fewer organized activities, have more free time, and more meaningful relationships with extended family members. Social class differences are also seen in the educational aspirations parents have for their children. Studies have found that while both working- and middle-class parents value education for their children, the expectations are different. Working-class parents, many of whom do not have high school diplomas themselves, aspire that their children complete high school, while middle-class
parents hoped their children would earn college and advanced degrees (Grolnick et al., 1997; Lareau 1987).

Social class variations have also been found to affect parental school involvement. Fantuzzo and colleagues (2000) sampled the primary caregivers of 641 urban preschool, kindergarten, and first grade students. They found that while both middle-class and working-class parents thought PI was important, the amount of contact varied significantly. Levels of attendance in parent-teacher conferences, attendance at open-house events, and school-based volunteering was higher with middle-class parents than in working-class parents. Lareau’s (1987) influential study of middle-class and working-class White parents found similar results. She also found that the perceptions of responsibility were different in middle-class and working-class parents. Middle-class parents tended to believe that the education of their children was a responsibility shared between the home and the school. Many felt confident that they could teach their children equally as well as the teacher could. Working-class parents believed that education was the responsibility of the teacher. These parents were also less likely to read to their children at home, and felt less able to assist with homework. Findings like these may help to explain differences in parent-teacher interactions. Lareau’s study found that middle-class White parents were more likely to interact with the teacher than their working-class and poor counterparts. The interactions also tended to be related to the child’s academic progress. Middle-class parents were also found to be more likely to challenge the authority and policies of the teacher and school. Working-class parents were more likely to interact with teachers about non-academic issues such as lunchboxes, bus schedules, and playground activities and were more likely to accept the teacher’s authority.
Another stark area of difference in middle- and working-class families is in the existence and the make-up of their social networks. Middle-class families tend to have more social networks. These networks are often comprised of other parents at the school and professionals in the community. Working-class families have fewer social networks, and rely more on kinship relationships for support (Horvat et al., 2003). One benefit of social networks in school communities is that they provide a way to access resources or information that may or may not be shared by school officials (e.g., passing rates of teachers, teacher evaluation scores). Social networks provide parents with a source of capital that may be activated when needed. Having fewer networks means fewer resources. In their qualitative study of 18 African-American parents, Diamond & Gomez (2004) found that working-class African-American parents owned different resources with which to navigate educational environments. The middle-class parents in the study possessed resources that were more highly valued by the educational system (e.g., human, financial, social, and cultural). The working-class parents in the sample negotiated more challenging environments with fewer of the valued resources.

Even though the children of working-class parents may not be able to directly benefit from the broad array of resources available to children of middle-class parents, they may see benefits indirectly. Research conducted by Cucchiara & Horvat (2009) indicated that the presence of a significant number of middle-class families in a school has the potential to bring valuable resources from which all children can benefit. At the same time, their research also showed that middle-class parents’ efforts can also contribute to inequality based on the parents’ motivation and perspective. They found that in schools where the middle-class
families were more individualistic, concerning themselves with what benefits their children and other middle-class children, lower-income students and families continued to be marginalized and PI was ‘fragile’. In schools where the middle-class families held a more collective perspective and were committed to the well-being of all children, PI persisted over several decades and all children benefited.

**Race.** As previously mentioned, the variables discussed within this work are interrelated. Race, which will be discussed next, has strong links to social class. Although some research has found that social class is a better indicator of PI (Ginsburg-Block et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2003), others have shown that race, regardless of social class, influences PI activities. Lareau and Horvat (1999) argued that race contributes independently and negatively on African-American parents’ levels of involvement. African-American parents, with a history of racial discrimination, approach schools with criticism and challenge rather than support and deference, which is preferred in the culture of the school. This leads to negative relationships between parent and teacher and the likelihood that efforts to be involved will be rejected. Much like their White, middle-class counterparts, middle-class African-Americans were also more likely than working-class or poor parents to ‘customize’ their children’s school experiences by intervening in ways that teachers do not perceive as confrontational.

Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) argued that race and ethnicity mediated the social class effect. They found that African-American and Hispanic parents contacted schools and attended parent-teacher organization meetings more frequently than did White parents of the same social-class. They also found that Asian-American parents were more likely than other
groups to be involved at home. Immigrant status also seems to influence the nature and levels of PI in schools. Huntsinger & Jose (2009) found that Chinese-American parents were less involved than European-American parents in activities at school, and more involved in explicitly teaching their children at home, even against the teacher’s request. Because White, higher-income parents are more likely to participate in activities held in the school, ethnic minority parents, who are often less visible in the school, are perceived as not valuing or being interested in education. Consequently, ethnic minority parents’ involvement is often underestimated by teachers who focus only on school-based participation (Patel & Stevens, 2010).

Diamond & Gomez (2004) found that while White middle-class parents intervened and challenged the school policies more often than their working-class White counterparts, African-American working-class parents were more likely than working-class White parents to intervene and were more often thought to be confrontational in their approach, as perceived by teachers. Grolnick and colleagues (1997) studied 209 mothers of 3rd-5th grade students and concurred that family social class was a strong predictor of two types of involvement: school-based and cognitive involvement (i.e., exposing children to intellectually stimulating activities). However, they found no differences between middle and working-class parents in personal involvement in the child’s life (i.e., knowing about and keeping abreast of what is going on). The researchers suggest that the more effective types of involvement may occur equally regardless of social class.

**Parental Role Construction & Self-Efficacy.** The vast majority of research seeking to determine the sociological influences on PI focuses on demographic variables such as
race/ethnicity and social class. Fewer consider attitudinal variables such as parental role
construction and parental self-efficacy (Grodnick et al., 1997). Parents’ role construction for
involvement in their children’s schooling is grounded in three ideas: (a) their own personal
ideas and expectations they have of themselves as parents, (b) their perceptions of what
others important to them believe their role should be, and (c) their perceptions of what other
groups who are important to them believe their role should be. Parental self-efficacy, the
perceived ability to positively influence the behavior and development of one’s own child
(Coleman & Karraker, 2000), is grounded in Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. The
theory suggests that parents guide their choices and actions regarding involvement by
considering and evaluating the outcomes they believe will result from their involvement
behavior. These beliefs are not focused specifically on skills the parents possess, but on their
beliefs about whether engaging these skills will make a difference in students’ school
outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). Like role construction, self-efficacy is socially
constructed and shaped primarily by mastery experiences (i.e., previous successful
involvement activities), vicarious mastery experiences (i.e., observing similar others succeed
in similar tasks), verbal persuasion from relevant others (e.g., family members, other parents,
teachers), and affective arousal regarding the importance of children’s school success
(Bandura, 1977).

Research conducted on the influence of self-efficacy and role construction on PI
suggests that parents who perceive themselves as important agents in the education of their
children were more likely to be involved in educational activities as a whole. Parents who
endorsed the belief that the education of their children was solely a job of the teacher and the
school tended to be less involved. The same research also found that parents with a greater sense of self-efficacy regarding their children’s education were more involved in home-based educational activities. It was speculated that this may be because home-based involvement activities are driven almost exclusively by parents. This may require more initiative on the part of the parent to engage in independent educational activities at home, as compared to attending programs at the school (Waanders, Mendez & Downer, 2007). Downer and Mendez (2005) in their examination of African-American father’s involvement with preschool children found a significant relationship between father’s self-efficacy regarding education and frequency of home-based educational activities with their children enrolled in Head Start. Locus of control appears important in this line of research. Downer and Mendez also found evidence that parents with an internal locus of control were more involved in educational activities at home and in school than those with an external locus of control. Georgiou & Tourva (2007) found similar results. They determined that parents who attributed their child’s achievement to a factor that was under their control tended to believe that involvement was worthwhile. On the contrary, those who attributed it to an external and uncontrollable factor (e.g., child’s ability, teacher) tended not to have this belief. In sum, Georgiou & Tourva state, “parents who think that they can make a difference are motivated to get involved, while those who think that other factors and not them have the determining power prefer to keep their distance” (p. 480).

**Parent & Child Characteristics.** Parent’s educational level as it relates to PI has been studied with mixed results. Some researchers find that higher levels of school-based involvement have been found among parents with higher levels of education (Castro, Bryant,
Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Georgiou & Tourva, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). However, Fantuzzo and colleagues (2000) found that higher levels of education were not related to home-based involvement and Waanders et al. (2007) found no significant differences in levels of school involvement among parents with higher and lower educational levels. Waanders did find that mothers with less than a high school education reported significantly lower levels of conferencing with school personnel.

Parent’s marital status has also been studied. Fantuzzo and colleagues (2000) found that two-parent families were more involved in both home-school conferencing and school-based involvement than single, widowed, divorced or separated parents. These findings support the belief that the added resources and stability provided in two-parent households enhance parents’ capacity to be involved. This research and others (e.g., Grolnick et al, 1997; McWayne, Campos, & Owisanik, 2008) suggest that involvement at school may be most difficult for parents who head households independently. Schools should consider targeting other types of involvement that do not require day-time availability.

Lastly, while a wealth of research exists examining the relationship between child characteristics and parenting behavior, fewer studies examine the relationship as it specifically relates to parent school involvement. In general, the literature points to specific child temperament characteristics as a major influence of parenting behavior (Clark, Kochanska, & Ready, 2000; McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002). Researchers give the most attention to children thought to have difficult temperaments (e.g., irregular biological functions, low adaptability, high-intensity affect, and negative mood). McBride et al. (2002), in their study of 100 two-parent families of preschool-age children found a stronger
association between temperament and general PI, both home- and school-based, for fathers than mothers. They found that less sociable girls had less involved fathers. No differences in boys’ sociability were linked to father involvement. The researchers hypothesize that for fathers, parenting a son may be a more integral part of their identity than parenting daughters, such that fathers feel that they have more discretion in the degree to which they become involved with their daughters. While fewer associations were found for mothers, they did find that less active girls received less maternal involvement. The researchers suggest that this might be because more active children require more supervision than less active children.

As it related specifically to PI in schools or with educational experiences, the age of the child and the child’s gender have been examined. Patel & Stevens (2010) found that parents of sixth graders were more involved than parents of eighth graders and Fantuzzzo et al. (2004) identified the parents of preschool-age children were more involved than children in the first grade. This may be indicative of parents’ belief that younger children require more oversight. As the research above suggested, fathers of boys have been found to be more significantly involved in home- and school-based involvement than fathers of girls (Patel & Stevens, 2010). This finding is not surprising when considering how fathers construct their role in the family and their strong identification with their male children.

The role of sociological variables greatly informs our understanding of parent’s school involvement decisions. Schools interested in capitalizing on the wealth of resources of all families, upper-, middle-, working-class, and poor, would be wise to examine their current involvement strategies and identify ways in which current practices and policies systematically exclude some parents. If we are to believe the research that indicates that all
parents want their children to be successful and that all parents believe that their involvement in school activities is important, then we must also believe that adjusting the current practices of schools so that they are more inclusive is a necessary next step.

**Parenting Within the School & Community**

Until this point, this review has primarily focused on PI in a dyadic manner, a relationship between parent and teacher. While the examination of this relationship is important, it takes place within the larger context of the community. In fact, many scholars believe that successful school partnerships must include three important elements: the family, the school, and the community (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Comer & Emmons, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette & Hambey, 1992; Epstein 1986, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et. al., 2010;). What follows is a description of one of the most popular models of school-family-community partnership cited in literature.

In Epstein’s (1986) theoretical framework, Overlapping Spheres of Influence, the family, home, and community are represented by three spheres. The model recognizes that there are some activities that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and others they conduct together in order to influence students’ learning. At the center of the model is the student who is an active participant in the learning process. “School, family, and community partnerships cannot simply produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes” (Epstein & Sanders, 2000, p. 287). The model includes both external and internal structures. The external structures of the model can be pulled together or apart by forces (e.g., the background and practices of families /schools/ communities, developmental
characteristics of the student, school policies) that create conditions, spaces, opportunities, and incentives for more or fewer shared activities. The internal structures of the model are made up of the specific institutional and individual lines of communications, and they locate where and how social interactions of participants occur within and across the boundaries of school, home, and community (Sheldon & Epstein, 2010).

This framework, representing the sharing of responsibilities and the overlapping influence, means that parents do not bear the entire burden of figuring out how to become and remain involved in their children’s schooling. Rather, the burden is shared between the school, family, and the community. The assumption is that if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of the student, they are more likely to do their best, learn other skills and talents, and to remain in school (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). But the sharing of responsibilities requires a level of trust and collaboration that is not always felt by all parents. Low-SES and African-American parents experiences more difficulties in establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with teachers (Beard & Brown, 2008; Rotter, 1967; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Williams & Barber, 2007). At this point in the review, we examine the construct of trust; specifically, the importance of trust, what it means to trust, how it is developed, the types of trust relevant to this work, and the factors that influence the formation of trust.

**Trust**

One of the most salient factors in the effectiveness of our present complex social organization is the willingness of one or more individuals in a social unit to trust
others. The efficiency, adjustment, and even survival of any social group depends upon the presence or absence of such trust. (Rotter, 1967, p. 651)

When Julian Rotter wrote those words, he was not specifically speaking of trust in a school setting; however, his words certainly apply within such a context. Schools are complex social organizations that require a great deal of trust among their members if they are to run efficiently. Students, teachers, principals, parents, and communities are all interdependent members of the school organization who must trust each other to perform specific tasks for the greater good of all (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). To the extent that trust is formed and maintained, teachers feel more efficacious and have a higher morale, school culture becomes one of cooperation and caring, parents feel greater levels of collaboration with teachers, and students feel safer and can devote more energy to learning (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). What follows is a review of the trust literature with a focus on those principles and ideas that are relevant to trust within school settings. This literature and our general understanding of the construct are greatly informed by research in organizational management and psychology.

**The Meaning of Trust.** Trust has been described as a complex social process that is necessary for effective cooperation and communication, and is the foundation for cohesive and productive relationships within organizations (Baier, 1986). Most of us only notice trust once it has been damaged or destroyed. In a highly quoted analogy, Baier says, “We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted” (p. 234). From an organizational perspective, trust can be
defined as a collective judgment that another group will not act opportunistically, is honest in negotiations, and makes a good faith effort to behave in accordance with commitments (Bradach & Eccles 1989). From a psychological perspective, trust can be defined as an “expectancy that is held by an individual or group that the word, promise, or statement of another individual or group can be relied upon” (Rotter, 1967, p. 651). From an educational perspective, trust can be defined as confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for children (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) offer yet another definition within the educational literature that speaks to the multifaceted nature of trust. They define trust as one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the later party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). The facets of trust as described by Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, have been empirically studied and have been found to covary together to form a coherent construct of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). What follows is a brief description of each.

**Vulnerability.** Vulnerability speaks to the interdependent nature of trust. Without a dependence on another, there is no need to trust. Trust comes with an assumption of risk. There is a possibility that the other will betray or harm. Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2000).
**Confidence.** Trust resides in the degree of confidence one holds in the face of risk rather than in the choice or action that increases one’s risk (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). This means that trust is not always absolute.

**Benevolence.** The confidence that one’s well-being or something one cares about will be protected and not harmed by the trusted person. Trust is the assurance that the other will not exploit one’s vulnerability or take excessive advantage of one even when the opportunity is available (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

**Reliability.** While at its most basic level, trust is about predictability, consistency over time, it goes beyond that. People can be predictably late, malicious, or self-serving. When this happens, our needs may be getting met, but our sense of trust in the other person is weakened (Beard & Brown, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

**Competence.** In school relationships, good intentions are often not enough. Parents, students, administrators, and other teachers need to feel confident that the teacher has the ability to perform the task that is expected (Goddard et al., 2001).

**Honesty.** A fundamental facet of trust, honesty speaks to the person’s character, integrity, and authenticity (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The implication is that statements made are truthful and conform to “what really happened,” at least from the person’s perspective, and that commitments made about future actions will be kept (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

**Openness.** Openness is the extent to which relevant information is not withheld (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). It is the process by which people make themselves vulnerable to others by sharing personal information.
Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) note that while all of the facets of trust are important, their relative weight will depend on the nature of the interdependence and vulnerability in the relationship.

**The Process of Establishing Trust.** Trust is a dynamic phenomenon that changes over time and takes on different characteristics at different stages within the relationship (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) describe a three-level, developmental progression of trust, beginning with a stage they call predictability. In this first stage, trust is based solely on the behavior of an individual and maintenance of the emotional environment. If behavior is stable, predictable, and positive, then trust is likely to be developed. In the context of the parent-teacher relationship, predictability is enhanced when parents and teachers have reasonable expectations of each other and communicate with each other in positive ways. At the next stage dependability, the relationship progresses toward trust being seen as a personal attribute, rather than simply based on a set of behaviors. This shift occurs when individuals demonstrate that their behavior is predictable and responsive to the other’s needs over time. When expectations that parents and teachers have of each other are continuously met over the course of the school year, the trust in the relationship becomes dependable. The final stage in Rempel et al.’s (1985) progression of trust is faith. In this stage there is an emotional security that is not solely based on past experience. In parents, this may be seen as an overall positive regard for the teacher and his/her decisions in the classroom. Teachers will have faith that parents are supporting their children to the best of their abilities. Despite any uncertainty that might exist, both parent and teacher are sure that the other will follow through and be responsive to the other’s needs.
Failure to achieve trust at the higher levels makes the relationship vulnerable to fluctuations in behaviors by either the teacher or parent. In this situation, one false step can move a potentially trusting relationship in the direction of distrust.

Research on the initial establishment of trust often conflicts. While it seems intuitive to believe that trust is developed over time, researchers have found evidence that new relationships may have higher levels of initial trust. This may be because when people interact with a stranger, rather than simply assuming that the individual is trustworthy, they tend to suspend the belief that he or she is unworthy of trust (Jones & George, 1998). Trusting another is often easier than initial distrust because trust is the easier option for some (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). In school settings, it is expected that parents enter the parent-teacher/parent-school relationship with high levels of initial trust. The school as an organization has norms, rules, and regulations that support trust for some parents. Relationships do not take place in a vacuum. They are embedded in the social contexts that impose constraints, values, and sanctions that affect the trust relationship (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). As we will see later, the social context of the parent influences his or her levels of school and teacher trust.

Trust is likely to be sustained as people interact in cooperative ways and the trust cycle becomes self-fulfilling (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2000). The organizational structure of a school can help to sustain or complicate the trust relationships within. Policies and norms of the school are important to the establishment and maintenance of trust. Policies must be in place that demonstrate an expectation of trustworthy behavior on the part of all participants. At the same time, policies must be in place to respond to breaches of trust
(Coleman, 1990). Trust, once it is broken, is often difficult to mend and requires honest communication and a constructive attitude. Fisher & Brown (1988) recommend what they call ‘unconditionally constructive attitudes and actions’ when trust has been broken. These include attempts to understand the other’s side, interests, attitudes, and beliefs, taking an attitude of acceptance toward the other side, working toward communication, being meticulously reliable, and using persuasion rather than coercion. Understanding the dynamic nature of trust is important particularly within the context of schools and the parent-teacher relationship. Equally important is the recognition of the role the school’s policies and culture play in sustaining or complicating trust.

**Types of Trust.** The nature of trust will not be the same at all times and in all places. As previously mentioned, the nature of the interdependence and the level of vulnerability will influence the type of trust individuals or groups will have. Several types of trust lend themselves to our understanding of trust between parents and schools. One type of trust, institution-based trust, is formed in situations where trust is extended based on the belief that structures are in place that make conditions favorable for positive outcomes. Institution-based trust is supported by formal structures such as licensing agencies and contracts. Informal structures also contribute to trust. In such cases, the trustor feels assured that because of socially learned behavior patterns, the trusted person will act according to the norms surrounding the social situation or risk sanctions through social disapproval (Baier, 1986). In schools, formal structures include teaching licenses and school accreditations. Informal structures such as an overall sense of responsibility on the part of the teacher and school support a sense of trust for parents (Tschannan-Moran & Hoy 2000).
Another form of trust with implications to parent-teacher relationships is knowledge-based trust. This type of trust is established over time through recurring social exchanges. It takes root as individuals get to know one another and feel able to predict how the other is likely to respond in a given situation (Tschannan-Moran, 2004). This type of trust underscores the importance of multiple opportunities for interactions among members of an organization. Teachers and parents must be given repeated opportunities to interact so that trust can be built. “Knowledge that accumulates over repeated interactions in which expectations are fulfilled leads to a reputation for trustworthiness which can then facilitate and reinforce trust with others in a wider social context” (Tschannan-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 562). While these types of trust lend themselves, more or less, to our understanding of trust between parent and teacher/school, relational trust appears to hold the most significance within this context.

Relational trust describes the extent to which there is synchrony with respect to the understanding of expectations and obligations from one group to another (Bryk & Schneider, 1996; Adams et al., 2009). In this way, relational trust focuses on the collective trust of particular groups rather than an individual’s level of trust. For example, when parents and teachers (as a collective) share common expectation for each other, synchronicity is built, and so too is relational trust. While the focus is on the collective experiences of trust within and between role groups (i.e., parents, teachers, administrators, communities), Adams et al. (2009) caution that the individual’s experience is important too. It is the individual that engages in direct interactions with members of the other role groups. Through these direct
interactions, and through indirect observations transmitted through interactions with one’s own role group, a collective perception is made.

Adams and colleagues (2009) also described relational trust as a property held by the school. To the extent that the social exchanges of the school are consistent with the mutually held beliefs about the expectations and responsibilities of the role groups, trust is enhanced or diminished. They assert that variations in the levels of parent trust in schools is most likely explained by organizational norms that affected the dyadic relationships between parents and teachers. Parents’ sense of influence on school decisions and students’ feelings of belonging are thought to be important to parent-school trust.

Certain contextual factors have been thought to influence the formation of trust (Adams et al., 2009; Beard & Brown, 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Forsyth et al., 2006; Goddard, et al., 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000;Williams & Baber, 2007). Goddard et al. (2001) found that differences in the size of the school, grade levels, and student characteristics had implications for parent-teacher trust with smaller, more homogeneous schools possessing fewer relational impediments to trust formation than larger, more diverse schools. The researchers note that this should not be taken to mean that contextual factors directly erode or build trust; only that context shapes trust perceptions by affecting the behavioral, cognitive, and affective norms that constitute a school’s culture. Particular to the parent-teacher relationship, one’s disposition to trust, values and attitudes, and issues of diversity appear salient.

**Disposition to Trust.** Dispositions to trust are important when making initial trust judgments when more specific situational information is not available. Certain people have
an attitude that makes them inclined to extend trust more readily. Rotter (1967) believes that historical experiences of betrayal or broken promises generalize from one social actor to another. This, as discussed below, has important ramifications for African-Americans and other historically marginalized populations. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) caution that a disposition to trust does not mean that people will be more gullible. Regardless of their trusting dispositions, people are able to make use of available information to guide their actions in a given situation.

**Values and Attitude.** Value can be defined as the moral practices, beliefs, and the acceptable standards a person holds. Trust judgments are often made on the basis of the assumptions of shared values. Distrust can arise when individuals or groups are perceived as not sharing key values. Attitudes refer to the knowledge structures containing the thoughts and feelings people have about other people, groups, or organizations and the means through which they define and structure their interactions with others. Attitudes and values are thought to be the key means by which people use to evaluate other people (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

**Diversity.** American schools face increasing diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status. This diversity brings a richness of experiences, but it also brings with it challenges in the development of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). People have the tendency to extend trust more readily to people they perceive as similar to themselves. Because our schools are growing increasingly diverse, trust becomes difficult because people are uncertain about the cultural norms of others. When people’s knowledge
of one another’s culture is limited, they often rely on stereotypes, partial or misleading images, leaving them unsure about what to expect (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998).

**Racial Diversity.** Williams & Baber’s (2007) study illustrates the difficulty in developing cross-racial trust in schools. The research utilized case study analysis in their examination of the perceptions held by African-American parents about the efficacy of schools to meet the needs of their children. The findings of this study highlight the inherent difficulties in establishing trust in diverse settings. The researchers found that as a collective, the parents interviewed did not trust the school system to operate in the best interest of African-American children. The researchers identified the historical legacy of destructive desegregation practices, the fragmentation of the African-American community and other poor community practices, the overall disregard of the African-American experience, and the unmet expectations of the school as contributors to the lack of trust.

Beard & Brown (2008) conducted a similar study with middle-class African-American mothers. Their finding suggest that while all of the mothers trusted that their local public schools provided an excellent education overall, they were worried about the experiences and actual education that their child received. These parents felt the need to be ‘proactive advocates’, ‘fighters’, and ‘squeaky wheels’ on behalf of their children. The mothers reported wanting to feel more welcomed, heard, and represented in their schools. While they felt their children’s teachers were generally competent, they felt that the teachers lacked cultural awareness, culturally relevant teaching strategies, and missed opportunities to show individual attention to the African-American children. They also wanted more frequent communication from the school. It might be fair to assume that the parents in both of these
samples, given their less than positive experiences with the schools in their communities, will carry forth a disposition to distrust schools, or at least a disposition of suspicion.

**Socioeconomic Diversity.** Socioeconomic status has also been found to influence parent’s level of trust although to varying degrees. Goddard et al.’s (2001) study suggested that poverty had a large negative influence on the social relationships between students, parents, and teachers. They found that the larger the proportion of poor students in the school, the lower teachers’ perceptions of trust. Adams et al. (2009) found that while parent trust did systematically differ across schools, depending on the social contextual environment of the school, intergroup cooperation among parents and school authorities and a school culture aligned with the affective needs of students were a more critical antecedent of parent trust. While contextual influences could not be ruled out, the researchers hoped the findings would challenge tendencies to overgeneralize the negative effects of socioeconomic status. Barriers to trust exist. Whether the barriers be dispositional in nature, based on differing values and attitudes, or grounded in differences in race or social class, teachers and schools must examine these barriers and work to overcome them if their desire truly is greater levels of PI and increased home-school collaboration.

**Home-School Collaboration: The Intersection of Trust, Parent-Teacher Relationships & Parental Involvement**

Traditionally, parents have been viewed as outside of the organizational boundaries of the school. Parents do not have the expertise in teaching nor do they have the formal authority and power to set school goals, create polices, and define school practices. However, given the awareness of the interdependence between the child, family, school, and
community, new initiatives are calling for the repositioning of parents from outside of the organizational structure of the school to a place at the table (Epstein, 1995; Goddard et al., 2001). Adams & Christenson (2000) assert that while it is important to recognize the structural boundaries separating parents and schools, it is also important to allow parents to share in the responsibility for student learning and development by engaging them in the educational process. While this is a worthy goal, it alone will not produce meaningful improvement without parents and other stakeholders cultivating productive, trusting relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Bringing parents into the operating core of schools requires a degree of trust that smooths the transitions from parent-school independence to parent-school interdependence in order that an authentic form of collaboration be established.

Collaborative practices with parents are outward indicators that school authorities value the role of parents in the educational process and trust their knowledge and understanding of their children’s learning and developmental needs (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Collaboration involves an investment of time and energy, as well as the sharing of resources, responsibilities, and rewards with all members (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), not just those share similar dispositions, values, and racial and social status. It is my belief that the process of schooling, among other things, is about the building and managing of relationships (e.g., administrator-teacher, teacher-student, teacher-parent). Trust and collaboration are essential components of these relationships, particularly those between parents and teachers. Acquiring trust from parents is often easier said than done. Many parents enter the family-school relationship with a different set of behavioral expectations than that of the school, and
oftentimes negative feelings and baggage from their own school experiences. This feeling of distrust is particularly prevalent in parents with limited income and resources. Overcoming this lack of trust is important for future parental school involvement.

Finally, trust and collaboration are both important and depend on the mutual respect of all parties. Parents must respect teachers as the leader of the academic process, and teachers must respect parents as integral members of the team. Parents’ time must be respected. Meetings must begin and end on time, follow an agenda, and value the input of families. Decisions are not made for parents, but with parents and based on what is best for students. Multiple opportunities for involvement must exist so as to respect parents’ level of comfort, skills, and available time. Any model put in place to encourage greater collaboration and involvement of parents in their children’s academic endeavors must take these issues into consideration.
Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of low-SES African-American mothers as it related to trusting their children’s teachers and their decision to become involved in their children’s school experiences. Four specific questions, influenced by the extant literature, guided this inquiry:

1. How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in their children’s education?
2. How do perceived differences in race and SES influence low-SES African-American mother’s relationships with their children’s teachers, specifically, their levels of trust?
3. How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s education and what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?
4. What strategies do low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of parent involvement?

Research Design

Given the purpose of this research, a qualitative design was deemed most appropriate. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with low-SES African-American mothers who, at the time of the interviews, were participants in Reaching Higher Ministry (a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the participants and the organization). Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted with two Reaching Higher Ministry’s (RHM) case managers who worked closely with the RHM participants, their children, and their children’s teachers. Interviews were analyzed to identify themes relevant to the research
questions stated above. An additional analysis was conducted to examine how the CRT theme of intersectionality presented itself in the experiences of the RHM participants. The use of a qualitative methodology and the examination of intersectionality support the overall goal of the research, which was to understand the lived experiences of low-SES African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers, and their decisions to become involved in their children’s educational experiences.

**Appropriateness of Qualitative Methods.** Qualitative research involves a set of interpretive practices that make visible the world of the research participant. Utilizing an interpretive and naturalistic approach, qualitative researchers employ multiple methods in an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This particular methodology is ideal for the purposes of understanding the meaning behind study participants’ perspectives and allows the researcher to build a complex, holistic picture (Maxwell, 2005). Because it is the fullness of the picture that is desired, qualitative researchers are usually not interested in large numbers of participants. What matters most is the quality of the data, not the quantity (Patton, 2002). Centering on a relatively small sample of purposefully selected individuals, this research gets to the true meaning of an experience from the perspective of the participant. This and other factors make qualitative research ideal for this inquiry including the critical role of the researcher and the use of multiple tools for analysis.

In qualitative research, the researcher is a critical component. Lave & Kvale (1995) argue that another human being is the only instrument that is sufficiently complex enough to understand and learn about the existence and experience of another human. My own personal
experience as an African-American mother of school-aged children allows me to connect with my research and the participants in a way that is valued by qualitative researchers. Moreover, my choice to study this particular topic comes from my personal experiences as a teacher educator and parent advocate. Additionally, qualitative research permits the researcher to make decisions about the data collection process and permits an open-ended, emergent format (Yin, 2003). While the goals of the research, the research questions, and the data collection process were predetermined, the process was allowed to naturally unfold at a pace, depth, and path that was informed by the study participants. Their own personal knowledge and experience not only shifted the focus of the conversations, but also the data collection process. The flexibility in the design allowed me to truly understand the perceptions of the participants on sensitive issues of trust, parent-teacher relationships, and their choices about school involvement.

Qualitative researchers use multiple analytic strategies to collect empirical evidence in their overall quest to understand how people construct meaning through their lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As methodological strategies are determined and inquiry tools are designed, how we choose the design and what we choose to ask speaks to our overall perspective on the nature of reality. Methods of research are not neatly separated from the researcher herself. Noblit, Flores, and Murillo (2004) assert:

Methods are ideas and theories in themselves. They have histories, are best understood as tentative, and are not separate from the theories they are used to test or explore. Method and theory are linked by people in concrete historical and ideational context. (p.3)
In this way, the qualitative researcher embraces the connection between herself and her participants. Just as in quantitative research, rigor is an important aspect of qualitative research. Davis & Dodd (2002) surmise:

We aim for a reliability in our data based on consistency and care in the application of research practices, which are reflected in the visibility of research practices, and a reliability in our analysis and conclusions, reflected in an open account that remains mindful of the partiality and limits of our research findings. (p. 280)

Many times throughout the process, I found myself laughing and empathizing with the women in study. I also became angry, frustrated, and offended along with them as they laid out their experience of disrespect and marginalization for me to dissect.

**Appropriateness of a Critical Race Theory (CRT).** Just as qualitative research is appropriate given the specific goals of this study and the questions of interest, utilizing a critical race theoretical lens is deemed equally appropriate. In this research, the CRT aspect of intersectionality will be utilized. Intersectionality, a term used to describe the various ways in which race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation combine and are played out in various settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), allows us to focus research on populations that are traditionally understudied. This approach requires the researcher to keep the following tenants in mind: (a) all social groups are heterogeneous; (b) individuals’ experiences are affected by the power dynamics within the social structures in which they are located; and (c) there are unique effects of identifying with more than one social group (Stewart & McDermott, 2004).
Feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s article, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics* (1989), is thought to be the preeminent work in this area (Carbado & Gulati, 2001). In this piece, Crenshaw examined how “dominant concepts of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (p. 140), such as race or gender. Rather, she encourages us to think about the multidimensionality of the experiences of Black woman. Crenshaw states, “Because the intersectional experiences is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 140). Patricia Collins (1994) illustrated how intersectionality influences the everyday experiences of women. Her analysis centered on the mothering practices of marginalized ethnic groups. In it she observed three themes key to their sense of motherhood not shared by White women: survival, power, and cultural identity. Collins asserts that many African-American, Native-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American mothers need to work to ensure their children’s physical survival, structure their mothering patterns based on the dominant group’s perception of them, and emphasize development of their children’s cultural identity in ways that most White women do not because of their greater social and economic privilege (Collins, 1994). This research will depart from the “single axis framework” Crenshaw writes about and will pay particular attention to how the study participants are multiply-burdened by not only race and gender, but also by income level and other social disadvantages. Additionally, it will add to the work of Collins and others interested in the experiences of mothers.
Additionally, elements of CRT in this work include a focus on the experiential knowledge of the study participants. While they do not have advanced degrees or important titles behind their names, they are the only ones who can speak to their personal experiences in the schools. As such, they are able to tell the counter-story, the story that is not always told by mainstream research and media. Finally, this research takes an action-orientation as mandated by CRT. This work concludes with implications for teachers, teacher education programs, and parenting and family support programs with the expressed goal of supporting all parents, particularly low-SES African-American mothers in their interactions with teachers and schools. It is my desire to not only add to the literature on PI, but to also provide useful suggestions for educators and others with similar goals.

**Evolution of the Design.** While it is important that qualitative researchers have a plan, it is equally important to have design flexibility (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The initial research design for this study included two focus groups of 4-6 participants each, individual interviews of purposefully selected focus group participants, and document analysis. Early in the research phase, it became evident that focus groups would be difficult to arrange. While I was granted permission to utilize the RHM conference room for the focus groups, the work schedules of those individuals who were interested in participating were varied and provided some challenge for agreeing on a mutual meeting time. Transportation was an additional barrier. Many participants living in outlying areas would have to spend hours on the bus making several stops to get to the centrally located meeting location. Childcare was also an issue. Since all participants were mothers and most were single mothers, childcare would have been a necessity. The RHM offices provided no space to care
for the children while the mothers participated in the focus groups. A final barrier included the discomfort of participants talking about specific issues in their parenting practices in front of others with whom they had not previously built a relationship. Taken together, it was decided that the barriers associated with facilitating focus groups outweighed the usefulness of the approach. Instead, it was decided and agreed upon by members of the research committee that individual in-depth interviews would be sufficient for the purposes of this study. In retrospect, it was most likely my middle-class bias that allowed me to believe that these participants would be compelled to overcome multiple challenges in order to participate in a research activity that would not provide them with any significant, immediate gains.

Another modification to the original study design was the removal of the document analysis portion of the research. It was determined that the documents would not help to answer the research questions, nor would they add any substantive information about the experiences of the research participants. A final modification was the inclusion of interviews of ‘knowledgeable others’. Two case managers with specific, first-hand experiences as mediators between the primary research participants and their children’s teacher, volunteered to share their experiences. The addition of the case managers’ interviews added context and a different perspective on the RHM parent’s in their children’s schools. An additional interview with an upper-level executive lent itself to the context of the agency itself.

**Participants & Context**

Typically, qualitative inquiry relies on a relatively small and purposefully selected sample in order to allow depth of inquiry and understanding of a complex phenomenon (Patton, 2002). This deliberate selection of participants is designed to yield information that
cannot be obtained from other sources (Maxwell, 2005). Merriam (1998) describes purposive sampling as a tool that anchors the assumption that “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). In light of this, two samples were chosen. First, interviews were conducted with low-SES, African-American mothers who were participants of RHM, a local faith-based nonprofit organization located in an urban city in the southeastern United States. To add depth and dimension, 2 case managers employed by RHM were also interviewed. The case managers worked specifically with the children of the mothers interviewed, and participated in many interactions between the parents and their children’s teachers. Both groups are described in greater detail below. An additional interview was conducted with one program manager of the agency. This interview provided detailed information about the purpose and mission of RHM.

**Context.** RHM was founded in 1988 by members of a large Presbyterian church located in a downtown suburb of the city in which this research was conducted. Shortly thereafter, it became an incorporated, self-sustaining non-profit organization with an initial goal of providing transitional housing to working families who were on the verge of homelessness. With a primary focus on financial literacy, participants met weekly with mentors, shared a meal, and reviewed the participants’ income and expenditures for that week. A current, more comprehensive model was put in place largely due to a major grant that was received in 2004. The new model, which was in place at the time of this study, offered participants a year-long, phased, incentive driven program leading to “safe, affordable housing and a stable, life-sustaining job”. The new model was based on a core
curriculum that addresses financial literacy and responsibility, physical and mental health, spiritual nurture, and healthy relationships. Children of participants (ages 6 weeks – 16 years) were required to attend and were involved in a curriculum that mirrors the adult curriculum (“Reaching Higher Ministry,” n.d.). In 2012, a program for children ages 16-21 was developed to address the need of the aging children’s population. This curriculum also mirrors that of the adult participants’.

Participation in RHM is voluntary. Members self-select into the organization and most work diligently to keep their membership dues current and to maintain their employment, both being conditions of their participation. What is important to note here is that the RHM members who participated in this study may not represent the larger population of low-SES African-American mothers. As is discussed in the Study Limitations section of Chapter 4, these women have volunteered to participate in an organization that they believe will change the trajectory of their lives. It might be said that these women no longer find their current lifestyles satisfactory and are working to make significant changes for themselves and their children.

Participant Recruitment & Selection. I was granted access to the participants of RHM through a prior relationship that was established approximately one year before my data collection began (see subjectivity statement for full details). I was invited to speak at one of the weekly meetings where I discussed the importance of parental school involvement, introduced my research, and asked participants to volunteer to be interviewed (see Appendix A for Recruitment Flyer). My initial attempts were to purposefully select participants based on the following criteria: (a) participants must be parents with custodial custody of at least
one child; (b) at least one child must currently be school-aged (approximately 5-18); and (c) parents must perceive their involvement in their children’s school activities (either school- or home-based) as beneficial to their children’s academic outcomes. These criteria were designed to identify participants who were most likely to engage in activities that were beneficial to their children’s education. At that meeting, only 2 participants agreed to be interviewed. Upon the advice of my research committee, I engaged a sampling technique known as snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, the researcher obtains knowledge of potential participants from an informed person who knows others that meet the research interests and criteria (Glesne, 1999). The case managers in the RHM Children’s Program provided names of adult participants who they believed met the criteria and would be willing to engage in an interview. From those connections, an additional 5 interviews took place, for a total of 7 participant interviews.

While the initial plan was to include only participants whose children were between the ages of 5-18, an additional modification was made to include a participant whose child was 3 years-old and attended a local childcare facility full-time while his mother worked. Early childhood education programs that have earned high levels of state accreditation and hold national accreditation status often encourage high levels of PI. The childcare program utilized by this participant earned the highest level of accreditation offered by the state. Therefore, the addition of this participant’s perspective was deemed appropriate.

**Primary Research Participant Overview.** Seven low-SES, African-American mothers who were current or past participants in RHM participated in the study. One woman, a past participant, was a current employee of the program. All of the women were single
mothers. Participants ranged in age from 25 – 47. Each mother had between 1 and 4 children, ranging from age 7 months to 29 years of age at the time the data was collected. The lowest level of education reported was an earned GED with the highest being some college courses, both at community college and 4-year institutions. Two participants disclosed that they had criminal backgrounds due to prior substance abuse. See Table 2 for a concise description of the participants.

Table 2

*Participant Description*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Children’s Age &amp; Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>15 year old female; 28 year old male; 29 year old female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carina</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>18 year old male; 22 year old male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>3 year old male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>17 year old male; 13 year old female; 19 month old female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>7 month old female; 11 year old male; 13 year old male; 15 year old female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>4 year old male; 6 year old male; 11 year old female; 22 year old female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiana</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>12 year old male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Anita.* At the time of the study, Anita was a 45 year-old mother of three children. She and her youngest child moved from New York to her current location in 2008. She became a
mother at the age of 16, at which time she dropped out of high school, only three credits shy of the graduation requirement. At the age of 39, Anita suffered a stroke, which left her hemiplegic. She has no functional use of her left foot or hand but reports that the stroke has not affected her cognitively.

**Carina.** Carina was a 47 year-old mother of two male children. Carina grew up in a neighboring county and spent a few years living in Philadelphia as a young adult prior to moving to her current location. Carina is a very soft-spoken woman with a shy demeanor. She credits RHM for helping her “come out of her shell”. Otherwise, she says, she would never be able to participate in a research project such as this one.

**Charlotte.** Charlotte, the youngest interviewee, was 25 years old at the time of the interview. She was the mother of a 3 year-old son who attended a local preschool during the day while Charlotte worked full-time at a local hospital and attended classes on a part-time basis at a local community college. Charlotte has aspirations of completing a bachelor’s degree and eventually opening up a group home for unwanted young girls. She credits RHM for helping her “get back on her feet”.

**Katherine.** At the time of the interview, Katherine was a 31 year-old mother of three children with a history of drug addiction. Katherine lost custody of her oldest children, and was in full addiction when she learned she was pregnant with her last child. Faced with losing her newborn, Katherine decided to get clean and joined RHM. At the time we spoke, Katherine was in the process of repairing her relationships with her children and the family members who are caring for them and enrolling in community college classes.
**Maria.** Maria was a 40 year-old mother of four children who graduated from the RHM program in 2008. At the time of the interview, Maria was an employee of RHM. Like Katherine, Maria also had a history of substance abuse, which contributed to her losing custody of her three older children for over 3 years. Maria currently has custody of her three youngest children and has generous visitation with her oldest child who lives with the child’s father.

**Nicole.** Nicole was a 41 year-old mother of four children from Newark, New Jersey. She relocated to her current location in 2010. Nicole says that while she was in New Jersey, she ran a non-profit organization for women and children with some success. She was forced to close the business when it became more difficult to secure funding from government and grant sources. Currently, Nicole works for a local hotel as a housekeeping supervisor.

**Tiana.** Tiana was a 32 year-old mother of a 13 year-old son. Tiana works as the supervisor of an assisted living facility and has been in her current location for 16 years. She relocated from the Washington, D.C. area. While Tiana and her son’s father are not married, they are currently in an intimate relationship and are co-parenting their son.

**Case Manager Participant Overview.** The addition of the case manager interviews Two case managers provided interview data.

**Chonda.** For the past 5 years, Chonda, a 29 year-old African-American woman, has been the program manager of the Children’s Program at RHM. In her role, she oversees all of the programing related to the Nursery, Children’s, and Young Adult programs. Prior to the addition of more staff, she also served as a case manager for several children in the program.
Isabelle. Isabelle was a 24 year-old case manager in the Children’s Program and was the only White participant in the study. Her role as a case manager included providing transportation for children and families to and from school meetings, providing support in the form of mediation between families and teachers, and empowering parents to support their children in and out of school. Isabelle came to RHM as a college intern and became a full-time employee 2 years ago.

An additional interview was conducted with an RHM employee. Her input was valuable as it contributed to my understanding of the history and context of RHM, however, none of the data gathered from her interviews contributed to answering the questions that guided this inquiry.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected both demographic and semi-structure interview data. Most of the data was collected in person, but the option of telephone-based data collection was offered to participants as needed. In total, 7 interviews were conducted face-to-face and 3 were conducted by telephone.

Demographic Data. Each participant completed a 2-page demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B for Demographic Questionnaire), which collected information about each participant’s age, gender, level of education, and marital status. In addition, participants provided information about the age, gender, and current grade of their children. For participants whose interviews took place via telephone call, I asked the questions and recorded the participant’s response on the document. The interviews were recorded in their entirety and also included the participant’s verbal consent to record the interview. For those
participants who were interviewed by telephone, Informed Consent Forms were provided and signatures were obtained at a later date (see Appendix C for Informed Consent Form).

Semi-Structured Interviews. For the current study, an open-ended, semi-structured interview format was utilized. All interviews were conducted between June 2012 and August 2012. In most cases, interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location chosen by the study participant (i.e., participant’s home, local coffee shop, restaurant). In some cases, interviews were conducted over the telephone. For each interview, an interview protocol was used. Rubin & Rubin (2005) describe a protocol as “a free hand map to the conversation, pointing out the general direction, but not specifying which nook and crannies will be explored” (p. 150). The interview protocol for the primary research participants included questions about their perceptions of the role of parent, teacher, and student in school, their relationship with their children’s teachers, and their levels of PI (see Appendix D for the Primary Participant Protocol). The interview protocol for the case managers included questions about their role at RHM, their role in the relationship between the RHM families and their children’s teachers, and their perceptions of the role race and income play in the parent-teacher relationships they have observed (See Appendix E for the Case Manger Protocol).

Each interview lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and was recorded on two digital recording devises. One recorder served as backup in case any technical problems occurred with the primary device. Once the interviews were recorded, they were transferred to the password protected hard drive on my computer and also saved on my password protected cloud server for sharing with my transcriptionist. Once interviews were transferred from the recording devises, they were immediately erased.
Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) refer to qualitative data analysis as the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate in order to make sense of them, with the focus on presenting what you find to others. They further assert that the process of analyzing data involves “working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p. 159). While this process may seem fairly linear, many researchers (e.g., Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998) recommend a concurrent or simultaneous data collection and analysis process. This requires that the researcher begin analyzing data with the first data collection activity. From one activity to another, concepts, ideas, and themes can further be elaborated on and new ideas can be added. The process of simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to test merging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) asserts, “To wait until all data are collected is to lose the opportunity to gather more reliable and valid data” (p. 14).

The process of analyzing the data for this research followed the advice given above. A paid transcriptionist transcribed all recordings. While waiting for the transcriptions to be complete, I created an a priori coding scheme based on the questions asked on the interview protocols. Codes in the a priori scheme included: Parent’s role, Teacher’s role, Community role, Perceptions of parent-teacher relationship, Trust, Perceptions of differences, Types of involvement, Invitations for involvement, Perceptions of own involvement. Once transcribed,
the data were uploaded into Atlas.ti, a software program used to assist in the analysis of qualitative data. After reviewing the transcripts to ensure familiarity, the coding process began with the a priori coding scheme that was already created. As new codes emerged, they were added to the original scheme. New codes included: Overlapping roles, Race trust, Trust relational, Trust institutional, Involvement home, Involvement school, Involvement barriers, Communication. Once all coding was complete, quotes representing each coding scheme were put together to form families of similar codes. Code families included: Communication Issues, Parenting Background, Role of the Parent, Role of the Teacher, Invitations for Involvement, Perceptions of Differences, Policies Supporting Involvement. Within the code families, themes representing shared experiences began to emerge. Once these major themes emerged, quotes relevant to the theme were then selected for the research. A similar process was conducted to identify quotes that were relevant to the CRT theme of intersectionality. The primary participant interviews yielded 7 themes (Education as a shared responsibility; Trust given, not earned; Race mediates trust; Desire to be involved; Varied types of involvement; Work negates school-based involvement; Just talk to me!) and the case manager interviews yielded 2 themes (Barriers between families and schools; Race and income mediate relationships). Each theme is described in the next chapter of this document. With the focus on the amplification of voice and challenging the deficit-based research that already existed in the next chapter, I will tell the stories of the low-SES African-American mothers who graciously shared their time and experiences with me.

**Trustworthiness & Credibility**
Validity of the study is of monumental importance to all research. For those undertaking qualitative studies, Edmonson and Irby (2008) identify credibility as “everything in every way for the qualitative researcher” (p.79). For this study, several strategies were used to ensure the validity of the study results – triangulation, member checks, thick and rich description, peer reviews, and reflexivity. Important to note, a completely valid study is not always a goal of qualitative research. Rather, Wolcott (1990) suggests pursuing the goal of a better understanding of the phenomenon and immersing oneself sufficiently into the situation as to ‘get it right’.

Triangulation is probably the most well-known method of ensuring validity in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Triangulation using multiple data sources allows the researcher to build a justification for themes. Data from the primary participant interviews and interviews with case manager were used to support the themes that were identified.

Member checking is the process of continuous checking of the data by soliciting feedback from the study participants to insure the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon studied is accurate. Lincoln & Guba (1985) identify member checking as the most critical technique for establishing the credibility of a study. In this project, member checks occurred during the interview process as participants were asked follow-up questions as needed to ensure that my understandings were correct. Additional follow-up via telephone or email occurred as questions arose during the analysis and write-up occurred.

While generalizability is not a goal of this research, transferability is. Transferability is described as the way in which the reader determines whether and to what extent this particular context can transfer to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research
utilized the strategy of thick, rich description. Providing the reader with dense descriptions of the participants, the context, and the results provides them with enough information to transfer to other contexts for themselves.

An additional source of credibility came in the form of peer reviews. The peer review process involves identifying people who review and ask questions about the study to ensure that the study will resonate with people other than the researcher (Creswell, 2009). Two of my colleagues who are also enrolled in Ph.D. programs and trained in qualitative research, served as my peer reviewers for this process. They reviewed data collection protocols, coding procedures, and data interpretations. Other than an early suggestion to change the order of the questions in the interview protocol, their contribution to this project mostly included serving as a sounding board as I discussed the themes that emerged and assisting with the set-up and use of Atlas-ti.

**Summary**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of low-SES, African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their subsequent decision to become involved in their children’s school experiences. A wealth of research exists on the benefits of PI for the academic outcomes of young children, but much less exist on the context of PI and how the parent-teacher relationship influences such involvement. It is anticipated that the knowledge gained from this inquiry will afford new insights to teachers and school administrators of the importance of building trusting relationships with all families, particularly low-SES, African-American families.
Chapter 4: Results

This study was designed to understand the lived experiences of low-SES African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their decisions to become involved in their children’s educational experiences. The study sought specifically to amplify the voice of the study participants and to identify ways in which parent-teacher relationships can be improved in order to enhance parental school involvement and subsequently academic outcomes for African-American students. This study also sought to examine the responses of study participants through the CRT lens of intersectionality, a helpful tool used to examine the multiple disadvantages of being a low-SES African-American woman in the United States. Four research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in their children’s education?

2. How do differences in race and SES influence low-SES African-American mothers’ relationships with teachers, specifically their levels of trust?

3. How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s educational experiences and what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?

4. What strategies do low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of parental involvement?

The first section of this chapter focuses on the interviews with the primary research participants. In it I explore the seven themes that emerged from the interviews (Education as a shared responsibility; Trust given, not earned; Race mediates trust; Desire to be involved;
Varied types of involvement; Work negates school-based involvement; Just talk to me!). Through thick, rich description, and situating the themes within the research literature, a picture of the experiences and voices of these participants emerges. The second section focuses on the supplemental interviews conducted with the RHM case managers and sheds some additional insights about the experiences of RHM parents in the schools. This data resulted in two relevant themes (Barriers between families and schools and Race and income mediate relationships). Table 3 (Research Question and Theme Alignment) describes how the themes identified from the primary research participants and case managers align with the research questions. In the third section, intersectionality is explored and examples of how race, SES, gender, and other social burdens influence the identities and relationships of study participants are provided. The last section summarizes the major findings.
### Table 3

*Research Question & Theme Alignment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes from Primary Participant Interviews</th>
<th>Themes from Case Manger Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the roles of the parent, teacher, community and student in their children’s education?</td>
<td>Education as a shared responsibility</td>
<td>(not examined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do differences in race and SES influence low-SES African-American mothers’ relationships with teachers specifically their levels of trust?</td>
<td>Trust given, not earned</td>
<td>Race and income mediate relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Race mediates trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s educational experiences and what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?</td>
<td>Desire to be involved</td>
<td>Barriers between families and schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Varied types of involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work negates school-based involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What strategies to low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of parental involvement?</td>
<td>Just talk to me!</td>
<td>(not examined)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Primary Participant Interviews

Any examination into the reasons why parents involve themselves in their children’s home- and school-based educational activities must begin with an understanding of how that parent conceptualizes their own parental role. Generally speaking, how parents see
themselves as supporters of their children’s education influences their involvement decisions (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). While parental role construction is important, the research literature points to the education of children as a responsibility shared by not only the parent and the teacher, but also of the student and the community (Epstein 1995). Therefore, it is not only important that we examine how parents’ conceptualize their own role in their children’s education, but also how they conceptualize the role of the teacher, community and the student.

**Theme #1: Education as a Shared Responsibility**

*I feel like the parent and the teacher, like a husband and wife, they all have to have an alliance. They have to join forces and work together. They might not always be on the same page, but they’re going to have to find a happy medium. ~Anita*

Anita’s description of the role of the parent and teacher in the child’s education was indicative of the feelings of most of the participants in this study. They all believed, to some extent that the responsibility of the child’s education was one that was shared, not only by the parent and teacher, but also by the larger community and the student. This idea of shared responsibility is supported by a plethora of literature on family-school partnerships (i.e, Fan et al, 2001; Hill, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2007) as well as Epstein’s (1986) Overlapping Spheres of Influence model. In this model, Epstein describes individual as well as shared responsibilities of the parent, teacher, school, community, and the student. Sharing of the responsibilities, according to Epstein, ensures that no one party bears the entire burden of education. Rather, the burden is shared between all.
Within this theme of education as a shared responsibility, each participant believed that their individual role as a parent was to support their child’s education. Tiana believed her role was to be involved in “everything that had to deal with the school”. “I don’t know about other parents” she states, “but I know I want to know what he’s being taught and make sure he’s on the level that he’s supposed to be on.” Charlotte describes her role as parent in a similar way. She says, “As a parent, I want to know what’s going on in the school. It’s up to the parent to stay involved at least enough to know how they can support the child at home with their homework.” Nicole echoed these sentiments, but also believed that the role of the parent was to teach the child how to be respectful in the school. She believed her role as a parent was to “teach the child how to follow the rules of the school and how to be on their best behavior”.

In supporting their children’s education, four of the seven participants either described themselves as advocates for their children, or shared situations with me where they had to stand up for the rights of their child within the school. This was never more evident than in my conversation with Maria. Maria clearly identified her role as advocate in the first question of our interview and reiterated that role several times later. I asked her why she felt so strongly in the advocacy needs of her children. She responded:

I believe what makes me such an advocate is that I’ve seen so much in the school system. I mean, whether it be on the news or just with my own eyes…I look at the challenges that Black children face…You know, as a Black single woman, we get stereotyped a lot. Especially when it comes to our young Black sons and not having a father in the home to advocate for them. And that’s something that I was not going to
be a part of. I definitely challenged myself that I was going to be that advocate. When they [the teachers] saw me, they knew that I was that parent that plays the mother and she plays the father.

In supporting her child’s educational experience, Anita also talked about standing up for her children:

Sometimes the teachers and the principal may not always be right. Then you have to stand your ground for your child. But if you come in with an attitude, like ‘not my child’ or ‘how dare you’, who’s that gonna help? It’s [the problem] not going to get resolved. That’s how I think about that.

The role of parent as advocate is not new in the extant literature. Beard & Brown (2008) described similar views of the parental role in his study of middle-class African-American mothers. The mothers in their study spoke of feeling pressure to be “proactive advocates, fighters, and squeaky wheels” (p. 478) to actively support their children in schools.

Interestingly, while Diamond and Gomez (2004) found African-American working-class parents were viewed by teachers as confrontational in their approach to resolving conflicts, Anita seems to contradict that finding as she finds it necessary to adjust a negative attitude she may have in order to resolve her problems with the schools and teachers.

The teacher’s role, as perceived by the participants, was highly consistent. Participants spoke of the teacher’s role as one that included conveying knowledge, serving as a role model, and ensuring the safety of their children. Several of the participants spoke of teachers taking on the role of substitute parent or step-parent. Charlotte described it this way:
I would hope that they [teachers] are teaching him things and treating him in a way that I would want him to be treated. Kind of like a step-parent, I guess…maybe. I mean they’re not an actual parent but they step in as the parent during the school day, you know. That’s what it is to me.

Katherine described the role of the teacher in a similar manner:

I feel like they’re [teachers] supposed to be that…that person when the parents are not there. You know, like they have the same roles that we’re [parents] supposed to have, but at the same time making sure they’re doing their schoolwork. If the student has any issues or any conflict within themselves, not just with other people, you know, if they feel that they can’t do the work or if something’s not right, they’re supposed to step in and do the same thing a parent would do. I guess I see them as a parental figure.

Most of the participants viewed the boundaries between home and school as fluid, even sharing stories of teachers babysitting children in the parent’s home or visiting as part of the beginning of the year routine. Carina, however, ascribed to more rigid roles when asked about whether or not the teacher played any role in the child's home life. “Oh, goodness, no” she exclaimed. In fact, Carina found it difficult to imagine an instance when the teacher might be invited into the child's home. She believed it was an imposition on the teacher’s time to have to visit the child's home and thought they should be paid more if home visits were a part of their job description. Even when I mentioned that the teachers of my children, while they were enrolled in a charter school during their elementary years, conducted home visits at the beginning of every year, she seemed surprised. Carina’s
apparent rigidity in her perceptions of the role of the teacher in the home coincides with Lareau’s (1987) findings of working-class families. Lareau found working-class parents believed education was the responsibility of the teacher while home-life was the responsibility of the parent. This belief, coupled with her shy demeanor, might explain her rejection of the idea of teachers in the home.

The extent to which participant’s believed the community had a role in the education of children varied widely from participant to participant. Anita was a vocal supporter of community influence in education. She talked about the lack of commitment of the Black community to its members:

I know that ultimately in the Black community everybody is for themselves. People say that they want unity, but what are you really doing for that unity to happen? How much are you participating? Don’t complain about it try to fix it! You have to actively be a part, you know. How many times have you taken a child from your neighborhood and brought him into your home and just sat down and talked with him? Or took him to the park. Just do something to make a difference. Don’t keep complaining about these kids.

From Anita’s perspective, the African-American community appears to be failing its children. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) explains communities of color are often separated from the schools within that community by a cultural divide. Schools, which most often support a middle-class value system, make policies that disrespect the values and goals of the family and view the families from a deficit perspective. This creates an environment of mutual distrust. In particular, the African-American community has a long history of skepticism and
often takes an adversarial stance toward schools that have historically failed their communities (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). This further divides and works to create more rigid boundaries between home, community, and schools. Rather than remaining divided, Anita calls for reform in her statement, “Don’t complain about it try to fix it!” With the exception of Anita, most of the other participants believed the community played a role, but were unable to clearly articulate such role. Perhaps this supports Anita’s comments about the lack of involvement in the Black community.

Nicole’s view of the role of the community was quite interesting. To my question she responded:

I don’t know [Laughter]…To me it’s just like [Laughter]. I had to laugh about it because my mother, she always says, ‘it takes a village’. And the first thing that pops in my mind is, ‘Where the hell was the village when I was growing up?’ [Laughter] But I’d have to say, for me and my children here in [my current state], it hasn’t been so much of the community. It’s always just been me and my fiancé, who they call their step-father.

When I probed this statement further, Nicole shared with me that her childhood was full of neglect and sexual abuse by family and community members. She recalled feelings of abandonment and distrust by those who were responsible for her care and well-being. When I asked her to reflect on the community in which she raised her own children, she described a much different environment. She described the Newark, New Jersey community as “close-knit”. She described a community where if one of her children needed to be picked up early from school, she could call on any number of people who would run to the neighborhood
school and pick them up. Her experience in her current location is very different. She went on to explain:

My job has been pretty good with me, very good with me. So, I don’t have to worry too much when it comes to that. But the community…everybody is quick to say they putting hands on [the children] but they not putting hands on them when I need them to put hands on! So, I would have to say the community thing don’t work too well for me. WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY? That’s who I’m talking about, mostly family. Because I don’t have too many friends yet and the friends that I do have are in [different cities] so I can’t depend on them to come all the way over here to do that.

Nicole’s move to another state seems to have interrupted the social capital she built over the years in her former community. Without that capital, she and her fiancé have very little support with their children.

Participants all agreed that the role of the student in his or her own education was an active one. They believe the role of the student is to: “absorb all they can” (Charlotte), “go after it [the information]” (Anita), “give their best effort” (Carina). Some participants’ ideas about the role of the student in their own education clearly reflected their own beliefs about their role as a parent. Katherine, who is presently rebuilding her relationship with her children after they were removed from her custody due to her substance abuse, described the role of the student in this way:

You know, I think their number one role is to do their work. You know, if they want something in life they should never say, ‘I can’t do it’. You can do anything you put your mind to. I’m proof of that. And I think that by our examples, when we share
what we’ve been through, it kind of helps them understand that we’re not telling them anything wrong. This is what you can do. I mean you don’t want to wait until you mess up everything, it’s too late or whatever. Even though it’s not too late until your last breath.

Maria, who described herself as a stanch advocate for her children, described the student’s role in this way:

The child’s role, from my perspective, is to advocate for themselves as far as the importance of their own education. They also have to connect with the learning and build a relationship with the teacher…As for their own education, they have to be very supportive of their own education. Whatever they don’t know or can’t understand, they have to ask and ask and ask until they do understand.

Lastly, Anita, who was very clear about the role of the community in education, described the role of the student in an interesting way, which further elaborates the collaborative role that all members play:

They [students] have to want it. You can lead the horse to water but you can’t make him drink. A lot of kids don’t see positive images as they’re growing up in their households or in their communities so it has to be something in them that wants to go in a different direction. And like I said that’s where the community gets involved because it only takes one person to change a child’s mind or direction or to show them something new for them, you know, for their eyes to open.

The theme of education as a shared responsibility was as clearly visible in this research, as it is in the relevant research literature. The participants clearly expressed an
interest in joining with teachers and schools in supporting, monitoring and enhancing their children’s education. They believed the community is an important piece of the educational puzzle, even if they could not articulate it or if their own personal experiences lacked the community support they desired. Additionally, they all believed their children should be active participants in the educational process and believed their children could be successful if they worked hard for it.

Research clearly identifies a relationship between race and income and parental school involvement. However the complexities of this relationship are not as clear. This is not surprising since both race and income influences how and with whom we choose to engage. Trust is also influenced by these factors as people tend to extend trust more readily to people they perceive as similar to themselves (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). This puts the participants of this study at a clear disadvantage since their children are most likely to be educated by White women of middle-class standing.

**Theme #2: Trust Given, Not Earned**

*Oh, I don’t know. I mean, I had a good education but times are different now. I don’t know, when I was going to school I trusted my school...I guess I trust my kid’s schools.* ~Katherine

Katherine’s inability to definitively define her relationship with her children’s school as a trusting one is indicative of the theme “trust given, not earned”. When I pushed Katherine a bit further and asked what made the schools or teachers trustworthy, she repeated that she had a good education (in a different school in the same county) and that so far, she had no reason not to trust. Carina expressed a similar sentiment. Carina had a great deal of trust in her youngest son’s school, but stated the school had done nothing specifically to earn
that trust. Her trust appeared to center around the fact that she attended the same high school 31 years prior. While the teachers, administrators, and students at the school had changed over the years, she still held a high level of trust. Likewise, Nicole expressed having a high level of trust in the school, but she recognized trusting schools and teachers was just something parents had to do:

I teach my children to trust their teachers. I mean, I don’t think they would do anything to hurt them, because that would definitely be a big issue. But you gotta have some kind of trust that the teacher is gonna do what she’s supposed to do. BUT WHAT MAKES YOU TRUST THEM? It’s hard to explain, the first thing I want to do when school is starting is to get to know the teacher, and if I get a bad vibe, I try to switch them to another class…I really just have to trust that the school has hired good teachers. OH, SO IS THE TRUST MORE IN THE SCHOOL THAN THE INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS? Yeah, maybe. I think that any parent, in their right state of mind, opens up to trust. It’s up to the teacher to keep the trust level up.

The comments of Katherine, Carina and Nicole align with the literature on the development of trust particularly the research of Jones & George (1998). They found, when interacting with a stranger, instead of assuming the individual is trustworthy, people tend to suspend the belief that the individual is unworthy of trust. This, as Nicole mentioned, seems necessary in the parent-teacher relationship.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) found that in the school setting, trusting another is often easier than initial distrust because it simply is the easier option for some. These comments
are also indicative of institution-based trust. The trust Katherine, Carina and Nicole described above does not seem to be based on their individual relationships with the teachers, rather the school as a whole. This type of trust is known as institution-based trust, a trust in the formal and informal structures in place (i.e., licensing boards, certifications, reputation) that allows a sense of assurance that the organization is going to act according to the norms of society (Baier, 1986). Only two of the seven participants described trust in an individual, rather than the school as a whole. Tiana described her relationship with her son’s principal this way:

I actually can say I’m more close to the principal at [my son’s school] than I am with the teachers. She knew him from elementary school. She just, she had his back….SO WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOU HAVE A SENSE OF TRUST IN THE PRINCIPAL? Yes, I do. Better than I do with any of the teachers or the vice principal which is who I deal with the majority of the time…WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES HER SO TRUSTWORTHY? I think because she’s been in my shoes before. Her having kids my age, she’s been through some of the challenges that I’m going through right now. I’ve made a connection with her.

Charlotte also described a highly trusting relationship with her son’s teacher. She reported the teacher occasionally babysat for her on weekends. The trust experienced by Tiana and Charlotte may have started as institution-based, but has moved beyond to what might be considered relational trust. At the individual level, relational trust is based on the extent to which there is synchrony with respect to the understanding of expectations and obligations between individuals (Adams, et al., 2009). Charlotte beautifully illustrated this synchrony when she described her early experiences with her son’s teacher:
When I first meet her, we sat down and had a parent teacher conference. She explained her rules and her expectations of [my son] and I explained my rules and my expectations of her while she had him in her classroom. It was kind of cut and dry, but we learned each other and had that communication.

If we can take anything from the experience of Charlotte and Tiana about moving trust from an institutional level to a relational level, it might be the importance of direct communication of the expectations and a sense of shared experience.

While Tiana seems to have created a trusting relationship with someone who is different from her with respect to age and race, other participants found it difficult to form such trust in their relationships with their children’s teachers. Some African-American families, still damaged by the historical legacy of desegregation and the overall disregard of African-Americans, continue to find it difficult to trust schools to operate in the best interest of their children (Williams & Baber, 2007).

**Theme #3: Race Mediates Trust**

*If she [son’s teacher] was Caucasian I probably wouldn’t be as friendly or as social to her.*

*Well, I probably would be friendly, but not as social. I mean, most teachers aren’t African-American, just to be honest. I just don’t think I would have had the same relationship. You just feel like they’re [White teachers] looking for an excuse to turn you in. ~ Charlotte*

Participants of this study appeared to vary in their belief about the role race plays in their relationships with their children’s teachers. Charlotte, Nicole, and Maria were the most outspoken on this issue and contributed several examples of how they believe race influenced their relationships with teachers. Carina was not quite sure how race contributed to her
parent-teacher relationships. In her initial statement she attested to feeling more comfortable with her children’s African-American teachers. Shortly after she appeared to back away from that statement. In the end she concluded that race “is not the number one thing” that makes her comfortable with teacher, but she recognized that it “plays a role”. Tiana, Anita, and Katherine thought race had no bearing on their own personal parent-teacher relationships. To that interview question, Tiana and Katherine each quickly and assuredly responded that race had no bearing in the relationship. They appeared to take on what Bonilla-Silva (2006) terms a ‘slightly’ colorblind mentality whereby they may be swayed by certain elements of colorblindness, which in this case is the idea that race does not influence their relationships. Peller (1990) offers another lens through which we might view the lack of acknowledgement of the importance of race in the parent-teacher relationship. He asserts that within the African-American community, many of its members have adapted an assimilationist perspective and have chosen to adapt a more White cultural view in which race is downplayed or even ignored. This may be a self-protective strategy in that the study participants may believe that the key to getting along in this society (and in the primarily White structure of RHM) is to believe that merit is the only factor in their success. This view is problematic in that the outward appearance of equality often overshadows the more subtle and often more harmful forms of racism and inequality that minorities experience.

Anita’s thoughts were somewhat different than that of Tiana and Katherine. Her resistance to believing race played a role in her relationships with her children’s teachers was based on her beliefs of who she is as a person. Anita stated:
You mean me personally? Do I feel like race is a barrier in my relationships with them? Not at all because I’m secure with who I am and regardless of where I come from, I know who I am today and I know what got me here so there’s not anyone that could really talk down to me so I could meet you head on and we can have it out (laughter). That’s just how it is…I don’t feel intimidated by much. If anything, I’m trying to see if they [teachers] have something that sparks my interest and I’m gonna ask about it because that’s the only way I’m gonna know. And I’m intelligent enough to know that if I don’t ask questions I’ll never know. And that may be the very thing that I need to get to wherever I’m trying to go. So it doesn’t bother me that most of them are White. It doesn’t bother me at all.

While Anita did not appear to take on a colorblind perspective as Tiana and Katherine appeared to have, it is not completely clear if she does not believe race plays a role in her parent-teacher relationships. I assert that Anita recognizes the benefits that could be gained from engaging in a constructive and collaborative relationship with teachers. Rather than a case of colorblindness, I interpret this as a form of interest convergence (Bell, 1980). In this case, Anita’s interest (e.g. supporting her children’s education, learning something new) converge with the teacher’s interest (e.g. supporting student’s education) and may override her feelings of apprehension due to race.

Nevertheless, comments similar to Charlotte’s above, are supported by the literature and give us insight into the difficulties of building trusting cross cultural relationships. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) assert the same diversity that brings about rich personal experiences also brings with it challenges in the development of trust. This is primarily
because people have the tendency to extend trust more readily to people they perceive as similar to themselves. This seems to reflect Charlotte’s experience as stated above.

The trust that is more easily shared with individuals of the same race may also influence a parent’s perception of the level of support their child is receiving in their education. Nicole, whose children have recently had African-American teachers, describes feeling a level of comfort and trust in them:

**IS THERE A SENSE OF COMFORT OR TRUST WHEN THEY HAVE AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS?** I think it really is. I think I automatically assume it’s gonna be a little better experience for them…It’s like they wanted the same thing as I did, if not more. Like they were really into their education. Wanting to do this, make sure they had a higher grade level. Not wanting them to get mixed up in the system where they would get dropped back or left back. Or just put to the side. They actually wanted to further their education on a different level. So yes they gave me more of a trust.

Maria, whose children have rarely had African-American teachers, describes her desire for not only an African-American teacher, but a male teacher as well:

**HOW DO YOU THINK THE DIFFERENCES YOU IDENTIFIED INFLUENCE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILDREN’S TEACHERS?** Because our backgrounds are different, sometimes our communication style is different. Just having a ‘peace of mind’ is different, you know? I would like for my children to have a Black, male teacher. I think it would be a really good opportunity to have a role model for my children since I’m a single parent and their fathers are not in their lives.
The ideas of these participants highlight the desire of some African-American parents to have teachers who can better relate to them and their children based on the shared experience of race. What is common in each of these three examples is the desire to be at ease with the teacher and to know their child is learning. Maria describes a certain “peace of mind” she experiences when her children have had African-American teachers. Charlotte describes a similar experience of not feeling like the African-American teacher is “looking for an excuse to turn her in”. In Nicole’s experience, African-American teachers have gone a step beyond what is expected of them to ensure her children remain on grade level, which most assuredly, contributes to a parents’ sense of ease. The sentiments expressed by Maria, Charlotte and Nicole closely align with the research of Fields-Smith (2005) in her examination of African-American parents’ involvement before and after the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision to desegregate schools (Brown v. Board of Education). She reports that prior to desegregation, African-American parents had higher levels of trust in their children’s African-American teachers and schools. Parents were motivated to be involved based on their belief that “education would be their children’s ticket to freedom and upward mobility” (p. 131-132).

However, since desegregation African-American parents feel less trust in their children’s schools and often feel the need to closely monitor the teachers. Unfortunately, this sense of ease in the shared experience of race is not likely to happen often. According to the most recent statistics (2012-2013) for the county within which most RHM participants reside, only 12% of teachers are African-American.

Although Anita did not directly believe race played a role in her own personal relationships with her children’s teachers, she was aware of how difference in SES between
children and teachers may influence their relationship. Anita described her thoughts about the college student interns at RHM, most of who were pre-service teacher education candidates:

The kids [college student interns] never saw children like the ones at RHM. They didn’t grow up with kids of different colors. Everyone went to the country club and played golf and things of that nature. Most kids in the inner city, if you play golf it’s miniature golf at the amusement park. And how often can mom and dad, or mom, afford to take us to the amusement park or even have access to these types of things? I just think it makes a difference, you know, especially if the teachers that are coming in are not exposed to children of lower classes or different cultures. If they [teachers] are coming in from a privileged background, they have to know that there’s a different world than the one they come from. They have to be open minded and the willingness to know it’s different. But different doesn’t mean less. You can’t come in with that superiority, only superior in knowledge and not because I’m a better person. You know because there’s a lot of teachers in the world that have that superiority complex like that.

Despite what may be considered overgeneralizations, Anita makes a point that differences in race and SES do influence the teacher-child relationship. While she was the only participant to describe SES as a factor, research points to social class creating distinctive parenting styles that influence how parents define their role in their children’s lives (Lareau, 2002).

Both race and SES have been linked to differences in how parents think about themselves as parents and in how they involve themselves in their children’s educational experiences, both in the home and in the school. According to research, low-SES families are
less likely to have flexibility in their jobs and less reliable transportation (Fields-Smith, 2005). This makes attending school-sponsored functions more difficult when they are held during the school hours. What is often missing in the research is an examination of the home-based efforts made by these families to supplement the instruction happening in the school (Grolnick et al., 1997). These research findings clearly show that parents, despite the barriers that do exist, make efforts to support their children’s education.

**Theme 4: Desire to be Involved**

*When its Parent-Teacher Night she says, ‘Ma you don’t have to come up for that, you speak to them all the time’. I tell her, ‘but [daughter’s name] I want to go’! ~ Anita*

The desire to be involved in their children’s educational experiences was a theme echoed throughout each interview conducted. Each participant described what appeared to be a sincere desire to be more active within their children’s school. This sentiment is contrary to the stories told by much of the extant literature on the desires of low-SES African-American mothers. In Anita’s comment above, she describes her daughter pleading with her not to show up at the school again. Anita reports being involved in all of her children’s school experiences and contributes this behavior to that of her own parents:

*I was brought up in a home with my parents who were very much involved in the school system. My mother was PTA president and my father was on several community boards throughout my whole district. Education was key with us so that was just something that you had to do.*

Despite her disability, Anita was determined to be present at her daughter’s school. She describes the teacher’s reaction to her efforts:
When they [teachers] see me for the first time they know I have physical challenges. They say ‘Ms. Martin you don’t have to come up [to the school]. We can email or you can call’. But I still think it’s better for me to have that face-to-face sometimes so they can just see, in spite of it all, if I need to be here I’m gonna be here. Like when I was taking my driving instruction, one of the things was to let me drive to familiar places. My daughter’s school was the place I wanted to go.

Katherine’s story is somewhat similar. While she does not have a disability that would prevent her from being involved in her children’s schooling, she does have a criminal background that she has had to overcome in order to be allowed into the school. In a very touching moment, Katherine reflected upon her first ‘interactions’ with the schools:

Actually, last year I just got on the, I guess, contact list. You have to wait 30 days for them to go over your paperwork, but yeah, I got a call. WHO CALLED YOU? It was one of those pre-recorded calls to let me know my son was late for his last exam. But it made me feel so good because, I guess, I finally got accepted. So I called my son all excited. He was like, ‘they called you mom?’ [Laughter]. It was nice. I was like this feels good.

This automated call from the school gave Katherine hope that very soon she can be the contributing member of the school community that she desires. She shared with me that once she is allowed to enter the school building, she will be there every chance she gets.

Finally, Carina made an interesting comment on this topic. She explained that both she and her children’s father had a desire to be involved in the school experiences of their sons, but she involved herself more when they were younger (elementary school), and the
father took more of a participatory role at school as the boys got older (middle and high school). This is consistent with two areas in the literature. First, Fantuzzo et al. (2004) found higher levels of parental involvement in younger aged children. Second, Patel and Stevens (2010) found that fathers tended to be more involved with their male children’s educational experiences. Carina mentioned that she wanted to be more involved, but that “boys just need their fathers”. Along with the desire to be involved, participants in this study described participating in a variety of involvement activities, both school- and home-based.

**Theme 5: Varied Types of Involvement**

*When it comes to being involved, right now it’s just the PTA. But I was very highly involved. I would volunteer in the classroom, worked at the school store in the elementary school, and I would show up to everything they had at school. I was always there and I’m still very involved. Right now it’s mostly the PTA, just having the baby. ~Maria*

In Maria’s comments above, she describes school-based involvement activities she participated in prior to the birth of her youngest child. She showed a great deal of pride in those activities and mentioned that other parents would make positive comment to her about how much she was involved. Anita also described volunteering for various fundraisers for the school and even serving as a proctor during the school’s end of grade examinations. While her children were in elementary school, Carina described volunteering for school field trips and helping out in the classroom. Despite receiving fewer invitations for involvement than she did when her son was in elementary school, Tiana described how she involves herself in his middle school education:
I think I’m very involved [in my son’s education]. I always attend the Open Houses the school has. I want to meet the teachers and just see how the whole outlook of the school was. When it came time for him to pick his classes, I was there to see which classes he picked and to make sure they were ok.

Participants also described ways in which they supported their children’s education from home. Charlotte spends a lot of time supplementing the instruction that occurs in her son’s preschool classroom:

Besides helping him with his homework packet, we write our numbers. He thinks it’s a game, but really it’s me seeing where he is academically. We do letters and shapes. Last night we had a talk about transportation, different types of transportation. So when we’re in the car he’ll say, ‘that’s a truck and that’s a motorcycle’. I try not to treat him like a child so much. I mean, I treat him like an adult because that’s what I want him to be eventually, an adult. I don’t go too dramatic with him, mostly in the words and topics we discuss.

Nicole also described her home-based involvement activities with her children:

I really limit their television time. I know people say, ‘kids are gonna be kids’. But I say they can be kids by reading a book. My kids love to write and they love to read so I make the read and write something educational, the boys and the girls. On their birthdays I’m not running out buying all these different video games. I’m buying the little games for studying and math tutoring and stuff like that. Christmas is basically the same.
Research points to the overall importance of both home- and school-based involvement activities for children’s educational outcomes (Ginsburg-Block et al., 2010). What is interesting in the present study is the finding that all of the participants who involve themselves in school-based activities, do so not only to benefit their own child, but all of the children in the classroom or school. Proctoring exams, serving on the PTA committee, and assisting in the classroom are all activities that help children collectively. It appears that these participants are not only interested in what may be best for their own children, but for all children within that school community. This collectivist approach to involvement, particularly in urban school settings, has been found to positively contribute to long-term educational outcomes for all children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009).

**Theme 6: Work Negates School-based Involvement**

*I’m not as involved as I would like to be, basically because it’s [school-sponsored involvement activities] during the day and I can’t take off as much as I’d like. There always has to be two people at [my job] and I have to keep my paid time off for if he was to get sick.*

~Charlotte

While each of the study participants’ believed they contributed to their children’s education through either home- and/or school-based involvement activities, most admitted to not being as involved as they would like in school-based activities. Anita believed that her physical condition contributed to her inability to be at her daughter’s school more often and Katherine sited her past legal troubles due to substance abuse being a barrier. However, an interesting pattern appeared in the data with regard to work being a major barrier to involvement activities. Charlotte (above) discussed work as a barrier to her involvement.
She shared that most of the opportunities for school-based involvement occurred during her work hours. She is often forced to make difficult choices about how to use her earned leave time. Should she attend the school performance or save that time for an unexpected illness? Maria, who prides herself on her involvement, also discussed work as a barrier for greater involvement:

I would like to go to the school at least twice a week. I would like to be more involved in the PTA. I would like to be involved in the after school activities, the extra curricula activities that the children take advantage of. I really would like to do those things. But I work full time. I don’t just work 40 hours a week. I work 50, sometimes 55 hours a week.

Some participants had more flexible work schedules and more accommodating bosses that would allow them to leave work to attend to matters at school. However, these instances seemed to be predicated on problems occurring at school rather than the participants’ desire to serve the teacher, classroom, or school in some way. Tiana’s statement seemed to reflect this idea, “Actually they are pretty flexible with me. I guess because of me being the supervisor, she [my boss] is a little lenient and I can leave if something happens, if a problem occurs.” Nicole tells a similar story:

If anything happens [to my child while at school], I gotta go down to the [work] office. I say, ‘Look, I told y’all in the beginning I got kids and sometimes I might have to leave. I’ll come back. I have no problem with that.’ And they usually understand and they work with me. They’ve been very good with me.
Neither Tiana nor Nicole shared stories of leaving work to attend the PTA meeting or to assist in the classroom. In this way, work may also be a barrier to these mothers when involvement is voluntary rather than a necessity.

Contrary to the notion that low-SES families are not involved in their children’s education, this research found that they do, in fact, desire and make time to be involved in their children’s schooling and learning experiences. For this particular population, home-based involvement seems the most logical and convenient choice (Grolnick et al., 1997). Unfortunately, the parent’s efforts in the home are not always recognized and cause teachers and researchers to label these parents as uninvolved. This deficit perspective paints quite a different picture than what was found in my study. Barriers to involvement do exist within this population, more so than other populations (e.g., White, middle-class), but participants of this study find alternative ways to be involved.

Building relationships across differences is often difficult. This research has shown that the differences between the low-SES African-American mothers and their children’s White middle-class teachers create barriers to building trusting relationships. Trust is an important component as parents, teachers, students, and communities work together to support the education of all children. Building trust, I believe, begins with understanding the perspective of another. To do this, listening to and respecting the experiential knowledge of others is critical.

Theme 7: Just Talk to Me!

*I would be more involved if they had called me. ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS ASK? All they had to do was ask.* ~Carina
A prominent goal of this research was to identify ways in which schools and teachers can provide a more inviting environment for the involvement of all parents. To that end, it made sense to ask study participants what schools and teachers could do to increase their levels of involvement. The last question in the protocol asked participants to fill in the blank, ‘I would be more involved in my child’s education if the teacher or school would______’. Carina’s response (above), while quite simple, was echoed in almost every interview. Participants wanted teachers and schools to communicate with them. They wanted to feel a sense of partnership between themselves and their children’s teachers and schools. Katherine illustrates this sentiment as she discussed her anticipated involvement:

I think I would be involved if they made me feel that I was a part of his education.
You know, it’s one thing to send letters or memos to parents. But it’s another thing to make me feel like I’m also a part of whatever [my kids are] doing in school. You know, anybody can send a letter but just a little more communication would make a huge difference.

Maria’s thoughts were similar:

I think I would be more involved in my children’s education if the teacher would be more open to take the time to tell me the concerns that they have so that way we can work together. I don’t really know what type of concerns they have and I think I would be more involved if they would actually take that quality time and talk about what’s going on, what was the week like, what kinds of things would you like for me to support you in.
Charlotte asked for more details in her communication with her teachers, “Tell me exactly what you want from me, and if it’s at a time that I could make it, I will be there.” Tiana, recognizing the stress that teachers are often faced with, asked that the teachers “open up more” to her. “Tell me what I can do to make it better for both of us” she stated. “Help me help you.”

Opposite from the stereotypical view of the low-SES African-American mother, the participants in this study all desire to be involved in both the home- and school-based educational activities of their children. Above, they describe the importance of communication as a means of pulling them in and encouraging greater levels of involvement. In reality, their life circumstances (e.g., inflexible work hours, multiple children, disabilities, criminal background) provide real barriers to their school-based involvement, but they appear to want a closer connection with the school and the teachers. This connection could make the difference in their motivation to work around those barriers. The message here is clear, they want to communicate, and they want a connection. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the participants’ desire for connection can be seen in their commitment to the weekly RHM meetings. There they form partnerships with volunteers and the case managers in an effort to effect change in their lives and in the lives of their children.

**Case Manger Interviews**

This section of the chapter focuses on the interviews conducted with two case managers who work very closely with the RHM participants. In their role, they often attend meetings with teachers and school administrators with or on behalf of parents. In this way, they serve as liaisons between parents and schools and could provide important insights.
about those relationships. Their other responsibilities include developing and implementing plans to support the growth and development of the RHM children, supporting parents with child or parenting related issues, and identifying necessary resources for the children including academic, behavioral, and emotional support.

The perspectives of the case managers add a valuable context to this research in two ways. First, their perspective further elaborates on the barriers experienced between schools and families. While the primary research participants described work as the primary barrier to their involvement, the case managers’ perspective was quite different, noting the lack of understanding of school culture, lack of confidence, and lack of time as the primary barriers. The case managers also add an interesting perspective on how race and income influence the interactions and relationships between parents and teachers by giving first-hand accounts of some of these interactions. Each of these are discussed below.

Important to note, while these case managers offer valuable insights about their understanding of the relationship between RHM parent and their children’s teachers, their perspectives were not used to legitimize the primary participants’ experiences. The experiences of the primary research participants stand on their own and are the focus of this research. The case managers, however, were in a unique position to speak about sensitive subjects such as parenting practices and race. In their professional roles, the case managers carried with them more power, privilege, and voice than the RHM parents and had less to lose by discussing and exposing the practices of teachers in schools. To that end, they add valuable insights about their understanding of how race and income influence the parent-teacher relationship (Research Question #2) and their understanding of the barriers the
participants face (Research Question #3). They could not, however, speak to how parents conceptualize the roles of parents, teachers, schools, or students (Research Question #1), nor could they offer strategies for increased involvement from the perspective of the low-SES African-American mother (Research Question #4).

It is also important to understand that the case managers shared their perspectives of working with the entire RHM population over multiple years, not just the participants of this study. While the case managers experiences may differ from the stories told by the primary research participants, it should not discount or lessen the value of the experiences perceived by the participants. Also important is the fact that the case managers speak about parent’s experiences with school-based interactions and involvement that they experience first-hand. They do not speak about the efforts parents make outside of the school to ensure their children’s academic success.

**Theme #1: Barriers Between Families and Schools**

As mentioned, the RHM case managers serve an important role as liaisons between schools and parents. They are often the middleman between the two, transferring information from one party to the next, setting up meetings, and providing support to both teachers and parents on behalf of the students. Both case managers spoke about parents having difficulty developing relationships with teachers. Chonda, the 29 year-old African-American program manager, spoke about new RHM participants’ initial feelings towards teachers and schools:

They initially have a difficult time engaging the teachers. Basically, they just feel lost. A lot of them don’t feel educated enough to understand what’s happening in the school system. But once we sit down with them and kind of explain what’s happening
we see a different perspective. We see their eyes open…Parents just don’t know what their rights are in the school system. A lot of times when we go into the schools and talk to the teachers we’re constantly talking about the rights you have as a parent and as a child. What you can deal with and what you can’t deal with. What they can do and what they can’t do. And a lot of times you see parents get a little more comfortable about being there when they start to understand.

Chonda suggests that RHM participants lack a certain knowledge base or cultural capital that would help them understand how schools work. Schools hold a largely middle-class value system and prefer certain behaviors of their parents. This is important because the primarily low-SES RHM participants often have a very different habitus or disposition than that which is valued by the school system (Lee & Bowman, 2006). Chonda attempts to provide parents with access to the knowledge base, thereby leveling the playing field and making parents more comfortable in the school setting. She remarks that once they have access, “We see their eyes open up” and that they begin to feel “a little more comfortable about being there”.

From her comments, the lack of knowledge or cultural capital appears to be a barrier in parents’ relationships and involvement in the schools.

Isabella, the 24 year-old White case manager, also had interesting thoughts about the barriers parents experience. In her comments below, she supports Chonda’s previous sentiment about the importance of ‘know how’, which can be interpreted as cultural capital. She also identified two other factors involved in the parent’s levels of comfort in the school:

I think there are probably multiple factors involved in a parent feeling comfortable in the schools. The first being confidence, confidence in their own self-presentation,
confidence in their ability to take charge of something, to take initiative. You know, to actually find that phone number, and make the phone call, and set up the appointment, and drive to the school, and go to the classroom, and meet with the teacher. I mean those things take effort and confidence and also the ‘know how’ that some of our parents lack. That would be the first thing, just that confidence. And the second would be time. All of those things that I just mentioned take time and a lot of these parents are having difficulty sleeping because they’re worried about paying their rent. Or maybe even finding a place to live or why their child in grade 5 is wetting the bed four to five nights a week. Those are the kinds of issues that our parents are dealing with. Meeting the teacher is not always as important as what their child is going to wear and how they’re gonna get to school. I think it varies between those two factors.

Isabella’s comment about the confidence of participants resembles Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as one’s belief in their ability to succeed at a task. While some might find the task of contacting the teacher, setting up an appointment, and getting to the school an easy task, for those with lower levels of self-efficacy, this seemingly easy task can prove very difficult. Additionally, Isabella notes that the complexities of the lives of the RHM participants often takes time away from what they may perceive as less immediate issues. When faced with potential eviction, job loss, or other financial strain, a request to be present at school may be less important.

Both Chonda and Isabella report attempts to empower parents to become and remain engaged in their children’s education despite the barriers they may experience. In the
following quote, Chonda described how she urges parents to engage with the schools “no matter what”:

It’s just not easy going up there to the school. And unfortunately a lot of our parents are called up there for bad things. What do you do? What do you say? And so we try to remind them to be a present face. To just show up or just go to teacher conferences no matter what. And one of the most important things that we share with our parents is that a teacher loves a willing parent. Just to show up, just to call, just to email, just to stay engaged. You can ensure that your child is learning and being paid attention to when you’re engaging. So a lot of times we start from that angle and work our way in.

Early experiences in the schools supported by the case managers appear to make the difference in parents’ desire to be involved. Isabella describes how her presence as a liaison between parent and teacher helps the parent increase their desire for involvement:

I will say that their desire to be involved only increases from start to finish in their time at RHM. I really sense empowerment and excitement to get involved. Because it’s amazing just having somebody there with them. Someone to go to school with them, someone to ask questions of when they don’t even know what questions to ask. That’s empowering. And, and I can relate to that. When I’m nervous about going somewhere, even if it’s just to a social event, it just feels so much better to have someone with me. So I think that there’s just something psychologically comforting in that.
While work proved to be the greatest barrier in the involvement activities from the perspective of the primary research participants, the case managers had a different perspective. They noted lack of cultural capital, lack of self-efficacy, and lack of time given the other life stressors as major barriers to school involvement of their RHM clients. Despite the differences, understanding the barriers from both perspectives seems important in developing better home-school relationships, particularly in those relationships which are further complicated by differences in race and income.

**Theme #2: Race and Income Mediate Relationships**

Race and income, within the context of the parent-teacher relationship, are viewed differently by the participants of this study. Of the primary research participants, only three of the seven identified race as an important factor in their relationship with their children’s teachers and only one participant identified income (SES) as a possible factor. Likewise, the case managers’ thoughts about how race and income impact the relationship appear disparate. In the following quote, Chonda, the African-American case manager, seemed to almost downplay the RHM participants’ complaints about their low-SES, African-American children being treated differently in the classroom. Chonda says:

Speaking from just my own personal experience, I hear a lot of parents say, ‘this is happening because I’m African-American or I’m low-income. That’s why my child is being singled out’. A lot of times we hear that because a lot of times we’re raised to think that. The low-income piece may have a little bit to do with it. We definitely hear that a lot. It’s difficult, our parents can’t compete intellectually sometimes with other
individuals who may have more education and more experience working with teachers, but you know, we can’t say one way or another that that’s the reason. In this statement, Chonda appears to bypass the issue of race and only slightly considers income as a factor. When pushed on the issue, she was able to recall instances where teachers appear to make assumptions about students based on race and income. As she recounts these instances, she appears to move from indecisiveness about the influences of race and/or income to the inability to discount it as a factor in the parent-teacher relationship:

I’ve had one or two cases where teachers have apologized for saying things that were inappropriate along those lines. They say things like, ‘I just assumed that he didn’t have any money’ or ‘I just assumed that he couldn’t afford to go on the field trip so I just told him to sit back or stay with another teacher’. Obviously that’s a red flag. You can’t do that. You just cannot do that. Another teacher said, ‘she always sits with these particular kids here so I didn’t place her with the other group because I felt like she wouldn’t engage with them’. Again, you can’t do that. SO TEACHERS ARE MAKING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THIS CHILD BECAUSE HE’S BLACK OR THIS CHILD BECAUSE THEY HAVE THIS ASSUMPTION ABOUT THEIR LEVEL OF INCOME? Yes I’ve heard things like that and I’ve witnessed it as well. But I think that the key here is that the teachers admit it. I’m not sure if they’re under pressure, but they say, ‘yes I thought this’ or ‘yes I thought that’. So apparently this could be happening in other classrooms too, to be quite honest, which is very disturbing. [Long pause] There are lots of other slurs and things that I’ve heard and
had to deal with on behalf of our participants. But I, we can’t ignore that it’s a possibility and we can’t ignore that it has happened before.

Chonda’s statement, “we can’t say one way or another that that’s the reason” may represent a colorblind mentality as well as her initial desire to believe that race and income play minimal roles in relationships (Bonillia-Silva, 2006). But when pushed to recall specific instances, her statement “we can’t ignore that it’s a possibility and we can’t ignore that it has happened before” appears to represent a small shift in her thinking as she becomes less willing to discount the effects of race and income on the relationships between RHM parents and their children’s teachers.

Isabella also shared experiences where she believed race and income influenced the communication between parents, teachers and other school administrators. In the first example, she described a meeting consisting of an African-American mother, herself, and 5 other school officials.

I can kind of picture one particular meeting that was between a parent, two teachers, a student support teacher, a counselor and a principal and myself. Everyone in the room was Caucasian with the exception of the mother, who is African-American. She is very overweight and very low income. And I could just tell that she felt threatened and just uncomfortable. She was just in a big t-shirt and sweatpants and everyone else including myself was in professional attire... I think that had all of those people been involved in a meeting with maybe my mom, you know someone middle class and of the same race, they may have communicated in a different way…Because they seemed to be just a little bit condescending in the way that they were speaking to her.
In the second example, Isabella describes the interactions she witnessed between an African-American RHM mother and a white male teacher and the same African-American mother and a female African-American teacher:

I have also gone to a school meeting with a parent who had multiple children, who had gone to multiple school visits for different ages but also for her different children. One teacher was a white male and the other teacher was an African-American female and the mother was African-American. And I remember walking away thinking my gosh, she was so much more comfortable with the African-American female. And she was, I mean her body language, the words that she chose. When the white male teacher asked her questions she deflected them a bit easier. Her speech almost seemed a little bit dumb down. She stuttered a bit with him. When we got with the African-American teacher it was almost like she was taking lead in the meeting. She seemed confident. I mean that was the same mother!

Isabella’s reflections about race and income on parent-teacher communication illustrate the power structure that is often at play within the relationship. Because the teacher, who is often more educated than the parent, has an intimate understanding of the ‘rules’ of schools, and has greater control over the outcomes of the parent-teacher meeting, he or she is likely to yield more power in the parent-teacher relationship. This power appears to be exacerbated by race, income, and number in Isabella’s first example, and race and gender in the second example. The fact that the RHM participant appeared more comfortable in the meeting with the African-American teacher could represent a perceived leveling of power, or the African-American teacher’s willingness to share the power.
The perspective of the case managers adds to the voice of the primary research participants and allows us a peek into the complex lives of low-SES African-American mothers as they interact with teachers and make their involvement decisions. We see that their desire to do what is in the best interest of their children is often complicated by both personal and relational issues that are confounded by race, income level, and gender. To fully understand their perspective, one must understand how the various social disadvantages experienced by the study participants intersect to influence their daily experiences and their relationships with schools and teachers.

**Application of a Critical Race Perspective: Intersectionality**

The experiences of the RHM mothers who participated in this study have been shaped by, among other things, race (African-American), gender (female), and income level (low-SES). Examined independently, each of these identities puts participants at a social disadvantage. Combined, these identities intersect to further disadvantage, marginalize, and silence these women (Crenshaw, 1989). The intersection of race, gender and income in the lives of the study participants can be seen in various areas of the research that has been previously discussed. In this section, I will elaborate on intersectionality in the experiences of the participants. I will examine how the social disadvantages many of the participants experience influence their lives, experiences, and parent-teacher relationships (see Table 4 for Intersectionality Table). Lastly, I will examine how the case managers’ support works to legitimize participants’ experiences in schools.
Table 4

Intersectionality Table

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<th>Intersections</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race &amp; Gender</td>
<td>Charlotte's relationship with her son’s teacher</td>
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<td>Race, Gender, Marital Status</td>
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<td>Race, Gender, SES &amp; Persona</td>
<td>Carina &amp; Charlotte's habitus</td>
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As previously mentioned, race, gender, and income level has shaped the identities of the primary research participants. Who they believe themselves to be as mothers, parents, and community members is inseparable from their identity as African-American woman of low-income status. Maria’s story exemplifies this idea. In her comments about her role as an advocate for her children, Maria recognizes the stereotypes that she faces being a “Black single woman”.

You know, as a Black single woman, we get stereotyped a lot. Especially when it comes to our young Black sons and not having a father in the home to advocate for them. And that’s something that I was not going to be a part of. I definitely challenged myself that I was going to be that advocate. When they [the teachers] saw me, they knew that I was that parent that plays the mother and she plays the father.
Maria’s advocacy role appears to be motivated by her experience as an African-American single woman. Cognizant of the stereotypes held about this group, Maria makes attempts to be seen in a different light by her children’s teachers. In this way, Maria appears to make choices about her identity performance. Carbado & Gulati (2001) describes the theory of identity performance in the following way:

> In a nutshell, the theory of identity performance is that a person’s experiences with and vulnerability to discrimination are based not just on a status marker of difference (call this a person’s status identity) but also on the choices that person makes about how to present her difference (call this a person’s performance identity). (p. 701)

I assert that it is the intersection of these identities that gives her motivation power. If Maria was married, non-Black, a man, or any combination of these alternate identities, her perceptions about her role would most certainly be different.

Anita provides another example of intersectionality in her thoughts about RHM’s college student interns and their work with the Children’s Program participants:

> The kids [college student interns] never saw children like the ones at RHM. They didn’t grow up with kids of different colors…I just think it makes a difference, you know, especially if the teachers that are coming in are not exposed to children of lower classes or different cultures. If they [teachers] are coming in from a privileged background, they have to know that there’s a different world than the one they come from. They have to be open minded and have the willingness to know it’s different. But different doesn’t mean less. You can’t come in with that superiority, only superior in knowledge and not because I’m a better person.
In her comments, the intersection of race and SES is evident. The children Anita refers to are primarily African-American and low-SES. These identities come together to form a culture that is different than that of the primarily White middle-class college student interns. Anita’s desire is that the interns understand these differences and recognize that the differences do not reflect a deficiency in the culture. Again, it is the intersection of the children’s identities that motivates these comments from Anita. Had the children and interns shared the same race and/or social class, she would be less likely to have concerns about differences in culture. In this way, it appears that it is the absence or perceived absence of shared experiences that influences perceptions and relationships.

As mentioned previously, race appears to mediate trust in the parent-teacher relationship. As such, we can also say that having someone who experiences similar intersections in identity (e.g., race, gender, social status) seem to support better relationships between parents and teaches. Recall Charlotte’s comments about how her relationship with her child’s teacher would be different without the similarities in intersections:

If she [son’s teacher] was Caucasian I probably wouldn’t be as friendly or as social to her. Well, I probably would be friendly, but not as social…I just don’t think I would have had the same relationship.

Charlotte’s relationship with her son’s African-American teacher is supported by the shared experience of being both African-American and female. She perceives that if her son’s teacher had been a White woman, she would not engage her in the same way. Similarly, as previously discussed, Maria attributes her absence of “peace of mind” to an absence in similarities in intersections.
While the intersection of race, gender and income strongly influence our identity; they are not the only disadvantages the study participants face. While these are the ones they have in common, each are burdened with other social disadvantages that are difficult to separate from their other identities. Most apparent in the group interviewed for this research is the physical disability of Anita. While disability has its own unique voice and experiences, they intersect with other social disadvantages to create more complex intersections and identities. Just as with other disadvantages, very often the voices of people with disabilities are not heard and their complex experiences are often reduced to one characteristic, the label for the specific impairment (Rocco, 2005). Anita, however, appears to work hard to perform her identity in a way which overcomes the label of her disability. While not the whole of her identity, Anita does recognize that the disability plays a significant role in how she sees herself. Not only does she recognize the disability, but so too do the teachers at her daughter’s school. They offer to mail items that parents would typically have to pick up from school and they offer to conduct parent-teacher conferences over the phone as not to inconvenience her any further. In this way, the disadvantage of her disability elicits sympathy and compassion from teacher.

Other social disadvantages experienced by the RHM participants do not elicit such sympathy. Both Maria and Katherine carry with them the social burden of criminal records brought about due to prior substance abuse. The incarceration of African-American women for drug crimes is on the rise (Crenshaw, 2012). Individuals in similar situations, particularly those who have been released, are often subjected to formal laws and informal rules (some regarding their ability to enter school buildings), which work to further reinforce social
stigmas and further confine them to the margins of mainstream society (Alexander, 2012). African-American women who were incarcerated not only face difficulty securing housing and employment once they are allowed to reenter society (Brown, 2010), but they also have difficulty reentering the school building. These additional burdens intersect with the burdens of being non-White, single, and low-SES, and serve to further alienate them from their children’s schools. Maria appears to have worked through any issues that would keep her from being present at her children’s schools, but Katherine has not yet fully resolved her issues. In addition, certain personality traits along with other social disadvantages intersect to create an even more complex dynamic that may contribute to the further alienation of RHM participants from the schools. Carina describes herself as awkwardly shy and Charlotte’s to-the-point personality might be off-putting to schools and teachers who desire a more middle-class habitus.

Overcoming the burden that these women face within the schools is a difficult task, one that may be made easier with the support of the RHM case managers. The case managers, who both bring with them a middle-class capital, may work to legitimize the parents within the schools and lessen some of the burden that they experience as low-SES African-American women. Having an ally, one who is familiar with the experience of the RHM parents as well as the expectations of the schools could be beneficial in bridging the gap between institutional trust and relational trust in an effort to increase parental engagement in schools.

Summary
Using a thematic approach, this chapter provided a summary of the research findings. In all, seven themes were discerned from the interviews with the primary research participants and two from the interviews with the case managers. Each theme contributed to answering the four research questions that were the focus of the study. Using thick, rich description, the voices of the study participants were amplified in an effort to understand the complexities of parent-teacher relationships and how the intersectionality of race, SES and other social disadvantages influence decisions about parental school involvement. In Chapter 5, I will summarize the research process and findings. I will discuss the implications of this study for parents, teachers, schools and communities with a particular focus on identifying specific ways to engage parents in their children’s educational experiences. This will be followed by a discussion of the limitations of the study and an examination of areas of future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of low-SES African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their decisions to become involved in their children’s school experiences. This chapter provides a summary of the research process and of the findings of the study. It also notes the implications of the study, the study’s limitations, and suggests areas of future research.

Summary of Study

This study sought to ascertain the experiences of seven low-SES African-American mothers who self-selected to participate in this research. Over the course of two months during the summer of 2011, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the seven primary research participants who were current or past members of RHM, a non-profit organization whose mission was to assist in the creation of more stable lives of its members. In addition, two interviews with case managers familiar with the school experiences of the RHM participants were also conducted. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. While the interviews were being transcribed, an a priori coding table based on the interview questions was created. Later, during the analysis phase, additional codes emerged and were added to the coding table. Participant quotes relevant to the codes were identified and themes began to arise. From the interviews with the primary research participants, the following seven themes were identified: (a) Education as a shared responsibility; (b) Trust given, not earned; (c) Race mediates trust; (d) Desire to be involved; (e) Varied types of involvement; (f) Work negates school-based involvement; and (g) Just talk to me! A similar process occurred for the interviews with the case managers. That
process brought about two additional themes: (a) Barriers between families and schools; (b)
Race and income mediate relationships. A final examination of the data was conducted to
ascertain areas where participants discussed or alluded to the intersection of race, gender, and
income in their experiences in with their children’s teachers and schools. Findings were
organized and presented in this document.

Summary of Findings

This section summarizes the major findings of this research based on the individual
research questions.

Research Questions #1: How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the
roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in their child’s education?

Contrary to research that examines the parenting trends of middle- and working-class
parents (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Lareau, 1987), the low-SES participants of this study,
conceptualized the roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in similar ways as
parents holding a middle-class status. Specifically, they viewed education as a shared
responsibility between parents, teachers, and children. This finding is consistent with much
of the extant literature (i.e., Fan et al., 2001; Hill, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010;
Jeynes, 2007). The relationship between the parent and teacher was thought to be vitally
important and compared to that of a husband and wife. Participants believed the
communities’ role was important as well, but perhaps to a lesser degree than that of the
parent and teacher, as many had difficulty articulating that role. One participant spoke about
the lack of commitment of the Black community to its members. Delgado-Gaitin (1991) and
Lareau & Horvat (1999) explain this disconnect between the African-American family and
their children’s schools as a result of the long history of skepticism since the integration of schools as they have continually failed to educated and support their community. Participants also believed that the role of the child in their own education was an active one. As participants view themselves in the parenting role, their identities appear to be shaped by the disadvantages they carry with them including race, gender, income level, disability, and criminal background. These multiple disadvantages intersect to influence not only their own perceptions of themselves (Crenshaw, 1989), but also how they perform their roles within those identities (Carbado & Gulati, 2001) and how they enter into relationships with others (Shields, 2008).

**Research Question #2: How do differences in race and SES of study participants and their children’s teachers influence the parent-teacher relationship and how might these differences influence levels of trust?**

Race and SES were found to influence both the parent-teacher relationship, as well as the level of trust afforded to schools and teachers. While most participants entered into the school with a level of trust that appeared to be based on the school’s status in society (institution-based trust), closer and more personal relationships between parent and teacher (relational trust) appeared to be mediated by both race and income (Beard & Brown, 2008; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; Williams & Barber, 2007). Overall, participants found it easier to establish trusting relationships with teachers who were similar in race. Some held the belief that their children would be better cared for and educated by African-American teachers who would spend more time ensuring their academic success. This feeling is supported by the extant literature. Williams & Barber
(2007) found that some African-Americans do not believe that schools operate in the best interest of their children. The case managers also came to similar conclusions finding that race and income influenced the parent-teacher relationship. Case managers believed that study participants were more comfortable in parent-teacher conferences and other school settings when the teacher was African-American, citing examples of first-hand accounts of these interactions. Case managers also alluded to the power dynamics that exist when low-SES African-American mothers interact with middle-class White school officials. Here again, the identities the women carry with them seem to influence how they engage in relationships with teachers and school administrators. They appear more comfortable with teachers and administrators who shared similar disadvantages.

Research Question #3: How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s education and what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?

This research found that the low-SES African-American mothers who participated in this study had a sincere desire to be involved in their children’s education and were in fact very involved in both home- and school-based involvement activities. Participants described home-based involvement including supporting children with homework and monitoring television viewing. School-based involvement described by participants included attending open house activities, volunteering with the school’s PTA, and proctoring examinations. Based on the range of involvement activities cited by the participants, it appeared that they were not only interested in what would be in the best interest of their own children, but for all children within the school community. They appeared to hold a collectivist approach to involvement which has been found to positively contribute to long-term educational
outcomes for all children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). While all participants gave examples of ways in which they were involved in both home- and school-based activities, most admitted that they were not as involved as they desired to be. The primary barrier to greater involvement cited by participants was work. This aligns with research citing that low-income families are less able to attend many of the school-based involvement activities that typically occur during the school day (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Lareau, 1987).

Case managers had a different perspective on the barriers between families and schools. From their perspective, lack of cultural capital, low self-efficacy for involvement activities, and lack of time given the other life stressors were the major barriers to school involvement for RHM participants. This supports much of the existing literature on race and SES differences in PI practices (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Grolnick et al., 1997; Lareau 1987, 2002). Both case managers believed their role as a liaison between parents and teachers helped parents to overcome some of these barriers. In their roles, they teach parents their rights within the schools, they encourage parents to get involved despite personal challenges that may exist, and they offer individual parenting support to RHM members as needed.

Taken together, the barriers to PI that both the primary research participants and the case managers cite can be easily viewed from the lens of intersectionality. The combination of race, income level, and gender intersect to create the experience of disadvantage, marginalization, and silencing of the participants (Crenshaw, 1989). Indeed, if participants were of a different race, gender, social, or marital status, their experiences with schools, their
involvement choices, and the barriers they perceive would be different. These participants, however, are further disadvantaged by disability, criminal history, and disposition. Each of these additional intersections further disadvantage participants and create wider relational and communication gaps between parents and teachers. From this research, we see that being non-White, non-middle class, non-married, among other identities forms a unique experience for parents and influences their PI activities and the perceived barriers that negate such involvement.

**Research Question #4: What strategies do low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of school-based parent involvement?**

Simply stated, research participants desired greater levels of communication from the teachers and schools. While they appreciated the memos and letters that schools provided detailing the events occurring in the school and classroom, they also desired child-specific information that would assist them in supporting their child’s education at home. Participants wanted to feel a connection and a sense of partnership between themselves and their children’s teachers and schools. This opposes the stereotypical view of the uninvolved, disengaged low-SES African-American parent. Despite the real barriers that exist in their lives (e.g., inflexible work hours, multiple children, disabilities, criminal backgrounds) they desire to communicate and connect with schools.

**Implications**

The results of this study allow us to draw conclusions about the experiences of low-SES African-American mothers as they engage in the shared experience of educating their
children, as they make decisions about being involved in home- or school-based educational activities, and the factors that influence the relationships they build with their children’s teachers. From these conclusions, I offer implications for teachers and schools, university-level teacher education programs, and parenting and family support programs as they work toward increasing PI for the shared goal of increasing student’s academic outcomes.

**Implications for Teachers.** The relationship that is formed between the parent and teacher appears important in the parents’ overall decision to engage with the teacher and school. The following are suggestions, based on this research, that teacher should consider in their efforts to further engage low-SES African-American families:

1. Teacher must recognize the barriers that exist that may negate not only involvement activities, but may also negate the building of collaborative relationships between parents and teachers. Race, income, work, self-efficacy, cultural capital, and life stressors all factor into how parents perceive their role as parents, how they believe their time is best spent, and how comfortable they are engaging in the school/classroom setting (Gay, G., 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Understanding this is critical for teachers and should inform their understanding and expectations of parents.

2. Teachers should work to view parents as allies with a shared responsibility for educating the student (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Sanders, 2000). The participants of this study fully believe that they play a role in their children’s education and each had a desire to assist teachers in that task, despite the barriers that exist. Just as teachers should differentiate the curriculum for the individual needs of
children, they should also differentiate the level of expectation of involvement from all parents. Teachers should view all parents as partners, those who show up for school-based activities, and those who do not.

3. Teachers should reach out to parents in ways that are convenient for the parent (Comer, 1996; Epstein & Salinas, 2001; Marcon, 1999; Murray, 2009) understanding that while email might be one parent’s preferred method of communication, it may not be for all.

4. Teachers should understand that the cultural perspective from which teachers and schools operate may differ from that of the parent (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lareau, 1987, 2002). Teachers should work to increase their level of cultural competence. This can be done by engaging families in conversations and showing a real interest in their lives and experiences. As a result, relationships based on relational trust may be formed.

**Implications for Teacher Education Programs & Schools.** University-based teacher education programs play an important role in educating teachers to not only teach, but to work with families as well. Even still, teachers continue to grow and learn long after they earn their degrees and initial teacher certifications. It is the responsibility of both university-based teacher education programs and school-based professional development initiatives to support teachers in their work with families. Based on this research, I offer the following suggestions for those responsible for curriculum development at the level of teacher education programs and school-based professional development:
1. Curricula should be designed to support the growth and awareness of pre-service teachers and fully licensed teachers’ awareness of cultural diversity. Specifically, the curriculum should introduce strategies with which teachers can employ to engage and support families of various cultures, income levels, family structures, and needs (Delpit, 1997; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

2. Teacher education programs should offer their pre-service teachers multiple opportunities for students to engage with families of all types. Early experiences will allow pre-service teachers an opportunity to reflect on their own identities and how they may be similar to or different from the population represented in this study.

3. Multiple opportunities for pre-service and licensed teachers to be exposed to literature written from the perspective of low-SES and minority families should be available (e.g., Delpit, 1997; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Much literature exists which examines the parenting practices of low-SES and African-American parents using a White middle-class lens. This literature often paints a picture of these families from a deficit perspective. Understanding what motivates parents’ behavior may contribute to greater engagement with families.

**Implications for Parenting & Family Support Programs.** The participants in this study are supported in their parenting practices by their membership in RHM. In their goal of creating more stable lives for their members, they recognize the importance of also stabilizing the relationships between parents and teachers. Based on the findings of this
study, I suggest the following for parenting and other support programs designed to improve parent’s involvement in their children’s education:

1. Just as teachers should be assisted in understanding the values of the diverse families they serve, parents should also be taught the often ‘hidden’ values of the schools (Freire, 1970). Teaching parents how to interact with teachers and school officials, their rights and the rights of their children, and the appropriate protocol to follow when issues arise will help parents be better received by the school.

2. Help parents understand the importance of their role in their children’s education (Epstein, 2005; Grolnick et al., 1997). While the participants of this study seemed to be aware of the importance of their involvement, others may need explicit connections between the parent’s involvement activities and academic outcomes of children. Parents may also need to know explicit examples of how to support their children’s education (Epstein & Salinas, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Many low-SES families did not have high levels of support from their own families, making it even more challenging for them to offer their support. Connecting parents to community resources for tutoring, behavior, emotional, and other forms of support may help increase self-efficacy, and thereby involvement.

**Study Limitations**

Just as all research has limitations, so too did this study. Limitations were most evident in the sample population. First, some may believe that the small sample size of this research puts limits on the overall generalizability of the findings to the larger population of
low-SES African-American mothers. While this may be true, my goal was not to offer findings that were generalizable. Rather, it was my desire to amplify the individual voices of the women who participated in this study. I attempted to provide enough detail in their stories so that the reader might decide for him or herself what, if anything, is transferable to other groups of women (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, some might find that the fact that these women were already engaged in the process of reconstructing their lives by participating in RHM further separates them from the larger population of African-American women and further limits this study. Indeed, these women were already on the path toward more stable lives for themselves and for their children, however, I assert that they are not unlike other low-SES African-American women in their city, state and around the country. Research points to the increasing numbers of upwardly mobile poor and working-class African-American women. While a college education is seen as the most likely ‘ticket out of poverty’ for African-American women (Cole & Omari, 2003; Shaw & Coleman, 2000), I further assert that RHM may provide participants with a more cost-effective and immediate form of education. A finally limitation of this study may be seen in the selection process for the research participants. Individuals were allowed to self-select into this study, which may suggest a greater interest in the subject matter than those who chose not to participate. I believe this is a strength of this research rather than a limitation. It is the participants’ interest in the subject matter and their willingness to provide thoughtful and meaningful contributions that is at the heart of this study.

Limitations of research bias may have also existed in this study. While I attempted to remain unbiased, my connections with the research participants existed on both a
professional and personal level. My employment with RHM provided a professional connection with the participants. I reminded each of them that their participation in no way affected their membership or experience in the RHM programs. On a personal level, my own experiences developing and maintaining relationships with my children’s teachers and making decisions about my own home- and school-based involvement decisions occasionally arose. Additionally, sharing similar concerns for the experiences of African-American children in schools brought about rich conversations between two mothers with a shared experience and desire, rather than between a researcher and a study participant. When either of these experiences of personal connections occurred, I quickly tried to refocus the conversation back to the experience of the participant. Even so, Bogden and Biklen (2007) assert that this subjectivity is considered a part of all research and is an important aspect of the work. They state, “A researcher’s standpoint can be considered an entry into the data” (p. 38). In this way, I believe my connections with the women of this study worked to enhance the quality of the interview and of the research findings.

Finally, the lack of generalizability may be seen to some as a limitation of this research. While there is certainly a need for greater investment of time and resources into exploring the experiences of low-SES African-Americans in a way that can be generalized to the larger population, that was not the goal of this study. This study was designed to hear from only a few voices and to tell their story with thick and rich detail. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, it is the reader’s job to determine whether and to what extent this findings of this research can be applied to others. It is my sincere desire that the stories of these seven
women will spark the interest of others and will be a catalyst for new, larger and more comprehensive examination of the experiences of this population in the schools.

**Future Research**

Despite the perceived limitations of the study, this area of research is primed for further examination. While the construct of parental involvement has been extensively theorized and conceptualized, low-SES and African-American’s experiences in the school, an important measure for school-based involvement, has not been. Much more research is needed to fully understand the complexities of the parent-teacher relationship particularly when a misalignment exists between culture and experiences. Based on these research findings, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Very few studies exist which focus on the parental involvement activities of low-SES African-American parents. Even fewer exist that examine parental behavior from a strengths-based approach. Replicating this study utilizing a larger, more diverse group of low-SES African-American families would greatly inform and extend this area of research.

2. Based on the results of this study, it seems relevant to further examine how trust is developed and maintained in the relationship between low-SES African-American parents and their children’s teachers. Additionally, it seems important to examine the strength of institutional trust where parents freely give trust to the teacher/school versus relational trust, which is born out of experience and commitment to the relationship.
3. This research highlights the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of race, SES, and gender in the lived experience of the low-income African-American mothers who participated in this study. Further examination is needed to fully understand how individuals carry their intersected identities with them into their relationships with others. Examining how these identities make for differing experiences in the schools seems worthy of exploration.

4. While this research focused solely on the perspectives and experiences of low-SES African-American mothers, the perspective of their children’s teachers is of importance if we are to truly understand all of the barriers that exist in the formation of the parent-teacher relationship.

Summary

Vast amounts of literature exists that attempts to examine the complex construct of parental school involvement. This study, however, attempted to examine it from the perspective of the low-SES African-American mother, a perspective that is missing in much of the literature today. This research sought to answer four specific questions:

1. How do low-SES African-American mothers conceptualize the roles of the parent, teacher, community, and student in their children’s education?

2. How do differences in race and SES influence low-SES African-American mothers’ relationships with teachers, specifically their levels of trust?

3. How involved are low-SES African-American mothers in their children’s educational experiences as what, if any, barriers exist that negate involvement?
4. What strategies do low-SES African-American mothers recommend schools/teachers use to increase their levels of parental involvement?

Through semi-structured interviews with the primary research participants and supplemental interviews with knowledgeable others, a holistic picture of the PI practices of the study participants emerged. These stories raise important questions about how we conceptualize PI, the role race plays in the parent-teacher relationship, and how the intersectional identities of race, gender, income and other social disabilities function to influence how parents engage teachers and schools.

This research served a very personal need for me. As a middle-class, educated, African-American mother I too struggle with the intersections of my identities within my children’s classroom. I often struggle to decide which part(s) of my identity to perform. Will I perform my middle-class identity and follow along with the rules and values of the schools? Or will I perform my African-American identity, which is often skeptical of the treatment of minority students at the hands of non-minority teachers? Or will I perform my educated identity, the one that is knowledgeable about best practices in education and outspoken when those practices appear to be ignored in the classroom? In truth, these identities are not easily separated. Even if I could downplay certain elements of my identity so as not to make teachers uncomfortable, I am and will always be perceived by teachers as a middle-class, educated, African-American mother.

Interestingly, my identity situates me in a different position than the identity of the study participants. While we have in common the identities of African-American and mother, because I also identify as, and am perceived to be, educated and middle-class, I am afforded
a different standing in the school. This has never been more clear to me than in the last nine months of my doctoral program. While in the past I had been a regular face in both of my children’s classrooms, the writing of my dissertation has kept me away. The irony of writing a dissertation on parental involvement along with my own desire to be engaged with my children’s teachers and school left me feeling a great deal of guilt and anxiety. On the few occasions when I felt obligated to go to the schools my children’s teachers, all of whom know that I am a doctoral student, acknowledged my guilty feelings and often appeared to be understanding of my situation. At times I would hear, “don’t worry about it, Mrs. DeVose” or “we know what you are doing, your not just slacking off”. While I was grateful not to be perceived as a negligent parent, I wondered if my study participants would be given the same lenience? Not likely, given the stereotype of the uninvolved African-American parent.

In telling the stories of these women, I hope to accomplish several things. First, I hope that I was able to accurately portray the feelings of the participants. Just as important as the words they spoke is the passion with which they spoke those words. During the interviews I felt their frustration, their anguish and their anger. I also felt their desire to engage with teachers and schools despite real and perceived barriers they face. In telling their stories I also hope to provide a view of the complex issues these mothers face as they make their involvement decisions. For them and others like them, being present in the school is not a simple process. I hope that teachers and other school officials will broaden their view of parent involvement and look at the contextual issues that may keep families out of schools. Finally, in telling their stories I hope to provide this population with a voice at the table. I hope to use my ‘middle-class’ and ‘educated’ identities to help legitimize the voices of this
population and others who may be silenced in the schools and in the classrooms. This, I believe, is where my contribution to families and children begins.
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer
An invitation to participate in research about...

**African-American Women, Parental School Involvement & Parent-Teacher Relationships**

### About the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of African-American mothers as it relates to trusting their children’s teachers and their decisions to become involved in their children’s educational experiences.

**Criteria for Participation**

- African-American female participant of Reaching Higher Ministry
- Have children enrolled in preschool, elementary, middle or high school
- Believe that your involvement in your children’s education is beneficial for their academic success.

**Time Commitments**

- 1 hour for focus group
- 1 hour for interviews

**Study Times & Location**

All research activities will take place at the RHM offices on Tuesdays prior to the meetings (unless requested by participants).

### About the Researcher

Hello, I am Dina Walker-DeVose, a RHM volunteer and doctoral student at North Carolina State University in the College of Education. I am a mother of two children (6 and 11) and stepmother of 2 children (15 and 18). I am interested in the experiences of African-American mothers in their children’s schools and how race and income influence the teacher-parent relationship. I would love to hear your stories!

For more information contact me at dinawdevose@aol.com or (919) 408-6805.
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

ALL ABOUT YOU

- Your Name:
- Address:
- Contact Telephone/Cellular Number:
- Do you believe that it is important for you to participate in your child or children’s education?
  - ___ Yes
  - ____ No
- Gender:
  - ____ Female
  - ____ Male
- Race:
  - ____ African-American
  - ____ Asian
  - ____ Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
  - ____ Hispanic
  - ____ Native American
  - ____ Other (please list __________________________)
- What is your current age?: _________________
- What is your highest level of education?: 
- Elementary 5th grade or below
- 6th – 8th grade
- 9th – 12th grade
- College Courses

- Marital Status:
  - Married
  - Divorced
  - Widow/Widower
  - Single

**ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN**

- Please indicate the first name, age, and grade of your children in the chart below

<table>
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<tr>
<th>FIRST NAME OF CHILD</th>
<th>BOY OR GIRL</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>GRADE IN SCHOOL</th>
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If you need more space, please use the back of this questionnaire.

**ABOUT RHM**

- In which phase of RHM do you currently participate?
- First Steps
- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Phase 3
- Phase 4
- Alumni Program
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form
What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
Research in the field of parental involvement and trust support the importance of both to overall positive outcomes for students. For families identified as low-income and African American families, the research seems even more critical and much more complex. The relationship between the parent and teacher contributes to the feelings parents have about the school and influences their desire to become involved. In this way, race and income level present challenges to educators in developing and maintaining relationships with low-income African-American parents, challenges that may not exist in teachers’ relationships with middle-class White families. To that end, this research hopes to lift up the voice of the low-income African-American mother in hopes that her beliefs will shed light on how she experiences trust in the parent-teacher relationship and how that level of trust influences her decision to become involved in her children’s educational experiences.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in

- I semi-structured interview. Interviews will be scheduled with participants at a location that is convenient to the study participant. The interview will require an approximate time commitment of 1 hour and will be audio-recorded in order to have a complete record of our discussion.

- If available, interview participants will be asked to provide copies of or access to documents that were provided to them from their children’s teachers or schools. These documents may include school or class newsletters, school or class websites,
personal notes, invitations to school events, parent handbooks, or school policy information. If possible, these documents will be photocopied and the original returned to parents. Any information that could identify any other person will be removed from the documents.

**Risks**
There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this research. Questions will be asked about your school experiences as a student, as a parent of a student, and about your relationship with your child(ren)’s teacher(s). You should avoid using actual names of any other individual during the interview, such as the name of your child’s teacher. Any statements that could possibly identify another person will be removed or given a ‘fake’ name in the research. To ensure the confidentiality of your responses, data handling procedures and confidentiality will be strictly adhered to in order to guard against any type of breach in data. Your choice to participate or not to participate in this study will not impact your status in the StepUp or First Steps programs. Information from this study will only be shared with StepUp or First Steps staff in aggregate form, not individually.

**Benefits**
You may benefit from participation in this study. Primary benefits may include a sense that your voice and experiences have been heard and taken seriously. Hopefully, you will feel a sense of pride in taking part in research that has the potential to improve the experiences of other African-American mothers of school-aged children as they interact with schools and teachers.

**Confidentiality**
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data files (both audio and video) will be stored on the researchers password-protected computer and backed up on a portable hard drive which is stored securely in the researchers home. Audio and video files will kept for 7 years after the completion of the project. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. Pseudonyms will be used in every instance.

**Compensation**
For participating in this study you will receive the following compensation: Interview participants will receive a $10 gift card. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not receive any compensation.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Dina Walker-DeVose, at (919) 408-6805.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you
may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature______________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature__________________________
Appendix D

Primary Participant Interview Protocol
Primary Participant Interview Protocol

First, let me say thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedule to talk with me today. I value your effort and promise not to go over the allotted time.

My name is Dina DeVose and I am a graduate student at NCSU. As you know, I am conducting research on the relationship between parents and teachers. Specifically, I am interested in how the parent-teacher relationship influences a parents’ decision to become involved in their children’s education. This interview is one part of the research. I will also be examining any documents you would like to share with me.

Before we begin, I’d like to tell you that:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time.

- The interview will be audio-recorded in order to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept completely confidential; any information obtained from you that can identify you will be disclosed only with your permission. You will be assigned a pseudonym and your real name will not appear in any of the research.

- The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Again, thank you so much for your time today. Your responses will provide critical information for my research and help to inform the larger body of research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

1. First, tell me a little bit about yourself and your child(ren).

   Probe: How many children do you have? What are their ages? What grade are they in? Has there been a time in which you were separated from your children? Would you like to share anything about that?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

   Parent/Teacher/Community/Student Roles in School

2. What do you think are the roles of the parent and the teacher in a child’s education?

   Probe: Do parents play a role in the school? Why or why not?
Probe: Do teachers play a role in the home? Why or why not?

3. What do you think is the role of the community in a child’s education?

4. What do you think is the role of the student in his or her own education?

**Parent/Teacher Relationship**

5. What can you tell me about the relationship you have with your child(ren)’s teacher(s)?

   Sub Question 1: Do you trust them? If so, what makes them trust worthy? If not, why?

   Probe: Have they done something specific to earn or loose your trust?

   Sub Question 2: Do you have the type of relationship you want to have with your child(ren)’s teacher(s)?

   Probe: What would you change?

6. In what ways do you perceive yourself to be similar to or different from your children’s teachers?

   Probe: Are there differences in race, gender, class, religion, etc.?

   Sub Question 1: Do you think these differences influence your relationship with your child(ren)’s teachers?

   Probe: Can you give me an example?

**Parent Involvement**

7. How involved are you in your child(ren)’s school experiences?

   Probe, if involved: What types of involvement are you most likely to participate in?

   Probe, if not involved: What would make you involve yourself more?

8. What types of invitations for involvement have you received?
Probe: Has the school invited you to be involved? The teacher? Your child(ren)?

Probe: How is (are) the invitation made (e.g., email, flyer, verbally)?

Probe: Could I have see or have a copy of the correspondence?

9. Thinking about your level of parent involvement, are you as involved as you would like to be?

Probe if yes: Can you describe the people/policies/things that help support your involvement in your child(ren)’s education (e.g., flexible work hours, supportive family members, welcoming classroom environment)?

Probe if no: Can you describe the people/policies/things that prevent you from being involved in your child(ren)’s education (e.g., non-flexible work hours, unsupportive family members, unwelcoming classroom environment)

10. Does the level of trust you have in your child(ren)’s teacher influence how much or ways that you are involved in their education?

11. Fill in the blank, “I would be more involved in my child(ren)’s education if the teacher would ________________.

CLOSING QUESTION

12. Is there anything more you would like to share with me?

THANK YOU

I would like to thank you for your participation. Your comments will be very helpful to the research. I also want to mention again that what you have shared with me is confidential. Again, you name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the final product and in other papers or presentations that come from this research. Thank you again for participating in today's discussion. I appreciate you taking the time and sharing your perspective with me!
Appendix E

Case Manager Interview Protocol
Case Manager Interview Protocol

First, let me say thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedule to talk with me today. I value your effort and promise not to go over the allotted time.

My name is Dina DeVose and I am a graduate student at NCSU. As you know, I am conducting research on the relationship between parents and teachers. Specifically, I am interested in how the parent-teacher relationship influences a parents’ decision to become involved in their children’s education. This interview is one part of the research.

Before we begin, I’d like to tell you that:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time.

- The interview will be audio-recorded in order to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept completely confidential; any information obtained from you that can identify you will be disclosed only with your permission. You will be assigned a pseudonym and your real name will not appear in any of the research.

- The interview will last about 1 hour.

Again, thank you so much for your time today. Your responses will provide critical information for my research and help to inform the larger body of research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

1. First, tell me about StepUp.

2. What is your role at StepUp?
   
   Probe: How did you come to work at StepUp? How do you support children and families in the schools? How often do you get to experience the first-hand interactions between parents and children

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

3. How would you describe the commitment of StepUp mother’s to be involved in their children’s educational experiences?
4. How would you describe the interactions you have witnessed between StepUp families/mothers and their children’s teachers?

5. In what ways have teachers been supportive of StepUp mothers/families?

6. In what ways have teachers been unsupportive of StepUp mothers/families?

7. In what ways do you think differences in race, income, religion, etc. play a role in the relationship between StepUp mothers and their children’s teachers?

CLOSING QUESTION

8. Is there anything more you would like to share with me?

THANK YOU

I would like to thank you for your participation. Your comments will be very helpful to the research. I also want to mention again that what you have shared with me is confidential. Again, your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the final product and in other papers or presentations that come from this research. Thank you again for participating in today's discussion. I appreciate you taking the time and sharing your perspective with me!