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George Warren Brown School of Social Work

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Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning  
for African American High School Students

by

Jennifer Threlfall

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iv
List of Tables .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Abstract .....	vii
1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 Race, Class, and Educational Experiences .....	3
1.2 Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning .....	5
1.3 Parent Involvement among Low-income and African American Families ...	6
1.4 Gaps in the Current Literature .....	8
1.5 Research Questions .....	12
1.6 Context of the Study .....	12
2. Literature Review .....	14
2.1 Traditional Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement .....	14
2.2 Alternative Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement .....	17
2.3 Barriers and Resources .....	22
2.4 Parent Involvement, Gender, and Family Composition .....	27
3. Methods .....	32
3.1 Partnering Agency .....	32
3.2 Study Approach: Grounded Theory .....	34
3.3 Sampling and Recruitment .....	36
3.4 Data Collection .....	40

3.5 Data Analysis .....	42
3.6 Strategies for Rigor .....	47
4. Results .....	49
4.1 Sample Description .....	49
4.2 Study Context .....	53
4.3 Findings for Research Question 1 .....	61
4.4 Findings for Research Question 2 .....	93
4.3 Findings for Research Question 3 .....	114
4.3 Research Question 4 .....	123
5. Discussion .....	131
5.1 Types of Involvement and Barriers to Involvement .....	132
5.2 Resources for Parental Involvement .....	151
5.3 Limitations and Strengths .....	157
5.4 Implications for Future Research .....	159
5.5 Implications for Practice .....	161
5.6 Conclusion .....	164
References .....	168
Appendices .....	184
A. Caregiver Interview Guide .....	184
B. Adolescent Interview Guide .....	186

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: Data Analysis Process .....	42
Figure 3.2: Conceptual Model of Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning .....	124

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: Caregiver and Family Characteristics .....	51
Table 4.2: Adolescent and School Characteristics .....	53
Table 4.3: Types of Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning .....	62
Table 4.4: Barriers to Parent Involvement .....	94
Table 4.5: Resources for Parent Involvement .....	105
Table 4.6: Gender Differences in Parent Involvement .....	115

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning for

African American High School Students

by

Jennifer Threlfall

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

Washington University in St. Louis, 2015

Professor Wendy Auslander, Chair

Parent involvement is critical for students' success in high school and in accessing college, especially in low-income and minority families. However, many schools have failed to engage low-income African American parents, thereby contributing to a popular narrative of uninvolved and uninterested parents. Traditional models of parent involvement have favored a narrow range of activities undertaken by white and middle class families and do not account for the wider social and cultural context in which parenting occurs. The purpose of this qualitative study was therefore to investigate (1) caregiver and adolescent perceptions of parent involvement in education and college planning for African American high school students, (2) barriers to involvement and resources that are drawn on, and (3) how perceptions of involvement might differ according to gender and family composition. The ultimate goal was to form a culturally and developmentally appropriate conceptualization of parent involvement in education and college planning for low-income African American high school students living in urban communities. In depth interviews were conducted with 24 caregivers and 23 students recruited



through a community based college access program. Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Caregivers engaged in many activities that are included in traditional models: parents supported their children's learning at school, at home, and in the community, they built their children's motivation, and they laid a foundation on which learning could occur. Other types of involvement arose from the context in which the participants lived: parents navigated complex systems to gain access to particular schools and they taught their children how to confront discrimination. Barriers to involvement included lack of systemic knowledge, isolation in certain schools, stereotypes of African American families, developmental needs of the child, and time and money. Resources that caregivers drew from included extended family and friends, professional help, religious faith, self-reliance, and familial knowledge. Parent involvement different by gender principally in terms of racial socialization. The complexity and fluidity of the families in which the students lived made patterns of involvement according to family composition more difficult to discern. A conceptualization of parent involvement that incorporates these themes in addition to the individual and societal context is presented. Implications for social work research and practice are discussed.

# 1: INTRODUCTION

Most African American parents have high aspirations for their children's achievement in high school and college despite the obstacles they face in an educational system that remains segregated by race and socioeconomic class (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009). Years of research has indicated that parent involvement is critical for students' success in high school and in accessing college, especially in low-income and minority families (Castro et al., 2015; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2014; Perna & Titus, 2005). Schools are therefore called on to treat parents as equal partners in their children's education (Epstein, 1995; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). However, many schools have failed to engage low-income and African American parents, thereby contributing to a popular narrative of minority parents as uninvolved and accountable for the educational failure of their children (Kim, 2009; Wilkerson & Kim, 2010).

The traditional models of parent involvement most commonly used in practice and research have privileged activities favored by white and middle class families and have not accounted for the wider social and cultural context in which parenting occurs (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Hines, Borders, Gonzalez, Villalba, & Henderson, 2014). Economic insecurity, residence in underfunded and failing school districts, and personal and communal experiences of racial marginalization are all likely to affect the activities that parents prioritize in promoting their children's educational success. Although low-income African American caregivers hold the same broad goals for their children as education professionals (i.e., graduation and preparation for college and/or career), they may choose to engage in supportive activities that are different to those typical of white middle class parents and that are largely invisible to schools (Jackson & Remillard, 2004; Spera et al., 2009). Lacking a sophisticated

understanding of the involvement strategies prioritized by low-income African Americans parents, schools may either pressure parents to engage in activities that are not culturally appropriate or even dismiss them as uninterested (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). As a result, low-income and minority parents may remain unaware of the specific steps their children need to take to succeed in high school and prepare for college, and education professionals are unable to make use of the strengths and resources already present in the students' families and communities (M. J. Smith, 2009).

The purpose of this qualitative study was therefore to investigate caregiver and student perceptions of the parent involvement strategies used in African American families living in low-income urban communities. The barriers parents experienced to involvement were examined along with the resources that they drew on. Additionally, ways in which caregivers might shape their involvement to meet needs specific to the gender of the child or the composition of the family they lived in were considered. The ultimate goal was to form a culturally and developmentally appropriate conceptualization of parent involvement in education and college planning for low-income African American high school students. The remainder of this introductory chapter examines the educational experiences of low-income African American students, the prevalent narrative of parent uninvolvedness, and the struggle of schools to engage minority families.

## 1.1 Race, Class, and Educational Experiences

Parents<sup>1</sup> usually strive to give their children a life that is better than their own. Regardless of ethnicity or income, most caregivers see education as providing a route to career opportunity and economic stability (Bridgeland, DiIulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008; Harris, 2013). In fact, higher levels of attainment are becoming increasingly necessary for successful participation in the labor market. Graduates of four year colleges currently earn almost twice as much as those who have only graduated from high school (Autor, 2014). Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2020 nearly two thirds of all jobs will require postsecondary education and nearly half will require a bachelor's degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). For children from disadvantaged families, earning a college degree is the most certain way of achieving upward social and economic mobility (Haskins, Holzer, & Lerman, 2009). However, the high aspirations of disadvantaged parents and their children all too often do not translate into school success. The low educational attainment of many low-income African American students has become a seemingly intractable problem.

Although the low-income population is ethnically varied, and the African American population economically varied, African American families are disproportionately poor and are more likely to face structural obstacles to education not encountered by more prosperous white families. They are more likely to live in communities comprised of other poor households and to have done so for multiple generations (Bishaw, 2014; Sharkey, 2013). Greater exposure to violence and crime in neighborhoods where poverty is highly concentrated has been associated with higher levels of stress that interfere with both parenting and learning (Burdick-Will &

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<sup>1</sup> The terms caregiver and parent are used interchangeably throughout the document to describe an individual who takes parenting responsibility for the student. This may include mothers and fathers as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and step-parents to name a few.

Ludwig, 2011; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McBride Murry, Berkel, Gaylord-Harden, Copeland-Linder, & Nation, 2011; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010). Moreover, the schools African American students attend are more likely to be racially and economically homogenous; the typical African American student goes to a school that is more than 70% minority and where around 60% of students are low-income (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Segregated schools have fewer resources, offer less demanding courses, and employ less experienced teachers, severely impacting the educational progress of the students who attend (Hopson, Lee, & Tang, 2014; J. E. Morris, 2008).

Membership in both a disadvantaged social class and a marginalized racial minority can have a devastating impact on educational attainment. The percentage of African American students graduating from high school is substantially lower than that of white students, and fewer than two thirds as many finish college within the expected time frame (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2014; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Furthermore, race plays a role in educational success over and above that of social class (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). Low-income African American students are at heightened risk for low achievement and being unprepared for college when compared to low-income white students (Burchinal et al., 2011; Dixon-Román, 2013).

Nonetheless, considerable variety exists in the educational achievement of low-income African American students. Many are highly motivated to achieve in high school and hope to gain access to highly selective universities and colleges (Kao & Tienda, 1997; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). Moreover, the numbers of black students attending postsecondary institutions, including the most selective colleges and universities, has increased - albeit not at the same rate as white students (Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012). However, many students, who as high school freshmen aspire to attend college, do not realize their ambitions.

Adolescence is often a time when students become less engaged with school and when their achievement declines, and the problem is intensified for socially disadvantaged students (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008; Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Of particular concern is evidence that initially high achieving low-income adolescents are less likely to pursue postsecondary education or to graduate from college than their middle class peers (Wyner et al., 2007).

## **1.2 Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning**

Parents have historically been held responsible for the educational development of their children, and an ever-increasing body of research confirms that children do better when they have a caregiver who is invested in their schooling (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Tierney, 2002). Usually considered to cover a range of behaviors (Christenson, 2004), parent involvement is classically defined as “parents’ interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success” (Hill et al., 2004; p. 1491).

A variety of involvement activities, both at home and at school, have been identified as promoting positive education related cognitions and behaviors. Students with involved parents are more motivated and engaged; they have better grades, enroll in more rigorous classes, have fewer disciplinary problems, and are less likely to drop out (Barnard, 2004; Castro et al., 2015; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2014; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). A smaller body of literature demonstrates that parent involvement remains important even as students transition from high school to higher education, with positive effects found for academic preparation for college, aspirations to attend college, applying to college, enrolling at more selective institutions, and not delaying enrollment (Cabrera

& Nasa, 2001; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, 2006). Evidence is also emerging about the broader benefits of parent involvement in education. Students with involved parents are less likely to be victims of bullying or discrimination or to have mental health problems (Jeynes, 2008; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014).

### **1.3 Parent Involvement among Low-income and African American Families**

Clearly, parent involvement is extremely important in ensuring educational success, and efforts to support caregivers of all social classes and ethnicities are warranted (Jeynes, 2007). However, models of involvement that privilege activities preferred by the dominant culture and ignore the wider social, economic, and political climate may serve to further exclude already disadvantaged parents and to problematize their parenting. The position that African American urban parents are a problem to be solved has in fact been the default stance of much of the historical discussion concerned with parent involvement in education. For example, in an influential report commissioned by the US Department of Education, James Coleman (1991) wrote, “What makes some ghetto schools function poorly is that the communities and families they serve are weak, lacking the social capital<sup>2</sup> that would reinforce the school’s goals.” (p.13). He attributed a decline in educational achievement to decreasing parent involvement resulting from the departure of women from the home into the workforce and to the rise in single parent families. The overall message was that deficiencies in parenting are at the root of institutional

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<sup>2</sup> Coleman defines social capital as a resource existing “in the relations between persons” (Coleman, 1991; p.7). Strong interpersonal relationships in a community or family make resources such as academic help more available to the child.

failure, and that it is the responsibility of families to change their practices to meet the priorities of schools.

Fortunately, at least in its rhetoric, current thinking has moved away from explicitly blaming parents for the failure of schools that serve the most disadvantaged students. Instead, schools are called on to make more effort to “engage” families from culturally diverse backgrounds (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Mapp, 2012). A recent Department of Education report, for example, recognizes the need to build the capacity of both schools and families to work in partnership with each other (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). However, in segregated communities where schools themselves are severely under-resourced and where parents may have good reason to be distrustful of the administration, the change in rhetoric may be insufficient (Mapp, 2012).

In practice, low-income and minority parents are still often seen by school based professionals as a problem to be conquered rather than partners in the same endeavor. There is evidence that some teachers blame the home environment for children’s school failure and believe that minority parents do not have the capacity to help their children in school (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). Teachers in urban low SES schools may be less confident of parents’ capacity to help their children and believe parents to prioritize other activities and relationships over their children’s schooling (Wilkerson & Kim, 2010). Deficit views of parents are also expressed by other professionals working in the school environment. School social workers were found in one study to view unresponsive as uninvolved parents as one of most significant barriers to them fulfilling their professional role (Teasley, Canifield, Archuleta, Crutchfield, & Chavis, 2012).



In order to better understand how parents may be supported in helping their children through the critical years of high school, and how schools may best forge truly equitable relationships with low-income African American families it is important to understand the activities that families currently prioritize as well as the parts of their experience that have served to support or hinder their efforts. Despite the attention paid to parent involvement by policy makers and researchers, there are several gaps in the current knowledge base that this dissertation addresses.

## **1.4 Gaps in the Current Literature**

*1. Current conceptualizations of parent involvement may not be culturally or developmentally relevant, meaning that involvement activities low-income African American parents engage in for their adolescent children are not recognized.*

**Cultural relevance.** Traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement have primarily been constructed based on the habits of white middle class families, and when African American families have been included in research, these majority models have served as the basis by which to understand their parenting (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Jackson & Remillard, 2004). However, researchers that have studied other areas of parenting have found that African American families often use strategies that are different to families of other ethnicities, and that the types of methods that produce positive child outcomes may even be different (Middlemiss, 2003; Smetana, 2011). For example, more restrictive parenting styles may be effective for families living in high risk neighborhoods or in environments where they may face discrimination (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Jackson-Newsom, Buchanan, & McDonald, 2008; Pittman & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). It is reasonable to expect that the ways in

which low-income African American parents manage their children's education may also be different and that they may undertake tasks not deemed necessary for families of other ethnicities or living in other environments.

A separate examination of parent involvement strategies for black adolescents may be especially important in light of common perceptions of the population as especially problematic when compared to white, Asian, or even Latino youth. In particular, African American adolescent boys are reportedly seen by some teachers as social problems, as dangerous, and ultimately as unteachable, possibly necessitating intervention from caregivers to advocate for their sons (Rowley et al., 2014).

**Developmental relevance.** The majority of parent involvement research has focused on children in preschool or elementary school. Adolescents are less often included, especially as they near the transition to college or work, despite the critical nature of the tasks to be accomplished at this time. It is commonly assumed that as adolescents increasingly search for autonomy from their parents, involvement in education necessarily falls. Indeed, studies that compare parent involvement in specific activities across levels of schooling often report that it decreases over time (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Spera, 2005).

However, it may be that as parents lay down some tasks that benefitted their elementary and middle school children, they take up others more suited to the child's current needs (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Prior literature has shown that although adolescents increasingly turn to their peers as their main form of social support as they get older, parents remain the key influence in adolescents' education and career choices (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Families that do not have many financial resources or personal experiences of higher education may, however, need to harness alternative resources to help their children at this important stage.

*2. The broader contextual factors that shape parent involvement in low-income African American communities, especially outside of individual parent, child, and school characteristics are understudied.*

Parent involvement has traditionally been seen as the product of interaction between the parent, the child, and the school (Epstein, 1995). Much less attention has been given to broader societal factors that may lead parents to undertake particular types of involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). These may include, for example, factors such as racial and socioeconomic segregation in housing and in schooling as well as policies that have sought to rectify these histories of discrimination. Similarly parent involvement in college planning may be affected by changes in state or national policy about the way in which higher education is funded. Alternative types of involvement may become necessary, or barriers to desirable types of involvement raised by such social, political, or economic changes.

Additionally, the deficit view of low-income African American parents that has been prevalent in previous discourse has concentrated on what families lack and has failed to look for the resources that these families rely on to support their children. In situations where caregivers lack academic and college knowledge and financial resources, they may access alternative forms of knowledge or material help from their extended families or communities (Yosso, 2005). Parents' access to these unconventional resources may further serve to shape the ways in which they are involved in their children's education.

*3. Less is known about how the child's gender and family composition may also shape parent involvement within the context of low-income African American families.*

Most previous research has treated low-income African American families as part of a homogenous community, with little attention given to other aspects of identity that might shape involvement. In particular, the role that the child's gender and family composition plays in shaping parent involvement in education in minority families is less well explored. This is surprising in light of the fact that low-income African American students are more vulnerable to school failure depending on their gender and the type of family they grow up in. In general girls do better in school than boys across all racial groups; like boys of other ethnicities, African American boys are more likely to drop out before completing high school than African American girls (National Center for Education Statistics: NCES, 2014a). Similarly, African American girls between the ages of 18 and 24 are also more likely to be enrolled at a college than African American boys (NCES, 2014b).

Previous studies of parent involvement have also focused on the role of the mother, almost to the exclusion of fathers or any other parental figure. This perspective ignores the fact that although half (51%) of all African American children live in female headed households, a third (33%) live with both their biological mother and father (US Census Bureau, 2014). Furthermore, more than one in ten (14%) live in households where grandparents are present (US Census Bureau, 2014). It is well established that family composition affects educational achievement; in general children from two parent households do better in school (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010). Moreover, father absence has more serious educational consequences for black youth than for white youth (Jeynes, 2015). However,

little is known about the strategies that African American parents use to promote their children's education in the context of complex, and often fluid household compositions.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

In view of these gaps in the current knowledge base, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. How do African American parents and adolescents perceive parent involvement in the education and college planning of high school students?
2. What barriers do parents encounter in their involvement and what resources do they draw upon?
3. How do perceptions of parent involvement in education and college planning differ according to the child's gender and family composition?
4. How can we conceptualize the parent involvement of low-income African American parents of high school students?

## **1.6 Context of the Study**

In accordance with most qualitative traditions, the purpose of the study was to make an in depth examination of a phenomenon or process in a specific context, in this case, urban school districts in a midsized US city. In order to access students with the ability and motivation to go on to higher education with a variety of experiences across school and neighborhood contexts, students and their parents were recruited from a community based college access program.

Although the results of the study are not intended to be generalizable to all low-income African American families, the region from which the sample was drawn in many ways provides a

microcosm of the issues that have affected the education of urban African American youth nationwide<sup>3</sup>. School districts in the region are highly segregated, reflecting the neighborhoods they serve. Furthermore, the achievement of students attending predominantly white schools and predominantly black schools is markedly different. Although a transfer program operates in the region and state law allows for students living in unaccredited districts to claim a place at a better performing school, it remains that black students disproportionately attend failing schools. The question of how parents seek to obtain the best possible education for their children in light of a fraught racial and economic context is therefore especially pertinent in the area in which the study took place.

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<sup>3</sup> The social and political context of the study is discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

## **2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the burgeoning literature about parent involvement, the conceptualizations that are most commonly evoked remain insufficient to describe the experiences of low-income African American families – especially those whose children have the academic ability to attain a college degree. This chapter gives an overview of the literature that is relevant to the research questions presented in the previous chapter. First, the most prominent traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement are discussed along with their relevance for low-income African American families. Second, alternative conceptualizations of involvement that have been applied to low-income and minority populations are presented along with relevant theoretical perspectives. Specifically, Critical Race Theory is discussed as a framework for understanding parenting in low-income African American communities. The third section examines the literature concerned with barriers to involvement, and the resources that low-income African American parents may draw from. The fourth and final section provides a description of ways in which the current literature insufficiently accounts for differences in the experiences of African American families pertaining to gender and family.

### **2.1 Traditional Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement has traditionally been conceptualized as encompassing parents' interactions with their children and with their children's schools that are intended to support their children's educational success (Epstein, 1995; Grolnick, Raftery-Helmer, & Flamm, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009). In a commonly used typology, Hill and Tyson (2009) identify three types of parent involvement in education. *Home based involvement* consists of activities such as helping

with homework, providing structure to support schoolwork, reinforcing learning at home, and creating educational activities. *School based involvement* includes activities such as communicating with school personnel, taking part in school governance, and volunteering. *Academic socialization* describes the ways in which parents let their children know the importance of school for adult success, and their expectations for educational achievement, as well as the ways in which parents build aspirations in their children and help them to plan for the future (Hill & Tyson, 2009). This type of parent involvement is thought to be of particular relevance during adolescence, a time of building individual identity, personal values and beliefs, and problem solving skills, and when planning for the post high school future becomes most relevant (Wang et al., 2014).

Activities that may be specific to parent involvement with high school students, such as college planning, are not often included in traditional conceptualizations, perhaps because this educational stage is less commonly examined. However, a separate body of literature concerned with parent involvement in college choice reveals some themes that overlap with traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement in education in addition to some that are distinctive. Concepts similar to academic socialization are included in most descriptions of parent involvement in college choice. Many parents create a predisposition towards attending college even when their children are still in elementary school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During high school they continue to build their children's aspirations and encourage them that a college degree is attainable (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; M. J. Smith, 2006). Parents may also take tangible steps to help their children realize their college aspirations such as planning for financial provision, visiting colleges, or helping with applications and financial aid forms.



In order to promote the child's educational achievement and successful transition to college and career, most traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement have emphasized the need for schools and families to work in partnership with each other. Scholars typically draw on the work of Epstein (1995) who proposed that schools and families should be seen as two "overlapping spheres of influence" that work in cooperation to achieve their mutual goal. Neither sphere owns complete responsibility for the education of the children they "share." Rather, they together promote the personal and academic development of the child through equitable and coordinated actions. Studies that have investigated the parent involvement in education of low income and minority families have, however, found that traditional conceptualizations, including partnership models, raise many concerns, and may have unintentionally contributed to deficit perspectives of urban African American parenting.

### **2.2.1 Low-income and minority parents**

Prior research using traditional models of parent involvement has suggested disparities in the types and frequency of activities that caregivers engage in according to their socioeconomic background and their race. In particular, African American and low income families are consistently found to be less involved in their children's schools (Hill & Tyson, 2009). For example, Lee and Bowen (2006) found that African American and low income parents reported significantly fewer visits to their children's schools to volunteer, to attend parent teacher conferences, or to attend fun events. Low-income parents of all ethnicities also communicated less with their children about school and had lower expectations for their achievement. Similarly, a recent study of adolescents in ten public high schools found that African American parents did not go to parent teacher conferences or help out at their children's schools to the same extent as

European-American parents (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). These studies indicate that low income and minority parents are not engaging in many of the activities that are ordained by traditional models, especially those that emphasize a relationship of mutual cooperation between parents and schools.

The continuing application of traditional models of parent involvement to low-income and minority families may have served to perpetuate a false image of both groups as not only uninvolved, but also uninterested in the education of their children. Models that are based on the normative experiences of white and middle class families and on the priorities of schools likely ignore alternative forms of involvement that are believed to be important by minority and low income families. In addition, they do not account for structural constraints on the involvement activities of parents living as members of disadvantaged and marginalized communities. In discussing the experiences of working class Latino parents, Auerbach (2007) argued, “If the norm for students of color is underachievement in K-12 schools and underrepresentation in 4-year colleges, then parents of color with high educational aspirations for their children may need to take deliberate steps to ensure access and counter the tendencies of schools to reproduce inequality” (p. 251). The same might be said for low-income caregivers of African American college-able students.

## **2.2 Alternative Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement**

In order to avoid privileging activities prevalent among middle class white families, and leaving the involvement strategies of minority and low-income families invisible (Bakker & Denessen, 2007; Jackson & Remillard, 2004) some researchers have used qualitative methods to understand how the parents themselves perceive their efforts to promote their children’s

educational attainment. Although the majority of these studies have focused on elementary or middle school children, their conclusions are informative for parent involvement in high school and in preparing for college.

Parents in low-income communities have been found in some studies to prioritize activities that foster the child's personal development and to regard academic development as the responsibility of education professionals. In her book, *Home Advantage*, Lareau (2000) used ethnographic methods to describe the involvement of parents in an urban elementary school. The children in her study were in kindergarten through second grade and from diverse racial and ethnic groups (chiefly white and Hispanic). Described predominantly in terms of their interaction with the school, parents in this low-income community were observed to defer responsibility for their children's academic instruction to the teachers, restricting their own role to preparing their children to learn in terms of behavior and appropriate manners. They did not challenge the teachers' expertise. Lareau speculates that the parents' unwillingness to engage with their children's teachers was fueled by a lack of confidence in their own educational skills due to a lack of personal and social resources.

In contrast, other studies of families who are both low-income and from minority communities have found that these parents engage in many of the same activities as are included in traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement. Moreover, they challenge the contention of Lareau (2000) that parents from lower social classes are less engaged with their children's academic learning and passive in their relationships with their children's teachers. For example, Jackson & Remillard (2004), in a study of mathematics education in an urban elementary school, describe how the low income African American mothers that they interviewed monitored their children's skills and grades in math as well as helping them with their homework. They also

engaged in activities that the authors argue were less visible to the school such as providing informal learning opportunities (e.g., counting money during grocery shopping) and obtaining additional educational materials. The authors do note that the mothers faced some barriers to their participation and, in common with Lareau, ascribed these mostly to their social class. Parents' own limited educations meant that did not always have the conceptual understanding of math that would enable them to help their children. Additionally, the urban school their children attended did not have the money to provide resources that students could take home with them.

In a later study, described in her book *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2011) described how middle class caregivers engaged in a type of parenting that she named *concerted cultivation*. By encouraging discussion and questioning of authority, as well as participation in extracurricular activities, these parents gave their children the tools to excel in educational settings. In contrast, lower class parents were observed to rely on *natural growth*. They were directive in their instructions, taught obedience to authority, and did not emphasize structure in their children's out of school time. These children were less prepared to navigate educational systems that relied on student initiative and self-expression. Crucially, Lareau concluded that differences in parenting styles (and educational success) were due to social class rather than race. Many other scholars have, however, questioned this conclusion, arguing that the experiences of lower class African American families cannot be understood without reference to socialization practices deemed necessary in a racialized society (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Hordge Freeman, 2010; Dunham & Wilson, 2007).

### **2.2.1 Culturally specific involvement practices**

A few studies have found that minority parents engage in culturally specific types of involvement that cannot necessarily be ascribed to their social class (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2004; Williams & Bryan, 2013). For example, in a rare study of African American parent involvement in an urban high school, Williams and Sanchez (2012) conducted qualitative interviews with 15 mothers in order to understand how they perceived parent involvement. The mothers described participating in some activities that are part of traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement. They attended school events, they talked with their children about their educational progress and communicated with their teachers, and they created an environment in their homes that was conducive to study. The authors also identified two types of involvement that they argue are more culturally specific. Mothers emphasized the role of religious faith in their aspirations for their children's futures. They also talked about parent involvement as a communal activity with some mothers seeing themselves as "surrogate parents" for others' children (p.641). The authors argue that these last two themes are not included in traditional parent involvement models, but rather represent approaches to parenting more specific to urban African American communities. Other authors have emphasized the role that race plays in all aspects of parents' interactions with schools and messages to their children about the value of education. Often they have taken an approach to their research influenced by Critical Race Theory.

### **2.2.2 Parent Involvement and Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework used to study the experiences of minority communities that emphasizes social inequality as the inevitable product of a racialized society

(Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994). Critical race theorists emphasize that racism is an ingrained feature of all societal organizations and systems, including families and schools (Burton et al., 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Moreover, CRT scholars critique the capitalist system that has denied property rights to minority communities and that continues to guarantee that the lowest resourced and lowest performing schools are found in neighborhoods inhabited by poor and non-white families (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994). The poverty experienced by minority communities is not a phenomenon separate from racism. CRT approaches to parent involvement in education and college planning for low-income African American students therefore grapple with issues of historical and ongoing systemic racism.

The ultimate goal of the CRT approach to educational inequality is to work toward “the elimination of racism” and “all forms of subordination in education” (Solorzano, 1997, p.7). To this end, CRT scholarship seeks to give voice to historically marginalized and oppressed communities. Because reality is seen to be socially constructed, it is important that African American students and caregivers be able to “name their own reality” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Clearly, qualitative methods are particularly suited to this approach and have been used by some researchers who have investigated the role that systemic racism plays in shaping parent involvement in education.

Qualitative studies of parent involvement that take a CRT perspective have highlighted the activist role that some African American mothers take in challenging inequality in their children’s schools. In a study of an urban elementary school, working class mothers were observed to find ways of becoming physically present in their children’s schools in order to observe their children and teachers and to be able to mediate problems as they arose (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Similarly, a study of African American mothers of

middle school students documented how they confronted teachers who they considered to be racially biased and challenged (and even overturned) the administration of poorly performing schools (Cooper, 2009). This evidence from mothers of younger children suggests that the CRT approach is useful in identifying alternative types of involvement that arise from the specific challenges faced by urban African American parents.

## **2.3 Barriers and Resources**

As indicated in the previous section, minority and low-income parents may engage in some distinct forms of parent involvement because of their personal circumstances and their marginalized position in inequitable systems. These same constraints may prevent caregivers from participating in other activities that are included in traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement. Less often considered in the literature are the resources that low-income African American parents draw on to support their involvement. As has already been noted, the discussion of African American parent involvement has been more concerned with what is lacking than with the strengths that families already possess.

### **2.3.1 Barriers to parent involvement**

It is frequently acknowledged that parents from lower social classes may struggle to engage with their children's schools because of limits to their time, finances, and knowledge of the educational system (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jackson & Remillard, 2004; Lareau, 2000). In the previously mentioned study of African American parents' involvement with one urban high school, Williams and Sanchez (2013) found that parents' time was consumed by work or other activities and that school meetings were often scheduled at inconvenient times such as mid-

morning. Financial constraints meant that parents were unable to pay for transportation and field trips, and some avoided contact with school personnel because of this. Similarly, a recent study of primarily African American middle school parents found that parents' demanding work schedules and lack of paid leave prevented them from participating in school activities (Murray et al., 2014).

Parents are also less likely to believe they can engage in equitable partnerships with their children's schools when the actions of teachers or administrators imply that parent involvement is not welcomed. Perceptions of positive invitations from schools to be involved have been found to be of particular importance in promoting the participation of low-income and minority families (Maríñez-Lora & Quintana, 2009; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2014). Negative encounters with teachers or in the school have been identified as detrimental to parent involvement. The means that teachers use to communicate with parents can be ineffective, inappropriately relying on technology parents do not have access to, or on children as message carriers (Reynolds et al., 2014; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Furthermore, perceptions of a negative school climate, including discipline and safety problems and ineffective leadership, can reduce parents' desire to spend time in the school building (Murray et al., 2014).

Barriers arising from social class have also been identified as limiting the participation of low-income and some minority parents in the college planning process (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Walpole, 2003). In particular, parents who have themselves not attended college may have little understanding of the steps their children need to take to get there, or believe college education to be so expensive that it is out of reach for their family (M. J. Smith, 2009). Although parents may still aspire for their children to go to college, their own life



experiences may limit their knowledge of the steps that more advantaged families take to promote their children's opportunities.

Parent involvement is undoubtedly shaped by factors beyond the individual parent, child, or school. Historical attitudes that have devalued parent involvement, national policies, and economic factors that determine funding for family focused activities can all also impact the way in which parents relate to schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). It is not common for these wider factors to be considered in parent involvement research, perhaps because so much of it relies on small studies with single schools, or on large data sets where systemic variables are not included. Despite this, it is evident that families do not exist in isolation from their communities or from the wider political context. The previously discussed CRT informed studies of African American mothers documented the challenges to involvement that can arise from teachers' negative perceptions of minority parents (Barton et al., 2004; Cooper, 2009). These mothers were able to successfully overcome barriers to involvement stemming from racial prejudice. In reality, however, low-income and minority parents are unlikely to be seen as equal partners with their children's teachers let alone school and district administrators. Even when parents are specifically invited to have a voice in the system, differences in power between family members and professional educators and managers can derail even the best hearted attempts (Fine, 1993).

Despite the myriad barriers, individual and systemic, some low-income minority parents find ways to be involved with their children's education, and even to serve as advocates in their schools. In the following section, the resources that these parents corral are discussed.

### **2.3.2 Resources used by low-income and minority families**

Low-income and minority parents clearly face many barriers to involvement in their children's education and college planning, but they also possess unique resources. The assets that parents may corral to encourage their children's educational success are less often discussed in the literature. In particular, parents who are used to disadvantage in other areas of their lives may bring the coping strategies they have learned to involvement in their children's education. In the previously mentioned study Barton et al. (2004) describe how African American mothers positioned themselves to affect change in their children's in an urban elementary school, using capital they had gleaned from multiple experiences, resources, and networks. Parents "activated nontraditional resources and leveraged relationships with teachers, other parents, and community members in order to author a place of their own in schools" (p. 11). The authors argue that where parents lack traditional capital (here knowledge of the education system and academic knowledge) they find other ways to literally become a presence in the school. From there they have a stage from which to question teachers' policies and actions.

### **2.3.3 Community Cultural Wealth**

Scholars aligning themselves with the CRT perspective have used the term, "community cultural wealth" to denote the unique types of capital or resources that members of minority communities might leverage to facilitate their interactions with mainstream institutions. Community cultural wealth represents the "agency and sustenance that are characteristic of African American people, culture, and institutions – apart from and in response to oppressive forces" (J. E. Morris, 2004, p. 102). Yosso (2005) presents a typology of community cultural wealth that translates well to the present discussion of parent involvement in low-income African

American families. Each type of resource is presented as an alternate form of “capital” to the cultural and social capital usually considered to be the province of wealthier white families and the guarantors of educational success. *Aspirational capital* refers the ability to maintain hope for future success despite evident barriers. *Linguistic capital* is the intellectual and social skills gained through communication in more than one language or style. *Familial capital* refers to the sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition nurtured by an extended family network. *Social capital* is reconceptualized to indicate the networks that a marginalized community maintains to survive and succeed in the dominant society. *Navigational capital* refers to the ability of resilient individuals to maneuver their way through a social institution designed with a majority, financially wealthier population in mind. Finally, *resistant capital* consists of knowledge and skills developed through behavior that challenges injustice. These six forms of capital are resources that low-income African American parents may be able to draw from, or seek to instill in their children, as a means of challenging and overcoming barriers that have halted their educational success.

A handful of studies have used cultural wealth as a perspective through which to examine parent involvement, primarily in Latino families. Auerbach (2007) interviewed 16 Latino working class parents of high school juniors and seniors about their involvement in planning for college and identified resources they leverage that were similar to the community cultural wealth typology. Some parents leveraged the knowledge they had about higher education and their networks with professionals to push their child towards college were described as having “navigational capital”. “Moral capital” was seen as being displayed by parents who had little personal academic or college-going knowledge, but nevertheless instilled values such as persistence and resilience in their children often drawing heavily on traditional Latino cultural

values. Lastly, “emotional capital” was mostly seen in the relationship between daughters and their mothers who were eager to support their educational ambitions but were fearful of the struggles they might face in college. This study also shows that even parents who share a common cultural heritage may access different resources and assume different roles in their children’s education. For this reason it is important to consider how parent involvement in education manifests in diverse ways within the same population.

## **2.4 Parent Involvement, Gender, and Family Composition**

Research on minority low-income parent involvement in both the quantitative and qualitative literature has been limited by the lack of attention to differences within the population. In defining involvement exclusively in terms of a black-white or poor-wealthy dichotomy other factors that shape parenting behaviors, goals, and strategies may be missed. Specifically, questions remain about African American parents’ perceptions of the different needs of boys and girls in education and about how their role is shaped by the presence or absence of other adults who take a parenting role.

### **2.4.1 Parent involvement and gender**

The concern expressed about minority student achievement is intensified when it comes to African American boys, who graduate high school and matriculate to college in considerably lower numbers than African American girls (NCES, 2014a, 2014b). Recent studies have suggested that different socialization of African American boys and girls may be the cause of behavioral differences between the genders (Barnett & Scaramella, 2013; Mandara, Murray, Telesford, Varner, & Richman, 2012). In general, parents have been found to show more warmth

toward their daughters than their sons (Mandara et al., 2012). Additionally, African American girls report higher levels of monitoring than boys (Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010; Varner & Mandara, 2014). Not many studies that have used traditional measures of parent involvement have examined the role of gender, but there are some indications that it may play a role in shaping involvement. For example, a study of African American first graders, revealed that parents of young children have higher expectations for girls and are more involved in more educational activities in the home with their daughters (Graves, 2010), indicating that messages parents give about the importance of educational success are different from the earliest years of schooling.

Differences in how boys and girls are parented were also considered in one study as contributing to the attainment gap between African American male and female students. Reporting on qualitative interviews with 11 African American parents in the L.A. metropolitan area, Smith and Fleming (2006) note that although mothers provided similar tangible support for their sons and daughters (e.g., paying for extra SAT prep), they communicated different expectations for academic attainment. Daughters were expected to attend four-year institutions with the expressed aim that they would not be financially dependent on anyone in the future. In contrast, boys were discouraged from going away to college, and pointed instead toward two-year community colleges. Mothers feared for their sons that they would get into trouble on the streets or with the police and so wanted to keep them closer to home. This dichotomy, however, only represents the views of a handful of parents, and differs to other findings that mothers want to keep their daughters close to home (Auerbach, 2007).

In the consideration of parenting practices in terms of both race and gender, intersectionality, another approach associated with CRT, is helpful. The intersectionality

framework rests on the premise that it is insufficient to consider a single aspect of identity, especially when seeking to understand experiences of oppression (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). The classic example is that the lives of women of color are shaped by experiences of both racism and patriarchy (Matsuda, 1987; Nash, 2008). These two aspects of identity – gender and race – interact with each other to produce an experience that is unique to women and girls of color. Because both racial and gender identities are understood to be “socially constructed phenomena” and not fixed entities, individuals may choose to privilege certain aspects of their identity depending on the context they find themselves in (Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Hulko, 2009). Furthermore, parents may teach their children how to present themselves in educational settings in regard to certain aspects of their identity (Reynolds, 2010). For example, recognizing that African American boys are often perceived as threatening in the classroom, parents may teach their sons to tone down certain aspects of their masculine behavior (Rowley, Varner, Ross, Williams, & Banerjee, 2012). In contrast, girls may be taught to privilege certain ‘feminine’ characteristics such as compliance in order to succeed fit in with the expected school culture (E. W. Morris, 2007).

#### **2.4.2 Parent involvement and family composition**

The relationship between who a child lives with and their academic achievement has been thoroughly documented; as discussed in the previous chapter, children who live in single parent households perform more poorly in school than those from two parent households (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Shriner et al., 2010). Less is known about how parental involvement works in the diverse types of family that high school students actually live in (Jeynes, 2011).

The parental involvement literature to date has relied on a limited definition of what constitutes a “family.” Studies either assume a more or less isolated nuclear family or, in the research concerned with poorer minority families, a single female-headed household. This focus does not reflect the reality of contemporary family life, especially among low-income African Americans (Gertsel, 2011; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007). Studies that have included an analysis of the relationship between family structure and parent involvement have typically contrasted single parent families with two parent families. In general, two parent families have been found to have greater levels of school based involvement, although it is not clear whether this holds true for minority families (Myers & Myers, 2015; Stacer & Perrucci, 2012). It is therefore worth examining how African American families promote their children’s education across multiple types of family.

Additionally, although more than half of all African American children technically live in single parent households (US Census Bureau, 2014), this does not mean that they have no other caring adults in their lives. Family researchers note that parenting responsibilities are often shared by “grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and older brothers and sisters” (Walsh, 2011, p.285). Each one of these persons might be involved in the child’s education. Their roles, however, are not often discussed in the literature, either in terms of the support that they offer to biological parents, or directly to the child. Minority and poor parents may therefore be labeled by researchers and practitioners as uninvolved, when in fact they view themselves as part of a community caring for the child (Guerra & Nelson, 2013). It is important that the voices of these individuals who are fulfilling a primary or even secondary parenting role are included in the research and that the types of involvement they engage in are identified.

## Summary

There is no shortage of literature demonstrating the importance of parent involvement for multiple educational outcomes. However, the majority of research has prioritized the activities favored by white families of a higher socioeconomic class and has not examined the wider social and political context in which parent involvement takes place. Several qualitative studies, primarily of younger students, have indicated that low-income and minority parents use some of the same strategies described in traditional models of parent involvement, but that they also engage in alternative activities. Some of these differences are likely to be a product of the different needs and barriers to involvement resulting from social class. However, a CRT perspective suggests that the parent involvement of low-income African American families cannot be understood without consideration of the societal context of systemic racism. Additionally, in contrast to the deficit perspective of minority parenting, African American families have access to non-traditional resources that they leverage as they maneuver through racialized and inequitable educational systems. Traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement have failed to account for these contextual factors, and alternative conceptualizations have generally not considered the parental role in the later stages of high school and in the transition to postsecondary education. Moreover, the role that perceptions of the different challenges African American boys and girls face in schooling play in shaping parent involvement remains largely unexplored, as do differences in family composition. The aim of the current study was therefore to build a conceptualization of parent involvement that acknowledges the unique challenges and strengths of low-income African American families, and of the social context in which they live and are educated.



### 3: METHODS

The methods employed in the study are discussed in this chapter including the following areas: 1) a description of the urban college preparatory program which served as the partnering agency for recruiting study participants, 2) the study approach using grounded theory methodology, 3) sampling, recruitment, and consent procedures, 4) data collection including interview procedures and the domains covered in each interview, 5) data analysis and the construction of theory, and 6) strategies employed to ensure the rigor of the study.

#### 3.1 Partnering Agency

The study was conducted in partnership with a large college preparatory program located in a midsized urban area. College First<sup>1</sup> (CF) provides free services to low-income youth with the goal of increasing their readiness for college. The program serves around 660 high school students in partnership with three high schools. A community-based program also reaches out to students not enrolled in their partner schools. All students attending partner schools and their parents are introduced to CF services in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Students who demonstrate an interest in college and minimum academic ability (usually GPA above 2.0) are offered more intensive services in tenth through twelfth grade. These include weekly tutoring sessions and summer academic enrichment workshops, activities intended to foster character building, leadership, and citizenship, and assistance with the college application process. The majority of CF participants (94%) come from low-income families; more than a third (36%) are classed as extremely low-

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the agency has been changed.

income.<sup>2</sup> The majority of students are African American (83%) and have parents who did not attend college (87%) or did not complete college in the traditionally expected timeframe.

Evaluations of CF's outcomes suggest that participants are better prepared for college than they might otherwise be. Nearly all students (99%) participating at CF graduate from high school, and 95% enroll in college immediately afterwards. Furthermore, CF students when compared to other similarly abled students are more likely to be classed as proficient in subjects that are considered foundational for college. They take more AP classes, have fewer disciplinary problems, and attend school more frequently. They are also more likely to attend college than other similarly abled students.

CF encourages family involvement in all of their activities, stressing that parents are welcome to attend and observe any of their programs targeted to students. In addition, separate CF activities seek to build the capacity of families to support their child's preparation for higher education. Workshops are provided for families from the point their children enter ninth grade. Individualized meetings, mailings, phone calls, and home visits, primarily concerned with raising parents' awareness of the financial steps they need to take in order for their child to attend college, are also incorporated into the program.

CF was chosen as a suitable partnering agency for the study because of the potential for observing the process by which parents become involved in their children's education and college planning. In qualitative studies the choice of sampling frame is conceptually driven with

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<sup>2</sup> CF uses definitions of income levels provided by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). "Low-income" means below 80% of the median family income for the area and "extremely low-income" means below 30% of the median family income. For a family of four in the region, "low-income" indicates an annual household income below \$53,700; "extremely low-income" indicates an annual household income below \$20,150.

the purpose of being able to make analytic rather than statistical generalizations (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Most previous qualitative parent involvement studies have drawn their sample from a single school thereby limiting the extent to which it is possible to explore the ways in which families function within the wider context of multiple school districts and municipalities. CF serves students from around 45 different high schools in the region. These schools are varied in the socioeconomic and racial diversity of their students and building locations. Because one purpose of the study was to explore the wider social and political factors that shape parent involvement for low-income African American families, the more varied sample frame allowed for a broader range of participant experiences and thus, richer data.

### **3.2 Study Approach: Grounded Theory**

A grounded theory approach was used to collect and analyze the data. Grounded theory is a method of qualitative research that is concerned with “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; p.1). The goal is to move beyond description to provide a theoretical explanation of a process, action, or interaction, grounded in the reported experiences of study participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2012). As such, the approach is inductive, seeking to build new theory or to refine, extend, challenge or supersede existing theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory was used in this study because the most prevalent theoretical approaches to parental involvement in the literature do not fully reflect the experiences of the low-income African American families, especially those with college-bound adolescent children. Creswell (2012) cites two circumstances when grounded theory is an appropriate method, even

in the face of existing theory. These are 1) when existing models have been built or tested on samples unrepresentative of the population of interest, and 2) when models are considered to be incomplete because they do not incorporate concepts considered to be important. The preference given in the literature to models tested on white middle class families, in addition to the lack of consideration of the broader social inequalities faced by low-income African American families, suggested the need to undertake further theoretical work.

This is not to say that the grounded theory method abandons all previous theoretical work. Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that the researcher should not enter the field as a “tabula rasa” but should have a perspective that is based on an extensive knowledge of the relevant literature. In particular, familiarity with the literature should be used to stimulate the researcher’s thinking about “properties or dimensions” that can be used to examine the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1997, p.45). An empirically derived grounded theory will therefore combine categories and hypotheses arising from the data with concepts gleaned from previous theoretical knowledge. With this in mind, the theoretical background discussed in the previous chapter not only served to form the focus of the study and data collection, but was also drawn from in the analysis of the data.

The highly structured methodology of grounded theory is intended to ensure that the resulting analysis is truly “grounded” in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the same time it is important to recognize that any resulting theory reflects the participants’ own interpretations or constructions of their experiences (Charmaz, 2006). As such, the findings presented in the next chapter are understood to reflect the participants’ perceptions of parent involvement and the factors that they believe to be shaping it rather than a purely objective portrayal of their circumstances. This constructivist perspective is important because participant perceptions of

how they are viewed as members of a minority group often associated with underachievement, and their potential internalization or confrontation of these stereotypes, are likely to be integral to the types of involvement that parents engage in (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Constructivist approaches to grounded theory also incorporate reflection about the extent to which the researcher's own predispositions have shaped the collection and interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2003). Although I have considerable experience working with low-income African American youth and their families as a social work practitioner, my ethnicity and nationality, my English accent, and my affiliation with the university clearly mark me as an outsider. As such, I paid close attention to power imbalances between myself and participants in interviewing, for example, allowing participants to choose the location in which to be interviewed where they felt the most comfortable, and were assured that they did not need to continue with the interview or topic of conversation if their tone or body language indicated any discomfort. Additionally, I carefully considered the ways in which my own predispositions, experiences, and values determined my reaction to participants' responses and my analysis through recording field notes and writing memos as described later in this chapter.

### **3.3 Sampling and Recruitment**

Grounded theory sampling is driven by the development of theory; the strategy used in the study was therefore purposefully flexible and designed to fulfill two specific purposes. First, it allowed for comparison of parental involvement across key subgroups of families and adolescents. Second, it facilitated the elaboration of themes as they emerged from the interviews.

As dyads of parents and adolescents from the same families were interviewed, their sampling and recruitment is discussed together.

### **3.3.1 Inclusion Criteria and Sampling**

To be included in the study, adolescent participants had to be enrolled in at least one of CF's high school programs; characteristics of the sampling frame were therefore limited by the admission criteria of the agency. CF participants all declare an interest in attending college, have a GPA of at least 2.0 (C grade), come from low-income families, and have parents who either did not attend college or did not follow a traditional route through higher education. Adolescent participants were 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who self-identified as African American. Parents were considered to be any person who served as a primary caregiver to the child. In addition to biological parents, other individuals with legal guardianship of the student, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives were eligible for inclusion. To participate in the study, parents also had to self-identify as African American. This resulted in a sampling frame of approximately 500 families.

**Maximum variation sampling.** To guard against the sample being biased to the most involved parents, or to students attending particular schools, a maximum variation sampling strategy was initially employed (Patton, 2002). Participants were purposively selected from families where parents had attended CF family workshops as well as those who had not. In addition, students were purposefully selected from a variety of schools and school districts. This was in recognition of the diverse types and intensities of parent involvement strategies practiced

in different institutions, as well as other characteristics of the schools that could affect parent involvement such as the race and socioeconomic class of the majority of students in attendance.

**Sampling for comparison.** A hallmark of a grounded theory study is the constant comparison of the opinions and experiences of different kinds of subject (Charmaz, 1990). Because a principal intent of this study was to compare how the parenting role may be differently perceived depending on the student's gender and according to who assumes parenting responsibilities, both male and female students and students living in two parent households, single parent households, and with another member of their family were purposefully recruited. Although the original intent was that equal numbers of male and female students and of different types of caregiver and family compositions would be selected, the overrepresentation female students and of single female headed households in the sampling frame was ultimately reflected in the final sample. Characteristics of the study participants are fully described in the next chapter.

**Further theoretical sampling.** Grounded theorists use theoretical sampling to ensure that they have the necessary participants for a full development of the emerging theory. In practice this means that new participants are sought who are expected to be able to offer further information on themes that appear to be important in the initial analysis. For example, in the current study a theme emerged in the early interviews about parents who had withdrawn their child from their first high school, often due to social problems. Therefore as data collection continued, students who had moved schools during their time at College First were purposefully sought for inclusion in the study so that this experience could be more fully explored.

### **3.3.2 Recruitment and consent**

CF provided de-identified student data, including information about the gender, race, age, GPA, school, caregiver relationship of the student, and attendance at CF family sessions. Potential participants were then selected following the sampling criteria outlined above. This ensured that participants were invited to be in the study irrespective of CF staff perceptions of their suitability. Staff members then sent letters to potential participants describing the purpose of the study. Interested parents were asked to call me for further information and if willing, to schedule interviews for themselves and their child. As the study continued further potential participants were identified from the de-identified data, with care taken to identify and recruit sufficient numbers of male and female students and different types of caregiver. The director of college preparation at College First was also consulted to identify students who had moved schools as theoretical sampling concerns were incorporated. The same procedure was followed to send invitations to participate in the study through the mail.

Sampling continued until it was judged that no new themes were emerging from the interviews; that is, theoretical saturation had been reached (Padgett, 2008). The final sample size was 24 caregivers and 23 students (one student declined to be interviewed after his grandmother had already participated). This is generally considered to be a sufficient number of participants to generate conceptual models (Creswell, 2012).

**Parent and adolescent consent procedures.** All procedures used in the study were approved by the Human Research Protection Office of Washington University in St. Louis. Parents were informed of their own and of their child's rights and asked to provide written consent to participate in the study before commencing their interview. Adolescent participants



over the age of 18 were also asked for written consent at the beginning of their interview and those under the age of 18 for their written assent. All adolescents were informed that they did not have to participate in the study even if their parent gave consent and/or had already been interviewed. Participants were also informed that they could stop the interview at any point or refuse to answer any of the questions posed. All participants were given a \$20 gift card for Wal-Mart or Target to compensate them for their time.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Data collection took place primarily through separate in-depth interviews with parents and adolescents. If possible, interviews took place in the participants' homes, allowing for observations of their neighborhood and living circumstances to be made by the interviewer. Families were also given the option of being interviewed at the CF offices or at another place of their choosing. Seventeen dyads were interviewed in their homes and five at restaurants or coffee shops. One family chose to be interviewed at the CF offices, and of the final dyad, the caregiver was interviewed at a public library and her son at a local university following participation in the CF summer program there. Twenty-one of the parent-adolescent dyads were interviewed one immediately after the other. In these cases, caregivers and students were allowed to choose the order in which they were interviewed, and each interview took place in a private space so that the parent and student were not able to listen to each other's interview. Two families opted for the caregiver and student to be interviewed on different days, and as mentioned previously, one student refused to participate after the caregiver had already been interviewed.

Student interviews lasted between about 30 minutes and 45 minutes; caregiver interviews were somewhat longer, lasting about an hour. All interviews were audio recorded and

subsequently transcribed. Extensive field notes were also made following the interview by the interviewer to record observations about perceptions of the participants' body language, emotions, and any other relevant information. Interviews took place between June and November 2014.

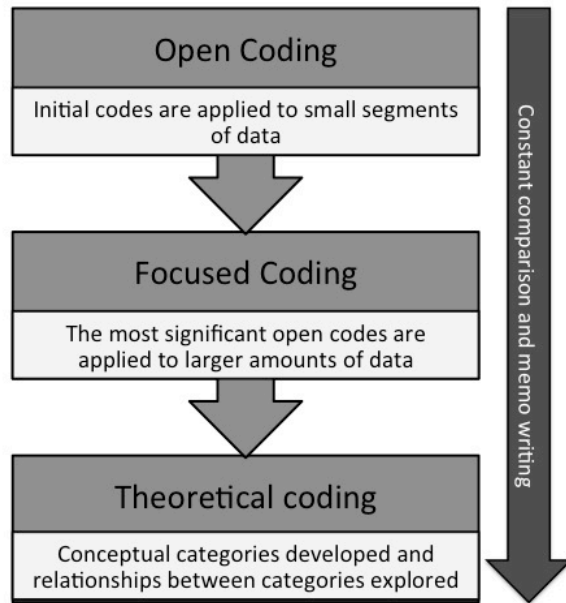
**Development of Interview Guides.** Provisional semi-structured interview guides were constructed with broadly the same domains being covered in both parent and adolescent instruments. The domains covered were as follows: description of the child, aspirations for the future, educational resources and challenges, the parent's own education, current parent involvement, barriers to involvement, parenting resources, race and gender, school description and choice, parent involvement at school, parent involvement in college planning, and involvement at College First.

Feedback was solicited from two CF staff members and from two college students who had formerly been part of the CF high school program. After incorporating advice from staff and students (principally about wording), the interviews were piloted with two families. This guide then formed the basis of all subsequent interviews, although following the grounded theory method that emphasizes the pursuit of new themes as they emerge, a few additional questions were added within the existing domains. For example, following an emphasis placed on the experiences of black boys in education, a question that asked about the intersection of race and gender was added. Specifically, adolescents were asked, "What messages do your parents give you about being a young black man/ woman?" The final interview guides are included in Appendices A and B. Basic demographic information was also collected after each interview (see Appendices C and D).

The interview guides were used to ensure that the same domains were covered in all the interviews and that the primary questions were asked in the same way. However, as far as possible, the conversation was allowed to flow naturally, and questions were not necessarily asked in the order they appeared on the guide. Further probes and follow-up questions were also used during the course of the interviews to explore new topics as they were raised. Following the qualitative interview a short survey was administered to collect demographic data.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Data gathered through the in depth interviews and observations were analyzed through a sequential coding process incorporating constant comparison and memo writing techniques (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This process is illustrated in Figure 3.1. De-identified transcripts, demographic information, and other documents produced during the study were stored electronically using the web-based qualitative software, Dedoose (Version 5.3.22; Dedoose, 2015). The same software was used to code the data and to generate reports that facilitated the comparison of portions of the data. Analysis began with the collection of the first interviews and continued throughout the project. The remainder of this section outlines the tasks undertaken in each stage of the analysis.



**Figure 3.1. Data analysis process.**

### **3.5.1 Memo writing**

Memo writing was used throughout the data analysis to record experiences, reflections, and interpretations of the data as they arose. Memo writing is an integral part of the grounded theory process, and serves to support the formulation and revision of theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The process has three main functions: 1) to make the researcher's pre-existing assumptions explicit; 2) to record decisions about methodological issues; and 3) to speculate on and analyze the data (Schreiber, 2001). In the current project, two main types of memos were written. First, field notes made immediately after interviews (often audio recorded and subsequently transcribed) captured observations made about participants and their responses, as well as thoughts about emerging themes. For example, one of the memos made within the first month of interviewing discussed an emerging theme of parents sacrificing their own ambitions in favor of meeting the current needs of their adolescent children, also noting that this was not

commonly discussed in the parent involvement literature. As the analysis proceeded, written notes were used to record ideas about the codes, conceptual relationships, and hypotheses as they developed.

### **3.5.2 Constant comparison**

Constant comparison is a key technique of grounded theory and was used throughout the analysis process. Data were compared with other data within the same code. For example, each interviewee's reflections included within the code Challenging Teachers were juxtaposed against each other to see if they were describing the same action or intent. By continuing to compare newly coded segments with previous extracts, it was ensured that all the evidence was considered. Categories were not simply based on themes emerging from the first few interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 2007). Comparisons were also made between codes to differentiate them from each other and later to look for relationships between them.

### **3.5.3 Coding**

Systematic coding of the interview transcripts began after 18 families had been interviewed, and continued concurrently with the remainder of data collection and after its completion. Although the process is presented here as being sequential, in reality there was considerable overlap between the stages as some codes became more salient as data collection continued and others fell out of use.

**Open coding.** The first stage involved ascribing short provisional codes to segments of the data. These "open codes" are so called because they do not rely on previously conceived

categories. In accordance with the recommendations of Charmaz (2006), segments were assigned codes designed to reflect the action that was seen to be taking place within the data. Charmaz argues that the use of gerunds helps the researcher to avoid conceptual leaps or adopting extant theories before the necessary analytic work has been done. For example, a segment of data where a mother discussed making sure that her son had the right clothes to meet the dress code at his school was labeled *Buying Clothes*. In subsequent transcripts, other segments that described similar activities were labeled the same way. When another caregiver described providing her son with brand named clothes and shoes so that he wasn't teased about his appearance, the same parental action was identified, and the segment was also labeled *Buying Clothes*. As the analysis continued, open codes were compared with newly collected data, and adapted or discarded as needed. Codes naturally became more abstract as more segments were compared with each other. For example, cases where parents had bought other things for their children to use at school such as cell phones were considered to have the same underlying action and were coded together with examples of buying clothes. In this way, the coding moved from open codes to the next stage of focused codes.

**Focused coding.** Focused codes are intended to be “more directed, selective, and conceptual” than initial codes (Charmaz, 2006; p.57). Continuing the process that had begun in the previous stage, focused codes emerged through a process of identifying the most frequently used and significant open codes. In the previously discussed example, the segments that had been labeled with the open code, *Buying Clothes*, were eventually combined with other passages about providing books, stationary, and technology, paying for field trips and transportation, and providing a desk or other quiet place to study in the home. The new focused code was labeled

*Providing Materially.* Transcripts that had previously been analyzed with open codes were coded again using the new focused codes.

At this stage, a preliminary codebook was constructed that outlined the code names and definitions. Two additional coders, both doctoral level students with experience in qualitative research, then tested the codebook by recoding each interview between them. This process was intended to ensure that important themes had not been missed, that themes had not been given more prominence than was justified by the data. The coders were asked to assess the extent to which the codes were clearly identifiable from the transcripts and that they made conceptual sense. Throughout the team coding stage, cases where the coders were confused about the appropriate application of a code, or where they disagreed with its usage were resolved through discussion. The aim was not to make sure that each coder applied codes in the exact same place in the exact same way, but rather to arrive at a consensus about the appropriate application of a conceptually clear set of codes (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005).

**Theoretical coding.** The next stage of coding in the grounded theory method serves to move the analysis from a more descriptive level to one that is useful for formulating theory. To achieve this, commonalities were looked for between the focused codes that allowed them to be grouped together and raised to the level of conceptual categories. Whereas open codes had been amalgamated into focused codes if they appeared to describe a similar type of action, theoretical codes were unified by a common underlying intent or process. For example, four focused codes, *Being a Role Model*, *Sanction and Reward*, *Setting Standards*, and *Staying on Them* were considered to be examples of the process by which parents motivate their children to stay in school and work hard. They were therefore combined to form the theoretical code, *Building*

*Motivation.* Theoretical codes were further developed and clarified through discussion with the coding team.

Defining relationships between categories is at the heart of theoretical coding (Urquhart et al., 2010). In the present study, the major interest was in how barriers to parent involvement and resources for parent involvement, as well as the context in which they developed, served to shape parent involvement. The final stage of the analysis was therefore to create a visual representation of the relationships between the themes, drawing from existing theory where appropriate (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

### **3.6 Strategies for Rigor**

In a qualitative study validity or “trustworthiness” can be defined as “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Four factors suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were addressed in order to determine the overall trustworthiness of the current study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

*Credibility* refers to the degree to which the researcher’s descriptions and interpretations represent the views of the study participants. Following the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), a process of “member checking” was used. After the coding process had been completed and rudimentary findings established, a series of meetings were arranged with individuals who were considered to be knowledgeable about the population and topic. Specifically, the findings were discussed with College First staff members who were themselves within a year or two of having completed college. Staff members were asked to comment upon



the extent to which the study's findings accorded with their own experiences both as high school students and in working with CF families.

*Transferability* indicates the extent to which the theory established in one context can be applied to another context. Transferability was established in the writing phase through "thick description". The beginning of the next chapter describes in detail the programmatic, social, and political context in which the study took place. Although the study was conducted in a specific geographic and historical context (heightened racial tension and civil unrest during the summer of 2014), it is apparent that many of the trends, problems, and resources of the participants of the current study are likely also similar to those from other urban areas across the country.

*Dependability* is concerned with the quality of the integration of data collection, analysis, and theory generation. *Confirmability* is the degree to which the findings are supported by the data collected. Both dependability and confirmability were established through leaving an audit trail. Documents created during the study including interview guides, transcripts, field notes, memos, codebooks, and notes from meetings with the coding team were preserved and stored using Dedoose. These were then constantly referred to throughout the analysis and writing to ensure that the analysis was truly grounded in the data, both interview and observational, collected during the study.

The use of Grounded Theory in this study allowed for a rigorous approach to data analysis at the same time as granting the flexibility to recruit specific types of participants and follow emerging themes at a time when families were experiencing anticipated transitions (between grades or from high school to college) as well as unanticipated changes in the social environment (racial tension and civil unrest). The next chapter begins with a more detailed description of the context in which the data collection took place and then turns to the findings of the study.

## 4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from 47 interviews with caregiver and adolescent participants. The first section includes a description of the study participants. The second section describes the context in which participants lived and were educated and is followed by three vignettes of participating families. In the third section the themes that emerged in relation to the first three research questions are presented and illustrated with examples and quotations from the interviews. Lastly, a conceptual model of parent involvement in education and college planning for African American high school students is presented.

### 4.1 Sample Description

Although all participants were African American and from low-income families, the sample purposefully included caregivers with a variety of relationships to the child, and adolescents who attended a diversity of schools as described below.

#### 4.1.1 Caregiver Characteristics

The majority of caregivers interviewed were mothers (n=17), although three fathers participated as did four other relatives who had primary caregiving responsibilities (Table 4.1). The ages of the caregivers ranged between 33 and 76 (mean 46, median 41). Most (n=13) of the caregivers were single; of these, three were widowed and three were divorced or separated. Eleven caregivers were married or lived with their partner. This did not necessarily mean that the students in these households lived with both their biological parents; four families included a stepparent. Nearly a third (n=7) of the students were the only child currently living in their

household. The largest household included in the study had six individuals under the age of 21. This, like other households was multigenerational; the caregiver participant lived with her mother, brother, sister, and four children.

All but one of the caregivers had graduated from high school or completed their GED. Half of those interviewed had taken some college credits but had not completed the degree. A further six had a postsecondary qualification, although none of them directly from high school. In general, the caregivers who volunteered to participate in the study had a higher level of education than CF parents as a whole, only 12% of whom have a bachelors degree or higher.

All but three caregivers were employed and worked outside of the home. Their occupations, broadly fell into three groups: clerical workers (e.g., office manager), service industry workers (e.g., hairdresser, housekeeper), and paraprofessionals (e.g., pharmacy technician). Most caregivers reported working more than 40 hours a week; two reported working more than 60 hours in a typical week. Of the three caregivers who were not employed, two were retired, and the third was a full time community college student. The average household income was \$33,561. Although all participants were low-income (see Table 4.1), only 58% were classed as extremely or very low income, compared to 77% of CF parents as a whole.

**Table 4.1 Caregiver and Family Characteristics**

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Age</i>	30 – 40	11	45.8
	40 – 49	6	25.0
	50 – 59	5	20.8
	60+	2	8.3
<i>Gender</i>	Female	21	87.5
	Male	3	12.5
<i>Relationship Status</i>	Single	13	54.2
	Married/ Living with partner	11	45.8
<i>Relationship with Child</i>	Mother	17	70.8
	Father	3	12.5
	Aunt	1	4.2
	Grandparent/ Great Aunt	3	12.5
<i>Education</i>	Less than high school	1	4.2
	High school/ GED	5	20.8
	Some college	12	50.0
	Graduated college	6	25.0
<i>Employment</i>	Full time	19	79.2
	Part time	2	8.3
	Unemployed	3	12.5
<i>Income<sup>a</sup></i>	Extremely low (< \$23,850)	8	33.3
	Very low (<\$33,550)	6	25.0
	Low (<53,700)	10	41.7
<i>Children (&lt;21yrs) in household</i>	1	7	29.2
	2	4	16.7
	3	9	37.5
	4 - 6	4	16.7

<sup>a</sup> College First uses definitions of income levels provided by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). “Low-income” means below 80% of the median family income for the area and “extremely low-income” means below 30% of the median family income. For a family of four in the region, “low-income,” for example, indicates an annual household income below \$53,700.

#### **4.1.2 Adolescent Characteristics**

More girls than boys were interviewed (Table 4.2), although the proportion of girls in the study (58%) was slightly smaller than that of CF as a whole (65%). The mean age of the adolescents was 16.5. Almost two thirds of those interviewed were in or were preparing to enter their junior year of high school. The remaining students were either beginning their senior year or had just graduated from high school the previous Spring. The students' self reported GPA's ranged between 2.5 and 4.0 (mean = 3.28).

The students participating in the study attended 15 high schools in 8 school districts. A wide spectrum of schools was represented in the sample. Of the 10 students who attended a school in the central urban district, eight were at charter or magnet schools. Two students attended private schools and the remainder were enrolled at public schools in suburban districts. Seven students did not go to school in the district where they lived. Of these, three were enrolled in the transfer program and were attending high-performing predominantly white institutions in suburban school districts. More than half of students attended schools that were predominantly African American, the majority of which were also high poverty institutions.

**Table 4.2 Adolescent and School Characteristics<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Gender</i>	Female	14	58.3
	Male	10	41.7
<i>Age</i>	15	2	8.3
	16	5	20.8
	17	12	50.0
	18	5	20.8
<i>Grade<sup>b</sup></i>	11	15	62.5
	12	6	25.0
	13	3	12.5
<i>Type of school attended</i>	Magnet/ charter	8	33.3
	Other public school	14	58.3
	Private	2	8.3
<i>School characteristics</i>	Predominantly African American	14	58.3
	High poverty	9	37.5
<i>Attending school in another district</i>	Transfer program	3	12.5
	Other	4	16.7

<sup>a</sup> Includes demographic information for one student who refused interview after participation of the caregiver.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates the grade the student entered in Fall 2014. Students who had graduated from high school in the Summer of 2014 are indicated as being in Grade 13

## **4.2 Study Context**

The results presented in this chapter are shaped by the historical and geographical context in which the study took place. The caregivers who participated are parenting college-able, and often highly motivated students in school districts and neighborhoods that produce far fewer college graduates than state and national averages. Moreover, College First students are pursuing their high school education in one of the most racially and economically segregated school systems in the country at a time when national headlines have been dominated by protests against injustices faced by African American communities (Logan & Stults, 2011). The first

section of this chapter discusses the school system in the region. This is followed by an overview of national events that took place during the course of data collection and their relevance for the study's findings.

#### **4.2.1 Public Schools and School Choice**

In common with most urban areas in the US, the quality of education received by high school students in the region served by CF varies greatly. Students who live in wealthy suburban districts attend schools that are ranked among the best in the state. Nearly all students from these schools graduate within five years and as many as 80% go on to attend four year colleges. In general, students living in in the inner-city and some inner-ring suburbs have a very different experience. At the worst performing schools in these areas less than half of students graduate within five years and only around one in ten go on to a four year college. These schools almost exclusively serve African American children from low-income families. The consistent underperformance of some of the region's school districts, together with questions about their financial administration, has resulted in withdrawal of the state accreditation from some districts in which study participants lived.

The extent to which families are legally allowed to select a better performing school depends on the district in which they live. Families that live in the central urban district may apply to send their child to one of ten magnet high schools. They also have the option of applying to place their children in one of two gifted high schools that offer accelerated programs for high achieving students. In contrast to many of the district's schools, these institutions perform well in statewide assessments; they also serve a higher proportion of white and middle class families. Five charter high schools also operate in the central urban district. With the

exception of the gifted schools, the magnet and charter schools are predominantly African American and serve mostly low-income families.

African American students living in the central urban district are also eligible to apply to attend a school in a predominantly white suburban district through the transfer program. Students are accepted on a first come first served basis in accordance with the amount of space available in the receiving school district. African American families living in suburban school districts are, however, not eligible to participate in the transfer; neither are they eligible to attend city magnet or charter schools. Students must attend the public high school that matches their place of residence. An exception currently exists for students who live in unaccredited school districts who may transfer to schools in designated accredited districts. Unaccredited districts must provide transportation for students transferring to another district and additionally remit student tuition to the receiving district. Students living in these unaccredited districts are 98% African American and more than 85% are eligible for the free or reduced price school lunch program.

#### **4.2.2 Timeframe of Data Collection and National Events**

The study also took place within a climate of heightened racial tension across the nation. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Peaceful demonstrations following the incident were accompanied by violent protests and incidences of vandalism and looting. The civil unrest and militarized police response drew widespread media and political attention. The event, and others like it, drew increased media attention to historical patterns of segregation across the US. Furthermore, national news outlets highlighted the role that failing school systems played in maintaining racial segregation and distrust in many urban areas (e.g., Hannah-Jones, 2014).



The shooting of Michael Brown took place approximately six weeks into data collection, after 14 families had been interviewed. Other incidents across the nation, such as the death of Eric Garner in New York after being placed in a chokehold by police officers continued to dominate public discourse during the remainder of the study. While the focus of this dissertation is not on police shootings of young African American men, the events – and the climate that made them possible – necessarily form a background to the study. Neither parents nor students were asked directly about any of the events in Ferguson or elsewhere, but the topic inevitably arose during lengthy discussions about race. It is important to note that themes of racial tension and the parenting response to it were already prevalent in the interviews before August 9. These themes intensified in the later interviews, often with specific references to the death of unarmed African American men as an example of the different strategies necessary when parenting African American children in the context of a racially and economically divided city.

#### **4.2.3 Participant Vignettes**

In order to give a fuller picture of the families that participated in the study than can be given by summary statistics, three vignettes of caregiver-child dyads are presented below<sup>1</sup>. These three families are highlighted here because they represent some of the diversity of living situations and educational experiences represented in the whole sample. Examples of their experiences and quotations from their interviews are prominent in the presentation of the study finding in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

**Caregiver: Brianna (married mother)**

**Student: Kiara (senior at a public school)**

Brianna proposed that we meet at a coffee shop that provided a convenient half way point between her daughter's school and the hospital where she worked as a clerical assistant. Both mother and daughter had brought homework with them to work on while the other was being interviewed. Brianna was taking classes at a local community college, and Kiara was working on her personal statement for her own college applications. Brianna explained that when she got home she would have to cook for her husband and Brianna's younger siblings so had little time to spend on her coursework at home.

Brianna and Kiara lived in a diverse neighborhood, where although African Americans made up the largest group, no single ethnicity could claim majority status. Only around one in ten of their neighbors held a college degree and the median household income was only marginally higher than \$20,000. Kiara traveled nearly eight miles through the city everyday to reach her school located in a similarly low income, but predominantly African American neighborhood in the center of the city.

Brianna talked enthusiastically about her own experiences in high school, summing up her time there as "awesome." She had a place on multiple sports teams, and "played quite a bit," but still got "good enough" grades. Her ambitions to go to college were abruptly halted, however, when still in high school she met Kiara's father (and current husband) and got pregnant. Wanting to stay away from the stereotype of "the single baby momma that was going to stay in the welfare system," Brianna enrolled immediately at a vocational school. However, her first job after graduating made little use of her training and earned her a barely livable wage. Brianna resolved that her own children would have a different experience.

Kiara was well on her way to fulfilling her mother's ambitions. Although she attended a high poverty school from which only around a third of students would go on to attend a four year college, she had done well on her first attempt at the ACT and was hopeful about winning a place at an out of state university. Like her mother, Kiara was constantly busy, participating in extracurricular activities and working, often into the early hours of the morning. She was pursuing classes in high school that she believed would ultimately contribute to her goal of starting her own business after finishing college. Kiara described the importance of education in her extended family by saying, "Education is definitely big in my family. You kind of wouldn't think it was because there's not a lot of us that went to college, but education is definitely stressed in my family."

**Caregiver: Tabitha (single mother)**

**Student: Kevin (junior at a public school)**

Tabitha lived with Kevin and his younger brother and sister on a block of newly built single family homes surrounded by dilapidated rental properties and vacant lots. She had grown up in an adjacent neighborhood and attended the local public school. When the family moved in to their current home Tabitha had been so nervous about their new neighborhood that she would not allow her children to leave the house on their own. She now believed that the area was improving but still worried about her children's safety on the streets, especially that of her sons.

Like Brianna, Tabitha was currently taking classes at a local college. She was determined to get a professional qualification but was struggling to keep up with her coursework at the same time as caring for her children and working full time. She explained that her parents had pushed her to go to college immediately after high school even though she had no idea what she wanted

to study. She quickly grew tired of the classes she was taking and dropped out. Her goal with her own children was to help them to figure out what they wanted to be while they were still in high school. That way, she reasoned, they could go to college at 18 to study something they were really passionate about and avoid the mistakes she had made.

Kevin attended a small high school in the same low-income and predominantly African American neighborhood as Kiara's school was located. Unlike many of the adolescent interviewees, Kevin was vocal about disliking his school. After excelling academically in middle school he had struggled to maintain good grades after the transition to high school. He was also disappointed about the lack of opportunity for particular extracurricular activities his high school, and missed his friends who had gone on to attend their local neighborhood school. He admitted that he thought often about asking his mom if he could transfer to a different school. Despite these reservations, Kevin was involved in the school clubs that were offered. He was also an active participant in weeknight events at his family's church. Perhaps because he was younger than many of the adolescent interviewees, Kevin was not sure where he wanted to go to college or what he wanted to do there. He just knew that he wanted to make enough money to "keep my family together, and just be a successful person." To this extent, he had internalized Tabitha's message that it was important to get a college degree as soon as possible, and certainly before starting a family.

**Caregiver: Barbara (single grandmother)**

**Student: Jayla (graduate of a public school)**

Jayla had lived with her Grandmother, Barbara, since she was a baby. Originally her mother had also lived with them, but a few years ago she had gotten married and moved to a

different area of the city. Jayla saw her mom and step dad regularly and would occasionally stay at their house, but preferred to be at her Grandmother's where her friends lived close by. Barbara explained that she and Jayla's mom had "kind of simultaneously raised her."

Barbara owned a small single family home in an inner-ring suburb of the city. With a median income of around \$40,000, their neighborhood was somewhat more prosperous than those of other CF families, and nearly two thirds of residents had at least some college education. Despite this, the local high school performed did not provide a ready path to college; only one in four students went on to enroll at a four year institution. The family therefore used another relative's address so that Jayla could attend a magnet high school in the neighboring central urban district.

One of the oldest participants in the study, Barbara had attended an all black high school at a time before enforced desegregation. She explained that the *Brown v. Board of Education* case had been decided in the year before she finished high school and so she had narrowly missed out going to an integrated school. Following high school she had taken various college level classes, but had never collected enough credits to graduate. She regretted that as an "average" student she was never pushed to complete her college degree immediately after high school but noted "it was a different time and people thought differently." Barbara had held various clerical jobs before her retirement.

Jayla had graduated from a public school the previous spring. Although she had been granted a place at a well-respected out of state university, financial constraints meant that she would be unable to attend. Her plan was now to attend community college part time and to work part time until she had enough money to transfer to a nearby state school. None of this, however, was deterring her from her ultimate childhood goal of becoming a doctor and moving out of the

state. Both Jayla and Barbara were confident that she could still reach her dream if she only worked hard enough.

### **4.3 Findings for Research Question 1**

*How do parents and adolescents perceive parent involvement in the education and college planning of high school students?* Five major types of parent involvement in education and college planning emerged from the interviews with caregivers and adolescents. The first two themes, *navigating school systems* and *supporting learning at school* are concerned with the direct ways in which parents promote their children's education through their interactions with school districts and individual schools. The third and fourth themes; *supporting learning at home and in the community*, and *building motivation* consider the ways in which caregivers seek to build academic skills and perseverance outside of the school realm. The fifth and sixth themes, *laying the foundation for learning* and *expectations and strategies for discrimination* emerged from participants' discussions of how caregivers involve themselves in aspects of the students' home and social lives that they see as having an indirect effect on learning. The final theme, *preparing for the future*, describes the steps parents took to prepare their children for life beyond high school. The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3 Types of Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
<p><b>Navigating School Systems</b>  <i>Parents took steps to get their children in to the best possible school, and sometimes to move them when things went wrong.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing schools</li> <li>• Transferring schools</li> </ul>
<p><b>Supporting Learning at School</b>  <i>Parents promoted their children’s academic achievement by engaging directly with their school and their schoolwork.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring academic progress</li> <li>• Communicating with teachers</li> <li>• Knowing and being known</li> <li>• Challenging teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Supporting Learning at Home and in the Community</b>  <i>Parents sought to give their children supplemental learning opportunities at home and in the community.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harnessing everyday activities</li> <li>• Accessing academic resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Building Motivation</b>  <i>Parents engaged in various strategies to keep their children applying themselves day by day in their schoolwork.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying on them</li> <li>• Setting standards</li> <li>• Sanction and reward</li> <li>• Being a role model</li> </ul>
<p><b>Laying the Foundation for Learning</b>  <i>Parents engaged in nonacademic activities that were intended to create an environment that supported learning.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building a positive relationship</li> <li>• Provision and sacrifice</li> <li>• Structuring spare time</li> <li>• Monitoring peer relationships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expectations and strategies for discrimination</b>  <i>Parents taught their children to deal with bullying and discrimination in school and extrapolated lessons for future behavior.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to bullying</li> <li>• Racial socialization</li> </ul>
<p><b>Preparing for the Future</b>  <i>Parents took steps to help their children access higher education as well as to prepare them more generally for adulthood.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building future thinking</li> <li>• Discussing college choices</li> <li>• Planning finances</li> <li>• Preparation to leave home</li> </ul>

### 4.3.1 Navigating School Systems

As described at the beginning of this chapter, the school system in the region served by CF is complex and the quality of education a student receives varies greatly depending on the institution they attend. Parents engaged in diverse strategies to get their children in to the high school of their choice and to ensure that their experience continued to be optimal. Two subthemes emerged for this type of involvement: *choosing schools*, and *transferring schools*.

**Choosing schools.** The strategies parents engaged in to choose the best school for their child emerged as one of the strongest themes in the interviews with some caregivers stating that the most important thing they had done for their child's education was to get him or her accepted to an institution other than their local neighborhood school. There was general agreement that many schools and even whole school districts were to be avoided if at all possible. Students who had no choice but to attend their neighborhood school were often scathing in their assessment of the institution. For example, Jada, a seventeen year old senior with her sights set on an Ivy League college, said:

I don't want to sound mean, but at my school we suck at everything. We're not educationally driven at all, we're not sports driven, we're really bad at it. All of our teams pretty much suck. The arts aren't any good really. Yeah, we're not good at anything ... Usually the foreign exchange students are the ones who are making it, and we're like, "Oh man." I mean, my school's predominantly black, and we don't necessarily have the drive to do that kind of stuff. If we do it, we do it in school, we don't practice outside of school. Very few people are in programs like College First.

Caregivers were particularly concerned about the discipline problems they believed to be prevalent in the neighborhood schools. Gabrielle, whose son attended a magnet school explained that she did not approve of many local schools because of "hearing about the trouble that they're having with the kids over the news and all the fights and different things." Furthermore, many



participants did not believe the problem to be limited to individual institutions or even school districts. Tabitha, the mother of magnet school student, Kevin, described the failure the entire region, saying, “they’ve struggled for years just to get the kids [to attend]. A lot of people have found alternatives to the [neighborhood] schools, so a lot of them are closed, a lot of them are not even open.” On the whole, parents took whatever steps were necessary enroll their children at a school that was perceived to offer academic and social advantages.

Not all caregivers were willing to accept their child’s fate as being to attend the neighborhood school. Some families who were not eligible to apply to magnet schools or the transfer program resorted to working outside of the system. Most commonly, they used another family member’s address to get their child accepted at a school in a more respected district. For example, Barbara’s granddaughter, Jayla, managed to attend a magnet school in the central urban district, despite the fact that they lived in one of the worst performing inner-ring suburban districts, by using her great grandmother’s address. Barbara explained: “If you’re daring enough you can work the system. Systems are designed to meet most people’s needs if you know how to work them. It’s done all the time, it’s nothing new.” Like her grandmother, Jayla believed that school districts almost expected families to work the system to their own advantage, saying of the administration, “I think they know, but they just don’t care anymore. That’s what a lot of kids do.”

Some families had chosen to move to their neighborhoods because the school district was perceived to be better. Antoinette, the mother of sixteen year old Marcus described how they had come to live in their working class suburban community:

So when I got to looking at moving out to [the suburbs], and I’m like looking at finances and what we can afford and school districts, you know, I honed in on [school district],

and with it being, you know it's not a big huge district, you know, it's a nice size and numbers were great, a lot of diversity, and so, I was like, "Ok we going to try it."

The choice often came with considerable sacrifice on the caregiver's behalf. Housing is inevitably more expensive in the better school districts and some families were enduring substantial financial hardship as a result. Some families wanted to move to another neighborhood but remained despite financial and personal hardships because of their desire for their child to finish high school a district that offered more opportunities.

Some caregivers continued to live in their poor urban communities while searching for the best choice of school that was legally available to them. Parents living in the central urban district had the option of magnet schools, charter schools, and the transfer program if they wanted to avoid the local neighborhood school. Some parents whose children attended magnet or charter schools had relatively little involvement in the process. Their children chose the school they wanted to attend and led the completion of the necessary paperwork. Other parents were more proactive. Brianna recounted how she had taken her daughter, Kiara, and her friends around open house events held by the local high schools. Although Brianna had decided in advance that Kiara would attend a magnet school highly regarded for its academics, after visiting another magnet school she changed her mind. The way in which the teachers they met appeared to be dedicated to their jobs and to care for the students, together with Kiara's protestations that this was where she wanted to attend persuaded Brianna to apply for admission there. She believed that arts curriculum offered there would allow Kiara to "spread her wings." Whereas caregivers who chose private institutions or to enter their child into the transfer program usually gave academic reasons for their school selection, families who had a choice of neighborhood or

magnet schools often selected an institution based on its fit with their children's artistic ability or desired career.

Parents who had opted for the transfer program or private high schools had planned what type of institution their child would attend from early childhood. Kristi explained that she had begun researching the transfer program when her son was four or five years old. Like the two other interviewees who attended suburban schools through the program, Jeremy had been travelling to his transfer school since he was in kindergarten. The two families in the study sending their children to private schools had a similarly long term plan. Joy, the single mother of sixteen year old Terence described how she had always wanted him to spend his important "college preparatory years" at a private institution where he would receive a better quality of education and avoid potential social problems at a neighborhood school. She had chosen a school recommended by a teacher at his public middle school and received a "lucrative" financial aid package. Adjusting socially to their predominantly white and affluent schools was not always easy for transfer or private school students. The steps their parents took to teach them how to successfully navigate their schools as African American students from urban neighborhoods are detailed later in this chapter.

**Transferring schools.** In view of evidence that school mobility is common for low-income and African American students, it is perhaps unsurprising that transferring schools emerged as a subtheme of school choice (US Government Accountability Office, 2010). Only one student in the sample, however, moved schools because of moving homes. More commonly, parents withdrew their children from schools because of social problems. For example, Gloria described how her son, Danny, had been "ridiculed and bullied" at his predominantly African

American urban school because of the way he dressed and his perceived sexual orientation.

Gloria explained that he was not “a typical African American young boy from urban society.”

Danny recounted the incident that led to Gloria’s decision to transfer him:

People just keep talking about me and just keep bullying me, in my face, just bullying me. [Another student] called me a transgender. I was like, “Are you kidding me?” I just got pissed off. I almost cussed her out, like, like cussed her out. She got all, she got all these brothers. I don’t want, nope, nope, I don’t want no part of that. So I had to calm down. I had to put my frustrations on the lockers, the chairs, the everything. Then I went to the counselor’s room, I mean to the counselors to talk to them, so I can calm down, and all that. And then basically I called my mother and was like, “Momma, please pick me up right now, really, just pick me up.” She was like, “What’s wrong?” I was like “You’ll know what’s wrong when you come to the counselors’ office.” Yeah, she got me out of that school. She was like, she was like, “I want him out. I want my kid out, he can’t take this no more, I can’t...” She was like, “I can’t have people talking about my son and then he won’t defend himself.”

Gloria remembered receiving a call from the school that Danny was contemplating suicide, and realizing that she could no longer tolerate the school’s inaction on her son’s behalf. She explained that “he couldn’t be himself there and the teachers didn’t know how to control the atmosphere.” She decided that her only option was to transfer him to another school. At Danny’s new school Gloria experienced a different type of parent involvement. She observed that at the new magnet school parents and teachers worked together to ensure the academic and social success of their children.

#### **4.3.2 Supporting Learning at School**

Parents promoted their children’s academic achievement by engaging directly with their school and their schoolwork. Although many of these activities reflected those included in traditional parent involvement models, it should be noted that the parent-school relationship was not always one of harmonious partnership. Key activities in this area included *monitoring*

*academic progress, communicating with teachers, knowing and being known, and challenging teachers.*

**Monitoring academic progress.** Most parents were informed about the classes their children were taking and the grades they were receiving, although some followed this more actively than others. Caregivers relied on a number of avenues to facilitate their monitoring. Some parents used daily conversations with their children in combination with tracking information provided by the school to ensure their children were making appropriate progress. Essie described the content of some of the conversations she had with her daughter Jada:

[We have] conversations when she gets out of school. How did your day go? And then zero in on particular classes, making sure when she makes her schedule there are some honors classes in there. Making sure she's got the credit hours she needs. How do you like this class, is it engaging for you? ... Making sure, why did you get a C? What do we need to do moving forward?

Other parents used online portals to monitor the student's progress. Students did not always appreciate the fact that their caregivers had such easy access to their grades. Kevin described the situation in his family:

And then, you know, they have the parent portal and stuff so they can see your grades online. That kind of doesn't give me the time to fix things before she can look at it, so she sometimes, she knows my grade before I do ... She might come and say, "So why'd you get a D on the paper?" I be like, "I got a D on the paper?" For real, it's gets kind of upsetting the way she gets to know everything I'm doing without me even knowing it, but it's just her, you know. She's just that type of person that needs to know. That's just her being my mom.

Other caregivers did not discuss the information with their children unless a particular problem arose. Still others trusted their children to keep them informed of anything they needed to know. Academic monitoring was one area of involvement that many parents reported as declining as their child grew older. One father, for example, explained how he used to check the parent portal

daily when his daughter was in middle school. Now he considered her six-weekly report card to keep him sufficiently informed of her performance so long as she was doing well.

**Communicating with teachers.** The extent to which caregivers communicated with teachers appeared to depend on the individual parent's availability and inclination as well as on the degree to which schools reached out to the families of their students. Several parents reported having little contact with teachers. The need for constant communication was believed by many to decline with age. Additionally, when their child was succeeding academically and socially in school, caregivers often believed that they had no reason to speak with teachers. Janis, the 33 year old mother of a high school senior, described how when her daughter, Alexis, started at her current high school she had many disciplinary problems. She recounted how after an event where Alexis had thrown a desk across the classroom in anger, she met with teachers several times in order to formulate a plan to help her daughter. As time went by, Alexis became more confident and able to express herself, and the need for Janis to communicate with teachers declined. Speaking of her current contact with the school, Janis explained, "I really don't get in contact with school so much because she's always on top of her everything, grades, so I don't really need to contact them." Similarly, many parents reported that the only time they spoke with their children's teachers was at parent-teacher conferences where they heard little but praise of their child.

Not all parents were content to relinquish communication with teachers to periodic parent-teacher conferences. In fact, some high schools did not even hold regular meetings with parents on the basis that the students were old enough to take responsibility for their own learning. A minority of caregivers, worrying that they would not hear about their children's

struggles before they became serious problems, therefore initiated contact with the school themselves. For example, Kristi initiated an annual meeting with all of her son's teachers. She explained that the first time she did it "nothing was really going on, it was just me wanting to make sure that I connected with all of his teachers." After the positive reception she received from the school, Kristi took to initiating a meeting every year on her birthday. Other parents had more conflicted relationships with their children's schools.

**Knowing and being known.** Some caregivers made a point of visiting the school without invitation to make sure that they knew their child's teachers and that the teachers knew them. The most common reason given was that the children of parents who were known to be concerned about their education would receive more attention from their teachers. Antoinette, for example, explained this philosophy further by saying, "As a parent, if you're not proactive, in showing them that, yes, I value my kid's education, why should the school district and these teachers care? You have to care just as much as they do." Another caregiver expressed a similar sentiment in explaining that if teachers know you as a parent, then "they gonna help your kids more." Both of these caregivers were reasonably satisfied with the response they had received from teachers. However, other parents were more distrustful of their children's schools. Tiffany, whose son attended a high poverty, predominantly African American magnet school, described her strategy for checking up on him and his teachers, saying, "I shows up; they don't know I'm coming." Sometimes she would bring in his lunch "Just to see what he doing." Having received a positive report from his teachers about her son's academic progress and character, Tiffany left satisfied. However, she and other caregivers continued to perform spot checks on their children

and their schools, concerned that something could be going on that their children wouldn't tell them about.

**Challenging teachers.** Caregivers sometimes felt the need to directly challenge the teachers at their children's schools. This was especially true when students attended underperforming high poverty schools, where the teachers were often less experienced and held fewer qualifications in comparison to other schools. For example, Kiara attended a school where fewer than half of the teaching staff held advanced degrees (compared to 90% or higher in some of the predominantly white schools). Her mother, Brianna confronted a teacher who she felt expected too much from her daughter. She explained that the teacher had not let Kiara take a test because she had been causing a disruption in the class. The teacher expected Kiara to take a leadership role in setting a positive tone in class. Brianna requested a meeting with the teacher and challenged her that it was not the job of the students to set the tone in class. She asked her to stop "assuming things" about Kiara and then getting upset when she didn't live up to those high expectations. The theme of challenging teachers was not common in the adolescent interviews, perhaps because parents were careful to prevent their child from witnessing the confrontation. Brianna stressed that she challenged Kiara's teacher in private and that she tried to do it in a non-confrontational manner:

It's not like I'm in there like, "You're doing my baby wrong." No, 'cos the way that they approach the teacher too. They human. Just because they a teacher doesn't mean that you get to go in there and just go at their throats. No. And I didn't let her hear me either when I did get a little stern. I didn't let her hear it, because you don't want her to think, like, "Yeah, my momma came up here and ..." No. That's not how we do things. We do things the way they supposed to be done.



Brianna's strategy proved to be successful. In the end, the teacher apologized and allowed Kiara to take the test.

### 4.3.3 Supporting Learning at Home and in the Community

Many caregivers also sought to give their children supplemental learning opportunities in their homes and communities. These activities included *harnessing everyday activities* to draw out academic lessons, and *accessing academic resources* in the community.

**Harnessing everyday activities.** A key strategy in the home was to take advantage of activities that the family was already engaging in. For example, two adolescents described how their fathers would use news stories they saw on television to instruct them about politics or current events. Sixteen year old Ebony, described the way her dad "lectured" her about politics, saying, "Like when my dad explains it to me, I get it. If we're watching it on the news, I'll be like, "What?" But my dad just puts it in a way that I get." Other parents tried to link their children's leisure activities including sports and entertainment to academic knowledge. Gloria, single mother of Danny, described how her high school aged children reacted to her tactic of teaching academics through movies and music:

They hate it when I go see movies. They're like, "You don't watch a movie for entertainment; you watch it for academics." I do, because if I show you bits and parts of a film, I want you to pull out the academic part out of it. I teach them literary devices. You know, rap music, "You want to listen to it? OK, where are the metaphors? Where are the similes? What is in here?" Because everything you listen to has some connection to academics. That's what I want to train their brains to do, to think academically.

Because both of her sons had a learning disabilities Gloria felt that this type of instruction was more effective than sitting down with them to look at written material.

**Accessing academic resources.** Parents often saw community resources as a means of compensating for support that they were not able to offer their children. Included in this category were organizations, both physical and virtual, that provided supplemental tutoring and enrichment activities. A number of parents, for example, reported taking their children to public libraries. Several caregivers strongly encouraged their children to take advantage of the tutoring opportunities offered through College First. At least two parents had also persuaded their children to enroll in a second college access program that provided supplemental instruction for low-income youth. As Tabitha explained, “I always make sure that I get them in to do that extra thing.” Some caregivers relied on Internet resources such as YouTube videos for the “extra thing” that might help their children to succeed. For example, Angelica, who had come to the region as a refugee, had minimal social or financial resources. When she saw a commercial for an online tutoring program she encouraged her daughter, Faith, to sign up for it. Faith cited this as one of the most important things her mother had done to prepare her for college.

#### **4.3.4 Building Motivation**

Parents engaged in various strategies to keep their children applying themselves day by day in their schoolwork. Key subthemes in this area included *staying on them*, *setting standards of achievement*, *sanction and reward*, and *being a role model*.

**Staying on them.** Nearly all participants reported that caregivers tried to “stay on” their children to make sure that they were doing what they needed to do to get through high school. This included making sure that they were completing their homework, turning in assignments, and putting in the necessary effort to achieve the best grade they were capable of. Caregivers were particularly adamant about the need to “stay on” their children in cases where the student was finding the work to be boring, or where they were struggling and ready to give up. Typically, adolescents interpreted the constant reinforcement of the importance of schoolwork as evidence of their parents’ love. They saw their parents as helping them to achieve their dreams, a perception perhaps best summed up in Kevin’s description of his mother, Tabitha, of whom he said, “She’s always on my back about my grades. You know, she’s that person who can give you that extra kick and makes you do good. She’s a real stubborn person, but it’s like a loving stubborn.”

Caregivers’ “staying on” their children, in contrast to many other types of involvement already described, was perceived to be even more important as they progressed through high school. One explanation given was that students were beginning to struggle more with their work as they enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Tabitha described her experience with Kevin as he got into his sophomore year:

He had advanced geometry, advanced chemistry, and AP World History, and that was kind of overwhelming for him. I had to really stay on him about it. And I’m like, I’ve never had to do this before. This is new. He always just excelled.

Other parents explained that their involvement in continually pushing their children had increased because of the seriousness of this stage of schooling for students hoping to go to college. Alexis, was currently struggling to get her GPA up to a competitive level for college

applications. Her mother, Janis, described how she encouraged Alexis to keep on striving in her work:

I let her know the severity of the stage that she's in right now. Like, "OK, now, you're in a transitional period. You're leaving high school and going to college and there's more independency. You have to maintain your grades, you know, if you want the scholarship. You have to focus on academics."

For Janis, the ultimate aim of the increased pressure she applied was to push Alexis to achieve her goals. In order to do this she had to try to "keep her on task" at the same time as making sure that she was not overwhelmed with schoolwork or other responsibilities.

**Setting standards.** Parents were eager to let their children know that they believed in their academic ability and therefore had high expectations for their achievement. Like many parents, Brianna expected her daughter, Kiara, to reach high in her senior year:

It's like, "I know that you could float by with B's and C's, let's get those A's. And if you get a B in the process of trying to get that A, I'm OK." We have high expectations, me and her dad. Because if I lower my expectations, you may lower your actions, so at least if you're aiming high, you're going to hit higher than you would if I had let you aim low.

This attitude, that the highest grades were expected, but that the effort put in was really what counted, was commonly expressed by parents, and had been internalized by many adolescents. In fact, some of the adolescents expected more of themselves than their parents did, saying, for example, "I don't want to be average. I want to be above average." In these cases parents encouraged students to accept less than perfection. Mia, the mother of 16 year old Kelly, described how she talked her down from panic over a less than perfect test score, saying, "If out of 25 [questions] you understand 24, you're doing pretty well. Don't be so hard on yourself."

**Sanction and reward.** Some parents provided incentives for achievement and threatened consequences for students who slacked off on their schoolwork. Students in some families needed to keep their grades up if they were to be allowed to continue in extracurricular activities or to undertake paid work. At least two students were promised monetary awards for exceptional achievement such as getting straight A's. However, not all parents believed that children should rely on external incentives to motivate their work. As Gabrielle, the mother of Christopher, explained, "You going to school to get an education. You're not going to school for mommy to pay you, your education is going to pay you." Other caregivers emphasized that their children only received verbal praise when they had done something exceptional. They expected a certain level of achievement from their children, and did not believe that they should receive commendation for doing something "you supposed to do anyway".

**Being a role model.** Caregivers used their own experiences of interrupted education as a cautionary tale. They wanted their children to understand how difficult it was to go back to education after taking a break, for example, warning them to complete their degree before having children. However, many parents also provided an example of perseverance in the face of adversity. Adolescent participants whose parents were currently studying taking college classes were inspired by their caregivers' dedication and applied the example to their own work. Alexis' mother, Janis, had gotten pregnant with her when she was 15 and dropped out of high school. Many years later she got her GED and was now studying full time at a community college. Alexis described the impact her mom's return to education had had on her own attitude:

My mother has been my main inspiration because she went back to school so she teaches me a lot. She came from where she was at and had me while she was young and still went back to school; that's amazing.

Similarly, Antoinette, the mother of a sixteen year old boy who was excelling in high school, believed that her pursuit of an associates degree had been a key factor in motivating him. When asked what key things she had done to help him do well in school, she responded:

Well, I think one of the main things is the fact that I've been in school while he's been in school, and I'm still not finished. I don't expect more of him than I'm willing to give of myself. He knows that the same energy, effort and stuff that he puts out is the same thing that I put out. Anything I do, I put my all in, so that's the same thing that I expect of you.

Antoinette's example demonstrated to her son the importance of hard work in education as well as perseverance despite setbacks. She believed that anything she could do as an adult, while managing work and family responsibilities, he could do as a child.

#### **4.3.5 Laying the foundation for learning**

Caregivers had a much broader interpretation of activities that would help their children to succeed in high school and to prepare them for college compared to traditional models of involvement. All participants discussed types of involvement that were not directly academic in nature, but rather created a foundation on which the child's learning could be built. Caregivers worked to build positive relationships with their children, to provide for them materially, and to structure how and with whom they spent their out of school time.

**Building a positive relationship.** Both adult and adolescent participants talked about a positive relationship between parent and child as being essential to success in school and beyond. They believed that if children knew that they were loved they would be better able navigate their way through high school and college. Love was demonstrated through consistent physical presence and through assertions that their support was unconditional. Barbara spoke at length about the importance of the consistency of family involvement to her granddaughter's education

and future prospects. Despite the fact that Jayla did not live with either of her biological parents, Barbara believed that it was her sense of being loved by her family that had gotten her through high school. She explained that her granddaughter “has a stable family life. She has people who love her and will support her no matter what. I think those things are instrumental in kids reaching some measure of success.” Like other caregivers, Barbara believed that one of her key roles was to provide the sense of security that comes from a reliable adult presence.

Kiara, also explained how she was motivated to succeed in school because her family demonstrated their love and support in all areas of her life. She believed parents who only cared about assignments and grades were not doing enough to help their children succeed:

So, not just being supportive of academic stuff, but *kids* is important, because it’s a sign of caring. You’re not just, “Do good in school, but I’m not coming to your basketball game today.” Then they’re like, “What’s the point of me doing well in school? If you only care about school, then what’s the point?” So it’s important to show that you care about the student, the child, and not just their work, because their work doesn’t always show necessarily their intelligence. I know for a while mine wasn’t reflecting mine.

For Kiara, parents who focused exclusively on academic performance risked remaining ignorant of other factors affecting their child. Parents who wanted to promote academic success therefore needed to demonstrate interest in all areas of the child’s life.

A key means by which caregivers demonstrated their support for their children was by listening to their concerns and striving to keep an open line of communication with them. Vivien, a 53 year old aunt caring for her sister’s daughters explained how she sought to ensure that her nieces’ social problems at school did not get out of hand by creating a relationship where they could talk to her about anything, saying:

I stress all the time that you can come to me with anything ‘cos I’m going to tell you the truth, she can come to me with, I don’t care, sex, whatever, I want her to feel like she can always come to me.

Unsurprisingly, open communication was not always unproblematic between parents and their teenage children. Some adolescents felt that their parents were not good at listening to them. As Marcus, a sixteen year old boy living with his mom and stepdad put it:

My mom, it's hard for her to understand, for me to tell her how I'm seeing things, because she kind of has a picture of how she thinks I'm seeing it. She does listen, but it kind of goes on to the point where she's like, does her listening really affect how she still thinks?

Some parents admitted that they did not always immediately understand or believe what their children were telling them. For example, Tabitha, the mother of sixteen year old Kevin, described how she had initially dismissed the severity of social problems he was having at school. Over time she came to realize the toll Kevin's victimization was having on him and regretted her earlier refusal to listen, saying:

A lot of times we do things as parents, damaging our kids without knowing, and we don't listen to what they say. And so, I always try to keep an open mind and I try to listen to what they say. And I always tell them that, "You may think that I might say 'no' about something or you might think that I'm indifferent about something, but always come and talk to me because I'll listen to your opinion."

The extent to which parents pressured their children for information about school varied. Some parents emphasized the need to be nosy and to ask questions. Others, like Tabitha, believed that their responsibility was to keep an "open door." This latter group recognized that their teenage children would not want to tell them as much as they did in their elementary school days, but that they needed to know that someone was there to listen when they needed it.

**Provision and sacrifice.** Caregivers sought to provide their children with everything they needed for school to the best of their ability. At its most basic this included food, shelter, and clothing. Parents also paid for books and fieldtrips, and those who could provided transportation



to extra-curricular activities. Some participants saw material provision as a physical manifestation of parental love and support; they did not want their children to worry that they would not have everything that they needed. Martha, a grandmother in her late fifties, had provided a home for her grandson, William, and his sister when their mother lost her job and home. She believed that giving William his own room and all the supplies he needed for school was the most important thing she had done to support his education: “I guess he feels his environment feels safe. I think he likes knowing this is where I live, this is what I do. Gammy’s going to make sure I have everything I need.” In this way she framed her material provision as having a deeper meaning. It gave her grandson a sense of emotional and physical security.

For the low-income families in the study, providing their children with everything that they needed often required personal sacrifice. Several caregivers spoke about putting their children’s needs above their own. Essie, the single mother of seventeen year old Jada, described the impact that prioritizing her daughter’s education had on her own life:

It’s my job to see that she succeeds educationally, and it takes hours, it takes time, it takes who I am, it takes what monies I’ve got, it takes it all. And for our students to be successful, it’s not about us, it’s about them.

Financial sacrifices were sometimes reasonably small and ongoing, such as setting aside money for books and school supplies. Other families had made significant changes to meet their children’s needs. Gabrielle, the mother of Christopher, a recent graduate, explained why she and her husband had decided to sell their house.

I sat down one night and I started figuring out some numbers and I’m like, if we could eliminate some bills we could save like 2,400 a year and put it towards helping him go to school. So, we’re going to move from a house into an apartment. Water, trash, sewage, taxes ... We’re going to rent an apartment. I want him to succeed, I don’t want it to be where he calls and says I need to pay for this book or that book and I just don’t have the money to do it.

Gabrielle worked part time at a local grocery store, struggled to get the hours she needed, and worried that she would be laid off in the near future. Wanting to ensure that her son could stay in college whether or not she was employed, she decided to sacrifice the family home. It is notable that no adolescent spoke about sacrifice. Although they were aware that their caregivers were providing for them materially, they were unaware of, or did not want to share about, the extent of sacrifice that their parents were making on their behalf.

**Structuring spare time.** Participants discussed the ways in which caregivers asserted some degree of control over how adolescents spent their out of school time. Many caregivers had sought out and enrolled their children in extracurricular activities not directly related to their academic studies. The most common types of activity were community service projects, sports, and music. Although one mother spoke about seeking out activities that would make her daughter an attractive candidate at a competitive college, most caregivers saw their actions as providing a less direct benefit to their children's education. Some parents engaged their children in extracurricular activities as a means of exposing their children to a wider world. For another mother, Gloria, extracurricular activities could open the eyes of her children to what life could be like beyond high school:

We're always participating in all kinds of things that keep them moving and to know that life is bigger than [state], life is way bigger than [city], and I don't want them to get in a situation like I am. I didn't get those opportunities and I want them to get them.

Like many other parents in the study, Gloria had her children while very young and had not realized many of her own educational and vocational ambitions. She did not want her children to be trapped in one experience or one location as she had been.

Although most parents saw the benefits of activities their children engaged in outside of school time and in their communities, most also tried to ensure that their children's lives were appropriately balanced. Caregivers worried that their children would lose their focus on school if they were allowed to spend too much time on sports or other activities. For these reasons, some parents let their children know that they would have to drop out of the football or basketball team or dance troop if their grades began to fall. Patrick, a sixteen year old boy who hoped to work in a sports related field related the advice that his mother gave him:

She always says, "Basketball is the last of your priorities, because you got to make sure that you get your education first, and make sure that you have what you need for the future, so you don't be like another person that just put his all in basketball and like he doesn't have no backup plan."

As well as day-to-day distractions, Patrick's mother worried that an overly singular focus on some extracurricular activities could be detrimental to her son's children's future. A college education was a much surer ticket to success than a place on the high school basketball team.

**Monitoring peer relationships.** Caregivers recognized that in addition to extracurricular activities, their children's focus on school could be diminished by the influence of their peers. In particular, parents worried about their sons getting distracted by negative friends. Parents employed various strategies to ensure that boys were not overly influenced by less focused peers. First, they instructed them about the qualities they should seek in a friend. For instance, Patrick's mother had instructed him: "You don't want to hang around people that's going to bring you down. You have to keep your friends positive." She wanted him to seek out friends whose "heads are in their books." Second, parents limited the time their sons could spend with friends they did not approve of. Gloria described how she isolated her children from peers that were not

what she deemed to be “parentally controlled.” Third, and relatedly, some parents engaged their children in family activities so that they would have less time to spend with negative peers. As

Tabitha, Kevin’s mother, explained:

We’re like a close-knit family. He doesn’t like, he hangs out with his friends some, but not a whole lot. We do family, lots of family activities together . . . I try to keep the family kind of close, busy doing things together, so kind of weed out some of the outside influences.

When Kevin was allowed to spend time in another family’s home, Tabitha made sure she knew exactly what was going on and who else was present.

Most of the adolescents seemed to have internalized the message that they should be careful about allowing their friends to draw their focus away from their schoolwork and some told stories about times when their grades had suffered because of the people they were spending time with. It was also reasonably common for students to share that they only had a small number of friends, and preferred to keep it that way. Sixteen year old Marcus, for example, described his experience soon after starting at his high school:

So like at freshman year I had not so good friends. You can be a totally different person and not reach as much potential as you could, depending on the friends you have. In a sense they’re still my friends, but they kind of, you have to have that distance. Like you’re not checking off with them. It’s like, this is what I do, this is what you do. So now we come to the point where I actually maybe only have a handful of friends, I guess one in particular. Our families [are] connected, I know they [friend’s parents] reinforce my positive and keep me on track just as much as my parents do, and it’s helpful

However, parental intrusion into their social lives was not always appreciated. Marcus also described a disagreement he had with his mom about his relationship with his girlfriend. She believed that his decision to give up his place on the track team was a direct result of the time he was spending with her, whereas Marcus framed the decision as wanting to have more time for all

his friends. They eventually reached a compromise that he would remain on the team for the remainder of the school year.

#### **4.3.6 Expectations and strategies for discrimination**

Parents recognized that their children would face many types of discrimination throughout their lives. Some of these would be the product of individual or systemic racism. Others might relate to gender, SES, disability, or sexual orientation. In contrast to times described above when parents stepped in to resolve their children's issues at school, interviewees also discussed ways in which caregivers taught their children to deal with hostile environments on their own. Two related themes are included in this section. First, parents taught their children how to respond to bullying; and second, they engaged in a process of racial socialization with their adolescent children.

**Responding to bullying.** In teaching their children how to cope with a broad range of social problems at school, parents drew wider lessons about the right way to deal with hostility in the rest of their lives. Several adolescents mentioned experiences of bullying during their time in high school. Parents did not always step in to resolve these situations, but rather gave instructions how to avoid, and when necessary, to stand up to bullies. The key message was that the students would always face situations where they were victimized because of some real or perceived characteristic. What mattered was how they dealt with it, and the attitude they maintained throughout.

Caregivers also told stories of how their child had been verbally, and sometimes physically bullied. For example, Brianna described a time when her daughter, Kiara, currently in

her senior year, had been bullied at her school when she was a sophomore. A group of older girls had physically attacked her during her sophomore year and posted a video of the attack on Facebook. Even though they attempted to file a report with the police, Brianna suspects that the paperwork was never completed. Brianna regretted that she wasn't able to "bring justice" for her daughter, despite her attempts to persuade the police and school that their interpretation of the events, that Kiara was a member of a gang, was completely false. Instead, she focused on teaching her daughter how to personally respond to the attack. She framed the incident as preparation for inevitable future problems, emphasizing the need to let go of grudges for her own well-being:

It was really hard to know how to kind of help her through it all, because I was still dealing with it myself. Like my daughter got attacked or whatever, but we took it spiritually to the point of, we have to move forward, you know, it happened for a reason. Maybe it taught you a lesson that you will have to learn much later that could be way worse. You're always going to have problems; it's how you react to those problems and how you let it affect you. So, she's finally forgiven this young lady, for herself, because I told her, "If you don't find a way to forgive her for it, it's going to eat you up."

Brianna emphasized that the final outcome was not just; although the attacker was expelled, she transferred to another school where she played on the volleyball team and graduated on time. In Brianna's opinion, "her life was not really affected." Because the injustice was not rectified, the important lesson was to limit its personal affect.

**Racial socialization.** Parents also made a connection between current problems in school and preparation for the future when discussing race with their children. Racial socialization is classically defined as "a set of overt and covert behaviors parents use, over and above those responsibilities shared by all parents, to psychologically prepare children for success in a racially stratified American society." (Peters, 1985, p.562). Although some parents cautioned their

children against believing that every disappointing grade was the product of discrimination, most wanted their children to understand that they could expect to be judged by the color of their skin throughout the rest of their lives. In order to be successful in higher education and beyond they would need to learn strategies to deal with personal and systemic racism.

The conversations that Joy had with her sixteen year old son, Terence, about dealing with racially based bullying and institutional discrimination provide an illustration of the topics that were commonly covered. After completing middle school at a predominantly African American public school Joy's "academically driven" and "self assured" son was awarded substantial scholarship money to attend an all male private school. However, Terence's work soon began to suffer in the face of repeated incidents of racially based bullying from his peers. He described how he was "called the n-word" and "stereotyped, like, 'Do you like this because you're black? Do you like this and that because you're black?'" Joy described the school's response to one particularly difficult incident:

There was a situation where the n-word was used freely, and we had to talk about that. We had to go to school, we had to talk about it at school, and that's when I started to see things as he was seeing things. Then understanding after talking to the school that they knew there was a problem; they didn't know how to fix it.

Following the advice of some older African American men, Joy initially decided to keep Terence at the school on the premise that the struggle would make him stronger. However, as time went on, there were no improvements. Moreover, Joy began to notice more systemic problems at the school. African American students were placed in less rigorous classes and, in a period of downsizing, the school let all its minority staff members go. This included an African American teacher who had been responsible for managing issues of diversity. At the end of his sophomore year Joy transferred Terence to another school.

The first instruction Joy taught her son was that his experience at his former high school would not be unique. Terence recounted the lesson his mom had taught him soon after he transferred institutions:

What you left at [your previous school] you can't avoid forever. It will come back to you at some point in your life and you have to be prepared for it. And expectations are always going to be low in, you know, the real world. People won't see you as more than just Terence, they'll see you as Terence the black guy.

Parents taught their adolescent children that racism was very real. They wanted them to be aware, in the words of Brianna, that "this is a world where race matters." This was especially important in view of the fact that the students in the study were all on the college track. Most would be leaving home in the next two years, or sooner, to attend predominantly white institutions where they needed to be able to handle prejudice and discrimination as adults. Caregivers wanted their children to have the tools to handle these situations before they left home.

The second lesson that Joy taught Terence in the face of racist encounters was "to be successful in your own right." In other words, the best answer to people who made negative judgments against him was counter their expectations in his behavior and in his achievement. This was a common message that caregivers gave their high achieving children. Kiara reported how her mother had taught her that she didn't have to "carry around" the negative stereotype of African American teenagers, saying, "If you want people to think of you differently, then you have to act differently." Negative stereotypes could be overcome by a demonstration of academic success. For Antoinette, the mother of sixteen year old Marcus, excelling in school would be an act of defiance:

I try to instill in them that you can be anything you want, anything you put your mind to you can do, and if somebody tells you you can't, show them you can. Don't get mad and



say, “Oh well, such and such told me I can’t.” Get mad and say, “I’m going to show you what I can do, I can show you better than I can tell you.”

In order to refute stereotypes, students would need to go above and beyond that which their peers were doing.

Caregivers taught their children that, fairly or unfairly, they must take responsibility in countering negative stereotypes of African American young people. This message gained new saliency in light of the events going on in the city at the time. Although expressing sympathy for their motives, several interviewees spoke apprehensively of the role violent protesters and looters were playing in reinforcing negative stereotypes of young African Americans. For example, Kelly, interviewed only six days after the death of Michael Brown, responded to a question about the most important things her parents had done her to help her in her education by describing conversations she had in the past week with her dad about African American culture. She spoke at length about the understanding she had gained from the discussions and how it related to her desire to excel in school and beyond:

But with society and what’s going on currently, it’s hard; like, some people don’t represent African Americans. You know, it’s already a statistic on us, but some people, what they’re doing now, it doesn’t represent African Americans. They probably think of us as all African American teenagers as alike and it’s not fair. And that makes it hard, and personally, that makes me want to do even more than I know I’m capable of.

Her conversations with her dad had given her a new motive to aim high in her college education and her career, with an understanding that her success would put her in a position to “do more for my people.”

Lastly, parents taught their children how to respond directly to personal experiences of racism. During their conversations about racially based bullying Terence’s mother, Joy, used role-play to give her son the tools to respond to his peers and teachers at his school. Terence

described how Joy would act as a white male saying something offensive in order that he could practice a response that defused the situation. He went on to describe how in the past he didn't know how to respond, but rather would "make a scene of myself, make me look even more stupid." Parents also reported discussing with their children how to confront specific incidences of racism. For example, Michael, the dad of seventeen year old Alyssa, described how he and his wife helped her to write an email to confront a teacher at her predominantly white school. The teacher had made comments that played on stereotypes of delinquent African American teens. Once, after leaving Alyssa alone in the classroom, the teacher had warned her to "avoid starting a fire." For Alyssa, who had never been in trouble at her school, the comment was highly offensive. In helping Alyssa to compose an email, rather than going to the school themselves to confront the teacher, Michael and his wife believed that they were empowering their daughter to personally confront injustice instead of relying on her parents to intervene on her behalf.

#### **4.3.7 Preparing for the Future**

Whereas most of the involvement activities discussed to this point have focused on the adolescents' current education and experiences, caregivers also were concerned to prepare their children for life beyond high school. Subthemes in this area include: *building future thinking*, *discussing college choices*, *planning finances*, and *preparation to leave home*.

**Building future thinking.** Most caregivers encouraged their children to think about their future beyond high school from an early age. For participants who spoke about this theme there had been an expectation that the student would undertake some kind of postsecondary education

from early childhood. Barbara, the grandmother of the recent high school graduate, Jayla, described how this had happened in their family:

College was implanted in Jayla at a very young age. It has been implanted in them, you know, since kindergarten almost, that college was within their grasp. So, that was reinforced every year to her that there is something after high school and that you're going to in some way get into some school.

Caregivers also encouraged their children to think about what they wanted to do after college as a means of helping them to see the importance of a college degree in getting there. Some felt that if their children developed a realistic life plans while they were in high school it would prevent them from wasting time and money in college. Tabitha, for example, explained how she had dropped out of college because she didn't know what she wanted "to do in life." She believed that for her son, Kevin, to successfully navigate postsecondary education, he would need to decide what he wanted to do in life before he left high school. Her current task was to "stir him into thinking" about realistic plans for his future.

**Discussing college choices.** Nearly all caregivers had conversations with their children about where they wanted to go to college and what they wanted to study, but there were varying beliefs about how much influence they should have in the process. Some caregivers thought that their input should be minimal. For example, when asked what sort of input she had into her son's choice, Gabrielle, the mother of Christopher, a soon-to-be college freshman explained, "I kind of left that up to him. He has to start making his own decisions because he's growing into a man. So I just stand back and see what happens." Parents who took this approach emphasized that their children needed to start making decisions as adults. Other parents were much more intentional about guiding their children towards an institution that they felt comfortable with. For several

families the decision about whether the student should attend an in state or out of state college was a point of conflict. In general, adolescents were eager to leave the state and parents wanted their children to stay close by. Recent high school graduate, Christopher, had disagreed with his mother about how close he should stay to home. Eventually they had compromised on a school about two hours from their home. He explained how he “always wanted to go off to school to get, like, a different experience.” He felt that he had missed out on some of the high school experience because his school was so small. By leaving town for college he reasoned that he would be able to “get that different feel on everything and get that college experience, and life.”

Kevin explained his desire to attend an out of state college in a similar manner:

I’ve been in [city] for a while, you know. I want to experience different things and a different city. I don’t want to stay in the same city, I want to travel the world too; I want to go to different cities around the world.

The opinion of his mother, Tabitha, was somewhat different:

I don’t encourage young kids that age to go out of town and be away from their family, especially not far far away. Something could happen and then you have to travel to where they are, and you don’t know the town, and it’s just a lot of things going on out there. I just don’t really encourage kids to go out of town. What I do encourage though is, if say you don’t get scholarships for four year colleges or whatever, go to community college, then transfer out. Or after you get your degree, you’ll be older, you’ll be about 26, 27 years old, and then I think you’re mature enough to travel and go to different places.

Caregivers often worried about what would happen in an emergency if their child was too far away. Some were also concerned about the maturity of their children and whether they would be ready to live independently immediately upon leaving high school.

**Planning finances.** For some participants financial preparation was the most important type of involvement in college planning caregivers had engaged in. Brianna, whose daughter, Kiara, had just begun her senior year described the process she was going through.

I'm looking at every scholarship that she could possibly be available for her. I told her already, we're going for every scholarship, we'll apply for whatever we can apply for. And we're going to apply for college scholarships throughout her college years, even though she may get tired. But as long as I'm there to remind her and push her a little bit, she'll thank me later. I have tons of them written down already.

Like other parents who were worried about the amount of debt that they and their children could accrue through tuition payments, this mother had devoted a substantial amount of time to researching avenues of funding. Even at this point she experienced some of her plans falling through and expected to again. By no means were all parents as proactive as Brianna. Many relied on the staff at College First or other similar programs to provide them with even the most rudimentary information about meeting the financial cost of college.

**Preparation to leave home.** As their children progressed through high school most caregivers took deliberate steps to prepare their children to live without monitoring and protection of their families. When asked about how her parenting role had changed, Brianna explained:

I have to take a back seat. It just, junior year, I'm like I have to pull back. It's hard to pull back because I want to make sure that she makes it, but she has to start taking the reins. She has to start doing it on her own and being able to take that initiative to do things. Now, I still push her some, but I'm not going to be at college to remind her, "Do your homework, get up, set your alarm." I'm not going to be there to do that. So, I would be harming her if I kept holding her hand as much as I was. So, I had to let go of her hand.

Stepping back meant many different things for caregivers. For some, like Brianna, it meant not being so intimately involved in monitoring academic progress. Others talked about it in terms of letting their child make bigger decisions such as where to attend college.

Many parents were also concerned that their children have the life skills to live as independent adults in college and beyond. Kiara gave a recent example about how her parents had encouraged her independence:

They're definitely teaching me to do stuff on my own as I get older. This is a really weird example, but they're forcing me to be independent, like, I hate calling places to order food or something like that ... But then they make me, basically forcing me out of my comfort zone so I can be on my own.

Essie spoke about making sure her daughter, Jada, understood about banking and voting. Bridget had a long list of skills her children needed to master including household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and other adult proficiencies including managing finances and health insurance. As an older parent, Bridget was worried that she might not be around when her son was still figuring out some parts of adulthood.

#### **4.4 Findings for Research Question 2**

*What barriers do parents encounter in their involvement and what resources do they draw upon?* Caregivers and students identified several barriers to parent involvement in education and college plan. Some of these emanated from individual characteristics such as the age of the child. Others, however, related to wider systemic and social factors. Five key barriers were identified: *lack of systemic knowledge; systemic isolation; stereotypes of African American families; developmental needs; and time and money* (see Table 4.4). Caregivers also leveraged certain resources in aid of their children's education. Five types of resources emerged from the interviews: *extended family and friends; professional help; religious faith; self-reliance; and familial knowledge* (see Table 4.5).

**Table 4.4 Barriers to Parent Involvement**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Points</b>
<b>Lack of systemic knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents did not know how to access the best school for their children, and did not understand why their attempts had been unsuccessful.</li><li>• Parents lacked knowledge about college access.</li></ul>
<b>Systemic isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The school choice system isolated families with the most agency in suburban schools where:</li><li>• They were afraid to complain for fear of impact on their children.</li><li>• They were less involved in their own neighborhoods and in advocating for their neighborhood schools.</li></ul>
<b>Stereotypes of African American families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schools had low expectations of minority students and their families' involvement, hindering communication between parents and teachers.</li></ul>
<b>Developmental needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents did not understand their children's academic work as they advanced through high school.</li><li>• Parents' relationships with their children had become more distant as they had gotten older.</li></ul>
<b>Time and money</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents' worked in low paid inflexible jobs that limited their availability to their children and their financial provision.</li></ul>

#### **4.4.1 Barriers: Lack of Systemic Knowledge**

Caregivers were sometimes prevented from accessing the best educational opportunities for their children because they did not understand the ways in which various educational systems worked. In particular, lack of systemic knowledge prevented caregivers from accessing the best schools for their children and from helping them in their transition to postsecondary education.

The various strategies that caregivers used to navigate the school choice system and to get their children into better performing schools were described earlier in this chapter. However,

not all caregivers were successful in getting their children into the school that they wanted. Several families whose children attended the neighborhood public school had tried to get them in to magnet schools or the transfer program but had been rejected. For example, Linda recounted how she had tried to get a place for her sons at a school that would offer them more opportunities and better prepare them for postsecondary education. The boys were not admitted to any of the schools Linda applied to. As she explained, “I filled out for magnet schools and [transfer] schools, but I don’t know why they was never accepted cos they made good grades. They had no choice but to go to a public school.” At the school her son currently attends, only one in ten students goes on to attend a four year college or university. However, the inner workings of the system that would allow them to access a different school remained opaque and Linda did not know why they had been rejected. Janis’ daughter, Alexis, attended the same public school as Jeremy, and had similarly been denied entry to a magnet school. Alexis recounted the experience:

I signed up to go to [magnet school] but they lost my paperwork, and so, they sent me to the closest school that they could find, which is [neighborhood school], and I cried my first day because of all the bad stuff I heard about it.

Janis explained how they had submitted their first application on time but then, realizing they had missed some paperwork, resubmitted. She believed that the second submission had voided the first and she had therefore missed the deadline. They tried again the next year but were refused. The neighborhood high school Alexis currently attends was the only option left.

Caregivers’ lack of knowledge also impeded their ability to help their children prepare for life beyond high school. Although parents were almost universally optimistic about their children’s future educational, occupational, and social success, many felt incapable of helping them search for, apply to, or get into a good college. The most often stated reason was that they



didn't understand the process. These caregivers, none of whom had successfully transitioned from high school into higher education themselves, expressed confusion about the schools that were likely to accept and be a good fit for their children.

A few adolescents also recognized their parents' lack of 'college knowledge'. Jada, in her senior year of high school, was hoping to apply to Ivy League colleges, but worried about her preparation to take the ACT. She described how at her school students who scored above the national average were given a t-shirt, her reaction to which was:

And we're like, that's not a good score, I can't do anything with a 21, you know like. So, I wish they [my parents] would have put me in programs or put me in with a tutor who could have like really taught me the stuff years ago, and then when I took the test a 30 or a 36 would have been easy to pull. Whereas now, it's like, I'm taking it for my seventh time in December.

She believed that her parents had not known how important it was for her to have extra help as a student attending an underperforming school.

#### **4.4.2 Barriers: Systemic Isolation**

Somewhat ironically, the school choice programs that were intended to redress racial inequality, in some participants' perceptions, actually had the effect of stymying some parent involvement. Parents who wanted the best education for their children sought out schools that scored the highest on standardized tests, had the highest rates of college enrollment, and employed the most qualified teachers. Almost all schools in the region meeting these criteria are predominantly white. Students who attended these institutions were often pointedly aware of their difference from the other students because they did not live in the same place that they attended school. Jeremy lived in a neighborhood that was over 90% African American and where almost half of residents did not hold a high school degree. Jeremy attended a predominantly

white public school through the transfer program and described his experience in the following manner:

You just know that you're different. Even through you go to the same school, you might eat the same meal and use the same textbooks and all the same supplies, you still realize that you're different than the other kids that go to that school because while they get to go back to their nice homes, not trying to stereotype, but their nice homes in [the suburbs] you have to go back to the inner-city at the end of the day.

Students were effectively isolated in two ways. First, they were part of a racial and socioeconomic minority in their schools, and second, they were not being educated alongside peers who remained in their urban neighborhoods. Two related barriers to parent involvement were therefore presented. Parents were fearful of challenging predominantly white schools, especially about their treatment of minority students, because of the negative impact it might have on their children. Additionally, because the caregivers with the most agency sent their children to these higher performing schools, they were not connected to their neighborhood schools where they might have advocated for change.

Parents were aware that the environment at predominantly white suburban schools was often difficult for their children, but worried about the impact that too much complaining would have on their children and other African American students. Like Martha who remained silent because she feared that her abrasive tone would affect the way teachers interacted with her grandchildren, some parents were reluctant do anything that might draw attention to the differences between their own children and the majority who attended the school. A further example was provided by Lana whose daughter, Aliyah, had been part of the transfer program since she was in second grade. Lana had been part of an African American parents' group at the predominantly white school that Aliyah attended. The group had been formed mostly in response to statistics that revealed how poorly African American students were performing in contrast to

their peers of other ethnicities. Not all parents, however, were supportive of the group. They worried that any activity that drew attention to the underperformance of African American would unfairly label their children. Although the group offered tutoring and mentoring to African American students, some parents refused to participate. Lana was concerned that as long as parents refused to speak out the racial disparities in achievement would remain. She asked the following question of other African American parents:

If it's the truth, why are you offended by it? It's something that needs to be dealt with and what are we going to do about it? We need to come up with a solution and come up with some results.

Lana concluded that many parents were just not open to challenging the way things were.

Parents whose children attended schools outside of their own neighborhoods had little confidence that the quality of their local public schools would ever increase. A few caregivers worried that by sending their children to alternative schools they had effectively eschewed their own responsibility to advocate for improvements to the education offered within their own communities. Kristi, whose son, Jeremy, attended the same suburban school as Lana's daughter, explained:

We as a community have not been proactive enough about improving the status of our neighborhood schools. I say "we" because I am also part of that community, and it's just as much my responsibility as anyone else to improve the community, the status of my community schools.

Like Lana, Kristi had been part of the transfer program as a child. She explained that her own mother had been bussed to a school in a more diverse area in the 1970's and then in the 1980's she had been part of one of the first cohorts to be part of the inter-district program. She worried that her future grandchildren would also have to leave their neighborhoods to get an adequate education. Kristi saw current efforts to improve the educational opportunities as nothing more

than a temporary fix, a “band-aid.” Furthermore, when successive generations of African American students are educated outside of their own communities, Kristi argued that they lose their sense of belonging. As she said of the connection she and her sons felt to their inner-city neighborhood, “We just reside there.” The transfer program, that had been created to address racial injustices had – albeit indirectly – removed the families with the most agency from their neighborhood schools and diminished any role that they might have taken in agitating for improvements in them.

#### **4.4.3 Barriers: Stereotypes of African American Families**

Still other barriers to parent involvement were traced more directly to problems with racial stereotyping. Specifically, African American parents were characterized by some teachers and administrators as irresponsible and uninvolved. Some participants believed that this impacted the way in which teachers at their children’s schools interacted with African American families.

Interviewees commonly referenced societal perceptions of uninvolved African American parents. The majority of participants actually agreed that a considerable proportion of parents in their communities were not involved in their children’s schooling. A frequently offered explanation was that urban African American parents often had their children at such a young age that they had themselves not completed their education and did not know how to help their children through school. Some participants disparaged other parents who did not have their priorities right or were not involved because they “didn’t feel like it.” Others were more forgiving of uninvolved parents seeing them as doing the best that they could. They believed that parents did not know how to parent because they had never been taught. Barbara explained that

parents “care at the capacity that they know how to care.” She continued, “But African Americans get perceived as a blanket group rather than looking at them more individually.” Barriers to involvement therefore arise when all African American parents are seen as uninvolved with no consideration given to whether they need help in their parenting, or are actually fully engaged in their children’s schooling.

Stereotypes of uninvolved African American parents were considered to be particularly problematic in the context of trying to communicate with school personnel. At predominantly African American schools participants felt that no parent involvement was expected from anyone. Caregivers who sent their children to predominantly white schools believed that less was expected from African American parents than from parents of other ethnicities. Martha’s grandson, William, attended a predominantly white suburban school through the transfer program. It is notable that at this school, although the student body was around 20% African American, the teaching faculty was almost exclusively white. Martha was appreciative that the school made certain concessions to families of transfer students. For example, they held certain meetings in the neighborhoods where the transfer students lived. She but did not, however, think that this concession was a reflection of the school’s overall attitude:

I don’t think their expectations are very high. You can call, you can call and ask about something and you can tell that they’re like, like it bothers them first of all. I think that they have different expectations from the kids who live in [the school district] and from the more ‘not ethnic’ parents. They don’t expect parents of black children to be as involved. And I don’t think they really care if they are.

Her experiences of trying to communicate with school personnel had done nothing to alter her perception. Recently William had told her of an incident at his school where the transfer children (all African American) had been required form a different lunch line than the local students. In order to find out the truth of what had happened and the reasoning behind it she contacted the

school but found that “trying to call to talk to them, and trying to understand, it was like pulling teeth.” Consequently Martha said that she now avoided making contact with the school for fear that she will be “abrasive” and that her attitude would affect the way that her grandchildren were treated.

#### **4.4.4 Barriers: Developmental Needs**

Some barriers to parent involvement stemmed from the changing developmental needs of the child. This impacted the ability of parents to directly support their academic learning. Several parents explained how they had used to be able to offer assistance when their children were younger, but acknowledged that they were no longer able to do so. On the whole, adolescents expressed understanding for their parents’ inability. Kevin recounted a conversation he had had with his mom about his math homework, saying:

She told me that she wished she could help me more because the work that we doing she doesn’t really know that well. She says she wishes she could help me more, but it’s only a limit to what she knows. She still trying to go to school.

Similarly, seventeen year old Alexis explained that her mom and grandmother were no longer able to help her with her math homework like they used to because textbooks had changed so much since they were in school. She was learning different methods to the ones with which they might have been familiar.

Additionally, as the students progressed through adolescence their relationships with their parents changed. Caregivers sometimes struggled to maintain the same positive relationship that they understood a foundation of learning. Parents were aware that their teenage children were not likely to want to constantly engage in conversations about their academic progress. Gabrielle

explained how she refrained from pressing her son, Christopher, into talking about his everyday experiences in school:

He's always on the phone, or he has company and they're playing a game, he really doesn't talk to me and his dad that much, unless I kind of force him to talk to us, you know, but I guess that's just part of being a teenager.

Similarly, adolescent participants expressed reluctance about discussing issues that they were having in school with their parents. A variety of reasons were given, including a fear that parents would think they weren't able to handle their own problems or that they would be ineffective in helping to solve them. Others thought their parents would not understand their experiences. As Jeremy, who had just finished his senior year, explained, "I didn't talk often to my mom about like emotional stresses in high school, and a lot of that has to do with just me being a teenager and feeling as if she wouldn't relate."

#### **4.4.5 Barriers: Time and Money**

Most caregivers in the study maintained low wage jobs that left them with limited spare time and resources to devote to their children's education. The need to work long hours was mentioned particularly in relation to participation in school based events such as Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. In general, adolescents were understanding of their parents' schedules, as sixteen year old Ebony explained:

As far as the PTO meetings and all that, they don't really participate in all that stuff because they work. When they do have down time, if they not taking care of they household, they out taking care of business, so, I wouldn't say they don't think it's important, cos it is.

In addition to working long hours, many caregivers were employed in jobs in service industries that offered irregular hours and limited flexibility. They were reluctant to ask for time off or to

adjust their scheduled hours in order to attend meetings or sporting events at their children's schools. Some caregivers also were engaged in shift work meaning that they were not often home in the evenings or at night to see their children.

Caregivers who worked in minimum wage unskilled jobs faced considerable pressure in simply meeting their children's basic needs. Angelica, a single mother with three daughters and one grandchild living in her home described her constant struggle:

I used to work two jobs, the reason was because I had to pay the rent and pay all the bills, and the only reason I stopped doing it, [was] when we were living downtown people used to break in our apartment all the time. I didn't want someone to break in while I was at work at night and do something to my kids. People would not understand I was only trying to keep my kids, for us not to be in the street, to be homeless. So I said, "Let me leave one of the jobs and work in the morning, and if something happens, it happens in my presence." That's the only reason why. I used to work fourteen hours a day. I used to work eight hours and six hours at night.

Angelica was caught between providing enough money to pay the rent and being there to ensure her children's physical safety. For her, financial barriers were interfering with her ability to provide a stable environment in which her children could learn. Her greatest desire was that her children could "get a better education [and] live better than I'm living right now."

Financial constraints also meant that parents had had to make difficult choices about how to use their money to support their children's current progress through high school. For example, the financial pressure of maintaining a residence in a superior school district left little extra money for study materials or social activities in some families. Hakim, who had bought a home in a well respected school district, described working up to 60 hours a week to bring in a salary that still left the household living well below the federal poverty threshold. When the family moved to the area their only concern had been to live in a good school district. However, the choice put considerable strain on Hakim who explained how "very hard" it was "to have to work



seven days, to work seven days and not cover [the mortgage].” He remained very happy with the school district, but regretted that he was not able to provide additional tutoring or college preparation for his three children.

The rising cost of college tuition together with caregivers’ lack of knowledge about applying for scholarships or federal aid for higher education was also a frequent cause of anxiety. Caregivers worried that their children would be forced to settle for community college, or would be barred from any postsecondary education if the money could not be found. Barbara, the grandmother who was caring for her recently graduated granddaughter, Jayla, described how lack of knowledge about financial planning had impacted their family. Barbara explained how she regretted not preparing for Jayla’s college education many years ago:

In retrospect as I look back I think the finances, planning, I think it’s very important. Who would have thought that college would be so expensive? I mean, you can’t foresee what’s happening 20 years hence, but tuition for college, it’s just crazy. It really is. And they can either go in debt with all these loans, and then by the time they get out of college they have \$50, \$60, up to \$100,000 to pay somebody back. It’s horrible.

Her caregivers’ lack of knowledge about how to prepare financially or where to find scholarship money was preventing Jayla from enrolling at the well respected but expensive HBCU where she had been offered a place. Barbara described what had happened:

They didn’t offer any money and the grants and the loans is just too late to try to get money together. And they were wanting \$10,000 tomorrow. And we’re not, our wealth or means, middle class, barely middle class, but you know. It’s just not reasonable to come up with that amount of money.

As a result, Jayla was planning on taking some classes at community college and taking on a part time job with a view to transferring to the local state school at the end of the year.

**Table 4.5 Resources for Parent Involvement**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Points</b>
<b>Extended family and friends</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extended family members provided emotional support, academic assistance, and help with preparing for college to students.</li><li>• Family members and friends/ coworkers were called on to instruct parents about what they needed to do to get their children in to college.</li></ul>
<b>Professional help</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• College access programs and other youth focused agencies provided academic help and college access support that parents could not.</li></ul>
<b>Religious faith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents relied on church communities for parenting help.</li><li>• Religious faith provided a moral framework for parenting and gave comfort about their children’s futures.</li></ul>
<b>Self-reliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some parents did not believe that other people could be trusted and taught their children to rely on themselves for educational success.</li></ul>
<b>Familial knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents used knowledge gained from their own experiences of being parented to guide their parenting and to navigate school systems.</li></ul>

#### **4.4.6 Resources: Extended Family and Friends**

Caregivers often compensated for the many barriers they faced in promoting their children’s educational success by calling on their families and friends for assistance. Extended family, including older siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and in-laws were relied on for the emotional support and the academic help they offered to the students – and to their parents. Both caregivers and adolescents noted that students could go to other family members about issues in school that they would not talk to their parents about. Jeremy, the student quoted above who felt

that he could not talk to his mother about “emotional stress” because she would not relate turned instead to his great aunt:

Wow, she’s cool . . . she’s kind of like a second mother to me. And she helped me by doing small things just like taking me places like the movies, or going to get ice cream and stuff like that and having long conversations. But a lot of that helped me get through high school too . . . Some things I would talk to my aunt about would be like, school – she would always ask me and my brother how are we doing in school. Sometimes we’d lie too, because we weren’t doing as well as we would tell her. But she’d always ask how well we were doing in school, and I talked to her about situations with my dad, situations with my mom. A lot of things, so [my aunt] was like that reinforcing support system.

In addition to providing emotional support, extended family also provided academic and practical assistance to students. For example, Michael relied on his sister to help his seventeen year old daughter with her math homework that neither he nor his wife could understand.

Brianna relied on her own mother or sister to provide transportation for Kiara to get to school when she had to work longer hours. In discussing family involvement three different caregivers referred to the adage “it takes a village to raise a child.” They viewed their relatives as more than background supports; they were joining in the everyday tasks of parenting.

Extended family members played key roles in preparing the students for their lives beyond high school, especially in planning for college. For parents who had no higher education or had completed degrees in a nontraditional manner, this was a highly valued role. In particular, adolescents saw members of their extended family who had graduated from college as role models to be emulated. Kristi spoke about how her son, Jeremy had always admired and “followed closely in the footsteps” of her own brother who had been able to finish his college degree. She was hopeful that Jeremy would soon provide a similar inspiration for other family members. Teanna, a sixteen year old student entering her junior year in high school, described how her cousin, inspired her, saying, “I really want to go to college and graduate and just be real

successful. In my family, to my eyes, there's only been one person that's been successful, and that's my cousin. I want to be like her." Teanna explained that her cousin by the age of 30 had not only graduated from college but also attained a position as an elementary school principal. Her cousin had additionally offered direct help to Teanna in choosing and applying to a college. Earlier in the year she had taken her on a tour of the out of state college that she herself attended. Despite living on the other side of the country, the cousin planned on working with Teanna over the Internet to complete her college applications.

Some caregivers relied on members of their extended family for advice about what their own role should be in the college application process. Mia, whose twin daughters were entering their junior year in high school used her sister as a guide for when she should be completing certain tasks. Her sister's daughter had just begun her freshman year at a four year college. Mia recounted a recent conversation that she had with her sister at their family reunion:

My sister has been kind of talking to me, she was just like, "We need to have some conversations because you need to start filling out paperwork now, filling out for scholarships for this and for that now." She said, "I have so many resources that I could share with you."

For Mia, whose only education beyond high school had been at a technical school, her sister's experience in parenting a student through the college application and admission process would provide an invaluable roadmap.

Beyond their extended families, some caregivers mentioned the role that neighbors or family friends had played, especially in watching or tutoring their children. Although this type of support was more common in elementary or middle school, a minority of caregivers continued to consider neighbors and friends to be a primary resource for their parenting. A mother of a boy

entering his junior year described the relationship that her family had with that of her son's friend. Both families lived on the same block.

We have kind of like a co-parenting [relationship]. It's kind of funny, because his best friend's a smart kid too and he, you know, has little challenges. I'll sit up and talk to his mom and dad and there's been times that I've fussed at his friend like he was my child and his parents have done the same. And they know [if] you get in trouble there, you're in trouble here too.

Friends with more academic qualifications were sought out to provide tutoring for students who were struggling with particular assignments. Zenia, for example, described how her mother had asked her former boss to help her when she failed a math test. Caregivers also went to friends or colleagues for advice about finding social and educational resources in the community that might improve the child's chance of being accepted at their college of choice. Essie, for example, mentioned going to coworkers to find out where her daughters could get volunteer hours to demonstrate community service on their college applications. She specifically mentioned relying on individuals whose children had already gone to college - "people who have already been past where I'm going" - for their experience and knowledge of the system.

#### **4.4.7 Resources: Professional Help**

Some caregivers also mentioned educational or social care agencies that their children were connected with as helping them in their parenting. This was primarily because agency staff members were able to help their children in ways that caregivers did not have the knowledge or resources to carry out. An example of the role that community agencies could play was provided by Janis, a mother of four who was enrolled full time in community college. Her daughter Alexis, who was in her final year of high school, in addition to her involvement at College First, also participated in a mentoring program and in activities offered through a youth development

program. Janis was aware that she did not have the time or the financial resources to offer what these agencies could:

It takes my mind off having to take a break from school to travel or take her places. They're kind of there as that avenue to help me out. You know, she does have a huge support system. She has so many different avenues to which she can go.

Alexis had become connected with these agencies through her current and previous schools. Her mother relied on them to help her daughter with her education, but did not have much interaction with them herself.

College First, the community partner for this research, was consistently mentioned as an educational support for the adolescents. Although parents had generally become connected with College First through their children rather than the other way round, the organization was often cited as a parenting resource. Like the other services the students were connected to, College First provided support to students in areas parents could not, such as academic tutoring and college visits. A few parents also mentioned relying on College First to provide advice about the financial aspects of higher education. Primarily though, caregivers were thankful for the ways in which the staff members reinforced the messages that they were already giving their children. As the Brianna explained:

College First has helped me, so it's not just mom. You know how we turned off our ear to mom and dad. So now you have someone that's maybe just a few years older than you - they just went through this situation - telling you, "Hey, you got to be like this, you got to do this, these are the skills that you need." So, you have someone else saying it. Now it's like, "They saying the same thing my momma said. This must be kind of real. This must be what needs to be done."

She continued to describe how knowing that her daughter has someone else to talk to relieved her own parenting stress, saying, "this would probably be a nightmare if I didn't have someone that she could talk to to vent whatever ideas that she needs to."

#### **4.4.8 Resources: Religious Faith**

Interviewees saw caregivers' religious participation as providing two benefits. First, the religious community was relied on to provide parenting support and guidance for the child. This benefit was seen, for example, when Joy sought the advice of men in her church about how to deal with the racial discrimination that Terrance was facing in school. Second, religious instruction, especially when given from an early age, was seen as a way of keeping children on the right path and limiting negative outside influences. Relatedly, Christianity was seen as a source of personal comfort. Parents drew strength from the belief that God was in control and would look after their children. Deborah explained how Christianity provided a clear moral direction for her children, going on to discuss the personal encouragement she drew from her faith:

It's easy to get on the path of doing the wrong thing and get on the path of "I don't care. If these people are going to be this way, then I'm going to be this way." So, with church and Christianity, and being able to use something that's not of this world, just of a different kingdom, and encourage your children, when you come up on a struggle and you feel like this is out of your hands, you can't give up. You can get to yourself and you can pray and you can open up this book and you can read encouraging scriptures.

Some parents also relied on prayer to guide them in making decisions that would affect their children's education. For example, Tiffany had decided not take any college classes herself so long as her eldest son was in high school because after praying about it she believed that God was telling her to wait. Other parents spoke about their trust that God would provide them with the money they needed to get their children through college, despite the financial struggles that each family was currently going through. Gabrielle in particular believed that prayer had helped her at the last minute to meet the payments necessary for her son to start college just a week after the interview.

#### 4.4.9 Resources: Self-reliance

In contrast to the caregivers who ascribed to the “it takes a village” philosophy, some participants emphasized that their main source of strength came from within themselves. In general, these were parents who had received little parental support for their own education. Tiffany, a single mother whose son, Frederick, was entering his junior year, spoke at length about how she had used her own determination to get through high school. Of her own parents she said, “They was there, but not there.” Because they were not involved in her day to day schooling and had few expectations for her academic success, Tiffany believed that she had developed her own internal drive to compensate. Reflecting on these experiences she explained,

That’s why I had more drive, because I knew what I wanted and I knew I had to do this for me. And it was like, I couldn’t go to them to get help so I used to stay up. I’d stay up, go in the bathroom when everybody was asleep, then I went in and I study. I’d make little index cards and I’d go over it and over it until I’d understand something. I got it, and that’s what helped me, and I made it.

Tiffany had carried this attitude over into her own parenting. When asked about whom she relied on to help her in her involvement in Frederick’s schooling she responded: “Actually, I’ll be honest, I rely on myself. Ain’t nobody I rely on but me. When you do that you never go wrong.” Similarly, Linda described how as a child, “I didn’t have nobody to force me to go to school ... my momma wasn’t really into my academics.” With her mother and older sisters absorbed by drug use and abusive relationships, Linda had no one else to go to for help and so she learned to rely on herself. She resolved that she would never be in the same situation as her family members and was teaching the same message to her sons.

Caregivers who relied chiefly on their own internal resources also taught their children to take charge of their own education. Tiffany described the messages that she was giving to Frederick about how to get through high school:



I'm trying to teach him to, you know, have the motivation to rely on yourself. If you think someone's going to do something for you ... you never know who's going to fail. So, you do it for yourself, and you don't got to worry about it, and it go down right.

Although her son was at a magnet school rather than the neighborhood school she went to she believed that the overall environment was now more hostile, and that her son would have to struggle even more to make a successful life. In the same manner, Linda's highest ambition for her son, Joshua, was that he grow up to me a man who didn't rely on anyone else. She was teaching him to be "that responsible guy that don't have to lean on nobody." Notably, Tiffany and Linda were two of the caregivers that were most skeptical about the value of a college education. They did not believe that a degree necessarily brought occupational or financial success. Their sons therefore needed to learn to persevere even when their education did not provide everything that had been promised.

#### **4.4.10 Resources: Familial Knowledge**

A different group of caregivers had, through their own experience of being parented, learned about activities that were especially important in promoting educational success. For example, caregivers had learned about the importance of prioritizing their children's needs, despite other pressures they were facing. Mia had parents who were intimately involved in her education, both at home and at school. She had learned from her mother the importance of prioritizing time with her children over the demands of employment:

There was never no missed PTO meetings or parent teacher conferences or stuff like that. She was really able to engage in us, and I guess like for me, I feel the importance of that for me being able to be there for my children. I know there are so many parents that can't spend time with their children; they're there, but they're not really there and involved, so I'm really thankful and grateful for that.

Similarly, Vivien, who was caring for two nieces, had learned the importance of being there for family in need from her mother. She described how her mother had been consistently engaged in their education despite stressful events including losing their housing and facing racism in the school and community they moved to. Vivien remembered the strength that her mother had displayed during that time, notwithstanding having no support from their father, saying, “She was a strong woman. I don’t know how she did it, I really don’t. And then, you know, to be on top of it, and being there for us, you know, that I will never forget.” It was her mother who had originally taken in the girls Vivien was now caring for. When her mother became terminally ill Vivien had no hesitation about taking them in to her own home, noting that she had a responsibility to care for family members in need.

Many caregivers also attributed their ability to advocate for their children’s education within the school system to the example their parents had provided and the knowledge they had passed on to them. This included the ability to navigate the school choice system. Notably, all three adolescents who were in the transfer program had parents who were also in the program. Furthermore, some caregivers had learned how to communicate with teachers in the context of the challenging environment of a majority white school by watching their parents do the same. For example, Lana, who like her daughter, Aliyah, had attended a suburban school through the transfer program, described how her own mother had been skilled at talking to teachers there and “getting certain points across.” Lana used the same confrontational skills to challenge teachers who suggested that Aliyah had a learning disability. After obtaining an independent assessment that found no evidence of any disability, Lana reflected on her victory as being “a good slap in the face for the school.” She believed that all too often minority students were “labeled and stereotyped” with disabilities and therefore even further separated from their peers. Because

Lana's mother, unlike many others, had been unafraid to confront authority, Lana had learned that she could affect change if she was prepared to directly challenge unfair treatment.

## **4.5 Findings for Research Question 3**

*How do perceptions of parent involvement in education and college planning differ according to the child's gender and family composition?* Participants talked about differences in their parenting practices for boys and girls in two key areas. First, caregivers had higher expectations for girls' ability to learn within a formal school environment. Second, they thought that issues to do with race should be addressed differently with their sons than with their daughters. These themes are documented in Table 4.6. In contrast, the concept of family composition was more complex and difficult to find consistent patterns across interviews.

### **4.5.1 Differences in Parent Involvement by Gender**

In general, caregivers engaged in the same types of involvement for their sons as for their daughters. Most were concerned that their children be treated equally at home and at school. In the words of Tiffany, a single mother of two sons and a daughter: "Some things boys can do girls can't do. Some things girls can do, boys can't do. Far as the parenting, I don't think it should be different. You don't treat them no differently." There were, however, two key areas in which caregivers recognized differences in boys and girls that required a different response in their parenting. First, parents had higher expectations of their daughter's behavior at school and that they would be self-disciplined in their study. Second, caregivers believed that boys would face particular challenges because of the intersection of their gender and their race. The targets of their racial socialization practices were therefore somewhat different for sons than for daughters.

**Table 4.6 Gender Differences in Parent Involvement**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Points</b>
<b>Expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Girls were believed to be more behaviorally suited to school environments than boys.</li></ul>
<b>Racial Socialization Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognizing that African American boys would be stereotyped parents taught them to minimize ways in which their presence could be interpreted as threatening.</li><li>• Some parents worried about the effect attending a predominantly African American son could have on their son's identity development.</li><li>• Caregivers wanted their sons to understand the threats they would face because of race and gender before leaving home for college.</li><li>• Girls were taught to take pride in their physical appearance.</li></ul>

**Expectations and gender.** Caregivers had high expectations for the educational success of both their sons and their daughters, but believed adolescents' experiences in high school would be different according to their gender. Parents commonly conveyed that the fundamental character of boys was less suited to schooling than that of girls. This was not because of their intellectual capacity, but rather because of social and behavioral tendencies. Boys were perceived to be less able to conform to the rigid expectations of the school environment. As one father put it, "By nature, boys don't listen." As previously mentioned, parents were also more inclined to worry about boys being susceptible to negative peer influence. In general, caregivers thought that boys were less responsible in managing their studies, and less able to concentrate in the classroom environment. Linda, a single mother of three boys aged between 12 and 20 offered such a view, saying:

I think [boys] more tend to play off than girls, so they most likely have to study and teachers may have to make them study or remind them to do things cos they not as responsible as some girls, I think girls more responsible than guys, than boys.

She noted how her middle son, Joshua had up to this point gotten away with minimal studying because of his innate academic ability. However, with his junior year about to begin, she was concerned that he would have to learn to be less “playful.”

It appeared that many adolescents had internalized parental messages about girls being more suited for the school environment than boys. Others were unsure that gender differences were real, but acknowledged that behavioral and academic expectations were higher for girls in their schools. Sixteen year old Teanna specifically tied male behavior to parenting:

It starts at home with school like. If you have a parent, like, don't care about what like you do and not do, then, like, it affects them at school too. But like boys, sometimes, parents care less when it comes to boys. Cos there's a lot of boys I know and like they just, they don't care, not for real. And then I'm like, “What do your mom think?” and they're like, “She don't care.” And some girls' parents are like that too, but you usually don't see girls like that for real in my school. And I feel like there's a difference, because, they have higher standards for girls than boys.

As she continued, Teanna struggled to decide whether girls really were smarter than boys, but either way, she was sure that expectations of girls were higher from teachers and parents.

Only one parent expressed an opinion challenging the perception of boys as behaviorally ill equipped for school. Tabitha, believed that it was stereotypes of African American boys rather than their fundamental character that made it “a lot harder for boys to excel.” According to her interpretation, a few poorly behaved youth had led to general negative expectations about African American boys' conduct and academic performance in schools. She was aware that her sons would likely face reduced expectations from teachers because of their gender and race. Although she did not explicitly talk about this problem with her sons, she was aware that they had picked up on the fact that some adults perceived them differently. Other caregivers addressed the issue of the intersection of race and gender more directly.

**Racial socialization and gender.** The lessons caregivers believed their children needed to learn about race were different depending on the gender of the child. In the case of male students, caregivers explicitly tied race and gender together. One could not be understood without reference to the other. When asked about how gender on its own affected schooling and parenting, several caregivers responded with an answer about “black boys.” Caregivers typically referred to the same stereotypes Tabitha had mentioned, of African American boys as undisciplined and apathetic students. In response, parents taught their sons to present themselves in a manner that would distinguish them from common images of threatening African American teenage boys. Bridget, mother of sixteen year old Patrick and his younger sister, explained:

They think that because you come from the inner city, or you live in a certain area that you don't want to strive, you don't want things out of life, and that's not necessarily true. You know, there's a lot of black boys that want the sagging pants and the hip-hop, there's a lot of them, but, for people looking in at you, it's how you carry yourself, how you walk, how you stand, how you sit ... So you have to instill in them when they're a child that you have to be a different way, you have to have a different role, you have to walk in God's eyes, you have to walk erect, you have to be able to be polite, so that they can see you not as a black boy, but as a nice young man.

Bridget believed that although the values she was teaching her son were universal, that as a African American boy he would have to take particular care to display respect and politeness overtly. People should know before he even speaks that he is not a threat to them, or someone who is uninterested in achieving anything in school.

Parents were also concerned about the impact that attending a predominantly African American school, where male aggression and underachievement were almost expected, would have on the ways in which their sons perceived their own identities. Although Terence had been victimized because of his race at his predominantly white private school, his mother, Joy, stood

by her original reasoning for not sending him to the neighborhood school. She explained the toll she believed attending a predominantly African American public school would have had on her son:

I didn't really care for the fact that every morning he had to go through metal detectors. For an African American male, that was a mental thing. You know, I don't want him to feel like he's being institutionalized as he is maturing. That was in my heart. I want him to be able to go into a building like a normal person without having his backpack checked and his body wanded down.

She worried that if her son were daily treated as if he were a threat to other people's safety it would become part of how he saw himself. His school, instead of nurturing his developing identity, would teach him that his gender and skin color were to be feared. Joy still believed, therefore, that it was better for Terence to attend a school where he was in the minority, than a school where he was taught to behave like he was in a prison.

Another common theme among caregivers of boys was the need for them to understand the threats they might face because of their gender and race before they went away to college. Linda spoke about this awareness in terms of maturity. She was concerned that Joshua become more "street smart" before enrolling in an out of state college as was his desire. Being street smart included avoiding negative peer influences as well as being aware of the way he was being perceived by figures of authority, including the police, because of the color of his skin. This theme, unsurprisingly, was amplified in the interviews that followed the rise in media interest in relationships between police and African American men over the course of the summer. Joy used the recent events to illustrate the messages she wanted to teach Terence about being an African American man before he went away to college, explaining that he needed to develop "a spirit of discernment":

If you're out on the streets walking around, be more aware of your surroundings, is there somebody walking behind you, is somebody following you, you know. Just be aware, because you know, we've seen over the last several months that things happen, don't know why they happen, don't know the truth of what has happened. But, it's still scary to have a young black man as a son.

Academic skill would not be enough to survive in college for these boys; they also needed to learn how to avoid dangerous situations and to recognize and diffuse the threat that others perceived in them because of their gender and racial identity.

In the messages that caregivers taught their daughters, race and gender were less inextricably linked, although it was acknowledged that both could affect their success in high school, college, and beyond. Whereas caregivers of male students rarely discussed gender without tying it to race, interviewees discussing the experiences of girls more often talked about juggling several identities, any one of which could come to the forefront in a given situation.

Kiara described the messages that her parents gave her about being a young African American woman in the following way:

There are going to be those that judge you, but there are going to be those that judge you for a lot of things. It could be your race, it could be your gender, it could be the way you dress. It could be a lot of stuff. It could be because I wear glasses. It could be just anything. So, yeah, they've definitely always taught me that discrimination is real, but it's not all just race, and it's not all just gender.

When race and gender were explicitly linked for girls it was to do with physical appearance and often associated with self-esteem. For example, Janis described struggles her daughter, Alexis, had had settling into her predominantly African American high school, partly because of issues with her peers:

When she initially got to high school, she didn't like [school] either. She despised the school. She had a self-esteem issue for a while because she was always called the black of the girls, she's the darkest one. I always let her know, "Don't ever let nobody make you feel as if you're not as important or not as beautiful, not as pretty as they are. You



don't allow anybody to allow you to feel less beautiful than who you are. Be who you are and take ownership to who you are. And that's really all you can do."

Similarly, Kiara had struggled with her self esteem because of comments the parents of a white school friend had made about the color of her skin. Kiara's mother also encouraged her to accept herself as she was, and to push on through with her schoolwork, saying, "Even when you have a lot going on you still have to try." These mothers couldn't change societal standards of beauty that prioritize lighter skin, so they taught their daughters to find their self worth within themselves and to defy their detractors by excelling in their schoolwork and other pursuits.

#### **4.5.2 Family Composition**

In order to compare parent involvement across different family compositions it would be necessary to conceptualize families as discrete and static units. In contrast, the families who participated in the study were complex and fluid. This is not to say that there were no differences in the structure of the households the students lived in. Six students lived with both biological parents and fourteen with their biological mother but not father. Four students lived in households headed by a relative other than a biological parent. However, these classifications do not capture how the students were actually being parented. Primary caregiver responsibilities were often undertaken by persons who did not currently live with the child. Additionally, families did not live as isolated units; parenting responsibilities were shared among extended families and communities.

**Primary Caregiver Roles.** Biological parents who did not currently live with their child were sometimes still extensively involved in their child's education. Three of the four students

who lived with extended family members saw their mothers on a regular basis and even lived with them for short periods of time. The two students who currently lived with their grandmothers had at one time lived with their mothers and grandmothers together. Although the mothers had since moved to their own homes, the students had remained with their grandmothers. The fluidity of her family's living arrangements was captured in the words one of the grandmothers, Martha, when she was asked how long her grandchildren had lived with her.

She responded:

I still don't know if they do. I guess they do, I mean, I know he [study participant] does, but it doesn't seem like it. His mother did for a while. She lost her job and so they moved in with me. When she found a job, so she's working now, and she's got a place, but he's still kind of like there with me. I think he just likes that, because I think his mom's real intense, and his sister's real intense, and he's not, so he just kind of stays.

In both cases the families considered the mother to still hold prime responsibility for the child's education, especially when it came to involvement with the school. It was the mothers who attended parent teacher conferences and came to sporting events and other performances. In this way, they were undertaking many of the same roles as parents who lived with their children. In contrast, the other two students living with extended family were there because their biological parents were unable to take care of them. These extended family members took responsibility as the primary care giver both in terms of school involvement and educational support at home.

Similarly, some nonresident fathers were extensively involved in their children's education. For example, Mia described the how she co-parented her twin daughters with her former partner.

I have been a single parent, I want to say from the time they were seven on up, but their dad, he is a very important instrument in their life and he, they are their father's only children, so he's always really hands on and everything. There's never a missed parent teacher conference or a dance recital or a basketball game, so we do pretty, very well

with co-parenting the girls. Every single parent teacher's conference, we're there together.

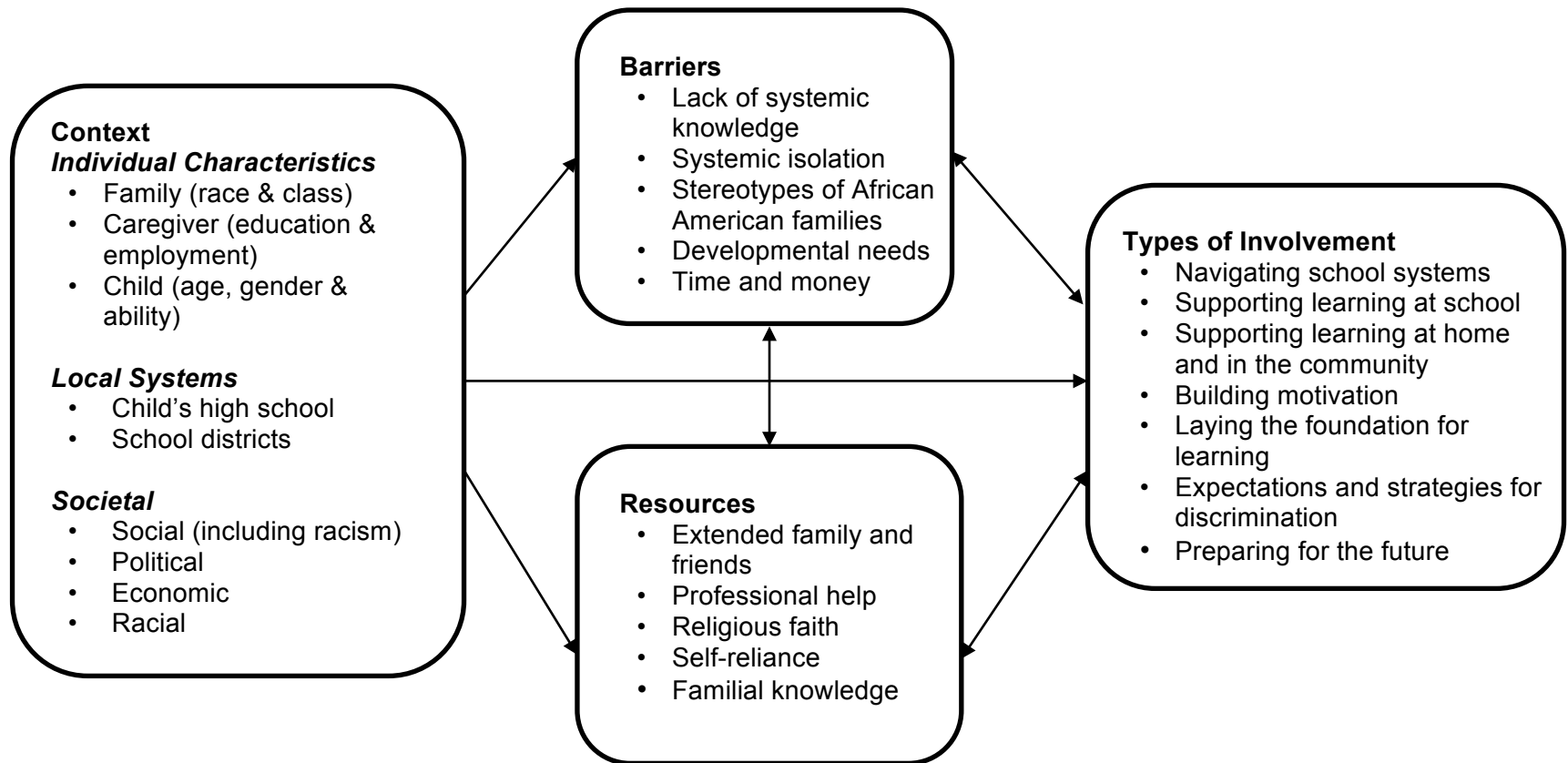
Mia's relationship with her children's father was unusually harmonious; other parents in the study took more separate but complementary roles. For example, Antoinette described how her son's dad was much more able to help him with math than she was. In another case, Jada, the daughter of divorced parents, described how her dad helped her form her academic and extracurricular interests whereas her mom was more responsible for pushing her to excel in her current work. Although not all nonresident fathers were able to have daily involvement with their children's education, the types of involvement they engaged in did not differ substantially from fathers who lived with their children. The role they carved for themselves seemed to depend as much on their individual abilities and interests as on their nonresident status.

**Parenting in Community.** A second reason why it was difficult to see patterns of parent involvement according to family composition is that no family unit existed in isolation from their extended family or from the wider community. Parenting did not take place exclusively within the bounds of a traditionally conceived nuclear family or even single parent family. Almost every participant in the study mentioned an extended family member that did not live in the same household as being extensively involved in the student's education. As described in the previous section caregivers relied on members of their extended family and friends provide direct support for their children's education and college planning, especially in areas where they themselves could not help. Although these individuals were not thought of as replacing the primary caregiver, students often had extremely close relationships with them and referred to them as second parents.

Shared parenting with the wider family or community seemed to be especially salient for single mothers when the child's father was either minimally involved or entirely absent. For example, Linda described how her sister's husband taking her son to youth events at his church every week had had a positive impact on her son, saying, "I think my brother-in-law's been a big influence, cos his daddy wasn't around. His daddy pop in and out when he get ready, so he ain't got nothing to do with his education. He ain't no help at all." Similarly, Joy described how she relied on men in her church to advise her on raising her son in view of his father's absence. Perhaps because all of the single parents in the study were women, many of whom were raising sons, several participants talked about the importance of finding alternative male role models for boys in single parent families. These men were seen as being able to understand the male student's experiences in ways that their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers could not.

#### **4.6 Research Question 4**

*How can we conceptualize the parent involvement of low-income African American parents of College First high school students?* Figure 4.1 represents how parent involvement might be conceptualized in view of the themes explored in the previous sections of this chapter. The model is used to consider how caregivers' involvement in their children's education is shaped by parenting barriers and resources that in turn arise from the specific context in which the families live. It should be noted that the model is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of every factor that might affect African American parent involvement; rather it is grounded in the data gathered through the 47 caregiver and adolescent interviews conducted for the study. It represents the experiences of a particular population living in a specific geographical and historical context.



**Figure 4.1 Conceptual Model of Parent Involvement in Education and College Planning**

#### **4.6.1 Context to Parent Involvement**

The first box in Figure 4.1 represents the context in which the students' education and their parents' involvement in it was taking place based on information gleaned from the interviews. Factors at three different levels that affected parent involvement are identified. These include individual child and family characteristics, systems local to the study context, and social, political, and economic forces that operate on a societal level. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful way of thinking about the way in which the individual student or caregiver and their relationship with each other is affected by different aspects of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consecutive levels of systems beginning with the microsystem of the family and school and ending with the macrosystem that represents the larger social, cultural, and political context are all seen to affect adolescent development as well as the ways in which family members interact with each other and with their neighborhoods and schools.

It is within this context that the various barriers encountered and resources drawn from by parents in the study unfolded. Barriers resulted when aspects of the context prohibited or made parent involvement more difficult. These are the occasions when parents were not able to be involved in their children's education in the way or to the extent they would have wished. Resources that facilitated parent involvement arose within the same context. These enabled parents to promote their children's education, often in spite of contextual risks or other barriers to involvement.

**Individual Characteristics.** Individual factors affecting parent involvement included characteristics shared by the parent and child (race and class), parent specific characteristics

(education and employment), and child specific characteristics (age, gender, and ability). In developing a model to aid understanding of developmental competencies in minority children, Garcia Coll et al. (1996) pointed to the importance of such “social position variables,” such as race, social class, ethnicity and gender, in influencing family beliefs and child rearing practices. In the current study these characteristics were seen to have a direct effect on parent involvement. For example, the gender of the child affected the lessons parents believed he or she needed to learn about race and the age of the child influenced the extent to which their academic progress was monitored. Additionally, individual child and caregiver characteristics affected parenting barriers and resources. For example, parents who had no education beyond high school often did not have extensive knowledge of the steps needed to plan for the financial cost of college. Alternatively, some parents’ employment had put them in contact with coworkers that had more experience with and knowledge about college applications.

Most of these individual characteristics, however, placed the study participants at a relative disadvantage to other families when it came to promoting their children’s education. Social position variables can influence child and family outcomes because of their resulting experiences in environments such as schools and neighborhoods (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Participants in the current study similarly spoke about the ways in which they were viewed in local systems because of their individual characteristics.

**Local Systems.** At the next level, parent involvement was shaped by factors that stemmed from characteristics of the local systems in which the families lived and their children were educated. Specifically, the individual high school the child attended, and the overall networks of school districts in the region, including the policies that governed school choice all

affected the ways in which parents were involved. Again, some aspects of parent involvement were directly affected. For example, the steps parents needed to take to get their children in to a good school depended on the district in which they lived. These local systems also presented certain barriers to parent involvement. For example, unresponsive teachers or administrators at their children's schools, who expected little involvement from African American parents, could make it difficult for parents to communicate about their child's progress. Additionally, the very complexity of the school choice system left some parents unaware of the steps they needed to take to access certain schools. In contrast, schools could provide access to additional resources. Many families, for example, were put into contact with College First through their child's school.

**Societal Factors.** Lastly, parent involvement was shaped by the social, political, and economic climate of wider society, both currently and historically. Pervading and long standing issues of racism and classism were evident in the caregivers' own experiences of schooling as well as that of their children. Historical policies that led to unequal schooling and more recent policies that sought to rectify injustices had, for example, led to the de facto segregation of many schools. Moreover, economic factors such as the high cost of further education or a labor market dominated by minimum wage low skill jobs also affected how caregivers could be involved in their children's education. Barriers to involvement therefore arose from encounters with personal and systemic racism in segregated schools, or from parents' lack of access to employment with a livable wage and flexible hours. Although these societal factors might appear to be entirely disabling for study participants, some caregivers were able to draw on strengths developed as a result of living as members of a marginalized community. For example, they used their



experiences of watching their own parents fight discrimination to learn how to navigate through oppressive systems. Historical experiences of segregation can also be seen to contribute to the religiosity of many African Americans and to the importance of the church as a source of community strength (McAdoo, 2007).

#### **4.6.2 Barriers and Resources.**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of community cultural wealth has been used to argue that minority communities have access to unique resources that may promote success even in the presence of oppressive forces (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, a framework of risk and promotive factors was influential in the construction of the conceptual model displayed in Figure 4.1 (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987). Many of the contextual factors identified in the first box may be identified as risk factors to parent (and child) functioning. For example, a parent who works a low-skill, low-wage job is unlikely to have the money to access supplemental academic resources or to search for free programs. What are here named as resources may also be conceived of as promotive factors that help families to avoid the negative consequences of contextual risk. The framework is especially helpful in thinking about the ways in which barriers and resources may also interact with each other. Just as some promotive factors are seen to facilitate positive functioning even in the absence of risk, and others to operate only in the presence of a certain risk, barriers and resources may operate independently or in conjunction with each other (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

The two-way arrow linking resources and barriers is used to indicate the times that parents access particular resources in response to a specific barrier. Although there are not direct parallels between the resources and barriers themes as they emerged from the interviews, it is

clear parents access certain resources because a particular barrier has arisen. For example, parents may only choose to contact family friends for help with their children's assignments when it becomes evident that they do not have the academic knowledge to help themselves. Similarly, they may only make contact with a staff member at College First when they realize that they do not know how to plan financially for college. In these cases by accessing a family or community resource and increasing parental knowledge, the barrier to involvement has been negated. Other resources, especially internal resources, are drawn from even in the absence of a specific barrier. For example, the emotional support that extended family members provide to students is not necessarily intended to compensate for deficiencies in the parent child relationship. Similarly, religious faith may be just as important when everything in the child's education is going well.

The barriers and resources both unfold within the unique context in which the study population was living. Some barriers to parent involvement are not experienced by the majority population, and therefore the same compensatory resources are not needed. Barriers that result from the context of personal or systemic racism are met with resources distinctive to the African American community. For example, when students experienced discrimination at school because of their race, some caregivers turned to the unique resources provided by the African American church. They were able to access a community of believers for advice, as well as to rely on a spiritual tradition that emphasizes liberation from oppression.

#### **4.6.3 Barriers, Resources and Types of Involvement**

The ways in which the barriers and resources either promote or hinder particular types of parent involvement has already been discussed in a previous section of this chapter. However, it

is important to note that, engagement in some parent involvement activities may also give rise to other barriers or resources. This process is indicated in the conceptual model by the two way arrow between the resources and barriers boxes and the involvement box. A clear example is found in the theme of navigating the school choice system. Some parents relied on the knowledge and support of extended family to help them successfully navigate the transfer program and get their child accepted to a high-performing suburban school. Parents who got their children into a high-performing school often were then able to access many resources provided by the school and outside agencies and programs that the school connected them too. This could include, for example, assistance in helping their child to choose a suitable college and about planning for the cost of higher education. However, as became clear at in the interviews of caregivers of students attending transfer schools, a collection of new barriers to involvement was presented. Each caregiver in this situation recounted at least one experience of discrimination based on their status as an African American parent at a majority white school. Caregivers felt that expectations of their involvement in their child's education were minimized and sometimes held back from complaining about injustices experienced for fear of the consequences it might have for their children. Their competency in navigating the school choice system had in fact raised barriers to their involvement in the child's school.

The following chapter discusses the extent to which the expanded and contextualized conceptualization of parent involvement derived from the adolescent and caregiver interviews accords with and builds on the parent involvement literature as well as its implications for research and practice.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The conceptualization of parent involvement in education and college planning presented at the end of the previous chapter is built on the experiential knowledge of college-able African American students and their caregivers. Through close analysis of their narratives a picture emerged of families that were highly invested in their children's education and that engaged in multifaceted involvement strategies to promote success in high school and entrance to higher education. Although they used many of the same strategies included in conventional models, an in depth examination indicated that caregivers also engaged in some unique activities, abandoned some, and subtly altered others in response to the context they lived in. In particular, caregivers widened their interpretation of involvement from a purely academic focus to include navigation of school systems and preparation to deal with social (and specifically racially based) problems. Additionally, interviewees' narratives revealed the ways in which wider social, political, and economic forces, including racial discrimination, formed a central component of their experiences and involvement strategies. Despite the many challenges families faced, caregivers' communities and personal experiences also provided them with resources that they could leverage for their children's benefit.

This final chapter considers how the insights gained through the current study are consistent with, differ from, and contribute to the existing parent involvement literature. First, the various types of involvement caregivers engaged in are examined. Barriers to involvement are discussed concurrently. Ways in which gender was found to shape parents' expectations and messages are highlighted. Each type of involvement identified in the previous chapter is discussed successively. The discussion then turns to a consideration of community and personal

resources that participants accessed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study as well as its implications for research and practice.

## **5.1 Types of Involvement and Barriers to Involvement**

The conceptual model presented at the end of the last chapter highlights how parental involvement is shaped by the social context, from the societal to the individual level. Each type of involvement discussed below aims to help children to navigate their education at one or more of these levels.

### **5.1.1 Navigating Systems**

Parents believed that the high school their child attended would be crucial in determining if he or she was academically and socially prepared for college, and most were deliberate in the institutions they chose to apply to. School choice is not usually incorporated into traditional parent involvement models, but emerged as a central theme in the current analysis<sup>1</sup>. This is perhaps because the process of navigating various school options is especially burdensome for low-income African American parents and that the stakes of failure are especially high in comparison to wealthier and white families (Andre-Bechely, 2005; Pattillo, 2015).

Lack of knowledge about how to access various school choice options was certainly a barrier to successful involvement for some parents. On the surface, the variety of choices offered to the families in the study seemed to suggest that the invested parent could access for their child a quality of education comparable to that of most middle class and white families. However,

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<sup>1</sup> There may also be methodological factors that allowed the theme of school choice to emerge in the current study. This is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

caregivers often found the programs confusing and the process by which their children were granted or denied entry opaque. These findings are consistent with the few previous studies that have examined African American school choice qualitatively. For example, in a study of choice in the Chicago Public Schools, Pattillo (2015) found that parents felt they had limited to no control over where their children were accepted, despite the apparent variety of choices available to them. The current study adds to previous findings by indicating the resources leveraged by parents who were successful in getting their children in to objectively better performing institutions. Namely, successful navigation of the school system took time and knowledge and sometimes a willingness to play the system. Parents had often planned where their child would attend high school from when they were infants and sacrificed their own financial needs in order to get them there.

It would, however, be unfair to blame parents' ignorance or lack of effort for unsuccessful navigation of the school system. Ultimately the system itself reproduces inequality. Families from higher social classes do not have to go through the same complex and sometimes bewildering process in order to access a quality education for their children (Andre-Bechely, 2005). Their neighborhood schools are more likely to prepare their children well for college (Hopson et al., 2014) and other options are more accessible if the local school is not considered to be adequate. Middle class families are more able to move to a better school district or to pay out of pocket for private education if they consider it to be the best option for their child (Lareau, 2014). In addition, schools in more prosperous neighborhoods are supported by abundant property taxes, and families do not have to enter lotteries or navigate confusing application procedures just to get their children an adequate education (Goyette, 2008). Systems intended to bring about equity have inadvertently placed an extra burden on low-income parents and

sustained the privilege of those who do not have to enter a lottery to get into a good school (Cooper, 2007).

It is not, however, possible to understand the experiences of the families in the study without reference to the long history of racial segregation in US cities. At least in terms of school choice, social class is not the only explanatory factor. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994) argued that “the cause of [African American] poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism” (p. 55). Historical policies such as the refusal of federal housing loans to black residents (redlining) contributed to the clustering of African American families in low-income segregated neighborhoods (Krysan, Crowder, & Bader, 2014). The effects of such policies are still apparent; the schools in these inner city and inner suburb neighborhoods remain under-resourced, unable to attract experienced teachers, or to offer courses that would prepare their children well for postsecondary education (Hopson et al., 2014; J. E. Morris, 2008). Scholars taking a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective have also argued that some civil rights policies have had unintended effects. For example, school desegregation policies can actually have the unintended effect of causing white families to flee to other neighborhoods or leave the public schools altogether (Goyette, 2014). The findings of the current study suggest that the current desegregation policies in force in the region may be having a similar unintended effect. School choice programs are often accessed by the families with the most agency. These families then leave the neighborhood schools, which now serve only families without the knowledge or resources to access alternatives, possibly widening disparities in opportunity and achievement (Andre-Bechely, 2005).

Even when caregivers were successful in accessing their target school, their children were still often not attending objectively higher performing schools. This may be because the

qualities parents were looking for in an institution were not always related to academics. Parents wanted to avoid schools where the students were undisciplined and might influence their own child negatively. Some previous literature has in fact suggested that the school choice process might look different for low income and African American families because the qualities they look for in a school are different. Specifically, they have been found to be less likely to value objective academic measures such as graduation rates and test scores, and to be more likely to favor schools they perceive to be safe and orderly and where the teachers are caring and maintain good discipline (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Hastings, Van Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007). In the current study, caregivers also placed a premium on a school's fit for their child's personality and talents. For instance, Brianna chose a low-performing career focused school over a high-performing academically focused school for her daughter, Kiara. Previous research has suggested that caregivers like Brianna may be unaware of how to access data (e.g., graduation rates, ACT scores) that demonstrate the difference in outcomes between particular schools (Hastings et al., 2007). More likely, Brianna's decision may have been a result of her prioritizing her daughter's social development over purely academic development.

### **5.1.2 Supporting Learning at School**

It is important to note that the low-income African American parents included in this study also engaged in many of the activities that have traditionally been considered as part of parent involvement in education. Moreover, they participated in each of the types of parent involvement identified in the trichotomy of Hill and Tyson (2009). They were involved at school, at home, and in academic socialization (here referred to as *building motivation*). However, the type and extent of involvement they maintained in each realm was influenced by



individual characteristics of the caregiver and the child as well the context in which families lived.

Parents were involved in their children's school and schoolwork through maintaining communication with teachers and monitoring their academic progress. Some parents, however, reported that these activities had declined as their children grew older and had consistently proved that they could maintain acceptable levels of achievement. Consequently some key differences with traditional models of involvement can be attributed to the fact that the students in the study were in middle or late adolescence and were academically able. Parents rarely spoke about helping their children with homework, perhaps because they did not understand the more advanced assignments, or perhaps because their adolescent children were more likely to turn to their peers for help (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 2009). The relative absence of this activity, together with the reported decline in others, correspond with previous literature suggesting that parents become less involved in some types of home based and school based involvement as their children advance through high school (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Other differences in the ways in which caregivers supported their children's learning when compared to traditional models of involvement arose from factors related to the status of participants as members of a socially and economically marginalized community. For example, parents did not participate in school governance or volunteer at their children's schools and rarely attended PTO meetings, mostly because of demanding and inflexible work schedules. Of course, wealthy parents may also work long hours and so be prevented from participating in school-based activities. However, for many parents in the study, their lack of time was a result of the need to work enough to earn a livable wage or lack of control over the hours they worked

rather than that associated with a developing career. Some scholars have used the concept of “time poverty” as a correlate of economic poverty to describe the difficulties that minority and low-income families may have in participating in school based events (Newman & Chin, 2003; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Parents who contend with time poverty often have to choose between maintaining or improving their economic status and promoting their children’s educational chances.

The pervading influence of race and social class were also evident in many participant narratives about the way in which they engaged with their children’s teachers. Some parents reported reasonably harmonious, if distant, relationships with their children’s teachers. They communicated infrequently, and heard positive reports when they did. However, like in previous studies of younger children, other parents opposed practices they observed in their children’s schools (Barton et al., 2004; Cooper, 2009). Differences could be seen in the ways in which parents contended with teachers depending on the type of school their child attended. In predominantly white schools caregivers mostly ceded power to teachers and administrators. In predominantly African American schools, caregivers were less trusting of personnel and more willing to assert their voice as parents. Findings suggest that parents employed strategies that they believed were best suited for the school environment.

For families with children attending majority white middle class schools, parent involvement was predominantly shaped by their social position as a racial and economic minority. Caregivers were aware that the school treated them and their children as different from other families. Even well intentioned policies such as holding parent meetings for transfer student families closer to the neighborhoods where they lived may have the unintended consequences of further separating out families of color from the majority white families local to

the school (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Caregivers often believed that their acceptance at the school was tenuous; they feared agitating teachers or administrators in case their children suffered the consequences. Other studies have shown that the efforts of African American parents to resist inequitable policies can be seen as confrontational and defensive by white teachers, leading to further stigmatization (Cooper, 2007). Although most caregivers were not entirely satisfied with the treatment their children were receiving at predominantly white schools the majority chose not to confront anyone about it. Far from an equal partnership between school and family, parent involvement in this context was about maintaining an unequal power balance for the perceived benefit of the child (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013).

The comparatively visible engagement of some parents at predominantly African American and high poverty schools seemed to stem from a sense of distrust in the institution. They were concerned that their children would not be receiving an effective education. By becoming a visible presence at the school they sought to demonstrate to teachers that they cared about their child's education and thereby elicit more attention for their child. Other studies have found minority parents engaging in this type of monitoring behavior in elementary schools (Barton et al., 2004). That some caregivers in the current study continued to check up on their children's schools, despite the emerging independence of their adolescent children, perhaps indicates the extent of the lack of trust they had in the teachers and administration.

There were also examples of parents who directly challenged teachers about ineffective teaching practices and placing unfair expectations on their high achieving children. Far from deferring to the teachers' expertise, these parents monitored practice, and corrected teachers about the right way to do their jobs. This contrasts with other narratives of educated higher class parents as involved and demanding and lower class and uneducated parents as passive (Lareau,

2000). Parents did not all cede the formal education of their children to education professionals. It is possible that parents felt more able to challenge teachers at predominantly African American schools because the power difference was smaller at these institutions. Because predominantly African American schools tend to employ less experienced teachers with fewer qualifications, the caregivers – many of whom had at least some college education – may have felt more sure about the veracity of their own opinions and their right to express them. In situations where caregivers determined the school to be incapable of meeting the needs of their child, one act of resistance remained. Parents transferred their child to another institution where they believed they would be treated more fairly.

### **5.1.3 Supporting Learning at Home and in the Community**

Some caregivers continued to educate their children at home to supplement the instruction they were receiving at school. Again, this was a common strategy of parents in studies of low-income minority parent involvement in elementary schools (Jackson & Remillard, 2004). Unlike these parents of younger children who often used planned strategies such as seeking out supplemental materials to develop basic skills, the parents in the current study engaged in more spontaneous acts of education. For example, they explained the context of a news report or discussed the content of a movie with their children. Similarly to school-based involvement, a decline in home-based involvement is often reported over the course of adolescence (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Whereas children's rapid cognitive development may have left parents feeling less able to act as additional teachers in their homes, it may have increased their propensity to seek out additional help in the community or online. In fact, free online materials were probably especially beneficial for parents who lacked the in person social

networks or financial resources to access other supplemental educational activities for their children.

#### **5.1.4 Building Motivation**

The strategies parents used to motivate their children to persevere in school reflect those that Hill and Tyson (2009) named academic socialization. Caregivers communicated their expectations about achievement and the value of education through constant encouragement to work, or “staying on” their children, setting standards for what they expected their children to achieve, communicating about the rewards associated with education, and demonstrating the importance of education through their own actions. “Staying on” their children, in particular, was one area of involvement that both adolescents and caregivers reported to have increased as the transition to college drew nearer. Parents felt the need to remind their children about the significance of their current studies in determining their future opportunities. The emphasis participants put on communicating messages about the value of education is important in light of literature suggesting that such activities are especially salient in determining achievement in adolescence (Wang et al., 2014).

Other activities caregivers engaged in with the purpose of motivating their children have not commonly been discussed in the literature. For example, both adolescent and adult participants talked about the way that caregivers’ current pursuit of their own college degree served as an inspiration to the child. Adolescents learned through observing their parents’ perseverance that it was possible to reach their educational goals, despite the pressures of economic insecurity and low societal expectations. Although it is commonly acknowledged that children’s educational expectations are to some extent formed by observation of their parents’

achievement and subsequent career (Berzin, 2010), it is not often considered a type of parent involvement. Such behaviors may be especially important in low-income African American families, and serve as a type of socialization that prepares children for the challenges they will likely face in high school and in college.

### **5.1.5 Laying the Foundation for Learning**

Participants broadened the definition of parent involvement to include activities not directly related to academic learning. In doing this they gave some traditional parent involvement activities a wider interpretation than they are usually accorded in the literature. For example, parent-child communication is often cited as an important component of involvement in education (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2010), but it is usually conceptualized purely in terms of discussions about school. The participants in the current study instead talked about open communication, in which adolescents felt able to talk to their parents about anything, as the foundation of healthy family relationships that would in turn create an environment where the child was free to learn. Furthermore, participants emphasized the bidirectionality of communication as parents were prepared to listen to their children, and even change their minds because of what they said. This perception of a negotiated relationship may be especially important in considering parent involvement in middle or late adolescence when the children's relationships with their parents are usually no longer characterized dependency and subordination (Eccles & Gootman, 2001; Laursen & Collins, 2009).

A similar broadening of the conceptualization of parent involvement is evident in narratives about how caregivers provided materially for their children. Whereas conventional models incorporate the ways in which parents create a learning environment in the home by

providing materials such as books, newspapers, and educational toys (Hill & Tyson, 2009), participants in the current study perceived parent involvement in education to include more basic provision such as food and shelter. In view of the instability of some of the participants' lives due to precarious employment and housing it is perhaps unsurprising that ways in which parents fulfilled their children's basic needs were prioritized in the discourse. The need to provide the student with a sense of security was especially prominent when the student was living with a member of their extended family due to experiences of adversity such as the sudden loss of income of their primary caregiver. Other researchers have discussed the priority that low-income African American parents place on material provision a part of promoting their children's educational achievement (e.g., Williams & Sanchez, 2012). Few, however, have noted the extent to which African American parents sacrifice their own needs in order to get their children through high school. Authors writing about Latino parents note that sacrifice is one type of involvement that may remain hidden from schools, even though parents may regard, for example working long hours at multiple jobs to be the most significant thing they do for their children's education (Auerbach, 2007; Hill & Torres, 2010).

Parents included their involvement in their children's nonacademic out of school time activities as part of promoting their educational success. Traditional models of involvement often include monitoring strategies such as checking homework completion, limiting TV time, and making sure the child comes home after school (e.g., Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). The ways in which parents limited the amount of time that students spent on extracurricular activities seems to fall into a similar category. Most caregivers were eager to see their children participating in extracurricular activities, including sports, arts, and mentoring programs, so long as they did not affect academic achievement. In fact, such activities were seen as a way of expanding their

children's horizons. Whereas middle class parents might connect their children with extracurricular activities to make them more attractive candidates at competitive colleges (Hamrick & Stage, 2004), these urban African American parents chiefly wanted their children to have a glimpse of a life beyond their own neighborhoods.

Furthermore, parents' involvement in their children's out of school time extended to exerting control over with whom they spent time. Parental concern about students' social interactions was mentioned by almost every adult and adolescent interviewee. Distracting or otherwise negative peer relationships were considered to be one of the greatest challenges that adolescents might face in graduating high school and college. To some extent, this concern may have been a result of parents' recognition that peers were becoming increasingly important in their children's lives and potentially influential in students' decision making (Laursen & Collins, 2009). However, many parents considered themselves to be more restrictive than other caregivers, even in their own communities, perhaps reflecting the link that has been found between more authoritarian parenting styles and academic achievement among African American families (Spera, 2005). It should be noted that parents' concern with social matters was usually not to the exclusion of their involvement in academic matters. Unlike the parents in Lareau's study (2000), who ceded academic matters to the professionals, these caregivers considered both social and academic involvement to be vital parts of ensuring their children's success in high school and college.

#### **5.1.6 Expectations and Strategies for Discrimination**

Caregivers' involvement in their children's social relationships commonly extended to giving advice about how to deal with various types of discrimination, including verbal, physical,



and racially based bullying. In addition to solving immediate problems that might interfere with students' academic progress, participants viewed these social lessons as preparation for future encounters. The ways in which parents empower students to deal with bullying in school and similar situations in college and beyond, like other social instruction strategies, are not included in traditional models of parent involvement. In fact, although parent involvement in education has been associated with reductions in bullying victimization, the exact strategies that are effective, beyond warm and responsive parenting styles, have not been examined (Jeynes, 2008; Ma, 2010; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007). In contrast, a large body of literature examines the ways in which parents socialize their children to deal with racial bias (Hughes et al., 2006; Priest et al., 2014).

Participants believed that racism, manifesting at both interpersonal and systemic levels, would be a key challenge to African American students' success. Parents therefore taught their children about the pervasiveness of discrimination in society and about how to deal with racist encounters in high school. They also prepared them to deal with racism in their colleges and careers. The practices of parents in the study belong to a specific type of racial socialization known as "preparation for bias" (Hughes et al., 2006, p.756). In a review of the literature about racial socialization, Hughes and colleagues (2006) note that the strategies parents use to prepare their children for biased encounters are not often spontaneously raised in interviews, though they speculate that this may be as much a result of the difficulty about talking about such topics as their saliency to parenting practices. The frequency with which preparation for bias was raised in the current study may be a result of the especially difficult climate during the summer of 2014. An alternative or concurrent explanation may be that this type of socialization, that emphasizes

the role of discrimination (in comparison to others that teach children more generally about their culture), is especially relevant to parents' involvement in education.

Racial socialization is not usually included in conceptualizations of parent involvement in education, although its role in promoting positive educational outcomes is well established (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011; Wang & Huguley, 2012). In the current study, some parents considered racial socialization to be a prime means by which school success could be promoted. The emphasis on racial socialization may have emerged in the interviews as a result of the importance that parents placed on involvement in their children's social experiences as a means of protecting their educational focus than is allowed for in conventional models. Moreover, parents taught that educational achievement was in itself a form of resistance against racial prejudice.

The value that disenfranchised communities place on educational success has been the subject of much debate. Some scholars have suggested that low-income African Americans disinvest in schooling because it is not seen as a valid route to success in the context of urban segregated communities (Ogbu, 1981, 2008). Educational success is therefore seen as a capitulation to a society in which white values are normative (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In contrast, the current study belongs to a body of literature that argues individuals' educational achievement may be seen as a victory and means of uplift for the whole community (e.g., Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2002). Parents taught their high achieving sons and daughters that by excelling in school they would be promoting the image of African American youth as a whole. This was an especially salient message in view of the images of violent and destructive urban African American teens permeating broadcast and social media at the time. Caregivers instructed their children that education rather than disruption was the way to promote their own success as

well as that of their community. In common with some previous studies of high achieving teens, educational success was in itself seen as a kind of resistance (Carter, 2007; Rowley et al., 2012). Parents did not suggest that their children left African American culture behind in pursuit of their education, but rather than they separate themselves from people who were not representing the community well.

Parents taught the value of achievement as a type of resistance no matter what type of school their child attended. Other racial socialization practices were more context specific. In families where students were attending majority white schools, participants also discussed how parents also taught their children specific strategies to use in racist encounters. For example, Gloria taught her son to diffuse situations where race became an issue, and Michael taught his daughter how to confront her teacher's microaggressions. This accords with previous research suggesting that parents adapt their racial socialization tactics depending on their expectations of how their child will be treated in a specific social context (Rowley et al., 2012). Although learned in school, lessons were intended to be transferable to college and adult life. It is possible that parents who were familiar with the challenges of attending a predominantly white school were also more aware of the tools their children would need in the predominantly white schools their high achieving children would likely attend. The relative absence of such tactics among families sending their children to predominantly black schools may also be explained by the likelihood of encountering overt acts of racism in schools where African American students formed the majority. Students at these schools did not so much need tools to challenge discrimination as much as an unwavering belief that college was a real possibility despite the disadvantages of their high school.

**Gender differences in racial socialization.** Racial socialization practices also presented the key area where the gender of the child appeared to play a significant role. Here the concept of intersectionality is crucial. Participants had a different understanding of what it meant to be black and male than what it meant to be black and female. Consequently, different parenting practices were required. In general, when gender was considered on its own, participants attributed the different achievement of boys and girls to fundamental behavioral characteristics. Girls were just better suited to learn than boys. However, when gender and race were considered together, different educational experiences were attributed to outside factors. Specifically, boys faced challenges due to the negative stereotyping of urban African American males. Although race and gender were less inextricably tied for girls, some participants discussed the negative affect of colorism on their mental health.

The findings of the current study accord with previous findings that parents expect their sons to encounter more discrimination and are more likely to teach them messages about racial barriers (Rowley et al., 2012; Varner & Mandara, 2013). Caregiver participants believed that because of their son's joint identity as black and male they would encounter negative expectations from instructors. They would be perceived as unambitious and lazy students and their physical bodies would be perceived as a threat. Perhaps because confronting racist attitudes would only serve to reinforce these stereotypes, these African American boys were taught to self regulate their behavior and withdraw from or defuse racial encounters (Bentley, Adams, & Stevenson, 2008). In Bridget's statement that her son and his friends should strive to be seen as "nice young men" rather than "black boys" there was even a suggestion that African American boys should reject parts of their identity in order to succeed.

Caregivers did not tie race and gender so directly together for girls, perhaps because in the context of high school and college entry, being female is usually thought to be advantageous. Parents did, however, worry about the effects that negative encounters, specifically in regard to the shade of their skin, could have on their daughters' self esteem, and consequently, their achievement. Girls were expected to be particularly susceptible to colorism, that is, discrimination based on the darkness or lightness of their skin (Burton et al., 2010). Previous literature has demonstrated that parents' messages about race to their daughters are often concerned with acceptance of their physical appearance and different standards of beauty (Bentley et al., 2008), however, the links that parents perceived between colorism, self esteem, and school achievement presents an area for further study. Parents' messages of how to overcome such prejudices were centered on taking pride in oneself rather than confronting the situation or changing because of it. Unlike boys, girls were not expected to present themselves differently because of their gender or race.

### **5.1.7 Preparing for the Future**

On the surface, the involvement that the caregivers in the study had with their children's college planning looked remarkably similar to models created based on descriptions of white and middle class families. They worked to build their children's aspirations to attend college, consistently encouraged them in their plans, and took practical steps, particularly in searching for financial resources, to help them get there (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, a closer examination reveals that the content of parents' conversations with their children was dependent on their own status, most as non-college educated, and all with few financial resources to spare. For example, in building the future thinking of their children, parents had to contend with, or

incorporate narratives about, their own interrupted education. In common with most African American families, caregivers had once held high aspirations for their own achievement, and continued to see college as an important part of their children's futures (Kao & Tienda, 1997; Spera et al., 2009). Messages about the importance of attending college were interspersed with warnings about not allowing the influences of "the streets" or romantic relationships to interfere with college plans. Additionally, parents were aware that financial hardship could cause their children to drop out of higher education, like it had for many of them. Parents' fears were grounded in reality. Even if all the students in the study eventually enroll in college, their membership of a racially and economically marginalized community indicates that many will not finish within the expected timeframe and others will never graduate (Ginder et al., 2014; Wyner et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the practical steps parents took to prepare for their children's college careers were shaped by their low-income status and by their own lack of knowledge about accessing funding for higher education. Most caregivers knew that they should be doing something to prepare for the financial cost of college but were limited in their knowledge of what that should be. This was most poignantly illustrated in Barbara and Jayla's narrative about how the failure of their family's financial plans meant that Jayla would have to attend the local community college rather than the prestigious and selective four year college she had been offered a place at. In contrast to some other literature, these caregivers did not begin by believing that the cost of attending a four year college made it out of reach for their children (e.g., M. J. Smith, 2009). Rather, the experiences of the families in which the student had already graduated from high school suggested that the full realization of the cost of college might only become apparent when making the final preparations for enrollment. Although the increasing financial

cost of higher education is a central part of much discourse, the sacrifices that low-income parents make to allow their children to attend college remain a largely hidden form of parent involvement (Hershbein & Hollenbeck, 2015; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Parents also had a wider definition of what it meant to prepare their children for college than traditional models allow for. Caregivers were concerned that their children be socially and morally prepared for the independence that they expected would be part of college life. In fact, when they imagined the challenges that their children would face in college, their concerns were almost entirely about their social experiences. There are a number of possible explanations for parents' focus on the social aspects of college. It is possible that parents were accustomed to their children's status as high achieving students and assumed that they would continue to excel in college in the same way as they have in high school. Unfortunately parents (in contrast to some of the adolescents) seemed unaware of the probability that their children's urban high schools were unlikely to have prepared them adequately for the academic demands of higher education (Reid & Moore, 2008). Lacking knowledge about, for example, the mechanics of getting into college, or how to choose course once there, they focused instead on things that were within their own experiences such as the warnings about social pressures discussed above. A similar explanation is that parents' actions are shaped by their own experiences of interrupted education. A previous qualitative study of five mothers of first generation college students found that parent involvement was shaped by the mothers' own experiences of struggling through their education (M. J. Smith, 2009). It is possible that because many caregivers in the study had not completed college because of social rather than academic reasons, that they saw an especial need to work on these same areas with their own children.

Once again, economic and social class factors are not entirely sufficient to explain how caregivers prepared their children for college and beyond. Fears of racial bias also played a role in parenting practices. Some mothers were anxious about the safety of their African American sons on college campuses and in unfamiliar cities. Although other authors have noted that African American mothers may be especially protective of their sons because they are concerned about their safety (Elliott & Aseltine, 2013), the issue has less often been discussed in terms of college choice or social preparation for college. Then findings of the current study suggest that in addition to the financial benefits of staying close to home, caregivers also believe that their sons are not yet mature enough to face unfamiliar threats without the protective influence of their families.

## **5.2 Resources for Parent Involvement**

The analysis presented in the previous chapter used Yosso's framework of Community Cultural wealth as a lens through which to view the resources parents leveraged for the benefit of their children's education (Padgett, 2008; Yosso, 2005). Although the resources identified by interviewees did not map directly on to Yosso's typology, they do represent the "assets already abundant" in African American communities that arise "apart from and in response to oppressive forces" (Yosso, 2005; p. 82). Areas where the resources discussed by the interviewees correspond to Yosso's framework are noted in the discussion that follows.

### **5.2.1 Extended Family and Friends**

The finding that the study participants relied on members of their extended families to assist in students' passage through high school and into college is hardly unexpected. The role of



grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, pastors, and friends in raising African American children is well documented (Dodson, 2007; Walsh, 2011). Unlike the isolated family unit assumed in much of the parent involvement literature, African American family systems can be extensive and are commonly spread across several households (Nobles, 2007). The current study contributes to this literature by exploring how extended family support relates to parent involvement, especially in high school and college planning. Findings indicate that extended family members were involved in promoting the students' educational success through providing support directly to the student and indirectly through help offered to the primary caregiver. Extended family members filled roles that parents could not, whether in providing emotional support or academic assistance. Caregivers also relied on the help of family members who had themselves or whose children had attended college. These individuals were called on to instruct caregivers about their own expected role as well as in talking to the student about matters such as college choice, applications, and entrance tests. Friends and work colleagues were called on to a lesser extent to fulfill similar roles.

The extent to which members of the extended family – as well as ex-partners and non-resident biological parents – were relied on for parenting support additionally suggests that traditional models of parent involvement that assume discrete household units are less relevant to African American families. Single parents and married caregivers alike delegated many education related parenting responsibilities to their siblings, cousins, own parents, as well as to members of their church families. The primary caregiver role was enacted as part of a caring community rather than an isolated endeavor (Guerra & Nelson, 2013).

### 5.2.2 Professional Help

Caregivers also relied on College First and other similar programs to fill in gaps in their parenting and to reinforce the messages they were already giving. Researchers who study college access programs (CAPs) usually consider parent involvement to be one of the most important elements of a successful program (Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Moreover, CAPs can be effective in increasing parents' knowledge about college and the steps their children need to take to get in (Auerbach, 2002; Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Shimshak, 2008). Despite this, the evidence suggests that the centrality given to parent involvement in these types of programs is honored more in theory than in practice (Tierney, 2002), and few are successful in engaged minority parents. It is notable that parents valued College First more for reinforcing parental messages than for its direct help to them as caregivers. This perhaps reflects the tendency of adolescents to turn increasingly to peers for affirmation (Laursen & Collins, 2009), but also may indicate, that College First, like other CAPs has yet to discover how to engage parents, especially those from minority cultures, directly in their programming.

Caregivers and students alike clearly relied on members of their extended network - family members, family friends, and professionals - to provide emotional support. They also leverage these relationships to fill in gaps in parental academic and college knowledge. Yosso (2005) redefines social capital as "networks of people and community resources [that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions." She goes on to note that such social contacts can help students identify and attain scholarships at the same time as "reassuring the student emotionally that she/he is not alone in the process of pursuing higher education" (p.79). Similarly, families in the study relied on people who had, as Gloria put it, "gone there before" them not only to fill in gaps in knowledge, but also to provide

stories of people from their communities who had managed to successfully navigate a system that reflects a culture other than their own.

### **5.2.3 Religious Faith**

The role that religious faith and religious institutions play in African American family life is also well documented (e.g., Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, & Schroepfer, 2002; McAdoo, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Church ‘families’ play an important role in the shared parenting of children in their congregations, especially in families where fathers are uninvolved (McAdoo, 2007). The emphasis that caregivers placed on Christian faith as central to their children’s educational achievement, and of the religious community as a resource, is consistent with the findings of other studies (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Williams & Sanchez, 2012). This study contributes to the previous parent involvement literature by emphasizing the role that religious faith plays in supporting parents emotionally as they seek to help their children navigate through high school and into college. Caregivers in this study turned to scripture reading and prayer when they were struggling in their parenting, when they had decisions to make, and at times of financial crisis. Although not commonly applied to parent involvement in education research, this perspective is consistent with previous scholarship on general parenting practices in which religious faith is identified as a resource that can provide meaning and structure to parents’ experiences, be used as a coping mechanism, and instill a greater sense of hope, optimism, and purpose (C. Smith, 2002; Sullivan, 2008).

#### **5.2.4 Self-reliance**

A subgroup of caregivers in the study did not believe that other people could be relied on to help themselves or their children. They relied instead on their own internal drive and sought to teach their children to do the same. The mothers' stories of completing high school despite very little support from their own parents were used to demonstrate the value of self-reliance for academic achievement, especially in the context of unstable or dysfunctional families. Previous research has indeed noted that individuality and self-reliance are highly valued by many African American parents even as they practice more communal parenting models (Smetana, 2011). Moreover, students who are intrinsically motivated and able to persevere toward an end goal despite adversity tend to do better in school (Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Strayhorn, 2014). These mothers wanted their children to believe that, despite the hardships they would inevitably face, that through hard work and determination they could get through high school and college.

However, a complete rejection of outside support clearly raises concerns about negative child outcomes. Children do better in school when they receive support from multiple sources (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Similarly, parents experience less stress and are more likely to engage in positive parenting behaviors when they have higher levels of social support (Lee, Anderson, Horowitz, & August, 2009; McLoyd, 1990). Furthermore, these mothers were also more likely to perceive the outside world as hostile and to question the link between educational achievement and financial success. It is possible that these mothers' belief in self-reliance but not in family and community support was adaptive to their own circumstances in chaotic families and unsafe neighborhoods, but would serve their children less well as they sought to forge a life beyond the home and their neighborhood schools.

### **5.2.5 Familial Knowledge**

The third type of resource that parents relied on was termed familial knowledge. This is different to the social support offered by extended families in that it represents the funds of knowledge amassed by caregivers through their own parents' involvement practices. It is experiential rather than didactic. Caregivers had learned the importance of caring for their biological children and wider kin through the lessons their parents modeled. They also learned to place the educational needs of their children above their own immediate needs, even in the context of poverty and racism. Furthermore, caregivers learned from watching their own parents how to navigate through complex and discriminatory school systems. Children who had been raised in the Transfer Program believed in its value and knew how to get their own children accepted. Finally, some caregivers had learned how to challenge inequality and to advocate for their children by directly copying the examples their own parents had set in challenging teachers. Yosso describes the similar concept of "familial capital" as "knowledges nurtured among kin that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" (p. 79). Caregivers in the current study had learned how to value and pursue education even in the context of historic economic and racial discrimination by observing the behaviors modeled by the generation before them.

To say that the families in the study possessed many types of resources that were used to support their parenting is clearly not to say that they possessed everything that is needed to help their children succeed in high school and college. The barriers to parenting and challenges to student success identified in previous sections are real. Rather, by identifying resources already present in the community, the aim is to challenge the narrative that prioritizes the deficits in African American communities, and to provide examples of places where school and community

institutions can be restructured to incorporate and build on the family and community networks, faith, motivation, and knowledge that is already present in many families.

### **5.3 Limitations and Strengths**

Before considering implications for future research and practice, some limitations of the study should be noted. First, as with all qualitative studies that use purposive sampling methods, the participants cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole low-income African American population. The students were all college capable and highly motivated to succeed as indicated by their participation at College First. It is probable that parent involvement looks different for this highly able and academically engaged group of students than it does for lower achieving groups. Furthermore, although invitations to participate in the study were sent to specific families selected from College First records, many more invitations were sent ( $n = 119$ ) than families participated ( $n = 24$ ). It is possible that responding caregivers valued education and their own role in their children's success more than those who did not respond. In fact, the education level of the parents (many of whom had accrued college credits even if they had not graduated) suggests that they are not representative of all low-income African American caregivers involved at CF. The design whereby dyads of parents and children were recruited allowed a richer picture of how parent involvement worked in particular families than if only the caregiver had participated. However, it is also possible that only families with little parent-child conflict were prepared to participate in the study.

Additionally, the study took place at a specific historical time when racial tensions were particularly high and the status of African American adolescent males was at the forefront of national conversation. It is possible that the theme of racial socialization practices, especially in

regard to boys, was more prominent because of this. However, as has already been noted, the same topics were mentioned in interviews prior to the events in Ferguson, Missouri. Ultimately the social, political, and economic context that led to the death of Michael Brown and other African American men and subsequent unrest is also the context that had shaped parent involvement in the participating families.

Although there are certain limitations inherent to qualitative approaches, the methods used in the current study also granted unique strengths. Few studies of parent involvement have incorporated student perspectives. By incorporating parent child dyads into the design, it was possible to gather data not only about types of involvement parents were engaging in, but also about how these activities and messages were being interpreted by their children. It should be noted that the students were (unsurprisingly) somewhat less reflective about their parents' motivations, challenges, and sources of support than they were about the impact of their involvement on their own lives. However, their narratives provided a complex picture of what it meant to be a high achieving African American teenager living in a low-income urban community. While contributing to the background of the study, many of the issues they raised were beyond the scope of the research questions discussed in this document.

Additionally, the strategy of recruiting families from the community rather than through a single school, as is the norm in parent involvement studies, allowed for *navigating school systems* to emerge as an important theme. Previous studies have not been able to examine the way that low-income African American parents navigate school choice programs as a part of their involvement, or the ways in which involvement differs across types of institution to the same extent. Similarly the choice to interview mothers, fathers, or members of extended family

who were in the caregiver role allowed for a more in depth understanding of how multiple individuals work together for the benefit of the child.

## **5.4 Implications for Future Research**

The evidence presented in this study suggests many avenues for future research, including further qualitative studies, measurement development, and model testing.

### **5.4.1 Further Qualitative Study**

First, further qualitative studies could explore in more depth some of the themes emerging from the interviews that are not traditionally considered to be part of parent involvement in education and college planning. In particular, parental strategies related to their children's social experiences in school and preparation for college merit further investigation. Future interviews might also explore the ways in which parents use racial socialization strategies, especially in light of specific events such as those in Ferguson, Missouri, specifically to promote their children's progress through high school and post secondary education. The findings of this study also challenge perceptions of white middle class parents as full of resources African American families as lacking resources. Not all families, however, leveraged the same resources or to the same extent. Future qualitative studies should investigate further the experiences that lead, for example, to some parents developing a more isolationist perspective to helping their children in comparison to more communal parenting practices.

Future qualitative studies might also consider incorporating the viewpoints of different types of participant. To understand parent involvement in school, teachers and school social workers should be recruited. Other professionals such as those working in College Access Programs (CAPs) might also be interviewed to offer more insight on parents' involvement in



whole school systems and in the community. In light of the importance placed on the involvement of extended family members and of communal parenting, it would also be useful to include more individuals who take on aspects of the parenting role. For example, nonresident parents, siblings, family friends, and church members might all be interviewed.

#### **5.4.2 Measurement Development**

Using the information gained through the current study and through further qualitative interviews, the next step would be to develop more appropriate measures for the study of parent involvement in education and college planning for low-income African American families. For example, the evidence presented here suggests that in order to capture all that low-income African American parents consider important in promoting their children's education it is necessary to include items relating to parents' involvement in their children's social activities, to school choice, and to racial socialization.

#### **5.4.3 Model Testing**

These steps – further qualitative investigation and the development of quantitative measures – would allow for refinement and testing of the conceptual model presented at the end of the previous chapter. The model could be used as a heuristic device to further investigate how parent involvement in college planning and education develops within contexts of individual and community poverty, segregated neighborhoods and schools, and personal and systemic experiences of racism. The direct effects of these on the types and extent of involvement that parents engage in could be tested in addition to the mediating (or moderating) roles of barriers and resources.

Lastly, in view of the barriers to involvement faced by all caregivers, further efforts should be made to develop and test interventions to facilitate engagement. For example, community based interventions might be developed to support parents in navigating the complex school systems present in many urban areas. The following section considers this and further implications the current study has for practice with low-income African American families.

## **5.5 Implications for Practice**

The findings of the study present several implications for social work practice, both in the community and in schools.

### **5.5.1 Social Work Practice in the Community**

The current findings challenge the notion that the school building must be the center of all parent involvement activities. Caregivers' understandings of what parent involvement meant extended beyond school focused activities or coursework. Moreover, many of the barriers parents perceived as impeding their involvement emanated from their children's high schools or school districts. While changes in school practice could help to alleviate some challenges, it is possible that parents may be best supported by community based agencies. These might include organizations traditionally focused on meeting the needs of youth such as youth development and mentoring programs in addition to community based College Access Programs (CAPs) such as College First. Agencies may also consider recruiting through or partnering with churches and parachurch organizations in view of the importance placed on religious institutions in supporting parenting. Existing services could be expanded to offer parents support with academic issues, with psychosocial needs, and with issues of navigating schools and school districts.

CAPs and other educationally focused agencies often provide tutoring services and test prep for the students they serve. In view of the lack of understanding many parents expressed about their children's assignments, they might also consider designating times when parents can accompany their children to ask about homework assignments. A sizable proportion of parents also regretted that their own education had been interrupted by life circumstances and expressed a desire to continue learning. Evidence from previous studies suggests that by connecting with their children's CAP and learning about higher education options may encourage caregivers to consider college as a realistic option for themselves (Perna, Walsh, & Fester, 2010). Agencies may therefore also play a valuable role in helping their students' parents to access further education classes that would fit around their work and childcare responsibilities.

Most college access programs consider increasing parents' "college knowledge" to be central to their mission. This typically includes instruction about choosing types and locations of institution as well as planning finances. However, in view of the concerns that parents had about the social needs their children would face, programs might consider including sessions about aspects of college other than the mechanics of getting in. Parents and other family members might also be taken on local college campus visits so that they could picture the environment that their child might be living in. Programs might also play an important role in relieving some anxiety that parents have about racism on college campuses or in their children's new cities. It is therefore important that staff members understand issues that their low-income African American students might face. Some pilot studies of college access programs aimed at Latino parents have suggested cultural adaptation strategies such as involving parents in designing sessions, inviting speakers from the participants' communities, and matching the ethnicity of staff members with participants (Auerbach, 2004; Downs et al., 2008) can benefit program

delivery and outcomes. Such strategies should also be tried in programs serving low-income African American families.

Third, community based agencies might also aid parents in navigating school systems and individual schools. Clearly, this type of service would need to begin well before the student was ready to enter high school. Designated navigators might work with the parents of middle school students to inform them about the options open to them, the application procedures, and what to do when something goes wrong. They might also help parents to approach schools about issues such as bullying that their children are facing in school and problem solve with them about whether transferring to another school or district is the best solution.

### **5.5.2 Social Work Practice in Schools**

This is not to say that professionals that work within school contexts do not have a role to play in facilitating parent involvement. In particular, school social workers may be ideally placed to engage with students' families in a way that teachers may not have the time or training for. The emphasis on issues of diversity, power, and privilege in school social workers' training gives them a starting point from which to address issues related to social, economic, and racial injustice. Additionally, because the remit of school social workers includes addressing social, psychological, and emotional as well as academic needs, they may be better attuned to recognize and address the wider needs of students that many low-income African American parents are concerned about.

Three particular roles for school social workers are suggested by the results of this study. First, school social workers should provide a point of contact for caregivers. It is crucial that parents should be able to speak with someone connected to the school with the knowledge that

their conversation will be kept confidential so that they do not fear retribution for their children. They should also provide a point of liaison with parents who are trying to resolve social problems, including bullying, that their children are experiencing. Having a designated point of contact to go to about such problems may alleviate some of the pressure that parents feel when they do not understand the administrative structure of the school or that their complaints are not being sufficiently responded to. Second, school social workers should advocate within schools for parent engagement practices that recognize the resources that low-income African American families bring to parenting as well as the barriers they face. Caregiver and adolescent participants in the current study experienced microaggressions from school personnel that may have resulted from a lack of awareness of issues of diversity. Similarly, the young white teachers often recruited to urban schools may wrongly interpret some parent communication as hostile or a parents lack of presence on school ground as evidence of them not caring (Cooper, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). School social workers could support teachers in working through diversity issues both by one on one conversations with staff members about specific situations or by providing additional in service training. Third, school social workers should work directly with low-income African American parents to facilitate group advocacy. This may be especially important in predominantly white schools. A school social worker could, for example, help a minority students' parents' group know how to challenge perceived injustices with school administration.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This study was motivated by the proposition that previous conceptualizations of parent involvement were insufficient to account for the experiences of African American caregivers and high school students. The qualitative methods used in the study allowed for an in depth

investigation of the experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of African American parents and their high school aged children about parent involvement. This final section gathers some concluding thoughts about the contribution of the new conceptualization to the parent involvement literature.

First, the new conceptualization expands traditional models of involvement to incorporate activities that arise from the social and political context. One key addition is parents' navigation of complex school systems before their child even begins high school. Another is how parents socialize their children to interact with peers and authority figures, especially as African American teenagers in segregated schools. It is important to note that these are not new areas of research. An extensive literature exists about school choice and about racial socialization. However, neither of these activities is commonly incorporated into models of parent involvement in education or in college choice. The practice of focusing on a narrow definitions of involvement, especially those favored by white and middle class families, serves to delegitimize activities that either fall outside day-to-day interactions (such as navigating entire school systems) or those that are oppositional in nature (such as teaching children how to respond to racial bias).

Second, and relatedly, the new conceptual model highlights the role that racism, both historical and contemporary, plays in shaping parent involvement. A particularly salient example was provided by the contrast between the visible and vocal involvement of some parents at predominantly black schools and the tentativeness with which parents approached predominantly white schools. The historical policies that led to school segregation combined with personal experiences of discrimination worked together to inform caregivers' approaches to communicating with schools and the lessons they taught their children about race. It is important to understand that parent involvement is not only guided by the perceived academic needs of the

children, but also by the perceived status of the family as part of a racial minority or majority. Parents were acutely aware of how they would be perceived because of their race and modified their behavior accordingly.

The focus of the study on low-income African American families was determined because of popular perceptions about the lack of parent involvement in the population. The study contributes towards the body of literature that discusses the relative importance of race and social class in determining parenting practices. The experiences of the study participants suggest that both social class and race are important in shaping parent involvement. Although poverty presented many barriers to involvement, experiences of racial discrimination were key influences on the ways in which parents prepared their children for academic and social success in high school and college. Moreover, decades of systemic discrimination in housing, employment, and schooling has ensured that racial disparities are inextricably tied to income and wealth disparities. Education was valued by both parents and students precisely because it had the potential to break the link between race and poverty. To get a college degree would not only be a personal triumph, but it would also be a demonstration to wider society of the strengths and talents possessed by urban African American students despite the challenges they face.

The conceptual model presented in the previous chapter also contributes to the parent involvement literature by taking a strengths rather than a deficit perspective. The interviews were designed to identify resources already present in low-income African American communities. While the roles of extended family, friends and professionals, religious faith, self-reliance, and knowledge passed on down through generations have all been extensively explored in other bodies of literature, they are not often included in models of parent involvement. The focus has been on helping parents to fulfill a particular previously identified role, rather than building on

previously existing strengths for the benefit of students. Additionally, by focusing on college able students who had maintained a certain level of achievement in high school, the study was able to identify parenting practices that were likely effective in promoting academic success and college entrance.

Caregivers expressed a great deal of pride in their college-able and highly motivated children. They dreamed of expansive futures unconfined by financial or social restrictions while simultaneously recognizing that the accumulation of academic knowledge and skills would be insufficient to guarantee success. Parents therefore engaged in a wide variety of involvement activities that were designed to obtain the best possible education for their child in the present and to help them to cope with challenges, including personal and systemic discrimination, in the future. In contrast to popular perceptions of low-income and African-American parents as uninterested and uninvolved, the caregivers in the current study were almost all highly invested in their children's education and drew on a wealth of experience and supports already present in their families and communities for assistance. In order to combat prevailing narratives of uninterested and uninvolved low-income African American parents it is important that future practice and research build upon these strengths instead of seeking to conform all families to a single model of involvement.



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## APPENDIX A Caregiver Interview Guide

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Probes</b>
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about [child]. How are things going for them at the moment?</li> </ul>	At school At home In your relationship with them
Aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What hopes do you have for your child's future?</li> </ul>	Education Career Family/ social
Educational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been some things that have helped your child do well in school?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apart from yourself, who have been some key people who have helped them do well?</li> </ul>
Educational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What challenges does your child face in high school?</li> </ul>	
Own education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about your own experiences in school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you like your child's educational experiences to be the same as yours/ different?</li> </ul>
Current involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the most important things you have done to help [child] with his/her education?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has your role changed as [child] has gotten older?</li> <li>• You talked earlier about challenges your child faces. What have you done to overcome these challenges?</li> <li>• How is your role different from that of [partner]?</li> <li>• How is parenting a [grandchild etc.] different?</li> </ul>
Barriers to involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes parents can't be as involved in their children's education as they would like to be. In an ideal world, what else would you like to be able to do for [child]?</li> </ul>	What gets in the way of you doing this?

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Probes</b>
Parenting resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who or what do you rely on to help you with [child's] education?</li> </ul>	
Race and gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What messages would you like your son/daughter to understand about him/herself as a black teenager?</li> </ul>	<p>What do they need to get ahead in school? How do you get this across?</p>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did they come to go to [school]?</li> </ul>	<p>What other options did you consider? What actions did you take to get them into [school]?</p>
Parent Involvement at School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What contact do you have with [school]?</li> <li>• What does the school expect from parents?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the school do well when it comes to involving parents? What does it not do so well?</li> <li>• What contact do you have with other parents?</li> </ul>
College Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the most important things you have done to help your child plan for college?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who or what has helped you with this?</li> </ul> <p>Aspirations, preparing academically, college choice, finances</p>
College Bound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about your child's involvement with College Bound.</li> <li>• Tell me about your own involvement with College Bound.</li> </ul>	<p>How did they get connected? What difference does it make for them?</p> <p>What events have you attended? What contact have you had with staff?</p>
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your involvement in your child's education that I haven't asked about?</li> </ul>	

## APPENDIX B

### Adolescent Interview Guide

Domain	• Question	Probes
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First, I'd like to know a little about <i>you</i>. How are things going for you at the moment?</li> </ul>	At school At home In your relationship with your parent(s)
Aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What goals do you have for your future?</li> <li>• Imagine yourself in 10 years. What would you like your life to look like?</li> </ul>	Education Career Family/ social Do your parents have the same goals?
Educational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been some things that have helped you do well in school?</li> </ul>	Apart from your parents, who have been some key people who have helped you do well?
Educational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What challenges do you think you face in your education?</li> </ul>	
Current involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the most important things your parents do to help you with your education?</li> <li>• So far this year, what things have your parents done to help you?</li> <li>• Thinking back over the past week, what conversations have you had with your parents about school?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is your family the same as/ different to other families?</li> <li>• Tell me about how the sort of things your parents do now has changed compared to when you were younger.</li> <li>• You talked earlier about some challenges you face in your education. What have your parents done to help you overcome these challenges?</li> </ul>
Barriers to involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes parents can't do as much for their children as they would like to. In an ideal world what else would you like your parents to be able to do to help you in school?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What gets in the way of them doing this?</li> <li>• Who do they go to when they need help?</li> </ul>

<b>Domain</b>	<b>• Question</b>	<b>Probes</b>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about your school.</li> <li>• How did you come to go to [school]?</li> </ul>	What difference does it make to go to [school] instead of [neighborhood school/ county school etc].
Parent involvement at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sort of contact do your parents have with [school]?</li> <li>• How are other people's parents involved at [school]?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about a recent time that your parent came to your school. What happened?</li> </ul>
Race and gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What messages do your parents give you about being a young Black man/ woman?</li> </ul>	
College Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the most important things your parents have done to help you plan for college?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aspirations, preparing academically, college choice, finances</li> <li>• In your opinion, what should a parent's role be in helping their children prepare for college?</li> </ul>
College Bound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about your involvement with College Bound.</li> <li>• Tell me about your parents' involvement with College Bound.</li> </ul>	<p>How did you get connected? What difference does it make for you?</p> <p>What events have they attended? What contact have they had with staff?</p>
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your parents' involvement in your education that I haven't asked about?</li> </ul>	