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A Phenomenological Study Examining African American Parent Involvement Towards Student Academic Achievement: Implications for School Counselors

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of parents of high achieving African American students and their child or children's academic achievement. Qualitative techniques were selected because they provide rich and authentic detail that can only come from personal parental experiences and feelings. This study adds to the current literature about parents and African American student academic achievement by acknowledging the experiences of the parents as stakeholders.

Keywords: African American academic achievement, parents, education, students

The educational needs of racial and ethnic groups of students in the United States have become a growing concern due to an increase in racially diverse student populations (Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, & Ryalls, 2010). As more and more racial groups of students enter into public education, it is important to involve parents in their child's education. Parents often provide their children's first educational experiences and strongly influence academic achievement within formal education (Ford, Wright, Grantham, & Harris, 1998; Kambui, 2014). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) asserted that the way parents view their role in their child's education is paramount. Parents who believe schools are solely responsible for their child's education will be less inclined to participate in school activities. However, parents who believe "that achievement at school depends as much on effort as ability, and that children's abilities can always be developed, are more likely to be more positive about parent involvement" (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 10).

Earlier studies investigating parental involvement primarily feature samplings of Caucasian students (Yan, 1999). Initial research on the pathology of African American families often compared African American families with Caucasian families and primarily used data gathered on the latter (Ford et al., 1998). Much of the literature that has been published focuses on the achievement gap, underperformance of African American students and the absence of African American parent involvement in education (Ford et al., 2008). Granted, a continuation of this conversation about the academic disparities between many youth only serves to perpetuate the societal narrative that African Americans are perceived as intellectually inferior to Caucasian students (Carter-Andrews, 2009). Equally, parental involvement continues to regulate negative stereotypes as well. According to Conchas (2006), African American parents are often blamed for the underperformance of African American children. This imbalance of published research only confirms negative stereotypes and beliefs that have persisted in American schools for decades.

To begin, an earlier study by Clark (1983) examined the achievement and underachievement of African American students and their parent households. Clark found that parent households of achieving African American children were assertive in parent involvement efforts, set realistic and high expectations for their children, established role boundaries, and maintained positive parent-child relations. On the other hand, Clark found that parents of underachieving students were less involved in their child's education, showed lack of confidence in their parenting skills, and set unclear and unrealistic goals for children. Clark's findings provide support for the idea that a parent's orientation toward achievement weighs heavily in student success. Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, and Tavegia (2005) analyzed the data from 15 parent households of gifted African American adolescents. The authors found that parents perceived that administrators and teachers lacked adequate training to support gifted African American adolescents. The findings from Huff et al. demonstrated levels of frustration among African American parents regarding their experiences when interacting with school systems.

Consequently, the present study seeks to examine the experiences of African American parents regarding their involvement in their high school students' academic success. This study sought to fill a void that exists amongst the scholarly articles that have been published about African American parent involvement. Moreover, the study sought to not only include the voices of African American parents in current literature,

but to also inform teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel. The study will serve as a resource for parents, educators, administrators, and other school officials to better serve student academic achievement.

Method

This study sought to examine the experiences of African American parents and their students' high school academic achievement. To understand African American parental involvement and student academic achievement, this study utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach and narrative analysis. Data was collected using triangulation of interviews, observations, and journals. This method was selected in order to capture parents' experiences of their children's academic achievement.

Participants

The participants for this study were six parents, which created six parent/student dyads. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling as well as purposeful sampling. Parent participants ranged in age from 36–52 and income levels ranged from 0-25,000 to 95,000+. Each parent had one child participating in the study. Parents' child's weighted GPAs were between the ranges of 3.7–4.5, and students were also enrolled in two or more AP or honors classes. Half of the students and parents were from a rural community in a Southeastern state. The other half attended school in an urban area in the same Southeastern state. High school students were targeted for this research study as many students continue to excel academically in high school.

Researcher as Interviewer

My interest in this topic is a reflection of my own experiences as a high achieving African American female student. In elementary school, I was identified as a talented/gifted student and I was given the opportunity to participate in testing programs and advanced classes throughout junior high school and high school. My parents have always been actively involved in my education. I cannot remember a time when I did not like school or learning. Both of my parents were educators and they encouraged my brothers, sisters, and I to achieve and always do our best. They provided us with supplemental educational and enrichment experiences. Throughout my formal education during my undergraduate and graduate studies, I became increasingly interested in the experiences of my peers, other high achieving African Americans, and African American achievement. When I began my career as a school counselor, I became even more interested in the experiences of African American students and their parents based on my interactions with faculty, staff, colleagues, parents, and students.

My status as an insider presents both an advantage and disadvantage. I am privileged to have access to this group not only because I identify as an African American, but also because I am a relatively young African American female. In addition, I have experience as a school counselor, and I am able to draw from my training and experiences with other students and parents at any given moment. A disadvantage to being an insider is a generational one with both students and parents. Participants may perceive my race and status as an African American woman and expect me to know what they are thinking and understand their perspective. To combat this potential, I sought

clarification via probing when necessary and when conducting follow-up interviews with parents, I made sure I recorded their statements exactly as stated.

Because of my background, interest, and the extensive review of research I've conducted concerning high achieving African Americans and their parents, I acknowledge that I bring certain preconceived beliefs and attitudes to this research. For instance, I was raised in a loving, two parent household. Both of my parents were college educated and were actively involved in both professional and civic organizations. Because of my background, I acknowledge a preconceived notion that parents should be involved in their communities to encourage greater awareness within their children (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, etc.). Also, as a school counselor, I have often believed that more studying would produce better academic achievement.

Whereas my attitudes and beliefs reflect my own ideas and experiences, I made every effort to be aware of my beliefs and attitudes in order to cultivate open, respectful, trustworthy, and non-judgmental relationships with potential research participants. To assist with this goal, I kept a journal through the data collection to reflect upon my own feelings and observations.

Procedure

The researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the study and sent flyers and e-mails to parents. Potential parents were contacted directly. During the screening before the interviews were conducted, the parents were asked to identify their race and/or ethnicity, income, and level of educational attainment.

Data Collection

Demographic forms were given to parents in the beginning of the study. The purpose of each demographic questionnaire was to gather background information about the parents participating in this study. The demographic questionnaire sought to collect information pertinent to the parent's age, educational background, occupation, income, number of children, and marital status.

Semi-structured interview. After parents were screened and met the procedure requirements, individual semi-structured interviews were scheduled. Interviews were conducted in either the home of parents or at a convenient public location, but in a private room in order to ensure confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were based on questions from a previous study conducted by Huff et al. (2005). In their study, Huff et al. sought to document the experiences of parents raising African American children who have been identified as gifted, with an emphasis on issues surrounding academic and social experiences and interactions with school, family, and community. The questions were selected for this current research because of their open-ended nature and the structure that allowed parents to speak freely.

The interviews began by obtaining consent to digitally record the interview and continue with the demographic questionnaire and interview questions. All participants were informed that they could discontinue the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Throughout the interview, frequent check-ins with parents were performed to ensure their comfort and understanding of questions. Moreover, in order to ensure accurate data collection and to collect additional data that may have been missed, member checks were conducted as a third data collection.

Member checks included sending participants an e-mail transcript of each interview and calling to discuss discrepancies if any existed.

Data Analysis

Data was interpreted using a phenomenological approach and deductive analysis. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) described a phenomenological approach as an approach that seeks to understand the meaning of ordinary people in particular situations. Phenomenologists do not attempt nor assume they know what things mean to people they are studying (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Douglas, 1976). Combinations of post positivist/constructive and critical paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) were also used to interpret the data collected. This phenomenological approach is influenced by the work of philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz with an emphasis on the aspect of human behavior of how participants make meaning of events in their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Coding and themes. Coding and subsequent thematic analysis was utilized to categorize data that was collected throughout this study. Coding systems were created to organize data using a multiple step process. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) described the process as several steps in which the researcher reviews data for words, phrases, and patterns as recorded by participants. In addition, the researcher searches for regularities of topics present in data. Significant and common words and phrases were categorized from codes and later formed into themes. There are a variety of coding styles; however, emic coding or the process of allowing codes to emerge from data was used in this research project. Two coders and one auditor analyzed the demographic forms from the parent participants, semi-structured interviews, and student self-portraits. Responses were tagged and coded by two coders. Codes were determined using a thematic coding process to find recurring themes. After each coder individually coded the data, the coding team met and created a master code list that consisted of individual codes and subsequent themes. The master code list consisted of 30 codes and definitions

Validity checks. Throughout the coding process, coding checks were conducted and interrater reliability was deduced using kappa. Kappa scores were determined for each coder separately for each interview (six in total) and results are reported below (See Table 1; Kappa was calculated following the Intercoder Agreement formula of (ΣAgreements) x (# coders)/ total coding instances [Miles & Huberman, 1994]). The Kappa coefficient measures the amount of agreement between two coders (P. Martin, personal communication, 2009). Overall kappa scores for the six interviews were above 0.91.

Validity

When conducting research, qualitative researchers need to ensure their research is credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Techniques designed to ensure validity include member checking, triangulation, thick descriptions, peer reviews, and external audits (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Table 1

Inter rater Reliability

| | Interview | | | | | | |
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
Researcher 1	77	56	82	68	70	47	400
Researcher 2	60	51	75	65	68	43	362
Agreements	59	50	66	64	66	42	347
Inter-rater	347x2	694	694/762	.91 or 91%			

Triangulation was used as a form of qualitative type validity in this study. Triangulation is defined as the use of multiple sources of information to form themes or categories in a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For the purpose of this research, the multiple forms of data that were collected from participants were demographic forms, semi-structured interviews, and results of member checking. Before coding began, coders were trained and instructed to code for common themes or recurring images.

When writing to establish rich, thick descriptors, it is important for the researcher to include as many details as possible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Credibility was established in data collected by establishing thick, rich descriptors in participant narratives as well as the researcher utilizing researcher reflexivity. Researcher reflexivity involves self-disclosing personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Throughout the entire process of data collection, the researcher maintained a journal to discover any preconceived biases before interviews began as well as throughout the data collection process.

Results

The results for this study produced two major themes and a total of nine codes. The two themes included parent impact and external influences. Within the theme of parent impact, four codes emerged. They included: parent involvement, parent challenges, motivation, and opportunities available for children. For the theme of external influences, five themes emerged. They include: religious influence, diversity, and educational family time, role models, and college preparation. The two major themes and nine codes demonstrate the impact parents, peers, and school officials have on the academic success of their child. The external factors highlight factors that are beyond the direct involvement of parents but that still greatly influence their children.

Major Theme: Parent Impact
The major theme of parent impact includes the themes of parent involvement, parent challenges, motivation, and opportunities available for children.

Parental involvement. Parent involvement can take many meanings for many people, and it can change over time. For example, Mr. Morgan explained his level of involvement with his daughter's school as:

> Yes, we've attended the teacher conferences in elementary schools, self-led conferences in middle school, in high school not as much interaction with teachers directly other than SPAN and working with to direct, for her to create direct relationships with teachers. Therefore, when she's going to need to create those relationships with professors, so not as much in high school.

Mrs. Williams was also very involved as noted by her statement, "I'm very active with teachers, I'll call them, talk to them, and I'll drop in every now and then just to check and make sure they are on the right track." Whereas both Mr. Morgan and Mrs. Williams expressed active involvement in their child's schooling, Mrs. Grady feels like her involvement is more one sided. She explained, "It seems like you're having to go and search for information yourself, and it's not coming necessarily from the school as you would think it would come." Instead of letting the lack of information deter her from her child's schooling, Mrs. Grady created opportunities for herself by taking advantage of educational seminars at her job and networking with other parents.

In contrast, Mrs. Strong and Mrs. White varied in their parental involvement. According to Mrs. Strong, she did not interact with school personnel as much because Billy is such a good student. Mrs. Strong stated,

> I don't necessarily go out and meet the teachers as much as I should because really I don't feel like I need to, ya' know, 'cause he really is a grounded student. He's very, very involved in his activities and schoolwork and everything . . . I always told him how important school is. Education is everything.

Also Mrs. White expressed, "Billy had tutoring sessions when he needed it."

Each parent determined what level of involvement they wanted to have and how to communicate with school employees. As recorded in participant responses, some were more involved than others.

Parent challenges. Some of the parent participants expressed challenges when interacting with their child's school and keeping their child on track. About his daughter, Mr. Morgan declared, "her experience in middle school—I say overall positive. I think it started off as more of a challenge, but Shannon really took off and she turned her abilities on and started to want to do the things that we wanted her to do." Mr. Morgan remarked:

> I mean we had to push to get her into algebra in elementary school because of the issues in the sixth grade, and she promised that she would spend extra time every day and that really helped turn her entire performance around.

Mrs. Grady described an interaction with one of Elyse's guidance counselors as:

> I think that Elyse is a very good student and she does well . . . I haven't had any real issues with her as far as program planning, her classes. I did have a misunderstanding with the guidance counselor . . . I wanted . . . I asked her about AP classes for Elyse, and I thought what she told me was that Elyse had to take a test in order to take the class and that the test was getting ready to be given. I thought she was saying, and so I was like, oh well, I guess I'll have to try next

year or something. But that was a misunderstanding because you don't have to take a test to take AP, you just have to either have recommendation or waiver or something, so I was little bit upset about that because I wanted to look into it although Elyse always has taken honors classes, so I figured that's still good but someone told me that if your school offers AP and you don't take any, then that's something that colleges say, "Well, why didn't you take any?"

Motivation. Another very important construct that developed from parent semi-structured interviews was parent observation of student motivation and parent encouragement. Mr. Morgan described Shannon's "light bulb" moment as:

> She turned her abilities on and started to want to do the things that we wanted her to do. She wasn't getting good grades, and one day the light came on and she just said, "I can do better," and she has been doing better. I think that was one of the things that kind of motivated her to be a high achieving student.

Parents also encouraged and supported their child's involvement in school activities. Mrs. Williams stated:

> Well I worked hard, very hard, but then as far as her going to . . . cultural trips and stuff, I encourage her to get in as many clubs and teams as possible so she can just see different aspects of life and not just try to focus on just the center point.

Opportunity. Taking advantage of opportunities was expressed by many parent participants. Many parents participated in educational activities related to both them and their children via school and other sources. Mrs. Dale recalled living in a small town and the challenge with "limited resources." However, she recognizes and takes advantage of opportunities. She stated, "I know this is a very poor county, but with being a poor county, we have a superintendent here that has brought in very nice resources, educational resources, because every child practically at the high school has a laptop." Mrs. Grady has taken advantage of opportunities available through her job. She stated:

> Well, I work at IBM, and they do make available some college planning assistance, and they have these like Webinars you can listen into or whatever. And there is a person you can call and get a personal . . . you know like maybe a hour with this called, personal coach or something.

Mr. Morgan reflected on the opportunities available to his daughter in terms of their past experiences in a lesser performing school system in a different state. He recalled:

> Well, just I mean coming here from Akron, Ohio, has been, in terms of the school system, a massive upgrade. People are fighting and complaining about the structure of the school, and they really have no idea what a bad system looks, feels, and tastes like.

Parents sought out and took advantage of opportunities and recognized what they had available not only to them, but also their children. Mr. Morgan stated the following:

> Well, um, I think one of the reasons why we want her to get involved with a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) summer enrichment program is I think a lot of times, I don't know why, I don't know if it's me or society or whatever, but girls, women, young women, don't . . . oftentimes don't

seem to gravitate toward technical careers and we wanted her to taste it even if she doesn't select that, to just make sure that she understands it is an option for her.

Major Theme: External Factors

The second major theme of external factors includes factors that are external and more personal and unique to each individual. The following five codes correspond to the external factors theme: religious influence, diversity, educational family time, role models, and college preparation.

Religious influence. Religious influence includes church involvement and influence on self and others. Mrs. Williams expressed her daughter's involvement in church and her academics as:

> We actually have tutoring at our church and she helps with the younger kids and then we have older kids that tutor, but the older kids tutor the smaller kids and then we have adults that can help with the older kids.

Millie's involvement in church is an extension of her helping others through tutoring. Also, Mrs. White described Michael as "loving the Lord" and doing "what is right" as a motivator for his success.

Diversity. Similar to the experiences expressed from the student participants, the parents also found diversity to be a very important factor in their child's education. When describing their child's interaction with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, parents expressed similar experiences. For example, Mrs. Dale described Miranda as following:

> I think she interacts very well with children from all levels. She's got children that are very affluent, and she's able to be in the group and respond well, and then she has students that are a little bit academic and economic below her and she does well. You look on Facebook, you see her with this one, that one, and yeah all races and economic levels. She does very well.

Mrs. Grady also noted Elyse's ability to get along with students from different backgrounds. She noted, "I think Elyse is very sociable so she makes friends very easily, and so she does have several friends that are of the same background but she has friends that aren't." Mrs. Grady went on to describe Elyse's interaction with students from different racial groups while participating in sport activities:

> She plays soccer so on that team, there is a mix of different cultures and students on that team . . . and she [gets] along very well with them. In her personal time, [she] will pick the ones that you know she decides to interact with on a more personal basis but, in general, she is very sociable and that is not . . . it's not an issue for her to interact with students from a different background. As a matter of fact, this year she met a young lady from Nigeria.

In addition, Mrs. White noticed Michael's ability to interact with all children from a very early age. She stated:

I'd say it was his background because he grew up with a lot of kids and he interacted well with them, especially when he was going to the daycare that I worked at, he interacted real well with those and he got along good with them.

Educational family time. Mr. Morgan recalled the benefits of having his daughter enrolled in academic enrichment programs as,

> . . . going through that program and those series of programs has really kind of led to college visits and led to meeting people from other schools who were also high achievers, and we thought all that is very positive. There is some more driving and kind of thing, but I mean, it's the fraction of what our parents did for us. It is just expected. It's part of what you should be doing. How I define parenting.

Also, he mentioned traveling to see "young family members graduate from college" as a positive and rewarding family trip. Mrs. Dale also recalled attending cultural and educational trips with her children. For example:

> We went to New York, and we take in the cultural things, and we saw *The Color Purple* when it was live up there, and we were able to go to the ballpark, and they see things, and when we go they have something lined up culturally for us to do.

In addition, Mrs. Grady incorporated educational experiences in family trips. She described a recent family trip as, "Last summer, we did had [sic] an opportunity to go and visit some colleges just to, you know, see what they were like and walk around, tour the campus and things." Mr. Williams and her family visited Chapel Hill recently to expose Michael to not only the campus, but also the surrounding area.

Both Mrs. White and Mrs. Williams described family vacations and field trips. According to Mrs. Williams, "I take her out . . . I mean, we go different places . . . we take family vacations and when we go, we go to aquariums, museums, and stuff so she can see the other things outside Benton County." Mrs. White expressed similar family outings such as, "Yes, we go on field trips to Raleigh. We went to the zoo one year."

As stated by parent participants, family time is not just for bonding, but also an opportunity to expose children to colleges, universities, museums, and other valuable educational experiences.

Role models and college preparation. The codes of role models and college preparation emerged from semi-structured interviews with parents. Parents participating in this research study recalled the importance of having positive role models and providing or encouraging their high achieving child to participate in college preparation activities. Mr. Morgan described the benefit of having a successful older sibling as a positive role model. He stated:

> One of the major advantages she has is she has an older sister who is a high achiever, who is an extremely hard worker, and she has really sort of embraced and modeled what her sister has done in that regard.

He went on to say:

> We wanted for our kids was for them to never have a moment where they did not expect to go on to college, and we've tried to foster that attitude, and I think once those expectations are there and they can see cousins graduating . . . and . . . it's a lot easier for someone who doesn't really have a way to model that through.

Mrs. Dale and Mrs. Grady sought out college preparatory opportunities for their high achieving students. Mrs. Dale stated her daughter takes SAT preparatory classes online because, "this area is kind of limited to some of the academic programs, so we have to look at other places like online and stuff like that for her." Mrs. Grady took advantage of college preparatory financial aid Web sites to guide her as she helps her daughter. She recalled:

> They tell you the FAFSA . . . the college foundational Web site . . . is out there. You should go out there and play around with it. You need to have that completed I think by the end of your sophomore year, so that your junior year, you're really just kind of like . . . okay, now what classes can really expose you to that interest to make sure that you really are interested in it.

Mrs. Williams recalled her daughter as tutoring that summer; she tutored juniors and sophomores in some classes they were struggling with, and then she attended Uplift Project (a summer pre-college program for high school juniors) that summer.

Discussion

Parents recalled positive interactions with diverse groups for student achievement, motivation to help their child succeed, the importance of taking advantage of opportunities made available to them from school and other organizations, and positive friendship influences of their children. It is important to highlight the common themes/codes as they reflect the experiences of both student and parent. Parents often communicate to their students certain expectations, and the common themes/codes reflect the expectations, goals, and desires that both parents and students share.

Challenges faced by parents of high achieving students emerged as an obstacle for some parent research participants. Some parents expressed challenges with school, in particular, communication with school officials and course selection. In order to overcome challenges, parents advocated for their child and, according to Mr. Morgan, he "pushed" to get his daughter in advanced level math courses in middle school. After successfully placing his daughter in advanced courses and observing her commitment to her studies, he noted that his daughter "turned her entire performance around." In addition, Mrs. Grady advocated for her daughter to take Advanced Placement courses in high school. After clearing up a misunderstanding about AP classes, she was able to take advanced level courses. It should be noted that both parents advocated for their child and their children wanted to take advanced level courses. Their initial challenges to get their children enrolled in advanced courses did not deter their child's dedication to work hard and succeed. In fact, they went above and beyond the challenge.

In addition, parent participants motivated their children to do well. They did not force them, but served as their cheerleaders. Parents recognized the things that motivated their children and supported their efforts. With the positive support, parents soon noticed "the light bulb coming on," and their children's grades began to reflect their hard work. Also, parents encouraged their children to participate in sports, clubs, summer programs, etc. As stated by Fries-Britt (2002), the role of the family is an important source of motivation because the achievements of high achieving youth are a reflection of family and community. Positive reinforcement and support motivated student research participants to seek opportunities and strive for academic success.

Parent participants also sought out opportunities for their high achieving children. Parents sought out opportunities not only from school, but also from their places of employment and the community. Despite living in an area when opportunities are scarce and there are "limited" resources, Mrs. Dale appreciated the support from her local school system. Her ability to take advantage of resources provided by her local school system supports the idea that school systems should provide opportunities for students. Mr. Morgan found opportunities made available through enrichment programs as valuable. Not only did Mr. Morgan see summer enrichment programs as rewarding, but also as positive influences to encourage and motivate his daughter to pursue a career in a STEM career.

Parent participants also acknowledged the positive influence of religion and the importance of having a strong faith as central in their high achieving child's success. Similar to student participants, parents did not see being African American as a hindrance in their child's social and educational experiences. In fact, parents encouraged their children to interact with students from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Parents also included educational experiences in activities such as trips, and family vacations. Parent participants sought out opportunities to expose children to new cultural and educational experiences when possible. According to Mr. Morgan, investing time in his daughter Shannon "is expected" as a parent. Expectations to encourage their children were echoed by all parent participants. Parents found having older, successful siblings or relatives served as an added benefit to help encourage and motivate their high achieving students. Subsequently, successful siblings, relatives, or friends encouraged parent participants and students to investigate college options and prepare for college.

Parent level of involvement appeared to change over time. Parents reported communicating more with schools when their children were in elementary and middle school. For example, Mr. Morgan stated he was more involved, but he encouraged his daughter to create more "direct relationships with her teachers." He also used technology such as a student/parent grade reporting Web site to learn more about Shannon's grades. Other parents, such as Mrs. Williams, liked to drop in and to see teachers and leave notes to inquire about her child's status. Mr. Morgan's and Mrs. Williams' level of school involvement reflect an assertion made by Clark (1983) in which families of achieving African American children were assertive in parent involvement efforts, set realistic and high expectations for their children, established role boundaries, and maintained positive parent-child relations.

Whereas some parents actively communicated with school officials, others expressed a different level of involvement. For instance, Mrs. Grady felt as if her communication was one-sided and felt as if she had to look for information without assistance. As a result, Mrs. Grady learned to create opportunities for her child herself. Her apathy toward lack of school communication reflects a lack of parent communication as recommended by Epstein (1995). Epstein proposed six levels of parent-school communication as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating. The six parent participants experienced one or more of the six strategies to promote communication. One parent preferred using technology and encouraging his child to become more involved, whereas others found school involvement to be more challenging. It is believed that schools can build lasting relationships with parents as students proceed through schools (Epstein, 1986, 1995). In

order to meet this goal, schools should communicate with parents using a variety of mediums. The parents in this research study varied on their thoughts and attitudes toward school communication and involvement.

Implications for School Counselors

The results of this study provide both relevant and timely implications for school counselors and counselor educators. Counselors, in particular, school counselors, often play a very important role in the academic and social development of students.

School counselors are encouraged to develop a comprehensive program that encourages student success through advocacy, leadership, collaboration, and systemic changes to barriers that impede academic success (ASCA, 2012). In particular, ASCA's position paper (2013) on gifted and talented student programs notes school counselors as consultants and advocates when identifying students in gifted and talented programs. The results of this study indicate a normalcy rule, rather than exception, of African American students as leaders and taking an active role in their education. School counselors can encourage positive identity development by taking an interest in high achieving students and their development. A school wide initiative school counselors can employ to help with this identity development is to create a high achievers club where students with a GPA of 3.5 or above come together to not only socialize, but to help each other. Club members should be encouraged to visit colleges, historical museums, participate in educational workshops, and programs. Also, counselors that promote high achievement and academic success can help match high achieving students with students in need of academic support. Creating a tutoring program not only enables high achieving students to take on a leadership role within their school, but also to help others and promote achievement and success. Many of the students participating in this research study discussed the importance of support systems.

In addition, schools should form a diversity parent group or create a sub-group within the parent teacher association to encourage more diverse parent participation. It is important to welcome membership of all parents in this group; however, the sub-group's focus will be on the academic and social experiences of minority students. School counselors can help recruit parent participants and have a prominent role in such organizations. Support is important and vital in the long-term success of the collaboration between school counselors, schools, and parents.

Counselor educators are encouraged to include research about giftedness, high achievement and African Americans in their curriculum. It is very important that counselors in training and counselor education programs dispel the myths of African American student academic achievement. Counselor educators are encouraged to highlight the special academic and personal/social concerns of gifted students in their classes. As more and more research becomes readily available, counselor educators should seek such research to promote academic achievement and positive development amongst racially diverse groups of students.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research study only adds to the ever growing research about the experiences of high achieving African American students and their parents. The parents and student

research participants had overall positive experiences in school. The students participating in this research study were motivated to do well and took advantage of opportunities presented before them. Future researchers can replicate this study by having a larger participant pool to gather more diverse results. In addition, future research can separate out genders and explore the experiences of high achieving African American boys as opposed to African American girls. Future research can determine if high achieving African American girls or boys experience pressure to succeed or perform.

Also, future research could focus more on the interaction of school personnel. Parent and student research participants both mentioned involvement with school counselors, teachers, and coaches. It would be worthwhile to gather the thoughts and attitudes of school personnel in positions where they counsel/advise students. The participants in this current study expressed some interaction with school personnel, but it was limited. Future studies can focus primarily on communication with school counselors. School counselors often assist families and students throughout their high school career. Counselors can play a major role in providing academic and emotional support, class recommendations, and notifying students and parents about opportunities. Further, counselors should include African American and minority parents in seminar presentations about college readiness to strengthen connections

Conclusion

Parents participating in this research study shared the challenges they encounter as they provide support for their children. For many of the parent research participants, the impact of their presence motivated them to assist their children and find additional opportunities. In addition, parents recognized external influences such as diversity, educational family time, role models and college preparation as playing a central role in their child's education. Parents supported their children and wanted the best for them. They had a strong desire and will to achieve and should serve as leaders/role models to their peers.

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