# AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE AS DECISION MAKERS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

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Title of Study: AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE AS DECISION MAKERS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

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Abstract:
For this narrative study, ten participants shared their experiences about special education and the special education K-12 decision-making process through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. An initial set of open-ended questions was developed based on current literature relating to the experiences and perceptions of African American families in general. The purpose of this study was to examine and describe how parents of African American students who received K-12 special education services and college students who received special education services in K-12 schooling understand their own level of preparedness to participate fully in the special education decision-making process. For more than forty years, African American students have been disproportionately placed into special education in certain disability categories. This study adds to the currently sparse body of literature from the perspective of parents and students in relation to decisions about referral, identification, assessment and placement of African American students into special education.

Five dominant emergent themes came from analysis of participant stories: supporting our own, fair treatment, independence, advocacy on behalf of self and others, barriers, and "othering." For African American families, the implications relate to purposeful self-advocacy, finding support within the home or community, and negotiating barriers to fair treatment. The schools, which may include administrators, teachers, counselors, and support personnel involved in the special education decision-making process, have the burden in recognizing and eliminating systemic barriers and increasing meaningful partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*On a cool, rainy day I entered into the front doors of the school where my son, Jace, attended. The gray marble floor inside the front entrance matched the overcast skies outside—dark, threatening, and uninviting. A musty, damp smell met my nostrils, and I immediately felt a strange wave of nausea hit the pit of my stomach. I had been summoned to the school on several occasions to conference about Jace's behavior. Today was different, however, because it was for a manifestation determination hearing that I had requested.*

*The school year was coming to an end and days earlier I had been notified that Jace was being suspended from school for 45 days, essentially for the remainder of the school year. The offense leveled at Jace had created buzz around the school, but as the fragmented pieces of the story relating to his actions began to unfold, the reality I saw was that it was also an account of one person (who happened to be white and female) against that of my son.*

*I was never one to present myself as the parent of a child who could do no wrong, but this all felt different to me, even odd. Jace was an African American male. He had been on an IEP since second grade. He was well liked by his peers and for the most part, the staff and administrators at his school deemed him as a "good kid."*

*Jace was soft-spoken but not shy and had soon gained a reputation for speaking his mind. Often, though, he did this in ways that frustrated and pushed the boundaries of the classroom culture, usually ending in a disciplinary referral for "talking out" or being "disruptive."*

*After being notified of Jace's pending suspension, I had, in confidence, received an unofficial call from an African American administrator at Jace's school, "Off the record, I know Jace, and I don't believe [the incident] happened the way that it did." The person continued, "I really think the school just doesn't know how to handle him and they're not going to listen to what Jace has to say, especially as a black male who tends to get into trouble. You have to fight this or it will ruin Jace for the rest of his school career." As the call ended, I was flooded by many thoughts and emotions: anger, confusion, frustration, helplessness. I knew Jace was struggling with the same kinds of feelings as a result of what was being said about him in the hallways at school by his own peers.*

*I did take on that fight and had many meetings and "conversations" with school personnel, but I wasn't always clear along the way what exactly was being said without being said. I wondered, was the issue about Jace's disability? Or was it about racism? Was it about inequity or about injustice? What was this struggle that I had taken on as a parent and had affected my son so deeply really about? I do know that after that incident Jace had stopped talking—completely. He became quiet and withdrawn. This was indeed about a shift that changed a young man and about a struggle that left more questions than answers. An important voice in the entire process—Jace's voice-- had gone missing and I struggled and searched to understand why.*

One of the longstanding debates within the field of special education concerns the overrepresentation of persons who are culturally different among specific disability categories. This is especially true for African American children who are deemed at risk for overrepresentation in what are termed "judgmental" categories, including mental retardation, also known as intellectual disabilities (ID) emotional disturbance (ED) and specific learning disabilities (SLD) and underrepresentation in gifted and talented categories. The term "judgmental" categories refers to those classifications made without the "readily observable distinguishing features, and the authoritative diagnosis of medical professionals" (National Research Council, 2002, p. 37). Within the past four decades an extensive body of research has examined and discussed possible reasons for the disproportionate representation by African Americans. Two of the earliest works include Dunn (1968) and Deno (1970). Both are cited as research efforts which brought attention to special education practices as a whole and steered interest toward examining referral and placement practices including those which relate to minority students (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Over time, other works have discussed a variety of factors ranging from the influences of biased assessment tools and practices, racial, cultural and socioeconomic factors, to examination of the quality of prereferral instructional techniques (Maheady, Towne, Algozzine, Mercer & Ysseldyke, 1983). Some have also examined the way disproportionality is defined and the manner in which statistical data are collected and reported (Bennett, Jones, & Sacks, 1983; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Although a general consensus remains that disproportionate representation continues to be a problem, there are still inconsistencies as to definitive causes (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006).

One important consideration is that students who receive special education services during their K-12 schooling reach pivotal points, one of which potentially involves transitioning out of special education when the services are no longer necessary. For many though, transition centers on the idea that there is life beyond K-12 schooling and that students are entitled to be guided along a path that allows them the greatest access to a reasonable quality of life beyond that schooling. The most significant measures to protect the interest of students with disabilities stem from the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1990, 1997 & 2004). As with other critical junctures along the special education path, IDEA calls for practices that ensure that the next steps for a student with a disability beyond K-12 schooling are built within a process that yields measurable results for the student. These include transition services and assessments, measureable post-secondary goals, and evidence that students are invited to take part in IEP meetings (20 U.S.C. § 1401 (602)(34)).

Another consideration is the care for children and the decisions that have an impact upon their educational needs. Typically, the primary care for children lies within the family structure and with the parent(s)/guardian(s) entrusted with that care. African American families, similar to families from other cultures and ethnicities, have the responsibility of raising and educating their children. Inherit with that responsibility is the potential that parents will on some level exhibit influence over their children, including influence over the child's education and the educational outcomes, typically manifest through varying levels of involvement in the child's education (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004; Desimone, 1999; Fan, 2001; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). African American families have an added task of ensuring that their children have some semblance of equal access to equal educational opportunities and ideally to provide adequate tools that

allow children, particularly as they become older, to advocate for themselves and to make decisions about their own educational needs (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Mazotti, et al., 2009). Students are met with these decisions and may or may not have the benefit of guidance from others to understand the implications and intricacies of balancing decision making within the educational system. This task can become even greater when coupled with the need to negotiate through the intricacies of the special education system and the processes involved within that system. Over the years, special education policy and legislation has evolved in efforts to strengthen the role of families and to include both the parents and the students as informed and involved participants. However, families sometimes must draw upon their individual lay skills and knowledge, rather than the collective and specialized skills and knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team in order to negotiate such a system. For African American families and for their children who are named statistically at risk for disproportionate identification and placement into special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), negotiating a system becomes intertwined with the importance of fully participating in the education process, making effective educational decisions, and advocating in the best interest of the child.

## Statement of the Problem

Over the past 40 years, the rate of special education referral for African American students, in contrast to other ethnic groups, has been consistently disproportionate. Recent reports issued by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services indicate particular trends for African American students (black students) receiving special education and related services under IDEA, part B. From a 2005 report the percentages for black students served, ages 6 to 21, were noted as "substantially higher" for the category of mental

retardation or intellectual disabilities (ID) at 17.4% or 2.99 times more likely to receive services and "considerably higher" for the category of emotional disturbance (ED) at 11.3% or 2.21 times more likely to receive services in comparison to all other racial/ethnic groups ((U.S. Department of Education, pp. 29-30). Reports from 2007 indicated that black students were 3.0 times more likely to receive special education services for mental retardation and 2.3 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance compared to all other racial or ethnic groups combined (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 40). The most recent indicators for black students show that they are 2.75 times more likely to be served under the category of intellectual disabilities and 2.28 times more likely to be served under the category of emotionally disturbed when compared to all other racial/ethnic groups combined. In 2006, the total percentage of black students served under IDEA, part B was 12.22 percent, making them the largest group served, second only to American Indian/Alaska Native students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). To date, there is little indication that the trends for African American students are reversing. Hence, the problem is that African American children continue to be referred to special education at high rates for particular disability categories.

The context of the problem is, in part, the decision-making team concept. As part of a team that refers, identifies and places students into special education, the families, which include the student, ideally are the principal decision makers and the best and first advocates for the student who receives special education services. However, African American families may hold such perceptions that school personnel do not respect their cultural beliefs (Zionts, Zionts, Harrison & Bellinger, 2003), that they are not viewed as effective advocates or important participants in educational decision making (Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005) and

that special education procedures and practices are a means of hindering the educational progress of African American children (Williams, 2007). In looking at the body of related data, it is apparent that the student and the family are critical components to the decision-making process. However, if families are disengaged, are not invited to the process, or if the team is effectively incomplete, this generates serious concern for students who are likely to be affected by the outcomes of the important decisions made.

## Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this research was to examine and describe how African American college students who received special education services in K-12 schooling, understand their own level of preparedness to participate fully in the special education decision-making process. Although, the issue of disproportionate representation has been debated for well over 40 years, the current literature is sparse in terms of students' views on how they come to the process as decision makers. This study sought to gather information to add to the body of literature from the perspective of African American students in relation to decisions about their referral, identification, assessment and placement into special education.

## Research Questions

This study is designed to answer two primary descriptive research questions:

1. How do African American college students who have transitioned from high school special education services perceive their preparation to participate in the special education decision-making process?

2. How do African American college students who have transitioned from high school special education services perceive their roles as partners in referral, identification, assessment, and placement into special education?

## Statement of Subjectivity

One of the most difficult parts of my parenting experience was watching my child, Jace, struggle through a disability. From the beginning, when a parent becomes aware that the child is not progressing on level or is lagging behind his or her peers academically or even socially, it potentially places an extreme burden on the entire family. There were times when meetings with school personnel became overwhelming and discussions felt very one-sided, driven by the verbiage of the referral-assessment-placement machine. As a parent, I became lost in that machine. No amount of education prepared me for the frustrations I encountered and I had no reason to feel that I was part of a team involved in making decisions about my child (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). I felt even less prepared to guide my own child through the process or to equip him with ways to advocate for himself.

I remember very few IEP meetings (perhaps one) where my child was invited to speak or to express his opinion about matters that would ultimately affect his education and his life. I clearly recall one conversation when my son expressed that he wanted to drop out of school because he felt like an academic failure and could not see how finishing school would connect him to a successful future. That became the struggle of his final year of high school—simply getting him to graduation. However, that was the first time I heard him speak candidly about losing his way through his schooling.

**Communicating within Special Education: Defining Terms**

Within the special education decision-making process communication remains a key element. It is critical that all who are viewed as a part of the decision-making team ideally begin that process with a foundational basis of how communication might occur throughout the process. This in turn involves developing some semblance of common terminology that may aid in any form of communication or discussion. For the purposes of this study, I have identified a list of terms along with the associated definitions. Many of them are common to special education identification, referral, and placement, but they also are terms that may help to clarify some of the discussion within this study. On a personal level, some are also terms, that as a parent when I sat down to discuss my own child's needs during an IEP meeting, no one took the time to explain to me, until I simply had the courage to ask.

**Assessment (Initial Evaluation):** procedures to determine whether a child is a child with a disability and the educational needs of that child (IDEA 1997, Sect 614 [a] [1]).

**Decision Making:** a process that moves logically from a particular premise, or set of premises, with the intention of accomplishing a specific goal or set of goals (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p.91). In special education generally includes early instruction, pre-referral activities, the decision to refer and the process of assessment (p.15).

**Disproportionate Representation/ Disproportionality/ Overrepresentation (for purposes of this study, these terms are interchangeable):** the numbers of students in specific race/ ethnicity categories who are identified for special education in comparison to representation in the total student population (National Research Council, 2002).

**Identification (eligibility determination):** determination made by a team of qualified professionals and the parent of the child a**s** to whether the child has a disability as defined by IDEA (IDEA 1997, Sect 614 [4] [A]).

**Intellectual Disability**: category of disability or impairment also known as mental retardation

**Parent ("Family"):** natural or adoptive parent or legal guardian who has authority to make decisions about child's special education placement and services.

**Response to Intervention (RTI):** A tiered intervention or multi-step approach to provide instruction and intervention for struggling students. Assessments determine if students need further instruction or intervention in general education or referral to special education.

## Legislation Related to Special Education

Decisions about identification, referral, assessment and placement into special education are based largely within the boundaries of a system-driven process. The whole of the process itself is defined and governed by specific legislation including the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1990, 1997) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004). Current reauthorizations of IDEA have shifted guidelines toward the use of alternative methods of special education identification and assessment. The result has been the emergence of a variety of response to intervention (RTI) models designed to provide research-based instructional interventions for students deemed at risk for academic failure and in need of such interventions (Bradley, Danielson & Doolittle, 2007; VanDerHeyden, Witt & Barnett, 2005). The policy mandates that parents be informed of and provide consent to evaluations related to identifying a child for special education services. This presupposes

that the process allows for informed stakeholders as decision makers. Professionals are mandated to include the Individual Education Program (IEP) team members, which involves input, knowledge and participation by parents, and the student, whenever appropriate, in the process of making identification and placement decisions for students with disabilities (Kalyanpur, Harry & Skritc, 2000). Further, this model as guided by IDEA is based on input and participation by members of a decision-making team. The team generally includes the teachers, both general and special education, a school administrator, other support personnel (i.e. school psychologist, speech language pathologist) the parents and the student. As team members, each takes on the responsibility of shaping outcomes that affect the child's future, educational and otherwise. Additionally the process is guided by federally mandated timelines and the need to interpret and assess varying amounts of information related to specific needs of the child. Ultimately, this adds to the responsibilities of the team members and also underlies the significance of their varying roles.

With the latest reauthorization of IDEA (2004) the issue of disproportionality becomes an even greater point of emphasis. From a recent memo issued by the Office of Special Education, the alarming trends bring attention to what has occurred within the American school systems and emphasizes a very clear call for a greater level of accountability within those school systems:

> Excerpts from findings in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004's statute note that: (1) greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling minority children with disabilities; (2) African-American children are identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance at rates greater than their white counterparts; (3) more minority children

> continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population; (4) in the 1998-1999 school year, African-American children represented 14.8% of the population aged 6 through 21, yet comprised 20.2% of all children with disabilities served in our schools; and (5) studies have found that schools with predominately white students and teachers have placed disproportionately high numbers of their minority students into special education (United States Department of Education, 2007, p. 1: Sect 601, 118 STAT. 2651).

IDEA has further resulted in states being required to report numbers of students served in special education based on race/ethnicity. States are also charged with monitoring and including in the State Performance Plan occurrences of disproportionality which result from inappropriate identification and to monitor occurrences of significant disproportionality with respect to children from specific racial/ethnic groups identified with particular impairments

Given that the number of children receiving special education services has increased to over 6 million, (United States Department of Education, 2011) the impact of how identification and placement decisions are made can be potentially far-reaching. As more and more children become eligible for special education, the process of decision making, the role of the decision makers and how those roles are defined become much more crucial.

## Summary

As a teacher of developmental courses, also known as remedial courses, I often watch college students struggle through what some of them term the "unfairness" of being placed in a remedial class, or even what some of them have openly labeled as a class for "slow

learners." In my observation, this seems especially to be a difficult space for African American students to negotiate. The complexities of that space increase when coupled with being an African American student coping with having a disability that impedes learning. Frequently, I encounter students who early in a semester, disengage from the classroom community and will express either verbally or through their writing why they feel they do not belong in a remedial course. The expressions are sometimes laced with anger, dissatisfaction, or at least with a reluctance to become fully engaged for the remainder of the semester. These factors can create a great deal of frustration for and tension between teacher and student. My own challenges stem from wanting to understand how best to help the students. The students' frustrations appear to be that they somehow are not part of a real college class environment or that they have been separated from their peers who are taking credit-level courses. For the African American students who come needing both remediation in a particular subject or multiple subject areas and accommodations as a result of having a disability I wonder at times about students possibly facing stigmas from their past experiences that relate to race, ability, and feeling segregated and isolated from the so-called mainstream population of their peers. Therefore, the "space" we find ourselves in as teacher and students is a space that at times seems tenable and unsure. These are a few of the wonderings that brought me to this study. I became interested in the stories other students (who are like my students) potentially had to tell. My thoughts have been about the knowledge they might add to the understanding of how students must indeed negotiate ability, race and other factors within the context of their learning experiences. Much of the understanding begins by examining the literature available to help to frame the basis for this study. In Chapter Two I present a review of the literature, which begins with the historical contexts of minority disproportionate

representation in special education and extends through a discussion of African American students and families within the decision-making process.

# CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Historical Contexts and Minority Disproportionate Representation

The discussion concerning minority disproportionate representation in special education is consistently aligned with discussion of educational equity (DeValenqzuela, Copeland, Huaquing Qi, & Park, 2006) and the Civil Rights Movement. Some scholars argue that the breadth of the discussion extends as far back as the 1800's or earlier (Harris, Brown, Ford & Richardson, 2004; Patton, 1998: Skiba, et al., 2008) in tandem with historical acts of oppression, segregation and early race relations involving marginalized populations. While education as a whole brought attention to the complexities of creating equal educational opportunities for minority children on a very broad basis, special education focused on similar issues for students with disabilities. Throughout time, the influences of legislative mandates and significant court cases broadened the discussion of equitable education and how it came to be defined, particularly for special education.

As special education policy evolved, specific legislative and judicial occurrences systematically shifted special education practices. While this shifting even to date has influenced practices on state and local levels, the impact has been seen on national and

international fronts as well. As seen when"[b]road international statements…are implemented nationally through the passage of educational laws and reform acts …e.g. IDEA in the US" (Truscott, Cantese & Abrams, 2005, p. 163). The intent of much of the policy shift was to bring a greater measure of accountability to schools and improve the quality of services provided to students with disabilities. Much of the history is based in commonly referenced court cases including *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which involved the doctrine of separate but equal in relation to racial segregation; *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954); legal decisions in *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972, 1979) and *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970) which examined bias in standardized educational testing, particularly in relation to the use of IQ testing. During the 1950's, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* drew attention to inequities in schooling. The *Brown* decision in effect laid a foundation for educational reform in public school settings and for examining issues of racial segregation and equitable practices (Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004). It additionally was significant for overturning the long held doctrine of "separate but equal" established decades earlier by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005). Well into the 1960's against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, the rights of students were being argued on two fronts. Overall, public schooling continued to struggle with the rights of minority students, most significantly African American students, to be educated in non-segregated settings. Comparatively, there was an increased interest among special education advocates to secure the rights of students with disabilities to first gain access to public schooling and then be served in the least restrictive environment (LRE). During this time, the work of Lloyd Dunn was regarded as one to shed light on minority

representation in special education, particularly in relation to the identification of mental retardation. As cited in Skiba, et.al (2008), "Dunn (1968) suggested that the overrepresentation of ethnic and language minority students in self-contained special education classrooms raised significant civil rights and educational concern" (p. 265). In general, African American students and their families were part of the interest that extended from the era of *Brown* into that of the civil rights movements to gain access to non-segregated schooling in both general education and special education settings. As noted:

> Because the Supreme Court in its decision in [Brown v. Topeka Board of Education] established that forcing African American students to attend segregated or Black only public schools denied them equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the 14th amendment, advocates and parents of students with disabilities were able to use this decision to argue against the segregation of students with disabilities on the basis of disability (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005, p. 73).

The cases of *Larry P. v. Riles* and *Diana v. California State Board of Education* were also seen as post civil rights efforts to bring about policy reform in special education (Semmel, Gerber & Macmillian, 1994) and raised questions of assessment practices in relation to placing minority students into special education. In the 1970's the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) established a set of guiding principles for providing services for students with special needs. It became the driving force for and subsequently evolved into IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-476), 1997 (P.L. 105-17), IDEA 2004, and the latest

reauthorization, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, or IDEIA 2004 (P.L. 108-446). Each manifestation of IDEA produced changes to particular elements of identification, assessment and placement of students including establishing more prescriptive guidelines for implementing nondiscriminatory and nonbiased procedures and practices. Some of the earliest provisions of IDEA included access to free appropriate public education (FAPE), instruction in the least restrictive environment (LRE), establishment of a set of procedural safeguards, including right to due process, implementation of an individualized education program (IEP) comprehensive and nondiscriminatory assessment and mandated family/ parental involvement in the decision making process.

One of the underlying principles in establishing such policies was to create a basis for safeguarding against discriminatory practices in referral, identification, assessment and placement decisions, and thus potentially reduce the occurrence of disproportionate representation. In relation to addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the context of equitability, Coutinho and Oswald (2000) assert IDEA delineates the conditions under which children are to be identified and placed for special education services and aligns the issue of equity with the assessment process. Specifically

> IDEA mandates nondiscriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. The prescribed evaluation procedures and the definitions of disability conditions in IDEA make it clear that children who achieve poorly because of differences related to environmental disadvantage or ethnic, linguistic or racial difference are not to be identified as disabled. The

> *entitlement* to special educational services in IDEA is accompanied by a mandate of *equity.* (p.136)

Some of the research contends, however, that despite the implementation of policy such as IDEA, disproportionate representation among minority students remains pervasive as ever (Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005). This contention is echoed in questioning of the efficacy and full extent of such policy:

> When P.L. 94.142 was passed in 1975, there was immense hope that this law would ensure a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities at public expense. However, although many students with disabilities gained access to public schools and benefited greatly from an education, they did not necessarily access mainstream classes. Furthermore, disability labels were now given to previously unlabeled students in general education, which facilitated their removal to segregated programs. The evolution of two separate systems of education echoed the inequalities associated with racially segregated schools. Rigid and narrow norms regarding 'ability' have affected the way in which special-education policies have been implemented, contributing to the persistent overrepresentation of Black and Latino (and Native American) students in special education. (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 457)

Over time, the challenges related to the issue of equal access to schooling for students from culturally diverse backgrounds has become intricately tied to the more focused issue of ability and race and their importance in the education of African American students with disabilities.

## Factors Related to Disproportionate Representation

Along with the reauthorization and implementation of IDEA 1997 came a mandated emphasis on increasing the involvement of families/parents. Attention was also drawn to the concern of minority disproportionality. Each of these issues, participation by families/parents (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005; Trotman, 2001) and minority overrepresentation in special education (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Patton, 1998; Salend, Duhaney & Montgomery, 2002; Serwatka, Deering & Grant, 1995) has drawn attention within the literature. The literature on disproportionate representation suggests that there are varied opinions on contributing factors. Several researchers have examined this issue from a variety of angles, but agreement on specific causes is yet to be reached (Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999) and the subject remains a controversial topic of discussion (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). There are, however, two general factors, economic and demographic, which are widely considered in the research. According to Hosp and Reschley (2004), the two areas have shared connections but are also difficult variables for educators to alter or control. Thus, considering additional variables, such as academic achievement, which are more strongly connected to special education identification, tends to yield a more comprehensive view of the pattern of disproportionality. Additional studies suggest that the contextual variables leading to disproportionate placement are important to understanding the phenomenon, particularly at the local school level (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006). The contention is that institutional habits and patterns produced within school systems at a local level help to perpetuate class and

racial inequities. Within this view, disproportionality is a system driven process affected by individual actions, sometimes at an unconscious level.

From both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, researchers have examined the possibilities for patterns of disproportionate representation. Along with that is the notion that understanding disproportionate representation involves examination rooted in statistical analysis that provides a "powerful teasing out of the variables that are associated with disproportionality" as well as examining the relevant social processes (Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002, p. 72). Some of the areas considered include the link between the restrictiveness of educational environments where African American students are placed and the influence of particular disability categories (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006) and restrictiveness of placement and patterns of identification, assessment and placement in relation to race/ ethnicity (Hosp & Reschly, 2002; 2003)). Also, bias in the use of standardized measurement and intelligence testing has been noted as an influencing factor in referral and placement decisions (Dunn, 1968; Luft, 1995) as well as potential bias within the prereferral and intervention process that affects student placement ratios (Mamllin & Harris, 1998).

The larger issue of disproportionate representation remains a complex topic of discussion, not only within the literature but also across a broad spectrum of potential stakeholders who are even today continuing the discussion connected to the longstanding historical outgrowths. Researchers continue to debate the effects of disproportionate representation and the various forms it has taken on. Most recently, one outgrowth of the larger discussion concerning disproportionate representation has been positioned as "one of the most puzzling paradoxes" within the debate. The consideration rests on the

question of how special education policies and procedures designed to protect one group historically deemed as marginalized subsequently serve to create elements of inequality for other groups deemed as "historically underserved" (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010, p. 281). Additionally, a consistently steady interest remains as to how this phenomenon continues to permeate the most complex elements of our school systems as well as the most rudimentary facets of a variety of education-related interests, one of these interests being the effective and equitable education of African American students with disabilities.

Artiles and Bal (2008) further suggest that the context of disabilities studies must expand beyond the present debate to explore ability differences. This context situates the debate of disproportionate representation in special education within a framework that asks questions to challenge ideologies that have typically fueled decades of inquiry into equity-based issues. The authors contend that issues of equity within special education as they relate to disproportionate representation demand attention on a much wider berth that expands that attention even globally. The contention is that a comparative approach presents a model "to understand the sociohistorical underpinnings of special education by examining the contexts that shape a society's treatments of minority students and students with disabilities" (p. 4). This is crucial to understanding what we historically know about special education, but it also helps to formulate deeper questions about these particular contexts and the construction of special education.

## Special Education Decision-Making Process

The act or process of decision-making occurs well before a child is placed for special education services. In fact, the moment a child demonstrates academic difficulty

or is suspected of needing additional educational services and assistance, a decision must be made concerning how best to proceed on behalf of the child. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA brought emphasis to the need for research-based instructional intervention before a child is referred to special education. The result was greater focus on Response to Intervention (RTI) an alternative means of determining a child's eligibility for special education, initially used for identifying specific learning disabilities (Harris-Murri, King & Rostenberg, 2006). While the efficacy of RTI continues to be a subject of educational discussion, the overall intent remains increased effort to address the effects of the "wait to fail" model, use of standardized assessment measures, such as IQ testing, and the implications for student learning:

> Over time, it has become apparent that the use of the IQ-achievement discrepancy has the effect of delaying identification until the child falls below a predicated level of performance. Waiting for a child to exhibit failure sufficient to signal a significant discrepancy between IQ and achievement level takes time. This type of discrepancy cannot be measured until a child reaches approximately age 9 and by that time the student has been experiencing the frustration of academic failure for two to three years. (National Research Council, 2002, p. 251)
>
> The Council for Exceptional Children in its 2008 policy statement indicates that partnerships with families are an important piece in implementing Response to Intervention. The process is deemed as a collaborative team effort focused on meeting the needs of the students and emphasizes the importance of informing and drawing in families as a part of that effort. Early in the process, even before a child is identified as in need of special education placement or services, the team

decision-making process ideally positions families to weigh-in on outcomes for the child and to be informed as "partners in the process." (p. 2)

There is also the consideration to separate out identifying a child for special education and deciding the proper placement for the student. Placement must be designed to meet the student's individual needs vs. aligning with the conveniences of a school system. The caution is that placement issues in deciding appropriate levels of restrictiveness or inclusion for a student not be confused with issues related to identification for receiving special education services. What is the "frequent and incorrect notion that special education is a place, rather than a system of supports and services" ties to the notion that "the increased isolation of minority students disproportionately labeled for special education in some schools may be a product of racial bias" (Fierros & Conroy, 2007, p. 40).

**Decision Making in Referral, Assessment and Placement**

One area of consideration relates to decisions made at the point of referral. This is a critical time in reference to the placement of students into special education services. Harry and Klingner (2006) investigated the "culture of referral" and noted that attitudes and beliefs held by teachers and administrators affected patterns of referral. In some instances, this was an indication that decisions about referral were based more on these beliefs versus characteristics attributed to the child. As the authors contend based on observation of specific referral patterns "the decision-making process was far from scientific or rational' and failed to move "logically from a particular premise or set of premises with the intent of accomplishing a goal or set of goals" (p. 92). With these

observations, there is an initial understanding of decision making and that it is a process that is multi-faceted and often not a simple process.

Offering yet a different view, Ysseldyke (2001) observed that "psychoeducational assessment and decision making are focused more on documentation of deviance than on demonstration of competence" (p. 301). Again, notably key considerations come into play for those making decisions about the assessment and placement of a child into special education at critical junctures in the process. According to Klingner and Harry (2006) in the context of the special education decision-making process an unbalanced reliance upon IQ testing and test scores potentially affects decisions made about a child's eligibility for special education. Thus, RTI offers an alternative means of focus when a child's academic achievement comes into question and before additional decisions are made about the child's need for special education placement. As noted by Bradley, Danielson, and Doolittle (2007) with the use of scientifically based interventions, through RTI procedures, teachers no longer have to wait for students to fail, but can implement interventions at the first sign that a student is not responding to classroom instruction.

A further area of focus relates to placement decisions as noted by Harry, Klingner and Cramer (2007). In their observations of specific cases, the authors assert that unilateral decision-making that excludes parental input can influence such placement decisions. On that front they state that, "Even though IDEA stipulates that parents and others on the IEP team should be involved in making placement decisions, most such decisions seem to have been made prior to the placement conference" (p. 7). The team decision becomes the exception rather than the norm. Further, as Kozleski, et al (2008) relate, key factors to the special education decision making process involve specific

communication patterns exhibited by families, families understanding the rules and practices of the school culture, being able to negotiate information from various sources, and possessing the cultural and social capital to be a part of the decision-making process with professionals. These are in fact all critical factors in the placement process that could potentially affect the outcome of decision-making. Specifically, these areas warrant further attention and discussion by researchers.

## Families and Shared Decision Making

On an overall school-based management level, Brown and Hunter (1998) consider the impact of shared decision making upon minority families and the education of their children. The authors discuss a model of shared decision making that involves "equal partners in the process", discussion of meaningful issues, focus on school improvement, creation of a concerned collaborative 'community' and "clear lines of accountability" (p. 99). This has implications for families in general and for African American families (as part of a "minority" designation) who may or may not have access to the "community of decision makers" within a child's school. Here the authors consider one aspect of this model in terms of it being firmly entrenched in school-based reform and the effort to draw in or "invite" minority families as decision makers in the process. Additionally, Anderson and Minke (2007) explore the act of "being invited" as an important variable to parental decision to participate and become involved in particular aspects of a child's schooling. As observed by Anderson and Minke, African American parents, in particular, were noted as especially responsive to such personally focused invitations, which in turn affected the nature of their decisions to participate. Shared decision making and the "power of social forces in the placement of minority students into special

education" raises additional considerations. "At every phase of the process, children's identity is being constructed in ways that will have long-lasting effects" (Harry, Klingner & Cramer, 2007, p. 7). This underscores the importance of families and their role as decision makers and the potential impact upon the child.

**The Perspective of African American Students within Special Education**

To date, there appears to be a small element of the professional literature that describes the nature of African American students' participation in the special education decision-making process. Even more limited are the perspectives that describe how such students view their own level of preparedness to participate fully in the process.

With development of models that foster student self-determination in planning their educational goals (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Zhang & Benz, 2006) and the idea that special education planning should be "person-centered" vs. "system-centered" (Meadan, Shelden, Appel, & DeGrazia, 2010) the emphasis continues to shift toward students sharing in the decision-making process. As Van Dycke, Martin, and Lovett (2006) suggest, educators involved in the IEP process and the planning of IEP meetings, should help students move from the role of passive participants, to communicating actively and effectively ideas that represent their educational interests, preferences, and needs. This involves developing a set of questions and criteria that address whether students are aware of the scope and magnitude of IEP planning and whether they are invited to become fully involved at an early age where deemed appropriate.

Education in general, and specifically special education, is also slowly shifting toward an approach of defining and meeting the needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse learners with exceptionalities or CLDE learners (Ford, 2012; Hart,

2009; Utley, 2011). With the abrogation of potentially exclusionary terms that continue to exist in some educational contexts in relation to CLDE learners and their families such as "at risk" and "disadvantaged" the shift continues to push the discussion forward. A slow, but more central focus, moves to understand the most significant needs of students. This begins with a strong push for culturally relevant teaching and pedagogical practice that moves students toward academic success, cultural competency, self-empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ideally, students have the tools and the resources to participate in their own learning and engage in the decisions that affect their learning across a wide spectrum.

In relation to special education planning, the IEP process can be tailored on multiple levels. These include finding ways to make families feel invited, providing clear and well-thought out channels of information prior to IEP meetings, and essentially "demystify" language and other procedural matters that traditionally have created barriers for families to come to the process fully informed (Lo, 2012). This helps to strengthen the position of the family and provide resources that otherwise may not be available or even offered. On some levels, it attempts to address a need where families may feel disenfranchised or disconnected from a school community or unequipped to negotiate language and other procedural barriers.

Mclaughlin (2010) also discusses the notion of educational equity for students with disabilities and the tensions that exist between K-12 educational policy and policy that governs and drives special education and the outcomes for students with disabilities. An important consideration is that educational equity is closely tied to four overarching goals stemming from disability rights. These include individualization, which relates to

equal opportunity, self-determination, economic self-sufficiency, and living independently. These are necessary and important tenets for guiding students through the special education decision-making process. They are also tenets that are inextricably tied to the rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate education and to basic civil rights that ensure access to education not driven by discriminatory practices and policies.

**The Perspective of African American Parents within Special Education**

As recognized and mandated by IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004) parents play a vital role in determining what happens in relation to their children who are assessed and placed into special education. The level of involvement by families is a critical piece to ensuring that decisions are aligned to the needs of the student. Much of the literature has stemmed from perspectives which address aspects of parental involvement in general (Hoover Dempsey & Sandler,1995;1997), the overall level of participation and involvement patterns of minority parents in education, including that of African American parents (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004; Fields-Smith, 2005;Troutman, 2001) and patterns of involvement in special education (Harrison & Arnold, 1995). Some of the research has also examined the perceptions of African American families toward special education services and delivery (e.g. Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Williams, 2007; Zionts, Zionts, Harrison & Bellinger, 2003). These works provide a glimpse of how parent perspective is interweaved into special education and helps to underscore the importance of parent perspective on multiple levels in a variety of areas. One particular study which relates parent perspective in terms of decision making is that of Hess, Molina, and Kozleski (2006). This work presents a defined focus that includes "parent

voice" in relation to their roles as advocates in the special education decision-making process. This work is especially useful for illuminating the role of the parent and the critical intersection within the decision-making process. Few studies, however, have extended this same perspective to include African American students within the context of general education or specifically in relation to special education.

## Disability Theory

Disability Theory extends from Disability Studies, which is a field that has come about principally since the mid-1980's. Its central tenets encompass an understanding of disability among all cultures, increasing awareness of experiences of persons with and without disabilities, and advocating for social change. Largely, the study of disability within this framework is defined as social, foundational, interdisciplinary, and participatory (Ferguson, & Nusbaum, 2012). Essentially, within this framework, disability shifts from being a condition that must merely be treated to being a social consideration that involves participation from the whole person and distinctive aspects of society and the culture connected to the person. The importance of Disability Theory is that it allows for a focus upon the human aspects or human experience of disability. More importantly, it incrementally has allowed for terms that lean toward "ability" to take emphasis over terms traditionally viewed as placing stronger emphasis on "dis/ability", deficiency or a model of deficit.

For African American students and their families, the struggle has been long to come to special education decision making as equalized partners in the process (Fierros & Conroy, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Ruppar & Goffney, 2011). Therefore, it is critical to enter into the discussion of decision making

with a way of framing and understanding the position of students and parents before decision making ever takes place. Consider, for example, what might be a child's first notion of him/herself in terms of being able/disabled? How does a student/parent negotiate labels of deficit or deficiency, particularly when coupled with labels attached to race or other marginalizing conditions? These are important considerations, and for this study, Disability Theory, allows for addressing these considerations and others in relation to what might be important to the student who comes to the decision-making process with the idea that s/he has to push past a label that may potentially become stigmatizing for the individual.

When looking at ability/dis/ability and how certain aspects of power and negotiation may come into play when decision making takes place, it is important to note that some aspects of Disability Theory intersect with Critical Race Theory. There are for example, aspects of race where persons who are marginalized are looked upon as different based on what are considered arbitrary or normative standards such as "white/middle-class" being the standard for race or "physically/mentally/able-bodied" being the standard for all abilities. Liasidou (2013) contends there are places where the study of disability and Critical Race Theory both intersect and diverge. An example where the theories intersect is the notion that "whiteness" is often associated with favorable positions such as "school achievement" and "intelligence" in contrast to the negative attributes associated with "blackness" such as "gangs" and lower socio-economic status. Similarly, the able-bodied/disabled encounter the same contrasts in associations that polarize their experiences within society (p.727). This becomes a question of how each situation is negotiated and what positions of power come into play

for those who are not considered a part of the "norm." African American students with exceptionalities may effectively encounter the experience of a dual-diagnosis. This means that not only must they contend with the diagnosis of a disability, but they must also contend with the social implications connected to race/ability/difference. As the student moves through school, these are real issues within the classroom as race/ability/difference become a matter of how the student encounters relationships, student-to-teacher, and peer-to-peer.

## Critical Race Theory

To further the discussion of disproportionate representation in special education, it is necessary to review the basis of Critical Race Theory (CRT). During the 1970's, CRT came about principally thorough the work of legal scholars such as Derrick Bell. Though originally entrenched in the legal system and associated with Critical Legal Studies (CLS), Critical Race Theory encompassed the following basic tenets: 1) white culture or white privilege as the invisible norm by which other races are measured 2) understanding the social construction of racism and the need for an inclusive worldview to achieve social justice 3) valuing the story telling of people of color as victims of oppression but recognizing their unique perspective and voice 4) employing a variety of disciplines of discourse and dialogue to analyze relationships of race 5) recognizing the systemic nature of racism and that the law is positioned to privilege whites and to marginalize those who are part of the minority (Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglas, 2013). It is both an important theory to help illuminate particular elements of this study and an important piece to aid in promoting understanding the importance of the voices that participate in the storytelling.

Critical Race Theory has rested upon these tenets for many years. Although as a movement it has shifted and changed, effectively moving into two camps of "realists" and "idealists" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), CRT as theory continues to be situated within this basic context as race and racism remain viable elements of concern for discussion. Bell, along with other legal scholars of the time, argued with respect to the permanence of racism within our American society. The basis of these tenets essentially emerged as a call to action. Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and the resulting civil rights legislation and litigation, CRT set forth the acknowledgement that people of color were part of the oppressed and encouraged forward movement as related to issues of empowerment of those typically part of the marginalized group. People of color were charged with recognizing the systemic nature of racism and what were considered veiled attempts at creating a more equitable situations for the marginalized, such as through the 1950's desegregation of American schools. Bell argued, for example, that the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* was driven by the economic times and was an attempt to satisfy the interests of the elite white over the interests of those who would be seemingly best served by school desegregation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Though a powerful statement, it challenged the status quo in what was an important time for both the nation's civil rights movement and for the American educational system. It is today a consideration to take up as we keep in the forefront the tenable nature of our educational system in the education of students of color and students with exceptional abilities. Also, as we continue to confront issue of disproportionate representation in special education, it is critical to keep the history of our nation's schooling in the nexus of the discussion.

Critical Race Theory, then, offers a context for examining and discussing the effects of race and racism from the most current and relevant vantage point for students who are educated in our schools today. Through the groundwork of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) CRT has challenged and questioned the effects of structural and institutional racism within American schooling and its effects particularly upon students of color. Critical Race Theory frames the discussion of how inequity continues within our school systems, across decades, i.e. as with Bell's contention, racism is yet a part of American life, and it is a systemic part of how children continue to be educated. One critical aspect of CRT is that it offers tools for bringing forth "counterstories" or "counternarratives" which are effective for exposing the hidden behaviors which are often noted as "microagressions" within cultures. As noted by, Sue, Capudulipo, and Holder (2008) particular verbal, environmental, and behavioral indignities towards Black Americans, or racial microagressions, relate to a dynamic interchange between perpetrator and recipient that amount to unconscious racism. Dunbar (2006) further notes that these types of dynamics are the "marginalizing dynamics within social institutions as the legal system, educational system, and social welfare system" (p. 113). The dynamics of microaggrssions or such hidden behaviors are certainly dynamics that exist within the systems where African American students with disabilities and their families find the need to negotiate on a regular basis. If their stories are to be told, they must be told with the most careful consideration to race, equity, schooling, ability, and other dynamics that come into play across the histories of people who must not be marginalized further into the invisible spaces of disconnected systems and institutions.

Whether from the perspective of the "realist" or "idealist", CRT makes relevant to this study and discussion the realities of the 21st century, particularly as they relate to the education of our children. First, racism is still a very real part of our American society and pervades many contexts, including our educational systems. Secondly, the storytelling and the stories of the participants are relevant to what will be added to the context of what society may come to understand about the experiences of people who come from the realm of the "oppressed" or "marginalized." What is gained from the potential actualization of empowerment raises the level of awareness for future indicators of how the American system of education and special education might be transformed on some level. In order to examine race in relation to special education, it is potentially important to have a framework that allows for what is known as a "advocacy/participatory worldview." One caution is that in providing voice for participants that they are not further marginalized but are allowed opportunity to become aware of an agenda that advances the improvement of their lives (Creswell, p.9). It is indeed important to create space for the voices of those who choose to contribute to and actively participate in adding to the existing body of knowledge related to decision making in special education. For African American families, undoubtedly, those voices have been muted or silenced for much too long.

Bell's notion was that it was possible to convince "reasonable people" of one's own point of view through the telling of stories. The contention was more so that those on the "bottom" were the voices that needed to emerge the most. Bell (1992) contented that "through fiction, personal experience, and the stories of people on the bottom illustrates how race and racism continue to dominate our society"(p. 144). It is through

this study that the intent is to allow participants to share their narratives as they bring forth their perspectives of their roles in the special education decision-making process.

## Summary

The complexities of educational decision-making and its relation to special education issues currently in the forefront clearly call for additional insights into the many variables which drive systems such as these. Invariably, students may benefit from the opportunity to tell their stories and to share their experiences. In relation to the topic of special education decision-making, Hess, Molina, and Kozleski (2006) state

> Given the multiple choices that families must make around the education of their child with special needs, it is critical that families are educated about their rights and offered guidance and support as they make these difficult decisions. (p. 150)

The student, too, is a critical component of the family system, and it is increasingly important to focus on the student's role when decisions are made that impact the student. As many African American students transition into college, the extended effects of the decision making process become an important issue of consideration for those who have transitioned from K-12 special education services. In Chapter Three I will address the methodology and framework for the study, describe participants and the research setting, and outline characteristics of the study's trustworthiness.

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# CHAPTER III

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) "narrative inquiry is a process of learning to think narratively, to attend to lives as lived narratively, and to position inquiries within a metaphorical, three-dimensional space (p. 120). The dimensions include temporality, which translates into the continuity of the inquiry, personal or social, also seen as interactions that occur, and place or situations where the inquiry occurs. This extends to how a study addresses, balances and focuses on matters of temporality or time, the personal or the social and the physical spaces and places where inquiry takes place. Part of the three dimensional space is attending to "internal conditions such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions " (p. 50). As Clandinin and Connelly further explain, in perspective, the entire process involves being positioned to ask questions, take notes, interpret findings, and attend to carefully to each dimension, presenting research that possibly addresses the past, present and future aspects of an event.

### The Role of Narrative: "Why Narrative?"

The challenge is also to answer the question "Why narrative?" One answer, as offered by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) is "Because experience." (p. 50). In choosing

narrative my belief in approaching the study is that within the stories of the participants (students and parents) potentially lies information that has not before been spoken, about disability, about race, about equitability and about the complexities of how the elements are intertwined or related. As Khalifa, Dunbar, and Douglas (2013) posit "storytelling is a methodology and practice that allows marginalized peoples to articulate their own realities in dignified, wholesome, and culturally nuanced ways" (p. 494). One factor of this method relates to allowing participants to provide first-hand knowledge about the topic of focus through participant narratives (or stories) on issues related to this research. For this study, participants shared their experiences about special education and the special education decision-making process through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The questions central to this study were 1) How do African American college students who have transitioned from high school special education services perceive their preparation to participate in the special education decision-making process? and 2) How do African American college students who have transitioned from high school special education services perceive their roles as partners in referral, identification, assessment, and placement into special education?

The overall impetus for these questions rests in understanding the nature of these particular issues: 1) There is overwhelming evidence that disproportionate placement of African American children exists. 2) There is little evidence about student involvement in the placement process. 3) There are good reasons to believe that school processes and other structures may inhibit and/ or fail to facilitate African American student involvement in the placement process. 4) Because of these possibilities and the fact that so little is known about African American student involvement in the placement process,

this study is designed to address these areas. Therefore, the specific focus upon African American students within this decision-making process lends to a study that draws from the information students have to contribute to the overall subject.

## The Research Setting

On any given day, on any one campus of Central City (CC) is a mixture of students who bring different life experiences to the campus environment. Central City is a multi-campus college with a sprawling population of students. The large metropolitan area of a Midwestern U.S. city creates the backdrop for the college and each campus location boasts its own unique set of characteristics that make up the campus atmosphere and student population. Although in the larger context, students have opportunity to connect to the local campus environment through various student services and organizations, students also travel and interact from campus to campus. This has its own nuances and characteristics in terms of how one might define the body of students who make up the population of CC College based on observation alone. There are characteristics that make the population appear very static and characteristics that make the population appear very fluid, dependent upon the moment. For example, there is no campus housing connected to the multi-campus system. Therefore, students must commute to the various campuses. This poses a great challenge for many students who sometimes must travel from campus to campus to accommodate class schedules and other obligations. A quick survey of the various campuses might give one a different picture of how students negotiate the challenges of urban versus suburban, wide-open versus concrete-laden compact spaces. In total, Central City serves nearly 30,000 students, with approximately 10 percent of the students identifying as African American.

I also visited Park District to gather stories from the parent participants. Park District is a large independent school district situated within the metropolitan area of a Midwestern U.S. city. The locale is both urban and rural mixture. The sprawling, bustling highway that parallels the school grounds seems an intrusive obstruction that offers a startling reminder of its urban characteristics. However, a small row of buildings, which include the administration building, the elementary, middle, and high school buildings, nestled within a quiet residential neighborhood, offers a slightly different, even more personal view of the school district and of the community.

It does not take long to observe that Park District is a community. Many of the surrounding homes are brick or stone with small front or side yards. Some have fences and some do not. Surrounding streets are lined by local businesses or churches that feed into what seems to be the daily flow of the neighborhood: People walking, talking, moving about, and many cross the street on foot or drive to the front entrance of the school building to drop off or to pick up children from the front entrance of the school. It is both bustling but settled at the same time. The parent participants live and work within the community that surrounds the school district, and many of them were once themselves students within the district. Of the nearly 37,000 students that Park District serves, approximately 32 percent are African American.

As an "outside observer" (which is what I determined myself to be on my initial visit) I walked into the front entrance of the elementary school building for the first time and saw a group of people who from my observation had gathered in a place that appeared to be their own. The walls and floors were painted in muted colors, so they were not immediately inviting or appealing to the eye. From my immediate point of view, it

was not a space readily marked, identified or characterized by race, ethnicity, class, or ability. Many things about Park District, including the physical appearance of the buildings and structures, seem very uniform and standard. There was, though, a distinctive atmosphere. Parents and caregivers, which included administrators and office staff, hustled and herded children to their perspective classrooms in the early morning rush like a well-oiled machine. Everyone moved within her or his own time and space and then—quiet and calm. The day was about to begin for Park District.

**Participants**

Participants were African American college students who had transitioned from special education services during K-12 schooling. Additional participants included parents of school-aged children (elementary to middle school) identified with a disability and placed for special education services in the category of learning disabled (LD) emotional disturbance/ behavior disorder (EB/BD) or mental retardation/ intellectual disabilities (MR/ID) as recognized by IDEA. The student participants had received special education services during K-12 schooling for one of the specified disabilities, learning disabilities (LD) mental retardation or intellectual disabilities (MR/ID) or emotional/behavioral disorders (ED/BD). Additionally, the students had transitioned into college and had taken college courses or were enrolled in college courses during the time of xinitial interviews. The parent participants who agreed to be interviewed either had a child with a current Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place or the child had an Individualized Education Plan in place within the year prior to being interviewed for the study. Each child was receiving special education services for one of the specified disabilities (LD, ED/BD, MR).

## Selection of Participants

In order to identify participants for the parent interviews, I first felt I needed to visit the community and school district. I had prior knowledge of the school system and the surrounding community, but I made at least three initial visits to the school setting and talked informally with school personnel about the school and the surrounding community. This was an important piece to cultivating a relationship of trust with those who were a part of the school community. Ultimately, I felt that I needed to establish some level of visibility before speaking with the parents as well. This, in my view, was important and would take time.

I used purposive sampling to identify participants for the study. Four students and six parents participated in this study. Initially, I distributed flyers describing the details and purpose of the study to the local school setting, and within the community, including various local churches and family and student-centered groups (such as sports groups) local organizations, and agencies that the families might encounter.

To identify participants for the student interviews, I distributed information flyers mainly to the local college setting, concentrating on areas where students were most likely to gather such as student life or student activities areas. I was more familiar with areas where students gathered as I had spent a significant amount of time in the local community. All potential participants were able to make contact with me to express their initial interest and to ask any questions they had related to the study. We then discussed and arranged an agreed upon date, time, and location for the face-to-face interview.

## Framework for the Study

### Disability Theory

I chose to use the lens of disability theory within the transformative research paradigm. Transformative research provides a basis for exploring similarities in the beliefs associated with research approaches, which include critical theory, critical race theory, culturally responsive and other approaches (Mertens, 2009). As this type of research extends beyond these basic beliefs, it identifies "relevant dimensions of diversity and their accompanying relation to discrimination and oppression in the world." It is careful to include those typically excluded or marginalized within society based "dimensions of diversity that have been historically associated with discrimination" including race/ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, or disability (p. 14). Additionally, Mertens (2005) asserts that the transformative paradigm is not represented by a unified body of literature. However, there are four common characteristics of the transformative paradigm outlined by Mertens as follows:

1. It places central importance on the lives and experiences of the diverse groups that,

   traditionally, have been marginalized (i.e. women, minorities, and persons with disabilities).
2. It analyzes how and why inequities based on gender, race or ethnicity, disability,

   sexual orientation, and socioeconomic classes are reflected in asymmetrical social action.

3. It examines how results of social inquiry on inequities are linked to political and social action.
4. It uses a transformative theory to develop the program theory and the research approach. (p. 23)

Disability theory as an analytic framework potentially positions the researcher through data analysis and interpretation to view disability from a vantage point of cultural richness versus that of deficiency. Mertens (2009) defines this as a "transformative experience" for the researcher when a shift occurs from the "problematic" or "exotic curiosities" attached to disability to the potentially "salient characteristics' embedded within disability as a culture or community" (p. 289). The researcher may have opportunity to experience a shift in perspective through the process and view other aspects of disability as ability as it relates to cultural details which might emerge. This perspective is important as it allows the researcher access to what possibilities might emerge during the research process, particularly in terms of exploring and gaining understanding of the cultural aspects related to special education.

Special education, and the practices associated with special education are often traditionally situated within what is known as the "medical model." This model focuses centrally upon disability as a "condition" that must be "treated" and attended to and shifts the emphasis away from the human factor. An emphasis towards the individual and towards "ability" ostensibly shifts the focus upon the needs associated with the person versus the condition and simple treatment of a condition. This does, however, open up larger discussions that involve the human condition and how it intersects with other aspects relevant to special education including race and ability.

## Disability and Race

Recent discussion within the literature has positioned ability and race within the framework of Disability Critical Race Theory, or *DisCrit*. The scope of the discussion explores the dynamics of Critical Race Theory as it intersects with Disability Studies. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013, p. 11) relate in their analysis particular tenets of Disability Critical Race Theory. Some of these include 1) focus on ways abelism and racism forces act interdependently in neutralized and invisible ways 2) places value on multidimensional identities of race, class, dis/ability 3) notes both the social construction and labeling effects of race and ability 4) privileges the voices of populations traditionally marginalized within the research 5) notes how historical and legal aspects of dis/ability and race have served to deny rights of citizens. This theory allows an intensive gaze into special education from multiple perspectives that explores race and ability and their impact upon those served or perhaps underserved by special education as a system. It also gives entrance into how each, race and ability, are defined within the context of special education. This is important as traditionally such contexts have taken on limited discussion or have found a very streamlined perspective. This may limit the focus of discussion and any potential benefits or outcomes of exploring race and ability from diverse perspectives.

## Data Collection and Data Analysis: Semi-Structured Interviews

An initial set of open-ended questions was developed based on current literature relating to the experiences and perceptions of African American families in general. Specifically, these initial questions are based on studies conducted by Dickson and

Diapola (1980) and Vaughn, Bos, Harrell and Laskey (1988) on patterns of participation in the placement and IEP development process.

I conducted forty-five minute to one-hour face-to-face interviews with each participant. Extensive field notes and observation were used to record participant responses during the interview. The protocol consisted of eight interview questions and each participant was asked the same set of questions. During the interview, follow up questions were asked, as needed, to gather additional information or clarification from the participant.

Each participant was allowed to choose the time and place for the interview, wherever s/he felt most comfortable. All of the student participants expressed that they felt more comfortable meeting on campus or near campus and that it was more convenient either due to a work or class schedule. I was able to secure private rooms to conduct the interviews. Interviews with parent participants took place at locations near the school or at school at the parent's request. On one occasion a parent asked to meet in the back area of the school library. It appeared that the parents felt most comfortable meeting in and around the school grounds and community. Many of them expressed a desire to meet before or after a time when a child would be dropped off or picked up from school. It also seemed that the school space itself was convenient in proximity and in the general atmosphere that it provided in terms of being a familiar space. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. A participant was allowed to talk longer than the one hour if s/he wanted to express additional information about a question or questions.

Data analysis consists of reviewing typed transcripts of interviews and field notes to look for emerging themes and coding themes. The process for analysis includes a

series of steps, adapted from Mertens' process (2009, p. 292). Step 1 involves data preparation during which I transcribe all interviews from student and parent participants. I have chosen to do my own transcriptions from the one-to-one interviews, field notes, and memos. Step 2 and 3 include data exploration and data reduction where I read through data to analyze and tease out meanings. I begin coding as themes emerge. Mertens relates this as an exploration of the data which reduces from an overwhelming pile of transcripts into a meaningful depiction of the phenomenon under study. Step 4 of data analysis involves Interpretation. Here I continue coding and interpretation in the form of summarizing main ideas, highlighting quotes, testing codes, themes, and interpretations.

## Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study contributes to "intellectual inquiry" that has an "impact on human knowledge." Additionally, the inquiry guarantees a measure of credibility, allows application by its intended audience, and also allows its audience to check on its findings (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 28). As "valid inquiry" it must further demonstrate its truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgment to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions" (p. 29). The whole of these characteristics include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and how they are demonstrated within a particular study.

### Credibility

The credibility or "truth value" of a study relates to the internal validity also seen as a "relationship between the data of an inquiry and the phenomena those data represent

(Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, p 30). Participants should have opportunity to review and validate what has been collected as representative of "truth."

**Transferability**

Transferability is also known as generalizability. This speaks to how findings might be applied in other contexts. Mertens (2005) contends that with transferability the researcher takes on the responsibility to provide sufficient detail for the reader to understand time, place, context and culture, termed as "thick description" (p. 256). However, it is the reader's responsibility to make assessments based on the details provided by the researcher.

**Dependability**

To demonstrate dependability a study presents reliability and consistency in that replication with the same or similar participants and context would produce similar findings. Additionally dependability relates to the accuracy, stability, and predictability of a study and the assumption that a replication of a study under similar conditions would yield similar outcomes. A dependability audit is one means by which a researcher provides an account of research processes which document how the study was conducted. These might include field notes and interview notes and other essential documentation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the characteristic of objectivity that ensures that the research and research methodology serve to guard against researcher biases. Additionally, the work is "open to public scrutiny" and "replicable." (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 34).

For this study, the particular characteristics of credibility (internal validity) transferability (generalizability) dependability (reliability) and confimalibity (objectivity) are represented in Table 3. 1.

Table 3.1 Table of Trustworthiness

| **Characteristic** | **Researcher Actions Completed** |
|---|---|
| Credibility (internal validity/truth value) | Triangulation, Peer Debriefing, Member Check |
| Transferability (external validity/applicability) | Purposive Sampling<br>Description of study (methodology, setting) |
| Dependability (reliability/consistency) | Dependability Audit<br>Field Notes |
| Confirmability (objectivity/neutrality) | Confirmability Audit<br>Field Notes |

## Summary

For some, special education is a tenuous space, meaning that the very act of being identified and placed into special education can create a dynamic line of demarcation. At the moment of identification for special education, a student may be shifted into a "label" or category (i.e., learning disabled, special needs, etc.) that caries with it a host of implications for future outcomes. It may also carry with it a point where student voice is potentially either activated or goes silent. Perception then becomes an important aspect of the stories that students may or may not have opportunity to share along the way. In Chapter IV, I present a snapshot of the participants and a glimpse of their perceptions.

# CHAPTER IV

## PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS

### (The Storytellers)

"Storytelling is a methodology and practice that allows marginalized peoples to articulate their own realities in dignified, wholesome, and culturally nuanced ways" (Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglas, 2013, p. 494).

The ten stories presented here are the perceptions of both African American students and parents I interviewed for this study. The first four stories are from the perspectives of students, Tara, Melvin, Sunny, and Will, who currently attend the same college, Central City Community College. Each student brings experiences from K-12 schooling, thoughts on life with a disability, and their experiences of the special education decision-making process. The next section includes six stories from the perspectives of parents, Lisa, Maxine, Alicia and Warren, Lorraine, Rita, and Isaac. These are the parents of children enrolled in one district (Park District) who share their most current experiences of the special education decision-making process. Of the parents I interviewed, the children were either currently on an IEP or had been on an IEP within the last school year. The researcher's intent has been to combine the perspectives of adult students with identified disabilities as they negotiate their lives experiences as community college students with the perspectives of parents of children with identified

disabilities who are currently within the K-12 system.

All participants talk about their experiences in relation to schooling, to special education, and to the special education decision-making process. As we speak, some seem very formal, in that they are polite and to the point. Others are just as polite, but appear less informal during our conversations. This shows up either in their relaxed postures, leaning back in their chairs, or taking time to respond to questions and seeming to have a more relaxed tone or relaxed or smiling facial expression throughout the interview. One thing I have chosen is not to correct the grammar of direct quotes from participants included here. I felt this necessary to best represent each participant's story as related to me during the interview.

The student participants I spoke with typically found it more convenient to meet on campus. With the exception of Sunny, I had not met any of the students before scheduling an interview. Sunny was very active on her local campus and had participated in several on-campus activities. I knew very little about the activities of the other students. Tara, Melvin, Sunny, and, Will each noted a particular disability for which she/he had been identified or placed for special education services during K-12 schooling. All have elected to continue receiving disability-related services through the local college campus.

I travelled to Park District to meet with the parents individually as each interview date was scheduled. My contact with the parents was limited to brief telephone conversations prior to our face-to-face interviews. I did not know any of the Park District parents before sitting down to interview them. I felt our face-to-face conversation was the only opportunity I had to get to know each parent. They were all open to speaking about

their experiences and agreed to meet as scheduled. One thing I noticed is that most of the parents were very familiar with the Park District school grounds, as many of them had attended there as children. So they seemed to be at ease with the school surroundings and chose to meet at a school library, an art room, or a community room in one of the district buildings. I begin here with what the student participants had to share.

**Student Perceptions**

As the student participants talked, one by one, what each spoke became more than simple responses to a set of questions. What follow here are the student perceptions. Although the words capture smaller moments of what the participants have spoken, the intent has been to allow the stories to take shape and to allow each participant voice to emerge, providing a bigger picture of each participant's experience.

### Tara

### On the Outside

"I did more listening than talking. I don't know. I just listened to everybody."

Tara admits that her love for animals and children has added to her desire to study teaching or veterinary medicine. Tara shares little about her past, but does share that her return to school is in pursuit of a long time dream. Part of that dream includes simply returning to school to pursue a degree. This is an important aspect of Tara's life as she lives with an intellectual disability. At this point, though, Tara has not chosen a major. Her face becomes animated as she speaks of being able to work with children, "I love working with children! I really want my teaching degree. I was a sub teacher and I volunteered at a school for a year with children." Tara is in her late 20's, is pursuing her second year of college, and explains how her immediate family has influenced the choice

to return to school and complete a degree, "What inspired me was my late Aunt. She loved kids like I do too." Tara's family is important to her. She has immediate family that she sees often and spends time with, and other family, cousins, aunts, and uncles, whom she sees less often. "I have other family members that are in school, but they live out of state, Arkansas, Maryland. I'll probably be like my aunt, how she loved to read and write."

Tara and I meet on a late afternoon following one of her classes. She reminds me, "I got just a little time to talk." I thank her for meeting with me, and she seems at ease as she shares informally about her classes that day. She talks about enjoying her classes which includes a reading course, that Tara particularly likes, and being able to live and work independently. Although she is close to her family, Tara works hard at being able to manage her own time. Her independence seems to be something she values and works to maintain, particularly as she attends college. Tara and I had not known each other prior to our initial interview. Tara had received an information flyer on the local campus where she attends classes. I had spoken to Tara by phone briefly to arrange our first meeting a week prior, but Tara called to reschedule the meeting for a later date. Tara asks to meet at a time and place that would fit her afternoon class schedule. We talk in an empty classroom, not far from Tara's last class for the day, to begin our interview. Tara is pleasant, often smiling. She does, however, remind me periodically, we have one hour to talk. I sense that punctuality matters a great deal to Tara. During our interview, one thing I observe is that Tara has moments where she speaks at a quick pace. Some of her words are cut short and staccato-like. Occasionally, she leans into the table where she sits and she looks at me, pauses, and smiles. In those instances it seems that Tara is placing more

emphasis on her words. It also seems she is pacing herself and thinking more about each word as she speaks. We continue our conversation and Tara talks more about her family, particularly about her aunt, her aunt's passing, and how much her influence has meant to her continuing to move forward in her education and her life.

Tara mentions often that being in school is her first priority and talks about the pursuit of her goals and her degree. She also wonders about time being a factor in getting to her goals:

> I'm almost 30, so I decided to come to college. Time is wasting and I coulda' been a teacher if I wouldna' waited so long. I can't believe I waited this long. It's good I'm in school. It's been ten years since I been in a classroom. A lot of people weren't telling me about programs like the teaching grant. I know [this school] has a lot of them I want to apply for.

Tara's thoughts on her own abilities are that "I'm very slow at reading. I want to catch up on my reading, and math and writing and spelling." In response to how she has seen her own role in IEP meetings as a child, she thinks back and explains, "I'm not really the one making the decisions." Tara recalls in particular:

> I wasn't in the classroom. My momma was. I mighta' went to a few. I don't remember. They talked about how I was behaving, what my grades were, what would be best for me, and that was it. I don't know. I just listen to everybody. I did more listening than talking.

Tara's recollections are that she was the receiver of information. She remembers being given information from teachers, from counselors, from school personnel, but she recounts little about contributing to conversations in school IEP meetings. These were the

times, according to Tara, spent in "the computer classroom" while others talked about her behavior.

## Melvin

### Make them a Lie

"One or two teachers tell you not amount to nothin'."

Melvin had gained a reputation in the local campus community as being a "snazzy dresser." Many of his peers had talked about his attention to detail in his dress. Some quipped that most days he arrives to campus with suit and tie, making sure that his shoes are polished to what some would call a respectable "spit shine." The day we meet, Melvin is dressed casually in a canary yellow running suit and dark tennis shoes. We meet in the early morning hours near the close of the school spring semester. Our meeting takes place in a quiet study area on the campus where Melvin attends classes. Near the room is a computer lab that normally is bustling with activity, but today it sits fairly empty since most students have gone for the semester break. Melvin and I sit across from one another at a small table. The quiet makes it easy for us to talk without the interruption of noise and distraction that normally would be heard from the surrounding activity. Melvin shares a bit about his college experience. Melvin had returned to college to pursue his degree after being out of school for many years. He admits that he bucks at the label of "non-traditional" student or being a returning student who is significantly older than most other students on the campus where he attends classes. "Most people say 'cause I say 'no ma'am' or "yes ma'am' I'm old school. I just think that's polite." As we speak, I note that Melvin speaks confidently but quietly, often speaking in a low tone of voice. Melvin is in his mid-50's. He remembers much about what school was like for

him growing up as a child. Most striking to Melvin is his experience of his school placement, as Melvin explains his thoughts on what he viewed as lack of attention by school personnel to address his academic needs, "In grade eight no effort to make accommodations." Melvin continues, "There were 'slow classes' but I was not slow enough to go into those classes. I was diagnosed through my mother recognizing the symptoms and the doctor diagnosed me." Melvin attributes his experience to "no accommodations" and "they really didn't care" referring to his thoughts on how lack of action by the school factored into his placement and the resulting relationship he had with school personnel. He adds that his diagnosis included E/BD (an emotional/behavioral disorder) and bouts with depression. In his early years of school, Melvin struggled with overcoming the perceptions of teachers and what this meant for his future decisions:

> I had good teachers. One or two put you down, like you never amount to anything. I said I make them a lie. I got my BSN in nursing. I worked 13 years in drug treatment. I got tired of that. One or two teachers tell you you not amount to nothing. After class when you go home they never had teachers help you. You had to go to the library. Teachers were all for they-selves *[sic]*. They were strict. Had to sit in one place. You had to sit out three days for talking in school. Back then if you got in trouble they put you out of school.

Melvin is from what is considered an "historically black town" and he notes that life was dramatically different for him growing up. He notes what it was like for him to attend school during his middle and high school years:

> Where I went to school there were riots, integration, police. No sitting together. We sat separately. We had teachers of the same race, the blacks for the black

> students, but no information on how to get to college. [Melvin's voice trails off and he speaks a bit more softly.] Out of 250 in my high school class fifteen black people graduated. Today I see the same type of prejudice as in the 1970's.

Melvin opens up more about his experience and what he felt he contributed to making decisions about his early education and the disconnection that he experienced:

> Meeting with teachers, it was aggravating, it made me mad. They talked down like I was dumb. If you asked a question, they didn't want to answer. They tell you to mind your business and do what I say. It was very frustrating. They want you to do what they tell you to do. College though they know how many kids in class. They did not know kids' names. Did not take the time to know you. You had to do homework. They just sit back, read their papers, eat their apples and oranges. You had to figure out what things were. It was more paperwork. They never had where we talk to each other.

Through this, Melvin stated he understood that he needed to "push forward." Melvin notes this came from "teachers telling me I wasn't gonna' amount to anything." He considers that being the first in his immediate family to get a degree makes him responsible for others: "I got a cousin who got his degree. He's not trying to do anything. He just sits at home. He just won't do anything with his degree. I tried to talk to him. It went in one ear."

## Sunny

## Looking Ahead

"Find ways to solve it"

"In school I thought I was stupid." A young, 19-year old woman sits before me on an unusually cool spring day. This was not my first time meeting Sunny. I had seen her occasionally around the campus community and she always appeared upbeat and pleasant. So, I am caught a bit off guard by her initial comments to the question of how she came to be placed into special education. A frown now consumes her face.

Ten minutes earlier, she had breezed into the room, a ringing cell phone in one hand, a set of books in another hand. Sunny's mother calls to remind her of an appointment Sunny has scheduled for the afternoon. Sunny catches her breath, but is smiling, "Man! I need a secretary…something." We talk for a while about her plans for that day and Sunny's pace seems to shift a bit. Sunny shares her experience as we sit to talk.

Sunny, who notes being diagnosed with a specific learning disability, is nearing the end of her second year of college. "I thought…why can't I be like other students? I thought I was slower. I was upset. I saw other people with disabilities and in wheel chairs and thought Why can't my teachers take time with me?" Sunny is tall and wears her hair in long, loose, curls that surround her face. She brushes a stray curl aside and continues her thoughts:

> Education of course is important. Doing well in classes and also knowing other help is out there with my classes. It should not be any excuse with my challenge. I have to go out to get help from instructors. I have improved day by day. Having a

> great time management, staying focused, being prepared, being on time for classes, be prepared, that's important.

To Sunny, her primary struggle has been in challenging herself to do better, but she recognizes specific areas where she feels she has consistently struggled the most. "The only trouble I had was with English. It was not steady. I had to adjust learning more and get help with English." Sunny recounts, in particular, what being placed into special education translated into for her early on in her schooling:

> When I started second grade going into third grade I know my English teacher noticed my writing, some of the reading. I always would go off from the main point. She had noticed me constantly doing this. She had told my parents this was a pattern. I needed support and additional help with my learning. I remember her constantly saying it was a pattern. My mentality was different from other students. They had a program. I threw a fit. I remember that. I remember her always saying it was a pattern with my learning. She told my parents how I was always going off with reading and English. I really can't remember. That's what I remember…she pinpointed [referring to the teacher noticing Sunny's struggles in the classroom.]

This early time in Sunny's life seemed to her the time she initially recognized being "different" and "separated" from her peers. The pronouncement that she felt "stupid" was her own assessment of how she somehow stood out. Sunny recalls that "she" [the teacher] pinpointed the concerns about Sunny's learning. Sunny notes that she was subsequently placed for special education services during this time.

## Will

### Pressing Through

"You can study your butt off, but never know what you're gonna' make."

When I first spoke to Will in person, he apologized for having missed our first meeting, "I completely slept through my alarm!" On the day that we finally did meet, he had come immediately from working the night shift at a local hospital, "Usually, I don't go to sleep if I know I have to be somewhere." He lifts a hand to catch a quick yawn. Will is tall, broad shouldered, and comes dressed comfortably in dark green hospital scrubs. His towering figure slumps down in a black leather seat near the entrance of the student lounge where we had arranged to meet that day, Will is obviously fatigued, but he manages a hearty laugh when I ask him about his schedule, "I drink a l-o-o-ot of coffee!"

Will is completing the nursing program at Central City and desires to continue his studies at a four-year university. He notes that much of his early schooling was spent out of state. He talks of his fear of being left behind, and mentions a "shame not wanting my mom to be disappointed." He talks of not wanting to be "left alone" and notes the particular influence of his peers. He recalls being influenced by his mother, who was a single parent, several cousins, and many of his peers, who according to Will, were home-schooled. Will notes, "I did enjoy my time. I had some close friends. It was great all day, and when I got home I just let it all out. So, I couldn't wait to get home." Will also speaks of a strong sense of faith and mentions that his childhood was filled with moments where he was unmotivated and felt he was "pushed along." He recalls, "I remember second grade. I was like why was everybody getting it and I wasn't? That's my experience." Will talks openly about the struggles that he encountered early on academically,

beginning with second and third grade. He recalls the struggles continuing through high school. The challenges of a Learning Disability were interwoven throughout much of his experiences. Much of that time his grades were C's and D's, according to Will. He struggled with basic math, reading, and English through his middle and high school years. At one point during the interview, Will makes a pushing gesture with his hands as he recalls hearing during his schooling years, "That's good enough" in reference to how he felt he was simply moved along at times. Will credits being influenced by his mother and pastor to motivate him to do well:

> Freshman year I failed all my classes. Fresh failed. After I had to take summer school all the way to my junior year and still wasn't enough. So I graduated with a 2.0 exactly. I had to take zero period classes which were classes before and after school. I didn't have motivation, I guess. But I became a Christian my junior year and that's when I realized my purpose. I started at a {another university} and transferred here. I started hanging around my pastor. He was real eloquent. He was like, 'You gotta' read. You gotta' read." I talk different now, you know, think critically.

Will's thoughts about what is important to him include the outlook for his future:

> I am learning what I can to make it through this world. I think about providing for, taking care of someone else some day. They are not providing right now but some day. Those are the main ones leaving and getting through. Paying off my loans is pretty important. I want to be a nurse so bad. I don't know what else to do. I want to be a good nurse. I want to contribute to society. I don't want to be like my cousins (laughs)…same old story…you know? What I heard, they are up

to no good. I have two cousins went to college. Which is awesome…that's it really. I want to earn as much as I can, get through school. I do want to do more schooling afterwards.

Similar to the students who attended Central City Community College, the parents of Park District also offered their stories. Here I present their perceptions as offered through their one-to-one interviews. My intent is to provide a glimpse into the participants' experiences and to capture some part of what each has spoken through an individual story.

**Parent Perceptions**

As the student participants shared their stories, the parent participants also spoke about their experiences. They, too, related words that were more than responses to the questions of a researcher. Here their stories are presented in words that offer their perceptions as parents of African American children who had their own experiences within the special education decision-making process. The words captured here will perhaps also allow each voice to emerge through each participant story.

**Lisa**

**Determined**

"When it boils down to it, I will make the decision"

Lisa is a single mother in her mid 30's. Lisa lives with her mother in the Park District neighborhood. Lisa and her mother are long time residents of Park District, and according to Lisa, each take on the responsibilities of caring for Lisa's daughter, who has been diagnosed with an Intellectual Disability. Lisa once attended Park District and prides herself on being a regular volunteer at the elementary school. "That's important to

me." She smiles when she speaks about the number of hours she spends not only helping out in her daughter's classroom but some days filling in for the office staff. On the day we meet for our interview, Lisa walks in and warmly greets the front office staff. Her dark hair is smoothed back into a tight bun; her small frame barely fills in the burgundy sweat suit that swallows up her body. She offers a quick embrace to the office receptionist and they exchange small talk about an upcoming school activity. They talk with ease like familiar friends. Lisa asks if we can talk in a small private room near the front office, "I need to be in [my daughter's] classroom later today." So meeting at the school is convenient for Lisa's schedule.

Before the interview, we talk for a few minutes about Lisa's desires for her daughter:

> I don't want to put a child in a class she won't learn. I want her to get the best education for her. I tell people here at the school she gets a different aide every year. She had so many different aides. She needs someone to treat her like their own child. I take interest in special ed kids. I want them to be treated right. I give them hugs when I see them.

For Lisa, being a part of her child's education is an important every day goal. She sees herself as an active parent. As we talk, she makes several references to her own experience at Park District. Living in the community translates into a tangible sense of pride that she demonstrates in her steady and consistent presence at the school and being present in her daughter's classroom. Lisa's thoughts about the classroom are that she likes the "smaller classes in special ed. They do better that way you know." Lisa notes that her fear that her child was not getting the individual attention in a larger classroom was what led to the initial placement into a special education classroom. "She goes to

special ed half a day and to regular ed the other half a day …because of the disability," Lisa explains. In Lisa's view, this works well for her daughter's needs. For Lisa, this is also her commitment to her daughter's education, " I am very involved in her education. When kids see you involved, they gone *[sic]* do better. Lot of African Americans won't be involved in a child's education."

## Maxine

### Prepared

"I really believe in education to help him function in life to be able to take care of himself and set goals. I believe in education for males, for females also but especially black males. I want him to be the best he can be without being over-bearing."

Maxine has worked and lived in Park District for well over twenty years. She knows much about the community and the local surroundings. It was difficult for Maxine and me to find a convenient time to meet because of Maxine's early work schedule. We finally agreed on a 7 a.m. meeting on a rainy Wednesday morning. As we begin to talk, Maxine initially seems hurried. We had spoken on the phone a few times to schedule our meeting so neither of us had seen the other in person. As we sit and begin to talk some of what appears to be hurriedness shifts to easy conversation. "I usually have to be out pretty early, so hope this is not too early for you." I nod "No" and smile back.

Maxine speaks about her son's experiences with a Specific Learning Disability. In Maxine's view, what brought her child to special education placement was based on shared observation and a shared decision:

> At home we would help him with homework. Then I noticed a problem. The teachers also noticed and we discussed it. We as a team decided we would set up

> a plan for him. Now he's in regular classes except for this help he gets with reading and math.

As a parent of a child in special education, Maxine's thoughts are that the time spent at home working with her son and communicating with the school has helped her child to progress. She acknowledges that one important goal is for her child to "become more independent and to function as normally as possible." To Maxine, her son's social ability and "communicating well with others" are central to what Maxine sees as an important educational goal. Maxine sees herself as a parent who is prepared and involved:

> I prepare mostly on a day-to-day basis, at least I try to. I observe him and help him with his homework. He has to read so I can tell him what he has done. I come to school and talk to his teachers…a lot, frequently. I make sure I sign his homework so they know I am paying attention, you know?

Maxine has held the position and role of "active listener and participant" in the learning process of her child. This, in her view, has allowed her to take notice of and address issues more readily. She discusses these issues with her son's teachers and asks for feedback. Maxine sees this as a way to "observe if he needs to dig in harder."

### Alicia and Warren

### Steady in the Midst of Challenges

"If college is not for him, we want him to have the life skills and learn to survive."

Alicia and Warren have lived in Park District for many years after recently returning to the community. "We just weren't satisfied with the last school…didn't like it at all." An apparent frown of disapproval shows on Alicia's face as she speaks of being dissatisfied with the experience at the last school their child had attended. Both parents

have attended the interview together. Warren sits attentively next to Alicia and smiles through most of the interview. Yet, as we talk, Alicia does most of the speaking and Warren chimes in occasionally with an affirmation or statement of support, "Terrible!...just terrible," Warren adds in reference to the school experience. His medium built frame at times does not seem to adequately support the timbre of his voice. Alicia's voice is soft, much like a calming presence in the room as she offers more detail, "At his old school he pretty much had D's and F's. We were worried about that." Warren nods in agreement. They both appear quiet and unassuming, leaning easily back in their chairs, yet during the interview they speak candidly about their expectations for their child's educational future and living with the challenges of an intellectual disability. It is a brisk, sunny spring afternoon as we continue to talk in the sparsely furnished community room near the elementary school building.

They express a primary concern about their son's education and what is most important: "That he's actually learning…that just because he's in special ed he's not being taken advantage of." Warren and Alicia have additional fears and concerns, "They're not giving him easy work. That he's able to go as far as he can go and that he's actually learning. That matters to us, that he's actually learning." They admit that the move back to the community was an effort to address their son's mounting struggles. Their own struggles rest in the confession, "When we had the first meeting to put him into special ed we didn't know about IEP's." When Alicia recounts attending IEP meetings, she explains:

> The last meeting wasn't conducted. The teacher acted like it was a big hindrance in terms of having to come to the meeting. So, the last meeting what I walked

away with was negative feed back, that there was no progress (frowns slightly).

All the meetings have been good except this last one.

Alicia points to her role as parent and the connection to home: "We can do at home [things] to make sure he is accomplishing everything the teacher suggests. We work with him as much as we can at home to do what the teacher has him working on.

**Lorraine**

**Inquires**

"I have to know what's happening for her in the classroom."

Lorraine speaks fondly of growing up in Park District and attending school there as a child. She lives within walking distance of the school which makes it convenient for walking to school each day with her daughter. She arrives early for our meeting as she does each day school is in attendance, "I like to be early," Lorraine notes. The day is dark and a brisk wind blows in with the morning rain. The early hours come with a brooding, overcast sky. At Lorraine's request we meet in the school's Arts Academy. The building is quiet, as few people have arrived. There are a few occasional quiet voices here and there throughout the long, sleek hallways. There is a crisp, clean smell that wafts through the air, mixed with the smell of the fresh morning rain. Much different from the setting of elementary school building. "Morning…Are you Ms. M-o-o-se?" She reaches for my hand and the correct pronunciation of my name at the same time. I am caught by how much she seems at ease in her surroundings. "This is our Arts Academy!" She waves a hand in the air with what appears to be a genuine pride in this element of the school's culture. We walk further to a bright room with over stuffed chairs, where we sit to talk.

A young woman peeks in to offer us coffee and water. We both decline as the woman shuts the door behind her.

Lorraine makes clear her thoughts on arts and culture and the influence they have had upon her own life:

> Being an arts person I feel music, painting, could change my mood. Like myself, my interest in the arts sustains me, what I can do with my hands. The same thing I did when I went to school here I am doing today. Those seeds are ways that are available for those children not college-bound. All I remember I wanted to be was a wife and a mother. Had it not been for art and a lot of things I do for my children, I would not be able to pass along had it not been for art. I believe in that.

Lorraine also shares that the smaller classes allow her child the chance to ask questions. This is important to Lorraine as her child negotiates a Specific Learning Disability in the classroom. She points to "the smaller one-to-one with the teachers gives them a better forum to ask questions and the smaller setting gives them a chance to ask questions so they're not embarrassed." Lorraine emphasizes that her child's self-esteem is at stake and being in a smaller class reduces the risk of embarrassment that might occur in a class with more students. She uses her own school experience to emphasize the point, When I was in school we gave the special ed kids, those kids, a hard time. It was not right but we did it anyway."

### Rita

### Attentive Advocate

"What's important is that they are not treated differently."

Rita is a grandmother and mother who speaks well of her time living in the Park District community. Rita has a thin-lined smile that appears only intermittently throughout the interview. At our first meeting, she is friendly but seems to keep her initial comments brief and to the point. I get the sense that straying off topic or spending time on what might be considered small talk is of little interest to Rita. She mentions that we have less than an hour to speak before she must leave to pick up her granddaughter. Rita greets me with a firm handshake and invites me into a well-lit outer office area. She also thanks me for being prompt. Currently, Rita also works within Park District and has done so for many years. She notes being aware of the balance that sometimes must occur between her work schedule and the needs and demands of her family. Rita lives in the same home with her adult daughter and granddaughter. Rita, along with her daughter, shares a role as primary caretaker for her granddaughter. This includes attending school conferences and IEP meetings, speaking with teachers, counselors, and administrators, and helping with homework and school tasks. Both Rita's daughter and granddaughter are hearing impaired. During our interview, Rita speaks candidly about her desire to advocate for both her daughter and granddaughter, "I always want the best for them both. People see my daughter can't hear or talk. They might take advantage of her…that's hard, always hard." What Rita sees as crucial is her connection to her family and how this helps in being an advocate:

> The main thing is my daughter's deafness. She [the granddaughter] was not getting a lot of talking in. she needed early intervention. Mom could not talk to her. She knows sign language…I know sign language. We talk to each other. She

signs to her mom. We all need to be together and have been since 2008. People see my daughter can't hear or talk, they might take advantage of her.

As Rita talks more, she holds on to the dull edge of an unsharpened pencil. Her finger runs along the side as she places the pencil on the table in front of her. She straightens the jacket edge of her business suit which is well pressed and decorated by a single multi-colored jewel lapel pin. Rita seems to take a minute to think before she speaks again. She notes also what helps her family to be prepared: "It's important that mom has an interpreter in the meetings [at school]. We prepare for an interpreter so my daughter can understand. That helps mom to be prepared also. We both typically attend the meetings."

Rita and I meet at the end of a workday, and Rita asks if we can speak in a conference room close to the office where she works. It is a quiet room, with small stacks of books and papers neatly piled in different areas. The afternoon sun streams in through a corner window covered by mini-blinds and hits the dust covering a bookshelf. We sit at a larger table across from one another. Rita notes what's important is that "they are not treated differently."

### Isaac

### Balancing a Conflict

"I help other children as a teacher. I feel why can't I help my own child sometimes? That's why I chose this field. I take it seriously."

Isaac, who is in his mid 20's, is an educator and a single parent of child with a learning disability. He juggles his teaching career with being a full time parent, having taken on the role of parent only a few years prior, when he adopted his teen son. The role

of parent is important to Isaac as he expresses he views himself as a role model for his son. Isaac speaks about the direct influence that he has on his son and what he believes that means for his son's continued progress, particularly in school. What Isaac finds most troubling, though, is what he views as his relationship with his son's school and with others who teach:

> I might get a notice, I might not. The teacher might come, they might not. I don't think I've seen an administrator or counselor the last few times. I think the special ed teacher avoids me. I don't know if she's scared of me because of problems we've had. I don't want to be talking but that's how it is. I've had problems with her, things my child has been allowed to do, taking short cuts during tests, not following the rules. There has been bad blood.

Isaac is vague about his reference to "bad blood," but he does refer more than once to his concerns about his son potentially being allowed to take short cuts on tests. He seems to have a determined view regarding his son's success. Isaac asserts, "I don't like for kids to be done wrong. That's a big thing with me. I tell him I don't want you to be a 'weenie.' You think I'm mean? I tell him I expect more of you. I know it's difficult for him. He has to prove he's not a teacher's pet, kind of."

Isaac also makes a clear assessment about his own role as decision maker in the process:

> As the parent [my role is] to be his advocate, to speak up, to make sure everything is okay for his benefit, to make sure decisions being made are in his best interest. If I hear something I don't agree with, I speak up, I ask questions. If I don't have any understanding I want it to be beneficial for my son—clarity. To be a good

support person for him and I guess the primary decision maker. I do, but the team actually makes the decisions but I would make the actual decision. I feel that I can.

Isaac explains that what helps him to make decisions about his son's education stems from what he observes in his son: "I see how frustrated [he] gets. I see the struggles and the grades when I talk to him. He helps me to make decisions based on conversations and behaviors. I closely monitor him and ask questions."

In addition to the Student Perceptions and Parent Perceptions presented, Table 4.1 provides an overview of all student participants, and Table 4.2 provides an overview of all parent participants.

Table 4.1 Student Participant Overview

| **Student Participants** | **Age (Range)** | **Primary Disability Category** |
|---|---|---|
| Tara | 26-34 | Intellectual Disability |
| Melvin | 50+ | Emotional/Behavioral Disorder |
| Sunny | 18-25 | Specific Learning Disability |
| Will | 18-25 | Specific Learning Disability |

Table 4.2 Parent Participant Overview

| **Parent Participants** | **Child's Age (years)/ Gender (Male/Female)** | **Child's Primary Disability Category** |
|---|---|---|
| Lisa | 9 (F) | Intellectual Disability |
| Maxine | 12 (M) | Specific Learning Disability |
| Alicia & Warren | 13 (M) | Intellectual Disability |
| Lorraine | 15 (F) | Specific Learning Disability |
| Isaac | 14 (M) | Specific Learning Disability |
| Rita | 11 (F) | Specific Learning Disability |

**Why Perception is Important**

At times, within the framework of special education, those who are defined as decision makers may have opportunity to speak, at times they may not, during the decision-making process. However these opportunities are given, granted, or take place, may not always be easily determined or defined. In this chapter, the perception of each participant, through each narrative, are small glimpses into what each has to share, as the stories have unfolded. In Chapter V, I will discuss the dominant themes that have emerged from the unfolding of these narratives as shared by the participants, the storytellers.

# CHAPTER V

## THEME ANALYSIS

I began my analysis of the research data by reading through each narrative interview and the observation notes I had collected for each interview. I chose to type all of the collected interviews using my hand written interview notes because I felt that this would be important to reading through the narratives and "listening" to the stories as "spoken" by each participant. None of the interviews were video-taped or audio-recorded, so I felt it was extremely important to write down observation notes immediately following each interview to reflect on and record thoughts about the interview. I also reviewed the interview notes to be sure that I had captured words, thoughts, and expressions as accurately as possible.

In this chapter I will discuss the dominant emergent themes that came from reading through and analyzing the participant stories. I read through each typed document at minimum three times and marked words or phrases to capture particular recurring themes. I sorted and categorized these using open coding to create categories. Through each reading, I re-sorted or created new categories as necessary to adjust or eliminate words or phrases that seemed to fit best in one category versus another category, gradually refining the emergent themes.

**Theme I: Supporting Our Own**

Family members and friends provide key supports to many participants. A young, articulate woman, Sunny, approaching her early 20's speaks eloquently about her years in elementary school. She also admits that she relies on her mother for help and support through her college years. Melvin, who is well past what might be thought the typical age of the traditional college student, recalls his mother being his first and most solid support during his early years of schooling. Across each narrative, support from family and others (mother, aunt, pastor, friend, peer) seemed the most consistent major theme to emerge. Within what might be defined as a typical African American, middle class community, such as Park District might be defined, family support may appear as a present staple. However, with the added complexities of special education, support from the home, community, or a source other than the school, appears to emerge as a strong counter-balance to challenges families may encounter within such a complex system. And so the stories unfolded for each participant as they recounted one by one the matters of particular experiences.

As an example, Will shares a memory of his early school years and one particular moment's effect:

> Mostly it was my peers. I didn't want to be left behind. I guess it was the fear, the shame not wanting my mom to be disappointed. I didn't want to be left alone. The teachers were like, Let's just move him along.

When Will speaks of these moments, he alternates between nervous laughter and a serious tone. He points out:

I want to be a nurse so bad. I don't know what else to do. I want to be a good nurse. I want to contribute to society. I don't want to be like my cousins (laughs) same old story…you know? What I heard, they are up to no good. I have two cousins who went to college. Which is awesome, that is really. I want to earn as much as I can, get through school. I do want to do more schooling afterwards.

It seems that being firmly entrenched in the knowledge of his surroundings has had an impact upon Will's decisions. How he moves forward is guided by his own analysis of the support systems he has determined is or is not in place around him.

Tara also seems to express her thoughts strongly as decisions about her career are guided by support from her family in spite of her thought about her own disconnection from the decision- making process, "They talked about how I was behaving, what my grades were, what would be best for me, and that was it." Yet, Tara articulates more how support from her family has pushed her toward her life goals despite what she calls being "slow" in math and reading.

To Tara, the consistent support is also a way to balance what she believes about her own level of academic performance throughout her school years. Now that she is in college, she voices passionately her desire to make up for time she feels she has lost. In these times when she speaks, she becomes very animated, and Tara seems to infuse her speech with a sense of empowerment and hope about her intentions to pursue her degree and complete college.

A history that entrenches itself in difference and marginalization, creates dilemma for a people who are a part of that history. The dilemma centers on how to function within a system that perpetuate the ideologies of that history. Where African American

students have been disproportionately represented in special education, African American families have been positioned to respond to the needs of their children accordingly, often reaching within the family system to do so. For African American families, the act of supporting their own underscores a cultural strength that throughout time and within various contexts has existed within the African American family system (Alston & Turner, 1994; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Whether it is to preserve the family system or to take up resistance against a perceived crisis or threat, the family often becomes a critical component to rising to such challenges.

**Theme II: Fair Treatment/ Let them be treated fairly**

When parents send their children to school, some may come with the expectation that their children will be treated with reasonable fairness and equity. Students may walk into a classroom with the belief that fairness is a given. These may also be the ideals of which dreams are made. Within a system where equity, equitability, and fairness may not be the given, students and parents express their fears, hopes, and concerns about the special education decision-making process.

As Rita shares she explains:

> The main thing is my daughter's deafness. She was not getting a lot of talking in. She needed early intervention. Mom could not talk to her. She knows sign language. I know sign language. We talk to each other. She signs to her mom. We all need to be together and have been since 2008. People see my daughter can't hear or talk. They might take advantage of her.

For Rita, it is a real concern that she must be proactive about decisions related to the welfare of her family. She and her daughter, and her grandchild form a family unit.

Rita positions herself as principal "protector" of the elements that create cohesiveness within that unit. Rira expresses with great passion, "What's important is that they are not treated differently." This is a consistent refrain throughout Rita's story.

Similar to Rita's concern, Isaac has similar concerns for his child, "If they get fair treatment as anyone else, fair treatment…all the help offered to them and not treated differently." Isaac notes that "fair treatment" is something that he pursues for the welfare of his child, "that he gets the treatment that he deserves from regular and special ed teachers, that he is catered to for what he can do right versus wrong." For Isaac, this concern appears to extend beyond fairness and equal treatment. This means more to the success and future of his child. Isaac points to what he believes is a direct impact upon his son's behavior:

> During testing they did not hold him accountable. It took about ten minutes (punctuates words). If he knows the teacher will let him draw and play he will just get done. If they make him buckle down, he will do well. He knows boundaries. He knows how to push the boundaries. I want to see him be a great leader not a follower, be the leader I know he can be and have a real chance at life.

To Alicia and Warren, who saw academic failure as an eminent possibility for their son and who moved from one school district back to Park District out of concern for their child's academic performance, their concerns were echoed in the need for equitable treatment:

> [What matters is] that he's actually learning, that just because he's in special ed he's not being taken advantage of, that they're not giving him easy work, that he's

able to go as far as he can go and that he's actually learning. That matters to us, that he's actually learning.

Principally, "fairness," "being treated fairly," "not being treated differently" are a part of what both the students and parents expressed in their stories. It came through as an expression of what they seem to view as a "reasonable expectation" from the school, particularly as it relates to on-going conversations during the IEP process.

**Theme III: Independence**

In many of the narratives, independence was a consistent expression. This would often translate into a sense of questions related to overall welfare, survival or life skills. Maxine articulates this in her thoughts about her son:

> We really want him to be able to learn, to take care of himself through socialization, his reading and math skills, to become more independent and to function as normally as possible. He's really good in math. I think also to improve on his ability to communicate well with others. If he improves, he will do better to gain more confidence in himself.

Maxine holds to her belief that the outcome of her son's success outside the classroom is inextricably tied to his success in the classroom. She shares that her sense of guiding her son to "function as normally as possible" is important as this year he is "doing things on his own." She does, though, see herself as part of a team that guides these decisions:

> At home we would help him with homework. Then I noticed a problem. The teachers also noticed and we discussed it. We as a team decided we would set up

a plan for him. Now he's in regular classes except for this help he gets with reading and math. We all came to the same conclusion.

On some levels, the community college students seemed to struggle to find their independence. Sunny talked of needing help from her mother to stay organized in her adult life. Will mentioned being pushed to find a passion for reading that did not come until his high school and college years and wanting to "access every resource available." For Will, "Until college I didn't have much influence." He states his next goal as he completes his four-year journey through the nursing program, "Now I want to go to seminary."

Worth noting are the questions the students brought up regarding their school experiences. Will questioned being pushed along. Sunny questioned not having a voice. Tara questioned not being told of scholarships. Melvin questioned the teachers' assessments of his abilities. All these seem to translate into a form of tension for the students in moving towards independence. This can be situated into Liasidou's (2013) assessment that dis/ability may converge with other factors including factors related to race, social awareness, and social interaction. Here the students have discussed elements of their past in relation to plans for negotiating a future. At some juncture, the intersection of dis/ability, race/social interaction is part of a participant's story. For the parents, the struggle may begin with having to negotiate this intersection along with helping their children find independence. For the college students, the struggles appear more pronounced as they connect their questions and their decisions back to a system that perhaps failed to include them, or simply failed them in other ways.

**Theme IV: Advocacy on Behalf of Self and Others**

Thoughts about a child's future have a huge impact upon the decisions a family must make. These often relate to education and other life choices that affect important outcomes. Families wrestle with these decisions on a daily basis, and decisions related to special education services create additional intricacies.

Isaac speaks:

> I've made a huge impact. He knows he has a chance; someone will fight for him. He can see the end of the tunnel. He has a chance. I can hear him speak about it. He wants to be something when he gets out of school. Now he wants to be a policeman or fireman. Now he speaks about the National Guard. Within the last year he's been doing research into it. His speech about his future has changed. I tell him to think about how his actions affect his future.

Isaac is assured that his role is to advocate for his son. Even as Isaac speaks, the undertone is a punctuated conviction that he will "fight" for his son's future.

Similar to Isaac, Rita, as the grandmother and head of a multi-generation household, notes throughout her story how she will "advocate" for the welfare of both her daughter and granddaughter. This she expresses with a tone of adamant conviction. Alicia and Warren also note through their willingness to physically uproot and to move back to Park District how they feel that their actions will affect the outcome of their child's academic success. The desire to continue through challenges, to "make a lie" of the naysayers, emerges through Melvin's determination to rise up above the language of those who challenged his abilities to succeed through racial and socio-economic oppression. Beyond daily survival, larger issues become the impetus to "fight," to

"advocate," to "push forward," or to do what is needed to survive greater, perhaps more eminent challenges.

Much in the same way the students appear to face challenges in negotiating independence at the college level, the parents voice concerns about advocacy or being an advocate for their children. This potentially may be of concern for any parent of a child within special education. Yet, for the parent of an African American child with a disability, advocacy can take on a different meaning. One significant challenge may rest in forming relationships between the family and the school (Harry, 2008). Harry notes the needed movement toward collaboration in improving relationships with parents of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners. This moves away from the primary needs of administration to a focus on the needs of the caregiver, the parents, and the family. For some parents, like Lisa, who volunteered on a regular basis, the relationships appear to come easily. For others, like Isaac and Alicia and Warren, the relationships appear strained as they express tensions in their communications with school personnel.

When considering further the perception of Isaac, who talked about his son's experience in school and his desire for his son to be treated fairly, Isaac mentions that he has a deep desire for his son to succeed on his own merits. When Isaac speaks about his overall goals for his son, he also seems to relate that he has a desire to for his son to realize the extent that "someone will fight" for him. Essentially, Isaac seems to want that message to translate clearly to his son, particularly in relation to his son's success as a male and as an African American male. This sets a stark comparison to Melvin's recollection of his early years in school. Melvin recalls his teachers and others saying he would "not amount to nothin.'" From what Melvin remembers, this prompted him to

advocate or fight for himself, throughout his life, to want to succeed, to move himself forward. Melvin also battled through the forces of what he noted as overt acts of racism and the experiences in his schooling where race factored in to how he perceived his experiences at school. Isaac, while not mentioning race specifically, speaks as an African American male, raising an African American male, who wants his son to push past what Isaac views as challenges placed on his son imposed by disability and perhaps by race as well. One man, Isaac, in his 20's, has taken on a fight, perhaps even a desire to leave a legacy, that he wants to translate to his son; this is the fight to succeed, regardless of what a system has established as perimeters which might in fact be limiters to that success. Another man, Melvin, has lived out his 50+ years, recalling the elements of the system, which may have potentially pushed him back further from his desired goals, but as Melvin equates, he is determined to "make them a lie."

Perhaps, then, advocacy is another piece of the tensions that must be negotiated for a student at the intersection of dis/ability, race, and social interaction. Advocacy relates to championing the rights of another. However, for the parent of an African American child with a disability, advocacy means fighting to undo systemically entrenched ideals and beliefs. This can be a very difficult stance for a parent, and later for a student, as advocacy often must begin early in the decision-making process. Negotiating all elements of what a child may need during that process creates a potentially complex challenge for the parent. For a child who is identified early in her/his schooling this may translate into years of the parent-as-advocate. Later, throughout schooling, the student may struggle as well to negotiate a place within the advocacy conversation. However this transpires, parents are faced with understanding how a

system, such as the special education system, may impose barriers to their role as advocate, including not creating collaborative relationships.

**Theme V: Barriers and Othering**

When decisions are made about placement, assessment, and continued services, the concept of team decision making is considered a basic tenet of special education. Sunny shares her perspective of the IEP process, and one particular meeting:

> A certain time I remember the biggest meeting, my parents, two counselors, the counselors' bosses, I believe there was an instructor from class, one of the faculty members from the school. I remember the boss being there. The boss had quizzed me out in front of everybody. It was like a test to see if the counselors did their job. I thought Was I in trouble? But it was to see how I had improved. I remember I had to walk out. My parents did too. Then they had to go back in to discuss it. They told my parents about what the counselors were doing, if they had helped me improve my test. They asked for my parents to come back in. When my parents came back there was a lot of talking. They did not call me back in to the room.

Sunny shared that she felt confused by the process and dismissed as a part of the discussion, "Counselors spoke about me. I never contributed because I did not know ways to better myself." Sunny talks about her role during the process. Sunny shares further:

> I had a role. It was all about me. It was to help me find a way to better myself as a student. They would ask my opinion but I never had anything to say. They would put out options like having extended time reading to me or typing it out on the

computer. I was the person who really needed the help on my learning disability. They would find ways to help me to improve overall or help myself as a student. I didn't say much to help myself.

Sunny's assessment of her inability to contribute to decisions during the IEP process seemed to place her as "silent observer." She was both physically not a part of the conversation during the IEP decision making and determined that she was not able to speak for herself, even when offered the opportunity. She notes that she wanted to "better herself" but felt she did not have the resources or ability to do so.

Some, then, saw themselves removed from the process physically as in being removed to a separate classroom. For example, when Tara recalls her time spent in the "Computer Classroom" while her mother attended meetings, she had little to no recollection of any IEP meetings where she was an active, contributing part of the meeting. Many of the students, as they spoke, recalled not being a part of a conversation or decision, particularly as IEP meetings occurred, and the distinctive memory was that of being "talked about" as the topic of conversation, with little to no active participation or contribution.

**Summary: Silenced Voices**

IEP meetings are designed to include all who are involved in making decisions in the child's best interest on some level. Ideally, the team, administrators, parents/care-givers, teachers, and the student, come together to function collaboratively as a team. Realistically, this does not always occur, and the best interest of the student may no longer be the primary concern. The students' accounts of a "separation" in terms of a physical space and in relation to their voices being removed from a discussion brings up

how a student might view equity in her/his own schooling. The IEP process that does not function well lends to what Delpit (2006) refers to as a "Silenced Dialogue." When conflict occurs, such as in a classroom, there is generally a resulting differential of power in relationships. This "culture of power," according to Delpit, has its own set of rules, which reflect the culture of those who have the power. (p.24). Thus, the students who express not participating in the decision-making process, perhaps also experience the "culture of power" and negotiating the rules of that culture. Sunny, for example, recognizes being "quizzed out" by the "bosses," a clear differential relationship of power as she acknowledges who is "boss" from her point of view. When and how Sunny is invited into the conversation demonstrates the rules of the "culture" as dictated by those who have the power in this situation. Although Sunny does not mention a specific grade in relation to this incident, she does make reference to high school. This ideally is a time when the student has greater opportunity to become a more integral part of the IEP decision-making process. However, in Sunny's case, this does not seem to be her experience. Therefore, power shifts and rule making are integral to how and when decisions are made and tend to place the student in the center of both. Whether or not the student is aware of her/his position within the rule making or the potential shifts in power is tenable. Inevitably, the student may have little to no understanding of how a seemingly ideal model has somehow systematically dismissed the student from the process. Further, these "voices from the bottom," as Bell (1992) relates, may be the voices of those who do not have the awareness of how to recover from within such a system. This means that students who are continually and systematically dismissed from the process, who perhaps

never learn to take on the rule making, do eventually become the silenced voices, as part of a silenced dialogue.

# CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

My first thought is to return to the story of Jace, my own son, whose voice was silenced through the special education decision-making process. I recall this being the overall impetus that initially brought me to the questions for this study, which were to examine how African American college students and their families perceive their roles in the special education decision-making process. I also wanted to know how they perceived their roles as partners in identification, assessment, and placement into special education. These are important questions, particularly given the historical contexts of the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education. I became keenly aware that my son being one of the children who were a part of the history had not been invited to contribute to any context that might illuminate the inner-workings of that history. For many African American children like Jace, this can be troubling when we consider the issues that have pervaded American schooling for decades. From my view, one silenced voice has, indeed, been one voice too many. The stories told here have illuminated both large issues and the nuanced complexity of IEP meetings serving African American students. The looming issues within American schooling, within special education, have not been effective addressed with time alone. Some of these issues bring us back to the same conclusions. Disproportionate

representation of African American students within special education lingers as a persistent reminder that our children have been scraped along the edges of an ineffective system called—schooling.

## Revisiting Themes: Listen Again

As I consider here the implications for theory, for research, and for practice, I revisit the emergent themes and the stories that capture the perceptions of the four student participants and six parent participants. Their voices have contributed the stories and even counter-stories (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) that inform us about the important aspects necessary potentially to effect change within education and special education. Perhaps there will be fewer voices gone silent and a deeper understanding of special education decision-making that affects the future outcomes for African American children.

### Theme One: Supporting Our Own

The tradition of the African American family is rooted in a rich history of community, culture, and connectedness. Consider that even in what might seem as adverse times or unfavorable conditions, African American families have risen from within their own to create community or sense of community as needed to survive. How this has played out across time has certainly shifted, and how "family" is defined in certain pockets of African American culture will differ. However, what springs forth from the lifeblood of African American experience across many contexts is that of the ability to "survive," particularly in the face in what seem challenging or insurmountable odds.

There are, for example, prevailing thoughts and assumptions that African Americans encounter and come up against when moving through every day life. A thought such as, "Most Americans don't believe that African American parents are good parents and most don't believe that we care about our children's education" is indeed a troubling thought to counter-act (Thompson, 2010, p. 60). When we engage in discussion about educating African American children, this assertion, unfortunately, does permeate our schools and our society. African American families must enter schooling with the knowledge that such attitudes and misconceptions exist, and they exist well into the present day system. An interesting note is that for many of the participants in this study, there was no immediate sense of partnership extended by the schools they attended. Both parents and students acknowledged their first line of defense when faced with a challenge or place of support came from within the family. In a sense, particularly when challenged, they deferred to what they knew which were the resources within their own family or community systems. However these resources were defined for the participants or whatever the dynamics of the family, this served as the basis of finding the help that they needed to move along during the process of decision-making. This is an important factor for students and their families who come to special education decision making ideally positioned to act as an equal part of a team but realistically having to negotiate, and perhaps re-negotiate a path that brings them to that equal place of position as team member and decision-maker.

The realization, then, for schools is that they may not be the initial and most natural place of support for the family. Indeed, perhaps they are contributing to widening an existing gap between school and family. The implications here would include the

potential risks for students and families being pushed further away from the center of where special education identification, assessment, and placement decisions occur. Students and families then identify less with their role with being connected to decision-making, to the school, and to a meaningful set of resources aligned with student and family needs. Students do need opportunity to feel more confident about access to resources and other tools to reach academic, career, and other meaningful life goals. While students may know that they have the support of family, their experiences may speak of a strong desire to be better connected to schooling and resources to move them along and to become better informed about their opportunities.

An additional reality for schools is that students and families are finding support outside of the school community. When necessary, families have created their own infrastructure to address the challenges they face in relation to promoting educational successes for their children. Warren and Alicia, for example, acknowledged what they did not understand about the IEP process. Yet, they expressed willingness to challenge a system they believed had contributed to their son's lack of academic progress. They returned to their community, the place to which they are rooted, and created their own framework for the support that would bring equity to their son's schooling experience, a place where he had previously experienced failure. So, as parents their decision to leave one school to return to the community where they have roots, to them, was empowering. Many African American families, particularly those who must make decisions within the special education system, may find that community is in fact the strongest and most effective place of empowerment.

Teachers, administrators, and the school community are not effectively released from their role in being supportive resources to draw in African American students and families. Schools first must look at what resources they are providing and what efforts they are making to create, maintain or even rebuild connections with African American students and families. Initially schools must communicate with African American families in ways that are relevant to their lives. As the dynamics of family systems change, so should the dynamics of the means of school-to-family communications. Within the special education decision-making process, communication is invaluable. It also lends to the efficacy of student voice and student perspective being honored and respected within the process of identification, referral, assessment, and placement into special education.

If students and families are pushed further from the center of the decision-making process, an even greater risk is that decision-making becomes more school-based or systems-driven. This serves to limit rather than equalize a process that is already systemically disenfranchising. Special education risks taking an even more backward movement into making the disproportionate representation of African American students an issue where students are neither viably nor tangibly invested in decision-making. A systemically driven process consistently fails to invite student voices to the process. Typically these are voices that are not valued as credible and reputable pieces of a dynamic and intricate puzzle. This, in fact, is a puzzle that has plagued our educational wonderings for many decades. To begin to make sense of the many different pieces of this puzzle, the voices of African American students must be a part of the conversation at the special education decision-making table. When decisions are made, students and

parents must be included in a way that makes sense for family and student. It is not a matter of fulfilling mandate or duty. It is a matter of recognizing the needs of the families and students and allowing them to weigh in on what it means to be "invited" to the process and what "active participation" looks like within the context of the family dynamics. From the moment the process begins, as students are identified for placement, the student and the family, are important assets to shifting the conversation and influencing decisions made about the student's future.

Further, African American students must develop resources to support and advocate for themselves through the special education decision-making process. This includes understanding the complete scope of their own roles and their own abilities to exact influence on decisions even as they transition from K-12 schooling. Self-advocacy can be a difficult, but critical, role for the student during the period of K-12 schooling, places the student in the position of being knowledgeable, of accessing or developing resources, and most importantly gaining power to negotiate a system-driven process not designed to engage them effectively or even equitably.

**Theme Two: Fair Treatment/Let Them Be Treated Fairly**

A look at the deep roots of racism, inequity, and the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education lends to a conversation about purposeful pathways to self-advocacy for African American students and families. The purposeful pathways are intended to create inroads to understanding that racism remains a part of our American society (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and a part of our American schooling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The pathways to self-advocacy must be purposeful as students and families move against the ideas and

ideologies that exist within the context of racism coupled with thoughts, ideas, and perspectives on ability/disability. Here is also where the actions of the students and families potentially become transformative in nature. Self-advocacy is an intentional and powerful role that ideally leads to other actions that promote change. These might include change that affects the community, school program or policy. Or they may result in political action or system-wide changes that lead to greater social outcomes. As advocacy efforts identify specific goals and missions they generally lead to an intended social action or change (Mertens, 2009). African American students and their families in the pathways to self-advocacy can potentially effect change in their schools, in their communities, and ideally in larger contexts that hold meaning for them and for the communities where they hold connections. For many of the participants, it is an expression of determination and a desire to want change and "fair treatment" in the process of special education decision-making. As Rita, Isaac, Warren and Alicia expressed through their hopes, "not being taken advantage of" is a critical aspect of speaking up and speaking out for the welfare of a student's future outcomes and needs. It pushes the student further to achieve, to excel, and to reach goals, perhaps initiated by the parents, but are challenged to be carried out by the student. It is a sense of power to fight and to move through the challenges presented by systemic racism coupled with a history that allows disability to push down a segment of a population that continues to fight for "fair treatment."

Students and families may also empower themselves to participate in the decision-making process. Considering that there may have long since existed a top-down relationship between schools and families where schools and school-systems exhibited a

great deal of power, families may seek ways to reverse or undo these trends. It may, perhaps, begin with the establishment of community conversations or creating conversations within a community where African American families and their children become proactive in roles. Many of the participants in this study were aware of their community and family resources and the importance of these resources to strengthening their role as advocate. While reversing a trend is never easy, it may be a first step for families in recognizing their own abilities to move beyond traditions and systems that have essentially created little to no access to a place of empowerment. Students and families may develop paths to become active participants in the decision-making process, thereby diminishing an imbalanced, imperfect, or broken relationship between family and school.

**Theme Three: Independence**

Schools can provide students with tools for creating and participating in realistic goal setting early in the decision-making process. The conversation may begin early in elementary school where the child is invited to think about and create realistic goals for the future. This effectively empowers a child to take ownership of her/his future and to create a path of success early in life. This also ties well with advocating for self and helping a child to seek after independence in academics and other areas where the child may not traditionally be pushed to excel in the early years of schooling. When a child sees the reality of a future and a goal, this creates a clear path that also connects to self-esteem, a sense of value, taking ownership of a specific path of pursuit, and being connected to an outcome generated from personal interest. These similar values hold true for students being part of the goals that are established during the IEP decision-making

process. When the student is actively involved in goal setting and participating in creating outcomes that directly affect the student, it takes on a different level of meaning for the student. Perhaps this also translates differently for a student who must manage a certain level of independence in order to negotiate the transition from K-12 into college. The transition can potentially be more difficult for students whose K-12 experiences involve disenfranchisement and a history of disconnectedness from a process that should ideally foster independent thinking and learning, but may not always do so.

**Theme Four: Advocacy on Behalf of Self and Others**

The challenges that we continue to face within our schools and within special education is a call for schools to address relationships of power, equity vs. inequity, and exclusion. Parents and students ideally become advocates for self and others through knowledge. This knowledge begins with understanding the nature of negotiating the system of schooling and the special education decision-making process. The school is a central factor is making that process one that helps parents and students to define the role of advocate vs. creating roles that are adversarial in nature. A school is to capture the best of what a student or parent has to bring to the role of advocate and overlay that with the conversation of special education identification, placement, and assessment. Much of this goes back to demystifying or even unpacking the rule making inherently interwoven into the IEP decision-making process. This tends to limit what parents and students have access to, including power, knowledge, and resources. This certainly allows schools to make an assessment of current practices and shift toward what might create more equitable practices for families who traditionally may not have realized the full benefits of the role of advocate.

Families, then, can outline definitive and realistic expectations as they enter into and even seek to form family-school relationships. What are these reasonable expectations? These might vary depending on the needs of the family. It is certainly worth the time and effort of the family to ensure that its cultural values and beliefs are recognized and respected by school administration and personnel. Central to this is the fact that the cultural dynamics of a family are ever-changing and evolving. Thus, the more that families feel aligned within these relationships, which ideally are partnerships, the more the role of advocate begins to take shape within the relationship. Parents and families realize they have a role and ideally can carry that over into a context that is less threatening.

**Theme Five: Barriers and Othering**

As schools have created a top-down dependent relationship with students/families, one goal is for schools to seek to actively change the nature of these relationships. One area of need is to create avenues to help students and families to participate in decisions that move beyond placement and assessment. This begins early in the process where schools take on an active role in creating environments that realistically address the challenges of families of students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds. School personnel, including teachers, counselors, and administrators should be aware of incidents of "micro-aggressions" (Sue, Capudulipo, & Holder, 2008) within the school environment and within a community at large. These relate to the unconscious acts of racism that occur within society that are often covert, but nonetheless create very real and often aggressive tensions between the aggressor and the recipient. Because such acts can be so very covert, schools have the

challenge of first being aware of how "micro-aggressions" can occur. Secondly, it is just as critical to understand how acts, which seem harmless on the surface, in fact, create tensions. When cultural differences exist within a family, for example, and these differences translate into what appear to be negative behaviors within a classroom or an IEP meeting, there generally is a breakdown in communication and other elements of reasonable means of collaboration. Typically, these situations do not go well for the student/ the parent, particularly if the school positions itself as the authority figure (aggressor) and the student/family as the offender (recipient). Such incidents may also spiral further out of control as the student/family is labeled as "challenging," "difficult," "incapable or unwilling to learn," when in fact the opposite may be true. Ladson-Billings (1995) relates it as just "good teaching" when we expect our children, particularly African American children, to achieve at high levels vs. creating a culture that sets children up for academic failure from the point of entry into schooling. Teaching African American children from a platform based on culturally relevant pedagogy demands that students maintain cultural competence, academic success, and a critical consciousness of the world around them. Our classrooms and the services we provide to students and families cannot be generically based on a model that fits one size of a norm created for all. We must adjust and refine our standards to draw out the best in students who are not put into classrooms or placed into special education services with the expectation that "wait-to-fail" is the only possible outcome or alternative.

## Limitations

When considering the nature of this study, the questions the study was designed to address, and the population of the participants, particular issues pose limitations. One central issue that warrants closer attention is that of race. Although, my questions did not directly focus upon race, the data revealed that race was indeed a part of the conversation, as evidenced by some of the participant stories. On some levels, it was a difficult task to tease out the elements of race, even though I recognized that it existed in multiple layers, which could potentially be pulled back and more closely examined. Given the historical elements of special education and the role that race place within that context, it is necessary to explore more deeply the nature of how these elements are intertwined. The history dictates that the relationship is complex, and one study that unveils a small element of that historical relationship will chip away a small corner of those complexities. If we continue to ask more questions and continue to unveil more truths about race, special education, and schooling, we begin to unravel the deeper complexities of what has kept our children on the outer margins of balancing out these complexities.

While a narrative study can allow for an intensive gaze into particular areas, it does tend to create other limitations. For this study, the small number of participants does not allow the findings to be generalized. Therefore, the experiences shared and the findings for this study may hold true for the ten study participants, but may not necessarily be generalized to a larger population.

## Delimitations

One challenge also presented in this study was my decision not to record participant interviews using audio or video. As a researcher, I do believe that the

participants felt a bit more at ease talking without the presence of a recording device. However, in retrospect, I believe that recording the interviews would have facilitated in areas such as data analysis and capturing participant information on a more detailed level. While I still feel that speaking with the participants with the aid of being able to listen intently and take notes as we talked provided the most natural setting, I do acknowledge that recording each interview could have provided another means of uncovering different nuances of each participant story.

The difficulty lies in knowing which decision is the right decision for a study and for the participants who have chosen to share what potentially are very intimate details of their lives. Speaking about a topic such as ability/disability that carries with it its own layers of stigma, particularly within restrictive systems, may affect the outcome of any conversation. For this study, the participants spoke without the additional consideration of being recorded. As a researcher, my wondering is how this may or may not have shifted the thoughts and words of any given participant. My belief, though, is that on some level the richness of what emerged was shaped by the participants' willingness to talk freely about the details.

## Implications for Future Research

A voice gone silent is a voice not fully recognized, heard, or acknowledged. Some voices are actively removed from the conversation, that is they are uninvited as meaningful participants, and not given space to re-enter or re-engage. As some of the participants noted they were asked to leave a room or found themselves observing, listening, but not speaking during the IEP decision-making process, the conversation does not always seem to be about full and complete access by everyone concerned. As I

listened to the participants speak, I noted things that were not said but resonated loudly and clearly, nevertheless, through their words. Many of their voices had, indeed, been silenced and actively removed from a conversation. Some by their own admission at times chose not to participate, but even with these choices, there was a tenuousness and uncertainty about their own rights to participate as an active contributor to a conversation. What I heard, then, was an underlying current, that translated into larger tensions. These were tensions of being silenced, "othered," discounted, or dismissed, without perhaps the full knowledge that these acts have occurred. What I heard in the participants' words are the tensions of these realities. In a story such as Melvin's that illuminates experiences of overt racism, positioned within a system that yet fosters acts of covert and overt racial aggression, the tensions are real and many. However, they are still a topic of hard or difficult conversation. Perhaps this is because it forces us to look head on at such realities as systemic racism, disproportionate representation, inequity, injustice, the imbalance of power, and other issues, sooner than we are ready to do so. However, now is the time that we must do so.

Future research would push toward taking a look at the systemic racism and exploring the question of whether special education could survive or endure another fifty-plus years of disproportionate representation of students of color within particular disability categories. To address questions in a larger context, future researchers might look at several factors. One factor is to increase the number of participants for the study and to consider gathering data through focus groups, through audio and video recordings, and other information to potentially make for richer sources of data. The focus groups, in

particular, would allow participants opportunity to speak with one another in smaller group settings and to share their varied experiences.

Additionally, future research with a larger population sample that employs a quantitative study design would be useful for exploring other issues this study could not explore fully. As the researcher, I was able to capture small glimpse into what each participant shared. My ability to listen, to take notes, and even to gain the trust of each participant as we sat to talk were critical pieces to this study. At times it was a delicate balance, knowing the participants had entrusted their words to me to guard as I would all things of great value, worth, and meaning. My original intent was to design a study with a larger population sample that would lend to using a methodology and framework quite different from the narrative study. However, after spending approximately two years recruiting subjects and encountering other limiting challenges, it was difficult to pursue a study on a wider scale within a reasonable timeframe. It is hopeful that what other researchers might find in studies conducted on a larger scale will increase the potential that we begin to address the most perplexing issues within special education, effectively one research design at a time.

## Concluding Matters: What I Have Learned

One lesson I have learned is that understanding the lives of those who contributed to this study goes deeper than the words captured here, now presented as glimpses of each of their experiences. I realize there is greater depth to each life and to each story that should be explored, and potentially can be through further research. In one sense, as the researcher, my thoughts are that the voices of these participants speak up and speak out for many who have not had opportunity or space to speak within the realm of special

education. As a parent of a child who was silenced within the special education system, listening to these voices and having the opportunity to learn about the lives connected to these voices gave me moments of understanding about my own experiences. As a parent, I understood that my son, Jace, or rather those like him, sit in many of our classrooms today, waiting for the opportunity to be invited to the conversations about their lives. As a researcher and as an educator, I wonder now, fifty years and more into a history that has kept these voices silent, whether we are finally ready to listen. There are many more questions to be explored. It is my hope that we can, in fact, listen intently, for there are more stories to be told and more voices to be heard. The silenced dialogues must turn to more open conversations that lead to schooling and special education that truly are about serving the needs of our children.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Date | Monday, February 23, 2015 | Protocol Expires | 2/22/2016 |
| IRB Application No | ED1243 | | |
| Proposal Title | African American College Students' Perception of Their Role as Decision Maker in the K-12 Special Education Process | | |
| Reviewed and Processed as | Expedited<br>Continuation | | |
| Status Recommended by Reviewer(s) | **Approved** | | |

Principal Investigator(s):

Sylvia Muse
PO Box 14519
Tulsa, OK 74159

Pamela Brown
237 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078

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Approvals are valid until the expiration date, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any modifications to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval with the advisor's signature. The IRB office MUST be notified in writing when a project is complete. Approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review Board.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

The reviewer(s) had these comments:

Subject involvement completed analysis of identifiable data only. Change advisor to Pam Brown. No new changes, reportable events, withdrawals, complaints or new/additional funding.

Signature:

Hugh Crethar, Chair, Institutional Review Board

Monday, February 23, 2015
Date

Appendix B

**Semi-Structured Interview/ Protocol of Questions- (Student Participants)**

Introductory Comments to Participants:

***Thank you for choosing to participate in this research study. The information that you provide is very important to this study. All of the following relate to your experience as a student in special education. There is no right or wrong answer and your name or other personally identifying information will not be connected to any of the responses.***

Q 1 What led to your being placed into special education?

Q 2 What things are important to you as a student?

Q 3 What are some things that helped you to prepare for your Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting?

Q 4 Describe for me what typically happened during one of your K-12 school IEP meetings.

Q 5 What was your role during the IEP meetings that you attended during your K-12 schooling?

Q 6 As a student in special education, what helped you to make decisions about your own K-12 education?

Q 7 What impact have you had on the decisions made regarding your K-12 schooling?

Q 8 What would you like to see happening in regard to your education that is currently not happening?

Appendix C

**Semi-Structured Interview/ Protocol of Questions (Parent Participants)**

**Introductory Comment to Participants:**

***Thank you for choosing to participate in this research study. The information that you provide is very important to this study. All of the questions relate to your experience as a parent of a child in special education. There is no right or wrong answer and your name or other personally identifying information will not be connected to any of the responses.***

Q 1 What led to your child being placed into special education?

Q 2 What things are important to you as the parent of a child in special education?

Q 3 What are some things that help you to prepare for your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting?

Q 4 Describe for me what typically happens during one of your child's IEP meetings.

Q 5 What is your role in the IEP meeting regarding your child?

Q 6 As the parent of a child in special education, what helps you to make decisions about your child's education?

Q 7 What impact have you had on the decisions made regarding your child at school?

Q 8 What would you like to see happening for your child at school that is not currently happening?

VITA

Sylvia Annette Muse

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE AS DECISION MAKERS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

Major Field: Education, Professional Education Studies, Special Education

Biographical: I was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to Johnnie H. and Mattie L. Herrod. I currently live and work in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2015.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Special Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2004.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Speech-Language Pathology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater in May 1985.

Experience: I have been teaching developmental education courses as an Assistant Professor for five years at Tulsa Community College. I have served as a Faculty Co-Advisor for the African American Student Association for four years. I have also worked in the public schools in special education classrooms. During my graduate level work, I served in AmeriCorps partnering with families to increase literacy awareness and opportunities at home, at school, and in the community.

Professional Memberships:
National Association of Developmental Education (NADE)
Oklahoma Association of Developmental Education (OKADE)/Online newsletter/Editor
National Writing Project
OSU Writing Project/*Writers & Projects*/Editor, Leadership Council, TIQ Online Facilitator
National Association of Multicultural Education