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The Lived Experience of African American Parents of Middle School Boys at a Predominantly White Elite Private School

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, **THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL**, by **DEBRA ELAINE SMITH**, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL

by
Debra Elaine Smith

Parental involvement has been associated positively with school success across ethnic groups (Hong & Ho, 2005). Yet, some African American parents were found to be more alienated from school than were White parents (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). One of the most consistent findings in educational research is the underachievement of African American males (Lee, 2003), and a recent report chronicled the pervasive and systematic failure of public schools to educate African American males (Schott, 2008). In the southeastern region, only 40% of African American males graduate from high school (Schott); however, in the post-Civil Rights era, advances in racial equity in education and other arenas of society have created a growing African American middle class (McKinnon, 2003). The southeast region has the largest percent of affluent African Americans (Miller, 2002), and a growing number of these upper middle class African American parents are sending their children to private schools because they are dissatisfied with the lack of rigor in the public school experience (Freedman, 2004). This is a new phenomenon that warrants study. Currently, there are no empirical studies on middle class African American parents who send their children to private schools.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways 12 African American couples of middle school boys experience a predominantly White elite private school. To

undertake this qualitative investigation, a phenomenological approach incorporating grounded theory was utilized. This research approach is well suited for exploratory investigation of phenomena that are not yet clearly defined within the literature (Creswell, 1998). Data were collected from the couple interviews, focus group, demographic information, and reflexive journal. Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data: better opportunity/brand, parental connection, selective engagement, parental struggle, and parental marginalization. These results are informative and significant to research and practice. Ultimately, it is hoped that this study may contribute to the efforts of providing a quality education to African American male students and satisfaction to their parents in the areas of diversity and inclusion at predominantly White elite private schools.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS AT A PREDOMINANTLY
WHITE ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL

by
Debra Elaine Smith

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CHAPTER 1
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS
OF BOYS IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Introduction

Parental involvement in schools is a national priority for teachers, parents, students (Deplanty, J., Coulter-Kern, R., & Duchane, K., 2007) counselors, and administrators. According to the most recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, teachers and principals agree on the importance of parental involvement: 71 % of principals and 59 % of teachers called it a priority (Padgett, 2006). Parental involvement consists of any parental attitudes, behaviors, styles, or activities that occur within or outside the school setting to support student's academic and behavioral success in school (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Strong parental involvement is essential for school success. Studies have shown that parental involvement in schools promote better student attendance, increased graduation rates, less grade retention, higher parent and student satisfaction with school, fewer discipline reports, higher achievement scores in reading, math, as well as improved scholastic outcomes (Englund, Luckner, Whaley & Egeland, 2004; Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). The purpose of this article is to review literature relating to the benefits of parental school involvement. More specifically, this review focuses on the academic achievement of African American males, African American parental involvement in public schools and the experience of African American parents in private schools.

Review of the Literature

Parental school involvement benefits the student, school and parent. Researchers have identified parental involvement as an important factor for the academic success, personal as well as the social development of students (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Steinberg and Silk, 2002). Parental involvement activities include attending parent-teacher conferences, assisting children with homework, volunteering for leadership roles within the school, and attending extracurricular activities. Researchers have found a positive relationship between parent-initiated involvement practices and school outcomes (Epstein and Sanders, 2002). Parent-initiated involvement represents parents' efforts to become directly involved with school decisions and activities (Spera, 2005). For example, parent-initiated involvement includes parents serving on school boards or parent organizations as well as getting involved with their children's school-related activities (i.e. help with homework, science fair, & etc.).

One of the most significant advances in the research on parental school involvement is the recognition that context is important and there are multiple dimensions to parental school involvement. Parent-school relationships occur in community and cultural contexts (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Spera, 2006). Demographic characteristics, like socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and cultural background, and other parental characteristics are systematically associated with parental school involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Spera, 2006).

Consistently, researchers have reported the positive effect of parental involvement on student achievement, but the process through which parental involvement influences student performance is not well understood. Hong & Ho (2005) conducted a longitudinal

study that addressed four dimensions of parental involvement among Whites, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and African Americans. The researchers assessed communication, parental educational aspiration, participation, and supervision. The nationally representative sample was from the National Education Longitudinal Survey with 24,599 eighth graders from 1,052 schools. The findings revealed ethnic differences of parental involvement on academic achievement (Hong & Ho, 2005).

The results indicated that for the White sample, the parental factors of communication and parental aspiration were most effective in having both immediate and long-lasting effects (at least for four years) on student achievement (Hong & Ho, 2005). For the Asian American sample, parental educational aspiration was effective for short-term achievement but was not long lasting (2005). For the Hispanic sample, parental communication proved to be the only effective parental involvement factor, and it had a short-term effect (2005). For the African American sample, parental educational aspiration was important for immediate effects on students and parental supervision showed a long-lasting effect (2005).

Researchers have found also that parental participation and supervision have significant indirect effects on student educational aspiration for the African American sample only (Hong & Ho, 2005). That finding strongly suggested that parental participation had a positive effect whereas parental supervision had a negative effect. For example, parent participation in the form of attending school meetings and events and communication with teachers and counselors can have positive effects on student educational aspiration, but parental supervision in the form of monitoring students' homework, time watching TV, and time going out with friends appears to negatively

impact the educational aspiration of African American students (2005). Parental school involvement can have a positive impact on the academic achievement of African American students.

The Academic Achievement of African American Males

During the past two decades, journal articles and scholarly books have detailed the deep troubles of African American males in society and school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lee, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Sanders, 2000). Some African American males continue to have increased high school dropout rates, low college enrollment, over-representation in special education classes, and low standardized test scores that reflect a pervasive problem of educational underachievement among African American males (Lee, 2003). There is a common perception that some African American males are most likely to turn away from school and form peer groups that discourage them from working hard and succeeding (Ogbu, 2003). Class privilege fails to inoculate African American males from low academic performance. Mortimer Zuckerman (2003) noted that middle class African American students have lower Scholastic Aptitude Test scores than White students from low income families. When compared to their White peers, middle-class African American males lag behind significantly in both grade point average and on standardized tests (Ogbu, 2003). Of any ethnic group, African American males are the most at risk for academic underachievement. However, African American parental school involvement can contribute to the academic achievement of their sons. Mandara (2006) concluded that some high-achieving African American males come from homes where parents use an authoritative parenting style, teach cultural awareness and personal power, monitor school assignments and keep counterproductive time to a minimum.

African American Parental School Involvement

Parental involvement in school has been associated positively with school achievement and success across ethnic groups (Hong & Ho, 2005; Spera, 2006). Developing a trusting relationship between parents and educators is one of the most effective ways to increase student achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). African Americans have historically prioritized educational attainment as one way to ensure a successful future for their children (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Recent research finding reported that some African American parents hold higher aspirations for their children than some Hispanic and White parents (Spera, 2006). Although parental involvement is widely recognized as a contributing factor to the academic success of African American students and the African American community values educational attainment, in many public schools, African American parents often are uninvolved (Gardner & Miranda, 2001).

In Abrams and Gibbs (2002) parent-school relationships study, African American parents were found more alienated from school than were White parents. Frequently, African American parents are reluctant to develop a relationship with their children's school. Some African American parents reported that they have been ignored, dismissed, or insulted by parents, teachers, or administrators (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). Several studies have revealed that African American parents who question or challenge the authority of teachers and administrators, or who do not mirror White middle-class norms are made to feel unwelcome within the educational system (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999).

There are “moments of inclusion” (Bradley, Johnson & Rawls, 2005, p. 422) when African American parents are encouraged to participate in school activities such as parent-teacher conferences and athletic events; interaction, however, with African American parents often does not occur outside of these traditional invitations. This lack of communication between schools and parents prevents the two environments from understanding the requirements and expectations of the home and school where the student must function. Research has suggested that African American parent involvement may be inhibited by the fact that many school personnel, who are mainly White middle-class women, receive limited culturally competency training with African American families (Troutman, 2001).

Diamond and Gomez (2004) found that middle-class African American parents customize their children’s education through school selection and experiences by intervening in ways that educators do not perceive as confrontational. These authors (2004) characterized middle-class African American parents as skilled or privileged choosers because they possessed substantial resources with which to choose (e.g., economic, human, social, and cultural capital). Some middle-class African American parents have the financial resources and choose to send their children to private schools.

African American Parents in Private Schools

Across the nation, there is a trend of African American students migrating to private schools. Many African American parents are choosing to send their children to private school because of their dissatisfaction with public schools and for a more rigorous education (Freedman, 2004; McKinnon, 2003). Several studies have documented the academic challenges of African American males (Kunjufu, 2001; Lee, 2003; Ogbu,

2003), including below average academic performance and standardized test scores, as well as low college enrollment. In an effort to improve student achievement of African American males, some parents are choosing to send their sons to private schools because the public schools are not meeting their children's needs (Thornburgh, 2006).

Further, research suggests that African American students who switched from public to private schools made significant improvement on achievement tests when compared to their public school counterparts (Chaddock, 2000). Many African American parents send their children to private schools to escape the crime and mediocre education of some public schools; they seek an enriched curriculum for their high-achieving children, smaller classes and individualized attention for their special needs children, and demand a rigorous education to increase their children's chance of getting into a good college (Mfuni, 2005). Sheldon (2002) reported that parents with access to more financial resources are more likely to be involved in their children's education.

In an effort to provide a quality education to the students and satisfaction to parents in the areas of diversity and inclusion, many private schools are searching for ways to increase the involvement of African American parents. The Network of African American Parents in Independent Schools (NAAPIS) encourages and supports African American parents who want to be involved in their child's school. This organization also challenges independent schools to provide an inclusive environment for all students and their families. According to NAAPIS, African American parents are reluctant to become active in their child's school because they feel intimidated by economic, educational, and cultural differences.

There is a limited amount of research on the experience of African Americans in private schools. Two recent studies highlight the experience of African American students in elite private schools (Kuriloff & Riechert, 2003; Ottley, 2007). Kuriloff and Reichert examined how high-achieving African American males from low income backgrounds navigated the academic culture of an elite private school. By mastering “a drill” that included “hard work, unwavering commitment, a will to win, a cool style, and self knowledge as learners,” they reported that the African American males developed a “transformative love of learning” (p. 751). The researchers described the future of African American males in this private school as one that leads to a pathway to success in college, graduation, and professional careers. Based on this study, when some African American males attend private school, they experience academic success. However, the culture of private school can be less nurturing to the personal and social development of some African American students.

Research suggests that African American students do not have the same private school experience as White students. In examining the experience of African American students in private schools, Luis Ottley (2007) described the culture of private schools as not inclusive of African American students. Frequently, African American students may be ill prepared and unaware of how to negotiate the cultural boundaries between home and school environments. While African American students are often proud of their school, White students had a greater sense of belonging (Ottley, 2007). According to the study, African American students felt it was both an honor and an opportunity to attend private school; this sense of opportunity came with a sense of indebtedness to the school.

The White students, however, did not indicate a similar sense of indebtedness, but their comments indicated a strong sense of cultural belonging (Ottley, 2007).

Ottley (2007) described the culture of many private schools as a culture of niceness; the unintended effects of making sure that some problems remain unacknowledged. In a culture of niceness, it is very difficult for anyone to complain, and if no one feels he or she can complain, a school cannot possibly have a clear sense of underlying concerns. Ottley (2007) reported that while African American students appreciate the niceness of the culture, most of those interviewed expressed concerns about their feelings of isolation and marginalization within the private school community.

African American students and parents in this study recounted the struggles of being an outsider within the private school community (Ottley, 2007). One parent was recorded as being concerned about the impact that racial micro-aggressions might have on the identity development of her son (2007). Racial micro-aggressions are verbal, nonverbal, or visual subtle insults directed toward people often automatically or unconsciously (Solorzano, 2000). African American students in this study experienced the culture of the private schools as an outsider within the school community. Some African American parents are intentional about strategically placing their children in the dominant American culture so their children are compelled to interact frequently with Whites (Lacy, 2004). At the same time, many African American parents are concerned with buffering their children from racism (Lacy, 2004). While some African American parents are investing in a private school education for the academic success of their children, many African American parents are concerned that their child's social and emotional needs are not being cultivated in the private school environment.

Conclusion

Clearly, parental school involvement is a critical component to students' academic development. Findings show that African American males, more than any other ethnic group, are most at risk for underachievement (Lee, 2003). Parents, however, can make the difference in promoting academic success (Englund et. al, 2004; Mattingly et. al, 2002). While members of the African American community are aware of the importance of education, some African American parents' daily practices do not reflect their involvement in their children's school. Some parents have experienced negative interactions with school personnel, and some parents are uncomfortable with the culture of the school (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). In an effort to increase the academic achievement of African American males, African American parents must become more involved in their sons' school experience. Teachers, administrators, and counselors are searching for ways to create a school environment that will be inclusive of minority parents. The majority of the research on parental school involvement, however, has been normed with middle-class Whites and low income African Americans in public schools (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Gardner & Miranda, 2001). Research demonstrates that parental involvement is culturally based (Hong & Ho, 2005), on class, race, and school context. The limited number of empirical studies on African American parental involvement at private schools is indicative of the relative dearth of research on the middle class African American community as a whole. Currently, there are no empirical studies on the experience of African American parents at private schools. Findings in this literature review, though, hold practical implications for educators and counselors. The culture of the school should be inviting to minority groups. Further research is needed to explore

the ways middle-class African American parents experience private school with their children.

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CHAPTER 2

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL

One of the most critical challenges facing our nation is improving the quality of education for African American males. The crisis that we face in this country by not providing quality education to African American boys is alarming. A recent report by the Schott Foundation titled *Given Half A Chance* (2008) chronicled the pervasive and systematic failure of public schools to educate African American males. Specifically, in the southeastern region of the United States, only 40% of African American males graduate from high school (Schott Foundation, 2008). At the middle school level, 90% of all African American eighth grade males are reading and performing math at the basic or below basic level (Schott Foundation). This report serves as a wake-up call that the state of affairs in educating African American boys in the southeast is disturbing. There is a demand for African American parents in this region to be given more educational choices, such as charter schools or tuition tax credits for private school (Delk, 2008). A growing number of upper middle class African American families in this region have the financial resources and are sending their children to private schools.

The U. S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2008) reported an increase in the percentage of students enrolled in nonsectarian private schools from 13 to 18%. According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS, 2008), private school enrollments are increasing at double the rate of all other

schools in this country. According to the NCES (2002), private school enrollment in 2002 was approximately 5.3 million students. Across the nation, there is a trend of African American students migrating to private schools. Many African American parents are choosing to send their children to private school because of their dissatisfaction with public schools and for a more rigorous education (Freedman, 2004; McKinnon, 2003). The reasons cited by families who send their children to private schools include individual attention, small classes, teacher excellence, and high academic standards (NAIS, 2008).

The main motive for families looking into independent private schools can be summarized in one word: *Quality*. According to Thornburgh (2006), the public schools are not meeting their children's educational needs. Parents simply want the best for their sons and daughters. Several studies have documented the academic challenges of African American males (Kunjufu, 2000; Lee, 2003; Ogbu, 2003), including below average academic performance and standardized test scores, as well as low college enrollment. In an effort to improve student achievement and provide a better opportunity for African American males, some parents are choosing to send their sons to private schools.

Research suggests that African American students who switched from public to private schools made significant improvement on achievement tests when compared to their public school counterparts (Chaddock, 2000). In addition, research suggests that minority students increase their achievement and attainment, reduce dropout rates, and improve critical thinking skills and ability to understand opposing viewpoints by attending a private school (NCES, 2002). In an effort to provide a quality education to the students and satisfaction to parents in the areas of diversity and inclusion, many private

schools are searching for ways to increase the involvement of African American parents. Parental involvement is widely recognized as a contributing factor to the academic success of African American students (Fann, 2001; Hong & Ho, 2005; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). In many urban schools, however, African American parents often are uninvolved (Gardner & Miranda, 2001).

Several important rationales exist for empirical research with African American parents. First, of any ethnic group, African American males face the greatest academic challenges (Fann, 2001; Schott, 2008). Second, research is needed to better understand the ways African American parents experience private schools. Although there are research studies that explore the experience of African American parents of public school students, the research on the experience of African American parents of private school students is limited. Third, there is a lack of adequate research on the relationship between school counselors and African American parents. Even with the lack of research, a significant issue that requires attention is parental belonging at school; this relates to the lack parental involvement. Finally, culturally competent school counselors and other educators must gain an understanding of the relevant experience of African American parents in order to meet their needs at school.

School Counselors Working with African American Parents

School counselors, by virtue of their training and skills, are poised to be instrumental in addressing the needs of educational challenges facing African American families. African American parents value the educational success of their children (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Troutman, 2001). Since educators have found parental involvement to be a predictor of academic achievement, schools are

recognizing African American parents as a critical component in improving the achievement of African American children. In addressing the needs of African American males concerning academic achievement, school counselors are ethically bound to make the academic environment more accessible to families (American School Counselor Association, 2008). The role of the school counselor is not only to work with students, but also, school counselors must be multiculturally competent in order to provide appropriate support to parents for the benefit of students' academic and developmental success (Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) launched a National Model for School Counseling Programs. The new vision for professional school counselors places the counselor in an active leadership role in the school (House & Hayes, 2002). Yet, minimum research has been done on the interaction between school counselors and African American parents. Bradley, Johnson, and Rawls (2005) provided nine strategies for school counselors when collaborating with African American parents: 1) explore your own attitudes about African American families and children; 2) obtain an accurate and well-balanced perspective of African American family life; 3) establish rapport; 4) make flexible meeting times; 5) establish community relationships; 6) perceive African American students as "at Promise" (p. 426); 7) establish parent groups; 8) advocate on behalf of African American parents and children; and 9) appreciate the strengths of African American families.

Developing a trusting relationship between parents and educators is one of the most effective ways to increase student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Frequently, African American parents are reluctant to develop a relationship with their

children's schools. Some African American parents reported that they have been ignored, dismissed, or insulted by other parents, teachers, or administrators (McNeil & Davis, 2003). In private schools, African American parents often feel hesitant to get involved in their child's school because they feel intimidated by economic, educational, and cultural differences (2003).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement has been linked strongly to student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). For the past 25 years, Laurence Steinberg, a pioneer in the field of parent-child relationships, has shown in numerous studies how parenting affects school achievement (Steinberg, 2005). Steinberg (2005) found that children from homes in which parents are warm, firm and supportive of the child's developing sense of autonomy perform better in school than their peers.

Research has suggested that parental involvement in a child's schooling is a pivotal process through which parents influence their children's academic success (Stewart, 2006). Typically, parental involvement includes attendance at teacher conferences and involvement in school activities like open houses and social activities. Intermittent contact with teachers and direct involvement with children outside the school setting also serve a monitoring function that allows parents to receive feedback about their children's academic performance. Some parents of high achieving African American students were described as engaged in distinctive parent-child interactions, like creating an emotionally supportive home environment, engaging in frequent and meaningful dialogue with their children, helping them with homework, and communicating clear and consistent behavioral limits.

“Moments of inclusion” (Bradley, Johnson & Rawls, 2005, p. 422) occur when African American parents are encouraged to participate in school activities like parent/teacher conferences and athletic events; interaction with African American parents often does not occur outside of these traditional invitations. This lack of communication between schools and parents prevents the two environments from understanding the requirements and expectations of the home and school where the student must function. Research has suggested that African American parental involvement may be inhibited by the fact that many school personnel, who are mainly White middle-class women, receive limited training with African American families (House & Martin, 1998; Troutman, 2001).

African American Parents' Experience in Private Schools

A considerable body of research documents the contribution of strong, trusting relationships between parents and educators to increased student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hong & Ho, 2005, Mandara, 2006). Yet, in Abrams and Gibbs (2002) parent-school relationships study, African American parents were found more alienated from school than are White parents. Several studies have revealed that African American parents who question or challenge the authority of teachers and administrators, or who do not mirror White middle-class norms are made to feel unwelcome within the educational system (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Samaras & Wilson, 1999).

Middle class African American parents experience school differently. Diamond and Gomez (2004) found that middle-class African American parents customize their children's education through school selection and experiences by intervening in ways that

educators do not perceive as confrontational. These authors (2004) characterized middle-class African American parents as skilled or privileged choosers because they possessed substantial resources with which to choose (e.g., economic, human, social, and cultural capital). As a result, some middle-class African American parents have capital and choose to send their children to elite private schools.

The private school experience creates many benefits and challenges for African American parents. Ottley (2007) described the culture of many private schools as a culture of niceness; the unintended effects of making sure that some problems remain unacknowledged. In a culture of niceness, it is very difficult for anyone to complain, and if no one feels he or she can complain, a school cannot possibly have a clear sense of underlying concerns. Ottley (2007) reported that while African American students and parents appreciate the niceness of the culture, most of those interviewed expressed concerns about their feelings of isolation and marginalization within the private school community. African American parents in this study recounted the struggles of being an outsider within the private school community (Ottley, 2007). One parent expressed concern about the impact that racial micro-aggressions might have on the identity development of her son (2007). Racial micro-aggressions are verbal, nonverbal, or visual subtle insults directed toward people often automatically or unconsciously (Solorzano, 2000).

Conversely, some African American parents are intentional about strategically placing their children in the dominant American culture so their children are compelled to interact frequently with Whites students and faculty (Lacy, 2004). At the same time, many African American parents are concerned with buffering their children from racism

(Lacy, 2004). While some African American parents are investing in a private school education for the academic success of their children, many parents are concerned that their child's social and emotional needs are not being cultivated in the private school environment.

The Network of African American Parents in Independent Schools (NAAPIS) encourage and support those African American parents who want to be involved and to challenge independent schools to provide an inclusive environment for all students and their families. According to NAAPIS (2008), African American parents are reluctant to become active in their child's school because they feel intimidated by economic, educational, and cultural differences. Other parents do not remain active because they have been ignored, dismissed, or insulted by other parents, teachers, administrators, or staff members (NAAPIS, 2008).

Given the pervasive need for African American parental involvement and the growing trend of private school enrollment for African American children, there is a need to gain insight into the experience of African American parents of children in predominantly White private schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school. Through couple interviews and a focus group, African American parents described the ways they experience a private school within the context of their parental involvement. Two research questions guided the investigation: (a) what are the lived experiences of African American parents of middle school boys in a private school, and (b) in what context did the parents have the experiences?

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways African American parents of middle school boys experience a predominantly White elite private school. To undertake this qualitative investigation, a phenomenological approach incorporating grounded theory was utilized. This research approach is well suited for exploratory investigation of phenomena that are not yet clearly defined within the literature (Creswell, 1998). Due to the unique experiences of middle class African American parents at private schools as well as the absence of their experiences in the literature, it is essential that their voices be heard and understood. The phenomenological approach is primarily an attempt to understand the meaning of the experiences of African American parents in a White elite private school. Phenomenology serves as the rationale behind efforts to understand African American parents by entering into their field of perception in order to see life as these parents see it (Creswell, 1998).

A grounded theory method was used to enhance understanding of the experience of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory is used within phenomenological studies to aid in the creation and development of a theory where one is lacking (Mertens, 2005). A grounded theory method contributes to a rigorous study through its use of clear guidelines to detail the relationships between the study's concepts (Charmaz, 2000). The methods of grounded theory entail inductive strategies for gathering and analyzing data in order to build theoretical support for the analysis process, the researcher used ongoing analysis to inform additional data collection to build and modify developing theories (Charmaz, 2000).

Setting

The private school (academy) was founded in 1900 as an all-male military boarding school. In 1964, the school became co-educational, and in 1966, changed its name and eliminated the military program from the curriculum. The boarding program was discontinued in 1993. Like many independent schools in America, the academy population had been exclusively White until the mid-1960s. In 1971 the academy succumbed to the pressures of the Civil Rights movement and enrolled its first African American student. Now, the student population includes a minority (i.e. African American, Hispanic, and Asian) composition of approximately 28 percent.

The academy is divided into five schools on two separate campuses in suburban communities in the southeastern region of the United States. It serves more than 2,900 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The school draws from 22 counties and offers a varied athletic program in all schools with impressive regional and state records, a professionally appointed fine arts center, and an academic program that affords intellectually gifted graduates advanced placement standing in the nation's elite colleges and universities. The academy admits students who have demonstrated above average to highly exceptional intellectual ability and offers appropriately-paced instructional tracks to accommodate this range of ability in its college preparatory curriculum. All graduates are accepted to four-year colleges and universities, and their parents are predominately college graduates who are employed in professional and managerial positions.

Recently, this academy was ranked as the number one private school in the southeast region (Top, 2008). The academy markets itself as an institution that has embraced a philosophy of education that asserts the importance and uniqueness of the

individual student. Because of the depth and breadth of offerings, the academy professes to help every child discover and refine his or her individual talents and abilities. The school strives to encourage the development of well-rounded individuals and to help students learn to appreciate the importance of academics, arts, and athletics. The academy motto is “Excellence, Character, and Opportunity.”

Middle School is a time of tremendous growth and change (e.g., intellectually, emotionally, physically and socially), and the middle school program at the academy provides a transitional period for the academic and social growth of seventh and eighth grade students. Throughout the program, the middle school faculty and administration are intentional about the growth and development of the students; the academy provides resources to help students achieve academic success. Study hall, tutorial, and tutoring are available resources beyond the classroom. Toward the goal of academic success, a 25 minute study hall is added at the end of the school day. During this time, students return to their homerooms to complete homework, get tutorial assistance from teachers, or work with counselors on study skills and organization. Also, students have an additional 30 minutes for tutorial. Tutorial is a time when all teachers and counselors are available to help students prepare for tests, answer questions, review study strategies and organizational skills.

The middle school environment is designed to create, cultivate, and nurture the socialization of students. Through the Connect 2 Kids program, students talk about issues like racism and stereotyping, as well as peer pressure and illegal drugs. This national media program is designed to help students understand character and life skills and to explain the consequences of poor decisions. Through a wide range of extra curricular

options, students develop a sense of community and responsibility as they are encouraged to participate in the arts, athletics, and clubs. During the fall, the middle school administration plans an activity day that includes a rock climbing wall, a bucking bronco, and an inflatable sumo wrestler. Further, students are given the opportunity to socialize on campus throughout the year. Specific examples include a casual dance in the fall and a more formal dance in the spring. Lunch is another opportunity for the students to socialize on campus. Students have the freedom to choose the cafeteria, campus store, student lounge or courtyard to spend lunchtime. Also, students have the option to study, play basketball, tag football, ping pong or fuse ball during lunch.

The middle school student body consists of 580 students; the African American population is 18 % or 106 students. The goal of the school is to instill students with a joy for learning, creativity, and the mind set to attain his or her fullest potential and academic growth. The middle school has 69 faculty members. As a school counselor, the researcher is one of eight African American faculty members who make up 12% of the faculty. Also, the researcher is a parent of an eighth grade boy at the middle school.

Participants

Participants were 12 African American couples ranging in age from 32 to 53 years ($M=45$) who have a son in the private middle school. All couples were college educated and upper middle class. Five of the parents have terminal degrees (i.e. M.D., J.D., & Ph.D.), four have graduate degrees, and three have completed undergraduate degrees. The annual income breakdown was as follows: 8 (100,000-299,999), 2 (300,000-499,999), and 2 (500,000 and up). Seven of the couples enrolled their sons in the private school during the middle school years, three enrolled during upper

elementary, and two entered the academy intermittently during kindergarten through middle school. Six couples have two or more children at the private school and four couples have children at this school and other schools (i.e. one public and three at other private schools). Six participants attended private school and reported their son as the second generation to attend private school.

Primary researcher. The primary researcher acknowledges that she is an informant in this study and as such, her lived experiences and worldview influence the research process (Creswell, 1998). Most salient are her identities as an African American individual of impoverished background with a combination of privileged and oppressed school experiences. She is a parent of a middle school boy at the private school. In addition, the researcher has a history of extensive engagement in the community, having spent six years as counselor and 10 years as a middle school teacher. This extensive experience facilitated her understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and enhanced her ability to establish trusting relationships with the parents in this study.

Research team. The research team consisted of the primary researcher (a doctoral candidate in counselor education), a school psychologist (doctoral student in school psychology), and a clinical psychologist (a Ph.D. graduate of counseling psychology). All researchers have completed course work and have experience in qualitative methods and analysis. The researchers were married females. One of the researchers was of European descent and two were of African descent. Two of the researchers have extensive work experience in schools serving as teacher, counselor, and school psychologist. One researcher has experience as a therapist in clinical settings. Phenomenological approaches guided the primary researcher to bracket, or withhold previous assumptions, before data

analysis (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, the research team described their prejudgments about African American parents in White elite private school, in addition to their expectations for emerging themes with the primary researcher. As a result of their various backgrounds and experiences, members of the research team possessed assumptions that may have had an impact on their interaction with the data. All members of the team assumed that the parents are privileged with cultural, social and economic capital. Two of the members assumed that the participants' racial/ethnic identities would have negative consequence in the White elite private school environment. This information was helpful as the team analyzed the data and reached a consensus. During team meeting discussions and being open to the emerging themes, the researchers were able to suspend these judgments.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in two ways. Purposeful sampling procedures in the form of convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants (Merriam, 1998) in an attempt to obtain other possible participants from African American parents within the school community. Participants who initially agreed to participate were asked to recommend additional participants for the current study. When the initial contact was made between the primary researcher and the participant, a description of the purpose and design of the study was thoroughly explained. A meeting time and place was established, with seven participants requesting the interview be conducted in their home, three participants requested that the interview take place in the researcher's home, and two participants requested the interview be held at their place of business.

Informed consent detailing potential benefits and risks of the study was emphasized and obtained from each participant prior to the beginning of the study. The couple interviews began with a series of demographic questions (see Appendix A for questionnaire) identified by previous research as important to the investigation of African American parental school experiences. The researcher conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for list of questions), lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes in length. A less structured design within the interview gave the investigator an opportunity to respond to the interview as it unfolded, to explore the emerging perceptions of the participant, and to follow up on new thoughts (Merriam, 1998). These interviews were exploratory in nature, with the goal of expanding the researcher's knowledge in this area where little is known (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation occurred (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and it appeared no new concepts, categories, or relationships were emerging from the data.

At the conclusion of the interviews, the primary researcher facilitated a member check by reviewing the main themes and sub themes and requested participants' feedback (Merriam, 1998). This member check (focus group) was conducted with 10 participants at the researcher's home. The goal of the focus group was to both develop and elucidate the information given within the couple interviews. Follow-up questioning was used to increase the richness of the data (Patton, 1990). Finally, after all data collected from the interviews and focus group, an audit trial was conducted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study.

Data Sources

Demographic sheet. Participants completed a demographic sheet containing questions that examine their experiences and perceptions of a White elite private school. The demographic sheet also contained questions about participants' age, socioeconomic level, education level and extended family school experiences.

Semi-structured interviews. The first phase of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews with the couple participants. The purpose of the research was to understand the experiences of African American parents at a White elite private school and to derive meaning from their experiences; the interview was chosen as the primary form of gathering data (Creswell, 1998). The goal was to understand each participant's experiences and perceptions related to a given situation in a non-threatening way, such that meanings emerge, develop, and are shaped by the discourse (Creswell). All interviews were designed to clarify and elaborate on responses, ensure accuracy of responses, explore the demographic sheet, and collaborate with participants to use emerging themes. The interviews ranged 45-90 minutes in length and were conducted by the primary researcher. A professional transcriptionist transcribed and verified the transcripts of the interviews. The primary researcher listened to the interviews and reviewed transcripts a second time.

Reflexive Journal. As researcher bias is a concern with this study, the reflexive journal serves to preserve the voice of the participants and minimize the influence of research bias on data collection. The primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process in order to facilitate the disclosure of researcher bias and ensure confirmability through measuring the extent of the primary researcher's biases on

the results of the study (Denzin, 1997). After each interview and interaction with the participants, the researcher recorded her thoughts, feelings, and opinions. To assess the degree to which the researcher's biases influence the outcome of the study, the journal was coded and discussed with the research team.

Focus group. The second phase of the study included a two hour focus group with ten parents from the couple interviews. The focus group was used to triangulate the data collected in the couple interviews. Facilitated by the primary researcher, participants were asked questions to confirm the emerging themes from the couple interviews in order to strengthen validity of initial data analyses. The focus group included ice-breaker activities, as well as time to share conversation during a meal. The ice breaker and meal were included in order to increase comfort level and engagement with one another. The data collected was informative and confirmed the emerging themes.

Audit Trial. An audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of the research project to the development and report of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These are records that are kept regarding what was done in the investigation. A second year doctoral student in counselor education was the auditor for this study. The auditor examined the raw data, data reduction and analysis products, process notes, and reflexive journal. The audit trial enhanced confirmability and dependability of the study.

Data Collections and Analysis

The data collection and analysis process was recursive in nature in order to strengthen verification procedures in the study. This process included seven steps (Creswell, 1998). Step one included the research team bracketing their assumptions about

the phenomenon of African American parents' experience in a White elite private school. In step two, the primary researcher interviewed the parent participants as a couple. The transcriptionist transcribed and verified the interviews.

In step three, the research team used phenomenological techniques (Creswell) to treat the data. Independently, the three researchers went through the following steps with the participants' interviews in order to move from a broad to a specific understanding of the data required by a phenomenological approach: a) horizontalization (listing of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements of participants about the phenomenon); b) meaning units (categories giving the "texture" of the phenomenon) description of what was experience; and c) structural description (collapsing the horizontalization and meaning units into the essence of how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants) (Creswell, 1998).

In step four, the research team used constant comparison to identify new themes and subthemes that did not clearly fit under previously identified domains (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and documented the final themes and subthemes for the participants. The research team replicated steps one through four for the remaining participants. At the conclusion of the data collection with the couple participants, the research team generated a list of questions to confirm and verify emerging themes. In step five, the primary researcher checked the themes by conducting a focus group with ten participants from the couple interviews. This final validation was undertaken by presenting the collective results of major themes and subthemes (Appendix C) and the overarching theme of opportunity: benefit-cost (Appendix D). All ten participants stated that the appendices captured the essence of their experience.

In step six, the research team collapsed the themes of the couple participants' interviews and focus group participants. In step seven, an audit of the data collection (e.g., raw data, data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction and synthesis products, memoing, and reflexive journal) was conducted by someone who is outside of the research team (a counselor education doctoral student). Bracketing of researcher assumptions and memoing researcher reactions were used throughout the data reduction and analysis phases as validity checks to demonstrate dependability, credibility, and coherence of the data analysis (Creswell).

Finally, the primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process in order to facilitate the disclosure of researcher bias and ensure confirmability through measuring the extent of the primary researcher's bias on the results of the study (Denzin, 1997). Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted within the research team throughout the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005).

Results

This exploratory study investigated the phenomenological experiences of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school in a suburban community. Detailed exploration and analysis of the parental school experiences led to an enhanced understanding of these parents' collective experience. The data were collected from the couple interviews, focus group, demographic information, and reflexive journal. These two research questions guided this investigation: (a) what are the experiences of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school and (b) in what context did the parents have the experiences?

Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data: better opportunity/brand, parental connection, selective engagement, parental struggle, and parental marginalization. Additionally, eight sub themes were identified related to African American parental school experience.

Better Opportunity/Brand

The promise of better educational opportunities propelled 100% of the African American parents in this study to send their sons to a predominantly White elite private school. The public school in their community was not considered to be an attractive option. All couples in this study chose a private school education in order to give their sons an enhanced foundation for college. During interviews, the parents provided the following responses when asked reasons for sending their son to a private school:

Couple 10 said,

To us it was one stop shopping. It was like they had all the after school programs and sports; they had anything that I felt my son might want to do. Everything was there, and I was really impressed by that. So, that's what really got us and then the 100% of graduates attending college was like icing on the cake.

Couple 11 said,

In the area where we live, the public schools are inadequate; the academic and the social environment are just not what we'd like for our son to be a part of, so we felt like we were practically forced to send him to a private school.

Couple 7 said,

I just knew that public school was not the right place for him. The influences, the social influence and the academics; I didn't feel like they would challenge him in a way that he needed to be challenged and I just thought public school was not the best option for him.

The parents stated that this private school offers a more academically challenging curriculum, exposure to a variety of programs, and nurtures their sons to be well rounded.

For instance, Couple 1 described:

This school is much like a breath of fresh air in comparison [public school] This environment where I feel like our son is doing well, he's learning, he's in an environment that fosters learning and he's got people around him that nurture.

Couple 8 stated:

When I first interviewed and talked with the administration at this school. they emphasized how they were trying not to just teach straight academics but they were trying to make the child well rounded and I'd never heard that any place else, not even from other large private schools in this area.

With another parent, she expressed that she chose this private school because its name brand would lead to a better opportunity for her son's future success.

Couple 12 stated:

I understood this private school to be a brand; like a brand name and that in order for my son to achieve beyond the level of most of the public school children that he would compete with or even private school children, he needed that extra help in this country to succeed. So, I don't mind paying the thousands of dollars that we pay for the brand. I don't think he's getting anything more, really, that I could provide him or even public school. I want him to have that brand because as long as we can afford it and we can get that to him as an advantage versus wearing the generic, he can wear the branded one and really people look at it superficially as an advantage, just because he went to this private school. He got something more than someone else and I just understand that it's a very superficial reason for me to send him there but I think that would be an advantage for him.

Parental Connection

Invested in their children's education and engaged in their son's activities, 75% of the African American couples reported feeling most connected to the school community when the environment is inviting and open. The parents identified two sub themes of

parental connection: all couples identified sporting events and nine couples identified the faculty.

Sporting Events. Collectively, couples shared the importance of sports for their sons. According to these parents, sports build character, camaraderie, and give their sons a place to belong at the White elite private school. Further, all twelve couples reported that being involved in the sporting events has allowed them to develop relationships with other parents. While supporting their sons at sporting events, these parents reported feeling most connected with other parents in the school community. This is contrary to the divisive experience when attending parent activities (i.e. parent coffee). Couple 11 described:

I think sports bring you together. You sit and you talk because you're talking about sports. I think if it's outside of sports, there are so many dynamics that can make you different that people don't necessarily...feel comfortable. You can go to a [parent] coffee and still see all of the Black parents over here and all the White parents over there. Whereas, when you go to a game, the parents are kind of co-mingled. They still have some division but are co-mingled and looking at a common sight. That makes it different when you're talking about common thing. But, when you go to a coffee, it can be a little bit more divisive just looking at the crowd so you have to kind of make an effort to co-mingle.

These couples are active leaders in their professions and community. Involvement and volunteerism are natural commitments that they enjoy. 50% of the couples reported being actively involved in athletic activities at the school. Through their involvement, these parents developed relationships with other parents that gave them a sense of community. One couple who provided leadership for the booster club as parent coordinators shared:

Being involved in football was a positive experience because we interfaced with the parents of 55 kids who were distinctly positive and broad based. Every game we're involved doing something; so, that reverberated back to us as a result of being involved when there were

issues. When there was an issue with our son, a parent called up promptly and said I think you need to know about this. I think without the relationship driven by the involvement, we might not have heard about that so compassionately or so quickly and that was important.

Faculty. 75% of the couples perceived this private school as the best academic environment for their sons. The parents described the faculty as open [communication] and approachable. The administrators, teachers, and staff were reported to be positive and available. The inviting atmosphere at the middle school gave couples a sense of belonging and connection. These couples reported the most positive experience at the White elite private school was the faculty's professionalism, knowledge of their son, and interest in his academic success. Couple 1 shared his opinion about the principal:

The middle school administration has been positive; definitely the principal. I think that he seems approachable. He comes across to me like the kids like him and they enjoy him. I know that our son talks positively about him and he thinks that he [principal] is cool. I shook his hand before and he seems approachable not confrontational; he seems like you can talk to him. I haven't needed to speak with him in those terms, but he seems like an okay guy.

Couple 7 shared their experience with the faculty:

I immediately think about the 7th grade parent orientation day when I was able to communicate with you [the researcher] as well as with the principal. I felt both were approachable and open. We had a concern that night with a response that a teacher had made about e-mails. Our concern was handled immediately. And, now I think it actually turned out to be a positive with the teacher. At first we had some serious concerns because we didn't know when teacher made the statement that she was frustrated with our child. But communicating with the administration and teacher, things seem to turn around. The response was immediate and I've even gotten positive email just out of the blue from this teacher as well as two other teachers.

Selective Engagement

Although all couples reported the importance of school involvement, 67 % of the couples described their parental school involvement as a personal preference. These

parents shared that they chose when to engage with the school community. The couples described their selective engagement being a result of the nature of the middle school, but more importantly for their son's independence. Also, six fathers noted that the parental school activities mostly consist of white stay-at-home moms; therefore, in their home, the wife was the selected parent representative for the family. They identified two sub themes of their selective engagement as within the school community and child-centered activities.

Within school community. Whereas 50 % of couples reported being an active part of the school community, 42 % of the other couples reported that sometimes they chose not to engage with the school community in order to balance parental school involvement with their son's autonomy. Couple 5 described:

We try to realize that this is our son's experience and we're not trying to make it our experience. So, we don't want him to see us at every turn but we want to have enough involvement so that he knows we're invested but not to smother him.

Another parent shared her selective engagement within the school community in relationship to her son's growth and development. Couple 6 said:

I want him [son] to feel like this is his environment and he could be the master of it and he can excel as an individual instead of as mommy's little boy. He's getting to that age where he's my height and you know he needs to start being a man and I think that's part of him growing up.

As the selected representative for parental school involvement, 42% of wives reported not fitting in with the stay-at-home moms. 25 % of the wives are homemakers and stated that they find many of the parents at these activities to be "pretentious and superficial." As a result, they expressed a lack of desire to be part of the school community. Couple 7 stated,

I'm as part of the community as much as I put into it. I don't feel like I want to be more involved or part of it. I would feel comfortable doing so.

Couple 6 shared,

I don't necessarily feel a part of the school community; I don't feel that I'm ostracized or isolated. I feel like it's more that I don't want to be a part of the school community

Child-centered activities. The couples have substantial economic, social and cultural capital. The average annual income ranges from 100,000 to 300,000 with two couples gross income exceeding 500,000. These parents are community, civic and cultural leaders. Several couples reported their extensive volunteerism national and internationally. Additionally, 58% of the couples reported strategically planning their son's education. For instance, four of these upper-middle class parents planned their son's schooling before birth. Couple 12 shared:

We planned on him being in private school. I planned on him being at this private school before he was even born. He was in the womb and I went to the school and got an admissions pamphlet. I wanted to know what he had to have done in order to go there. I've always respected that school and that was just where he was going to be.

Endowed to their children's education, the parents reported attending activities that involved their sons. 42% of the couples stated that their purpose for choosing an elite private school was for their son's future success; therefore, they only select to engage in activities that enhance the growth and development of their sons. Three couples shared that they found most general school activities not aligned with their purpose for their son or a good use of their time. Couple 6 shared:

I attend [activities] if they have a good topic but what I find is a lot of that is... a lot of those times interactions with the other parents end up being a gripe session and ends up being gossipy and those interactions I don't cherish. So, if it's something that is pertinent to my child's education then I'm going to go but I'm not going to go to the ones that talk about how to handle suicide and how to be a

better parent and those...if they've got something substantive to talk about then I'll go but even then the interaction with other parents is real competitive and often very negative.

Parental Struggle

Although parents uniformly shared that sending their son to a private school to be overwhelmingly advantageous for college preparation, 58% of the couples reported a constant tug of war (struggle) between current cost and future benefit of a private school education for their sons. These parents struggle with the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and vestiges of racism.

Lack of culturally relevant pedagogy. All couples identified with the African American culture. 50% of the couples shared their experiences with the Civil Rights Movement and integrating neighborhoods in the southeast during the early 70's. In their community, education is the pathway to success. Parents shared their struggle with sacrificing the lack of cultural relevant teaching and curriculum for the educational benefits in the future. These couples reported having to supplement African American history at home because minimum attention given to African American contributions at this private school. Couple 1 reported:

There is no African American culture that my son is learning about at the school. I asked him "what are they [the school] saying about Black History month?" He said "oh, they make a mention of something over the announcements. That's it...just that blurred. So, that makes me have to tell him: Okay, let me tell you about this happening on this day in Black History. So, I feel whew! We're missing it again. Here we go again. My son's school experience should include him. He should see himself in his textbooks. He should be able to relate to the stories that he is reading about.

Couple 9 expressed,

I think there is a lack of affirmation and concern involved for the [African American] culture . . . for the distinct cultural needs and affiliations of the African American in that environment.

The upper-middle class parents in this study are highly educated professionals. Their professions include one CEO, several doctors, administrators, attorneys and entrepreneurs. These parents shared that increasing the diversity of the faculty would have a great impact on making the environment better for African American and White students. 58% of the couples reported the lack of African American faculty and administration in the school is not fair to the African American children and an insult to their parents. Couple 2 elaborated:

It bothers me that the custodial staff looks a certain way versus the teaching staff looks another way. It's not representative of the student body and the kids don't need to see that all of the janitors are African Americans. That's just not fair for them to...it's not fair that reality hits them in the face everyday they walk out of the door. They don't need to walk in the door and get hit in the face with it. So, that really bothers me. If you're going to be representative of the community by hiring African Americans for those menial jobs then you should also be representative of the community in your professionals; there are qualified Africans of color throughout the city who can come in there and teach just like the White teachers.

Couple 6 shared:

I really do believe that the administrators of that school don't realize what a great/magnificent impact a multi-cultural...an African American male faculty would have on all of the kids.

Vestiges of racism. 50% of the couples reported visible traces of racism with team sports. Three of these parents are former high school and college athletes who are well versed in sports and the sports selection process. As might be expected, they have introduced their sons to sports at an early age and their sons have participated on athletic teams for a number of years; thus, their sons' athletic skill level is high. Parents expressed their frustration with the unfairness of how children are chosen for the baseball and basketball teams even when they are athletically talented. Couple 9 shared:

You could tell in the end that it was pre-determined who was going to be on the baseball team. They actually had a kid who was in a cast (his throwing arm/dominant hand) who made the team. So, how in the world do you explain to your child that you get cut and they keep somebody who can't even physically play the game? And that was our frustration.

Couple 2 echoed:

It's an unwritten rumor, no not even a rumor, it is! The baseball team only accepts one Black on each team and if you go through each level of the baseball program, you will see one African American boy on each team.

One parent reported attending the tryouts to actually see the talent because he was aware of the bias selection process and Couple 2 shared:

I look at the unfairness of how the kids are chosen for the teams; the best aren't chosen. I think it's chosen for diversity reasons and personal relationships

Parental Marginalization

Unlike the positive atmospheres at sporting events and with the faculty, couples expressed feeling like an outsider within the parent community. 50% of the couples reported an unwelcoming environment with other parents. In addition, couples described disheartening experiences with cliques and feelings of distrust among other parents. Six couples noted social isolation occurring in the context of parent activities. One couple reported:

The parent activities are very territorial. And it is disheartening sometimes. Because, you know it. He [husband] knows that I won't say anything. I'll just sit back and kinda observe. Because my thinking is that you really don't know who I am. You know what I mean? Because, I don't feel like I have to say "hi, how are you? ALL THE TIME! Because you feel like after a while, you're working hard. You know, I'm like (pats her chest) I'm just who I am. And we are who we are and we are here, so.

Parent Activities. Ten couples have children at this private school, as well as at other schools. 40 % of the couples reported being actively involved at a public school and other private schools. However, when describing their experience at this school, couples

reported feeling marginalized when attending parent coffee, parent club, and parent volunteer activities. Parents described the pretentiously nice environment at the parent activities as closed and unaccepting of African American parents. This culture of niceness creates feelings of isolation and marginalization; it is supported in the literature (Ottley, 2007). Couple 4 who is actively involved at another private school explained:

The parental involvement here is different from our other private school. I just don't think it's an open campus. Even though they're friendly and nice, they're not really accepting our race. Yeah, you know it's a very contrived friendliness (wife added).

Couple 1 shared:

When we first appeared there [private school], we relatively never spoke to any of the parents outside of the sporting events. There was no welcoming committee. It is evident when you attend an activity, the people who know each other, they sit together. And they sit in the same spot all the time and I have heard and seen them say "who's that one?" (pointing finger). You hear them sitting in their little cliques saying "who's that one?" You know, I'm here to participate in the activity and I don't care who's sitting next to whom. But that seems to be the culture even amongst the parents, like "who's that?" (snobbish tone is noted).

In my interviewing with Couple 7, the husband spoke to his wife's dislike for attending parent activities:

She [wife] does not want to be there. No, here is what the situation is...there's a lot of phoniness going on, let's just break it down. Yeah, okay (wife added). Like some people are not really who they truly are and so she wants to avoid being phony because she does not have a phony bone in her body and so that is her approach and so she wants to avoid things like that and ...I agree (wife confirmed).

The detailed exploration and analysis of the experiences of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school within this study has enhanced our knowledge of how these couples view the opportunity, struggle, engagement, connection and marginalization. Although they do share much in their

thinking and experiences that the benefits of a private school education outweigh the costs, these parents do have unique experiences, strengths, and needs.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study provide important insight into the experiences of African American parents of middle school boys at a predominantly White elite private school. The couples in this study are remarkable in their commitment to their sons' academic achievement. These parents are not taking the "half chance" that the public schools are offering to educate their sons (Schott, 2008). They are purposeful in planning their sons' educational paths. With the 100% guarantee of high school graduation and college enrollment, this private school is an attractive choice for many upper middle class parents of African American boys.

Collectively, these parents described their investment at this private school as an opportunity to give their sons a quality education. With this opportunity, these parents discussed a benefit-cost experience. The experiences that the parents reported range from extremely positive to negative. Parents expressed total satisfaction of their sons' academic achievement at this private school because they believe this experience will be beneficial in preparing their boys for college; however, at the same time, these parents described this school community as excluding African Americans from the curriculum, professional staff, and team sports. This perceived exclusion is a cost that these parents are sacrificing for the academic success of their boys.

This study confirms some aspects of the culture of "niceness" described in the literature (Ottley, 2007). Many couples reported "fake friendliness" while describing the parent culture of the middle school. Several of the families in this study expressed the

pretentious and transparent nature of the White majority parents. According to several of the participants, the niceness and friendliness from the White majority appears to be insincere and superficial. All of the parents reported that matters of race are absent from the conversations; therefore, these African American parents and students at this private school are left without a voice.

Based on the data collected through interviews, focus group, and the researcher at the school, the following describes the phenomenon of African American parents at this private school: better opportunity/brand, struggle, selective engagement, connectivity, and marginalization. In order to provide their sons with a better educational opportunity, these parents struggled with sacrificing their sons' cultural and emotional needs for academic success at this private school. These parents reported the absence of the African American experience and socialization of African American boys as critical components missing in the school community. According to the philosophy of the academy, this school embraces the importance and uniqueness of the individual student. Without addressing the emotional and developmental needs of African American boys, however, the integrity of the stated philosophy is in question.

This study also supports the existing literature on "moments of inclusion" for African American parents at school (Bradley, Johnson & Rawls, 2005). Outside of attending their son's activities and parent-teacher meetings, these parents are rarely invited to participate in leadership/decision-making processes of the school. Leadership opportunities include principal council, parent club officers, and parent representative on the academy board. African American parents are not invited into these leadership roles; thus, they are not participating in critical conversations about the school.

Clearly, the parents are selective in their engagement with the school community. Although understanding the importance of parental involvement, these upper middle class parents skillfully choose (Diamond and Gomez, 2004) their level of involvement as it relates to the academic achievement of their sons. When involved in child-centered activities, these parents reported feeling connected to the school community. Their purpose of involvement is not for their socialization but to enhance a successful school experience for their sons.

Further, this research supports the existing literature on African American parents in private schools that states that when interacting with the majority White parents in the school community, feelings of isolation and marginalization occur for them (NAAPIS, 2008). The upper middle class African American parents are professional leaders in their community who place a high value on their time and commitments. Attending parent activities that focus on White privilege issues is not a priority for these African American parents. The parents reported that these activities are usually not relevant to the growth and development of their sons.

Implications

Overall, the data suggests that the African American parents of middle school boys at this predominantly White elite private school were appreciative of the academic preparation. These parents stated that they preferred to exist in a private school environment rather than in the midst of the plight of public schools. A common refrain during the study was “choose your battles.” The social and emotional toll, however, that the private school experience requires of some African American male students suggests that private schools should enhance their efforts to learn more about students from

diverse backgrounds. Enhanced efforts by private schools would give African American boys the most well-rounded experience possible. African American parents who believe that school is only about getting a good education and getting into a good college should be better informed about the short-term and long-term impacts of this type of social and educational experience on the emotional well-being of their children.

Recommendations

The parents in this study had clear ideas on how to improve the African American experience and increase parental involvement at this private school. All of the parents expressed a desire for the school to hire more African American teachers and administrators. One method toward that goal would be recruitment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to increase the chances of hiring qualified people of color. Also, with such a highly selected group of parents, it is suggested that the school invite these, and other African American professionals in the school community to be guest lectures, speakers, and teachers. To heighten the awareness and sensitivity to the different needs of African American students and parents, these parents suggested an in-service program for administrators, teachers and other parents.

Well meaning adults often teach children to ignore differences and focus on similarities. Administrators and teachers at the middle school often state that they “do not see color”; however, such comments often discount and disconnect the majority White faculty from African American parents because African American parents and students want their color to be acknowledged. One important way to do this would be to review and adjust the curriculum to include the study of African Americans. The comments from the participants in this study could be used to improve the education at this private school

by encouraging the administration to listen and act by including African American culture in the school's reading and literature selections. Half of the parents expressed frustration at the voluminous amount of Jewish content in reading and literature selections; yet, there is a noticeable absence of the African American culture throughout the reading and literature selections.

Further, teachers and parents should be educated about White privilege and the African American experience in private schools. Additionally, the parent club should recruit and include African Americans on its leadership team. Parent club activities were reported to be the most marginalized events for the parents in this study. Parent club discussions should include topics that are specifically related to African American boys. Finally, objective, outside consultants could be valuable in assessing the school climate, advising school professionals, and facilitating a strategic plan focused on diversity for this private school.

Limitations of this Study

While this study's results provide important information on the experience of African American parents of middle school boys in a predominantly White elite private school, caution should be taken in relating these findings to other African American parents in private schools. While the data is thorough and in-depth, only a convenient sample of African American parents was interviewed for this study. All couples who participated in this study are upper middle class African Americans; therefore, it is unclear as to whether the findings of this study would have significant meaning for African American parents in a lower socio-economic class. Further investigation is

needed to determine if these findings have similar meaning to African American parents in other socio-economic groups.

Conclusion

As a counselor and parent of an African American boy at the middle school, this study was not only a professional quest but also a personal journey. Professionally, I wanted to explore the experiences of African American parents and search for ways to improve their parental school involvement. In conducting this research, one discovery surprised and positioned me with the stakeholders in the school community. The discovery that I have come to embrace is the tremendous power of *influence*. Working in an elite academic community in which I have the respect of the administrators, teachers, students, and parents, has significant meaning for me. This research has led me to reflect on how I will use my power of influence in my work environment. Unlike the parents in this study, because I am the school counselor, I have a voice. This research has given me insight and empowered me to use my voice responsibly in making a difference in the African American experience at this private school.

Like the parents interviewed for this research, however, I am concerned about the emotional impact of educating my African American son in a predominantly White elite environment. Many times I ponder: education or esteem? I have realized that it is critical to provide both quality education and emotional development to African American boys at this private school. Although African American boys are performing well academically, the White elite school experience can prevent them from having a full, rich, or healthy learning experience. This less than optimal environment for African

American boys negates the promise of the academy to recognize the uniqueness of each student and can inhibit the parents rights of providing their sons a better opportunity.

It is hoped that this study might contribute to the efforts of providing a quality education to African American male students and satisfaction to their parents in the areas of diversity and inclusion at predominantly White elite private schools. Also, because I am a leader in the school community, I am charged with making a difference with this research. Finally, the study has multiple implications for administrators, teachers, counselors, students and parents. The benefit-cost phenomenon of these parents' experiences tells the story of opportunity in this predominantly White elite private school.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

In an effort to determine if the variables of this study are related to your family's socio-economic status please respond to the following questions. Your answers will be kept private and confidential.

1. Please circle the number of years of education for the parent with the highest level of education.

- 1-12 years (no high school diploma)
- 12 years (high school diploma or GED)
- 13-14 years (some college)
- Associate degree
- Bachelor degree
- Master degree
- Postgraduate work
- Terminal degree

2. Please circle the income range of your family's annual income

- 100,000-300,000
- 300,000-500,000
- 500,000 or more

3. Please circle the age range of both parents.

- 35-40
- 40-45
- 45-50
- 50-60
- 60+

4. How long has your son been attending this private school?

5. Your son's previous school was a private or public school?

6. Did you attend a public or private school as a child?

7. Is your son the first generation in private school?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Talk about your reasons for sending your son to a private school?
2. Tell me about your perception of your son's school experience?
3. How are you involved at the school (i.e. parent coffees, school programs, booster club, extra-curricular activities, parent club)?
4. Describe your experience at the school.
 - a. Please share any positive experiences you have had as a parent (i.e. other parents, teachers, administration and staff).
 - b. Please share any negative experiences or frustrations you have had as a parent (i.e. other parents, teachers, administration and staff).
5. What are your thoughts on what it's like to be an African American parent at the school?
 - a. In what ways do you feel that you are part of the school community? In what ways do you feel like an outsider within the school?
6. As a parent, given the experiences you have had with private school, would you still enroll your son in this school?
 - a. What advice would you give other African American parents who will be sending their children to the school?
 - b. What advice would you give the school to make the environment better for all of its students and to increase African American parental involvement?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience at the school that I have not asked you?

APPENDIX C

Major Themes and Subthemes

Private School Choice	Perception of Son's Experience	Parental School Involvement	School Experiences	School Community	Advice
Better Opportunity (12)	Positive (9)	Very Important (12)	Faculty Open & Approachable (+) (9)	Part of school Community (6)	Parental school involvement (6)
Dissatisfaction with Public School (9) <i>Not an option</i>	Academically Challenging (8)	Sporting Events Unite Parents (12)	Parents' Connections (+) (9)	Selective Engagement (3)	Increase Diversity of Faculty (7)
Brand (4)	Culture Impact (6) <i>AA teachers AA curriculum</i>	Child-Centered Involvement (5) <i>Purposeful</i>	Parental Isolation (-) (6)	Outsider within (5)	African American Events (4)
Strategic Assimilation (3)	Affirmation (4)	Mother primary involved parent (5)	Racism in team selection (-) (6)		
		Decreased Opportunity in Middle School (8)			
		Helplessness (4)			

APPENDIX D

Opportunity: Benefit-Cost

