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An Exploration of African American Parents' Level of Trust in Special Education Meetings

Kizin Burton-Fox
Loyola University Chicago

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

AN EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' LEVEL OF TRUST IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION MEETINGS

A DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
PROGRAM IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

KIZIN BURTON-FOX

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother and grandmother, who taught me to care for others and demonstrated the importance of education through their life examples.

I also dedicate this to my two wonderful kids, Kira and Kyle, who I hope to pass on the importance of caring for others and a love of learning.

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ABSTRACT

There is a plethora of research to suggest that there are a number of benefits to parent participation in a student's education, including improved education outcomes for students (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). However, there has been no real consensus on whether or not African American parents demonstrate appropriate involvement in their children's education since parent participation has typically been defined according to the norms of White middle class culture (Fields-Smith, 2005). Nevertheless, African American students have been found to demonstrate some of the lowest levels of academic achievement compared to their White counterparts, even when socioeconomic factors are taken into account (Yeung & Conley, 2008). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) special education law, parents are required participants in the special education process (PL. 108-446).

According to Boyd and Correa's (2005) framework on how families perceive special education, trust is both a direct and indirect factor in how an African American parent is likely to view special education. Trust as it pertains to parent involvement in the special education domain has been a relatively unexplored area in terms of examining parent-school collaboration practices, particularly with African American parents. Therefore, this researcher sought to explore how trust might impact African American parents' participation in special education.

This case study was conducted in a small Midwestern middle school in which 87% of the students were African American, while 70% of the staff was White. Semi-structured interviews were provided to parents that addressed their levels of participation and trust. A grounded theory method was used to interpret results of the study.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Research studies support the idea that parent involvement is linked to higher levels of motivation and academic achievement (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Therefore, improving parent participation would only serve to enhance both the academic environment of schools and likely have a positive influence on overall student achievement. In schools serving predominantly African-American students from working class and high poverty socioeconomic levels, parents typically have demonstrated lower levels of school involvement (Moles, 2000). Schools serving students in these communities could particularly benefit from increased parent involvement since African American students underperform academically compared to their White counterparts even when SES is taken into account (Yeung & Conley, 2008).

Barriers to African American Parent Participation

There are a number of factors which impact the level of school participation of African American parents. One factor is the differing perceptions of school staff versus parents as to the roles of parents in the school involvement. According to a study regarding the role of parents in high achieving schools serving low income minority communities, researchers found that parent involvement at home was considered to be have the strongest impact on student achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). However, the parents' form of school involvement is generally not acknowledged by

school staff members, who tend to place an emphasis on activities within the school environment (Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009). Further, some African American parents utilize supports from extended family members and religious participation and affiliation to influence their children's education and reinforce behavior expectations (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006). Often African American parents enlist the support of extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents to support them in rearing their children. Additionally, African American parents sometimes enlist the support of pastors from their affiliation with religious institutions such as churches and utilize the support of members to support them with rearing their children and reinforcing behavior and academic expectations. In this way many parents may perceive that they are demonstrating adequate participation in the participation of their children's education that is not usually understood or acknowledged by individuals from different cultures.

African American working class families face difficulties of having limited resources. Parents demonstrate challenges with childcare or inability to take time from work to participate in school activities (Baker, 1997). Thus, when school activities are planned without taking these factors into account, parents are simply unable to participate. School staff members who have middle class values are often unaware of the challenges to school participation minority parents in light of limited resources and financial capital.

Poor school climate may impact parents' desire to participate and be involved in school (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). The need to establish their legitimacy in the context of school means that although all of the parents are involved, schools often resist

that involvement. Unfortunately school staff often assume that all working class families have a lack of education and as such these families often have to prove that they should have a say in their dissatisfaction of a school or when they have a concern regarding the quality of their child's education (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009). This issue presents as an added burden for working-class African American parents not typically faced by middle-class African American parents (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). According to McDermott and Rothenberg (2000), there is a lack of teacher training in how to communicate with parents of various cultural groups. This may be exacerbated in school districts in which the majority of the school staff is White, while the majority of the families are members of a cultural minority group due to differences in perceptions of communication styles.

Improving Participation of African American and Culturally Diverse Parents

While there are many barriers to African American parent involvement, research also indicates that there are ways to increase parental involvement, thereby counteracting some of these barriers. According to Epstein's framework (1997), there are six types of involvement in the development of school-family-community partnerships. These include: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Parenting involves helping families establishing home environments to help their children at school. Communicating involves designing effective school to home and home to school communication regarding their children's progress and school programs. Volunteering involves recruiting and organizing parent help and support. Learning at home includes providing information to families about how

to help students at home, including homework and other curriculum-related activities. Decision-making involves including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. Collaborating with Community involves identifying and integrating resources and services from the community for families, students and the school. These frameworks can be used as a guide in laying the groundwork for increased parent participation. There are relatively simple strategies can be initiated by schools to improve parent participation in any school. These include school parent centers, home visits, and the creation of action research teams in schools (Davies, 1990). A study conducted by an elementary school in Baltimore with predominantly African American students of a low SES found that the creation of action teams with a parent liaison to communicate concerns between parents and teachers under the Epstein framework led to a more positive school climate and improved student attendance (Sanders, 1996).

While increasing parent involvement may be one way to create a more positive school environments, this may not be enough, particularly for minority parents. Instead schools should work towards establishing increased family-school collaborative practices. Whereas family participation is a one-sided process in which school administration makes decisions as to how and when a parent will participate, family collaboration implies a two way decision making process in which both parents and school officials share equal power in making decisions as to how and when parents will participate (Cook & Friend, 2010).

Barriers to School-Family Collaboration in Special Education

While increased family-school participation or collaborative practices may be a goal for most school districts, parent participation is a requirement in the special education process. According to IDEA 2004 legislation, parents are required to be participants in the development of student Individual Education Plans. Research regarding individuals of varying cultural differences point to a variety of challenges to equitable participation in meetings. One challenge is that parents from a different cultural background than school staff may feel alienated from traditional educational systems (Goldstein, 1993; Kroth & Edge, 1997). This information is consistent with historical contextual perspectives of racism in which parents feel that they are not equal members of the educational environment. Many parents are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). This lack of understanding and sensitivity by special education team members often leaves parents feeling confused and further alienated. Professionals tend to dominate the decision-making in educational planning (Dabkowski, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). This is reflected in most traditional special education meetings in which school staff typically present information and state what they plan to do, such as discontinue services or provide consultative services without asking parents whether they agree with decision and whether they think this decision is the most appropriate. Teachers provide limited communication until problems worsen (Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson & Jayanthi, 2001; Munk, Bursuck, Epstein, Jayanthi, Nelson, & Polloway, 2001). Often parents may be made aware of additional behavioral or academic challenges just prior to or during

meetings before they have the opportunity to process and speculate as to why these behavioral changes might have occurred. This could lead to limited participation in meetings. Climate or tone established by team members in addition to team culture can influence parent participation in IEP meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). Climate can be established by many factors during meetings, including the seating and positioning of chairs. Staff may be seated at one end of the table while the parent is seated at another end. Further, parents may not be aware that they can enlist the services and support of an advocate during meetings, which can increase their level of support and confidence during team meetings.

School psychologists are guided by professional organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to encourage positive family-school partnerships across a multi-tiered support system. According to a recent NASP position paper (2012), partnerships are defined as “families and educators working together as equal partners who share responsibility for the learning and success of all students.” Key components of these partnerships include intentional coordination of activities across families and educators. NASP further identifies positive relationships in which there is underlying “trust” as a key element in establishing these partnerships. Minorities, particularly African Americans have long been overrepresented as students in special education (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). This is troubling since African American parents often demonstrate some of the lowest levels of overall participation in schools (Lynch & Stein, 1987) as well as IEP meetings (Hernandez, Harry, Newman, & Cameto, 2008).

African American Parents and Trust of School Staff

While there are a number of factors that contribute to lower levels of parent involvement of African American families in schools, trust is a relatively unexplored area in terms of its impact on building collaborative relationships. This includes level of trust of school staff. This level of trust is based in part on historical factors. According to a study conducted by Williams and Baber (2007), African American parents explained that after schools were desegregated, schools in African American communities were closed and African American children were bused to schools in predominantly White neighborhoods. This weakening of the community by school closures was considered disruptive to the African American community and has weakened trust between African Americans and schools today. Traveling out of the community for a good education also added the burden of African Americans having to spend more time traveling out of the community to attend school, thereby making it more difficult for parents to participate. In many ways African American parents continue to face challenges of locating quality education in their communities. For example, many schools in predominantly minority communities are overcrowded, with limited resources. A large number of African American parents find that they must travel longer distances to attend schools outside of their community in order for their children to obtain a quality education.

Parent perception of racial prejudice is another common theme that has decreased levels of trust. Racial prejudice was felt to be a factor in African American parents of gifted children obtaining less appropriate placement and services for their children (Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Tavegia, 2005). Middle class African American parents

of children who attended predominantly White suburban schools felt that they were not equally informed of opportunities in the school, their children were unfairly disciplined, and schools lacked cultural and ethnic diverse curriculums (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Boyd and Correa (2005) proposed a framework based on three interrelated factors that affect African American families' perception of special education. These include:

1. *Sociocultural experiences of this group in American society.* This factor includes African American constructs of what a disability is, embodiment of religion, and extended family support in African American culture.
2. *Development of bias towards professionals working within the system.* This is often based on a parent's own involvement in the special education system as a child.
3. *Levels of acculturation.* African American parents whose social capital is more comparable to the dominant culture are more comfortable interacting with the system. With increased levels of social capital, African American parents with higher levels of education and income tend to have greater access to services and opportunities, than their lower SES counterparts.

This framework suggests that African American's perception of special education is a two-way complex relationship with educators, based on cultural, personal, and economic factors.

Unfortunately many of the variables associated with lack of parent involvement of African Americans are viewed primarily as cultural and systemic factors, even by school psychology professionals who are trained in the area of cross cultural competence.

According to a study conducted with approximately 150 NASP approved school psychologists regarding their perspective on causes and solutions for disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, most study participants described causes as lack of parent involvement, cultural disadvantage and failure of the regular and special education systems as the primary causes of over representation.

Unfortunately, respondents reported few solutions for this overrepresentation as long as African American families faced poverty and limited opportunities (Linney, 2005)

When evaluating levels of parent participation from a sociological, economic, and deficit perspectives, school psychologists typically fail to acknowledge that we can play a role in establishing trust with families and improving parent-school collaborative practices even with some of the most marginalized families. While trust is not an easily defined measure, it is one that requires addressing, particularly in the African American community. School psychologists need to explore African American parent perspectives regarding trust in order to move forward with examining ways to improve parent-school collaboration in the special education process.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine African American parents' feelings of trust in the special education evaluation process by inquiring:

1. Do parents feel they have a significant impact on meeting outcomes?
2. How confident do parents feel that the school advocates for the needs of their child?

3. Does parent level of trust in school staff influence their expectations in special education meetings?
4. Does parent level of trust school staff impact their level of comfort in actively participating in special education meetings?

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Researcher Experiences and Biases

This researcher is an African American female and parent of children who have received special education services. The researcher is also currently employed as a school psychologist in a large urban school district. Therefore, this researcher has had the opportunity to experience special education in very different ways. Prior to becoming a school psychologist, this researcher had limited knowledge of the special education process when her children initially began receiving special education services for speech supports. As a result, the researcher experienced some feelings of confusion regarding how children qualified or did not qualify for services. This researcher also demonstrated some skepticism in addressing concerns regarding her own children during special education meetings as it began to seem as though decisions had already been made prior to the meeting time. At times, it appeared that the special education staff members did not seem to view the researcher as a truly equal participant and had their own specific agendas during special education meetings.

As a school psychologist, this researcher has had the experience of being the primary “gatekeeper” to students receiving special education services. In this role, there are times when this researcher desires to obtain more specific information from parents regarding what they feel are their children’s needs and more specific information about

how to help their children since parents often have more extensive knowledge of their children than they often realize. This researcher was initially interested in obtaining more feedback from parents as to how to improve collaboration with parents during special education meetings. However, this researcher recognized that some parents might feel confused about special education and question the motives of some special education staff members. These barriers may be based on internal factors, such as their overall perception of school staff, or external factors such as their own experience in school. It may also be impacted by differences in staff perception as to what constitutes parent involvement in school. For many African American families, participation at home, or outside of school, is considered more important than volunteering in school (Ingram et al., 2007). This happens to be consistent with the experience of this researcher, who is African American. For example, the predominantly African American church that the researcher attends provides financial incentives for students earning good grades and regularly recognizes students who graduate from school from elementary through graduate school. As a result, this researcher deemed it necessary to understand how these factors might affect trust in meetings, which may or may not impede the collaborative process that is desired in most school districts.

Setting

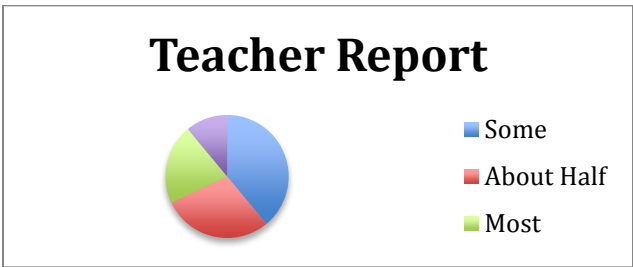
Toledo Academy is a suburban middle school located in a Midwestern state. According to data from the district psychologist, Toledo school has approximately 19% of its students classified as having disabilities. The school population is comprised of approximately 86% African American and 90% Low SES students

(Illinoisreportcard.com). On the contrary, 70% of the teachers are White and 27% of the teachers are Black (Illinoisreportcard.com). The current school psychologist, who has been there for seven years, reported some challenges with parent participation in the school. Specifically, the school psychologist reported that many parents do not attend school events. Also she reports that parents do not regularly volunteer to help during school field trips. The psychologist stated that there were also some challenges in having parents attend and participate in eligibility and IEP meetings. Therefore, it was suggested that assessing parent perceptions of special education meetings in the school might be a helpful first step in understanding reasons why parents don't participate in meetings. It may also begin to aid staff in determining better ways to increase parent participation in meetings. The percentage of special education students along with some challenges in levels of parent participation at special education meetings suggests that there may be some challenges with overall collaborative practices in the school. In terms of special education students, family-school collaborative practices during special education meetings and the referral process may be particularly challenging in light of the differences in background of the school staff and families and students being served in the school.

Toledo School Parent-Teacher Trust

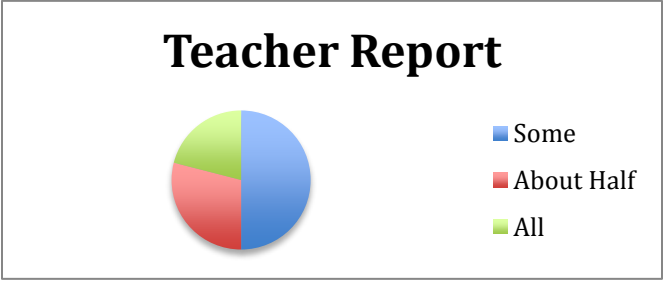
Issues of parent-teacher trust may contribute to lack of participation and collaboration by school staff and parents. According to a study conducted by The University of Chicago Researchers, a large number of schools in Illinois are evaluated on five essential components of school success based on survey results from teachers,

students, and parents. The report of the evaluation is titled the 5 Essentials. The five essential components of schools success include: Ambitious Instruction, Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, and Supportive Environments. Toledo School is one of the schools included in the study and will be the site of the research study. Based on overall survey results of Toledo School from the 2014-15 survey, Supportive Environments was rated at the least implemented area based on student ratings. While Toledo School was rated as moderately organized for improvement, they received the lowest ratings in the area of having less implementation in the area of Teacher-Parent Trust according to teacher ratings. Results of Teacher-Parent Trust included teacher responses to the following questions:



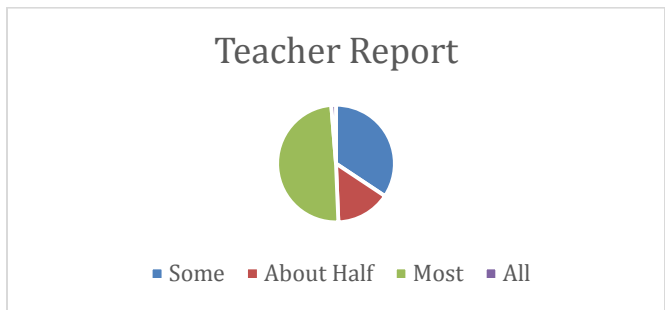
From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 1. Parents do their best to help their children learn



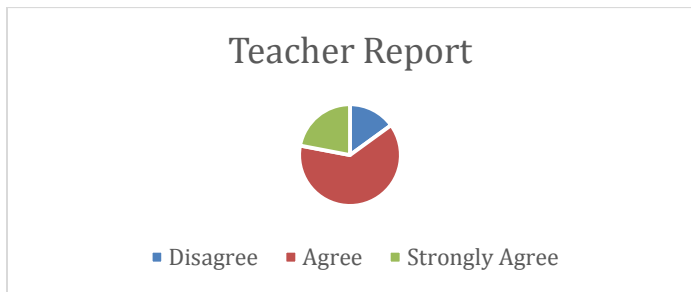
From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 2. Teachers feel good about parents' support for their work



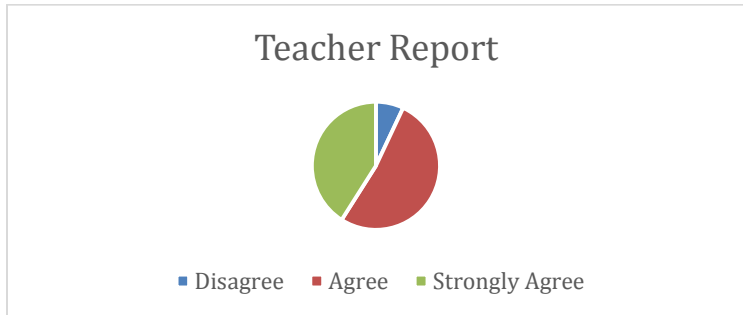
From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 3. Parents support teachers' teaching efforts



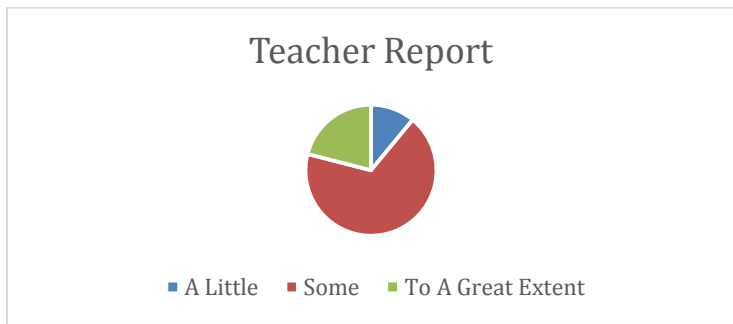
From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 4. Teachers and parents think of each other as partners in educating children



From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 5. Staff at this school work hard to build trusting relationships with parents



From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 6. Teachers feel respected by parents of the students

According to student ratings, Safety and Student-Teacher trust were rated as the weakest components. Specifically in the area of Student-Teacher trust, students provided responses to the following questions:

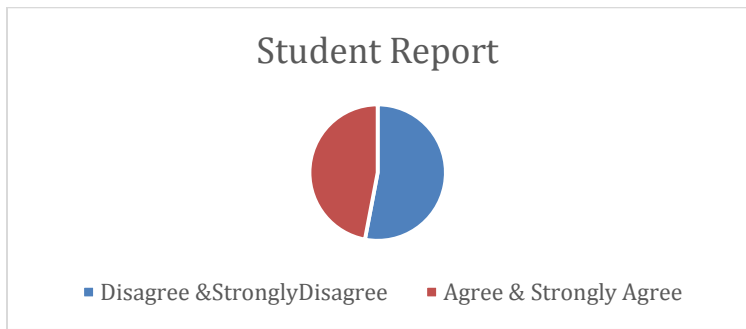


Figure 7. My teachers always keep their promises

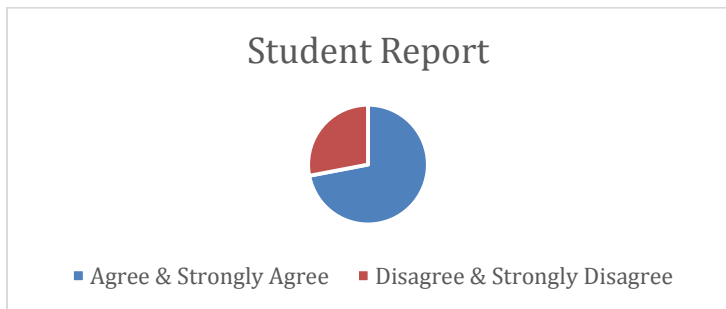
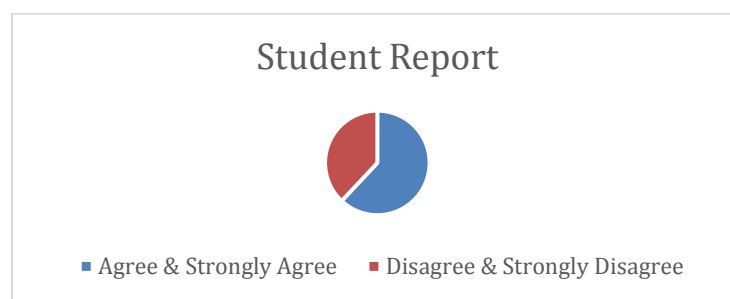
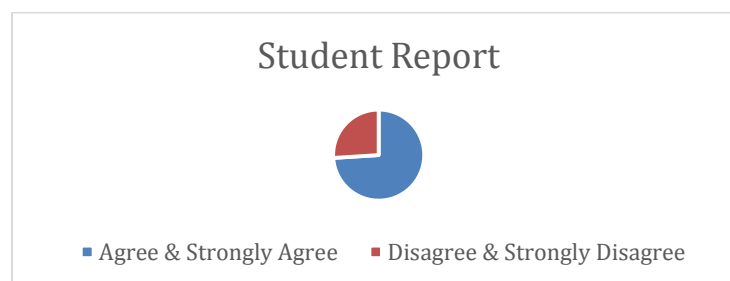


Figure 8. I feel safe and comfortable with my teachers at this school



From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 9. My teachers will always listen to students' ideas



From: Illinois.5-essentials.org.

Figure 10. My teachers treat me with respect

According to the Illinois State Board of Education Website, Toledo Academy is reported to have 100% parent contact. The average district parent contact is 98.8% and the average state parent contact is approximately 95.2%. This means that Toledo Academy demonstrates higher than average parent contact. By parent contact, this includes: parent-teacher conferences, parental visits to school, school visits to home, telephone conversations, and written correspondence.

Based on University of Chicago Consortium on School Research survey results and Illinois State Board of Education parent contact data, the school's data suggests that while Toledo Academy appears to demonstrate higher than average levels of parent and school contact, there is a need for improved collaboration between parents and teachers

and an increased need to improve parent-teacher trust in the school. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to explore reasons for weaknesses in parent trust from the vantage point of parents at Toledo Academy.

Participants

The study consisted of five African American female parents who met in a private area of the school for a semi-structured interview with the examiner at the end of the school day. Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 48 years. Participant incomes ranged from less than \$20,000 per year to more than \$40,000 per year. All parents reported regular meeting attendance either in person or by telephone conference. Participants' children represented a diverse section of disabilities, with some having more than one disability on their Individual Education Plans, according to parent report. All parents in the study had children whom had received special education services for at least two years. All but one parent allowed audiotapes of interviews. One parent requested that researcher only transcribe interviews in person.

Instrument

Meeting participants were asked a series of questions regarding their level of trust in the special education process. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) included demographic data regarding participants such as age, ethnic identity, income range, special education services their child received, how long their child has been in the school or district, and the number of meetings they have attended. The second part of the interview protocol included questions pertaining to the parent's perception of their usefulness to meetings and whether he/she believed that the school staff advocated for

their child. Finally, the interview protocol focused on questions specifically pertaining to parent levels of trust of special education team members and how this might have impacted their participation in meetings.

Procedures

The study included five African American parents who had children who were currently receiving special education services at Toledo Academy. The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in brief interviews following Toledo Academy's prescheduled special education meeting dates, which was provided by the district school psychologist.

The researcher selected several dates based on preselected team meeting dates and race of participants to interview parents. The researcher then contacted parents via telephone based and explained the purpose of the study, answered questions and reviewed the consent information via telephone (see Appendix B). Potential meeting participants were provided with telephone reminders from the researcher a few days prior to the scheduled meeting dates after they agreed to participate in order to confirm their participation in the interview. The researcher then initiated telephone contact with the individual parents a few days prior to the meeting date as a reminder to participate in the meeting following the interview.

On the date of the interview, parents were reminded of their rights to decline participation or not in the study, consent forms were reviewed and consent documents were signed and collected. Interviews were conducted in a pre-designated private area of

Toledo Academy. A \$20 gift card was offered to parents who participated in the interview immediately after they signed consent forms.

The researcher asked questions from the interview protocol and used an audio recorder to record responses in order to ensure accuracy of responses. All but one parent agreed to have their interview audiotaped. The researcher transcribed parent responses verbatim in that instance. The study utilized a qualitative design using an audio-recorded semi-structured interview process in order to obtain parent perceptions of trust.

Case Study Approach

The researcher used a case study approach using a multiple case design in order to gain greater insight into the research questions. The semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. In this way, results could be generalized more accurately than with a single case design. According to Yin (1994), there is more confidence in a finding that has been replicated multiple times. A cross case analysis was used to search for similarities and differences across multiple cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

A critical case sampling approach was used to select study participants. Critical case sampling involves selecting particularly important cases to answer the questions of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this study, specific factors, such as the race of the parent and student, and whether the student currently received special education services, as well as whether or not the parent has attended at least one meeting were important considerations in determining how African American parents level of trust factors into their involvement in special education meetings. According to Patton, “a clue to the existence of a critical case is a statement to the effect that ‘if it happens there, it

will happen anywhere' or vice versa, 'if it doesn't happen there, it won't happen anywhere'" (Patton, 1990, p. 174). In this study, due to the particular differences in the racial and ethnic identity of the majority of the school staff team members, who were predominantly Caucasian and the student population, who were predominantly African American, it is felt that these cases presented the most critical cases of which issues of trust might be a significant concern.

Analysis

This researcher analyzed all responses using the grounded theory approach, which is based on an inductive approach to gathering data. Grounded theory is a "general method for developing theory that is grounded in data that is systematically gathered and analyzed" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 410). Thus, data was gathered and analyzed based on interviews from parents in order to gain a better understanding of whether or not race or other factors indirectly or directly impact levels of trust and types of participation by parents in special education meetings.

Responses were codified based on a qualitative comparative analysis approach in which parents' responses were compared to determine how they were interrelated. Once data was transcribed, the researcher developed codes based on parent responses to each question provided. Then the researcher used inductive analysis methods in order to pull out similar themes, patterns and relationships in the responses provided by each parent (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 393).

In order to improve the reliability of coding the researcher utilized a second coder, who is another Loyola doctoral student. The second coder independently coded the initial

parent interview. Then both this researcher and second coder compared the results to determine the amount of agreement and disagreement in themes and patterns. Following this initial coding, this researcher and second coder discussed any areas of discrepancy and then recoded independently in order to improve the reliability of additional parental interviews. This process was continued until 100% reliability was obtained, which occurred after two coding cycles.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The results of the study are grouped into themes and findings based on the individual research questions that were asked to parents. All of the names used in the following sections are fictitious and are used to protect the identity of actual parents in the study.

Themes Related to Research Question One:

Do parents feel they have a significant impact on meeting outcomes?

The themes expressed by parents included those of feeling included by exchanging ideas, and being asked for input in meetings by staff as active participants. However, parents also discussed how their own individual advocacy influenced meeting outcomes. These themes are highlighted below:

Feelings of Inclusion

Several parents shared that they felt that their ideas and input in meetings was not only welcomed, but that they were considered a useful and helpful part of strategy planning. Parents expressed that special education team members appeared genuinely interested in understanding parent concerns. For example, one parent Debra explained, “I’m able to give my input and also give input for what I see at home to see if it kinda matches what goes on at school.” Similarly, another parent Sharon explained, “They want to know exactly how he acts at home...and how I go about helping him with his

work or whatever being continued from them to the home.” Another parent, Brenda stated, “Mostly with the meetings, they like listen to me.”

Self-Advocacy

An example of self-advocacy was reflected by Carmen, who explained that the team complied with her demands to discontinue support services in the special education classroom. She stated that as a result of her input, stated, “They kept his assistance, but he’s going to be independent in the regular classroom unless he needs help.” Similarly, Karen stated, “I’m such a huge advocate on making sure the kids get what they need.”

Themes Related to Research Question Two: How confident do parents feel that the school advocates for the needs of their child?

All of the parents expressed some level of satisfaction that the school advocated for their child’s needs primarily due to the educational supports from the classroom teachers. Several parents indicated that they felt that being informed of their child’s progress by school staff also was a factor in their feelings that the school advocated on behalf of their child. However, one parent expressed discontent with what she expressed as consistent negative feedback from a staff member. These feelings are highlighted below:

Teacher Support

Karen indicated that a teacher supported her child by coming up with a plan by linking her class performance to additional desired activities by telling her child, “Well, I’ll tell you what, you get good grades, we’ll work together to get you there.” Another parent, Brenda reported that a teacher encouraged her child to perform better in academic

subjects by offering a snack reward. One parent, Debra, stated a teacher spoke with her about academic difficulties her child was experiencing. Specifically, she stated that the teacher told her, “We need to come up with a plan because I don’t want him to get left behind.”

Being Informed

Sharon reported, “I get a lot of phone call. It’s helpful to me. They don’t waste time to call if they need me to come in or something like that.” Another parent Carmen, stated, “They let me know his progress.” While most parents were satisfied with how well Toledo Academy staff informed them of their student progress, Brenda expressed concerns that for related services, she found that service delivery was inconsistent due the fact that the team did not have a clear plan in place to address some behavior concerns of her child, although she reported feeling satisfied that academic concerns were being properly addressed. Therefore, she expressed displeasure with telephone communication without a specific plan in place to address specific behavioral concerns.

Themes Related to Research Question Three: Does parent level of trust in school staff influence their expectations in special education meetings?

The majority of parents did not report feeling any connection between trust and meeting outcomes. Brenda explained her own *advocacy* as the primary reason that she held expectations for special education meetings. Specifically, Brenda stated, “I’m always going to put my child first.” Although most parents generally reported being satisfied with special education services, slightly more parents did not report feeling that their feelings of trust or lack thereof impacted meeting outcomes for their children. It is

quite possible that they felt similar to the parent who expressed her own individual advocacy. Specifically, Carmen stated that she didn't want her child to continue services and felt satisfied that team members were adequately addressing the matter based on her communications with staff. Debra reported being "very" pleased with her child's progress and did not feel there was any connection between trust and meeting expectations perhaps because she was particularly pleased with her experience with special education and had not encountered any prior negative experiences with special education services.

Almost half of the parents reported feeling that having trust impacted their meeting expectations in a particularly positive manner. Specifically Karen explained, I feel like they're not going to have an irate parent...but coming in and saying okay, so what do you need from us...that makes a huge difference because we have somebody who is just going to sit and listen and have 'intelligent conversations' because we have so many that don't.

Karen expressed that she felt that her ability to communicate with staff members in a positive manner regarding her concerns contributed to reciprocal trust and respect, which had a positive impact on the meeting. Sharon, indicated that having a very positive relationship with a member of the special education team, whom she trusts, was one of the largest factors in terms of her feelings of trust during meetings. She explained that she anticipated that staff would do what was best for her child due to her positive relationship with the staff member.

Themes Related to Research Question Four: Does parent level of trust of school staff impact their level of comfort in actively participating in special education meetings?

The overarching theme to this question was positive *communication* with team members. This was reflected in comments by Karen, who stated,

We have a really good understanding. And part of that is because when we're here, we're not just listening to one side, we're really discussing what's going on and not just pertaining to the school setting. But the home setting as well so that you know what we're doing at home and we know what they're doing here...that makes a huge difference versus me sitting and listening to you tell me we're doing this and they're not meeting this goal.

Carmen, discussed how communication with a team member positively impacted her trust in meeting participation stating, "I told her how I felt about it. I told him he don't need it anyway (referring to inclusive services) so she offered other alternatives." Only one parent, Brenda, indicated that she would actively participate in meetings regardless of trust. Specifically, she stated, "I'm always going to express my concerns." When Brenda was asked about how trusting she felt regarding staff, she reported "poor" because she experienced a negative interaction with a special education staff member regarding how they addressed her child's behavior. Regarding the team member, Brenda stated, "It's like she threw out that negative energy." She stated that the staff member, approached her child "just as if he's a problem child," which led to her feeling less trusting regarding special education services despite her active participation in meetings.

Conversely to most parents, Brenda reported active meeting participation despite specifically reporting having low levels of trust.

Findings Related to How Differences in Racial Background of Team Members and Parents Could Impact Meeting Outcomes

In order to determine whether differences in race could present as a factor to African American parents in terms of meeting outcomes, parent participants were asked if they perceive that differences in racial/ethnic makeup of the majority of the team members, who are Caucasian, during the meeting might have impacted meeting outcomes. The majority of parents stated that they did not feel differences in race between the special education staff and themselves impacted meeting experiences at Toledo Academy. Most parents indicated that they had not experienced any perceptions of racial/ethnic differences in meetings. However, one parent, reported that she felt racial differences impacted how students were labeled in general when they are placed in services. Specifically, she stated, “I feel like they put Black people in special education class in general.” Another parent stated that she did not experience any negative racial experiences within the Toledo school district but reported prior negative experience in another school district that she felt were at least to some extent racially-based. Referring to racial differences, she stated, “I did feel like it was a factor. I felt like some of the conversations were more generalized based on color...it was just mind blowing to me that we still have to deal with that.” She further stated “I felt like they were not trying hard enough and because they just wanted to label everybody.”

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Finding #1-Support System

The African American parents in this study viewed special education meetings more favorably when they utilized in school or out of school support systems. Two parents reported utilizing outside support of friends and/or relatives with detailed knowledge and understanding of the special education system. Specifically, one parent reported utilizing support of a family member whom was reported to be a special education teacher prior to seeking special education services. Another parent reported having a social network of parents with children having disabilities to confer with regularly to discuss how to advocate for the needs of their children. A third parent reported having a favorable relationship with one of the special education teachers with whom she trusted to advocate for her child. Finally, one parent reported that she had the support of a family member to discuss educational concerns and strategies for approaching meetings.

Lack of outside support systems tended to correspond with a somewhat less positive and trusting outlook. One parent who initially was unable to identify a specific support person in or out of the school, but later reported a sister as a source of support, did not allow this researcher to record her interview and presented as less trusting than other parents who reported having specific support systems. Specifically, the parent who

initially did not report a specific support system appeared to provide limited responses to questions, required more probing from researcher, and responded to questions in a more generalized response despite obtaining the same information regarding the study as all the other parents involved in the study.

Research supports benefits of informal support systems for culturally diverse parents as well as those of students with behavior disorders. According to Lukowiak (2010), parents of students diagnosed with Emotional Disabilities often have limited emotional support systems which they can turn to for “guidance and discussing their feelings and experiences,” which often leads to feelings of isolation. Similarly, research by Geenen, Powers and Lopez-Vasquez (2005), demonstrated that culturally diverse parents of students receiving school based transition planning indicated a need for emotional support systems that could be provided by informal community networks, parent support groups, or professional counselors since many parents were susceptible to “fatigue and burn-out” which could adversely impact their meeting involvement. African American and Hispanic parents of students who were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder were found to have significant increases in knowledge of their child’s disability and reduced levels of stress as compared to treatment level groups when they were provided with Family Peer Advocates (Jamison et al., 2017).

Since parents of students demonstrating disabilities are under higher levels of stress, having the additional informal support system for parents appears to be an empowering factor for parents, which can lead to a greater sense of control and active participation in meetings particularly for African American parents. Focusing on an

ecological approach to improving parent engagement in schools, Hong (2011) indicates that schools need to focus on “relationships” rather than activities of parent engagements in order to close the gaps between schools and families. Hong suggests that this can be accomplished by encouraging parental interaction with school staff and other parents. While Hong was not specifically addressing special education students, the same principle can be applied to engaging parents and building trust with parents of special education students.

Finding #2-Active Inclusion

Parents who reported feeling actively included in staff meetings demonstrated more favorable reactions to special education meetings. In terms of active inclusion, parents reported that they felt that staff actively sought input from them by asking questions regarding student behaviors at home and inquiring about strategies parents used at home. Several parents indicated that they felt “respected” which cultivates trust. According to Olivos, Jiminez-Castellanos and Ocha (2011), when addressing bicultural parent engagement, authors propose that true parent engagement can be generalized as an “active, two-way connection that is inclusive, ongoing, and engaged process...” (p. 11). Authors contrast this with the “generic” term of parent involvement which they describe as a passive, one-way connection that benefits the school and places accountability of the student success and failure on the parent. Parents at Toledo school’s description of active participation via expression and mutual communication of ideas supports the building of more inclusive relationships between parents and the school, which builds trust.

Finding #3-Race was not a Primary Factor in Building Trust

While differences in racial/ethnic backgrounds of individuals with power have been historic concerns with African American in American society, most parents in this study did not appear to assume that racial differences were the primary factors for them to trust or distrust special education staff members. For example, although one parent reported feeling that African American students tend to be “labeled as requiring special education services in general,” she reported that she felt that it was not a primary factor in terms of her feelings of trust in meetings and that her primary concern was to “see progress” so that her child would not remain “dependent” on receiving services indefinitely. A second parent reported that while she felt that differences in race likely played a role in services being withheld from her child as well as an overly negative assessment of her child’s behavior in the past, she did not report similar perceptions in her current school, which had a special education team that was also comprised of predominantly Caucasian staff members. In other words, she appeared to approach the situation from a case-by-case basis. Several other parents quickly pointed out that they did not view race as an area of a concern in their experiences with the special education team. Parent responses in this study suggest that while most parents appeared to be aware of racial barriers in special education, most did not appear to immediately attribute racial differences between staff and parents as a negative factor in communicating during special education meetings.

These findings differ from prior research in which African American parents who perceived differences in race as a barrier to appropriate placement of their gifted children

as well as a barrier to services (Huff et al., 2005). Similarly, middle class African American parents whose children were enrolled in predominantly White suburban schools felt that racial differences in staff led to their children receiving unfair discipline, and access to ethnically diverse curriculums (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). One theory as to the reason that parents may have not have the same perceptions of racial differences as parents in those studies may have been due to the fact that Toledo School's student demographic is predominantly African American. Therefore, the basis of comparison of racial differences in treatment or services may have been limited. It is quite plausible that differences in treatment, services, and behaviors could be evaluated more clearly in circumstances by parents in which there is more diversity in the student and parent population by which African American parents could observe a difference in treatment. Finally, it should be noted that most parents in this study were generally satisfied with services, which likely impacted parents overall perceptions of race in this study.

Finding #4-Staff Perceptions of Student Behavior Tied to Increased Risk for Parent/School Communication Barriers

Parents with children who had behavior concerns tended to be at risk for increased difficulties in general with members of the special education team. For example, one parent of a child with reported behavior difficulties indicated poor interaction from one team member who had been servicing her child, which she reported, "clouded her view of much of the team" due to the initial negative feedback from the team member upon her arrival to the district. While this parent reported that she had no problems voicing her concerns during meetings, she indicated that the negative approach

from the team member adversely impacted her feelings in general about the entire special education team.

Another parent who reported that her child had some behavior concerns reported overly negative reports from staff at her prior school, which led her to feel more negative regarding the special education team at her prior school in general. A third parent reported that she did not understand why behavior issues with students led to disability labels and appeared to be concerned with “getting her child out of special education.” According to research conducted by Yeh, Forness, Ho, McCabe, and Hough (2004), researchers found that African American parents whose children were identified as having Emotional Disabilities according to special education teams were less likely to see relational or familial issues and more likely to see prejudice as related to their children’s problems after controlling for student gender, age, family income and youth symptomatology. This finding suggests that African American parents whose teachers report behavior concerns may become suspicious of team members and power differentials particularly when students receive services under categories of Emotional Disturbance. Additionally, when teachers report continued behavior concerns regarding students, parents might have increased concerns that prejudice is a factor, particularly when staff and parents are of differing racial backgrounds. This can likely place parents and team members at risk of having poor relations if differences in cultural issues are not addressed or acknowledged. While this finding may appear to contradict the prior finding that African American parents did not directly attribute issues of trust to race, it is important to note that how behavior concerns of their children were perceived or

addressed by teachers appeared to be an important variable of concern. Also, it would be important to distinguish whether African American parents define prejudice as a variable specifically as a matter of differences in racial or ethnic background as opposed to systemic prejudice and racism.

Limitations of the Study

The small sample size limited the researcher's ability to gain a clearer understanding of the scope of concerns regarding how trust impacts parents in terms of participation in special education meetings, particularly in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of parent trust for those who lack regular participation in special education meetings. Since the study is representative of one suburban school within the district, the researcher was unable to compare parent responses from secondary schools or from other districts for greater generalization of results. This researcher was unable to triangulate data in terms of observing parents in special education meetings and accessing records in order to obtain a more detailed history of their student's special education concerns to determine whether students with certain disabilities may have been more adversely impacted by trust issues or if certain parent behaviors or staff setup during meetings (microaggressions) could have impacted levels of parent trust. Additionally, one parent did not allow the researcher to audiotape the interview, which could have led to minor inaccuracies within the transcription and/or interpretation of data. However, it should be noted that researcher attempted to clarify parent responses by repeating information to parent and verifying for accuracy.

Conclusion

The purpose of study was to determine how trust impacts African American parents' participation in special education meetings. Findings from this study indicated that several parents did report that trust was a factor in their participation in special education meetings, but that trust appeared to be based primarily on the parents' assessment of inclusive communication style of team members as well as their satisfaction with services. Based on research suggesting limited parent participation of African American parents in special education meetings (Lynch & Stein, 1987), this researcher sought to explore whether issues such as trust during meetings could be a factor in how often or to what extent parents choose whether or not to participate in special education meetings. Parents indicated feeling positive feelings in meetings based on the following feeling included, teacher support and advocacy, being informed of student progress, and overall positive communication with special education team members.

Based on information gleaned from parent background information, and observations, this researcher found that parents who reported having a specific in or out of school informal support person appeared to have the greatest levels of comfort and positive feeling regarding meeting participation. All parents valued having staff actively include them in meetings by specifically asking for information, and sharing ideas with team members. While two parents reported that differences in race could account for issues with placement and withholding services, most parents did not appear to specifically attribute communication during special education meetings as a result of

those differences. This researcher also found that parents whose children whose teachers had reported some negative behavior concerns appeared to have more negative experiences with special education team members and services than those whose students did not demonstrate any reported behavior issues from teachers. While several parents reported overall positive feelings during special education meetings, the same parents also reported some weaknesses with how services were provided, which likely provided an impact on how parents felt during special education meetings.

Findings suggested that there are complex reasons for parent's level of meeting participation, with trust being one variable in how comfortable African American parents feel in terms of participating in special education meetings. While some parents might report good meeting participation, it does not necessarily indicate a satisfaction with services or an understanding of special education that would enable them to participate in a way that is most beneficial for their child. Although in most instances, trust of staff resulted in parents in this study feeling comfortable with participating in special education meetings regularly. However, in other instances, a lack of trust may not decrease parent participation, but could have the opposite impact on meeting participation by African American parents. This suggests that parents in this study might participate in meetings whether or not they were satisfied with meeting outcomes. This is interesting to note since parents might handle meeting participation in a number of ways based on their levels of social capital, income, and/or access to resources.

Suggested Next Steps for Research

Future studies should explore African American parents' perceptions of what it means to have a disability in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of factors pertaining to parent's overall trust regarding special education. As a part of this process, it would be useful to obtain more information regarding African American parents' specific experiences in special education. Additionally, it is necessary to understand specific parent experiences regarding trust in special education based on their child's disability label. This is particularly important due to the specific overrepresentation of African American students in disability categories of Emotional Disturbance and Intellectual Disabilities (Department of Education, 2010). This might aid in determining what impact, if any these specific categories impact African American parent levels of trust and participation.

Due to findings suggesting the importance of parent support as an enhancer to parental meeting involvement, it would be helpful to explore African American parent informal support systems in more depth since it appeared to be a factor in parent resilience and strength for parents. Specifically it would be useful to explore types of informal supports such as parent support groups, advocates, family members as well as informal support systems in schools order to determine how these supports might impact parent trust and participation in special education meetings. Future research should also focus on interviewing parents who have access to fewer support systems.

It remains unclear as to how parents who do not consistently participate in meetings address their concerns since this study focused on parents who were clearly willing to

participate in an interview and appeared to be consistent with participating in special education meetings. Due to challenges with reaching specific parents who might not participate in meetings, it would be helpful to explore what options parents would explore if they disagreed with team members or provisions of services by exploring what would they do if that was the case; For example, would they transfer schools, participate more in meetings, remove their child from special education services or participate less in meetings in order to determine specifically how parents would deal with conflict from special education team members. Finally, it is important to continue to explore the subject of how differences in race of team members impact meeting participation of African American parents as well as under what circumstances it can be perceived to be a significant issue as it pertains to trust for African American parents. It is clear that more research is needed in order to determine what factors are of greatest influence in determining how to actively engage African American parents in the special education process and garner trust of parents since parent support ultimately leads to more positive outcomes for African American students.

APPENDIX A
PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part I

I will first start out by asking you a few questions about yourself and child/children in order to obtain some basic information about your background, as well as your experience with the special education process.

1. What is your current age?
2. Are you currently employed? If so, what kind of work do you do?
3. How would you describe your current household income range? (Below \$20,000, Between \$20,000-\$30,000, Between \$30,000-\$40,000, Above \$40,000)
4. How would you describe your current race/ethnic identity?
5. How many children do you have currently enrolled at Toledo Academy?
6. How many children enrolled currently receive special education services? What disability does your child receive services for?
7. How long has your child/children been receiving special education services?
8. How often do you participate in special education meetings and how do you participate in the meetings, (eg. via phone, in person, send a family representative)
9. How satisfied are you with your child's current special education services? Has it been helpful for your child?
10. Describe any positive or negative experiences that you or your child have experienced with special education process?

Part II

The next questions are about your experiences in special education meetings at Toledo Academy

1. Tell me about your experiences in special education meetings at Toledo Academy?
2. Do you feel that you have a significant impact on meeting outcomes for your child? Why or Why not?
3. How confident do you feel that Toledo school staff advocates for the needs your child? In other words, have there been times that teachers or service providers seem to notice specific things that your child needs to work on and identifies those needs and puts a plan into place to address these needs? Can you provide specific examples?
4. If you could make improvements in special education meetings at Toledo Academy, what kinds of things would you do? In other words, what do you think can be done to make the meeting process go easier for you as a parent? (In terms of scheduling meetings, providing information at meetings, and including you as a parent, what would you like to see more of?)

Part III

The last questions are about how trusting you feel about special education process at Toledo Academy

1. In general, how do you feel about your interactions with staff at Toledo Academy?
2. Do you feel that you or your child have similar (more positive or negative) experiences in the special education setting (for example in meetings with service providers or receiving services in or out of the general education classroom)?
3. Thinking back on these experiences do you feel as though these experiences, good or bad, have had any impact on how trusting you feel about staff members at Toledo Academy?
6. What factors contribute to your feelings of trust or lack thereof?
7. There are many factors that can make it hard to have the outcome you desire in a special education meeting. Sometimes there are differences in opinion, other times things are not communicated well, and other times people have different levels of knowledge, amongst other things. One possible factor, particularly when parents are persons of color and the majority of the school staff in the meeting is not, is race/ethnicity. To what extent do you feel that your race/ethnicity played a role in how the meeting went in this meeting or other special education meetings at Toledo Academy?
8. Does your level of trust in staff members affect the quality or type of services that you think child will receive after the meeting?
9. Does your level of trust school in school staff impact how comfortable you feel in terms of talking or expressing your concerns in special education meetings or attending meetings? Why or why not?
10. Do you have other relatives, friends, or sources outside of school staff that you seek support from to assist you with addressing your concerns regarding special education services for your child? If so, who are they and in what way do they provide support?

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: An Exploration of African American Parents' Level of Trust in Special Education Meetings

Researcher: Kizin Burton-Fox

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. David Shriberg

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS: PARENT CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION

Introduction:

My name is Kizin Burton-Fox and I am a doctoral candidate at in Loyola University Chicago's School Psychology program. I would like to conduct interviews with African American parents of special education students in order to better understand parent feelings and comfort level with participating in special education meetings. This project is being done as a component of receiving my Ed.D. degree and is being supervised by Dr. David Shriberg of the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as being African American and have at least one child who receives special education services and have participated in at least one special education meeting at Toledo Academy.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not parents' willingness to participate in special education meetings is impacted by their perceived relationship with staff members involved in the special education meetings.

Procedures

I will meet with parents after regularly scheduled special education meeting dates for approximately 10 minutes to ask interview questions in a designated private area of the school building.

Participation is completely voluntary; it is up to you whether you participate or not. The information that you provide during the interview will be kept confidential. Only members of the research team will have access to the data. The members of the research team include Kizin Burton-Fox, Dr. David Shriberg, and Kisha Jenkins, who is another doctoral student that will assist with coding data.

Audio-recording

I am asking permission to audio-record your interview. The purpose of the recording is to aid the researcher in writing up the interview so that nothing is forgotten or inaccurately reported. The recordings will not be made available to anyone outside the research team. The audio recording will be erased from the recorder as soon as it is transferred to the computer. Computer files of the audio-recordings will be password protected during the study and destroyed at the end of the study. Refusing the audio recording does not mean that you cannot participate in the study.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. By participating in this study, you can help provide information that may help your school to improve special education services for your child.

Compensation

Following the completion of the interview, participants will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card.

Confidentiality

Your privacy is protected as a participant in this study. There will be a number rather than your name on copies of his/her interview. Computer files will be protected with a password.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or published articles that result from this project.

Rights of Refusal and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to refuse to participate. If you change your / his / her mind about participating at any time, including during the interview, you/you have the right to withdraw.

Questions and Contact Numbers

If you have questions about this research, you may contact Kizin Burton-Fox, the Study Coordinator via email at klburtonfox@luc.edu or the faculty supervisor, Dr. David Shriberg at

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773)508-2689.

Signatures

I understand that the information given above is true to the best of my knowledge and ability. I have provided all the necessary information the parent/guardian may need to voluntarily make his or her decision to take part into this study. I also understand that the parent/Guardian has the right to participate or not to participate. He/she has the right to withdraw from the study and even during the course of the interview if chooses to do so.

Signature of the Study coordinator

Date

I have read/been read this information, and I understand the purpose of the study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I consent to participate in this study and understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

I will take part in the interview.

Signature of the Parent/Guardian

Date

I agree to have my interview audio-recorded Yes No

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VITA

Kizin Burton-Fox was born in Mobile, AL. Her family moved to Chicago, IL at an early age, where she was raised. Before attending Loyola University, she attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology in 1993. Following graduation, she worked as a Mental Health Specialist at the Cook County Department of Corrections in Chicago, IL for approximately 15 years. She enrolled at Loyola University in 2008 and graduated with her Educational Specialist degree in School Psychology in 2011. She currently resides in Chicago, IL with her two children. She is employed as a School Psychologist with Chicago Public Schools.

DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT COMMITTEE

The Doctoral Research Project submitted by Kizin Burton-Fox has been read and approved by the following committee:

David Shriberg, Ph.D., Director
Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Hank Bohanon, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Gina Coffee, Ph.D.
School Psychologist, Denver Public Schools