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RECLAIMING POWER. ACTIVATING BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS MOTHER ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMMITTEE ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

Kellie M. Ramsey

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Kellie M. Ramsey

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Kellie M. Ramsey

Dr. Stephen Kotok

ABSTRACT

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From conversations in school hallways, to SEPTA meetings, to parking lots and church benches, Black middle-class parents have engaged in talk of disillusionment with the IEP development process for their special needs child. Previous literature has provided limited insight into the navigational capital of Black middle-class parents in the special education system. This author interviewed Black middle-class parents who felt overwhelmed by the IEP development process and came to utilize their cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) to overcome systemic barriers to their active engagement in the CSE (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and to explore opportunities they have had for positive interactions. Findings of this research show that limited navigational capital was the greatest hindrance to Black middle-class parent engagement in the CSE. This study illuminates school culture's grasp of the deficit theory model, which lends itself to ill approached relationships with Black parents that hinders positive, active parent engagement crucial for child development and growth (Yull et al., 2014). Parents and the larger school community benefit from cultural reciprocity as it develops the navigational capital parents require for effective CSE engagement.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to the memory of my grandmother, Marie Berry Bradley and her two sons, David P. and Gilbert (Bud) Bradley Jr.

I dedicate this study to my mother, Elease Marie Johnson, my original model of Black middle class mother fortitude, fiercely slaying each barrier in her path.

I dedicate this study to my children, Brieonna and Lamar. I pray that I have modeled for you that it is never too late to pursue your passions and your dreams. It is always important to keep moving forward.

I dedicate this study to my "study buddy," my sweet rescue dog, Brock. He sat at my feet as I wrote each inch of this dissertation with unconditional affection.

I dedicate this study to my beloved mentor, my doctorate model, Dr. Mary McKnight-Taylor, the grand dame, and fairy godmother of my academic career.

Most of all, I dedicate this study to my husband, my heart, my rock- Lamar Ramsey II. His belief and unwavering support of me has gotten me through many nights of self-doubt by saying, "Don't forget the endgame. When you earn this, it can never be taken from you."

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), parent participation in the special education decision making process is legally required. To be an active member of the special education decision making process, there is an assumption that parents have the use of cultural and social capital to access and understand the legalities of IEP development to be actively involved (Trainor, 2010). As a result, some parents, including many Black ones may be at a disadvantage in the process.

The Committee on Special Education (CSE) is the linchpin of each school district's special education program. The CSE is when parents, staff and, when appropriate, the student meet to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a specialized education plan so the student with special needs may best access a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (NYSED.gov, n.d).In 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act was amended. IDEA is a federal law that ensures the rights of students with disabilities and those of their parents are protected under the law. The development of the IEP and CSE stems from IDEA. Under this law children with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate public education which prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living (sites.ed.gov). Under the procedural safeguards of IDEA parents have the right to participate in CSE meetings for their child and to share their child's strengths and their suggestions for enhancing the education of their child. Parents are mandated members of the CSE and equal partners in the creation of the IEP expected to share their child's strengths and the educational path their child should take (IDEA, 2004).

The United States Supreme Court ruled in Winkelman v. Parma (2007) that parent involvement in the IEP is mandated, and they must be involved in providing their child with FAPE. Many parents are unaware of the legal authority they hold as part of the CSE team (IDEA, 2004). Oftentimes parents feel overwhelmed and at a disadvantage at their child's CSE meeting due to their minimal knowledge of educational law (Wakelin, 2008). Prior research such as Mueller & Buckley, documents parents' complaints that IEP development is full of challenges. The process has been described as educator driven replete with data and goals and little room for parents to actively participate (2014). The procedural format of CSE meetings may hinder parental comfort level as they perceive their culturally diverse collaboration is not sought by the professional team who may devalue their experiences and emotions versus the school's presented evaluations and data (Kalynanpur & Harry, 2012).

Navigating the IEP development process can be wrought with fear, anxiety, and confusion for the novice parent regardless of socio-economic status, cultural background, or education because of their implicit emotional investment (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Many parents struggle to learn procedures and terminology when their child is first classified with a disability and may be uncertain where to turn to for the knowledge that will make them an informed decision member of the CSE. They may also feel hindered in their ability to actively engage in the IEP development process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how black middle-class parents overcome barriers to their active engagement in the IEP development process. IDEA states "…the education of children with disabilities can be made more

effective by… strengthening the role and responsibility of parents…and they have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children" (Center for Parent Information and Resources, n.d.)

The first step towards the goal of removing barriers to active engagement is to identify what barriers exist. The assumption of equality is a barrier as the IEP development team assumes parents are equal partners in this decision-making process when such collaboration is not explicit in local or federal law (Welch, 1998). Prior research by Blue-Banning et al. (2004) reported a disparity of power in the relationship between parents and special education professionals. My study will extend the discourse on barriers to communication between parents and IEP teams. Traditional CSE meeting structure may not allow enough time for parents and school personnel to fully discuss the child's needs and build a collaborative relationship between team members (Kervick, 2017). Culturally diverse parents may be barred from true participation in CSE due to a lack of cultural reciprocity or sharing of cultural capital (knowledge) between school and parents, (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004). This study will explore the barrier of parental lack of knowledge of special education law.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the federal law signed in 2015, which provides flexibility to states' education departments to lay out expectations of transparency for parents so they may be empowered with information about their child's school (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2022). The Federal Department of Education has an Equity Action Plan, which provides resources and tools to address large gaps in outcomes for students of color (ed.gov, July 2022). This study directly relates to the May 2021 New York State government initiative for diversity, equity, and inclusion

in the field of education. The New York State Board of Regents "has encouraged school districts to implement strong Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies and practices…in partnership with parents and families, empower students to visualize success" (The New York State Education Department, n.d). This study will examine how the Black middle class parent's active engagement in the development of their child's IEP has been hindered by an educational culture and professional bias of low expectations for children of color.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs critical race theory and community cultural wealth theory to examine Black parent engagement in the development of an IEP. Derrick Bell 's Critical Race Theory (1989) as later adapted by Tate and Ladson-Billings (1995) is one theoretical framework of this study. CRT by Tate and Ladson-Billings was designed to examine educational systems under the premise that teachers typically approach children of color from a deficits-based perspective. The deficit lens addressed by Tate & Ladson-Billings was written about by Daniel Moynihan, who conducted a study entitled "The Negro Family the Case for National Action". His study framed a deficit model of Black family achievement that was accepted by policy makers and social scientists (Moynihan, 1965). In contrast, CRT promotes the notion that children of color have backgrounds replete with experiences and cultural practices that should be considered a foundation of strength and not a deficit (Miller & Harris, 2018).

As stated, critical race theory was introduced to the field of education by Ladson-Billings in 1995. Critical race theory analyzed Black parent perception of their involvement in the IEP process based on the societal norms of the dominant culture. In

addition, this study examined parent engagement through the lens of Yosso's community cultural wealth framework (year). Yosso expanded from Bourdieu's original cultural capital theory, which had linked school, home relationships, and student achievement based on the level of parental education (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). Bourdieu believed that one's habitus or the value one has for school are created by one's home environment. A parent's ability to participate in special education requires specialized habitus or cultural and social capital which Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth shifts the focus from the White middle class to a CRT lens of community cultural wealth (CCWT) possessed by families of color (2005).

DisCrit Theory was initially considered and ruled out as a theoretical framework for this study. At first, I was drawn to DisCrit because of the intersectionality between race and ableism. DisCrit has seven tenets and tenet four especially made me decide that DisCrit would not reflect the focus of this study. It reads in part, "DisCrit invites understandings of ways students respond to injustices" (Annamma et al., 2013). The focus of this study is that of the lived experiences of Black middle-class parents in special education, not their students with disabilities, therefore, DisCrit was not utilized for this study.

Significance of the Study

This study extended research of active parental engagement in the IEP development process. It is important to conduct this study so that disparate engagement of Black middle-class parents in the CSE process is brought to the forefront of New York State and National school special education systems.

IDEA is the federal law that makes a free appropriate public education possible for students with disabilities nationwide with the assurance they will receive special education and related services as needed in the least restrictive environment (ed.gov, n.d). The federal government monitors how states implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with an accountability checklist of compliance indicators such as #8. New York State proves accountability for IDEA with 17 compliance indicators, which are monitored for compliance every six years. Indicator 8, the heart of this study, is parent engagement (nysed.gov). Indicator eight reads as, "Percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results children with disabilities" (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(A). Parents actively engage in the IEP development process when New York State's Indicator 8 is compliant.

According to the N.Y.S Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities "Parents and other family members are engaged as meaningful partners in the special education process and the education of their child" (New York State Board of Regents). The Blueprint reports parents are engaged as meaningful partners when it is evident, "…parents and educators engage in frequent, respectful, and open discussion of the Districts across New York State are mandated to adopt, "Culturally responsive and sustaining practices, "which should include the parent as well as the child especially in CSE engagement on which a child's educational career is determined. With increased parent engagement and knowledge of policy should come decreased over representation of ED, ID, and special class programs for Black children, (NCLD.org).

Local and federal law supports the right to a student's high-quality education. Parents want what is best for their children and schools want to do what is ethical and legal for all students. This study will educate school systems on the rights parents are entitled to and should be cognizant of through cultural reciprocity, to ensure F.A.P.E for their student with disabilities.

Connection to Social Justice/Vincentian Mission in Education

This current research is connected to the Vincentian mission of social justice because it challenges institutional structures that serve as barriers to systems of educational improvement. This study will educate school district leaders of local educational agencies of their systems' potential discrimination against a group of community stakeholders. This study will provide rich data for leaders of school district special education programs by challenging them to question their system of parent engagement in the IEP development process.

Research Questions

This study investigates the perceived barriers to full engagement of Black middle-class parents in their child's CSE meeting and how these barriers might be removed for the benefit of the student with disabilities. The following questions shaped this study:

1) How do middle-class Black parents perceive the function and role of the CSE Office? 2) How do middle-class Black parents perceive their own role within the IEP development process?

3) What are the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process?

Definition of Terms

This study makes use of the following operationalized definitions made mention throughout this document:

African American. An American of Black African descent, (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d).

Black. Relating to a variety of groups of African ancestry with a wide range of skins colors, (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d).

Committee on Special Education (CSE). The CSE is mandated by federal and state law to include the participation of the student's parent/guardian. The CSE develops the IEP, which is a student's plan of instructional support for an academic year. The CSE must develop an academic program in the least restrictive environment, (NYSED.gov, n.d.)

Class. A group of people in society that share the same socioeconomic status. In the United States, one's class is often determined by a group's level of networking and social capital (Horvat et al., 2003).

Cultural Capital. The leverage one's family must navigate the system of success as deemed by the dominant culture (Arce, 2019).

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). By federal law, students with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d).

Individualized Education Program/Plan (IEP). The educational plan designed and developed between educational staff and parents for the academic growth and development of a student with disabilities (NYSED.gov, n.d).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A federal law which governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services for eligible children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d).

Intersectionality. A theoretical approach that simultaneously considers multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage (i.e., disability, race, social class) (Cole, 2009).

Middle Class. "Middle class families have certain common aspirations for themselves and their children. They strive for economic stability and opportunities for their children" (Reeves et al., 2018).

Parental Social Capital. A network of pooled parental resources to increase the human capital of their students (Hao & Bonsteac-Bruns, 1998).

Socioeconomic Status (S.E.S). The social standing of a person or family based on their education, income, and occupation (apa.org).

Student with a Disability (SWD). A student with one of the 13 classifications for an IEP (NYSED.gov, n.d).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

For decades, Black parenting and school engagement were viewed as dominant White middle class versus low-income, Black at-risk families in typically utilized samplings (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). Parent engagement theory research finds that families of color are often perceived as uninvolved by school personnel who may not recognize what parental engagement looks like outside of the school setting (Yull et al., 2018). This same study reported an underlying belief that all parents of color live with deficits of education and economics and unable to effectively engage with the schools (Yull et al., 2018).

Trotman (2001) explained that Black parents' low socio-economic status…and work schedules hinder their involvement in school. A second study was conducted by Williams and Sanchez (2011) which identified barrier themes to parent involvement; time poverty, lack of access, lack of finances and lack of awareness.

Studies inclusive of middle to upper-level socioeconomic Black parental CSE engagement are limited. Hayes' reported, "Focusing entirely on Black families from low socioeconomic backgrounds can create incomplete findings on potential predictors of parental involvement and/or the influence of parental involvement has over student outcome" (Hayes, 2011).

Toliver shared, "There has been a growing number of studies in response as there has been a need to expand studies on middle-class African Americans…a "culturally ambidextrous" subculture fluent in both African American and mainstream cultures" (1998). Expanding the research to Black middle-class families will work towards minimizing the deficit theory lens and expanding the understanding of the full spectrum

of Black parental engagement. The definition of middle-class is fluid and culturally varied. Traditionally, middle-class has been defined by one's income bracket away from poverty level. There are those who identify as middle-class because they have a four-year college degree and a good paying career, which affords them opportunities. President Biden's task force definition of middle-class the as having an aspirational mindset will be the definition embraced for this study (Reeves et al., 2018).

This literature review is divided into subtopics that illustrate shared lived experiences of educated, middle class Black parents of a SWD. This phenomenological study will present a multi-faceted lens of research and personal reflections to discuss perceived barriers to active engagement in the IEP development process. Pertinent research articles have been included in this literature review from twenty years ago to the present because the tribulations of active Black parent engagement have and continues to be problematic for middle class Black parents of students with disabilities. A theoretical framework inclusive of qualitative articles about critical race theory and cultural capital theory informs this literature review. This review of related literature will demonstrate how this current research is extended and supported by the reviewed literature of this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

This phenomenological study was informed by critical race theory and cultural capital theory to present a counter narrative to understandings of low expectations of Black students and their families held by professional school staff in the dominant White middle-class culture of the public schools.

In research, the use of critical race theory methodology means the researcher foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process; challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color; and offers transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our societal and institutional structure (Creswell, 2018). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate published "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" which first brought CRT to the educational community. Ladson-Billings and Tate's Critical Race theory of Education illuminates the following quote of abolitionist, former slave and author, Frederick Douglass, who said, "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe" (1886).

According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), "Critical race theory of education has five tenets inclusive of: (1) The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (2) Challenge to dominant ideology, (3) commitment to social justice, (4) Experiential knowledge and counter storytelling, (5) Interdisciplinary perspectives". In this literature review, CRT will be used as a tool to reveal how racism can negatively affect the active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the development of the IEP when the dominant middle class White culture assumes that most Black families are of a lower S.E.S ilk, seemingly unaware of the intersections of race and culture in the Black community. In part, this literature review will document a university's plan to educate novice teachers about such cultural differentiations to address the cultural gap of understanding.

This literature review will demonstrate how this study challenges the deficit lens theory of low African American parent engagement in the IEP development process by illuminating examples of active parent engagement through the lens of community cultural wealth theory. A premise of cultural capital theory by Pierre Bourdieu was that parents leverage power or engagement. For Bourdieu a parent's level of education heavily affects a parents' socio-economic status that in turn may affect their level of social/cultural capital. Having one's social/cultural capital determined in part by one's S.E.S may in turn affect the Black parent's ability to actively engage in the CSE process (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016).

Therefore, in this study I focused on well-educated Black parents who developed alternate ways to claim their power in the CSE meeting by utilizing their cultural capital to navigate the special education system. In fact, Yosso's community cultural wealth framework brings an awareness to the cultural capital that minoritized students have been provided by their parents and in turn, how their parents flex their cultural capital in the development of their child's IEP.

"Yosso reports six forms of capital within her framework of, cultural capital wealth. The six forms of capital are: (1) aspirational (2) linguistic (3) familial (4) social (5) navigational and (6) resistant" (Yosso, 2005, p.77-80). Yosso's community cultural wealth framework is built on and then expanded from Bourdieu's original cultural capital theory that is based primarily on one's wealth and social class. The following forms of community cultural capital most pertinent to this study will be (1) aspirational (2) social and (3) navigational capital as applicable to achievement of active engagement in the development of the IEP. Aspirational capital is a parent's hope for their child's future.

An example of this is when Black families encourage their children to believe in their own success. Social capital is one's community connection. This is when one relates to networking groups such as church, civic and sorority groups. Navigational capital is when by understanding one's culture one can navigate a system of oppression such as the special education system. A person of color must be able to navigate a landscape of disrespect and bias if they wish to have success. The overall community cultural wealth of Black middle-class parents can lead to success for themselves when designing an IEP for their child and ultimately their child's future success (Bean-Folkes and Lewis-Ellison, 2018).

This theoretical framework gives voice to the barriers middle-class Black parents of students with disabilities face when they seek to actively engage in the development of IEPs for their children with special needs.

Related Research

This section will provide findings from peer reviewed literature articles on the topic of Black middle-class parent IEP engagement. The research reviewed for this section is inclusive of peer-reviewed journals, state and national educational policies and websites. Many of the searches were conducted in Eric and ProQuest databases searching with but not limited to the terms Black parent engagement, navigating the CSE, low expectations of students with disabilities, CRT and special education, CCW and special education. Findings from this literature review have been organized into the following themes: 1) Black parent school engagement; 2) The Black middle-class school experience; 3) The CSE and development of the IEP and 4) Teacher and school administrator bias. This study will work towards closing the gap in understanding of

barriers that adversely affect the active engagement of Black middle-class parents in the IEP development process (Doucet, 2008).

Black Parent School Engagement

Black parents have often complained that special education staff are dismissive, and they do not feel concerns/needs, or the strengths of their child were heard while developing the IEP. In 2008, Williams found that to eliminate that experience, "...teachers must examine the beliefs they hold about parents and how those beliefs shape their expectations of parents in the educational process" (p. 260). Previous studies report that school professionals often perceive Black parents as being apathetic or uneducated when it came to the needs of their students with disabilities and see no value in their parent/school engagement.

Studies document that parents are expected to learn how to engage within parameters established by the dominant culture of the school setting. Since the release of the Moynihan report in 1965, studies have been conducted to analyze how the Black family navigates school/parent engagement within parameters defined by the dominant White culture. Doucet conducted one such study in 2008 based on the 1997 Tudge and Putnam study called, "The Cultural Ecology of Young Children Project" which examined parental values, beliefs, and practices for raising children as culturally competent members of their societies (p.114).

The Doucet study (2008) was conducted in the United States and the White and Black samples included were of middle-class families. In the Doucet study, social class was measured by parental education and occupation. A theme that emerged from the intersection of race and class study was that most parents show an understanding of the

importance of advocating for their children if unhappy with how things are going in school (Doucet, 2008). A second theme was these parents said they influenced how their child experienced the world inclusive of building prior knowledge with library or museum visits (Doucet, 2008). In general, Black parents were found to take a multi-cultural approach with their children so they know they are equal to any other ethnic group and expect to be treated equally and treat others equally in their interactions (Doucet, 2008). Doucet notes that teachers must recognize, acknowledge, and validate the various ways in which families participate in children's schooling inclusive of the village behind the scenes and debunk the myth that working class parents do not care about their children (2008). This mind shift can and should occur during pre-service teaching with active analysis of case studies of culturally diverse parent engagement.

In 2014, Loque and Latunde engaged in a mixed method study about the engagement of Black families with their children's education. In this study, they utilized surveys and follow up questions to analyze the perceptions, experiences, and feelings of the Black parents. They sent a statement about their study to various organizations that serve the Black community to generate interest. Ultimately, they were able to recruit 130 participants. The survey given was derived from the Harvard Graduate School of Education parent engagement survey and various learning support parent survey templates. The researchers included questions they create relating to decision making bodies in school and one open ended question (p.6).

Their findings were that most of the Black parents they surveyed frequently visited their child's school. The parents reported that when they visited the school, they were warmly received which is crucial to encouraging return visits by parents. It was less

common for Black parents to attend school board meetings and only half of the parents knew of the school site council. They were unaware that being part of a council could help them effect change in their child's school (p. 7).

Resources identified by most of the participants were those that stem from the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." The 'village' resources are inclusive of (a) programs/organizations; (b) personal life experiences; (c) professional information sources, such as journals, seminars; and (d) social interactions with friends, parents, and the Internet (p. 8). This study gives insight into how Black families use cultural capital, 'the village,' to engage with their child's school setting. The study recommended programs that build upon the engagement Black parents have and expand it with mentoring programs for their students. Expand their engagement with focused parenting group opportunities where they may delegate representatives for site council or school board meetings to relay information to the parent community at large. Expand their engagement with cultural reciprocity. Parents that come regularly should know that they will be treated respectfully and that they will be in collaborative partnership with their child's school, learning and growing together to benefit their children.

The Black Middle-Class Experience With Education

The Black middle-class subculture is not typically explored in research about special education. Deeper analysis of the intersection of race, culture and social class evolves usually after a larger study has been conducted about Black parents of a school community. An example of such a study is the one in 2014 by Yull, Blitz, Thompson and Murray, which examined the marginalization of middle-class Blacks in a small Northeastern city. Critical Race Theory was the framework for this study of Black middle

class family engagement with their children's schools (2014). The data derived for this study came from a larger one of the school district whose parents expressed racial concerns about the district.

The decision was made to focus on the middle-class Black parents whose children did well in school to determine parental/student perceptions of racism. Those who participated were identified through convenience and snowball methods based on social and professional connections (p.15). Nineteen parents of 1st through 12th graders participated in this study; 80% of the parents had bachelor's degrees or higher. Focus groups were the methodology of this study. Two black women, one who was a co-investigator of the study facilitated the focus groups. Focus group discussions were transcribed and then coded with member checking and sharing of findings with school administrators and board of education.

The themes that emerged were lack of cultural competency in the schools, stereotyping, and racial disproportionality in suspensions and school discipline (p.16). A noted limitation is that the study utilized snowball and convenience sampling with more mothers than fathers represented, and participants all came from the same school district (p. 22). The findings of this study were that Black middle-class parents do not feel the deficit lens of school personnel should generalize their experiences. Educators should take it upon themselves as this study's sample district did by educating themselves about cultural competency. When educators learn about the cultural capital and competence of middle-class Black parents, they raise their expectations of Black students and their families. The study documented that Black middle-class families were often assumed to

belong to a lower socioeconomic class lacking in cultural capital and were disregarded and feared by school educators.

Black middle-class families are often perceived as being of the lower socioeconomic class assumed lacking in cultural capital and disregarded and feared by school staff. When viewed from a CRT lens, there is deep-rooted racism regardless of socioeconomic position. For this reason, it is crucial for Black parents whatever their socioeconomic status to teach their children about their racial heritage to buffer them from the implicit bias they may encounter outside of the safety of their home. Foundational demographic questions were asked of study participants to establish educational level, occupation and which of Yosso's community capitals did they feel the strongest when given the choices of; aspirational, financial, cultural, and social/navigational capital.

Carter-Black (2001) examined strategies that Black middle-class parents might use to forge their children's navigation of race in America. The study was a purposive sampling of middle-class Black families to further investigate the importance of linking Black children to Black adult networks for resources to enable future success. The purposive sample population was two Black middle-class families of a large mid-western city and were known to the researcher therefore limiting how much can be generalized due to small sample size. The parents and children were all interviewed for this study with modification of questioning geared towards parent or child. With grounded theory, the researcher analyzed and coded these interviews. Categories of coding were done with the aid of five independent researchers and the researcher by process of discounting data.

The findings of the Carter-Black study were that the children all reported they were very aware of the expectations to academically perform and to attend college. Their middle-class parents ensured they were involved in school sponsored and community sponsored events. These parents worked hard to raise physically and emotionally healthy children in a society in which being Black is a negative (Bell et al., 1998). This study found strategies used by middle-class Black parents to support their children were to: (1) create opportunities for success; (2) affiliate children with resource rich people and organizations; (3) keep close tabs on children's relationships/activities; and (4) culturally specific child rearing practices (p.93-94).

Many Black middle-class parents can use their resources and cultural competence to withstand deficiency assumptions of Blacks made by many educators at the intersection of race and culture. Cheryl Fields-Smith examined the racial and cultural intersections by S.E.S of Black families' interactions with school (2007). Her study made use of data from a larger study (Fields-Smith, 2004) in which 19 Black parents were interviewed about parent-school involvement. Ultimately, seven parent interviews of managerial middle class Black parents took place in a Southeastern school district. The parents were chosen based on a nomination process and they were all highly involved in the Parent Teachers Association (PTA). This qualitative study used two stages of interviews conducted six months apart, transcribed and then reviewed by each participant for accuracy. To strengthen their children against the low perceptions of educators they teach their children that school is not playtime, you are there to learn.

These middle-class Black parents believed in fostering student independence and belief that education is important. The Black middle-class parents felt it was important

for them to be known in their child's school because visibility increases availability of parents and school staff. Interviewed parents from this study reported they, "…worked with other parents and spoke with them at events because shared knowledge can benefit their child and all children of that school setting" (Fields-Smith, p.188). Fields-Smith (2007) feels this belief stems from the West African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" which broadly differs from while middle-class parents who tend to band together for only the interests of their children, (Fields-Smith, 2007).

Latunde and Clark-Loque (2016) conducted a study about the untapped resources of Black parent engagement utilizing two Likert scales of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Parent and School survey to explore the concept of "Disparities in educational outcomes and inequitable treatment have strained the relationship between Black families and schools" (2016, p. 73). The theoretical framework of their study was the theory of multiple influences and the theory of cultural reciprocity. This was a qualitative study designed to examine the strategies Black parents of school age children use to engage with their child's education. A non-random sample of 130 parents, foster parents, and guardians of SWD with an income range of $19,000-$150,000 completed the survey given.

The qualitative findings of this study were that Black parents engaged in student's education in two major ways: (a) helping with learning at home (b) exposing their children to educational activities outside of school (p. 76). The study concluded that their findings were in alignment with previous research on Black parent/school engagement in that the parents are highly involved within and without the school and the myths of low engagement could be eliminated with open, culturally respectful communication between

parents and school (p. 78). School cultures fail to realize that Black parents utilize a social network for parenting/educational information in the form of church, community centers and organizations such as the NAACP, Mocha Moms, and Jack and Jill (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016).

Social forums such as these are a safe space for Black parents to discuss their concerns and seek educational and financial information for their families. Middle class Blacks establish external and internal boundaries of representation with the creation of such groups. These constructs help them navigate the suburbs and White dominant school systems within a safe space (Lacy, 2004). The implications are that schools should develop culturally relevant programs to encourage Black parent engagement in the schools. Professional development of the staff on how to best engage, and modeling of by school administrators can develop increased trust and mutual respect between schools and black parents because they are "acknowledged and appreciated" by the dominant school culture (Latunde & Clark-Loque, 2016, p. 77).

The CSE and Development of the IEP

Black parents' lack of trust in the special education system has historically disenfranchised many from the IEP development process. An early three-year qualitative longitudinal study by Harry, Allen & McLaughlin investigated the participation of Black parents in the CSE development process. This study took place in a large urban school district where 80% of the students and 70% of the staff were Black. With interviews and observations, they gathered the views of 42 Black preschool and kindergarten parents. Equivalent sample sizes were taken from the general and special education population of this school district. Eight members of the professional staff were interviewed and

observed as well. The participating schools had a range of S.E.S inclusive of middle income (1995).

As related to my current study, three themes that emerged from analysis of the parents of SWD in 1995 were expectations to disillusionment, participation and advocacy, and deterrents to advocacy, (Harry et al., 1995, p.368). The Black parents were concerned that programs created by the CSE would lead to isolation and regression for their children in the school system. They did not feel the CSE was flexible in meeting their needs as a parent. In part they expressed, "(1) late notices and inflexible scheduling of CSE, (2) limited time for conferences, (3) emphasis on documents rather than on participation (4) the use of jargon (5) the structure of power" were all emblematic of what was wrong with the IEP development process for Black parents (p. 371-372).

In 1995, these researchers recommended empowerment of the parents in the IEP development process. They reported on the, "we-they" process of the CSE which some special education professionals perceive doesn't allow for flexibility in how or when CSE meetings are effectively conducted for parents. This study recommended development of engagement teams, which would allow professionals to effectively interact with parents of SWD and educate them on the IEP development process (p. 375).

Williams' (2008) wrote a case study of a group of North Carolina Black parents who filed an appeal to the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights in 1998 about reported deficit perceptions and of Black students (p. 250). Williams (2008) reported the following, "...the parent is not involved in the

drafting of the IEP...All the school system is really interested in is the parent's signature on the IEP (2008, p.255). Williams framed this study from the lens that, "school professionals should use a posture of cultural reciprocity" (p.251). Consequently, the study reported that parental concerns were the cultural disconnect of special education practices and the abuse of protocol (p.251). A repetitive parental complaint was the lack of knowledge of Black student culture by educational staff. Other parents voiced, "…according to IDEA the IEP is …written by parents, teachers…When parents get to the IEP meeting the IEP is already written" (p. 255), indicative that determinations had been made without the active input of the Black parent. Ultimately William's study recommended facilitating an atmosphere of transparency, trust, and partnership with parents as research finds that it is through the slow and steady development of relationships between home and school that the barriers to shared CSE decision making can be eliminated (p.260).

Fish (2008) extends the conversation of cultural reciprocity in the IEP development process. Fish created a study to investigate how parents of students with IEPs perceived their value to the Committee for Special Education (CSE) process and how valid they felt the CSE meetings were for their child's IEP development.

Fish's study had fifty-one upper to middle class parents of elementary school students' participation. They received special education services from a family support agency which provided support services for their SWD. Surveys were administered to these parents about their student's Individualized Education Planning (IEP) meeting. The survey was created based upon literature review about IDEA, decision making and reported parental feelings of alienation. The survey found it

important for educators to build positive relationships with parents during IEP meetings. Parental input should be encouraged especially when determining a student's special education program and services. Special education administrators must be knowledgeable about special education law and share that information with parents to build capacity and reduce parental angst. Parents want to have a positive relationship with their child's special education team and do not want to feel afraid to ask for clarification during a CSE meeting.

Afore mentioned studies describe the need for parental collaboration with the school team for development of an effective IEP for their child. The Staples & Diliberto article (2010) recommends establishing regular communication with the parent of a SWD at the start of the school year. Ten years ago, teachers and parents would have kept a communication journal. Today daily and monthly communication can be maintained with cell phone applications such as Class Dojo and Remind. Best practice would be to contact the parent a month before the CSE meeting to schedule CSE to accommodate the parent's schedule. Next, parents should receive a draft of the IEP goals not at the meeting, but before to allow them time to review and provide input to further development of goals. Allowing time and space for parents and special education staff to pre-conference before the CSE meeting encourages a collaborative relationship and eliminates the angst of meeting with a large group about their child (Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Jones (2017) compiled a literature review of the perceptions of special education teacher preparedness to collaborate with parents. A prevalent theme was that parent/family collaboration is vital in predicting the success of a student with special

needs. Without collaborative preconference parents often report feeling confused, not welcomed, and rushed through the meeting as jargon may be used and their direct input is not sought during the meeting (p. 698). The benefit of the mini pre-conference is to reduce parental apprehension, communicate procedures, and develop a culture of trust, respect and collaboration between the parents and the rest of the IEP development team of CSE (p.703).

Teacher and School Administrator Bias

This section of the literature review will focus on how the deficit lens prevalent with teachers and administrators can hinder parental engagement in the IEP development process. An early study conducted by Williams (2008), examined the perceptions held by families of African American students with disabilities of the legitimacy of the programs their students were placed in and how they perceive the effects of said placement in their child's life. The participants of this study were Black parents of students with IEP's who participated in an appeal to the Office of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Those parents requested OCR intervention for perceived discrimination in student programs and services in their county's school district.

This was a qualitative study that used a case study design. The case study involved four African American parents in a North Carolina community. The case study was guided by concepts of culturally reciprocal relationships. The legitimacy of SPED for African American students in Wallace County, North Carolina is what these parents questioned. The parents of this case study participated in the SPED referral process as a parent of a child with a disability or as an advocate or as foster parent. Group and individual interviews were held with these parents to collect data. The outcome of this

case study was that teachers and SPED staff had to discontinue homogenous labeling/grouping of students together and the students' individual needs and strengths must be considered. Evaluations for classification of a disability must be standardized and norm referenced, and members of the evaluation team must be in communication with parents and decisions cannot be made based upon one report (data point). The authors recommended that parents must be involved in the decision-making process and parent engagement facilitates the development of individualized educational plans to children with parental advocacy and insight.

Institutes of higher education who seek to reframe their development of novice teachers through the lens of critical race theory are shifting novice teachers away from assuming Black families do not value education to a mindset of cultural responsiveness. Puchner and Markowitz (2017) revisited a qualitative study they conducted from 2010-2011 with two White preservice teachers through a series of interview and observations conducted with them to analyze, "…where institutions and individuals meet in propagating and perpetuating racism" (p.10).

Puchner and Markowitz (2017) found that preservice teachers whose field experience was in schools with low social trust had a challenging time moving away from that pattern once they became teachers (p.15). For example, a mentor of one of the pre-service teachers said in an interview, "She believed African American students struggle more and have less involved parents…but she didn't know why she thought that" (p.11). There is a "cultural script" of teacher assumed low expectations of Black parents, which is in stark contrast to analytical data of the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study

of 26,000 8th graders, parents, teachers, and administrators. Derived from the study was indication that African American families, controlling for SES had a higher rate of school involvement than White families (p.13).

The teaching industry has long been dominated by White, middle class, female teachers (Miller & Harris, 2018) and their cultural expectations of parental engagement. Miller and Harris constructed a literature review examining with the lens of CRT the beliefs often expressed by self-described, open-minded educators of Black children. This literature review explored the implications of students of color more likely having a White teacher than not through their educational career. Matias conducted one study documented by this literature in 2013. Matias' article uses counter stories to highlight discrepancies between perceived truths and those when only one point of view tells the story as in the white teacher of a class of Black children and expresses cultural responsiveness. This article viewed Whiteness through a CRT lens to understand how one's Whiteness may be invisible to the White person in the school setting because of their strong social capital.

Culturally responsive teaching is a shift from deficit to dynamic thinking and is greatly useful (Matias, p. 70). Matias shared that White teacher candidates in her courses had never experienced a Black educator in their academic career until her college courses. Matias reported that, "…having no people of color with whom to interact can lead to an entitled feeling of White superiority," (Matias, p.75). As a college professor, Matias reports that it is best for White teachers to learn about their Whiteness and within the context of critical whiteness studies, critical race theory and cultural responsiveness.

By knowing more about the philosophy, sociology and anthropology of their Whiteness they can in turn better understand cultures different from their own,(Matias, p. 78).

Conclusion

This study will extend the conversation on perceived barriers to active Black middle class parent participation in the development of their child's IEP. The Williams, 2008 study of Black parent engagement is an example of research typically done about lower SES Black parents in special education. The 2008 Doucet study brought the research of engagement to the Black middle-class parent. The Doucet study was based upon a larger study conducted in 1997.

This current study will not be part of a large, longitudinal study but a purposeful examination of modern-day middle class Black parents seeking to successfully engage in the IEP development process. The current study seeks to illuminate the implicit bias of the school system that hinders their active participation in the CSE. Most Black middle-class parents want to feel respected, heard and not seen as problematic when they seek clarification about their child's IEP (Yull et al., 2014). There's an overall need to address the gross generalization of Blacks across subcultures which permits educators to view Black students with disabilities from a deficit lens (Fields-Smith, 2005). With close examination, this study will close the gap in realizing how middle-class Black parents can effectively navigate the IEP development process for the benefit of their child's educational future.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLGY

Chapter two documented initial themes that illustrate the research of this paper's literature review. The themes of barriers to active Black middle-class engagement in IEP development is: Black parent school engagement, the Black middle-class experience with education, the CSE and development of the IEP and teachers and school administrators' bias.

This chapter documents the procedures and methods undertaken for this study. This study utilized a phenomenological approach. Creswell and Poth state, "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for a group of individuals of 10-15," (2018,p.124).The shared experiences of Black middle-class parents with the special education system has yet to be exhausted and these interviews provide a lens to how Black middle-class parents have actively navigated the development of IEPs for their children.

This study intends to decipher the shared, lived experiences of Black middle-class parents of SWD. vanManen speaks of "phenomenology of practice" which in part is a phenomenological experience that gives significance to the meanings that influence us before we are aware of their formative value (vanManen, 2007). Lopez and Willis (2004) explained that these lived experiences are explored through the narratives they share with the researcher.

A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study because evidence comes from first person experiences as shared by my participants' interviews. The Epoche was very crucial to collection of this study's evidence. Epoche is the process by which the researcher sets aside their preconceived notions and instead brackets those things, their

biases so one may experience them anew, (Moustakas, 1994). A critical part of phenomenological research and the Epoche is the ability to reflect and mediate on those experiences you are reviewing.

Before I conducted the first interview, I sat with myself and wrote a free verse poem about my own lived experience as a Black middle-class mother of a SWD and my emotions. This process permitted a psychic cleanse of my pre-conceived thoughts to open me to reflective journaling about the interviews to come. Before each parent interview I journaled priori codes or preconceived notions of what I felt I would learn from the interview. Following each interview, I journaled if the experience was what I expected or not and if not, how so.

In addition to Epoche, I utilized horizontalization to analyze the interview data. With horizontalization, you don't exhaust your conscious experience of things. There is always a new way, a new perspective from which to analyze an experience. The varied horizons or perspective s of the experience(s) lends itself to different emotions each time it is experienced (Moustakas, 1994). For example, I may have had a perception of a shared life experience but then when I heard about a shared experience from a different horizon, it left me feeling sad for that parent which was a thought I had to journal about after their interview.

Defining what it means to be middle-class depends on your demographic, geographic and cultural identification. This study analyzes a shared experience of Black middle-class parents. Historically the Black middle-class are known to be in a quest for community. They seek to," (1) buy a home; (2) white -collar occupations, high levels of

education; (3) develop and exemplify lifestyles of the middle-class; (4) maintain their sociocultural identify and unity," (Phylon, 1986, p.261).

In general, the definition of middle-class varies. Many Americans share a belief that due to COVID 19 the middle-class is experiencing a decline of stature due to reduction of salaries, increase of housing and educational expenses. The middle sixty percent of the population is considered middle-class. If one determines middle-class status by income only the threshold for a family of four is $53,930 to $143, 813 with a median income of $71, 906 (Wenger & Zaber, 2021, p.5).

Data collection for this qualitative research began with convenience sampling of Black middle-class parents known by me for the sake of convenience, which later morphed into snowball sampling as original mothers referred additional mothers to my study. To bracket and reflect upon my shared middle class Black parent experience of a student with disabilities, I included an original free verse poem reflective of said lived experiences and the theme of, "power." A priori theme of this study was power as in the wielding of power when developing a child's IEP. Who wields power knowingly or unknowingly is a significant factor of active Black middle-class parent engagement in the development of the IEP.

Research Questions

The study focused on three questions:

1) How do Black middle-class parents perceive the function and role of the CSE Office?

2) How do Black middle-class parents perceive their own role within the IEP development process?

3) What are the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process?

Methods and Procedures

Setting

This research took place across three suburban New York school districts and one New York City Department of Education district. The school districts for this convenience sampling represent the districts in which the participants of this study either reside or in which their students received their special education program. This proved to be a convenient sampling as this researcher knew most participants from prior relationships, either personal or professional. The study sample was convenient to this researcher, as eight of the twelve members were known through work or personal relationships. To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, I have estimated the size of districts. While the numbers are estimates, the snapshots ought to provide a sense of the characteristics of each respective district.

The (2020-2021) demographics of *District 1* includes a population of approximately 6,000 students whose students with disabilities met the state's graduation rate target. District 1 SWD graduate with a Humanities based degree. District 1 is a large suburban, mixed income community. *District 2* in 2020-2021 had a population of approximately 6,000 students. District 2 did not meet the state SWD graduation target. The majority of SWD graduate on the Humanities pathway, as the general education population. Less than 50% of SWD graduate high school in four years. District 2 is a large suburban mixed income community. *District 3* had a population of around 4,000 students in 2020-2021. They met their target rate for SWD graduation in N.Y.S. Over

90% of SWD graduated high school with a Humanities degree like their general education peers. 60% of their SWD graduated within four years. District 3 is a large mixed income suburban community. *District 4* (in NYC BOE) 2019-2020 demographics include a population of 38,000 students. Students with disabilities met the state's graduation rate target. 98% of SWD graduated with a Humanities-based degree and 2% graduated with a focus on the sciences. 9% of SWD in this district dropped out of high school. The second largest population for each of these four districts is Black.

Participant Recruitment

Purposeful convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify and recruit participants for this study who shared common traits and had experienced the same phenomenon. Participants for this study were selected by the following criteria: 1. Self-identify as middle-class 2. Identify as Black or mother of a SWD that is identified as Black 3. Have engaged in the development of an IEP for their SWD between 2018-2022. For this study I was able to recruit eight participants who met the recruitment criteria and were previously known to this researcher as a purposeful convenience sampling.

Purposeful convenience sampling is when the researcher selects sites or individuals to which they have access and can easily collect data from (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To participate in this phenomenological study the participant(s) had to identify as a Black middle-class parent of a Black student with a disability. All participants for this study were chosen based upon this author's personal or work relationship with each of them. A convenience sample for this study comprised of eight Black middle-class mothers. These mothers were interviewed about their experiences developing their

child's IEP within the CSE process through the lens of CRT and community cultural capital theory. All interviews were held virtually on St. John's University secure platform WebEx platform. I remained vigilant against my researcher bias as a parent/sister of learning-disabled Black men and reminded myself that the purpose of this study was to tell the shared experiences of Black middle-class mothers in the IEP development journey and not my own. Limitations of this study were the convenient sample size and the limited randomness of the participant sample.

Participants

Participants of this study all reside in a suburban county of New York State. The children of two of the participants attended Catholic school and all other children attended their local public school district. The children who attended their local schools received their IEPs from their public school district. Those children who attended Catholic school had IEPs that designated them as out of district placement and received their IEPs from the public district of location (U.S. Dept of Education, 2015). For this study, all participants are referred to by Mother (letter), such as Mother A. Table 1 presents a description of study participants including their participant ID, level of education, occupation, and race. All these mothers had one child with a classified disability.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Participant ID	Education	Occupation	Race
Mother A	Master's degree + Doctoral courses	Speech Pathologist	Hispanic
Mother B	Associate degree	Retired phone operator	Black
Mother C	Master's degree +	School Administrator	Black
Mother D	Master's degree +	Teacher/SPED	Black
Mother E	Master's degree	Director of HR	Black
Mother F	Master's degree +	Teacher Elem	Black
Mother G	Master's degree.	Social Worker	Black
Mother H	Master's degree	Social Worker	Black
Mother I	Master's degree.	Social Worker	Black
Mother J	Master's degree	Clinical Researcher	Black
Mother K	(2) Master's degrees	Teacher Elem	Black
Mother L	Master's degree +	Teacher Elem	Black

Note. Study participants were asked their highest level of college education, occupation and racial identity.

Data Collection Procedures

Black middle-class mothers with whom I have a personal or professional relationship were asked to assist me with this study. Data was collected according to the following steps:

1) Consent to interview was emailed to parent members.
2) Researcher reviewed the interview protocol with each interviewee.
3) Interviews conducted by Webex with automatic generation of written transcript.

4) Interviewees were asked the same open/closed questions about their lived experience as a Black middle-class parent developing an IEP.
5) The three sets of questions asked will be 1) demographic, 2) CRT and 3) community cultural capital theory.
6) Researcher generated preliminary codes based on personal lived experience as a Black middle-class parent of a SWD.
7) This researcher analyzed raw interview notes before and after each interview for researcher bias with detailed memos.
8) Each interviewee had the opportunity to member check transcripts after coding of interview.
9) Data bracketed by the researcher's own phenomenological reflection.

The interview consent form requested consent to audio record participant interviews for later transcription of interview notes for thematic coding. The questions asked of each interviewee were related to their lived experience of IEP development before and during their child's initial CSE meeting. Phenomenological interviews allowed each interviewee to elaborate upon their lived experiences as a middle-class Black parent of a child with a disability within the theoretical frameworks of CRT and cultural capital theory.

Each participant was asked the same series of questions in a combination of closed and open questions all within the CRT and cultural capital frameworks to analyze their lived experiences as a Black middle-class parent who have engaged in the development of a SWD Individualized Education Plan. These twelve participants engaged in two interviews from June to August of the summer of 2022. Each mother was

emailed a letter of informed consent to participate in this study. They were informed that their identities would remain confidential, and they could withdraw their participation at any time. The participants were a sample of convenience, which morphed into a snowball sampling when two of the original participants recommended four other mothers for the study. Not everyone referred to this researcher for an interview met the criteria, or they felt they did not meet the criteria. I had to disqualify one recommended mother because her child's last IEP was not developed between 2018-2022. One recommended mother gave consent and agreed on a date to interview and was a no show. After several failed attempts to reschedule this researcher discontinued attempts. Initially this mother expressed hesitation, as she did not feel she was qualified to participate.

The interview protocol was based on Ladson-Tate and Billings (1995) Critical Race Theory (C.R.T) and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Theory (2005). This researcher noted there was an overlap of responses given for CRT and Cultural Capital framed questions. This researcher noted the willingness of all participants to speak about their shared experiences with active IEP development clearly and with transparency

Trustworthiness of the Design

Qualitative researcher Guba established four constructs to determine trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, (Shenton, 2003). I maintained trustworthiness through generation and dissemination of parent interview consent forms which were transparent of the needs, the outcomes, the anonymity, and the effect if any this study may have on the participants. Two interviews were held with each parent to increase length of my engagement with

each parent. Increasing the length of engagement likely increased the credibility of data collected from said interviews.

Reflective journaling before and after each interview was used to develop trustworthiness enabling this researcher to analyze my own personal bias and how it may affect interpretation of interview themes. This reflective analysis of the raw interview notes helped ensure confirmability of the gathered data. It was very important for my notes to have rich descriptions. I took notes on what I saw and heard during each interview in addition to what was transcribed from the audio. Reflection of those notes enhanced the accuracy of attribute coding and therefore development of thematic codes. Study participants were able to reflect on their personal journey to active engagement in the IEP development process following our second interview. Reflective journaling for the interviewees allowed them to reflect on their personal journey of CSE engagement from their first CSE meeting to their most recent one.

Lastly, credibility was reinforced with member checking each coded transcript by its' respective participant. This added depth of validation and trustworthiness of the data collected as it provided the interviewees opportunity to refute or expand upon what they had shared in the two interviews with this researcher.

Research Ethics

Each member of this study was a self-identified Black middle-class parent or a parent of a Black student with a disability with whom this researcher had a prior relationship or they were recommended for this study by one of the original invited participants. All members of the study were informed that their participation in the interviews was voluntary, and they would be under no obligation to complete the

interviews. One mother was asked to participate and initially agreed to do so, but after several attempts to schedule, decided not to participate in the interview process. Another mother was recommended for this study but while informing her of her rights this researcher learned she did meet the criteria of a child having had an IEP between 2018-2022 and was disqualified. Reporting this data illustrates that only those who truly and freely wished to participate in this study and met this researcher's criteria, did so.

The interview consent form informed them that their responses would be confidential. This researcher explained the purpose of the interview consent form by scheduled telephone call with each interviewee. Signed consent for each interview was obtained by emailed pdf document or when possible, in person meeting. All interviewees were given the opportunity to review results of coding of their interviews to cross check the validity of this author's thematic coding of their transcripts by the process of, member checking. The purpose of member checking is to confirm the accuracy of participant responses in research projects (Koelsch, 2013).

Data Analysis Approach

This researcher bracketed this study with "phenomenological reflection" a means by which I personally identified with the shared IEP development experiences but moved myself apart from it to focus solely on the interpretation of the experience by those parents who I interview by a poem of my own creation (van Manen, 2007). Writing this poem before starting the interview process helped clear this researcher's mind of personal past CSE adversities.

Creswell and Poth's (2018) strategy to utilize one's research questions to guide the collected database informed this study. In a phenomenological study such as this, it

was necessary to collect the data and analyze it on a continuous basis to make sense of it and ensure a thick description of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, affective coding methods were the strategy chosen for this phenomenological study to establish initial codes of understanding close to the data. "Affective coding methods investigate subjective qualities of human experience by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences" (Saldana, 1988, p. 124). Affective qualities are the core motives for human action, reaction, and interaction as Saldana goes on to explain that provisional/deductive codes which I used are listed under roles, organizations, and sub-cultures of which all are considered units of social organization.

My coding process began with provisional codes made before I interviewed anyone. The provisional/deductive codes were generated by what I know about disability, critical race, and parent engagement theories. In addition, provisional codes stemmed from my own personal lived experience with CSE as a Black middle-class mother of a student formerly classified with a disability. The provisional codes were confusion, barriers to understanding, perspectives, relationships, student experience, and meaning of special education (SPED).

The emotional aspect of Black middle-class parent navigation of IEP development was analyzed through the first cycle affective methods of; emotion, values, versus and evaluation, (Saldana, 1988). I utilized In Vivo coding alongside the affective method to demonstrate shared experiences with direct quotations. The benefit of In Vivo codes to this study are that such codes use the direct language of the participants (interview responses) to exact meaning (Saldana, 1988).

I then compared the transcripts of my parent interviews with my provisional codes. In analysis of the statements, I applied first cycle coding of affective methodology. The codes were made broad enough to capture the gist of the parents' shared lived experience of developing a child's IEP as a Black middle-class parent. Transcripts then required a second cycle of coding using the language of the interviewees to create more nuanced, detailed coding.

My interview transcripts were coded with the support of Dedoose, a web-based application that permits a researcher to import data for analysis such as qualitative coding (Silver & Lewins, 2014). I employed analytic memos, which led me to my second cycle coding and ultimately, realization of themes in the data. The collection of analytic memos is the process of writing in the margins, taking notes of noticeable patterns or themes during the data collection process, (Saldana, 1988). While interviewing, I wrote memos and underlined or highlighted what interviewees shared. I took time to read and jot analytic memos about the pre and post reflection journals I kept for each interview. In addition, this researcher utilized the word cloud generator component of Dedoose for further data analysis. This part of the analytic process helped me to recognize patterns of experiences and create themes of understanding as a word cloud visually showed the participants responses. The word cloud is a supplementary tool that shows which words were used the most by interviewees, supporting the confirmation of consequent themes (Cidell, 2010).

Researcher Role

As a Black middle-class parent of a student with a disability, one may second-guess the decision to classify or the possible "delay" of classification. In my experience,

you always wonder, “What if I do? What if I do not?” as this decision of classification will have a lifelong impact upon your child. The impact of this decision on the life of a Black child in America can have adverse effects if parents are not cognizant of student rights under the federal and state regulations for special education.

I am the sister of a former student who was classified as a student with a disability in the early 1980s. I am the niece of two Black men who had special needs before the passing of the PL 94-172 in 1975, which guaranteed a Free and Appropriate Public Education and the American Disabilities Act of 1991, which guaranteed access to the disabled.

I am a self-identified Black middle-class parent of a child who did have an IEP for some of their academic career and the voice, the active engagement of the Black parent in the special education process, in the development of the IEP is deeply personal to me. As a special educator, I have played the role of advocate for my family and for my own students. As a former CSE Chairperson, I have advocated and encouraged parents at their CSE meetings. As a friend, I have given support and counsel as needed to parents’ novice to the CSE. In this capacity of researcher, I had to step back and remove my, “cloudy lenses,” so I might bear witness to the shared experiences my Black middle-class participants have had in the CSE process. My role as researcher was to bracket my personal understanding of this experience to hold, support and encourage their shared experiences, (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a researcher, I had to examine my positionality in this study’s discussion of CRT and CCW and the Black middle-class parent of SWD.

Research by Milner recommends that I pose the following questions to myself while I conducted this study,

"In what ways do my racial and cultural background influence how I experience the world and what I emphasize in my research? What racialized and cultural experiences have shaped my research decisions, practices, approaches, epistemologies, and agendas?" (Milner, 2007, p. 395).

Milner's paper shares that, "From a CRT perspective, the researcher's interests can overshadow the interests of those participating in the research" (Milner, 2007, p.395) thus the critical need for bracketing and constant rich use of language for reflections before/after each of this study's interviews.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this sample was the size of the Black middle-class mother population. For this qualitative study, I chose a sample of convenience that consisted of an initial eight mothers and later snowballed into twelve mothers. "Convenience sampling saves time and effort but at the expense of information and credibility" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.225). To mitigate the limitation of that convenience sample I was able to solicit snowball sampling from two of the original sample participants, as they were able to identify people who were rich with information for this study (Creswell, 2018). These two mothers each gave me two more mothers, unknown to me, who shared similar lived experiences and made great interview candidates for this study. The snowballing helped increase my sample size and to make it more randomized. As this was primarily a convenience sample there was a selection bias on the part of the researcher. Mostly, I chose Black mothers or mothers of a Black student with a classified

disability to participate because 1) they were known to me 2) I felt there was trust between us, which would allow them to openly share their lived experiences with me without a filter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher justified why phenomenology is the best and most appropriate approach to research of barriers to active middle class Black middle-class parent engagement in development of the IEP. The researcher has described the potential participants by type of and sample size and setting. All steps of this study were guided by the research questions and purpose of this study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how a sample of Black middle-class mothers' navigation of their child's IEPs increased their community cultural wealth as they persisted against societal barriers as defined by C.R.T. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the data culled from these research questions:

1) How do middle-class Black parents perceive the function and role of the CSE Office?

2) How do middle-class Black parents perceive their own role within the IEP development process?

3) What are the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process?

Findings

Thematic shared experiences of all twelve mothers were the findings gleaned from their heartfelt interviews. Data analysis of transcribed interviews produced the following themes: (1) Black middle-class mothers navigation of the IEP development; (2) Black middle-class parent advocacy; (3) Black middle-class mom frustration; (4) Low expectations of Black students with disabilities by educators; (5) What can school districts do better for these mothers?

Table 2 documents a sample list of codes, descriptions and themes as derived from this study's interviews.

Table 2

Thematic Codes Derived From Parent Interviews

Affective codes	In Vivo codes	Thematic codes
Nightmare Learning Self-educate Cultured Building capital Overwhelmed	Didn't know what to expect CSE was horrible	Black middle-class mother advocacy.
Hurt Implicit bias Defeated	Education professionals' skill set or lack thereof.	Low expectations of Black students with disabilities by educational staff.
Helping Wondering Researching Teamwork Second guessing	Fact check Research develops confidence.	Black middle class mother navigation of IEP development.
Helpful Supportive	Beautifully supported SPED is supportive	Positive interactions with SPED staff.
Uncertain A means to an end Help! Beneficial	The process is to help, A plan to set up help for children falling behind due to a disability. Services to help them ready for each level of education.	What SPED classification represents/means to the mother.
Useless Inadequate Desperate	Workshops How to help our kids at home	What can school districts do to remove barriers to engagement?

Note. Qualitative coding utilized for parent participant interview analysis.

I felt it was important to see how this study's participants understood various terms related to the study so I asked them to help provide context. The first set of questions pertained to being middle-class. Three of the twelve mothers voiced the same opinion that "It's getting more and more difficult to be middle class these days," (Mother J). Mother J continued with,

> The middle class, I feel, is being left behind. If you're very wealthy, you don't have a problem with the losses in your 401K. Lower income class you have a lot of government resources. Middle class, you're on your own.

Mother I also voiced that being middle class was when, "you don't have much but you don't have enough to qualify for certain programs. It's like the new working class." Mother L defined middle class with a monetary sum. "Based on a salary middle-class would be people that make around $70,000 to around $200,000 dollars." Mother E expanded that definition to include," A two-income home making more than $70,000 a year."

Mother D's definition of being middle class was, "You are college educated, have a working knowledge about what's going on socially, environmentally and in the community, holistically I am middle class."

I next asked them to illustrate how they believed being middle-class was critical in the development of their community cultural wealth. Participants were given Yosso's CCWT definition of social capital, which is "a network of people and community services" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). When asked, two of the twelve participating mothers felt their strongest form of capital was social capital. Mother G believed her social capital

was rich due to her extensive social network that advised her on how to navigate the IEP development process.

I then shared with the mothers Yosso's definition of cultural capital, and I asked, if they feel their socio-economic background was a factor in to how to navigate the IEP development process successfully. For this study, I interchangeably referred to navigational capital as cultural capital. Yosso defined navigational capital as, "Having the skills or ability to maneuver through institutions not created with communities of color in mind," (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Nine of the twelve mother interviewees consequently identified culture as their strongest form of capital. Mother E made known that it was the most important to her, as she believed she had cultural values she strongly identified with. Mother E did not believe one's S.E.S would affect one's ability to successfully navigate the CSE process. On the other hand, Mother J strongly believed that her middle-class background enabled her to navigate the IEP process successfully. "I was able to get a part time remote job with Duke University to pay my son's private school tuition and get a lawyer to sue the school district. Mother J shared, "I'm reading a book that points out lower income homes don't feel they have the authority or power to question the school. Through friends, research, and monetary support I've been able to gain my power."

I wished to know their opinions of Yosso's tenet of aspirational capital. Yosso defines aspirational capital as, "The ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers," (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Two of the twelve mothers felt that this was their strongest form of personal capital. Mother H, this study's youngest participant strongly identified with aspirational capital as her children areyoung

and she is striving so they may have access to the best educational and cultural opportunities she can avail herself of.

One can have an income, the money you receive for a job done by a salary, but it is the other means of wealth, such as community cultural wealth, that one cannot explicitly measure. I felt it was helpful to share the ideology of CCW with the participants so they may elaborate upon their own understanding of what it means to be middle-class within its' framework.

Theme 1: Black Middle-Class Mothers' Navigation of the IEP Development

Initial Feelings on role of IEP Development. The participants of this study all self-identified as Black and middle-class, except for Mother A, who identified as a Hispanic middle-class mother of a Black child with a disability. Six of the twelve mothers are educators, three are social workers (not in education), one retired professional, and two others in professional fields not connected to education. Each mother shared muddled experiences navigating the IEP development. Mother H a social worker shared, "The navigation process has been confusing. At my son's first CSE meeting I just went with the flow because I wasn't knowledgeable."

Mother E initially believed that IEPs were developed when a child had issues to work out. Mother E shared that, "Those children have to get the appropriate services to iron out the wrinkles." Social worker, Mother I reported that at her child's first CSE she felt confident because at the time she worked in the field of early intervention. She shared, "I was able to access more resources for my son because of my early intervention experience." Elementary school teacher Mother L said her first CSE experience was likely universal. "If you are new to the experience of dealing with a child with special

needs you have to start somewhere. Regardless of your own background you have to educate yourself to create an IEP plan."

All twelve interview respondents shared a similar perception of the function and role of the CSE Office, which was, "The role of the CSE office is to help develop an IEP for a student with the assistance of the parent. They develop a plan that tells how a child's special needs will be met within the context of an educational curriculum and environment" (Mother F). Mother D, who is a special education teacher expanded this definition by sharing, "My navigation of the IEP development process meant that I had to learn my child as a whole, not just from the perspective of a test. My child's educational team has to be part of the navigation of his education psychologically, culturally, and educationally." Similarly, Mother A, a speech-language pathologist who professionally frequents CSE meetings, added

> The function of the CSE office is to guide parents through this process of regulations (timelines, parental rights, etc.); look to family as collaborators and include parents and students (if of age) in the decision-making process; explain to parents the importance of the IEP document and its development; ensure that appropriate assessments are conducted, and outcomes explained to parents in a way that they will understand.

However, even knowledgeable parents, such as Mothers A, D, and F, experienced difficulties with the IEP process. Mother D shared,

> Those CSE meetings can be a bit overwhelming for parents if you don't know what your child's needs are. The function and role of CSE is to encourage the active participation of parents in the IEP development process. There was a CSE

chairperson unwilling to work with, and I had them removed from my child's meetings.

Mother E, a Human Resources Director viewed the CSE as failing in their role. "I had to fight at her (daughter's) meetings. There were a lot of battles. People sat on CSE that didn't have the knowledge or they just didn't care. They had never come across a parent like me that was going to read and understand the paperwork." The next theme will illuminate the barriers these mothers felt hindered their ability to navigate the CSE meeting.

Barriers to Black Middle-Class Mothers' Full Engagement. Mothers interviewed for the study who did not have a special education background shared that the greatest barrier to their active participation in the IEP development process was their initial lack of knowledge of the CSE process or navigational capital. Parents felt they lacked detailed information on the ongoing role beyond the meeting. For example, Mother H shared, "I understand the function and role of the CSE office as it being the office for special education and this is the office or department that has annual meetings with the parents each year, outside of that I don't understand much." Similarly, Mother L said, "I was totally confused at my son's first CSE meeting. I knew what I was there for but dealing with and hearing all these different things, my head was in a whirlwind".

Specific points of confusion included understanding the documents and evaluation. For example, Mother L shared, "The greatest barrier was within me. I had to learn what was in that document. I sought help from my friends who were in special education because the process is quite different from that as teacher to that as parent." Mother J reported, "I didn't know to be prepared for a CSE meeting. I didn't know what

it was, I didn't know." Mother C, a school administrator, explained, "My comfort level at my child's first CSE meeting was low. I didn't know what to ask for, what to expect. In the beginning, there is nothing easy about the CSE process. Even as an educator, I felt intimidated. It was a daunting task."

Evaluations were also a point of confusion for some. Mother B, a former telephone operator, noted her inability to understand the standardized evaluations was her barrier:

> When they do those big tests, I don't understand what was done and then they tell me what his percentage was. I'm like, percentage of what? It's hard for them to explain it to me so that I understand. I'm not a teacher and I need help understanding the paperwork.

Mother H, a social worker, shared,

> I don't understand those lines (IEP) all of it. I don't understand what it means to progress. What do you need to get rid of a goal? I don't know if he has met a goal. Does it get thrown out and then a new goal is implemented? It sounds like I understand but when it comes to the paperwork in front of me, I actually don't understand.

Mother I expressed, "The IEP and the CSE (meeting) is basically them saying this and this is what we are going to do for third grade and that's it. It's kind of like they don't want to talk it over. They can get their meeting done."

Interviewees who worked in special education such as Mother D felt their ability to navigate the CSE process was better than most because of their professional training in the field. At the first CSE for Mother D's son, she shared, "I knew what he needed and

what he would require in school. If you're not familiar with special education, you will be at a lost at the initial CSE."

These parents all understood that engaging in the IEP development process was crucial for the academic futures of their children. The greatest struggles to engage typically occurred in the initial CSE meeting because they lacked the navigational capital to know what to expect. These parents did not fully understand the legal jargon of New York State special education procedural regulations, how to interpret standardized testing or which data driven questions they should ask their child's CSE team during the meeting.

Theme 2: Black Middle-Class Parent Advocacy

Parent advocacy was a significant theme of this study. The study participants either identified as advocates for their child with special needs or as an advocate for all children, including their own, with special needs..

Advocate for Their Child. Three of the mothers spoke only of advocating for their own child. When this researcher asked Mother I if she considered advising mothers as herself about the CSE process she was hesitant to answer. At Mother I's last CSE she, "felt powerless and ganged up on and was on the verge of tears." Mother C is an example of a mother who only advocated for her own child. To her a special education classification "meant her intuition was correct. I knew something was different...I've seen my role grow to help her become a self-advocate." Mother C shared, "I didn't feel comfortable talking about it (IEP)." Others, like Mother F, stated, "I had his little picture on the table so when they spoke of him, they knew exactly who they were talking about," is how Mother F advocated for her child during CSE meetings. As a general education

teacher, Mother F felt her background was to her advantage and she did not need a professional advocate.

Mother D felt, “the classification means learning about your child as a part of their educational team. You learn about your child not just from a test perspective but as an individual. You get to see the whole picture.” For Mother L, the special education classification is, “the process to help them (child) get acclimated to what we call general public education. It’s a plan set up to help those children that are falling behind due to a disability, and it provides them with services to help them in all aspects of their education.”

Mother A expressed,

> My perception of my role in this process is one of an equal stakeholder in the education of my child. My job is to ensure that my child is provided an equal opportunity to access the curriculum, whether it be through initial assessments to determine a disability (or not), accommodations if needed, and to be the voice of or allow my child to voice what works best for him.

Mother F felt,

> My role as a parent is very important because I help make sure that the IEP correctly supports my child. I hold the key to making sure they fully understand my child’s needs. As the parent I must make sure that my son’s special needs are being met and that he is getting the appropriate services.

Mother L advocated for her child, saying:

> At my son’s CSE meetings I ask them what is he doing in class? Where do you see him going? What’s the next step for him? That’s logical. That’s realistic. I

> want his IEP to show where he's gradually improving. I was at every single meeting. It was something that I had to do because I needed them to know that I was serious. In 12 years, I've never missed any of his meetings. They saw that I was consistent.

"I find myself at times having to educate those at the table as to what is appropriate or inappropriate in how they refer to my son, not necessarily the regulations but more of a personal, social nature," shared Mother A, a speech pathologist. Mother L expanded on Mother A's sentiments when she shared, "The school district didn't do enough to help me navigate the process. I think my friends did way more because when I reached out to them, they helped me." Mother J lost faith in the CSE as well and shared, "I started testing my son privately. I basically did not trust the school district's testing at all. Over the years they did their testing, but I always did private testing as well."

Some parents had to use their social capital and knowledge of the legal system. Mother E explained, "I would come to meetings and people (CSE) hadn't read the file. They didn't understand my child and often I found myself educating the staff." Mother E illustrated low staff expectations further by sharing, "I feel the staff doesn't usually come across an educated parent willing to fight for their child like I do. They didn't take me seriously until I threatened them (lawsuit)."

Mother J shared a painful experience that occurred early in her son's academic career. She stated,

> I kicked a speech therapist out of my house. She didn't try to make him comfortable. She just started testing. He would not answer her questions because of his sixth sense about people. She wrote that he was severely mute, which he

wasn't. I told her the evaluation was over. She said it was not. I told her I'm asking you to leave my home right now. She started arguing with me and I said you're trespassing. I'm calling the police. She ran out of there fast.

Advocate for All Children. The other mothers viewed their role as both an advocate for their child and one for other parents. A prime example of CCW can be seen through Mother E's comment:

> I help other parents navigate the system because they don't have 300 hundred dollars for an advocate. They don't know how to write a letter, they don't have the knowledge of New York State law or the resources, so they come to me, and I help them tell the district they are not going to do this to this little brown kid.

Mother J's example of advocating for other children is,

> I recently started an organization called, Partnering Parents. Whether you're low or middle class, a lot of people and families don't know their power and don't know their rights. They don't know I can push back and no; I'm not agreeing to that for my kid. That's the piece that the school district doesn't give you because they don't want you to push back. So, we have to get it from each other, one parent to another.

This study's participants often felt frustrated by a lack of results, which is mirrored by the Rossetti et. al. (2021) study that reported "Instead of being collegial, the majority of participants described the IEP process as adversarial." (p.446). When parents see a lack of results, they demonstrate resistant capital, defined by Yosso's CCW as, "Maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth," (Yosso, 2004, p. 80). The ability to extend one's self to other mothers is a powerful

example of building navigational and social capital of Black middle-class mothers in the CSE process.

Theme 3: Black Middle-Class Mom Frustration

During our interviews, the participants shared many points of frustration. Mothers were typically frustrated with their own lack of navigational capital or with school staff that were not knowledgeable of their child or who exuded racial bias. “There were staff members who didn’t know how to do the testing. Testing wasn’t done appropriately to see what my daughter was needing,” lamented Mother E when asked about her frustrations with the IEP development process. “Trying to identify what my daughter needed was a struggle. We used to battle in the CSE because they did not know what my child needed to be successful, and they didn’t know what to do with a parent like me,” (a Human Resources Director). Similarly, Mother B complained, “They wanted to give him just speech and I felt there was so much more that he needed. The process of going back and forth was difficult in trying to get them to see what I saw at home.”

Frustration often escalated to moving or withdrawing their children from their school district’s special education program. Of the twelve mothers, there were two examples of those who became so frustrated with the IEP development process that they removed their children from the school district. Mother J reported, “I was so frustrated one year that I took him out of the school district. They were threatening to put him in a class with no curriculum. They were trying to force my hand. They were bullying me basically to put him in there, so I pulled him out completely.” Mother I was motivated to remove her child from her school district’s special education system in part because, “I

felt the teacher didn't really care for him and for lack of a better word, didn't really like him. I did not feel supported. It was not a good fit."

Mother I felt hindered in her ability to actively engage and be heard in CSE. Mother I reported that CSE's deficit was "This year CSE was threatening. I felt like I didn't know anything. Every time I would try to provide feedback, it was kind of like in one ear and out the other. I was just disregarded." Mother I conveyed, "I felt powerless. I didn't know what to do for him. I didn't want to ruffle too many feathers either. I didn't want to get anyone angry, and they retaliate against him." She continued. "I felt powerless and ganged up on, I was on the verge of tears."

Special educator Mother D took action to stem her frustration with CSE. She shared, "I experienced a Chair who was not willing to work with me. I think this Chair of CSE had pre-directives and I told her that was not the way we were going to conduct a meeting, as a result, I no longer had meeting with that CSE Chairperson." The interviews found that whether one's navigational capital was strong or limited, there was always a frustrating moment during the CSE that sometimes could not be avoided. The mothers with limited CCW became frustrated because, like Mother I, they did not know how to reclaim power. The mothers with strong CCW, like Mother D, would become frustrated because they fully understood the attempted manipulation by CSE and were disappointed they had to "fight back."

Theme 4: Low Expectations of Black Students with Disabilities By Educators

A recurring theme or this study was perceived low expectations of Black students with disabilities by school special education staff. Local educational agencies cultural embrace of deficit theory has permutated to a point where the federally required least

restrictive environment (LRE) may appear minimized. Eleven out of twelve mothers reported that at some point in their child's academic career, they experienced some form of implicit bias or low expectations for their child with special needs. Before she became a teacher, Mother F herself had held the belief that, "Schools put Black kids in special ed and didn't support them because the mentality was, they were not capable of not doing anything."

When asked, about barriers to her active engagement in her son's IEP development process, speech pathologist Mother A shared, "That's a good question. Case in point, we did his annual review meeting and I had to stop his resource room teacher from using the term lazy. Lazy, in context of my son." Mother A continued, "All of my (CSE) experiences have always been with those who are white. This would be the second time he was either not given what he needed or was belittled, and I think race definitely plays a part in it."

Special educator Mother D gave the example of, "A conversation for alternative schooling for my child. The alternative schooling was for 2 ½ hours of the day and the remainder of the day, he would be home. I asked them, what did they expect me to do with him for the rest of the day? They gave me nothing."

Mother J, a clinical researcher, shared this example of low expectations. She informed her CSE that, "the district said we can meet his academic needs here but I said no. I have a sixth grader reading on a first grade level and he has been with you."

Mother F was the only mother out of twelve who did not have a negative staff experience to share with this researcher. "Initially we thought he's going to go to private schools, but we have been supported so beautifully throughout his academic career," was

the glowing report given by Mother F about her positive interactions with special education staff. Mother F went on to say, "The special education department is supportive, he's thriving and doing well. They're not hindering him." She added, "My son's school district shoots for the least restrictive environment. He was transitioned to L.R.E through his academic career even when I didn't feel ready for it." Mother F continued, "The members of the CSE always gave me opportunity to agree or disagree and share my concerns. I always asked my son; did you go to speech today? What happened? I would then use that information at my meetings." Mother F summarized her experience with, "I always had the feeling it was the culture of the special education office and school district to take a true interest in my child (and all of their students)."

Black Middle-Class Mom Fears. To some degree, all twelve mothers expressed fear for their child's path through life as a person with special needs and in that telling, tears were typically shed. Mother G painfully shared, "I'm just very emotional because I know the struggle he's going to have from grade to grade because this is going to get harder and harder."

If one views the middle-class as being educated and aspirational, you can understand the fear expressed by Mother A for her SWD. Mother A expressed,

> My son's classification represented how much literacy is needed in school and I am still extremely concerned for his success as a student and ultimately, as an independent adult. In a little bit, you know, in a little way, it (classification) represented a bit of a failure on my part.

Change or period of transition can be scary for not just the child, but for the parent as Mother F reported, “His Pre-K teacher told me she really wanted to put him in a 15:1 class and I started crying. I was so scared because I wasn’t sure if he was ready.”

The fears of these mothers ranged from fear of failure of child, fear of failure of parent and fear that the school system will fail their child and hinder their academic potential.

Theme 5: What Can School Districts Do Better For These Mothers?

When mothers of SWD meet at the market or on social media, they often will vent and share what they feel the school district should improve about the CSE process. The mothers of this study did share their thoughts on what districts can do to better support them. All twelve mothers agreed that school district special education offices should do a better job of educating parents about their IEP programs in person and on their school district websites. Mother E shared, “My district does not provide parents with resources or information they can go to for help along the way. If you look at our special education website, there’s outdated material and nothing about the processes.”

From her point of view, Mother J voiced,

> When you write a protocol or a consent form in my business you don’t put scientific language in the consent form. We’re required to write it in layman terns, on a 5th grade level because everybody has to be able to understand it. (With CSE) It should be, these are the ABCS and the 1,2,3’s of the process from the parent’s perspective, not from the institution's perspective.

Mother I believes, “you have to listen to parents. Listen to their concerns. Listen to their needs instead of dictating. If a parent is asking questions, break it down in layman’s terms so a parent can better understand.”

Several mothers identified training and workshops as a strategy. For example, Mother L felt,

> There should be training in meetings by the school psychologists. Parents need help understanding the meetings. The parents will become more involved because when parents don’t understand something, they pull away from it. The district should have meetings once a month on how to read the IEP and what it means.

Mother I also believed parenting workshops would be very valuable. Mother I said, “It’s important that if a parent asks questions that the responses are given in layman’s terms. She also shared, "When there is a CSE meeting it should always come from a positive place.” “I think the special education department should really take their time explaining the whole process to a parent,” shared Mother H. Mother L affirmed the need for parent training. She articulated, “whoever runs the CSE meetings should train the parents on how to become more involved. When parents don’t understand, they pull away. Give them meetings once a month on how to read the parts of the IEP, to understand it.”

Mother B reported that the Special Education Parent and Teachers Association (SEPTA) should be supported more by her district’s office of special education as an additional engagement tool. She shared that “it is not a resource (to parents) because it has not been held consistently in my district.”

Conclusion

This chapter explored the shared experiences of Black middle class parental navigation of the IEP development process. These mothers were generous with their time, their stories, and their tears as well as their triumphs in this IEP navigation process. This chapter gave this cultural striation called the Black middle-class an opportunity to voice their respective IEP navigation journeys. This researcher focused on what challenged them the most and how they overcame those barriers to successful engagement in the CSE meeting.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In Chapter 4, Black middle-class mothers shared experiences about their navigation of IEP development. These mothers spoke about their fears, frustrations, and triumphs in overcoming barriers to successful CSE meetings. These twelve participants shared painful memories of fear, confusion, and disappointment as well as exalted feelings of appreciation or joy when they were supported by special education staff or when their child proved successful due to the effective IEP they helped to create. In their interviews, many of the participants shared how community cultural capital played a significant role in their ability to navigate the CSE. The three research questions addressed were the following:

1. How do middle-class Black parents perceive the function and role of the CSE office?
2. How do middle-class Black parents perceive their own role within the IEP development process?
3. What are the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process?

The following themes emerged from their heartfelt stories: 1) Black middle-class navigation of the IEP development process; 2) Black middle-class parent advocacy; 3) Black middle-class mom frustration; 4) low expectations of Black students with disabilities by educators; and 5) What can school districts can do better for these mothers?

Chapter 5 discusses the implications of this study's findings, their relationship to prior research, the limitations of this study and how this study may be used to better

understand and support the needs of Black middle-class mothers and their children classified with special needs in the public school system.

Implications of Findings

Twelve middle-class Black mothers of students with disabilities told stories of their shared phenomenological experiences which reflected themes directly related to Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) and minimally with the proposed critical race theory framework of Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995). Initially, I believed that CRT would have been the dominant frame of this study but came to realize from interviewee responses that CRT was interwoven into the dominant themes of CCW such as navigational, aspirational, and social capital.

The first research question of this study on how middle-class Black parents perceive the function and role of the CSE office was reflected most by community cultural wealth framework and the following themes of; "What special education classification represents, special education staff deficits and what school districts can do better for these mothers." The first key finding is that, many of the mothers were disappointed with how their CSE office handled their child's IEP journey. Often, they reported feeling dismissed and/or overwhelmed by the process. The mothers shared that classification for their SWD meant they would get the support they needed in a F.A.P.E but at the expense of discord and grief

The second key finding was that mothers had to utilize CCW navigational capital to push against the barriers imposed on them by school district special education offices. Yosso's community cultural wealth framework influenced the themes of question two which asks, how do middle-class Black parents perceive their own role in

the IEP development process. The theme of advocacy was dominant in response to this question. Most of the mothers responded they learned to advocate for their SWD and three of the twelve mothers became active advocates for other Black parents. Advocating parents shared that it was because of their support system of family, friends, and colleagues that they were able to obtain the support their child needed to access the general education curriculum in school.

The third finding was that these mothers utilized strong social capital to increase their empowerment in the IEP development process. Their ability to learn who and where to turn to for support was critical in their SWD's educational journey. They were able to voice that the "village" helped them to navigate the special education system for their child. The third question of this study sought to answer a question on the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process. These findings affirmed Yosso's CCW theory in that these mothers had to develop their community cultural capital to successfully navigate the IEP. Most felt frustration and fear for their SWD because of real and perceived low expectations of their child by school staff, as related to CRT. Over all, any mothers were confused and overwhelmed about how to read an IEP, how to decipher evaluations, how to participate in a CSE until they built their cultural capital wealth. Opportunities realized by these mothers occurred when exceptional staff members engaged in cultural reciprocity with them. These empathetic CSE chairpersons, teachers and special education leaders took the time to encourage full parental participation in planning of their child's IEP and did so through clarification and support of the process.

Relationship to Prior Research

This current study gave insight into the lived experiences of Black middle-class mothers who often struggled to navigate the CSE and IEP development for their children with special needs. This study supports prior research on middle class parent acknowledgement of advocacy as a necessary tool for success, a theme which emerged from the intersection of race and class in the Doucet study of 2008. Most parents whether Black or White showed an understanding of the importance of advocating for their children if unhappy with how things are going in school. Mother J realized how important advocacy was immediately after her son's first CSE meeting:

> After my son's first CSE meeting, I went to see my grandmother. I explained to her what happened, and she said to me, you know why you felt blindsided, like a bulldozer ran over you? It was because you weren't prepared. From that day on I became my son's fiercest advocate.

The findings of this present study were consistent with prior research centered on the Black middle-class parent's experience with education. In this study the parents all shared their aspirations for their children which led to development of cultural capital to ensure the success of their SWD. This present study echoed a 2014 study conducted by Loque & Latunde, which reported, "There was a failure of school personnel's understanding of how Black families engage with their children's education system," (p.5). As with the Loque & Latunde study, the mothers of this current study always visited the schools of their children for meetings and events on a regular basis. As Mother L shared, "to be consistent." Black mothers come to school when necessary but typically utilize the concept of the "village" as expressed in the Loque & Latunde study. Mother I

voiced," Other mothers helped me navigate. We all kind of stuck together trying to make an understanding."

The Yull et al. (2014) study reflected many of the same CRT concerns reflected in this study. As in the Yull study, my parents' expressed frustration with lack of cultural competency reflected by special education staff deficits. These Black middle-class mothers were frustrated by the inconsistent display of professionalism by special educators. Several of my participants shared that they felt racism at their child's IEP meeting by the language used and the lack of time or explanation given to the procedures for their child's IEP by the educational professionals. Mother E expressed, "Instead of talking about how bad a community is, get a group of parents like me and start investing and holding them accountable. Things will change. If the district sees that low- and high-income parents are involved, they will put the resources out there." As with prior research, cultural reciprocity is a necessary skill set school district's special education offices must develop. "Professional self-monitoring of the implementation of IDEA has not been consistently effective…as parents may not have similar access to capital (navigational) compromising IDEA home-school relationships" (Trainor, 2010, p.3).

A significant finding was that a Black parent's social economic status does not determine how well they will navigate the special education system or how well received they will be by the professionals. Barriers arise when a parent is lacking the navigational capital to fully engage in the IEP development process and when they have a deficit of social capital to provide the social/emotional support one requires when a child is first classified for a special education program. Mother L's example was, "The greatest barrier was within me. I had to learn what the document was saying. I had to get others to help

me translate it. I had to learn from my cohorts so I could conquer the process and understand so I could best help my son."

Limitations of the Study

This was a qualitative study that relied on parent interviews in turn that were analyzed for data by this researcher. This researcher's self-identification as a Black middle-class parent of a SWD is a limitation to this research. I worked hard to bracket my lived experiences so that I could experience each participant's experience freshly anew. Interviewing only middle-class Black mothers was the second limitation of this study. It would have given a broader, whole family perspective if the fathers of these students were included in the interview process. Mother J had commented, "I felt like a single parent because I went through this process by myself." The study could have been expanded if fathers were asked if they did or did not participate in the IEP development process and for what reason(s)? The third limitation was that of sample size. This study had a relatively small sample size from three Long Island, New York school districts and the results are not generalizable to a broader population.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The present study found that barriers such as lack of knowledge, implicit bias, and lack of cultural reciprocity existed for 11 out of 12 of the interviewed participants. One recommendation for future practice is to develop workshops for special education administrators on how to ensure cultural reciprocity between staff and their culturally diverse parents. School and special education administrators would benefit from diversity and equity instruction on best practices for family engagement. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (D.E.I.) training would afford them opportunity to learn how striations of sub-

cultures prefer to engage with the school community and receive information valuable to their child's academic career.

Higher education institutions should require novice teachers to engage in case studies on culturally diverse parental relationships in their future special education classes. They should have opportunity to intern in school districts culturally different than their own alma mater. Their internship should include a reflection journal to share in their college class discussion on pointed topics about diversity, equity, and inclusion in their student teaching classes. Diversity and equity training is critical for novice school psychologists as historically they chair sub-CSE meetings in local schools. Special education staff should be trained on how to explain standardized evaluations and achievement data in terminology which any parent could understand at a CSE meeting.

Lastly, I recommend consistent usage of the pre-CSE meeting. When a school district develops a culture shift to encourage critique, question, and challenges from all parents of SWD they will want to encourage a pre-CSE meeting with those parents. This is a meeting that can be held one to two weeks before the scheduled CSE meeting with the student's case manager/teacher and the parent in a forum conducive to both (virtual, phone, or in person). In a pre-CSE meeting, the rough draft of goals, accommodations and modifications can be discussed with the parent. This facilitates an environment of comfort and cultural reciprocity allowing the parent freedom to question without fear of appearing unknowing. Prior research by Jones & Peterson-Ahmad referred to this as mini-conferencing (2017). Providing time for prior discussion allows for a deeper, concise generation of an IEP for the student at the next CSE meeting with all IEP team members present.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of the present study suggest that there are opportunities to extend the study in the future. This study exclusively consisted of twelve self-identified Black middle-class mothers. This research could be broadened by including the fathers of their children. It would give insight to the intersectionality of culture, gender, and race in development of the IEP for a Black middle-class student. One recommendation for future research is to conduct mixed-method research to survey parents' perceptions about how to increase parent engagement in CSE and compare to what their open-ended questions reveal about their beliefs. Another recommendation would be to conduct a quantitative study on Black middle-class parent engagement in the CSE to examine the relationship between types of cultural capital and impact of engagement in the CSE. Utilizing a Likert survey would allow for a much larger sample of parent participation than the parental interviews alone, which would increase the randomization of the sample. Lastly, I would recommend extending this research by interviewing special education administrators and/or CSE chairpersons for their perceptions on barriers to active parental engagement in the CSE to determine if perceptions are similar are dissimilar and if so for what reasons.

Conclusion

It was evident that the middle-class Black women who participated in this study demonstrated courage as they shared similar lived experiences navigating the IEP development process for their child with a classified disability. Their lived experiences allowed this researcher to view anew the anguish, which can turn into triumph for parent,

and child when one embraces their CCW to navigate the special education system for the aspirations and dreams they all have for their children.

APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL MEMO

* External Email *

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Jun 8, 2022 1:28:25 PM EDT

PI: Kellie Ramsey
CO-PI: Randall Clemens
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2022-376** *A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BARRIERS TO ACTIVE MIDDLE CLASS BLACK PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN THE IEP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS*

Dear Kellie Ramsey:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BARRIERS TO ACTIVE MIDDLE CLASS BLACK PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN THE IEP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS*. The approval is effective from June 7, 2022 through June 6, 2023.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology
Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a research study with details below. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you agree to participate and then withdraw, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits that are usually accessible to you. Please read the information below and do not hesitate to ask questions for clarification before signing this document by contacting the student researcher using the information below.

Student Researcher:

_____

Kellie M. Ramsey, M.S.,

Doctoral Candidate, Spring 2022

Dissertation Chair:

_____

Randall F. Clemens, PhD.

St. John's University

TITLE OF THE STUDY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BARRIERS TO ACTIVE MIDDLE CLASS BLACK PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN THE IEP. DEVELOPMENT PROCESS.

Purpose of the research: This qualitative phenomenological study will understand how Black middle-class parents of students with disabilities face and overcome barriers to their active engagement in development of their child's Individualized Education Plan.

Description of the procedure to be followed:

1. The researcher will invite a cohort of middle-class Black parents of SWD who are known to her to participate in the interview process.
2. An initial meeting will be scheduled, held either in person or by Zoom for the researcher to explain the purpose of the study, a rationale for being selected, the data collection procedures and the platforms to be used.
3. The researcher will explain to participants that they are asked to provide consent to interview and for that interview to be audio recorded for later transcription by the researcher.
4. The interview consent form will be signed either in person by each participant or by encrypted email to the researcher.
5. Data collection will happen at a mutually agreeable time virtually via Zoom or in person. If by Zoom it will be attended only by the researcher and the interviewee.
6. All collected data will be stored on a password-protected laptop owned by the researcher only.
7. If interviewee chooses to be interviewed by Zoom it will be done through a personal subscription of the researcher which is inaccessible by anyone but herself.
8. The participants will be allowed to review transcripts from their interview responses to decide if they agree with what was scribed and if they wish it revised or not utilized.

Discomforts/risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) discomforts or risks. There may be unknown discomforts or risks.

Benefits for participation: While there are no expected direct benefits to participating, the findings of this study are intended to inform other educational institutions of the impact of barriers to active Black middle class parent engagement in the development of the IEP and this will assist the field of education.

Duration of participation:

Statement of confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your responses will not be linked to your name in any written or verbal versions of this research study. Research records will be coded and electronically secured in a password protected file on a password protected computer accessible only by the researcher. Your responses will be used solely for educational and publication purposes and presented as a summarized version.

If you have any additional questions during this research study, you are welcome to contact the student researcher, Kellie M. Ramsey, at kellie.ramsey18@my.stjohns.edu or kelliem711@icloud.com.

Fees: You will not be paid to participate in this study.

Termination of participation: If you wish to terminate the session at any point during the study, I will do so.

Questions regarding the research:

a. You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by the student researcher before, during, and after the research.

b. If you have any further questions about this study at any time, please do not hesitate to email me at kellie.ramsey18@my.stjohns.edu, kelliem711@icloud.com or call me at (516) 318-4110. You may also request an overview of the study, which will be sent to you.

c. If any problems or issues occur due to your participation, you may report them to Dr. Randall F. Clemens, Mentor at: clemensr@stjohns.edu.

SIGNATURE FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

If you have read and understood the study's purpose, the procedures to be followed, and the benefits, risk and confidentially clause you consent to participate in this research study, please complete this consent and assent form. Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate in this study, knowing that you are free to withdraw your participation in this study at any point without penalty.

Name and signature of participant:

_____ _____

Signature of participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of researcher Date

SIGNATURE FOR PERMISSION TO BE RECORDED DURNG INTERVIEW SESSIONS

If you have read and understood the study purpose, the procedures to be followed and the benefits, risk, and confidentiality clause and have given consent for your interview sessions to be recorded as participants in this research study, please complete this consent form. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed or omitted.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate in this study, knowing that you are free to withdraw your participation in this study at any point without penalty.

Name and signature of participant:

_____

Please print your name (*Participant)*

_____

Signature of *participant*

_____ _____

Date

_____ _____

Signature of *student researcher* Date

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of being middle-class?
2. Based on your own definition, are you considered middle-class?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. What is your profession?
5. The following are forms of community cultural capital. Rate them from your greatest to least amount of capital: social, aspirational, cultural, financial.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research questions 1, 2 and 3	**Critical Race Theory framework (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)**	**Community Cultural Capital Theory framework (Yosso, 2005)**
1. How do Black middle-class parents perceive the function and role of the CSE Office?	1. As a Black middle-class parent, what does the IEP development process mean to you? 2. Why was your child classified and what was the classification? 3. Did you or the school make the initial referral to CSE and why?	1. Did you initially perceive the special education process as a help or a hindrance towards achieving your goals for your child? Why or why not? 2. How easy has it been for you to navigate the IEP development process and why?
2. How do Black middle-class parents perceive their own role within the IEP development process?	1. Describe how you felt during your child's first CSE meeting. 2. What made you feel that way? 3. What role does your being a Black middle-class parent play in the development of your child's IEP?	1. What does your child's SPED classification represent to you? 2. Has anyone ever helped you navigate the IEP development process? If so, who and how? 3. Have you used resources such as

	4. How knowledgeable of the IEP development process were you before your child was classified?	websites, books, parent groups to help you navigate the IEP development process? If so, to what extent? If not, why not?
3. What are the opportunities and barriers to active engagement of middle-class Black parents in the IEP development process?	1. What does your active participation in the development of your child's IEP look like, sound like? 2. What has been the hardest aspect of IEP development for you to navigate and why? 3. Have you developed a positive relationship with special education personnel. If so, with whom and how? 4. Which changes would you recommend facilitating Black middle-class parents' navigation in the IEP development process?	1. Describe how you felt during your child's most recent CSE meeting. How would you compare it to your initial CSE meeting? 2. If you felt differently, what created that shift for you? 3. Have you been able to develop a relationship with SPED personnel responsible for co-creation of your child's IEP? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D A POETICAL REFLECTION

Bracketing this researcher's lived experience as a Black middle-class mother of a SWD

There is power

There IS power in my words,
In the look of my eyes.
There IS power in the heart of a woman, of a soul, of a mother of a son, who will not be denied. Who Will not be denied.
Not denied his FAPE
Not denied his LRE
Not denied his freedom to be the best possible Be he can BE!

No. No. No.
Do not sleep on it.
Don't dare think because he is black that he does not have parents who love
Support and
Develop him.

He does not drink from just the fount of the school who doubts.
No.
He eats from the bowl, where his Grandma mixes,
His Grand mommy mixes,
His Nana mixes,
His Grand'Mere mixes their belief and pride in him,
Into him.

He drinks from the cup his Papa, his Daddy his uncles drink-
long deep draughts of stories, care, and wisdom.

Yes. He has a voice – a future.
Yes. His momma has a voice.

Yes.
He breathes in when his mother breathes out.
Her life. His life.
Momma Bear got you.
Momma Bear got you.

Climb each branch, push back the leaves.
Climb.
Did you get the correct rope to climb with?
Did you need to modify that climb?

Accommodate that climb?
Were you free to climb in the Least Restrictive Environment?

Climb.
Feel the warmth of a thousand splendid suns upon your face.

The Power of the educated Black Man.
Relevant
Supported.
Needed.

Oh yes. He does have a village.
Oh yes!

Educated.
Man.
Black.
Despite of.
Because of,

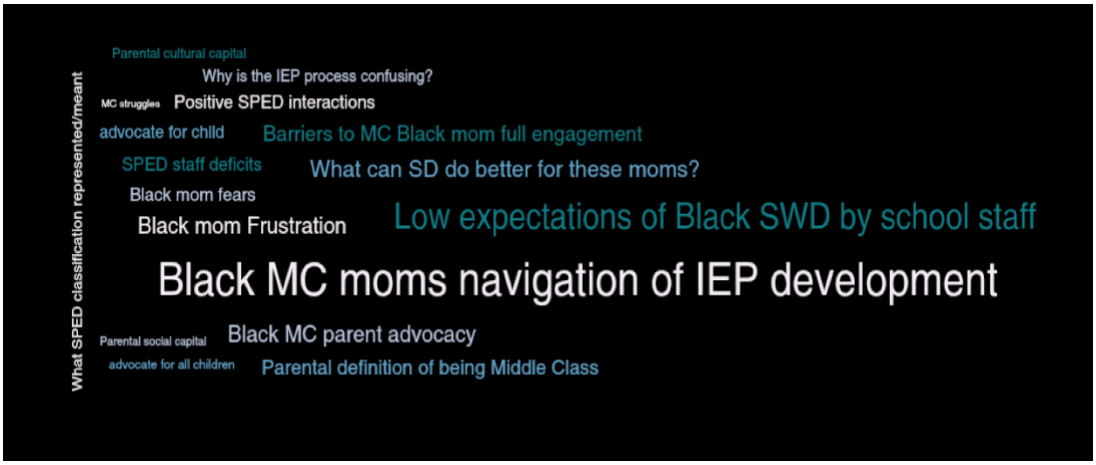
Power.

Written by Kellie M. Ramsey

APPENDIX E DEDOOSE CODE- WORD CLOUDS

Figure 1

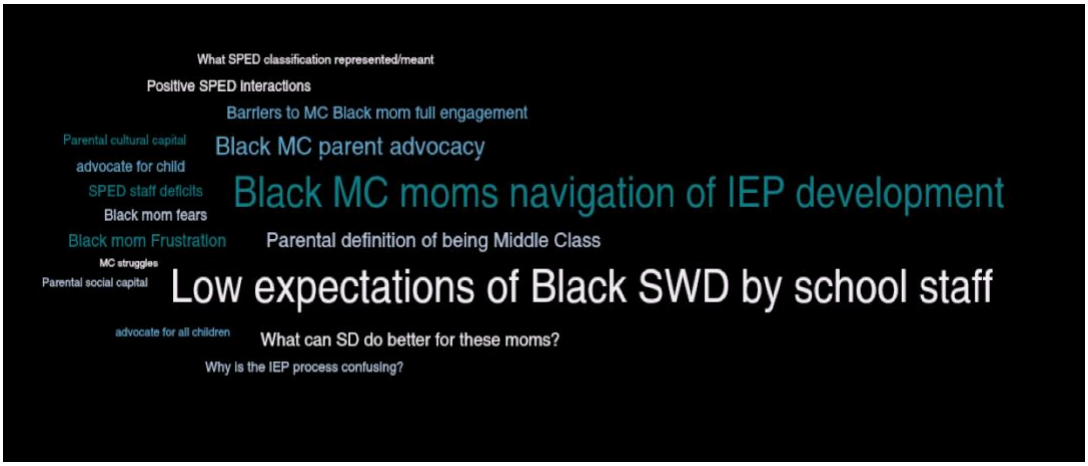
Parent codes of middle-class Black parent IEP development interviews



Note. Theme titles shown by font size for increased or decreased amount of interview responses.

Figure 2

Sub-codes of middle-class Black parent IEP development interviews



Note. Sub-theme titles shown by font size based on increased or decreased amount of interview responses.

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Vita

Name	*Kellie M. Ramsey*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Arts, Hofstra University* *Hempstead, New York* *Major(s): Secondary Education, American Literature*
Date Graduated	*May, 1990*
Other Degrees and Certificates	*Master of Science, Hofstra University* *Hempstead, New York* *Early Childhood Special Education*
Date Graduated	*May, 1992*
	School Administrator Certificate Of Advanced Study *College of St. Rose*
Date Graduated	*August 2015*