The Lived Experiences of Black Parents in Their Relationships with a White School Community

Jaclyn Cervo-Jacobson

Regent University

Dr. Leitch- Alford

Qualitative Research Methods and Design

Regent University

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**Statement of the Problem**

Both recent public events within Louisa County as well as my own personal experiences working in the community’s school system have raised my awareness of a significant population of people whose voices are not be being heard or validated by the school system. The county’s local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recently held a “March of Solidarity” (Shulleeta, 2011). The purpose of the march as described by a statement in the organizations press release was “to bring the citizens of Louisa together as a community to address issues such as community and economic growth, unemployment, education, family values, law enforcement and the role of the church in the community” (“Local NAACP”, 2011). The NAACP’s press release spoke to a troubling shared experience among low-income persons of color who reside in the predominantly white, rural central Virginia County of Louisa.

Working as a school counselor for the past five years in this rural central Virginia school system I have seen multigenerational patterns of low-come persons of color’s failure to thrive in the school system. There is a huge disconnect between the educators and administrators that run the schools and the marginalized population of low-income black students who overwhelmingly fail to be successful in them. Local organizations such as the county’s NAACP chapter and The Louisa Education Foundation (LEF) have already answered a call to action to address the educational and other inequities of low-income minority residents. What has yet to occur is the identification of the essence of the phenomenon that these marginalized members of the community face in their relationship with the school system. My hope is that by listening to the lived experiences of parents who grew up as low-socioeconomic persons of color within the school system and who are now parents of low-socioeconomic students of color within the school system it will help to reveal the essence of the phenomenon that has kept this population from seeing success within the county’s school system. It is my hope that armed with a better understanding of the experiences of the aforementioned members of the community that the action oriented groups such as the NAACP and the LEF will be able to better advocate for the needs of this population.

**Purpose of the Study**

It has been my experience that education plays a profoundly important role in peoples life paths. A strong and supportive educational experience can help foster success in a person’s life just as a negative and disadvantaged educational experience can inhibit success. Both of my parents are first generation college graduates and come from blue collar families. Education was highly valued by both my parents’ families, and despite many obstacles my parents pursued and achieved college degrees.

Irrespective of their humble backgrounds my parents were able to find success in and a positive accord with their respective school systems. One of the most critical factors that I believe separates my parents’ education achievements from the population that I am focusing on in this research study is race. My parents are both Caucasian and did not encounter resistance or obstacles related to their educational success as a result of their race. My grandparents were able to advocate for and play an active role in my parents’ educational careers without fear or trepidation of facing cultural barriers because of their race. The proposed purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the essence of the discord experienced by low-income persons of color in their interactions with the Louisa County Public School System.

**Literature Review**

Ladson-Billings (2000) was a name that I came across in nearly every relevant source of literature on the topics of education and underserved community members that I examined during my literature review for this study. The breadth of Ladson-Billings contributions to the body of literature associated with this research topic is beyond the limit of this literature review and so instead I will focus on briefly describing just one of the many contributions that Ladson-Billings (2000) has made. Ladson-Billings (2000) provides an overview of the historical and sociocultural experiences that African American’s have faced in our country and the effect that it has had on their quality of education. “Schools and teachers” Ladson-Billings (2000) writes, “treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of African Americans as aberrant and often presume that the teacher’s job is to rid African American students of an vestiges of their own culture” (p. 206). Ladson-Billings (2000) implores teacher educators to take the necessary step and “help prospective teachers recognize the way that race and racism structure the everyday experiences of all Americans” (p. 211). The level of awareness among educators and their willingness to explore issues of racism is holding back the American education system from serving the needs of its diverse body of students. Ladson-Billings (2000) posited a call for action writing “when we fight about education, we indeed are fighting for our lives” (p. 212).

Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) conducted a qualitative case-study on the whether the “social and intellectual capital of low-income and diverse families” could “be enhanced through parent education programs” (p. 5). The purpose of the study was to “examine how social and intellectual capital developed in groups of parents who participated in the Parent School Partnership (PSP) program of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). The study was primarily conducted at two elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District where the PSP program was being implemented. Between the two schools approximately 55 parents of Mexican origin who were first language Spanish speakers participated in the weekly PSP meetings. In addition to observing the PSP meetings the researchers also collected data from program documents and focus group interviews (Bolivar and Chrispeels, 2011). Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) study found that “when parents from disadvantaged groups receive information and training that increase their social and intellectual capital, they can effect change in the educational system through their individual and collective actions” (p. 33).

Schutz (2006) provided a literature review of “what emerged as either the most prominent or the most promising efforts to improving community-school engagement, evaluating the extent to which each achieves something like what Anderson calls ‘authentic participation’” (p. 692). Schutz (2006) begins his review by illustrating an important difference between the concepts of “school-community relations” and “community-school relations” (p. 693). The distinction between these two terms is highly significant given the implications that each has on the power differential between the groups of school and community members; the former term refers to the “perspective of educational professionals looking out from inside schools” while the later term refers to the perspective of community members looking into the schools (Schutz, 2006, p. 693). For the purposes of this research project it is the lived experiences of the community members looking into the schools that I am concerned with. “Only groups external to schools seem able to consistently provide contexts where community members can develop relatively independent perspectives and action projects that allow them to interact with schools as relative equals” explains Schutz (2006, p. 726).

Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2010) built on a brilliantly constructed metaphor of the ‘achievement gap’ as a ‘bankruptcy’ by the highly regarded researcher Ladson-Billings (2006) to “reframe the way the ‘achievement gap’ is viewed (p. 1). The debt metaphor “looks at how the accumulation of long-standing inequities such as racism or poverty in society has left to inequitable educational outcomes” (Gerstl-Pepin, 2010, p. 4). Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2010) suggest viewing the bankruptcy of the educational system through the lens of critical race theory (CRT): “CRT allows us to acknowledge the role of race and racism and socio-economic inequality in U.S. society and its relationship to achievement differentials” (p. 7). The authors warn that “blindness to racial inequity ignores past discrimination, education debts, and the racial boundaries that have reinforced education inequity” but suggest that CRT creates a way to recognize these inequities (p. 8). Beyond simply recognizing educational inequities Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2010) advocate for a veritable declaration of bankruptcy of our nations educational system and for all stakeholders, not just school personnel and teachers to take responsibility for making “significant changes” (p. 22). Invariably, Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2010) conclude that “the link between educational inequity and societal inequity must be acknowledged” followed by a commitment to systemic change (p. 21).

Young (2010) conducted a mixed methods action research and critical case study qualitative research project to determine if a “culturally relevant pedagogy was a viable pedagogical tool” (p. 248). Young’s (2010) study was conducted through the lens of CRT. Young (2010) “engaged a group of administrators and teacher leaders in difficult conversations concerning race and achievement” in inquiry group meetings (p. 250). Following the group inquiry meetings Young (2010) joined with the group members to “transform the theories learned into a viable pedagogical tool” (p. 250). Data collection took place over the course of a three month period and included multiple forms of data which were then “transcribed and coded using deductive and inductive analysis in an ongoing manner” (p. 251).

Young’s (2010) study brought to light three “significant challenges” of social justice education: the need to increase race consciousness and cultural biases of educators, the need to “address systemic roots of racism in school policies and practices” and the need to provide ongoing training for teachers on “how to implement theories into practice” (p. 257). Young (2010) concluded that the findings of the study were simultaneously “overwhelming” and “underwhelming”; they were overwhelming because of such issues as trying to resolve cultural biases of educators and underwhelming because of the limitations of the study including such as the small-scale and short time-table (p. 258). Despite the small scale, Young’s (2010) research did contribute to the literature by being one of the few studies which went beyond theory and stepped into the application of addressing culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Methods and Procedure**

**Method**

A phenomenological research method has been chosen for this study because of its focus on describing the meaning of “several individuals…lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Coming from a background of a philosophy and political science double major in my bachelor degree studies the traditional “philosophical basis” of the phenomenological approach greatly appeal to me (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Within the body of phenomenological approaches I have chosen to follow Moustaka’s (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007) transcendental phenomenology. I believe that it is important, as Moustaka’s approach dictates, to “set aside” my personal experiences as much as possible in order to full focus on the “phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59, 60)

**Research Questions**

The central question to be examined in this study is: What is the essence of the relationship that low-income, black parents who are living in the same community in which they were raised have with their children’s school system?

Procedural subquestions, using those which are recommended by Moustaka (1994, as cited in Creswell 2007, p. 110) include:

* What statements describe these relational experiences?
* What themes emerge from these experiences?
* What are the contexts of and thought about the experiences?
* What is the overall essence of the experience?

**Participant Selection**

This study would best be served by a criterion sample of 8 to 10 adult participants. Inclusion criteria would include (a) racial identification as black (b) 18 years of age or older (c) having attended Louisa County Public Schools as a low-income student and (d) being a parent of a current black, low-income student attending Louisa County Public Schools.

**Procedure**

Pending approval from Regent University’s Institutional Review Board and the Louisa County Public Schools Board, persons who met the inclusion criteria will be approached for participation in this study. After potential participants have been informed of the purpose and procedure of the study by way of either an in person meeting with the lead researcher or a phone conversation with the lead researcher informed consent will then be obtained from those potential participants who wish to partake in this research project.

Two rounds of individual interviews will be conducted in person by the lead researcher with each of the study participants; these interviews will be video recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first round of interviews will each last approximately one hour and will be in an open-ended format. The interviewer will ask the participant to talk about his/her childhood life experiences of attending Louisa County Public Schools. Limited probing questions will be used as needed to help direct the participant towards answering the central question. The second round of interviews will follow the same format at the first round. The interviewer will ask the participant to speak about his/her experiences as a parent of a student attending Louisa County Public Schools.

After all participants have been through the two rounds of interviews the lead researcher will hold a focus group and facilitate a discussion amongst the participants about some of the preliminary themes that have emerged from the interviews. The focus group will be videotaped and transcribed verbatim in the same fashion as the interviews. Following the focus group individual debriefing sessions will be offered to participants in order to allow for participants to talk about their experience participating in the study.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study will entail the use of Creswell’s (2007) “simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as discussed by Moustakas (1994)” (p. 159). The following procedures will be conducted by the lead researcher(me) as part of the data analysis.

* I will begin by recording my own experience as a school counselor in Louisa County of the phenomena of multi-generational negative relationships between low-income persons of color and Louisa County Public Schools. In following the tenets of a phenomenological study I will do this so as to “set aside” my own personal experiences “so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159).
* I will read through the transcribed data and identify statements which reference how the participants are experiencing the identified phenomena. I will construct a list of these statements and group them into themes.
* I will formulate a textural description of the experience of the participants in the study; this will include verbatim statements of what they experienced with the identified phenomena.
* I will formulate a structural description (how the phenomena happened) of the experience of the participants in the study in the same fashion as used with the textural description.
* I will incorporate both the textural and the structural descriptions of the phenomena to illuminate the “essence” of the participants’ experience.

**Ethical Considerations**

To maintain the integrity of this research project and that of all persons involved with it the highest level of attention will be paid to all ethical decisions. No contact will be made nor will any attempt to acquire participants for this study will be made until it has been lawfully approved by Regent University’s IRB and the Louisa County Public School Board. All potential participants will be given a full disclosure of the design and purpose of the research study both in written and if requested audio form before being asked to give their informed consent to participate. In order to protect the identities of the research participants they will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves to be used in the data collection and all materials submitted for future publication. All electronically stored data will be password protected and duplicated backup copies will be saved on an external hard drive that will contain only data for this project. All paper data and other tangible forms of data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office to which only the researcher has direct access. Due to the emotionally difficult nature of the experiences explored in this study the researcher will offer individual debriefing sessions to all participants and will have professional resources and referrals available for those that desire or require mental health services. Any ethical dilemmas that may emerge during the course of this study will be dealt with using the procedures recommended by the American Counselors Association’s ethical guidelines.

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