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BLACK FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN PUBLIC

HIGH SCHOOLS PARENTS IN THE GREATER BOSTON AREA

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARIETTE BIEN-AIME AYALA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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December 2019

Urban Education, Leadership and Policy Studies Program

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ABSTRACT

BLACK FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN PUBLIC

HIGH SCHOOLS PARENTS IN THE GREATER BOSTON AREA

December 2019

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Directed by Professor Wenfan Yan

Black family engagement is the key to improving the life outcomes of young Black students (Clark, 2015; Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Recently, as a response to a need for better family engagement in K-12 education, new technologies have emerged. As educators, it is important to study the effectiveness of these new communication technologies, as well as how Black families are experiencing opportunities for engagement through them. Guided by critical race theory and capital theory, I ask: How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technologies? To find this answer, in chapter one, the four fundamental areas that characterize the social contexts for engagement of Black families in urban education are explored. Chapter two then follows with a literature review composed of six emerging

themes. Next, chapter three presents my researcher positionality in connection with my

decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study about Black families. This will

then be followed by the research measures and techniques. After conducting twenty-five

individual interviews, two focus groups, and collecting document archives from nine school

districts, the textural findings were provided in chapter four and the structural findings were

provided in chapter five. Finally, chapter six combined the textural and structural experiences

to convey the essence of the Black family experience within urban public high schools in the

Greater Boston Area.

DEDICATION

To my dozens of nieces and nephews, my brothers and sisters, and my mom. This dissertation

was inspired by the strength of our family and God who covers us.

To my husband and our future children, may our family grow with the same resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank my dissertation committee members for their tireless efforts, guidance and support. Dr. Wenfan Yan, your mentorship has been monumental to me. I would not have been successful in this program without you. Each year you taught me more and more about myself and who I am becoming. I hope my work in the future measures up to the time you have put into me. You are a remarkable, unforgettable teacher. Dr. Farinde-Wu, thank you for always reminding me to push myself and keeping the standards high so I can always aim to go farther than places I originally imagined. Dr. Wei Ding, thank you for taking the time help me learn more about this research. Lastly, thank you Dr. Patricia Krueger-Henney for being a physical representation of love in the classroom. You have taught me how to be my true self.

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Thank you to my colleagues in the Student Affairs Division at UMass Boston. You have invested five years into me and kept me afloat. Thank you for the encouragement, support, care, and kindness you have each extended to me.

I would like to think my sincerest friends and family. You have given up so much and sacrificed too much for me to go through this experience. My hope is that every second missed will be multiplied and poured into each of you in the future. Mommy, Luis, Manny, Mirthy, Shirley you are my core, I hope I have made you proud.

Finally, thank you Euri Ayala, my love. For every edit, every late night, every tear, every up, every down, celebrating big and small accomplishments, and titling my head up when I fail. God knew I needed you, thank you for being a reflection of his love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDIX

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have,
and you come to us endangered.
                    —Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Statement of the Problem

The educational system of the United States has put the lives of young Black students

at risk (Warren, 2014), leaving many educators to question how they can undo much of the

damage that has been done to these students and their families (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro,

2013). The goal of this research was to contribute to the body of educational literature that

aims to reverse this damage. Specifically, this study focused on the intersection of three

pillars: the educational and life outcomes of young Black students, family engagement in

education, and communication technology. Given the severe inequalities related to the

educational and life outcomes of young Black students, this study was both necessary and

urgent (Coates, 2015).

This failure of the educational system stems directly from inequalities of race and

class in the United States (Warren, 2014). The populations that suffer the most academically,

as measured by poor test scores, and that have the lowest high school graduation rates are

found within Black communities (Murphy, 2010). In a related vein, Black boys comprise

58% of juveniles sent to adult prisons, many of whom had dropped out of school (Laura, 2014). Studies have shown that approximately one third of young Black men will serve time in prison before the age of 35 (Turetsky, 2007). Black girls are also sent to prison at high rates. Moreover, Black girls are criminalized and punished not only by the police and prison system, but also by a myriad of state institutions, including the foster care system and schools (Roberts, 2011). Combined, one third of Black students who do not complete high school end up in prison (Warren, 2014). Yet, as alarming as these statistics are, schools have not fully addressed these concerns, though some K-12 schools have tried to counter these trends through family engagement.

The literature shows that Black family engagement can improve not only the life outcomes of young Black students, but also academic progress, and can help maintain passing grades (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Defined as the "collaborative relationship between families and schools, and between schools and the community" (Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016, p. 7), family engagement can help to improve students' educational performance and retention (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Research has also shown that Black families and students who share the same educational expectations are more likely to have higher academic achievement (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Black parents and families are equipped to passionately create partnerships with schools to support their children's learning (Graham-Clay, 2005). However, despite the recognized importance of family engagement, there remains a family engagement gap—defined as a lack of connection, involvement, or relationship between families and the children's schools or teachers (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011)—and it is still difficult to get Black families engaged (Murphy, 2010).

Communication technology has recently emerged as a response to and intervention around the lack of family engagement in urban schools. By definition, communication technology comprises software and other applications that serve as a third party between families and teachers. These forms of technology include email, parent portals,[1] 24/7 phone applications for providing real-time feedback to parents, and classroom management tools to which parents and families have real-time access.

Research has shown that "as communications in U.S. society become more digitally focused, many schools have transitioned toward using more digital technology for school-home communications" (Hoffman, Podikunju-Hussain, & Ridout, 2015, p. 2). Technology can support the education of young Black students—but also negatively impact it if it is not accessible (Wong-Villacres, Ehsan, Solomon, Buil, & DiSalvo, 2017). As partnerships between schools and families are created, communication technology can play a leading role in facilitating how the partnerships are maintained. Yet, although communication technology has the capability of improving Black family engagement, its impact and effect on supporting young Black students needs further research (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). In addition, Black parents' perceptions of their engagement with communication technology in schools remains under-examined (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Through this qualitative phenomenological study, I captured and interpreted some of the perceptions and experiences of these Black families (Laverty, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

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[1] The purpose of parent portals is to help parents stay informed about and engaged in their child's education. Parent portals allow parents and guardians access to "view [their] child's grades and transcript, see [their] child's schedule, monitor [their] child's attendance, communicate with [the] child's teachers, stay current on homework, projects and deadlines, and view contact information" (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2017).

Focus of Research

The key focus of my research was Black family engagement in education through the use of communication technology. In this study, I asked: How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technology? The four sub-questions that delved further into this research are the following:

1. How do Black families within the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?

2. What opportunities available to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?

3. In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?

4. To what extent does racism impact Black families once interacting with urban schools through communication technology?

In this research, families who identified as Black[2] chose to represent a sense of community with other non-Whites (Harris, 1995). Through this phenomenological study, I argue that the voices of Black families are needed to analyze the use of communication technologies for family engagement with their children's schooling, and ultimately to keep Black families engaged. By focusing on family engagement—specifically, the uses of technology as a means for family engagement—this dissertation makes a case for addressing the difficulties that young Black students face during and after their schooling.

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[2] The Black Diaspora encompasses the many families who identify as Black, including those who are directly from Africa, who are Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, multiracial, and who are from Black communities internationally (Livingston, Pierce, & Gollop-Brown, 2013).

Background of Family Engagement

In the 2000s, the terms *family engagement* and *parent involvement* were often used interchangeably. Scholars of parent involvement have researched and documented multiple topics and subtopics. For example, Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) revised Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) theoretical models of the parental involvement process and the perceived life context of parents. Specifically, Walker et al. showed that parent involvement research can be broken into two topics—home involvement and school involvement—which can then be separated into three subtopics: parents' motivational beliefs; parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement; and parents' perceived life context. Parents' motivational beliefs encompass parental role construction and parental self-efficacy. Parents' perceptions of invitations from others to become involved deals with general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, and specific child invitations. Lastly, parents' perceived life context pertains to skills and knowledge as well as time and energy.

While parent involvement and family engagement have often been used synonymously in the literature, the definitions of the two terms are very different. This research focused primarily on family engagement.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement has been variously defined in the literature. One research study defined parent involvement as the dedication of resources by the parent to the child (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Another defined parent involvement as "parent-teacher-organization involvement, monitoring, and educational support strategies" (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 195). Indeed, it has been difficult for most scholars to agree on a common definition, resulting in

inconsistency (Fan & Chen, 2001), the responsibility for which rests with scholars, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders who have the educational authority to influence the definition. There is little literature that highlights the role families and parents play in defining what parent involvement is or should be to them. If parents are not defining parent involvement (or family engagement), it is evident that their voices are not being heard or valued enough in the research.

The Parent Involvement to Family Engagement Continuum

The primary difference between family engagement and parent involvement is that family engagement is more inclusive of all the forms of engagement contained within the subtopics mentioned earlier, as well as family members who are not biological parents (Wilder, 2014). In addition, according to Goodall and Montgomery (2014), family engagement is part of a continuum along which the choice of action and engagement remains with the families. The authors viewed family engagement as a model. Rather than centering on how the terms *parent involvement* and *family engagement* overlap, they considered how parent involvement turns into family engagement on the continuum. Thus, their model represents a progression from involvement to engagement.

Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum includes three main points, or stages. The first is parental involvement in the school. At this stage, although families do have a relationship with the school, the teachers have more control over the direction of that relationship; families may be involved in school-based activities, but the school takes primary responsibility for setting up and building a relationship with the families (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The second point on the continuum is parent involvement with their children's schooling. At this stage, the process focuses on school-based learning and takes

the form of a partnership. Learning at this point is the responsibility not only of the teachers, but also of the families. The third point on the continuum is family engagement with the child's learning. At this point, the choice of action and engagement remains with the families, and the process moves from partnership to ownership. A strong relationship between teachers and families means that families are far more likely to be engaged. Just as learning is facilitated solely by families before children begin school, families who arrive at this third point on the continuum have that same level of engagement (Murphy, 2010).

Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum was important to my research because it clarifies the need for family engagement and helps to identify the depth of Black family engagement in particular. Although the continuum should not be used to judge families' engagement as lower or higher, it can be used to inform future research. As Goodall and Montgomery noted,

> it is not expected that schools will start at the beginning and move to the end, nor yet that parents will follow the same path. Rather, we offer the continuum as aspirational, so that work with parents can move from school directed (which is useful) to fully engaged (far more useful to students). (p. 407)

The continuum also allows researchers to understand the progression of family engagement and why family engagement should be valued over parent involvement.

Family Engagement

According to Halgunseth (2009), family engagement appears in high schools when educational "programs encourage and validate family participation in decision making related to their children's education" (p. 4). As mentioned previously, family engagement is more inclusive of the voices of non-dominant families, while the term *parent involvement*

presumes a homogeneous family (Wilder, 2014). In addition, family engagement implies that all members of the family play key roles in improving the outcomes of a student's education (Ishimaru, Torres, Salvador, Lott, Williams, & Tran, 2016). Whether family engagement is defined as a brother helping his siblings with their homework or a grandmother showing up to a parent-teacher conference, all such scenarios help students academically (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jeynes, 2012). Therefore, for this study, *family engagement* was used because it is more inclusive when than *parent involvement*. For the purposes of this research, family engagement was defined as the relationship developed between families and school educators, including staff, faculty, and administration (Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016).

Defining Communication Technology

Another term used consistently in this research is *communication technology*, which, as noted earlier, comprises software or applications that serve as a third party between families and teachers. In order to narrow the dozens of educational communication technologies available today, this research focused only on technologies that allow for two-way communication between Black families and teachers. Here, *two-way communication* includes communication technology that encourages interaction from parents (e.g., websites portals, phone applications, or traditional methods such as telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities; Graham-Clay, 2005). Each of these technologies has specific features that make them marketable according to schools' preferences. Currently, the most popular communication technologies include Aspen, ClassDojo, Classroom 360, and Google Classroom. In addition to communication technology, schools connect with parents through other forms of technology, such as text messages, phone calls, emails, and social media. Communication

technologies have become especially prevalent in urban public schools. With the emergence

of communication technology, new trends and challenges have arisen that are changing what

family engagement looks like compared to when today's parents/guardians were in school.

The Emergence of Communication Technology

The Internet is approximately 30 years old, which means that family communication

technology in schools is even younger (Gohel, 2014). The growth of Internet browsers and

technologies providing access to the general population became available in 1991 in the form

of Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), which made a major contribution by creating a way

for people to send information between different computers, despite their location in the

world. Since then, many now-familiar browsers have been released, such as Netscape in

1994, followed by Internet Explorer in 1995 (Gohel, 2014). The concept of smartphones

emerged through cellular moguls such as Blackberry and Apple, whose iPhone was not

released until 2007. Within the past 10 years, access to the Internet and associated

technology has changed dramatically (Common Sense Media, 2013). As a result, within this

same period, family engagement has changed and will continue to do so as technology

progresses. What family engagement looked like to a family in 2000 looks far different today

considering the new communication technology tools to which families and schools now

have access.

Olmstead (2013) argued that "as access to technology continues to expand, the

capabilities for connecting parents to schools will continue to grow" (p. 28). Today, dozens

of companies produce communication technology. While some of these technologies are

classroom-based, others specifically target and facilitate relationships between families and

teachers. Classroom-based communication technologies are mainly used for student

engagement and classroom management (Faronics Corporation, 2017; Lenovo Software, 2017; Nearpod, 2017). Some of technologies are known to increase student productivity and promote collaborative learning (Hapara, 2017; Heulab, 2017; SchoolVue Software, 2016), while others are better known for classroom behavior management (Impero Solutions, 2017; Nanjing Mythware Information Technology, 2016; Netop Vision, 2017; NetSupport School, 2017; Veyon Community, 2017). My research focused more on communication technology that connects families, which, in most cases, possesses both classroom and behavior management capabilities (Class Tech Tips, 2015).

Through these types of communication technologies, families are able to learn about classroom issues in real-time. More specifically, parents are consistently informed about their child's performance via alerts, text messages, and emails (ClassDojo, 2017; Class Tech Tips, 2015). This constant contact through behavior alerts, daily class photos, and status updates creates connections between teachers and families (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). However, research has shown that these communication technologies are not always well-received by families. For instance, according to Krach, McCreery, and Rimel (2017), families argued that "ClassDojo can be used as a shame-based tool because every child's Dojo points can be displayed to the entire classroom on an interactive whiteboard screen" (p. 271). In addition to behavior, some of these technologies also provide information on class schedules, grades, homework marks, and student attendance (Edmodo, 2016; Edsby, 2010; HDSchool, 2017; RenWeb, 2017; Techno Solutions, 2016).

Although these each of these communication technologies tends to work efficiently, this research focused specifically on tools that are used in high schools and that also incorporate parent portals and two-way communication. As communication technology

10

opens up more opportunities for families to connect with teachers, it can also present barriers.

With a focus on Black families, this study highlighted the importance of considering how this

subgroup experiences opportunities for engagement with their children's school through

communication technology.

Social Context for Family Engagement of Black Families

While previous research has explored the educational and life outcomes of young

Black students, family engagement in education, and communication technology separately,

my study considered these issues together to determine if technology strengthens Black

family engagement in urban schools (see Figure 1).
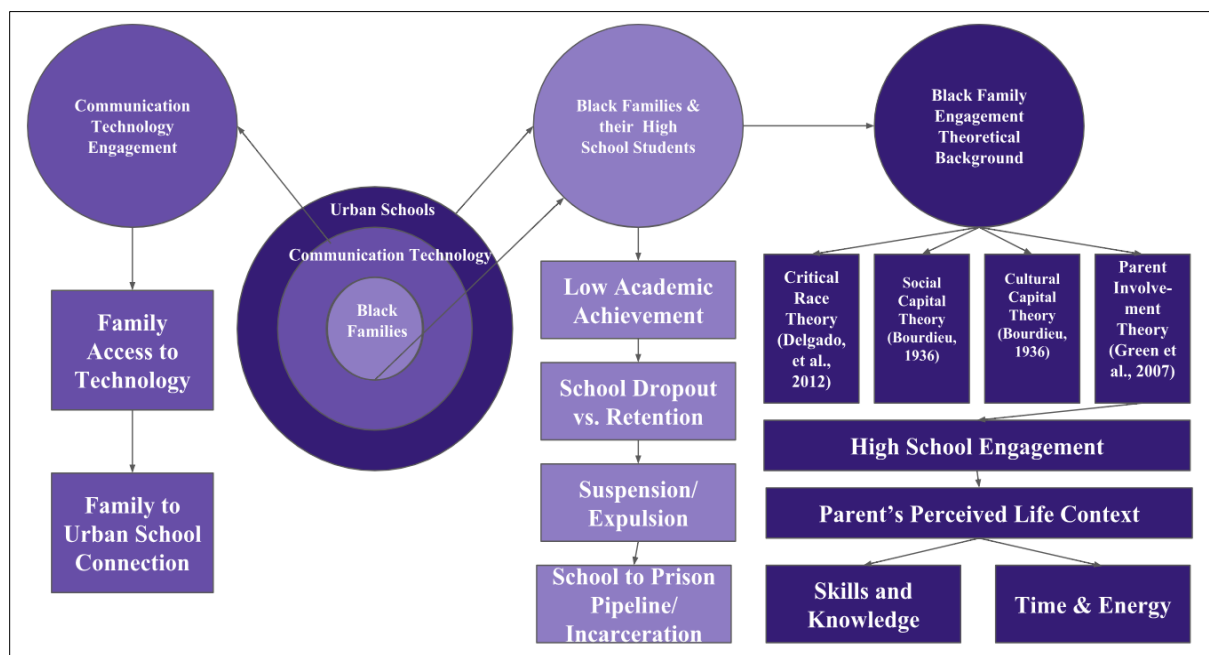
Figure 1. The social context of Black families and communication technology.

This research is situated specifically in the context of an anti-Black, racist educational

world. Wald and Losen (2003) found that, since 1986, Black students have grown more and

more segregated from the White students in their schools—a documented gap that has continued to widen while retention rates have barely improved (Irvine, 2010; Murphy, 2010). As racially minoritized students are pushed out of the classroom via punitive school discipline practices, they are often and simultaneously pushed into the U.S. criminal justice system (Laura, 2014). Persistent school discipline has been linked to student apathy about completing school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013), leading to increased rates of incarceration stemming from socially unacceptable behavior developed in school (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001; Laura, 2014). It has been demonstrated repeatedly that Black students specifically are exposed to harsher discipline sanctions than their White peers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

While Black students face stringent discipline such as expulsion, their White peers receive less severe discipline for making the same student-conduct violations (Skiba et al., 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003). Similarly, recent data have shown a significant discrepancy in punishment rates between White and non-White youth (Kupchik, & Catlaw, 2015). Consequently, Black students are overrepresented in juvenile detention centers and prisons, and underrepresented in relation to college and high school retention rates (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Howard, 2015). For some of these youths in prison, staying in high school until graduation could have made a difference in their future life outcomes. The four fundamental areas that characterize the social context of Black family engagement in urban education include: low academic achievement of Black students; high school dropout and retention; suspension and expulsion; and incarceration.

Using Communication Technology to Improve Low Academic Achievement

Family communication comes in multiple forms, including in person, written, or through technology. Yet, regardless of the form that family members use, communication contributes to the improvement of Black students' academic achievement (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler, 2006). Miretzky (2004) looked at the relationships between parents and teachers as perceived by the two groups. Teachers and parents found commonality in their desire to build a democratic community in which they could "be seen and to be listened to, not simply be reduced to a role, [and] to be recognized as people who have something to offer the school community" (p. 816). Both the teachers and the parents recognized that their relationship focused on the student; however, in order to be progressive, their commitment needed to extend past the student's experience in the classroom and into their homes (Miretzky, 2004). Research like Miretzky's suggests that communication technology can enhance teachers' ability to provide students with a better educational experience by strengthening the commitment of parents and teachers to each other.

Additionally, communication technology can improve the experience for all stakeholders. As Miretzky (2004) argued, when communication technology is used effectively, teachers will take more chances with innovative ideas in the classroom, students will try harder, and parents will contribute more to the student's education. Overall, Miretzky's study highlighted a theme of the relationship between parents and teachers— respect. While some parents felt there was mutual respect between themselves and the teachers, the Black parents in the study vocalized that they did not feel a connection to the school or that other Black parents were committed to forming connections. For example:

13

One [parent] described seeing Hispanic families "stick together" to advocate for their

kids, while feeling as though many lower-income Black parents "settled"' for

whatever was doled out. Another talked about volunteering at the school, saying, "If a

teacher gives me that opportunity, I'm gonna take it. This shouldn't be upper middle

class, it shouldn't be White; it should not even be that way, you know? And I am

saying, where do we stop with our excuses?" (Miretzky, 2004, p. 832)

The division between teachers and families can prevent students from performing their best

in school. Miretzky (2004) found that without communication between the parties, teachers

were not respected for the professional work they did, the parents' expertise was not

recognized, and the relationship between the two grew further apart.

Some studies, however, have provided insights into how communication barriers can

be broken down to improve family engagement (Merkley et al., 2006). Merkley, Schmidt,

Dirksen, and Fuhler (2006) documented how technology can help families become more

engaged with schools. Sometimes, a barrier to communication between teachers and families

is the student themselves; therefore, families are left to find other way to communicate with

teachers and administrators because the student is uncommunicative about their educational

experience (Merkley et al., 2006). Merkley et al. recommended technology, such as websites

and online portals, for improving family communication. Such communication platforms

offer ways for families to check in with teachers apart from the traditional parent-teacher

conference. These platforms are beneficial to Black families because they help to break down

barriers that families consistently face when trying to become involved in their children's

education. If family members are not available when teachers are available, they have

alternative access outside school hours. If they have multiple jobs, or a negative relationship

with the teacher, they can still check on their student's progress. Most importantly, should the student not be performing well, access to the online portal can help parents identify student weaknesses early, before it is too late to help the student (Merkley et al., 2006). Although the use of an online portal can facilitate family and teacher communication around a student's academic progress, a family's personal comfort level with or access to the technology could present possible roadblock.

Graham-Clay (2005) provided a guide for how teachers can communicate with parents and families. In addition to emergent technologies, there are other communication methods that involve either one- or two-way exchanges. One-way communication involves methods of informing parents about upcoming activities, events, or student progress. These methods include, for instance, "an introductory letter at the beginning of the school year, classroom or school newsletters, report cards, communication books, radio announcements, and school web sites" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 118). However, one-way communication is less likely to encourage family engagement because it typically does not require a response from parents. Parents are also unable to voice their concerns using this method. Conversely, two-way communication encourages interaction between teachers and parents. Teachers can initiate two-way communication through "telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 118). Based on the parents' communication style, one method (e.g. open houses) may end up working better for one parent than another. The best way to learn the communication style of parents and families is to ask what works for them. In doing so, educators can benefit from hearing directly from parents and families. My study focused on two-way technology communication because it allows researchers and practitioners to

identify how Black families experience opportunities for engagement through methods that allow them to serve as active participants.

However, initiating the conversation is only one part of two-way communication, and there are multiple barriers that can prevent communication between teachers and families. One of these barriers is inconsistency. Teachers must be sure that they are communicating with parents in more ways than a traditional report card (Graham-Clay, 2005). Using communication technology, teachers can provide families with ongoing and consistent information about their child (Olmstead, 2013). Teachers must also utilize their interpersonal skills and practice genuineness and authenticity in their approach (Graham-Clay, 2005). Due to the economic setbacks, time constraints, and cultural barriers that many Black families face, teachers, according to Graham-Clay (2005), must work to build stronger relationships based on trust. Once those relationships are formed, schools and families can work together to set goals and objectives for the student. Full collaboration with families involves monitoring, informing, and participating (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Mestry and Grobler (2007) showed that two primary factors—effective parent collaboration and communication—impact the level of family engagement in schools. The authors maintained that family engagement can encourage a family to contribute to and share the responsibility of the student's learning in school, thus helping improve their student's academic achievement.

The Impact of Race on High School Dropout and Retention

Race plays a major role in the academic experiences of students (Murphy, 2010). For the purposes of this research, race is defined as a social construct rather than as a distinct difference between humans and other species (Wynter, 2003). More specifically, race is a

supernatural social construct used to secularize the West and to delineate who individuals are based on physical characteristics (Wynter, 2003). While low socioeconomic status has been linked to risk factors for students, such as school dropout, race has played an even greater role in the disproportionality of school discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Most students share the same race and/or shared culture as their parents. Race has a major impact on the role that parents play in their engagement with their children's education. The racial makeup of the family impacts students in multiple ways. Race is closely tied to the language spoken at home, socioeconomic status, citizenship status, religious practice, and culture.

Race was central to this research because schools often show little sensitivity to a student's culture (Doll et al., 2013; Valdés, 1996). Race is closely related to socioeconomic status, as is evident when looking at Black families in urban schools today (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Murphy, 2010). For example, it has been determined that "low socioeconomic status mitigates a host of related risk factors, which may include race (particularly Black and Hispanic), family structure (female-headed households), physical health (undernourishment and frequent illness), and mental health (low cognitive ability and academic delay; Garmezy, 1991; Renchler, 1993; Scott & Nelson, 1999)" (Christle et al., 2005, p. 83). Though a student's race is not the sole factor determining their success, there is a correlation between race and the percentage of young Black men and women who drop out of school (George, 2015; Morris, 2016; Murphy, 2010).

Black families are the most economically oppressed subpopulation in the United States, and Black children are often targets of racial discrimination, regardless of their social class (Murphy, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2013). Schools cannot retain students who feel

17

disengaged from academics and disconnected from their school community (Doll et al., 2013). This in not only outside of the educational system, but particularly within schools that they attend (Cose, 1995; Hochschild, 1995; Tatum, 1987, as cited in Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Black parents have had to deal with their students being over-disciplined, misdiagnosed with learning disabilities, and afforded fewer resources than their White peers, making family engagement more necessary than ever (Howard, 2015; Murphy, 2010; Warren, 2014).

Even beyond the engagement of parents and families, race is the foremost predictor of a child's academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This is because minority groups are given fewer opportunities, and the academic expectations for them are lower (Kao, 2004), resulting in alienation from their White peers. Black adolescents are more likely to drop out of school if they are consistently discouraged or pushed out due to racism and implicit bias (Christle et al., 2005; Doll et al., 2013). They also face increased school discipline and have access to fewer academic resources (Howard 2015; Murphy, 2010). Studies have shown that Black students in urban schools are two times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (Wallace et al., 2008). Their race also affects "the kinds of schools and the kinds of peer networks in which youths are embedded. These characteristics can affect the odds of choosing peer groups that promote or discourage schooling" (Kao, 2004, p. 174). Parents, families, and students cannot choose their race; yet, their race has an unfortunate effect on how they are treated and taught, and their retention. By studying family engagement, educators can learn what Black students need to keep them in school.

Suspension and Expulsion

It is important to study school discipline in relation to family engagement because it is a key factor in school pushout. For instance, researchers administering the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights Elementary and Secondary School Survey noted that "97 percent of the nation's schools' districts and 99 percent of its schools found that there was a total of 3,053,449 student suspensions and 97,177 expulsions in 2000" (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 1). Although Black youth made up 17% of U.S. public school students in 2000, they accounted for 32% of the students suspended (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003, as cited in Wallace et al., 2008).

Black parents and families can continue to fight these disparities, but first they must be heard (Skiba et al., 2011). This is critical issue to address because school suspensions force students to spend more time out of the classroom and away from school. School suspension is also a leading cause of repeat behavioral problems, school dropouts, substance use, and antisocial behavior (Hemphill, Heerde, Herrenkohl, Toumbouro, & Catalano, 2012). Sheldon and Epstein (2002) found that family engagement—that is, parents making connections with the school—played a significant role in improving school behavior and reducing instances of school discipline. Being proactive (having an ongoing relationship with families) rather than reactive (initiating contact solely for student issues) with school discipline can make a difference in keeping a student in school (Hemphill et al., 2012; Steinberg et al.,1992).

Sheldon and Epstein (2002) proposed six ways for schools to engage more with families in an effort to improve retention and reduce discipline:

1. parenting, or helping all families establish home environments to support children as students;

2. communicating, or designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication;

3. volunteering, or recruiting and organizing families to help the school and support students;

4. learning at home, or providing families with information and ideas to help students with homework;

5. decision making, or including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders, and,

6. collaborating with the community, or identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen schools, students, and families. (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

By hearing from families, researchers can learn how they feel about these and similar methods. Researchers can also share how these interventions reduce student misbehavior and therefore lessen the need for school discipline (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Family engagement makes a major difference in the lives of all students, but especially Black students. It is imperative that researchers become more proactive when working with minoritized youth. Having knowledge of practice interventions and understanding the needs of the population can help improve student discipline and student retention. In an effort to improve family engagement, Sheldon and Epstein (2002) made their recommendations based on what they found to be effective forms of communication between families and the school. Some of these recommendations included "the use of day planners or

assignment books to communicate with families, conducting orientations for new families before the school year begins, and conducting workshops for parents on school goals and expectations for student conduct" (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, p. 18). Although these recommendations are compelling, the authors offered no evidence showing what the parents believed or how (or if) the interventions fit the needs of unique families.

In 2011, Skiba and his team of researchers investigated school discipline and found that Black students were disproportionately targeted. Students from non-dominant families were two to three times more likely to receive office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion (Kilimci, 2009; Skiba et al., 2011). However, the same study also found that family engagement was one way to resolve this disproportionality. An authentic partnership between families and the school administration must be created in order for students to be retained in the school. Although school discipline has been proven to negatively impact students of color, some teachers and education practitioners still believe it is needed to promote student success (Kilimci, 2009). In the studies referenced above, there is no indication that the voices of families were heard, or that parents were involved in teacher decision making. Therefore, there is a need to study the perceptions of parents and families of Black students who have been or are at risk of being pushed out of school, suspended, or expelled.

Fighting Black Youth Incarceration with Family Engagement

Black boys and girls who are suspended or expelled find themselves back at home, in their community, but only if they are lucky (George, 2015; Morris, 2016). Compared to their White peers, the likelihood of Black boys ending up incarcerated after being suspended or expelled is disproportionately higher (Porter, 2015). Black girls face the same risks. Wallace,

Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman (2008) found that Black girls are twice as likely as their White peers to be sent to the administration's office and are five times more likely to be suspended or expelled. In 2013, research by Ford, Kerig, Desai, and Feierman (2016) showed that more than two thirds of youth incarcerated were Black or non-White. Yet, research has demonstrated that family engagement contributes to improving low academic achievement and positive school behavior (Christle et al., 2005). This is especially true for Black high school students who live in low socioeconomic neighborhoods (Porter, 2015). Students with low socioeconomic status, often young Black students, are more likely to attend schools and live in neighborhoods that receive limited funding and support (Murphy, 2010).

With limited resources to support the education of these students, the community, parents, and teachers must work collaboratively to enhance educational resources through fundraising and volunteering (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Parents/guardians are not limited to participating in parent-teacher conferences and/or interactions, school activities or functions, or activities at home (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). They are also able to "influence … educational reforms although they are not formal partners in policy-making processes" by volunteering to supplement the limited funding (Conley, 2003, as cited in Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008, p. 395).

Since Black families are major stakeholders in the education of their children, their empowered engagement can be central to improving students' behavior, reducing school discipline, and decreasing the chance of student incarceration. The passion and commitment of parents/guardians in bettering their sons and daughters make them the best advocates for their children (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). In order for parents/guardians to be involved, there must be a strong bond between families and teachers. Unfortunately, the

power that families have over the education of their children is often constrained by teachers who believe that their formal education gives them more merit in the parent-teacher relationship (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Furthermore, some teachers assume that parents will use their power in the school to interfere with the progress teachers are trying to make in their classrooms. While family-school partnerships can be difficult to establish and maintain, teachers cannot let their emotions toward parents/guardians outside the classroom impact the decisions they make inside it (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). It should not be alarming to teachers when parents/guardians find their voice as leaders in classrooms (Auerbach, 2008).

It is imperative that teachers do not let positive or negative relationships with families affect student academics. In the same way that teachers can inhibit parental empowerment, parents can also hinder their own empowerment through fear (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). In any collaboration between parents and teachers, the two must see one another as equals. Over 85% of public school educators are White women (Case & Hemmings, 2005). In some schools, Black families are often afraid to voice their ideas and/or to collaborate with these educators (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). In order to be effective, collaborations call for partners to share common goals and to work together to develop and implement partnership plans (Bryan, 2005).

Interconnections Within This Social Context

Low academic achievement, high school dropout, suspension and expulsion, and incarceration are the four main areas that characterize the social context of Black family engagement in urban education. All of these areas are interconnected because each of them contributes to a social context that produces violence in Black lives and destroys Black

23

bodies. Low academic achievement and poor grades cause students to lose interest in school and eventually drop out (Doll et al., 2013). Even when Black boys and girls strive to stay in school, they still face an implicitly biased education system and are racially targeted through school discipline (George, 2015; Morris, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). Between dropout and pushout, many young Black students are not able to secure the education they need to live and work in society (Porter, 2015; Šileika & Bekerytė, 2013). Instead, they are often left unemployed, imprisoned, or dead (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Howard, 2015). To gain a deeper understanding of the social context of engagement by Black families in urban education, key supporting theories such as social capital theory, cultural capital theory, and critical race theory will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Challenges Around Family Engagement

Some educators blame family conditions or the role of parents for students' behavioral and academic performance issues in school (Murphy, 2010). Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Holbein (2005) linked family engagement with students' control and competence, their sense of security and connectedness, and positive educational values. However, other researchers have argued that "rather than simply blaming parents as the cause of discipline problems, effective disciplinary programs forge a partnership with parents and the community (Barclay & Boo, 1997; Morrison, Olivos, Dominguez, Gomez, & Lena, 1993)" (Skiba & Peterson, 2000, p. 341). In the last two decades, scholars (e.g., Jeynes, 2007) have studies family engagement from a holistic standpoint that takes into account the entire educational context of students instead of relying on assumptions about the lack of family engagement.

While the blame seems to be slowly shifting away from the family in theory, this is not the case for all academic research or teacher practice (Milner, 2006; Murray, 2012). Moreover, the viewpoints of parents whose children have been removed from the school system are oftentimes not heard (Howard, 2015); their voices are obscured within quantitative studies and deficit models that center on student academic success rather than individual students and their families. Therefore, there is a need and opportunity for new educational practitioners to emphasize family engagement in their work. For instance, in a meta-analysis, Jeynes (2007) found an association between family engagement and school achievement: "The results of the study are especially noteworthy because these findings suggest that parental engagement may be one of the means of reducing the achievement gap that exists between White students and social racial minority groups" (p. 103). Due to pressures related to the academic success and retention of students who come from non-White families, there is a need to better understand how to effectively change the relationships between families and schools so that underrepresented youth from non-White families can have the same chance of staying in school as their White peers.

Rationale for This Study

Issues around how Black families experience opportunities for engagement in their children's schools through communication technology remain underexplored in the current literature even though communication technology serves as the most popular intervention for combating the family engagement gap. I argue that family engagement through communication technology should be studied because of the importance of emphasizing family and parent perceptions within the data collection and analysis process of education

research. An increased understanding of how families use communication technology to engage will help to fill this gap within the literature.

In particular, communication technology is being used as a tool to better engage families and improve the life and educational outcomes of young Black men and women in high school. I argue that it makes sense to study the high school population because, after reaching 16 years of age, students can choose to drop out of school (Heckman, Humphries, LaFontaine, & Rodriguez, 2012) and therefore family engagement becomes more urgent. This is the best time to raise the issue of family engagement through communication technology. In Boston public schools, the four-year graduation rate of 75.1% in 2018 was the highest it had been since 2009 at 61.4%; yet, the graduation rate for Black high school students was lower (Boston Public Schools, 2018). Whereas the graduation rate stands at 93% for Asian students and 80.6% for White students, Blacks students fall behind at 76.4% and Hispanic students remain the lowest at 67.6% (Boston Public Schools, 2018). Dropout rates range from a low of 0% in Boston public exam schools to a high of 29.9% in public schools in low socioeconomic and minority-populated areas such as Roxbury and Dorchester (Boston Public Schools, 2016). Regarding school discipline in Boston public schools, 12% of Black girls were suspended in 2013, a rate six times higher than the suspension rate for White girls (African American Policy Forum, 2014). In gathering data for this study, I invited families whose sons and daughters had been—or were in danger of being—pushed out, suspended, or expelled. The methods of collecting data and analyzing were participant-guided, allowing parents to vocalize their concerns and helping school officials to identify supports for these Black families. By learning the perspectives of Black families, my research was more likely to lead to practices that make sense to those families.

26

Etheridge, Hall, and Etheridge's (1995) study exemplifies research that includes parent voice. Despite being marked as a low-income parent, one mother became an advocate for her child as she fought against a lack of family engagement that was preventing parent-community collaboration in school management (Etheridge et al., 1995). The story of this mother, however, should not be seen as unique because all parents and families deserve to have an opportunity to be engaged in the academics of their children. There is power in parental voice within urban education that can transform traditional school practice and improve the educational experience of (and advocacy for) students who come from non-dominant families (Civil, Andrade, & Anhalt, 2000; Friedel, 1999; Samaras & Wilson, 1999). This idea was exemplified by a parent in Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, and George's (2004) research who found her voice participating in her son's education:

> Despite her lack of traditional capital, Celia has achieved a high level of engagement with the school. She works every school year to forge a personal space within her son's classroom, informed by her accumulated beliefs about the impact of parental engagement in her son's education. It is within this personal space that Celia believes she is successfully involved in the school, that her voice is listened to, and that her participation makes a difference. Celia has risked being misunderstood or even rejected, to create a space within the school where she can engage in the type of reciprocal negotiations that formal school spaces do not facilitate for her. (p. 8)

Families that are low-income, have immigrant status, come from non-dominant racial backgrounds, and lack traditional capital face multiple social and economic hurdles before their children even approach the school doors (Murphy, 2010), as evidenced by the previous example of the mother who put her pride aside to support her son's academic experience. My

study captured voices like Celia's, as well as other parents and families lacking opportunities to be engaged in the academics of their children. The parents and families whose children had already been pushed out of the educational system and into the judicial system, the streets, or into danger—or who were at risk of being so—were of particular significance to the study. My research included the points of view of these Black parents and families, as illustrated in Figure 2. Critical race theory (explained in detail in Chapter 2) places societal issues, like family engagement in urban schools, in a broader context that measures their racial relationship to other factors such as institutions and interpersonal interactions. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These factors are also closely related to achievement (Murphy, 2010). This study used the knowledge of Black families to identify which type (or types) of communication technology interventions increased their family engagement.
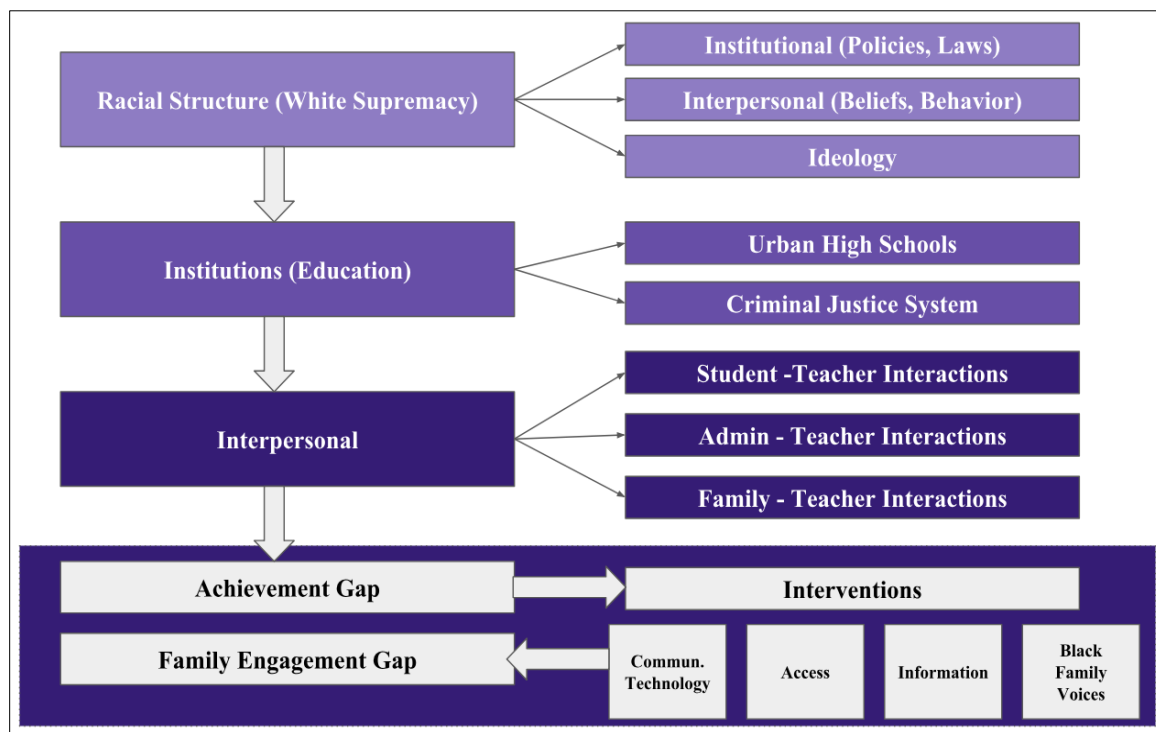
Figure 2. Conceptual framework of Black families and communication technology.

Significance of Study

There is a strong need to study the engagement of Black families in their children's education through the use of communication technology, first because of the strong link between engagement and positive outcomes, and second because of the prevalent and growing use of technologies for family engagement in urban school contexts. Black families have something to say about their engagement, and they should have the opportunity, or platform, to do so in order to effectively challenge White domination (Vaught, 2008) and its educational and life consequences for their children. Families are important advocates for their children, and their empowerment in this case can help parents/guardians overcome systemic barriers to the academic and personal success of poor minority students (Bryan, 2005). Small actions on the part of schools, such as creating family outreach programs or offering parent education, can support families that are hesitant to engage.

School administrators, teachers, and other educators should seek better ways to break down communication barriers that prevent parents from vocalizing their thoughts. Communication is an "opportunity for teachers to promote parent partnerships and, ultimately, to support student learning" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 127). Although some teachers lack the training needed to effectively communicate with families (Hradecky, 1994, as cited in Graham-Clay, 2005; Lawrence Lightfoot, 2004, as cited in Graham-Clay, 2005), the need for Black family engagement is more urgent ever to create partnerships that directly benefit young Black men and women (Merkley et al., 2006).

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the social capital [3] of families is transferred through technology linkages and parent-teacher interactions (Inkpen & Tsang,

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[3] For the purposes of this research centering on Black families, social capital was defined more specifically as

2005). Educators must therefore explore the role of technology in family engagement. Black families are continually trying to determine new ways to communicate with teachers and administrators due to conflicting schedules, uncommunicative students, and access to resources (Merkley et al., 2006). Communication technology has the ability to break down the barriers these families face when trying to engage and support their children.

"a set of social relations that enable the reciprocal monitoring of children by the parents of peers, thereby increasing adherence to behavioral norms that are presumed to affect school performance" (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 321)—or, alternatively, as the transfer of knowledge from families to their children.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Good, bad or indifferent, if you are not investing in new technology, you are going to be left behind.
                                                              —Philip Green

Twenty-first century technology has made access to information ubiquitous: In addition to e-readers, tablets, and smartphones, there are media forums, computer games, software applications, and millions of websites (Rideout, 2014) for users to access. In addition, technology is being used in classrooms in order to connect families with students and teachers. Indeed, technology in K-12 education has captured the attention of educators and scholars, and the literature has begun to explore the boom in communication technology over the past decade. As communication technology has become a prominent means for facilitating family engagement in K-12 schools, families have become increasingly affected by its implementation. Technology is being used for classroom learning via multiple platforms. For example, in 2017, ClassDojo was used in 90% of K-8 classrooms across the United States (ClassDojo, 2017). The literature review comprising this chapter identifies and discusses several types of classroom technology that have emerged in the past decade, and examines literature and theories related to how Black families experience these technologies.

As mentioned previously, the key focus of my research is Black family engagement through communication technology. In Chapter 1, I argued that the voices of Black families need to be heard by teachers and administrators to keep students in schools and to keep families engaged. In order to elevate these voices, educators must understand how the modern Black family experiences opportunities for family engagement. Therefore, this study investigated how Black families experience opportunities for engagement in their children's schools through communication technology, including a discussion of family engagement, an explanation of the social context for the family engagement of Black families, and a consideration of the interconnections within this social context.

This review begins with a discussion of theories that are commonly used in the literature on family engagement as well as the specific theories that guided this research. The second section of this literature review examines the effectiveness of classroom technology from the family point of view. Though classroom technology and parent portals represent surging trends in K-12 education, it is less clear how well this technology is received from the perspective of families and parent users. The next part of this literature review explores current scholarship on family engagement and the impact that technology has on Black families across the United States. The review concludes with a critique on technology and issues related to Black family engagement that must be further explored.

<div align="center">**Theories on Family Engagement**</div>

Several theories have been used to explore communication technology and family engagement. Epstein (1986; Epstein et al., 2002), one of the leading researchers of family engagement, developed a framework comprising six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the

community. Epstein's parent involvement framework explains how family engagement influences children through procurement of learning, aptitudes, and an expanded feeling of certainty that they can succeed in school (Taylor, 2016). In addition, the framework helps teachers and educators understand how family engagement can help all students succeed.

Researchers have expanded on Epstein's work to show how teacher characteristics and perceptions are connected to family engagement (Calzada et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016; Walker et al., 2005). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) created a theoretical model of the parental involvement process and the perceived life context of parents. This model has now become the most commonly referenced theory in family engagement research, and revisions by Walker et al. (2005) helped further influence and shape the literature surrounding family engagement. This theoretical model is divided into two types of family involvement—home involvement and school involvement—which are broken into three subtopics: parents' motivational beliefs, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, and parents' perceived life context.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argued that a parent's level of family engagement is connected to their "beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities, [their] sense that [they] can help [their] children succeed in school, and the opportunities for involvement provided by the school or teacher" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997 as cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 22). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), each of these factors influences a family's decision about whether or not to become academically involved in the lives of their Black children (Reynolds et al., 2015). Based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parent involvement processes, these factors also have a major impact on a family's motivation to be involved (Murray et al., 2014).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) theory also emphasizes the concept of social

ecology, or the social and physical environment that affects people's minds and behaviors

(Oishi & Graham, 2010). Based on their theory, social ecology helps determine family

engagement by analyzing socioeconomic characteristics, parent cultural characteristics, and

teacher characteristics (Calzada et al., 2015).

The findings associated with previously mentioned research on Black family

engagement cannot be the sole considerations when looking at how race and social capital

play an integral role in family engagement. Therefore, in addition to building on the work of

Epstein (1986), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), and Walker et al. (2005), this study

used capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Delgado &

Stefancic, 2012) to understand the relationship between Black family engagement and

communication technology.

Theories Guiding This Study

The two major theories that supported this research are capital theory (Bourdieu,

2011) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Each of these

theories explains why strengthening family engagement through communication technology

to support Black students is imperative for improving young students' academic and life

outcomes. Capital theory is divided into economic, social, and cultural capital theory, but for

the purpose of this research, I focused on the latter two (Bourdieu, 2011).

Social Capital Theory

Social capital (Bourdieu, 2011) plays a major role in the ability of parents and

families to be engaged in students' academics. Generally, social capital is defined as

"features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate

34

coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, as cited in Conrad, 2008, p. 1). For the purposes of this research centering on Black families, social capital was defined more specifically as "a set of social relations that enable the reciprocal monitoring of children by the parents of peers, thereby increasing adherence to behavioral norms that are presumed to affect school performance" (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 321)—or, alternatively, as the transfer of knowledge from families to their children. These social relations are major factors in accessing resources available to students and the connections that students have to those resources. Inkpen and Tsang (2005) argued that social capital contributes to the four means of knowledge sharing, which include technology linkages, alliance-parent interaction, personnel transfers, and strategic integration (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

Family social capital. One of the major challenges identified in the family engagement literature is the lack of family social capital (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). When considering a parent's social capital, the income and occupation of the parent are related to the level of education to which they can help their children gain access. It also relates to their economic and social resources, as well as social positioning (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006), all of which are closely correlated with one another because income gives access to social capital that people of low socioeconomic status cannot access.

According to Coleman (1988), social capital theory comprises three forms: levels of trust, information channels and norms, and sanctions. This perspective centers on the impact of social capital on different societal groups. Members who have no access to social capital are pushed out by the conventional wisdom that prioritizes and supports wealth and opportunities (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). This helps explain why income is so impactful in family engagement, as it is a strong indicator for a family's level of social capital. In

relation to family engagement and student retention, social capital relates to what knowledge non-dominant families are able to share with their children for them to stay in school and be academically successful.

Social capital has been correlated with improved student retention and academic performance (Murphy, 2010). Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) examined social capital in the context of students' kinship lines. Whereas working-class or poor families made connections primarily through the activities their children were involved in, most of the middle-class parents made direct connections with the school and teachers. Parents of the middle- and upper-class students "knew a teacher, in contrast to less than half of the working-class parents and about a third of the poor parents" (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 330). The researchers concluded that families of students who need the most support are least likely to have relationships with teachers, having a negative effect on the academic success of the students.

In the same way that social capital benefits students, its accumulation benefits the students' families (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Students from wealthy families, who have more social capital, are more likely to be more successful in school than students who have less social capital. It is important to note, however, that social capital does not only come in the form of economic wealth (Lee & Bowen, 2006). For some families, social capital is built through a prioritization of the student's education at home—through, for example, requirements that the student complete homework assignments or read books before enjoying other privileges.

Lee and Bowen (2006) posited that parents who have little education may have trouble helping their children with their homework, but they can still take the initiative in

advocating for their children and seeking help for them. As the authors maintained, "because parents from nondominant groups possess less social capital, they may need to make more extensive efforts to ensure their children's academic success" (p. 199). In their study, Lee and Bowen found that when both parents in the household had a two-year degree or higher, there was significantly more family engagement compared to parents who did not have at least a two-year degree. There were also "more frequent parent-child educational discussions at home and higher educational expectations for their children" (p. 204).

Apart from enhancing connections to teachers and administrators, social capital also helps to increases access to parent networks. According to Kao (2004), parents who know other parents are more likely to navigate the education system more effectively. Not only are they able to use their own social capital, but they can build off the resources and social capital of other families. In turn, this acquired knowledge oftentimes improves the student's outcomes and increasing their chances of staying in school (Kao, 2004).

Social capital theory research. Researchers usually study the effects of social capital on family engagement using quantitative methods and relying on data sources such as standardized test scores, student grades, college acceptance rates, and high school dropout patterns as indicators (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 322). I did not employ these methods in my study because a narrow focus on numbers and scores cannot assist practitioners in understanding the lived experience of the participants. Scholars and practitioners have begun to emphasize that "those who are struggling are spotlighted as in need, not a system that comprehensively functions to secure and refresh higher status for those already holding power and marginalize non-dominant populations" (Patel, 2015, p. 41)—a strong call for researchers in urban education to incorporate social justice into their research. Additionally,

as Sirin (2005) held, "researchers should try to use multiple components of socioeconomic status in their operationalization because, when only a single component is chosen, the results are more likely to overestimate the effect of socioeconomic status" (p. 444). Although Sirin used quantitative measures to generate his results, he indicated that quantitative data can overestimate the findings of a study—a caveat that when viewed through a positivist lens, study data can be written, altered, or misused to detect and defend results that do not reflect the truth.

While every individual possesses capital in some shape or form, the social capital needed in education today is limited to economic resources, social resources, and social positioning (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006). What varies is the way that capital is valued in places of exchange, such as in the schools where Black families send their children. Dominant forms of social capital like income, race, occupation, and parent education allow for greater leverage than other forms of capital that minority parents may be able to offer such as living capital, spiritual capital, experiential capital, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011).

Cultural Capital Theory

While social capital increases people's access to wealth and resources through connections, cultural capital helps people gain social mobility through non-economic resources. Cultural capital theory is more relevant to research on how families use communication technology to improve their social mobility and how technology is part of their daily lives. Bourdieu (2011) noted that cultural capital

> can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting
> dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural

38

goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace

or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the

institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as

will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original

properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (p. 17)

In its objectified state, cultural capital can be converted into economic capital through

communication technology. The way families use communication technology can allow them

to maintain engagement with their children's schools despite time constraints. By learning

how to use communication technology, Black families can forgo the pressures of being

physically engaged while remaining aware of how their children are performing by using

parent portals and phone applications, for instance. As a result, they acquire cultural capital

unconsciously, and their children obtain additional support to maintain passing grades,

complete school, and continue to higher education (Bourdieu, 2011; Carter, 2003). In this

way, technology can mitigate the lack of social capital. Therefore, despite a student's

socioeconomic status, family income, culture, or ethnic background, family engagement

through communication technology can improve the academic success and life outcomes of

young Black students (Robles, 2011). Additionally, the student can inherit the family's

cultural capital by, and the student's cultural capital can be converted into educational

credentials (Sullivan, 2001).

Cultural capital theory was important to this study because the background of a

student can predict their digital competence as well as the extent of the family's technology

use (Hatlevik, Guðmundsdóttir, & Loi, 2015). By being born into a family that has valuable

knowledge such as technological savvy, a student is more likely to have "access to the

knowledges of the middle and upper class and the potential for social mobility" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory builds on the idea of cultural capital, highlighting the skills, knowledge, and resources of marginalized families that generally go unnoticed (Yosso, 2005); it also focuses on the relationships among the dominant forms of social capital. More specifically, critical race theory helps educators understand the relation between race, racism, and power (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory places societal issues (e.g., family engagement in urban schools) in a broader context that reveals their relationship to history, interests, feelings, etc. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Regarding the underrepresentation of non-dominant families' concerns about their children, this theory looks at the wider context of racism in education. Studies have shown that a majority of the oppressed populations in the United States are Black (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4). In order for White Americans to maintain their social power, they must also maintain an "integrated sense of race, rights, ownership, and humanity" (Vaught, 2008, p. 548). Young Black students do not have ownership over their educational experiences because they lack the privilege that comes with the exclusivity of Whiteness (Vaught, 2008). The lower-class population, consisting primarily of Black families, is placed in subordination to White America, which maintains control of minoritized populations for its political and economic benefit (Coates, 2015). This poses a major barrier to effective change in the current racially classified education system, and non-dominant families must risk self-annihilation in order to be heard (C. Harris, 1993). Critical race theory played a significant role in this research because it reveals the barriers preventing the change needed to improve family engagement.

In addition to oppression by the judicial and educational system, young Black students are also heavily oppressed through historical research methods. Many empirical studies have "close[d] their findings with implications, and in studies of lack of achievement, the most common suggestion is interventions for various populations who do not enjoy the safety, security, and flourishing historically experienced by upper and middle-class White settler populations" (Patel, 2015, p. 41). Educators must question how certain research methods further exploit non-White populations rather than helping them. My research sought to expose these injustices by working with families to construct their own findings. and to reveal the viewpoints of marginalized people which are consistently suppressed from the dominant narrative (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013).

Studying how Black families experience opportunities for engagement through communication technology is only one small step toward supporting this oppressed population, thought it has the potential to equip future generations of Black families. Capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) together reveal the relations between Black family engagement and communication technology. In order to study how Black families experience communication technology, researchers must use the social tier of capital theory to understand the relations families must have to facilitate the use of the products (Bourdieu, 2011). Then they must use the cultural tier of capital theory to identify how the social assets of families, such as their level of education or intellect, impact how *they* experience that technology (Bourdieu, 2011). Finally, critical race theory must be used to reveal the racial and power-related barriers that hinder the improvement of Black family engagement (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

As noted in Chapter 1, the notion of family engagement, compared to parent involvement, builds on past parent involvement approaches by taking into account more expansive ideas of the family and of student learning both in and outside the classroom (Ishimaru et al., 2016).

Black family engagement is a persistent issue in secondary education because the lives of young Black men and women remain at risk (George, 2015; Morris, 2016; Warren, 2014). The literature has shown that Black family engagement is a potential way for students to not only improve their safety, but to maintain their academic progress and passing grades (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Unlike their White peers, young Black children walk into high schools with a plethora of setbacks, including coming from neighborhoods that have "high rates of violence, crime, infant mortality, and homicide and low levels of life expectancy, public trust, interpersonal connection, and political efficacy" (Massey, 2017, p. 800). Many studies of family engagement have been conducted, each focusing on different populations, locations, and school grade levels. These will be explored in this literature review.

Recently, as a response to the need for better family engagement, new communication technologies have emerged. It is important for researchers and educators to study the effectiveness of these new technologies and how Black families experience opportunities for engagement through them.

Using Technology to Facilitate Black Family Engagement

Technology can help families become more engaged with schools. Many families today must seek alternate ways to communicate with teachers and administrators due to time constraints, uncommunicative students, and lack of access to resources (Merkley et al., 2006). Communication technology can help break down such barriers as families try to

become engaged. In addition, technology helps families identify ways to support students before they begin to suffer academically. For their part, teachers must communicate with parents and families in more ways than through a traditional report card, and communication technology can help in this effort (Graham-Clay, 2005). However, educators and researchers must speak to Black families directly in order to identify how they experience this technology. Parents of non-dominant families can make a valuable contribution to this research, though they have all too often been silenced. In reviewing the literature around family engagement, one is better able to understand why the population must continue to be studied and to perceive significant gaps in the literature.

Over the past decade, several studies of family engagement have been conducted (Ferguson, 2017; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010; Williams & Sanchez, 2013), and more recently, researchers have begun to investigate the integration of communication technology with K-12 schools (Krach, McCreery, & Rimel, 2017; Olmstead, 2013). Very few studies, however, have looked into the use of communication technology in the context of Black family engagement at the high school level.

In exploring more recent studies, six thematic categories emerged:

1. communication between families and educators (Olmstead, 2013; Razak, Abdurahim, & Mashhod, 2016);

2. barriers to family engagement (Ferguson, 2017; Taylor, 2016);

3. family engagement from preschool to eighth grade (Calzada et al., 2015; McWayne, Melzi, Schick, Kennedy, & Mundt 2013),

4. family engagement at the high school level (Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015; William & Sanchez, 2013);

5. addressing family engagement that does not involve technology (Hoffman et al., 2015; Wong-Villacres et al., 2017); and,

6. communication technology in today's classrooms (Krach et al., 2017; Martinez, 2016).

The following sections detail each of these emergent areas emergent in the literature.

Communication Between Families and Educators

Communication features prominently in the literature, specifically the way teachers communicate with families and what types of communication are most effective for improving the academic success of students. There are two primary types of communication discussed by researchers: one-way and two-way communication. As Graham-Clay (2005) explained, one-way communication occurs when teachers inform parents about school-related issues, events, or student progress using methods that do not require responses from parents. This can include introductory letters, school newsletters, report cards, flyers, communication books, radio announcements, school website (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Two-way communication, on the other hand, allows families to become more involved through their responses. Examples of two-way communication include school web portals that let parents check on student progress, telephone calls, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, school-based activities, and other forms of communication technology for informing families about their student's academic performance in real time (Graham-Clay, 2005, p.118). Two-way communication is most beneficial when it is combined with traditional forms of communication that connect families with teachers. Classroom technology is extremely beneficial because it give teachers opportunities to communicate that are "not limited by school hours or location" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 123). Yet, whether a

teacher uses one-way or two-way communication, or both, close communication between families and teachers helps students perform better in school (Razak et al., 2016).

Some recent studies have shown how some communication technology methods impact family engagement. For instance, Olmstead (2013) challenged the findings of previous research focusing on principals and administrators who believed that poor family engagement is directly correlated with low student academic achievement (Taylor, 2016; Williams & Sánchez, 2013). Olmstead's (2013) study showed that technology can improve parent-teacher communication and family engagement. Through focus groups with parents and teachers, the author found that parents valued family engagement just as much as teachers did and concluded that "parental beliefs are likely to be influenced by teacher-parent communication [and] well-organized teacher-led communication actions" (p. 29). This finding was similar to those associated with previous studies showing that students of families who developed plans for their children and enhanced communication with teachers were more likely to graduate and continue their education (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead, 2013).

Olmstead's (2013) study was relevant to this research because it not only examined how technology can improve parent-teacher communication, but also explored technologies similar to those pursued in this study. However, while Olmstead looked at the general impact of websites, phone calling systems, parent portals, online curricula, and other types of technologies, this study centered only on the use of emerging technology by Black families of high school students. Even so, Olmstead's research on parent-teacher communication and technology opened the door for future work "on the effectiveness of these technologies to increase parent involvement" (Olmstead, 2013, p. 28). This study responds to that call.

45

There is a need for further study around communication technology at the high school level because such technology can help remove communication barriers between teachers and families (Razak et al., 2016). Williams and Sanchez's (2013) study—conducted in a Midwestern high school consisting of 92% students of color and 86% students from low-income families—highlighted factors that impact overall communication between teachers and families. They identified five main barriers to family communication: time, poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources, and lack of awareness. In order to combat these communication barriers, the authors also recorded solutions that the parents in the study proposed, including involvement opportunities, incentives, and strategies for effective communication between schools and families (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Research on communication technology can contribute to Williams and Sanchez's findings by identifying how technology impacts the effectiveness of family-teacher communication, which plays an important role in family engagement. Indeed, when communication is not present, the absence poses a major barrier.

Barriers to Family Engagement

It is important to note that "not only do parents have barriers to involvement, but teachers also report encountering significant barriers to enacting family-school partnerships" (Taylor, 2016, p. 31). However, barriers, whether they are school-based or home-based, can be removed by identifying them and creating effective partnerships between families and teachers. While Williams and Sanchez's (2013) study showed how communication barriers can decrease family engagement, Razak, Abdurahim, and Mashhod (2016) showed how barriers to communication can be analyzed and eliminated, thereby increasing Black family

engagement in particular. One of the first steps in identifying the barriers is by speaking to the parents.

Ferguson (2017) examined family engagement by studying the perceptions of parents and teachers participating in academic parent-teacher teams (APTTs) in an elementary school in the metro Atlanta area composed of 781 students, the majority of whom were Black and Latinx students from low-income backgrounds. The APTT model comprises a 75-minute meeting that includes a team-building activity, an explanation of the functional grade-level skills that students must master by the end of the school year, a graph of the child's status in the skills, activities modeled by the teacher to help the student improve the skills, and an opportunity for each parent to practice the activities with the teacher (Paredes, 2010). Specifically, Ferguson wanted to know if there was a correlation between "teacher leadership, administrative support, parental perceptions of effectiveness of communications, parental perceptions of convenience of scheduling of meetings, parental perceptions of usefulness of meetings, family engagement, and student academic achievement" (p. i). Two hundred and three parents in the study responded that they had a positive perception of the APTT model. Parents also appreciated the time teachers took to implement the model and teach families how to practice the activities at home. The APTT model is designed to increase student achievement and break through common barriers that Black families consistently face.

Murray et al. (2014) studied barriers to and facilitator mechanisms for school-based parent involvement opportunities for families of urban public-school students. Although the study did not focus on classroom technology (as the current study did), the authors did sample Black parents, the majority of whom were of low socioeconomic status. When the

study was completed, 89% of students qualified for free or reduced-cost school lunch. This is significant because "there is evidence that some teachers may not invite parent involvement because of their frustration with low-achieving, low SES students (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007) or because they view the family as the source of their students' achievement problems (Griffith, 1998; Trotman, 2001)" (Murray et al., 2014, p. 3).

Murray et al.'s (2014) study revealed several findings connected to Delgado's (2001) critical race theory and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2007) model of parental involvement theory regarding parent perceptions of their ability to be engaged. Murray et al.'s (2014) study composed of a quantitative survey sent out to 512 parents. One of the findings was that most parents had positive feelings about being involved in their child's education. They understood that family plays a pivotal role in student academic success, and they were interested in fostering that success. The results of the survey indicated that the most common barriers to involvement were work and obligations at home. Another theme in the findings related to relationship building (Murray et al., 2014). Some parents reported that they wanted to avoid the negative interactions and confrontations they had had with teachers in the past. Not surprisingly, families viewed such hostile interactions with teachers and school professionals as barriers to future involvement.

What sets Murray et al.'s (2014) study apart from similar research is that participating families expressed a need for more community-building efforts. The survey findings revealed that families within the school had negative relationships with other parents and families of students who attended the school. Overall, this study reinforced the need for better, more meaningful relationships across families, students, and educators to improve family engagement.

Similarly, Taylor (2016) looked at barriers to engagement faced by Haitian-American immigrant parents at an elementary school in Broadview Park, Florida. The goals of Taylor's research was to "develop, implement, and describe Haitian parents' perceptions of their involvement in a structured parent intervention program and to describe the perceptions of their children's teachers concerning the parents' involvement in the program" (p. vi). Through an interview process, Taylor found several barriers that prevented Haitian-American parents from being engaged. One of the first barriers identified by the parents was language (Taylor, 2016). Even parents who spoke more fluent English did not feel confident when speaking to teachers because they felt intimidated by the proficiency of their language skills. Similarly, each family in the study indicated that they feared being judged. Another barrier reported by parents was their ability to connect with the school. Although the families wanted to be more involved outside of mandatory meetings, they were not notified about these family engagement opportunities. Parents also spoke about the barrier of time; that is, families believed that there simply was not enough time in one day to be as active as they wished they could be. The parents believed that the level of engagement required was not only time-consuming but demanding, considering their other, non-parental roles and responsibilities.

Family Engagement from Preschool to Eighth Grade

Barriers to family engagement begin to arise at the start of a child's educational experience (Murphy, 2010). Thus, learning how to address issues such as time, communication and access to resources early can even contribute to students' academic success beyond their high school experience (Olmstead, 2013). For example, McWayne, Melzi, Schick, Kennedy, and Mundt (2013) considered family engagement from the

49

perspective of non-White families with children in preschool. Their mixed-methods study—involving 113 parents from 14 Head Start programs—explored family engagement behaviors that support children's educational experiences (McWayne et al., 2013). Because the skills and knowledge that children bring to kindergarten are often predictive of later achievement, McWayne et al.'s findings were significant (Murphy, 2010). In addition to improving family engagement, general government-funded preschool programs that focus on early childhood education (e.g., Head Start) are key to closing the achievement gap[4] between Black and White students. The literature on family engagement has shown that "half of the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites at the end of the twelfth grade is attributable to achievement differences between students when they start school (Le, Kirby, Barney, Setodji, & Gershwin, 2006, p. 1)" (Murphy, 2010, p. 136). In interviewing these families, McWayne et al. (2013) gathered their perceptions of what family engagement means. Rather than comprising general school-based activities, the families reported that they thought family engagement was more home-based, that is, "general time/attention activities, including listening to the child, showing patience, playing with the child, and monitoring the child's activities" (McWayne et al., 2013, p. 597).

The results of McWayne et al.'s (2013) study also indicated that the participating families saw their engagement as comprising a wide range of parenting behaviors in the home, school, and community. Furthermore, the findings showed a correlation between family challenges and lower levels of family engagement (McWayne et al., 2013). For example, if parents were recent immigrants, spoke English as a second language, had less

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[4] The *achievement gap* "refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students" (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

education, and had a low socioeconomic status, they were more likely to have lower levels of family engagement at home (McWayne et al., 2013).

Another study completed by Calzada et al. (2015) focused on predictors of family engagement and revealed similar results to McWayne et al.'s (2013) research. Calzada et al. sought to understand how to use contextual characteristics as predictors of family engagement among Afro-Caribbean and Latino families of young students in urban public schools. Their sample of 636 people consisted of families from New York City; they selected this sample because, at the time of the study, over 70% of students who attended public schools in New York City were from families of Afro-Caribbean and Latino descent, and over 50% were foreign born or had a parent guardian who was foreign born (Calzada et al., 2015). These researchers also examined differences between Black and Latino families regarding their investment in their children's education.

Calzada et al. (2015) argued that family engagement is impacted by both socioeconomic and teacher characteristics. For example, Black and Latino families, especially foreign-born families, tend to have lower paying jobs, less flexible schedules, and lower education levels. Each of these socioeconomic characteristics poses a potential barrier to family engagement in school-based activities (Calzada et al., 2015). Regarding teacher characteristics, the researchers argued that teachers are less likely to understand the cultural and social norms of Black and Latinx families (Calzada et al., 2015). These findings suggest strongly that there is a need to promote family engagement for families of students in urban schools.

While socioeconomic disadvantage has been associated with lower home-based involvement, the families in Calzada et al.'s (2015) study who were connected to their

culture of origin and to U.S. culture were more likely to be engaged. In comparing the cultural groups, the study also found that Black families were more likely to be engaged than Latinx families. According to survey results, however, teachers believed Latinx families were more engaged than Black families. Overall, the authors believed that more work must be done to improve family engagement, including training teachers to communicate more effectively with families from diverse backgrounds, and targeting the skills and knowledge needed to help families engage more.

Although some of Calzada et al.'s (2015) important findings were applicable to Black family engagement, their study population included all pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children attending urban public elementary schools; however, most studies on family engagement focus on kindergarten through middle school populations. My study focuses exclusively on secondary education since family engagement at this level continues to be under-examined. At the high school level, families do not physically engage with schools as often as they do at the elementary and middle school levels, creating a need for different communication strategies (Simon, 2004).

Family Engagement at the High School Level

Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) sought to demystify high school family engagement and "reexamine the belief that the parents of secondary-level students are not as interested in their child's education simply because teenagers seek independence and thus create a natural distance from their parents" (p. 41). They examined attitudes toward family engagement from the perspective of high school administrators, seeking "to determine if attitudinal differences exist based on principals' gender, professional title, years of experience, educational attainment, size and type of school, and percentage of students receiving free or

reduced lunch" (p. 25). Lloyd-Smith and Baron studied 245 secondary-school administrators in South Dakota who worked during the 2007-2008 academic year and found that administrators viewed family engagement from a unique perspective. Although the administrators still valued family engagement, they did little to maintain it or initiate relationships with high school families. The researchers also found that the secondary-school administrators did not have enough preparation or training to specialize in family engagement, so they were left to define it on their own and to determine how they wanted to apply it to the structure of their high schools.

Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) concluded that the false belief that most high school families do not want to be engaged in their children's education persists. For this to change, family engagement must continue to be studied through modern methods of family and teacher communication. In addition, as Lloyd-Smith and Baron noted, the various forms of communication that serve as invitations for families to be engaged needs to be reexamined specifically. My research did just that by studying communication technology used in urban high schools.

Creating roles that allow parents to be meaningfully engaged continues to be a challenge for educators (William & Sanchez, 2013). In addition to administrators creating such roles for high school parents and families, education researchers need to study families from high school populations. My research addressed this concern by working with urban high school families, namely Black families, to analyze engagement through communication technology.

Using Hoover-Dempsey's (1997) parent involvement theory as a lens, Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, and McRoy (2015) studied how psychological motivators, contextual

motivators, and life contexts influenced parental engagement in an urban high school serving students of color. The families they studied were of Latinx, African-American, Haitian, and Cape Verdean descent. After 119 (out 310) families completed a participant survey and teachers completed 73 surveys corresponding to the family survey, the researchers conducted four focus groups with 25 parents. This mixed-methods study captured several important findings. During the English-speaking focus groups, the authors found that families believed they were being consistently involved with their child's education. They gave examples such as making contact with teachers when needed, making sure their student showed up on time for school, and attending school events to which they were invited (Reynolds et al., 2015). In the Spanish-speaking focus group, however, families were split in their perceptions of family engagement. While some Spanish-speaking parents went so far as to stay up late with students to finish assignments, other families supervised their academic responsibilities from a distance. In addition, the participating high school teachers did not share the same perspective as the parents. Whereas a majority of the families who participated in the study felt they were engaged, most teachers indicated that families were not as engaged as they would have liked.

A major overall finding of Reynolds et al.'s (2015) study was associated with social capital. Despite differing opinions, the families and teachers did agree that there was a need for a "systematic, organized, and institutional approach to involvement that could establish common expectations, patterns, and protocols to facilitate parent-teacher interactions" (Reynolds et al., 2015, p. 18). The authors amplified this observation by drawing from Bourdieu's (2000) notion of habitus, social capital. Family engagement is improved by increased access to cultural and social capital. Non-Black families understand how to

navigate the K-12 education system better than Black families (Reynolds et al., 2015), and the same argument can be made regarding communication technology. Although some may view technology as progressive, a family's social and cultural capital impacts whether and how it interacts with the technology (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017)—which is why some families and educators still prefer traditional communication methods over communication technology.

Addressing Family Engagement Without Technology

Several studies have centered on families who prefer traditional communication methods over new communication technologies (Hoffman et al., 2015; Razak et al., 2016; Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). Hoffman, Podikunju-Hussain, and Ridout (2015), for instance, made a strong counterargument to findings in the literature about the capabilities of low-income families and their interest in family engagement through technology. Their study produced two major findings. First, English language learning families were interested in helping with their children's academic and literacy development at home (Hoffman et al., 2015). Second—also a departure from current literature—families still preferred traditional one-way communication methods, such as sending announcements and messages in student backpacks. In fact, 79% of families in Hoffman et al.'s study preferred traditional methods over two-way communication methods using technology. These findings demonstrated clearly that there is more than one way for a family to engage effectively; while some families prefer technology, others do not find it useful or necessarily progressive.

Likewise, Wong-Villacres, Ehsan, Solomon, Buil, and DiSalvo's (2017) research, based on 63 semi-structured interviews, provided a counterargument to the use of classroom technology in K-12 education. Their study focused on "identifying and studying the spaces

for parental engagement that existing technologies are fostering" (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017, p. 3). The study was driven by the concept of maintaining meaningful relationships and interactions between families and teachers. Although technology is oftentimes convenient and fast, researchers highlight that convenience can detract from the benefits of modern family-teacher communication methods. However, rather than completely dismiss the advantages of classroom technology, the researchers advocate the design of new, more effective technologies.

Wong-Villacres et al. (2017) argued that any future technology should foster equitable partnerships between schools and families. Their study of the impact of current classroom technology on parental ecology led to the identification of four key shortcomings to be addressed by future classroom technology: inflexibility in the boundaries of digital spaces; inequality; fragmentation and inconsistency of information; and lack of relevant non-academic information. Although communication technology needs modification, it does work as a liaison between families and teachers (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). Therefore, researchers should study these shortcomings and improve it for better use and accessibility in the future.

Razak et al. (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of communication technology in hopes of creating a new form that would address the aforementioned shortcomings. Specifically, they critiqued three related technologies: school portals, social media, and mobile applications. They argued that school portals require teachers to request administrative access to make changes to the website, then to create pre-assigned unique IDs for students and parents to log in—a cumbersome process. Though social media web pages are faster and more accessible for families, Razak et al. noted that they raise questions about

security due to confidential information being shared and the ability of unlawful imposters to pose as parents. Finally, the researchers compared four popular mobile applications: ClassDojo, the Teacher App, the Gradebook Application, and the Rushyl Homework Application. Their critical descriptions offer a rationale for why some families continue to prefer traditional communication methods. Razak et al. identified several downsides to these mobile applications: some applications may be too large to download; some may not provide due dates for families to keep up with; some may cost money to use, and some may lack appropriate instructions for use. Furthermore, each applications caters to a specific group—that is, students, teachers, or families—but never all three.

The product that emerged from this work— Classroom 360—has had great success. Razak et al. (2016) argue that Classroom 360 addresses most of the previously mentioned issues while providing an alternative form of communication between families and teachers for monitoring tasks and homework assigned to students. The authors also argue that communication technology should serve as a mediator between teachers so that they are aware of the tasks and assignments given to the students by other teachers to prevent heavy workloads. Razak et al.'s study shows that making improvements to communication technology can better serve educators and families.

Communication Technology in Classrooms Today

Some recent research has demonstrated how communication technology supports classroom management and student achievement. Krach et al. (2017) conducted a study at an elementary school in the southeastern United States focusing on how teachers managed their behavioral charts, a technology tool used by both "teachers and their students [as a] behavior frequency measure ... to monitor individual classroom programs and make educational

decisions" (Binder, 1996, p. 166). With ClassDojo used more frequently in classrooms, the authors wanted to analyze how this classroom technology was used in comparison to more traditional methods such as logs created and kept by teachers, and other paper-and-pencil methods. In their literature review, the researchers both credited and challenged the use of ClassDojo according to the perception of parents who used it. While the free application has over 35 million users, including teachers, families, and students, only about 8% of teachers use it to its full capacity (Barbarán, 2014, as cited in Krach et al., 2017). In addition, some families have begun to challenge this classroom technology because, as they argue, it retains a permanent record of their children's performance; the application decreases the storage capacity of cellphones for an entire year due to the size of the application; the graphics used in the application merely bribe children to behave; it does not keep students' behavior or performance private; and some application's activities are seen as shame-based (Krach et al., 2017).

Krach et al. (2017) discovered that regardless of which method teachers used to track behavior, they each thought of it differently. Some used structured techniques to record behavior, while others had less structured techniques whereby they simply used smiley or frowning faces. The study indicated that most teachers still "used paper-and-pencil BMCs to track negative behavior, and very infrequently tracked positive behavior" (Krach et al., 2017, p. 272). This is important to note because other studies have found that parents often get discouraged because the interactions with teachers center more on behavior-related issues than positive relationship building opportunities (Murray et al., 2014). Although ClassDojo was reported by study participants to be the most accurate and consistent behavioral

management tool, Krach et al. (2017) concluded it was generally under-utilized (thought at some schools it is used often and successfully).

Martinez (2016) also completed a recent study of ClassDojo. With the popularization of this classroom technology, this study was very relevant to my own. The purpose of Martinez's study, which took place in an eighth-grade special education classroom in the suburbs of Chicago, was to "determine whether or not this program is effective in the classroom with the management of behaviors" (p. 4). After six weeks of observing the students, the researcher found that the intervention was successful, with the number of behavior referrals decreasing for each of the students. There were, however, limitations to this study. Although ClassDojo allows families to receive instant feedback on how their students are performing, the researcher did not include families in this study.

The studies described in this section showed that communication technology can be seen from multiple perspectives and used in diverse ways. However, I believe it is equally important to explore the negative implications of integrating technology into urban schools, as I do in the next section. Doing so will help educators understand the full scope—the potential and the challenges—of communication technology and assist them in making informed decisions for the benefit of their students.

A Critique of the Literature on Communication Technology

Penny (1997), an early researcher on computer technology, wrote in detail about the way technology works well for some but not for others. Specifically, he referred to the two groups as winners and losers. According to Penny, "large-scale organizations like the armed forces, or airline companies or banks or tax-collecting agencies" were the winners because their work supported high-level authorities. However, according to Penny (1997), average

day-to-day users were the losers and ultimately had nothing to gain from computer

technology.

Findings from later research have supported Penny's (1997) hypothesis. Warschauer,

Knobel, and Stone (2004), for instance, recognized an imbalance in access to technology.

They found that equal distribution of technology and Internet supports marginalized students

and families by providing them with more information and access to resources (Cummins &

Sayers, 1995, as cited in Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004). Conversely, the authors

elaborated, "unequal access to new technologies, both at school and at home, will serve to

heighten educational and social stratification, thereby creating a new digital divide (Bolt &

Crawford, 2000)" (Warschauer et al., 2004, p. 563). In fact, in 2011, 20% of families with a

low socioeconomic status background owned a tablet device, compared to 63% of families

with higher incomes (Common Sense Media, 2011). This is relevant to my study because

Black families need access to communication technology in order engage in urban high

schools in nontraditional ways. Not only is there a digital divide[5] (Warschauer et al., 2004),

but there is an "app gap" due to disparities in the use of mobile media that most families

would utilize to engage (Common Sense Media, 2013). This gap causes lower income

parents to use educational apps far less frequently than higher income parents (Common

Sense Media, 2013).

This disparity was also highlighted in Mouza and Barrett-Greenly's (2015) research,

which analyzed how technology affects low-income and minority families. Because they

having less access to computers and the Internet at home compared to more affluent families,

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[5] The term *digital divide* is defined as unequal access to new technologies, both at school and at home, that heightens educational and social stratification (Bolt & Crawford, 2000, as cited in Warschauer et al., 2004, p. 563).

they are less likely to have the skills needed to properly utilize different forms of technology (Mouza & Barrett-Greenly, 2015). Without this access, racially minoritized students and their families are also less likely to "enter or persist in the most lucrative of fields—technology" (Scott, Sheridan, & Clark, 2015, p. 412). Teachers also witness these disparities between students from affluent and disadvantaged families (Wilson, 2014). It is also important to note that simply having access to a computer at home is not enough to bridge the digital divide since, as researchers have found, this alone does not significantly impact student learning nor can it overcome or minimize educational inequities (Warschauer et al., 2004).

In addition, communication technology is not always well received by educators. Some teachers have found it difficult to integrate communication technology into their classrooms (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017), while others have noted it is not always readily accessible when they need to use it (Warschauer et al., 2004). Also, even when the communication technology is available, they must still develop backup lesson plans in case the technology fails, resulting in twice the work (Warschauer et al., 2004).

Despite these criticisms, some researchers have claimed that the digital divide is shrinking (Dolan, 2016; Hess & Leal, 2001). The student-to-computer ratio at schools with a majority of Black students has decreased, indicating that the digital divide has narrowed (Hess & Leal, 2001). Even so, some disparities remain (Common Sense Media, 2013; Dolan, 2016). As Penny (1997) noted, technology enthusiasts/winners are more likely to try to convince the losers that technology is the best option because they have more to gain and will not suffer from the loss. Although technology can be wildly unpredictable, Penny's claim that some people will benefit from technology more than others is still accurate.

When viewing communication technology from the perspective of Black families and their high school-aged children, one can see that the digital divide is not the only factor complicating the issue of communication technology in urban schools. In fact, there is a "host of complex factors that shape technology use in ways that serve to exacerbate existing education inequalities" (Warschauer et al., 2004, p. 564). Many parents/guardians remain digital immigrants,[6] while their children were born digital natives[7] (Kirk, Chiagouris, Lala, & Thomas, 2015; Prensky, 2001). Clearly, there are several disconnects between families and schools, families and their children, and affluent and disadvantaged families.

In light of the inconsistent results in the recent literature on communication technology, this study is both needed and timely. The way Black families experience opportunities for engagement through communication technology remains understudied, and teachers and administrators can benefit from learning the most effective ways to use technology to communicate with and engage families in ways that can improves its use in urban classrooms (Kormos, 2018). Furthermore, by examining my central phenomenon through a theoretical lens, my research will help others make meaning of how Black families experience communication technology.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the theoretical frameworks and literature that support Black family engagement and communication technology. The chapter first explored the emergence of communication technology in K-12 education, namely parent portals, which provide two-

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[6] People "who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are, and always will be compared to them, Digital Immigrants" (Prensky, 2001, p.2).

[7] "Students today are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p.2).

way communication between families and educators and help families stay informed about and engaged in their child's education. After discussing this technology, the chapter offered a review of literature on Black families and communication technology. Six thematic categories emerged: the communication between families and educators; barriers to family engagement; family engagement from preschool to eighth grade; family engagement at the high school level; addressing family engagement without technology; and communication technology in classrooms today. The chapter then reviewed theories commonly used in family engagement research, including Epstein's (1986) parent involvement theory, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) theoretical models of the parental involvement process, and the perceived life context of parents and families. After reviewing these theories, a justification was provided for why critical race theory, cultural capital theory, and social capital theory were chosen to guide this research.

Communication technology actively improves student learning and changes the characteristics of modern classrooms (Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon, & Byers, 2002). However, despite the mark that communication technology is making on education, very littler research has analyzed the impact that technology has on students and families. Although communication technology can create opportunities for Black families to become engaged, more research needs to focus on how families are experiencing it (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). Olmstead (2013) called for research on "the effectiveness of these technologies to increase parent involvement" (p. 28). In order to equip Black parents with the modern skills needed to support their students, Black family engagement through communication technology must be studied (Ferguson, 2017). Indeed, educators cannot continue to use

communication technology without understanding how Black families in urban schools are affected by it—from the perspective of those families.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

We participate in and become as much a part of "family" matters as possible, with all of the responsibilities that this entails. And we consider our academic communities and how our connections, constraints, and obligations there have implications for the people with whom we do research. (Laura, 2016)

This phenomenological qualitative study sought answers to the following guiding question: How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's schools through the use of communication technologies? I adopted an intimate-inquiry, love-based approach to this qualitative research because it allowed me to focus on "witnessing, engaging, and laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape" (Laura, 2016, p. 219). This research not only generated new knowledge, but it supported the lives of the Black students who give meaning to and shape my work on a personal level. Before I began my phenomenological research, I felt inclined to engage in bracketing, also known as *epoche* (Creswell, 2013), which makes the readers of this research aware of my biases before they read the results and interpretations of the data (Husserl, 1970; Langdridge, 2008). Although I did not previously know the Black families who participated in the study, I identified as part of their community and felt deeply invested in and connected to them. This connection is evident throughout this chapter, as I explain each step that was taken in order to ethically gather data and analyze my findings.

In this chapter, I first cover my research design that was derived from a review of methodologies that other studies have used to explore issues of family engagement. Next, I bracket some aspects of my worldview and discuss my researcher positionality (Langdridge, 2008). I then explain my decision to interview Black families, my criteria for selecting interviewees, and how I created my sample selection. This is followed by a description of the measures and techniques I used. Finally, I detail my research design data-analysis method. Each of these steps was approached cautiously in order to ensure that I attended consistently to the best interests of the participating families and because I wanted to consider the implications my academic communities and connections had for the families I researched (Laura, 2016).

Research Question and Sub-Questions

It was important for me find answers to the following questions because I am part of the community of families I researched, and I want to see us thrive:

- Main Question: How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's schools through the use of communication technologies?
  - Sub-Question: How do Black families within the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?
  - Sub-Question: What opportunities available to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?
  - Sub-Question: In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?

66

o Sub-Question: To what extent does racism impact Black families once

interacting with urban schools through communication technology?

Theoretical Connection to Research Questions

The sub-questions guiding this study were influenced by theories that can help inform

practitioners about family engagement and social capital, namely critical race theory (Bell,

1995) and capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011). See Table 1.

Table 1

Guiding Theories and Corresponding Sub-Questions for the Study

Theory	Sub-Questions
Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995)	• How do Black families in the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?
	• To what extent does racism impact Black families once they begin interacting with urban schools through communication technology?
Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 2011)	• What opportunities being given to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?
	• In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?

Critical Race Theory

As presented in Chapter 2, critical race theory helps educators understand the relation

between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It places societal issues (e.g.,

like family engagement in urban schools) in a broader context that measures their

relationship to history, interest, feelings, etc. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Regarding Black

families and parents of school children, this theory looks at the broader context of racism in

education. Therefore, the first sub-question was, "How do Black families within the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?"

The second sub-question was also based on critical race theory and was also tied to research on family engagement. Earlier researchers studying parent involvement and family engagement have noted that "parents' perceptions of personal skills and knowledge shape their ideas about the kinds of involvement activities they might undertake" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, as cited in Green et al., 2007, p. 534). These researchers have argued that factors such as skills and knowledge determine how involved parents are in the academic lives of their students. This is usually not because parents do not have an interest in their child's educational experiences; rather, it has more to do with the level of impact they believe they can have by getting involved. If parents/guardians do not believe they can truly help their children or they do not have the time and energy, they are more likely to decide not to be engaged, according to critical race theory. This lack of confidence and these negative perceptions of engagement can stem from racism they may have experienced (or be experiencing) at their children's high schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Vaught, 2008). Thus, the second sub-question was, "To what extent does racism impact Black families once interacting with urban schools through communication technology?"

Capital Theory

The second theory that informed this study was capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011). The social capital of a family impacts their economic resources, social resources, and social positioning (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006). Black families who have a low socioeconomic background and limited social capital are less likely to live in affluent neighborhoods that

have better funded schools.   Social capital theory, which encompassed levels of trust, information channels and norms, and sanctions, describes the impact of social capital on different societal groups (Coleman, 1988). Black families, in the case of this study, who have no access to social capital are pushed out from the conventional wisdom that supports wealth and opportunities (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Therefore, in the third sub-question, I asked, "What opportunities available to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?"

Cultural capital theory informed the final sub-question of this research. According to this theory, Black families acquire cultural capital acquired unconsciously in three forms, or states (Bourdieu, 2011): the embodied state, in the form of goods, and in the institutionalized state. Yosso (2005) argued that one does not have to be born into a family whose knowledge is already deemed valuable in order to benefit from it; rather, one can access the knowledge of the middle and upper class by learning it. In relation to this study, the theory argues that Black families can learn how to use communication technology and benefit from it, even if they are not immediately familiar with how to navigate it. Thus, I chose to investigate the fourth sub-question, "In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?"

Research Design

I chose to conduct a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study featuring individual and group interviews that highlighted the experience of 25 parents or guardians engaged with urban high schools in Boston (see Table 2). The research deign was constructed after reviewing similar studies that has, separately, explored the educational and

life outcomes of young Black students, family engagement in education, and communication

technology (see Appendix B).

Table 2

Research Design of the Study

Research Topic: Black Family Engagement in Urban Schools
Research Question: "How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technologies?"

Research Sub-Questions	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Research Audience
How do Black families in the Greater Boston Area define their own needs, in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interviews	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
What opportunities are being given to Black families that have limited access to communication technology?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interviews	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
In what ways have urban schools in the greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Groups	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
To what extent does racism impact Black families once interacting with urban schools through communication technology?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interviews Focus Groups	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students

Review of Methods

Overall, 13 studies were reviewed which included quantitative methods, qualitative

case studies, and mixed methods, as well as other research methods (see Appendix B). Some

of the studies had similar findings, but each of the methodologies used in the studies served a distinct purpose.

Quantitative methods. Four quantitative studies were reviewed. The purpose of the first, which used an A-B design, was to determine whether ClassDojo effectively managed behaviors in the classroom (Martinez, 2016). The second study, Hoffman et al.'s (2015), used a combination of surveys and paper questionnaires to study the potential language barriers of digital school-home communication. Both of these studies examined the effectiveness of communication technologies; however, one was classroom-based, the other home-based with the families. Similar to Hoffman et al. (2015), Calzada et al. (2015) wanted to connect with individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. Rather than looking at language barriers, they considered contextual characteristics as predictors of parent involvement among Afro-Caribbean and Latino parents of young students in urban public schools (Calzada et al., 2015). The authors conducted a prospective longitudinal study using surveys. The fourth quantitative study, by Llyod-Smith and Baron (2010), focused not on families and parents but on attitudes toward parental involvement of high school principals, using a two-part quantitative survey.

Each of these quantitative studies centered on either a perspective or the effectiveness of family engagement or communication technology. However, though each produced interesting findings, they used quantitative surveys that did not include the opinions of parents and families.

Qualitative methods. Three qualitative studies were reviewed. Using in-depth interviews, the first examined specific barriers to parental involvement from the perspective of families, teachers, and administration at a predominantly African-American high school

71

(Williams & Sanchez, 2013). The second study used 63 semi-structured interviews to understand the impact of existing parent-school technology's design aspects on the parental ecology (Wong-Villacres et al., 2017). The third qualitative study was a follow-up from a previous study in which the researchers conducted interviews to identify barriers to middle school parent involvement among a sample of predominately African-American parents with low incomes.

Similar to the present study, each of these three studies used interviews to capture the perspectives of parents or school personnel. By doing so, they were able to gather data directly from participants, while making intimate connections and building relationships with them. The participants in these studies were mostly from Black families, and the researchers were able to connect with them and determine in person if the participants understood the interview questions or needed further clarification.

Case studies and mixed methods. Two case studies and one mixed-methods study were reviewed. One descriptive case study focused on Haitian parents' perceptions of their involvement in a structured parent intervention program and the perceptions of their children's teachers concerning the parents' involvement (Taylor, 2016). Another case study, identified as mixed-methods research, looked at vulnerable populations, examining how role construction and self-efficacy, invitations, and life contexts influenced a parent's decision to become involved in an urban high school (Reynolds et al., 2015). The participants were mostly parents of Latino, African-American, and immigrant children, and the data were collected through surveys and semi-structured focus group interviews. Olmstead (2013) used these data sources to analyze the relationship between parents' and teachers' perceptions of student achievement through electronic communications.

Other methodologies. The last three studies that I reviewed used unique methodologies. Razak, Abdurahim and Mashhod (2016) sought a way to alleviate the burden on students of serving as intermediaries between families and teachers. To this end, they completed a search and did functionality testing on the user activity of parents, teachers, administrators and students to determine their use of the communication technology. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) used a literature analysis to create a model for the progression from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement. Lastly, Krach et al. (2017) used a combination of classroom observation, review of teaching methods, and a comparative analysis of teacher data to examine teachers' use of technology-related behavioral logs and to compare that use against empirically based methods.

Methodological Paradigm

My research fits best within the interpretive paradigm because I sought to understand and describe the realities parents faced as they interacted with this emerging technology (Chilisa, 2011). Generally, the techniques for gathering data within the interpretive paradigm include interviews, participant observations, pictures, photographs, diaries, and documents (Chilisa, 2011). I decided to conduct interviews because there is a power in not only hearing about people's experience, but hearing it in their own words. According to Massera (2006, as cited in Lincoln & González y González, 2008), "stories are powerful narratives not only for the political, physical, and cultural context that surround[s] the participants … at that time but also because of the way you can 'feel' their words, their OWN words, telling you … their stories, stories coming from their souls, full of pain, humanity, and authenticity" (p. 791).

The ontological methodological paradigm shaped the way I collected and analyzed my data because it drove how I interviewed the study participants and made me more considerate of the ways I allowed Black families to express themselves.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

My decision to take a phenomenological approach came from an in-depth review of methodologies employed in recent studies about family engagement. Specifically, most of these studies had either been conducted in urban high schools with non-White families or aligned with the present study's focus on communication technology. After exploring and critiquing each of these methods, I chose to specifically take a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach. Through this methodology, I was able to gather in-depth responses from participants that accurately portrayed and captured the essence of Black families' lived experiences.

Researcher Positionality

Patel (2015) posed three questions to help researchers identify who they are in connection with their research: (1) Why me? (2) Why this? (3) Why now, and why here? Patel (2015) believed that just as researchers "have a responsibility to understand, contribute to, and be fluent in existing research, we also are responsible for our ontological entry-points and impacts" (p. 57). In my research, I explored family engagement using a form of privilege that most Black families are less likely to have. By *privilege*, I mean working as a researcher rather than being researched. Oftentimes, research is done *on* Black families rather than *by* them. Therefore, I understood how important it was for me to bracket my experience and acknowledge how I entered this research (Husserl, 1970; Langdridge, 2008).

74

Why me? I am a Haitian-American woman who was raised by a single mom. No great outcomes were ever expected of me by my family or by high school educators. I was consistently challenged by my family and teachers but always lacked support. As a K-12 student, I had many expectations placed upon me but no resources to make any significant progress. As a result, I had to fight, and nothing came easy to me. The simplest school tasks were difficult to complete because, at the age of 12, I started working under the table; by the ninth grade, I was completely self-sufficient, and when I turned 16, I became a full-time working adult.

Where was my family? Although I have seven brothers and four sisters, my family ended up scattered. Some brothers were incarcerated, some were deported to Haiti, two siblings passed away, and the ones who managed to keep their heads above water distanced themselves from the family. As the youngest of the siblings, I experienced the added pressure of raising nieces and nephews who were left behind, paying bills and realizing that each paycheck left me torn between saving for future opportunities or supporting family in the present.

There are K-12 students in the Boston Public Schools with stories similar to mine, growing up in crime-ridden neighborhoods, poverty-stricken, while somehow feeling lucky because they are still *alive.* I have pain in my heart for these students, and I wanted my research to contribute to the elevation and strengthening of Black families in the Greater Boston area.

I believe that I was the right person to conduct this research because I authentically and wholeheartedly cared about the participants. Black families are often seen from a deficit perspective rather than recognized for the strength and resiliency they must embody to survive (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Reynolds, 2010; Valencia, 2012; Weiner, 2006). I believe, as

75

I have heard people say, that "if you want something to get done the right way, you just have to do it yourself." This does not mean, however, that I believe I was the best or most intelligent person for this research; rather, I have the heart and physical ability needed to conduct it. Discovering that love can be integrated into research motivated me to put my full energy into it (Laura, 2016). Laura (2016) revealed a similar reasoning for her work: "The most obvious reason for calling my methodological approach 'intimate' is that it reveals a researcher's positionality—who the researcher is in connection with the people under study—and the nature of their affiliation" (p. 217). Like Laura, I believe that my relationship with Black families and urban communities would exist even if my research did not.

Since I was empowered to research family engagement in high schools and since I had the unique opportunity to study Black families, I feel that this was the best study for me. I also believe that my study contributed to family engagement research in a distinguished way by using my own experiences with the Boston Public Schools system to create a study whose results will help inform the Black community of the Greater Boston area.

Why this? As discussed in Chapter 2, as technology continues to change, researchers are needed to study its effectiveness and, more importantly, to give voice to the people whom the schools and this communication technology are serving. From a parent perspective, families no longer have a model or a springboard to assist them in understanding family engagement for modern K-12 students. In the past, family engagement primarily involved direct contact between schools and families, consisting of letters home, face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and open houses. Today, technology provides not only additional access, but also timely access to its users (Siegle, 2010). However, it is important to understand how Black families experience technology, and at what cost. In this case, *cost* is

defined as what Black families must give up to use communication technology (Ferraro & Taylor, 2005). More importantly, is the technology enhancing traditional communication methods for family engagement, or is it merely replacing them?

Why now, and why here? This research is situated in an anti-Black, racist, educational world (Coates, 2015; Warren, 2014). I specifically chose to use phenomenology as my research method because it helps researchers understand "how we experience what it is like to be human" (Scott, 2000, p. 203). As a Black researcher, I feel the need to illuminate the realities of Black students and their families. Black students are at a higher risk academically than their White peers (Murphy, 2010), and their lives and well-being will remain at risk if educators and researchers do not work to find solutions around supporting them academically. They also cannot implement new technology changes without acknowledging the Black students who are left behind in the classroom. Failing to do so will push these students even further back academically.

I felt it was best to conduct this research in Boston because of the distinct racial disparities with the Greater Boston community. Massachusetts has "high levels of income inequality and racial/ethnic segregation and [has] racial/ ethnic and economic inequities in fatal and nonfatal assaults" (Krieger et al., 2017, p. 256). Boston in particular is known for racial inequality (Meschede, Darity, & Hamilton, 2015; Oliver & Shapiro, 2013; Subramanian, Chen, Rehkopf, Waterman, & Krieger, 2005). Educators must seek to understand why a state with some of the best educational institutions in the United States cannot improve the financial disparities and education of Black students and families.

Data Collection

As is evident in my research question and sub-questions, I sought out the stories of parents and family members who had played or were playing a pivotal role in the academic experience of their children. This phenomenological qualitative study consisted of focus groups and individual interviews with families in the Greater Boston area who attended schools that used communication technology. Each interviewee was selected based on the location of their child's high school in the Greater Boston area.

These data collection methods helped me identify and analyze how families and parents felt about the communication technology that was used to connect teachers and families. I utilized the individual interviews to help me learn about the family members' stories and individual experiences navigating the technology, receiving news and notifications from the high school teachers, and contacting the schools based on their student's needs—and to what extent they felt engaged in their child's education.

Participants: Black Families as Experts

As mentioned previously, I invited Black families to participate in this research. For the purposes of this research, *families* were considered the parents/guardians who oversaw the academic and personal experiences of Black students. This encompassed mothers, fathers, single parents, married parents, parent-guardians, caretakers, etc. Understanding that Black students come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it was my goal to connect with the family members who had the dominant role in supporting the education of the student.

Participation criteria. I developed criteria for determining the eligibility of the participants. Specifically, participants who were considered for the study had to be family

members of high school students (Grade 9, 10, 11, or 12), their student had to attend a public high school in the Greater Boston area, and they had to identify as Black or African American. In addition, the family member had to feel that their participation in this research was of their own free will, and they had to feel comfortable being studied. These criteria were each put into place in order to protect the families and ensure that data collection analysis were conducted ethically (Maylor, 2009). Some of the requirements are further explained below.

Inclusion criteria. As mentioned earlier, I selected participants because of their direct relation to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). My study focused on the families of Black high school students since family engagement at this level remains under-examined. As emphasized in Chapter 2, researchers must "reexamine the belief that the parents of secondary-level students are not as interested in their child's education simply because teenagers seek independence and thus create a natural distance from their parents" (Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010, p. 41). High school families were vital to the success of this research; thus, being a parent or guardian of a high school student was a key attribute that participants of this study had to have to qualify for this study (Robinson, 2014).

Exclusion criteria. Families who fit some but not all of the criteria of this study were not selected to participate in an effort to strengthen the accuracy of the results (Robinson, 2014). However, the requirements did not minimize the population sample. One crucial consideration was that strict criteria for the sake of methodological rigor can create challenges during the data analysis (Suri, 2011). They can also cause valuable voices to never be heard, marginalized populations to feel further excluded, or low (or no) transferability of synthesis findings (Suri, 2011). With this in mind, I took the risk and did not alter the criteria,

to support the validity of the study during the data analysis. One factor that cannot be ignored in sample selection is the complexity of Black family identities. As Livingston, Pierce, and Gollop-Brown (2013) noted, "often the African American culture is imposed on non-African American Black students without recognition of their non-American identity" (p. 4). Therefore, in my study, families who did not self-identify as Black were not considered, even if they were commonly misidentified as Black.

Studying Black families. As a Black female researcher with a vulnerable family background, it was important to me to consider the best ways to not only study Black families but also connect with them. Researchers studying Black families have not always used the most ethical methods in doing so (Lucey et al., 2009; Skloot & Turpin, 2010). In my personal advocacy for my community and children in the future, it was my goal, through this research, to encourage Black families to use their power and agency to advocate for their children. As a result, the accurate representation of these families' lived experiences was highly valued in my research (Reviere, 2001). Consideration of an Afrocentric research methodology helped to keep this research honest and valid.

An adherence to Reviere's (2001) "five canons" increased the validity of the research by harmonizing the values and experiences of the participants. The five canons include *ukweli* (truth), *uhaki* (justice), *kujitoa* (commitment), *ujamaa* (community), and *utulivu* (calmness and peacefulness), and are "derived from seven cardinal African Virtues of truth justice, rightness, propriety, harmony, order and balance of reciprocity" (Chilisa, 2011, p. 191). In considering these virtues and canons while studying Black families, I remained accountable to the same ethical values held by some of the participants. With a focused

commitment to the community, the laboring component of intimate inquiry was fulfilled. There were, however, other factors to consider as I studied Black families.

Both in the data collection and analysis phases of this study, I was cautious about how I represented the studied populations. The Black Diaspora encompasses families who identify as Black, including those who are directly from Africa, who are Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, or multiracial, and who are from Black communities internationally. Livingston et al. (2013) explained the complexities of Black identity:

> Often in the United States, there may be an implicit or automatic assumption that dark-skinned individuals are African Americans. African Americans are generally defined as people with ancestry from Sub-Saharan Africa who are residents or citizens of the United States. While African Americans are the largest racial minority in the United States, there are many other groups of people that have dark-skinned members. These include some people from the Caribbean (Jamaica, Virgin Islands, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Martinique, etc.), Pakistan, South America, Europe, Southern India, Mexico, Cuba, and also dark-skinned Creoles, Native Americans, as well as mid-eastern groups from Sudan and Saudi Arabia, newly immigrated Africans, and a variety of multi-racial people. (p. 2)

In a similar vein, Maylor (2009), reporting on his personal experience researching Black people, noted that *Black* has become a generic term in the data collection process of many researchers. Moreover, being Black is viewed differently not only by people who conduct research, but also by research participants themselves (Maylor, 2009). Even researchers who consider themselves Black often cannot decide who should or should not identify as Black

(Maylor, 2009). Indeed, the political category of *Black* remains problematic for many and cannot be ignored.

These considerations were foremost as I developed my sample selection methods, and during the data collection, it was the responsibility of the families to identify themselves as Black.

Participant/sample selection. To find Black families for the study, I used purposeful sampling to select 25 families, a common qualitative research methodology (Suri, 2011). A researcher utilizing purposeful sampling identifies and selects "individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Since I sought Black families of high school students for this study, I regarded purposeful sampling as the best method. The Black families were the experts about their own experiences, so they were selected based on their identity and expertise. Drawing on Weiss (1994), purposeful selection was essential during my recruitment because Black families served as unique informants privileged enough to experience this study's research phenomena. In addition, recruiting Black families in the Greater Boston area allowed me to be more intentional in gathering sufficient data to properly exploring my research questions (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012).

In order to achieve the number of participants needed for the study, each participant was asked to complete an online demographic form to keep their information organized. Also, an extensive amount of follow-up was needed with educators and families in the Greater Boston area via emails and phone calls. I also had to be mindful that communication often needed to be made after business hours for working families and, in some cases, in multiple languages for families who did not speak English.

Setting. Families considered for this study had to live in the Greater Boston area because I wanted to focus on Black students in urban schools. The Greater Boston area is complex because there are nearby cities closer to the center of Boston than actual Boston neighborhoods. Looking at the surrounding areas, I decided to narrow the study location to towns, neighborhoods, and cities (e.g., Quincy, Medford, Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline, and a portion of Lynn) within a nine-mile radius of Boston (see Appendix A). This reduced the area of residence of Greater Boston families by more than 50% while ensuring that the study examined schools in urban neighborhoods outside of Boston that normally would not be considered. Appendix A lists all of the neighborhoods and cities considered in this study, including their distances from Boston.

Outreach. I reached out to Boston Public Schools engagement specialists and Parent University to help me with the recruitment of participants. I informed them that I needed help identifying a purposeful selection of 20 to 25 sets of Black parents or families of high school students. For families who were interested, they were directed to complete an online demographic form that collected information about them as well as their availability. In my personal recruitment, I tried to find interview participants who included both single parents and married parents representing a variety of racial and gender identities. I personally contacted interview participants via phone, e-mail, and social media. I was sure to adhere to any policies set forth by the social media sites pertaining to research; before reaching out to potential participants, I reviewed the research policies of Facebook (https://research.fb.com) and Twitter (https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules-and-best-practices). With permission from pastors and church administrators, I also posted flyers—which I had translated into Haitian Creole and Spanish for people for whom English was a second

language or could not read English—in churches located in areas with high Black populations. I also took advantage of the diverse student population at the University of Massachusetts Boston and posted flyers on campus in hopes of attracting the interest of families. To make sure I adhered to all university posting and advertising polices, I reviewed them at https://www.umb.edu/editor_uploads/ images/ campus_center/CC_PostingandAdvertising.pdf. In addition to making connections with potential family participants through educators and advertising with flyers, I also relied heavily on the Black community of the Greater Boston area by asking people to invite people who may be interested to participate.

Once I contacted the Black families who were interested in being part of the study, I also asked if they knew of any other families who might fit the criteria of the purposeful sample, a technique known as snowballing (Palinkas et al., 2015). Generally, the snowball method is used to "identify cases of interest from sampling people who know people that generally have similar characteristics who, in turn, know people, also with similar characteristics" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 535). Snowball sampling was appropriate for this study due to limitations around obtaining demographic or statistical information about Black families in Boston (Maxwell, 2013). In using this method, I was sure to only contact people who had expressed interest in learning more about my study. Just as I valued Black families as experts, I also recognized that they were more likely to know who could provide the most applicable responses for this research.

Gaining access. In addition to inviting Black families to participate in the research, I also invited educational practitioners, teachers, and administrators of urban schools in the Greater Boston area. Maxwell (2012) emphasized the importance of establishing research

relationships with gatekeepers to gain access to closed settings. By using gatekeepers, I had an easier time finding a sample of families with common lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In addition, gatekeepers helped maintain the representativeness of the participants and the data-gathering process (Maxwell, 2012). During the planning stages, I used this sampling method cautiously, in an effort to avoid ethical challenges. The Black families being studied—and I as a researcher—could easily have gotten get caught up in studying one common perspective rather than exploring a variety of responses by sticking with the same Black community and their connections (Patton, 2002). To prevent this, I broke up the sample and analyzed each participant on their own terms before I aggregated their responses (Robinson, 2014). Other precautions were taken to maintain trustworthiness and validity in the data collection and data analysis.

Attrition and accountability. I put a plan in place to anticipate the natural attrition that can occur during data collection when participants drop out, begin but stop midway, do not feel comfortable with the publication of the data, or did not show up for planned interviews. First, in the data analysis, I recorded the number of subjects who had dropped out. Then I provided reasons for attrition. Finally, I removed information about the dropouts. Precautions were also put in place to handle missing data. Although this did not occur, given the nature of the qualitative study, I would have contacted the interviewee for a new interview if there were multiple discrepancies. Once the interviews were complete, I sent my notes back to the interviewee to verify that the notes were true and complete. Any interviewee who was uncomfortable with any of the notes or portions of the interview being published was informed that I would remove those pieces from the research findings.

One-On-One Interviews

After receiving IRB approval to conduct the study, and after developing the interview questions, I requested feedback from engagement specialists and educators within Greater Boston area public schools. I then conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to explore Black family engagement through technology. The interview protocol consisted of 21 semi-structured open-ended questions. Using an interview guide (see Appendix C), I referred to the list of written questions sorted by the topics that I wanted to cover during each of the one-on-one interviews (Maxwell, 2012; Weiss, 1994). These topics included family background, family engagement, communication technology, and suggestions for educators. As recommended by phenomenological methodology, I began by asking interviewees about their family background, that is, their history and life (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

I conducted each of the interviews myself. While interviewing parents/guardians, I took brief observational notes. Interviews generally lasted 30 to 60 minutes and took place in a quiet, private, agreed-upon space close to where the participant lived. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants I made sure there was no video surveillance in the interview location. I asked each interviewee to sign a consent form indicating their willingness to be interviewed for this project and to have the interviews audio recorded. As an incentive, I gave each participant a $25 gift card once their interview was complete, and also provided refreshments during the interviews. These incentives were paid for with funds from a $3,000 grant I had been awarded from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Appendix D lists the budget for the study.

By audio recording the interviews, I was able to focus on the participants and maintain the integrity of each conversation. Part of the audio consent form informed participants that the recordings would be effective until the completion of the dissertation. I transcribed the recordings myself and erased them once the transcriptions were checked for accuracy. Interview transcripts were reproduced in their entirety for use in presentations or written products that grew from this study. Audio recording was a voluntary option, and neither the name nor any other identifying information of the family member (such as their voice or picture) were used in presented products resulting from the study. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a number (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.).

Focus Group Interviews

The second part of the data collection process included focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012). I conducted two 1-hour focus group interviews with three to five people in each group. The focus groups consisted of families who were engaged with their children's high schools through communication technology. The themes of the focus groups were based on trends that arose from the individual family interviews. For example, some of families liked engaging through communication technology while others did not, so I grouped families in the focus groups accordingly. Focus group families were selected from the same sample as the individual interviews; after completing their individual interview, each participant was offered an opportunity to join a focus group. The focus groups took place in a reserved room at a private location accessible by public transportation. I made sure it was an agreed-upon location where there was no video surveillance, in order to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Appendix E includes the focus group protocol, which consisted of six questions.

The goal of the focus groups was to understand how each of these selected groups experienced engagement from their perspectives. For consistency, I made sure focus group participants had signed consent forms, were provided with refreshments, and were compensated with additional $25 gift card. Focus groups were an important addition to this study because, generally, findings should not be based on only one data source (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012). From my perspective, the focus groups allowed families to speak collectively about their experiences and to identify how their experience related or did not relate to one another—which the one-on-one interviews could not accomplish.

Using multiple methods (i.e., individual interviews and focus groups) helped me gain a more complex understanding of my research phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012). It also enhanced the validity and reliability of the study.

Reliability of Data Collection

To increase the study's reliability, I conducted two pilot focus groups with parents and families to ensure that the interview questions had no double meanings or double negatives and were clear and unambiguous (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012). I also asked expert stakeholders—recruited through colleagues familiar with communication technology in urban schools—to review the interview questions. They also helped me determine if the questions were strong, that, is, aligned with the research question, or unclear.

For content validity, seven experts reviewed the interview and focus group questions, and for validity, five parents served in the pilot test group (Creswell, 2012). Since the interviews were being offered in multiple languages, I also made sure to include parents who spoke Haitian Creole and Spanish in the pilot test group. Table 3 lists examples of the pilot interview questions.

Table 3

Examples of Pilot Interview Questions

Research Sub-Questions	Information Needed	Instrument Type and Focus
How do Black families in the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?	Sub-Construct: Engagement through Communication Technology	Instrument Type: Focus Group I will interview families of high school students in Greater Boston to help answer this research question because they are best equipped with the knowledge to provide information about procedures and practices.
	Indicator #1: Family Notification/Outreach	• How do you identify the best way to connect with families? • How do you best connect with families?
	Indicator #2: Access	• What does your school do to reach families who do not speak English? • How to you make time to speak with families who work multiple jobs? • What services are being provided to families who do not have the time to be engaged?
What opportunities available to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?	Sub-Construct: Supporting Families of Low Socioeconomic Status	Instrument Type: Focus Group I will use the parent focus group to gather perspectives of Black families with children in high school
	Indicator #1: Stress Factors/ Triggers	• How does communication with your son/daughter's school help you balance the barriers you face as a parent? • How do you think this communication technology will help your child?
	Indicator #2: Support	• What does support look like for you as a parent/guardian? • What opportunities has communication technology given you/kept you from?
In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help	Sub-Construct: Learned Dispositions	Instrument Type: Focus Group I will use the parent focus group to gather perspectives of Black families with children in high school

Research Sub-Questions	Information Needed	Instrument Type and Focus
Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?	Indicator #1: Knowledge	• Can you describe any pieces of training or information made available to you to learn about communication technology? • How did you learn how to use communication technology to check on your student's progress? To connect with your child's school?
	Indicator #2: Values	• Do you think it is important to learn about new and innovative ways to be engaged with your child's school? • Do you think communication technology is needed to be engaged?
To what extent does racism impact Black families once interacting with urban schools through communication technology?	Sub-Construct: Parent Perception	Instrument Type: Individual Parent Interviews I will use the individual interviews to ask these question because they are intimate, and parents are more likely to have unique responses.
	Indicator #1: Parent Capabilities	• Do you believe you have the capabilities to use communication technology? • What could prevent you from using communication technology?
	Indicator #2: Time and Energy	• Do you set aside time each day to connect with your child's teacher? • Is communication technology easy to apply to your day-to-day life with you and your child?

After receiving feedback about the pilot interview questions, I constructed the semi-structured interview protocol for both the one-on-one and focus group interviews. I then identified which instrument types and focus would be most appropriate for gathering the information I needed. This contributed to my instrument triangulation (see Table 4).

Table 4

Instrument Triangulation

Research Questions	Information Needed	Instrument Type and Focus
How do Black families in the Greater Boston area define their own needs in relation to their race in order to be engaged in urban schools?	• Engagement through Communication Technology • How race impacts engagement • Who is it reaching?	Family One-On-One Interview
What opportunities available to Black families have limited their access to communication technology?	• Support • Resources	Family Focus Groups
In what ways have urban schools in the Greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?	• Family Knowledge • Family Values	• Family Focus Groups • Archival Data
To what extent does racism impact Black families once they begin interacting with urban schools through communication technology?	• Time and Energy • Parent Knowledge and Skills • Racism	• Archival Data • Family One-On-One Interviews

Archival Data

Once the interviews were complete, I began to collect documents, which I integrated

with the previous two data sources for triangulation (Patton, 2015). Using archival data was

important because I knew that having multiple data sources can increase validity and

reliability (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) provided a comprehensive list of documents and

artifacts that can support qualitative inquiry, some of which I collected for this study,

including newspapers/newsletters, websites, and social media. Although Patton identified 41

types of documents and artifacts, I decided to focus on these three because they are most

relevant to communication technology and because they are publicly accessible to parents and families who have access to computers and technology.

Based on my interview participants and the public districts where their children attended school, I selected nine districts from which to collect archival data: Boston, Brookline, Malden, Everett, Somerville, Cambridge, Milton, Quincy, and Medford. Each of these districts is located in the Greater Boston area. As I searched the Internet for archival data, I decided to answer the same set of questions for each district. These questions (as seen in Appendix F) were designed to capture the average user's experience interacting with communication technologies.

Specifically, I examined parent portals, social media[8] (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), district newsletters, and text messaging alert systems. In addition, photocopies of school newspapers, publications for families, and information about ways for families to be engaged were also collected during the individual and focus group interviews to inform the data analysis (Patton, 2015). I gained access to these documents with the permission of the families. These documents were important to my research because they allowed me to see what communication was given to the families firsthand.

Strategies for Ethical Issues

Black families are considered a vulnerable population due to their historical marginalization, their average socioeconomic status in urban communities, and the ways they been further marginalized by Westernized research (Marshall & Batten, 2004; Murphy, 2010). It is therefore important for future researchers to not spotlight Black families as

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[8] Within each social media platform (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) I searched for activity levels, frequency of use, number of followers, and types of information provided to parents and families.

people in need but rather to consider how marginalized non-dominant populations are portrayed by research about them (Patel, 2015). Researchers have hurt Black families in the past through both subjective and objective research findings (Lucey, Nelson-Rees, & Hutchins, 2009; Skloot & Turpin, 2010), which have disseminated inaccurate or false information about the populations researched (Lucey et al., 2009; Skloot & Turpin, 2010).

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

In objective research, the findings are clear-cut, the results of a research process. During this process, the researcher does not consider external information or factors outside the process that may influence the results of the study (Ratner, 2002). For example, if a researcher were to objectively study academic outcomes of Black students, the researcher would not grasp the full experience of the child. Should the researcher should take into consideration internal and external factors that also affect the student's academic experience? Subjective research is based on a researcher's interpretation of a subject. However, when researching Black parents in particular, over-interpretation of subjective findings can negatively affect the family and fail to reveal the truths in the findings (Ratner, 2002). For example, if I decide to study Black families but rely solely on my own experience as a Black women to interpret interview data, my findings would be limited and highly subjective.

When looking at the history of phenomenology, the differences among the various iterations of this method are based primarily on objectivity versus subjectivity. Husserl (1970) focused on transcendental phenomenology, which is grounded in the idea that all experience arises from objects and how individuals interpret those objects in order to describe phenomena. Husserl's approach was then split and expanded upon by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Laverty, 2003), who took a more subjective approach as they

moved toward hermeneutic phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). This hermeneutic

approach, which more closely reflects what I used in my study, argues that there can be no

objective understanding; rather, experiences should be interpreted by the researcher (Laverty,

2003).

Crozier (2003) noted that the issue of objectivity versus subjectivity persists in

research on Black families. However, Crozier (2003) argued that this tension can be avoided

by involving families in the research. By using semi-structured qualitative interviews in the

study, I maintained a commitment to giving families space to express their perspectives of

their experience and to serve as experts driving the study. By engaging the Black families in

a dialogic relationship with me, the researcher, they had the opportunity to exercise some

ownership over the data that were produced.

Boxing and Categorizing Participants

Boxing and categorizing the Black families in this study may have been a direct result

of my own subjectivity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, for the purposes of this research, Black

family members were individuals who chose to represent a sense of community with other

individuals who also identified as Black (D. Harris, 1995). That is, to avoid categorizing

participants, I only considered a family Black if they themselves identified as Black. This is

an ethical conflict that researchers have encountered in past studies: Though they considered

the participants Black, the participants, in some instances, resisted the term *Black* because

they did not like the label (Maylor, 2009) or felt, for various reasons, that the term was a

"catch-all" category.

Hypothetically, Black families who considered themselves Black could have been left

out of the study at the discretion of the researcher. It is also possible that families who did

not identify as Black could have been misidentified if the researcher recruited them simply because of the skin pigment. As a result, this would cause the data collection to be inaccurate, leading to many identity disruptions in the analytical process (Maylor, 2009). Arguably, as evidenced in recent research, being Black is so complex that is should be left to the respondents to identify whether they consider themselves to be part of the Black community (D. Harris, 1995). Maylor (2009) noted that "if researchers are to gain access to diverse communities and secure their involvement in the research process, it will be important to use terms that are considered appropriate and acceptable by the communities [they] seek to investigate" (p. 26). As the researcher, I made every effort to show the Black families who participated that I supported them. Before conducting the study, for instance, I made a commitment to the participants: If any parts of my data collection or analysis caused any harm to the participants, my support for the community would drive me to change the methodology to fit the needs and boundaries of the participants rather than my own.

After-Effects of Research

Laura (2016) emphasized that "the intimate inquirer works under the assumption that the process and product of his or her scholarship has real consequences for the lives of three-dimensional human beings" (p. 218). Once the researcher concludes a study, the community they were studying can potentially be left less informed and less supported with fewer resources. This is especially true when working with Black communities. These after effects—as measured in damage to the surrounding community—are caused by the exploitation of the participants through the lack of research trustworthiness and transparency. Furthermore, inaccurate findings can create more social problems for the community than it had before the study was conducted (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991, as cited in Marshall &

Batten, 2004). Each of these factors informed my decision to use intimate inquiry, a love-based approach, for this qualitative phenomenological research.

Using Intimate Inquiry

Intimate inquiry consists of three activities: witnessing, engaging, and laboring. Collectively, these activities contribute to a powerful research experience for the researcher and the individuals who are being researched. Each of these activities is not performed for the researcher, but out of love and respect for the communities being studied.

Witnessing. The first activity relates to the physical presence and support of the researcher. It involves the "deliberate attendance to people, seeing and taking notice of that which they believe is meaningful. Fears and desires are situated in a sense of past and future, and experiences become the fabric of time and space" (Laura, 2016, p. 219). For my research, I not only took additional time and effort to physically connect with the participants, but also showed them that I was willing to be there. A quantitative survey cannot serve as substitute for witnessing because the latter requires stepping into the lives of families and observing their lives up close, deliberately and intimately.

Engaging. Being physically present is not enough for intimate inquiry; the researcher must also be willing to be part of conversations, experiences, and, in this case, the Black families themselves. As Laura (2016) pointed out, "engaging points us to the posing of problems and the highlighting of contradictions that are inherent to all experiences of the peopled world. To engage is to put people in deliberate dialogue around the mundane, the taken-for-granted, the whispered, and the hushed" (p. 219). By stepping out and being fully engaged with the study participants, I was be able to understand their perspectives better. As a result, I became more informed about who they were as families. Assuming a peripheral or

covert role in this case would not have worked because this study required me to get to know

them (Johnson, Avenarius, & Weatherford, 2006). Therefore, it was my intention to take an

active role when interviewing and observing the families (Johnson et al., 2006).

     Laboring. Being physically present and engaging with Black families requires not

only time, but also a sacrificing of oneself. I had to recognize that my work as a researcher

was going to require physical labor. In intimate inquiry, "laboring encompasses the mental

work of writing, but also the physical labor—the work of the hands and the bodies—of

sharing available resources" (Laura, 2016, p. 220). Coates (2015) wrote in a similar tone

about the oppression of Black people and their bodies:

> But a great number of educators spoke of "personal responsibility" in a country
>
> authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility. The point of this language of
>
> "intention" and "personal responsibility" is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made.
>
> Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. "Good
>
> intention" is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.
>
> (Coates, 2015, p. 33)

It is evident that, despite the best intentions of researchers of vulnerable populations, Black

communities have been manipulated and abused at the hands of research (Brandt, 1978;

Daugherty-Brownrigg, 2013). Of course, not all researchers are members of the communities

they research, but in their work, they must try to adopt the role of a community member

rather than an expert. As a community member, the researcher should be prepared to learn

from the community while maintaining transparency and authenticity to themselves (Brown

& Danaher, 2019).

As I studied how Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technologies, I relied on the family members as experts. As a community member, I developed partnerships with the research participants, thereby reducing the risk of treating them insensitively (Marshall & Batten, 2004). My intimate inquiry approach revealed my positionality as a Black woman from a Black family in this research. It also revealed my connection with the Black families of this study. Most importantly, the approach allowed me to show respect to these participants and highlighted that a relationship would have existed between me and the families even if the research did not (Laura, 2016).

Data Retrieval and Protection

Informed consent. To elaborate on the consent procedures mentioned earlier in this chapter, all interview participants signed a consent form indicating their willingness to be interviewed for this project and to have their interviews audio recorded. As the principal investigator, I collected the consent forms. The consent process took place in a private place where there was no video surveillance to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. I also emailed the form to each participant one week before their scheduled interview so they had time to review it. If they did not review it beforehand, they were still given ample time to consider their participation. There was no time limit given to them, so they did not feel rushed. Participants were informed that their consent was voluntary verbally, through the interview protocol, and in writing in the consent form. As noted on the form, any participant was free to withdraw from the interview at any time. In addition, consent forms indicated clearly that they were for adults. Assent forms were not needed for this study because I only interviewed adults over the age of 18.

Translating consent forms. Understanding how diverse the Black population is within the greater Boston area, this study was considerate of the multitude of languages that families and parents speak. Whether they have English as a second language or they were more conformable having the interview in their native tongue, this study took that into consideration. After English, Haitian Creole and Spanish are the most common language spoken amongst the Black population of greater Boston (Boston Public Schools, 2016). Therefore, I believe having the forms translated to these languages was appropriate for my study population. The interview questions focus group questions, flyers, and consent forms were all available in English, Haitian Creole, and Spanish.

Confidentiality of Data Collection

Any personally identifying information collected from participants was handled with caution and honesty. Such personal information included the names, email addresses, phone numbers, and the neighborhoods of the participants. As previously mentioned, the links between personal information and other study data was managed responsibly. In addition, as indicated in the interview script, participants were reminded not to make references during the interview that could directly identify them. Direct identifiers were gathered from the demographic forms were separated from the interview and focus group data by using different flash drives. In interviews and focus groups, the participants were each assigned a participant number (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.), and I recorded this unique number on the bottom of the interview script. I then kept a list of the participants' numbers so that I could link each to the specific participant's data. To assign a participant number to each participant, I used Google's random number generator (https://www.google.com/search?q=random+ number).

Data access. As the researcher, I had primary access to the data. No one else had regular access with the exception of interview participants who requested an audio copy or transcription of their interview. All data were encrypted and password protected to prevent others from misusing the data having accessing participants' personal information.

Data storage. All of the data were maintained on an encrypted, password-protected flash drive. Even consent forms and demographics forms that were completed online were directly downloaded to a flash drive so that numerous copies were not stored on computers or available online. The only other people who had access to the data were dissertation committee members during the data analysis phase. Since these individuals were not part of the research team, the data they received were completely de-identified and did not link to the participants. Once advisement sessions with the dissertation committee members were complete, I took back the flash drive and disposed of the data.

Data disposal. All of the data were deleted once the study was complete. The audio recordings were disposed of much earlier, after the transcriptions were complete. Later, all transcriptions, notes, memos, and participant demographic information were destroyed once the study was complete as well. If participants wish to remain in contact in the future to learn about the results of the study, this will be done voluntarily via postal mail since it is the most secure method.

Procedures

After gathering the participants for the study, I conducted 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews, followed by two semi-structured focus groups (see Figure 3). The study was conducted in three phases: one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and data analysis. Each of the phases allowed me enough time to gather participants, complete memos,

transcribe interviews, and conduct a partial analysis. They did not include preparation and post-work after the findings were written up. Details regarding the full timeline of the study can be found in Appendix G.
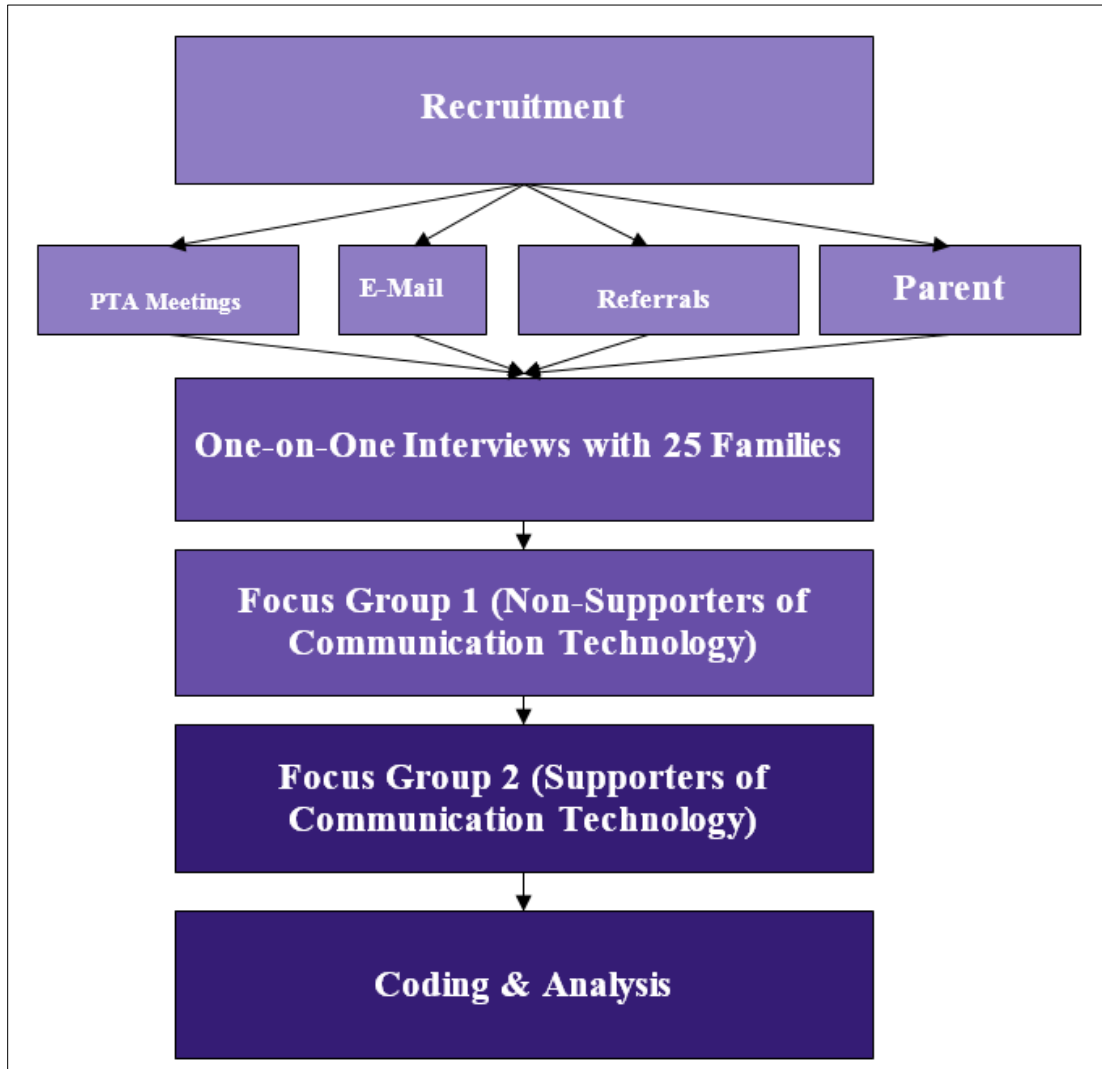
Figure 3. The data collection and analysis process.

Phase 1: One-on-One Interviews

The first part of this phase included training in qualitative methods, namely around learning which type of software would work best for audio recording my interviews and keeping them organized. I sought this training from my dissertation committee, through online tutorials, and from classmates. The most time-consuming part of this phase was the recruitment. I began by creating flyers (which met IRB requirements) outlining the key points of the study and providing potential participants with information about how to contact me and by when. To begin establishing a rapport, I made a series of phone calls and sent emails to school engagement specialists and family engagement coordinators to discuss the research design of my study. Since this recruitment method was not sufficient, I resorted to emailing parents and families that I had located through connections in the Greater Boston area. Once I made contact with parents and families who might be interested in participating, I sent an introductory email. Once 25 to 30 parents and families had shown interest, I sent out initial demographic forms through Google Docs (https://bit.ly/2xzppb1).

These demographic forms allowed me to gather information about the participants beforehand, saving time during the actual interview. The demographic form included questions about participants' place of residence, their occupation, and the education level of their children. In addition, I tried to frontload the paperwork by asking parents and families to complete their consent forms using electronic signatures. This was the best and most ethical way to complete this process because families had more time to read the consent form and fully understand the main purpose of the study without any pressure. If parents did not feel comfortable with any of the electronic forms, they were given the opportunity to complete them in person once their interview was scheduled.

The next part of this phase involved creating a weekly fall interview schedule based on where the families lived or their interview location preference. By scheduling two to three families who lived close to one another on the same day, I was be able to be more efficient with time and travel costs. Once I began the data collection phase, I tried to interview five to eight families a week. This allowed me to complete memos between each interview and to complete my member checks or follow-up with any families in the event that any data was inaccurate. Phase 1 of the research was completed by January 2019. In order to retain families and make sure they remained interested in the study, I maintained a positive relationship with them through email and phone contact. In addition, I kept them informed about the next steps of the research, I made sure that my interviews were conducted with a high level of respect and transparency, and I maintained open and honest communication with them.

Phase 2: Focus Group Interviews

Phase 2 was very similar to Phase 1, with the main difference being that I focused on group interviews in the second phase. After interviewing each of the individual family members, I followed up them via phone and/or email. I formed the focus groups around two themes: families who liked engaging through communication technology and those who did not. I grouped families according to theme to see how they expressed their opinions about it collectively. In addition, the same families interviewed in the one-on-one interviews helped me to edit my interview protocol for the focus group. For example, if there were common concerns and themes that were brought up in the individual interviews, I asked further in-depth questions about them during the focus group interviews.

The focus groups consisted of married families as well as single parents. The focus groups were conducted one week apart, with the time between allowing me to write memos for each of the interviews and review notes (Creswell, 2013). Once the focus groups were completed and all of the interviews transcribed, based on the accuracy of the transcriptions, I requested member checks from each of the focus group interview participants. By completing this member check, I ensured that all the collected data accurately reflected what the families wanted to convey. This phase took me three months and was completed by March 2019.The third phase was the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is iterative, involving both data collection and data analysis concurrently. According to Maxwell (2012), each of these processes informs the other throughout the research. The strategies I used for my data analysis included two stages: preliminary analysis and focused analysis.

Preliminary Data Analysis

The preliminary data analysis consisted mainly of taking field notes and memos during and after each of the one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews. This not only allowed me to track my research progress but also helped me to improve my interview process. After each interview, I took a moment to write memo, answering the following questions:

- What went well with the interview?

- What did not go well with the interview?

- How did I connect with the family member?

- Were all of my questions answered?

- What questions should be considered for future interviews?

- How did the interview respond to my overall research question and sub-questions?

- What improvements should be made in subsequent interviews?

It was important to raise each of these questions immediately following each interview since I was able to recollect the most information at that time. As mentioned, I kept closely in mind Reviere's (2001) five canons—*kweli* (truth), *uhaki* (justice), *kujitoa* (commitment), *ujamaa* (community), and *utulivu* (calmness and peacefulness)—throughout this research (Chilisa, 2011).

The data analysis phase was the most complex part of the study. I began this phase by reviewing memos from the one-on-one interviews, reading each one twice—the first time to recollect the experience, the second to take notes and extract key details. Writing memos after interviews helped me keep my data honest and show my commitment to each family member with whom I met. The preliminary data analysis also gave me a chance reflect on my own positionality as a researcher (Creswell, 2013; Langdridge, 2008; Patel, 2015), and because I knew I would be emotionally connected to this research, the memos provided me an outlet for feelings that emerged during the study (Patton, 2015).

Focused Data Analysis

The focused data analysis occurred primarily after all of the interviews were completed. As an ongoing part of the data collection, all of the interviews were transcribed. During this stage, all data from the transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed-methods data, text, and multimedia analysis (Silver & Lewins, 2014). I reviewed the transcriptions from each of the

interviews, listening to each of them three times. The first time was to recollect the conversation, the second to take notes and extract the key details, and the third to code the interview into themes and subthemes. This was followed by member-checks by each of the participants (Chilisa, 2011). The same process was conducted for the analysis of the focus group interviews.

Using a phenomenological data analysis method, I coded and themed the transcriptions from the interviews (Creswell, 2013) in two coding rounds. Using Dedoose, I conducted a focused analysis of the interview transcripts and analytic memos, identifying connections between the families and communication technology (Maxwell, 2012). Through this process, I organized the data into sub-themes and looked for internal convergence and external divergence (Maxwell, 2012). I maintained the anonymity of the parents and family members during this process as well. The information gathered through Dedoose, the responses, notes, and memos from the interviews, as well as any audio recordings were stored on an encrypted flash drive so that all of the data remained confidential.

Once all of the interviews had been coded and themed, I wrote out the analysis. As with most phenomenological studies, the analysis was separated into two parts: textural and structural (Creswell, 2013). I first wrote out the textural experience of the participants, that is, *what* the black families had experienced as they engaged with their children's high schools through communication technology (Moustakas, 1994). I then wrote out their structural experience which helped to identify *how* they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I combined the textural and structural experiences to convey the essence of the Black family experience within urban public schools in the Greater Boston area.

Benefits of the Study

Although this study directly benefited the participants, there were numerous incidental benefits associated with it. For example, as a result of this study, parents and families who had previously been uninformed about communication technology had an increased understanding of what it is and how they could use it. Also, parents and families who were already familiar with it had an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding. Another benefit of this study is that parents and families who may not have had the chance before could reflect on their experience with communication technology.

This study offered participants an outlet for expressing their opinions collectively and as individuals. Whether they were appreciative of it or frustrated with it, this was a chance for them to reflect on their experience with family engagement. Furthermore, I shared the findings of the study with the participants. Finally, the findings of the study helped me to see the bigger picture surrounding communication technology and to better understand how Black families in the Greater Boston area were or were not experiencing opportunities for engagement through it. Each portion of the research process reinforced why Black family engagement and communication technology should be studied. The reality is, when major changes to urban education like those presented by community technology arise, researchers cannot afford not to study them.

CHAPTER 4

TEXTURAL FINDINGS

If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's the power of using your voice. I tried my best to speak the truth and shed light on the stories of people who are often brushed aside.
— Michelle Obama, *Becoming*

The Black Families

In choosing to conduct a phenomenological study, I charged myself with the task of raising awareness about the perspectives of my research participants (Crotty, 1998). Specifically, through my research, I illuminated the experiences of Black families of students in high schools within the Greater Boston area. By the end of my data collection, I had interviewed 25 families who identified as Black, conducted two focus groups, and searched for archival information from nine school districts. While the participating families showed multiple similarities in their responses to the interview questions, there were many factors that set them apart and individualized them. Each of them made powerful statements that infromed this research. Coming from different urban public schools and neighborhoods within the Greater Boston area, these families shared narratives highlighting their complexity and diversity—despite all living within 10 miles of each other. To best represent each of the families, my description of the data analysis begins with an overview of the characteristics of

the families. This is followed by the three textural areas covering what the families

experienced in relation to the research.

Characteristics of the Families

Each of the Black families who participated in this study were unique, but there were

also multiple connections among them. Whether in relation to their backgrounds, the

neighborhoods they lived in, or their spiritual beliefs, they were all interconnected somehow.

A profile of each of the families as well as a small highlight from each of their interviews can

be found in Appendix H. Before interviewing the families, I asked each to complete a short

demographic survey. Through this tool, a great deal of information was collected that

revealed who the participants were in relation to the others. The results can be seen below.
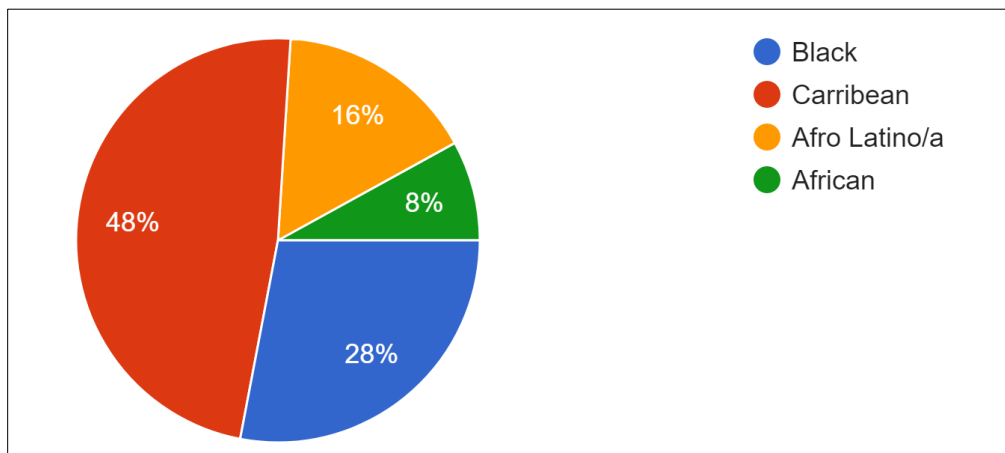
Figure 4. Participant identity (25 responses). This pie chart represents a breakdown of

participant responses to the demographic survey question, "What is your race/ethnicity? How

do you identify?"

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, identifying as Black in the United States is very complex. The Black Diaspora encompasses the many families who identify as Black, including those who are directly from Africa, who are Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, and multiracial, and who are from Black communities internationally (Livingston et al., 2013). My participants represented this diversity and complexity. Overall, almost half of them (48%) were of Caribbean descent. (In their individual responses, they indicated more specifically that they came from countries such as Haiti and Jamaica.) Over a quarter of the participants identified as Black people who were born in the United States. The remaining quarter came from African countries, such as Gambia and Cape Verde, or from a multitude of international Black communities.

As indicated in Figure 5, my sample population came from the 8% of Black individuals who live in Massachusetts and the 25% living in Boston. Though the Black population is a minority population in Massachusetts, there are thousands of Black families who live in the Greater Boston area.
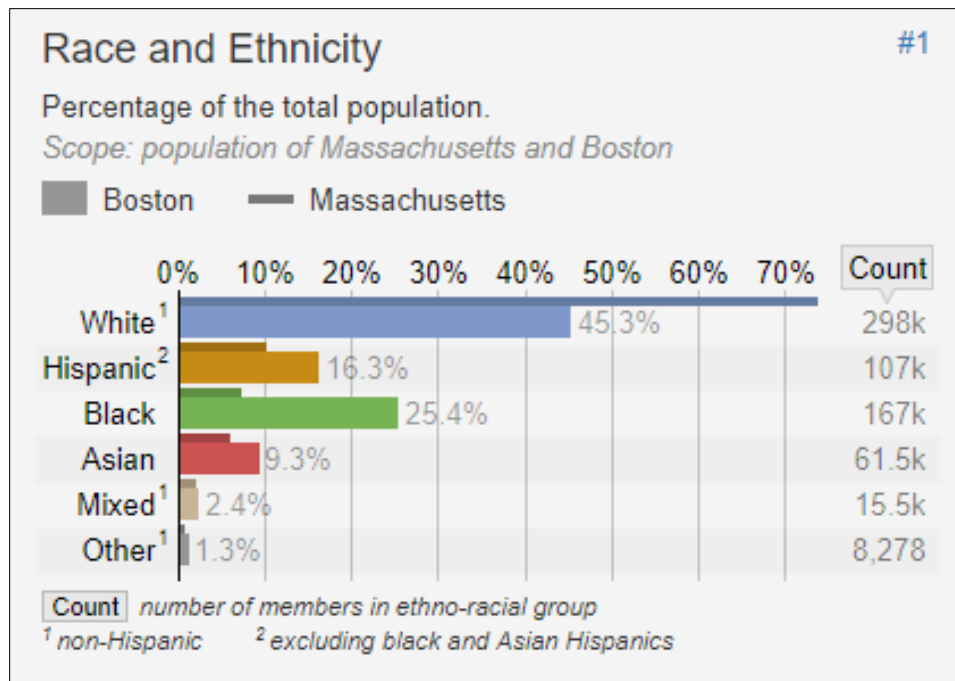
Figure 5. Race and ethnicity in Boston and Massachusetts (2018). Source: Statistical Atlas, https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Massachusetts/Boston/Race-and-Ethnicity#figure/race-and-ethnicity.

Despite being grouped into a single category, the Black population in the Greater Boston area speaks multiple languages. Each of the participants in this study were minimally comfortable speaking English; in fact, of the 25 interviewees, 14 spoke a language other than English at home (see Figure 6). Yet, although the participants were offered to have their one-on-one interview conducted in Haitian Creole or Spanish, each of them elected to do so in English.
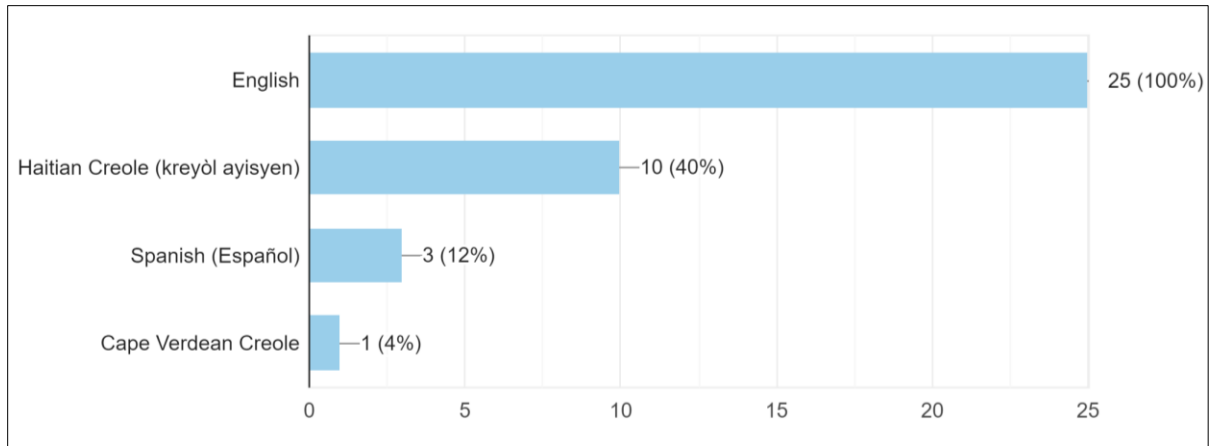
Figure 6. Languages spoken at home by study participants (25 responses).

As noted in Chapter 1, this study focused on the term *family engagement* because *parent involvement* presumes a homogeneous family (Wilder, 2014). In reality, all Black family members play key roles in improving the outcomes of a student's education (Ishimaru et al., 2016). In this study, each family's makeup differed from student to student (see Figure 7). Indeed, the primary caretaker for each high school student varied constantly. Whereas 64% of the participants were traditional mothers and 24% traditional fathers, 12% were not. Within this 12%, there were brothers, sisters, and step-parents who had stepped up to support the students as guardians. The marital status of these family members varied as well. Overall, 11 (44%) were married, nine were divorced or separated, and the remaining five (20%) were single or had never married.
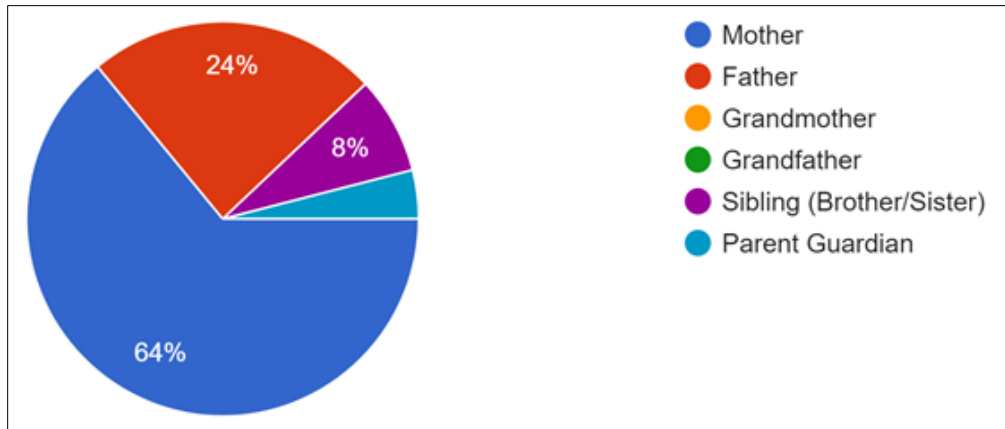
Figure 7. Participants' relationship to high school students (25 responses).

There were also a variety of family sizes represented by the study participants. Family sizes ranged from one child to more than five children. A majority of the families (36%) had three children. The second most common number of children in a family (32%) was two. As seen in Figure 8, only two parents (8%) had one child. In fact, 80% of the families had three or more children. Since the average family makeup included multiple children, it was important for me to follow up and ask participants how many of their children were in high school. Twenty-one of the families (84%) had children who were outside of high school; these included a range of children as young as two years old to those who had already graduated from higher education institutions.
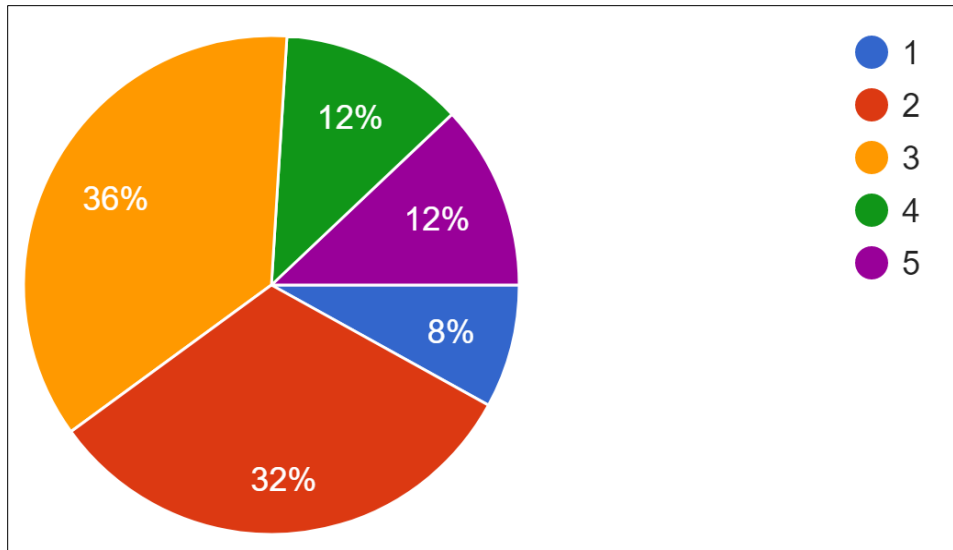
Figure 8. Number of biological children reported by participants (25 responses).

As discussed in Chapter 3, in the Greater Boston area, there are nearby cities that are closer to the center of Boston than actual Boston neighborhoods. Because of this, I made the decision to keep the participant sample narrowed geographically (by residence) to towns, neighborhoods, and cities within a nine-mile radius of Boston (see Appendix A). Eleven (44%) of the families lived in Boston proper. The remaining 14 (66%) were spread out among neighborhoods and towns in the Greater Boston area, including Everett (12%), Somerville (8%), Cambridge (8%), Malden (4%), Quincy (4%), Milton (4%), and other neighborhoods (16%). Each of the families was asked how long they have lived in Greater Boston. Fifty-six percent had lived in the area longer than 10 years, 12% for eight to 10 years, 6% six to eight years, 6% for four to six years, and the remaining 16% for less than four years. Based on the residence of the participants, document archives were collected for each neighborhood and schools district. Specifically, documents were collected from the

public school systems in Boston, Brookline, Somerville, Cambridge, Medford, Malden, Milton, Everett, and Quincy. Figure 9 depicts participants' city or neighborhood distribution.
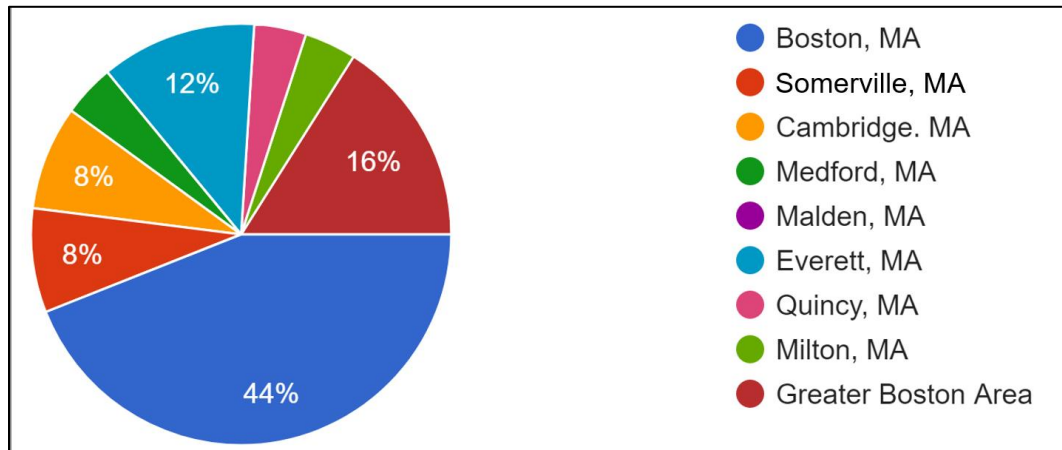
Figure 9. Participants' city or neighborhood of residence (25 responses).

Participants' place of residence was an important factor because it impacted the income of the parents (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006; Murphy, 2010). For example, as shown in Figure 10, there are drastic differences in household income distribution based on where Black families live in Greater Boston. Black families living close to the center of Boston have a household income of less than $33,000 per year, while Black families in areas such as Malden, Cambridge, Somerville, and Medford have a household income of $42,000 or more. Regardless of residence, however, even the highest household income of Black families still pales in comparison to the overall median salary of $85,691 in Boston (Department of Numbers, 2017).
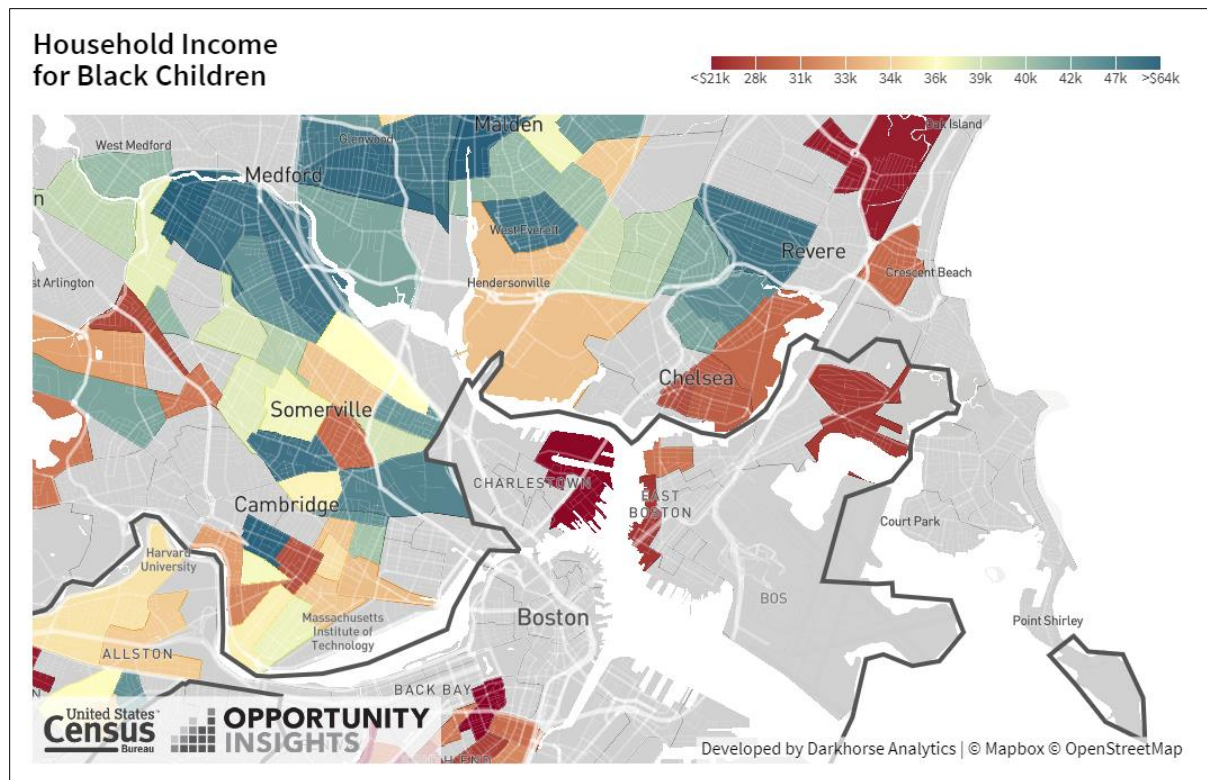
Figure 10. Household income for Black children. Source: Opportunity Atlas
(https://www.opportunityatlas.org/)

Regarding participants' salaries, it was also important to consider the careers of

family members. Each interviewee was asked about their current profession (i.e., "What do

you do for a living? How do you provide for your family?"). At the time of the interview,

every participant noted that they were employed. The most common profession among them

was educator. Other common professions included chef, medical assistant, and nurse. Very

few respondents had advanced-career professions. Figure 11 illustrates participant's

professions at the time of the study.
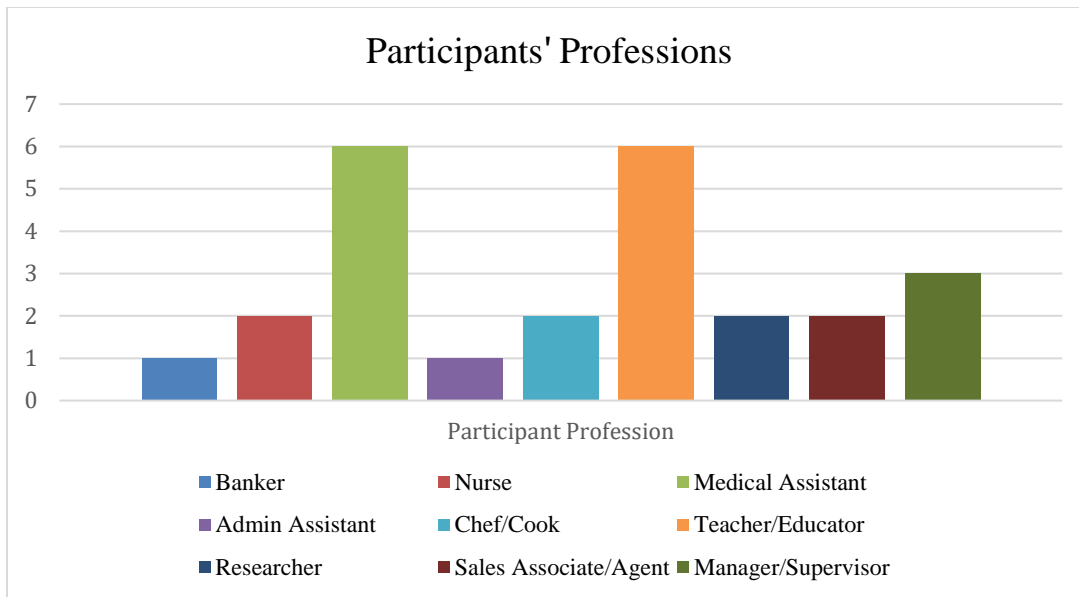
Figure 11. Participants' professions (25 responses).

Data Findings

The 25 individual interviews and two focus groups were completed over the course of six months. As noted previously, once the interviews were complete, I collected document archives from the nine neighborhoods and school districts the families represented. Each of these data sources contributed to the research findings and revealed important insights. Several themes arose from the interviews and archival material. These themes fell into three areas that highlighted *what* the families were experiencing (textural) and three areas showing *how* the families were experiencing it (structural). Based on these results, I constructed a set of recommendations from the perspectives of the Black families.

What Black Families Experience

The three textural areas relating to what the families experienced in relation to the research question include (1) influences and forms of family engagement, (2) perceptions of

family engagement, and (3) family concerns for their students. Each of these areas is divided into themes and subthemes.

Before speaking about the form of family engagement, it is important make the meaning of family engagement—as defined by the participants—clear to the readers of this research (Patel, 2015). Within the focus groups, the participants shared their perceived meaning of family engagement. Whereas some participants (e.g., Participant 21) saw it as a "hands-on approach" to their child's education, others saw it from a multi-dimensional standpoint. As Participant 16 shared:

> So, for me, family engagement basically is how families engage in their children's academic affairs at their schools and also to check in with their social emotional behaviors inside the school because sometimes they don't know. I mean, students spend close to eight hours with teachers a day and so teachers would get a good chunk of how they're doing academically. And how are they doing social emotionally. So, for me it's a combination of the three—academic, social, emotional—and also even the family, a parent themselves.

Although family members tended to agree with Participant 16, they also noted that families are represented differently across the Greater Boston area. Participant 6 urged the others to consider the differences in family structure and culture:

> I would define family engagement as not only the parents being involved … as much as I can, but, you know, also their siblings, checking up on them, making sure that they're doing okay because parents are at work—sometimes they're not always there. So family, family should come together, support each other. Not just the parents for their kids.

118

Participant 6 wanted the parents/guardians to understand that family engagement depends not only on the efforts of mothers and fathers, but also other stakeholders who support the children. These stakeholders, such as grandparents, siblings, aunts, and uncles, are also invested in the success of these children. For example, when Participant 8 was asked, "How did this level of family engagement have an impact on you when you were a student?" she responded:

> It makes me motivated, not just study but know that I have a family, you know, who was not just my mother, my aunts. I remember my aunt also made sure I was studying and my homework was done. So they were always on my case when it came to school.

> Participants made it clear that family engagement was a joint effort that they could

not take for granted. Another mother, Participant 14, shared the same sentiments as the previous comment:

> I see family engagement as my brother sees it—as a whole component that everybody is involved and that everybody is welcomed at the school that our children attend because family engagement takes two pieces, not just the family. And if we're not welcome or don't feel welcome, then it's irrelevant.

In this case, Participant 14 maintained that family engagement involved not only the people students interact with and receive support from at home, but also the people they interact with at school, teachers, and administrators. Therefore, collectively, the families believed that Black family engagement has specific requirements:

1. To be engaged, families must show concern for the student academically, socially, and emotionally.

119

2. Engagement can come from multiple stakeholders, including those who are not traditional parents (i.e., mothers and fathers).

3. Families must first feel welcome in the high school in order for them to be engaged.

Influences and Forms of Engagement

In the first textural area, the following themes emerged from the individual interviews and focus groups: generational parenting, forms of engagement, feelings toward family engagement, and lack of family engagement. Each of the themes, including their basic description and supporting subthemes, are included in Table 5.

Table 5

Textural Area: Influences and Forms of Engagement

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Generational Parenting	What families recall experiencing when their parents/ guardians were engaged in their academic experience	• Comparing to their high school experience • Great parent examples • Learn from their parents
Forms of Engagement	Ways that families are involved with their student's high school	• One-way communication • Two-way communication
Feelings Toward Family Engagement	Families' descriptions of their engagement and what they think about it	• Positive feelings (e.g., motivated, proud, enthusiastic) • Neutral feelings (e.g., balance, change, informed, responsible) • Negative feelings (e.g., draining, tired, guilt)
Lack of Family Engagement	Factors that measure the quality of family engagement	• Parent guilt • Frequency of involvement/engagement

Generational parenting. This first theme related to what families recalled about their parents' or guardians' engagement in their past academic experiences. The subthemes that contributed to this theme included: comparing to their high school experience, great parent examples, and learning from their parents.

The first subtheme, comparing to their high school experience, was prevalent. Each of the families was asked to rate (on a scale of 0-10) how engaged they were in their children's academic experience (with 0 = "not engaged at all" and 10 = "exceptionally engaged") and how involved their own parents were in their academic experience (also on a scale of 0-10). As illustrated in Figure 12, there were significant differences between the two family generations. In the figure, "1st generation" represents those who raised the participants in the study, while "2nd generation" represents the participants themselves (i.e., the parents or guardians of the high school students in the study). As shown, the second generation of Black families was significantly more engaged than the first. For example, the average level of engagement for first-generation families was 4.96, and the average for second-generation families was 8.44. In fact, out of all of the participants, only two reported being less engaged than their parents were when they were in high school. All other second-generation respondents indicated that they were more engaged than their parents were when they were in high school. The rest of the parent/guardians (second generation) reported that they are more engaged than their parents were when they were in high school.
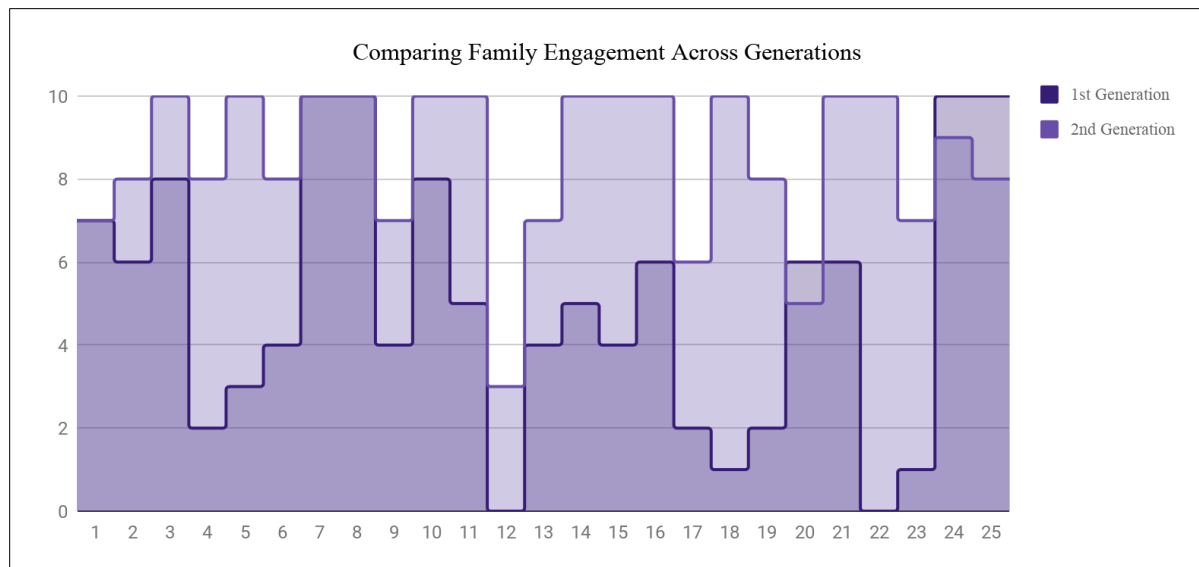
Figure 12. Comparing family engagement across generations.

Comparing to their high school experience. The families often made comparisons to
their own high school experiences, primarily in reference to technology, academics, or their
family's engagement. Most families identified improvements that had occurred between their
generation and the current generation (i.e., their children's generation). For example,
Participant 9 spoke about the differences in family engagement that she perceived:

> I just remember when I was in high school, you know, K through twelfth grade, you
>
> would get a call, you could expect a call from the teacher or the school if the child is
>
> in trouble, in danger, or probably just didn't show up that day. But those calls weren't
>
> consistent either. You'd get them sometimes and other times not. So it's definitely
>
> been upgraded. All these emails and stuff. Like, I don't even think I was using emails
>
> when I was in high school.... I feel like the schools are also helping to make this
>
> possible.

Indeed, families saw a transformation in family engagement, with some attributing this change, in part, to the increased efforts of the schools. As Participant 9 noted, she had seen an increase in the consistency of communication from her son's school. Her son was attending high school and living in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. She believed that increased communication enabled her to be more informed. Other families, like Participant 12, shared the same sentiment: "I think it's great. Honestly, I really do because like me growing up, compared to when I was in school, we didn't get as much information regarding, like, programs, after school programs, or sports or anything like that."

Great parent examples. Whereas some families attributed the increase in family engagement to the efforts of their children's high schools, others gave credit to their own parents. Having an example of great parenting or caretaking in their lives had set the tone for when they became parents. Participant 7 commented that she "operates under the same family engagement structure" that her family implemented when she was in high school.

Participant 8 provided an example of how engaged her mother was when she was in high school:

> My mother was very, very engaged in our education. So, she makes sure she doesn't have any, just hear our perspective, but also the teachers, and anything that we said, we were wrong, the teachers always right, you know, and if there's something that she needed to go to the school and ensure that she will do. So, my mom always has a good relationship with the teachers.

Her mother's efforts were passed to the next generation: Now a mother of five, Participant 8 was more involved than the average family. She played multiple roles in her daughter's high school and served as the coordinator and liaison for the Haitian Parent-Teachers Association,

recruiting other Haitian parents to get them more involved in the academic experiences of their children. Participant 8 explained her reasoning: "I guess that's the same thing that I grew up with. And then I also do the same thing for my children now, you know, really engaged in their school."

As these examples make clear, Black family engagement does indeed exist in high school academic settings—and it is not new. Participant 25 gave an example of how active her father was when she was in high school:

> If they felt like my sister or I had been mistreated at school or if there were any type of racial incidents or if our grades weren't being done fairly then they would definitely speak, especially with my father. He would very much speak his mind to them about, um, you know, where or what his perspective was on the issue, but generally very positive relationship. The principal loved my family, the administrators and the teachers. My parents are still good friends with some of my teachers from then, and then I guess more in high school.

Learning from their parents. All of the participants indicated that they had learned how to be better caretakers from their parents or guardians—through positive or negative experiences growing up. Although some families reported that they wanted to mimic or model their own parent's styles, others wanted to do better than their parents had. For instance, Participant 1 explained the difference between her parents' engagement and her own:

> I'm very engaged. My daughter always says that I'm like a helicopter mom. I guess. I don't know, I just feel like because of my experience, I just feel like I like my parents, they weren't born here, they were born in a third world country. They didn't really

have the same experience I had growing up. So I feel like I have a little bit more

insight as to what happens in school, in high school, especially here in America, so I

know how dangerous it can be if they get involved with the wrong crowds or if they

don't join certain groups or if you're not present at the teacher meeting, how that can

affect certain things.

Participant 1 viewed family engagement from multiple angles. Her conceptualization of family engagement had been influenced by her parents, her high school experience, and her children's experience. Although her parents were not as informed as she was, her experience had encouraged her to prioritize engagement. Participant 16 shared a similar perspective:

When I personally was in high school, I think my family really didn't know much

about my high school experience. Didn't know much because my dad usually sees me

on weekends, only sometimes he won't, he won't see me for two weekends, but most

of my high school experience was very personal because number one, mom never got

a formal education, so that was totally new to her. Dad got up to two years of college,

had to drop out because the funds went out there from grandpa and grandma.

Similar to Participant 1, Participant 16 had parents who were not informed about his academic experience. Both explained that this was because their parents did not have the same educational experience as they did. However, whereas Participant 16 thought it was because of a difference in education level and opportunity, Participant 1 attributed it to a lack of awareness due to cultural differences. Likewise, other participants indicated that culture and language gaps had led to their parents' lack of connection with schools. Participant 13 explained, "Looking back at my parents, they didn't have the ability or the language skills to be able to communicate and have that accessible language needed to help them have that

engagement." Reflecting on and making sense of their own educational experience, helped

participants devise a plan for their own children. As Participant 22 shared,

> When I compare it to me growing up, you know, how my family really paid very little
>
> attention to my education. I remember when I was, I moved to Haiti when I was 16
>
> because, you know, things with school and just, you know, just a very, on a negative
>
> path for me in especially growing up in Boston around those areas. Things were very,
>
> very, very hard on immigrants, especially Haitian immigrants. Then because of that,
>
> you know, I realized how my parents did not pay any attention and me went back to
>
> Haiti was a different scenario in my life because I think when I was 17 I said, you
>
> know, I'm not going to school anymore. I'm done. I'm tired of it, you know. And I
>
> was 17 to remind. My daughter is 17 now and I was 17 and I said I'm not going to go
>
> to school anymore. And you know, no one in my family said anything to no one. So
>
> when I looked back in my past, you know, the things, the mistake that I've made and
>
> you know, how you know, by God's grace a lot of them were corrected. So therefore
>
> now it's a must for me to be engaged in, in education.

Although Participant 22 had a negative experience in high school due to his parents' lack of

family engagement, he made an effort to learn from that experience. Over 20 years later, he

had a chance to make a difference in the lives of his five children and refused to let any

barriers get in the way of his engagement. As this example attests, Black families in the

Greater Boston area are learning and changing across a single generation. They are learning

how to overcome the family engagement barriers their families struggled with, and they are

changing the way they engage with schools.

Forms of engagement. The family participants in this study had discovered

numerous ways to connect and be involved with their children's high schools. The theme of

forms of engagement encompassed all of these engagement strategies and methods. Some of

these involved traditional one-way communication methods, and some comprised methods of

two-way communication. Table 6 provides an overview of all the ways (organized by

communication type) that participants connected with their children's high schools. These

methods are separated by communication type. One-way communication methods include

Flyers, Postal Mail, Helping with Homework, Researching Schools, School, Website,

Newsletters. These are all methods that informing parents about upcoming activities, events,

or student progress but they do not require a great deal of response from the

parents/guardians (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Table 6

Forms of Engagement Mentioned by Families

Communication Type	Form of Engagement	Number of Participants[*]
One-Way Communication	Helping with Homework	16
	Flyers	8
	Postal Mail	8
	Researching Schools	6
	Newsletters	5
	School Website	4
Two-Way Communication	Emails	25
	Parent Portals	22
	Parent Teacher Conference	22
	Social Media	22
	Text Messaging	16
	Face to Face	15
	Sports Games	15
	Schools Activities	15
	Chaperoning Field Trips	8
	Parent Teacher Association	8
	Cell Phone Apps	7
	Phone Calls	5
	Fundraising	3

Note. [*] "Number of Participants" indicates the number of interviewees who noted using the listed communication method.

The two-way communication forms or methods that families mentioned using to engage included emails, face-to-face conversations, chaperoning field trips, fundraising, parent portals, parent-teacher conferences, parent-teacher associations, cellphone applications, text messaging, phone calls, social media, attending sports games, and participating in school activities. Though all of these two-way communication methods encouraged the involvement of parents/guardians (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 118), the ones

cited most frequently by participants included parent portals, social media, emails, and parent-teacher conferences. The most popular method of communication identified by participants was email. Participant 11 offered insights into why families use email most often:

> So definitely, email is the number one to be very honest. That personally for me helps me a lot. Like I said, I'm work eight hours. I'm on the computer. So that's the best reply or quick reply that I can do in both ways as from a teacher and from a parent, you know, I feel like that's the best form of communication, personally.

Participant 11 preferred email because she found it easy to use while balancing her work obligations. Urban schools are steering more toward communication that is convenient and easy for them to deliver. Three out of the four most popular methods mentioned by the interviewees are forms of communication technology. Most of the participants (88%) were aware that such technology was available. Some, like Participant 12, appreciated the directness of communication technology methods such as parent portals:

> I think by having access online or the portal, you get more information. It's more like direct. Like every day I can go on and see if there's something new. When I was in school you would, you'd rarely get notices that were sent home with the student in the backpack. Not something where you can log online and check out, you know what I mean?

Feelings toward family engagement. In sharing what forms of engagement they used, families also described their own family engagement and their feelings about it. Their comments represented an array of emotions, which emerged as three subthemes: positive feelings, neutral feelings, and negative feelings.

129

Positive feelings. The positive feelings participants shared about their family engagement included enthusiasm, pride, and motivation. For some parent and guardians, being engaged in the academic experiences of their children increased their confidence and validated their efforts. For example, Participant 5 explained, "It lets me know that I'm being responsible and taking care of what I need to as a father. So I do, you know, feel good about that." Many families expressed that being engaged was part of their responsibility as a parent or guardian. Rather than being a suggestion or an option, family engagement was, for some families, a major priority: "So that's the parent's job to help them do that, you know, not to and then expect them to do whatever on their own. They need guidance, they need love and support that they need attention" (Participant 8). Families who had positive feelings toward their engagement consistently tied those feelings to the well-being of their children. That is, their commitment to the academic success and well-being of their children encouraged them to continue engaging. For instance, Participant 17 explained what it felt like for her to know she was supporting her son:

> I did have the sense of, like, pride because I know that I can be there for him. Um, and, but yet also proud to know that he, I've raised them well enough to, you know, be responsible at school and he has to doing relay the messages to me that need to relay to me. So, emotionally you would say pride, it gives you a sense of pride and made you proud.

Neutral feelings. Some families shared mixed feeling about their engagement style; some of their feelings were neutral, neither positive nor negative. For example, some expressed that their engagement made them feel balanced, informed, and responsible. Even though families recognized the importance of their engagement, they also tried to share that

130

responsibility with their children. Participant 17 shared a conversation she had had with her son about his senior year in which she told him that, "You still need to do well, but yet I trust that you will make the right decisions academically and socially." She went on to explain why she shared the responsibility of her son's his academics with him: "Because he likes to have the sense of independence, like how I had. So, I would give him the benefit of the doubt and say, 'All right, he's taking care of things.' So, I would try not to be so involved."

The notion of shared responsibility between families and their children was a sub-theme in the interviews. The older the high school students were, the more likely the families were to talk about shared responsibility for engagement, with parents or guardians playing more of a supportive role and letting their high schoolers lead. As Participant 15 said,

I mean, that's because they've moved up. I try to play a back role, they are really advocating for themselves and also schools really pushed that to let the parents be coming like that last step. So I'm not really communicating with the teachers like I did back in the day. I won't go out my way and say, 'Well, what's going on with this class?' So I'm not really talking to the teachers as much as I used to.

Many families spoke about what it was like to parent students who were nearing adulthood. They wanted to be involved in their children's progress, but they were also aware that their roles and responsibilities as parents or guardians were changing. In order to help prepare their children, they adopted more of a supporting role, letting their children take the lead. Some believed that assisting their children with their responsibilities, rather than administering them, would help them make better choices in the future:

I guess you know, you want to be that parent that is safe to be around, and let your kids feel loose. So you want to give them the space to be. I want them to have space. I

131

want them to be very independent and I want them to make smart choices.

(Participant 22)

Negative feelings. While the families understood unanimously the importance of family engagement, some of them still had negative feelings about it. These feelings ranged from frustration to fatigue; some families even expressed deep feelings of guilt about their level of engagement. Participant 6 spoke about his experience being a guardian at a young age:

> Me personally, well it was putting a lot of stress on me. As a result, I started to feel like that it was just one of the things that was, you know, thrown on top the pile of things that made me stressed out. It was school, my job and then it just, that, that added to the mix.

Families balancing parenting with their other competing obligations often experience hardship. For some families in the study, this hardship was prevalent, especially among single parents/guardians. As noted earlier in this chapter, 11 of the family participants (44%) were married, nine were divorced or separated, and the remaining five (20%) were single or had never married. Participant 11 spoke about her experience parenting as a single mother:

> Being a single mother and being a minority, I feel like I've shown how strong I can be being by myself. No, I don't have that one, you know, the male partner to help me. Like, okay, it's always been, you figure it out, you find out what the problem is and then you have to fix it.

Despite these difficulties, families in the study continued to persevere and find ways to be engaged even if they were stretched thin and had minimal support. Even families in this study who were part of a two-parent household had difficulty being or staying engaged.

Although some of the participants had the support of a spouse, they still felt burnt out as they tried to keep up with their obligations and their relationships with schools. For example, Participant 13 explained how difficult it is for her:

It does because it could be draining, it can be tiring. Especially when you have to go through all those activities during the day, then home and then start cooking and getting them ready to go bed. It's just, it, it puts a toll, it affects you in some way. When you have to juggle so many things at once, it's, it's really hard to do, but you still try to manage to at least be some sort of involved in some sort of way, which makes it difficult, but they get accomplished.

Lack of family engagement. This final theme within the textural category related to factors that measure the quality of family engagement. Often, how families feel about family engagement determines their level of academic engagement in their children's high school experience. The subthemes supporting this theme were frequency of family engagement and parent guilt.

Frequency of engagement. Each family viewed the frequency of their engagement differently. For example, two families might be highly engaged in the academics of their children's high school but have different connections with teachers, different perspectives on how to be engaged, and have completely different levels of engagement frequency. Each of the parents/guardians in the study reported that they were more involved than the average parent or guardian, but when asked how often they connected with their students' teachers, they answered the following:

133

- Participant 3: "Every day. I check in every day with them. I didn't miss it. I ask: Any homework. How was their behavior? Is there anything you need?"

- Participant 13: "I want to say like twice every quarter."

- Participant 1: "About once a semester or if it's dependent on what's going on."

- Participant 17: "I don't know how often. Sorry. Monthly. Weekly, daily. Uh, okay. Really only if anything comes up, like if he was to say something to me that would, I would have a concern about, I would reach out to the teacher, um, or they would reach out to me, but it would probably be like pretty rare, like once every couple of months. Maybe."

The participants' frequency of engagement varied considerably because each family viewed engagement from a different perspective. In addition, each family and each student was different, so their frequency of engagement was conditional. Responses about frequency of engagement ranged from checking in every day to rarely. Yet, each family member felt that they were reasonably engaged in the academics of their children.

Parent guilt. Although some families claimed confidently that they were happy with their engagement level, others shared their feelings of guilt. As much as they wanted to be engaged, their jobs often prevented them from connecting with schools:

I feel like I don't really engage with them as much because—and again it has to do with my work schedule. Um, I leave here early in the morning. I would say I leave here at 7:00, that I don't get back home until after 7:00, which is maybe twice a week. They see, they see me before they go to bed. Other than

134

that, by the time I get home, they're already in bed, which is after 9:00 and

that gets to me … a lot because even my kids sometimes, she would come out,

the little one, saying, "Mommy, I hate your boss because I don't get to see

you." But I mean, I'm looking forward to changing that, to make sure I spend

more time with them because it does mess with my emotions a lot and I can

see that they are hurt from me not being home like I used to be. (Participant

19)

Mothers like Participant 19 often struggle with the guilt of not being engaged. It is

one thing to hear parents speak about how hard it is working long hours and not

seeing their kids; it is another to witness the pain and anguish they feel for not

spending time with them. Although she was hard on herself, every moment

Participant 19 was not working, she was with her girls, supporting them through their

weekends, evenings, and summer hobbies. Participant 23, another mother, spoke

similarly about how her lack of engagement filled her with guilt:

Sometimes I'll be honest, like if I get the negative calls then it kind of makes me feel

guilty. Like what am I doing wrong? Like what can I do differently? But then I think

about it, and I just let it go. You know, I don't dwell on it. I try not to. I take it

personally, like I said, and I'm being extremely honest, like I could do better.

It was obvious that Participant 23 was very hard on herself. When she ranked her level of

engagement, she gave herself a 7 out of 10. Although she appeared to be very involved in the

academic experiences of her four children, she expressed that she wanted to do much better.

She used to volunteer for many of the events and activities at her children's schools, but now

she was obligated to stick with parent-teacher conferences and connect via email because she

worked over 60 hours a week. Similarly, Participant 18, a father, expressed that even though

he was highly engaged, he still felt guilt:

> I feel like I'm not doing my job when I'm not engaged or I don't know what's
>
> going on.... I don't know any other way to do it. I don't know any other way to
>
> be. It's just that, that's just how I am. They're just the most important things to
>
> me. That's the most important job that I have to do is, is be their dad.

In this case, Participant 18 used his parent guilt as a motivator to be a better father: When he

was not proactive in his academic engagement, he felt guilty, so he tried to stay ahead of it.

Overall, the textural area comprising influences and forms of engagement provided a context

for understanding what families were taught about family engagement and how they

themselves used their engagement. The following sections explores the thoughts behind what

they were experiencing.

Perceptions of Family Engagement

The second area, perceptions of family engagement, explored what Black families

thought of their own experience as well as the experience of other Black families engaging

with urban public high schools. In this second textural area, the following themes emerged

from the interview and archival data: family needs, family experience, and sympathy for

others. Each of these themes, including basic descriptions of them, and their supporting

subthemes are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Textural Area: Perceptions of Family Engagement

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Family Needs	Stressors and barriers to family engagement	• Work demands and scheduling issues • Human connection • Access to technology • Training
Family Experiences	Experiences that families had had with family engagement in different settings	• Experience at home • Experience at school • Experience at work
Empathy for Others	Feelings families shared about other parents and students	• Empathy for other parents • Empathy for other students

Family needs. The definition of family engagement offered by the participants (presented at the beginning of Data Findings section) connects directly to the theme of family needs. I define *family needs* as the stressors and barriers that impede Black family engagement. The subthemes supporting family needs included work demands and scheduling issues, human connection, and access to communication technology training. It is important to explore family needs because doing so can reveal what prevents families from engaging and what, therefore, can encourage them to be more engaged. The first subtheme, work demands and scheduling issues, was mentioned by most of the participants. In fact, 19 out of 25 participants commented on time constraints due to their work schedule and other obligations.

Work demands and scheduling issues. Families expressed that the time commitment needed to be engaged with high schools can be challenging because of the need to balance work, family, and the school-related activities of their children. The average participant

worked during the hours of either 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. or 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., which

overlap with school hours. This overlap made it hard to for them to achieve balance:

> A lot of the times, a lot of these meetings and conferences are booked during hours
>
> that I'm actually at work. So, unfortunately, I don't get to participate. So, most of my
>
> participation comes from, like, scheduling a meeting time or something that would
>
> work for both me and the teacher. (Participant 9)

Here, the participant expresses her frustration about her son's high school scheduling

meetings and parent-teacher conferences during the day, or the early evening, while she was

at work. Due to such conflicts, she had to take the initiative and reschedule meetings with

teachers that were more convenient for her. Other family members, like Participant 13,

shared similar frustrations:

> You have to juggle so many things at once, it's, it's really hard to do, but you
>
> still try to manage to at least be some sort of involved in some sort of way,
>
> which makes it difficult, but they get accomplished.

Parents like Participant 13 felts as if they were missing out of their children's experiences

because of work and other competing obligations—not only during school but also when

parents worked late into the evening as well. Participant 13 (like Participant 9) strived to find

ways to be engaged; even when balancing her daughter's school life with her work life, she

found a way to make it work.

> ***Access to technology.*** Communication technology has been given to parents and

families to remove barriers to engagement, such as time. Time is just one of the barriers that

Black families face. Williams and Sanchez (2013) argued that there are five main barriers to

family communication: time, poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources, and lack of

awareness. Communication technology can serve as a bridge over these barriers (at least in part), but for some families, it is not efficient. Participant 14 shared:

It sets them up for failure because first of all, not everybody has a computer. So how can they go on email or parent portal? The only thing they say is, oh, go to the library. If I can barely be at home cooking dinner for my child, how am I going to have time to go to a library? Right. So they were—it was like they were very inconsiderate of my time or of a parent's time because we're not like the other parents with husband's are at work all day and could stay home and sit on the computer and eat bonbons, so we can't do that. We have to work. If you're, especially if you're a single mom or dad, you have to work, know you have to figure out how you're going to pay for the daycare for the little one and then be at home hopefully by the time the older ones get home.

Families indicated that it could be cumbersome for them to get access to technology, thus pushing them further behind in their engagement with high schools. Families also expressed shock when they learned that having a computer at home is now a requirement for students. Participant 4 described what it was like when she found this out for the first time:

They [i.e., the school administrators] were kind of like, "Well most homes have computers." Well, we don't have a computer. I take my work computer home so for me it's easier than me going out and buying a computer, but it pretty much puts you in that position and I think for families that can't afford it, that's—what are they doing about that? You know? So I think that's where I have the resources but I don't know what happens when someone who doesn't, you know, and I could see that family, like the communication, is not happening at all until they get the report card is just like,

139

"Oh my goodness, what happened here? Like how come I didn't know?" Well, they

don't have a computer or a cell phone. How were they informed?

Participant 4 exemplified what families will do to make sure they are involved and

well informed. Although communication technology was created to support families,

there was a clear divide in this study between those who were for it and those who

were against it. Some families expressed their preference for in-person human

interaction.

     Human connection. Families recognized a need for one-to-one connections with

teachers. As demonstrated in the previous section, although parents/guardians balanced work

with being engaged in their children's schools, they still had a desire to connect with teachers

and principals. Participant 1 shared her belief that communication technology is actually

replacing human connections:

> I feel like it's, it's non, we're losing it. We're losing the person to person contact. And
>
> I, I don't, I personally don't like that. I feel everyone is like so wrapped up in this, you
>
> know, social media and technology, you know, they're, they're on this wave and it's, I
>
> feel like people are losing that connection that you should have, the person to person
>
> connection. You're just losing it and I feel like a lot of information can get lost that
>
> way. I feel like it's a risky thing. I don't care for it.

Participant 1 viewed communication technology as another barrier to connecting with

teachers and schools. Rather than increasing engagement, some families maintained,

technology is reducing it. Although they were more informed through this communication

technology, some families reported that the lack of personal interaction diminished their

relationship with the school:

I find that the technology takes a lot away from interaction that is human to human.

It's good, but then again, the way I was raised with the interaction, the relationship

with the school, with the parents and kids, I find it to be very useful and better.

(Participant 7)

Training. Despite the lack of human connection that families reported, a majority of them—22 out of 25 (88%)—still used communication technology. Families even shared their hope that other families would embrace it: "I hope that more parents get plugged in and they learn how to use technology" (Participant 15). In using it, however, some faced a steep learning curve and had little to no support from their children's high schools. As discussed earlier, Black families come from an array of backgrounds. Due to differences in their identities and skillsets, their needs and accommodations vary as well. One mother noted:

You know, if you have a parent that is 60 years old, or someone who happens to be

here for a year or two from a different country, that person is just lost, you know, and

that's when you know other methods of communication will have helped them a lot

more. Or to have special classes just to teach them, you know, how to use it.

(Participant 22)

One major issue that arose for families was not getting the training they needed to sufficiently use the communication technologies, such as parent portals and phone applications. Twenty-one of the 25 interviewees (92%) reported that they had received no training. This was also verified in the document archives.

In looking at the websites of the participating districts, only two out of the nine made online training available for the families. Furthermore, only one of the nine made training available in multiple languages. Participants voiced their frustration over this lack of training.

For example, when asked if he received any type of formal training on communication technology, a father reported the following:

> They haven't for me. The only time they give me instructions on how to be engaged, and how to log into the portal is when they gave me the flyer when we were registering for classes, and this is how you do it? No follow-up or anything. Um, they actually just gave it to my son for me, they did not even give it to me. (Participant 10)

Just as families felt a lack of human connection with schools, they felt similarly about training. For example, Participant 10 received no formal in-person training on how to use the parent portal; instead, the responsibility of making that connection was given to his high school son.

The lack of training was also emphasized during the focus group interviews. After I asked if schools have contacted them about any trainings on the portals, the families in the first group unanimously reported "no," as seen in the following excerpt:

- Participant 1: "No, not me."

- Participant 21: "Email. They say parent universities have many classes available, but then, but no, other than that, nothing personal. Even at parent teacher conferences, they don't tell you that at all."

The findings in the second group were similar, but only one parent in the group reported having received training. In that case, the training the parent received was not related to communication technology for parent portals, family engagement apps, or school social media websites. Instead, the training was on how to use an online search engine for college searches.

Family experiences. The third prevalent theme within the perception of family engagement textural area was family experiences. I defined *family experiences* as those that families had with family engagement specifically in different settings. Within family experiences, three supporting subthemes emerged: experience at home, experience at schools, and experience at work. Examining participants' experiences in the different settings allowed me to understand the parents/guardians from a holistic viewpoint. As families spoke about what they experienced at home, in their children's high schools, and at work, it became evident that those experiences overlapped and contributed to their perception of family engagement.

*Experience at home***.** Walker et al. (2005) were deeply influential in shaping the literature surrounding family engagement. Their theoretical model of family engagement comprises home involvement and school involvement. Although my research focused on school engagement, issues related to home involvement consistently came up during interviews. In fact, it was often difficult to separate the two because the families recognized that they worked together. Each family reported ways in which they connected with their children at home. As Participant 7 shared:

> Very often. I, I liked taking time with them to dinner or to go have any fun time, socialize a bit because we don't see that much. They go to school. I go to work like day all day, I should say from morning to evening. So once in a while or if not once a month, I set a time, I say, okay, it's time.

Other families, such as Participant 24, took a similar approach. Each month, Participant 24 practices "intentional bonding," during which she and her son do activities that promote growth in their relationship as well as growth in his awareness

of his culture. Another father, who shared a similar perspective, spoke about why socializing and bonding with his son were priorities for him: "You have to be there for the kids, like in anything, in any way. I can, academically, emotionally. You have to be there to support their kids" (Participant 10).

Experience at schools. When some of the parents/guardians tried to show this same type of energy and engagement at their children's schools, they met with resistance from teachers and administrators alike. Participant 14 explained that the headmaster of her daughter's high school caused her to join and co-chair the school's Parent Teacher Association:

> See, this brings me back to the very first meeting. The headmaster was new and the very first thing she said was, "Don't expect me to stay late because I'm not the old headmaster and I have things to do," and that really rubbed me the wrong way. Wow. That really rubbed me the wrong way. So, I was determined to be co-chair.

In this case, the headmaster of the school was so off-putting that it reduced this mother's trust. Instead of shying away, she decided to fight back by become more engaged with the school. As a result of her increased engagement, she became more informed about her daughter's experience. Unfortunately, however, her efforts were sometimes not received well by her daughter's teachers:

> I was always communicating. It's every day. It's every day, every day basically. I make sure they are doing their part and she [i.e., her daughter] is doing her part as well. Yeah, some of them weren't so receptive, but it's okay. It didn't bother me. I didn't give up.

144

Similarly, one father, Participant 18, shared a negative incident that led him to become more engaged. His daughter's teacher was constantly making assumptions about her academic capabilities, even though she was performing well. Participant 18 worked with his daughter until she became one of the top-performing students in the class, but this did not reduce his frustration with the teacher. Taking action, he made it clear to the teacher that he possessed power and agency as a parent, and that he could claim it:

> In the meeting early on when she made certain assumptions that I had to disprove on purpose. So, I think I don't want to say there's a fear, but I think she knows what she's dealing with. And, and one of the things I said to her is that I have options. I can pull my daughter out of the school, or put her in your class. I'm looking for somewhere where she's going to get nurtured. If it's not here, if it's not in your class, I'm trying to next class. If it's not in this school and we're trying another school, um, I have options.

Experience at work. Families had concerns about the quality of their children's education because they saw the other side of their children's high school experience in their work experiences. Families expressed that they valued education because of what they experience at work. Participant 22, for instance, recognize the power of education and its impact on their children once they graduate:

> So you know, the more education that you have, the more you will succeed in life. Especially here in America, people tend to respect that a lot even though sometimes they might bypass you and choose someone else. But race definitely plays a major factor in society that we live in. You know, even if you're Christian, you're a nonbeliever, you cannot deny it, it is everywhere.

145

Here, Participant 22 emphasizes the importance of education to his children because he does not want them to be passed up for options that he missed due to his level of education. Throughout the interview, he explained that his race and educational status had reduced his chances of upward mobility. He hoped that his students would excel in their education so that they did not miss for future opportunities. Another father made the same claim.

> This whole thing of diversity is just, to me, is just a ploy. The company I worked for had a meeting at a town hall where diversity was part of the conversation and the entire front line. So this is the CEO at all. Everyone who's anyone in that, in that company where, where was there a, the CEO is white female. All of her executive staff is a bunch of white people. Even that, the managers, the executives, everybody was white and yet, we're having a conversation about diversity. (Participant 18)

The Black parents/guardians in the study understood the world their Black children would enter after graduating from high school. The families' experiences at work impacted what they said to and taught their children. Through their engagement, families tried to take a proactive approach so that their children were prepared for the future. In sum, as one can see in the families' comments, their experiences at home, at school, and at work were closely interrelated, with each environment impacting what actions they took as parents/guardians.

Empathy for others. The last theme of this category was sympathy for others, which, for the purposes of this research, was defined as the feelings families shared about other parents and students. While interviewing families, their consideration for what other Black families were experiencing within their communities consistently rose to the surface of conversation. During the interviews, 12 out the 25 participants made empathetic comments

146

about other families, and 14 out of 25 shared feelings about and concerns for high school

students who were not their own.

   Empathy for other parents. During one of the focus group interviews, participants

expressed empathy for families within urban Black communities. For instance, when

speaking about access to communication technology, families shared mutual concern about

the cost and affordability of the electronics used for the technology:

- Participant 16: "I think, um, with, with the advance of technology today, it's

   gotten cheaper. You can buy a laptop, $150, $200 if it depends on, again, the

   family's priority. And I also believe that economically, families are struggling.

   We may think that the economy is favoring everybody else but not, not many

   black families..."

- Participants 15: "…definitely not minorities and people of color."

Due to their personal experiences, families often viewed the experiences of others with

empathy. Raising their children, they sometimes shared the same fears as other Black

families within their community. One father shared his empathy for families who had high

school children battling mental health:

   I'm sure in hindsight nothing's more important than their child. And I'm sure as a

   parent if something like that happens, you feel like a failure as a father, as a parent.

   That your child is gone and you didn't even know there was something wrong with

   them. I think you can't tell them they're not going to tell you everything, but does got

   to be some connection where you can sense certain things and even if they don't tell

   you, you gotta make sure you let them know that you're aware and you got to ask

147

questions and you got to look at them and you got to get a sense of where they are.

(Participant 18)

Oftentimes, as Participant 18 exemplified, the empathy that families shared was paired with parenting strategies they would take to support the child in question. Whereas some families identified a solution, others had a difficult time because they were facing the challenge in real time.

Empathy for other students. Families expressed just as much empathy for other students they heard about or encountered as they did for other parents. Working as a parent liaison within her daughter's high school, Participant 8 spoke about the stories she heard at Parent Teacher Association meetings.

> Some stories that you hear break your heart. Some parents, maybe working two jobs, they don't have time to bring the kids to school or the kids just go to school by themselves and then go home alone, you know, and then their homework is not done and sometimes they go to school with dirty clothes. Where's the parents? You know, my kids are 11, I don't have the heart, you know, even the oldest one, she's 17. I drop her to school. It's not safe, that's why many kids are missing or they're just wandering around.

In this study, the more families became engaged in their children's high schools, the more their concerns for other students (who were not their children) grew. Participant 14, for example, had developed a strong emotional attachment to the students at her daughter's high school since she had assumed her role as co-chair of the PTA. When I originally asked her how many children she had, she immediately noted that though she had three, there were several students she helped and supported emotionally and academically. Throughout the

148

interviews, she often referred to these students as her "children," her "babies." She wanted to see all students, even those without parental representation, supported and heard. She commented on the poor treatment toward Black students that she had witnessed at her daughter's high school:

> They didn't ask to come here, you know, and you're just treating them like garbage. Even if you were treated like garbage, that should be the more reason why you're going to treat them better because you know how it feels and this is how they treat our children.

Family Concerns for Their Student

In this last textural area, the following themes emerged from the individual interviews and focus groups: parent perception of their children, violence, and life outcomes. Table 8 lists each of these themes along with their basic descriptions and supporting subthemes.

Table 8

Textural Area: Family Concerns for Their Student

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Parent Perception of Their student	What families think of their children	• Academic performance • Motivation • Independence/autonomy • Behavior/discipline
Violence	Behavior involving physical force intended to hurt people	• Violence within neighborhoods • Violence within schools
Life Outcomes	Family concerns about where their children will end up	• Fear of prison/death • Graduation/college • Drop out/pushout • Lack of opportunities

Parent perception of their children. What families experienced while engaging in the schools and what they thought of their children were often intermingled. This theme covered a wide range of perceptions. Throughout the individual and focus group interviews, parents/guardians shared their thoughts about the academic performance, motivation, independence/autonomy, and behavior/discipline of their children.

Academic performance. As highlighted in earlier responses, some parents/guardians wanted to share the responsibility of their children's education with the children themselves. Although families had concerns about their student's academic performance, they tried to address those concerns alongside—or in partnership with—their children and the teachers. Participant 25 described how she and her son addressed her academic concerns with him.

> Checking his academic progress, I'm able to look at what assignments he has coming up that are due. So, we try to get in the habit of doing that more and going through it with him so that he doesn't forget stuff because he tends to be disorganized, that kind of stuff, and definitely email and texting, getting immediate contact with teachers.

By viewing the responsibility of her son's education as a partnership, Participant 25 felt that her son was learning from her as she was learning from him. Participant 16 shared a similar perspective. He spoke about his son's struggles with math and their implications for the future:

> He's gravitating towards things like bio, biochemistry and, and they say they putting him by … engineering. But I told my wife that that might involve mathematics down the line and if he struggles with math now, you know, when he comes to the pre cal and the calculus, that could be a set up of failure for him. Let's give him the second

alternative way. He writes very well. He has sort of like a legal mind that I was like,

well maybe he'll benefit in that area.

Instead of dwelling on his concerns about his son, Participant 16 focused on alternative

ways for him to benefit from his talents. His main concern was that his son's high school

was trying to lead him into a major in which he might face difficulty in the future. In this

case, Participant 16 wanted to work with his son to figure out what he was passionate about,

what he did well, and what direction to guide him in next.

    Motivation. Oftentimes, families recognized that students were not having trouble

with their academic performance; rather, they lacked motivation. To help students stay on

track, parents/guardians spoke about how they increased their engagement with their children

in order to help remain accountable to their academic obligations. A few of these families felt

as if their children's lack of motivation was a reflection of their parenting:

> I don't know if it's because I don't have much time, but when I talked to him and my
>
> daughter, they say no, it's not me, it just him that needs to stop the procrastination,
>
> you know, keep track of his work schoolwork and get things done. My son is more
>
> into plans, you know, he's more into games and things, so I have to make sure I'm on
>
> top of it. (Participant 7)

As reflected in Participant 7's comment, a few parents blamed any mishaps on themselves.

Since they thought their children's lack of motivation was partially attributable to them, they

tried to help them resolve it. To make up for her son's procrastination, Participant 7 tried to

take a more proactive, rather than reactive, approach. She was not alone in her concern.

Participant 24 stated:

151

I actually like stressed the importance of it. "You don't like school," he's like, "I don't

care about this, I'm going to watch TV." But like, you know, if you want to set good

habits for yourself now so that they carry over into, into college, I'm not going to be

there to, you know.

Participant 24 was very worried about her son's lack of motivation. Most burdensome for

her was knowing that her influence was limited, and she worried that her son was not

learning good habits that would allow him to prosper after graduation.

    ***Independence/autonomy*.** As their high schoolers grew older, families in this study

tended to give them more freedom than guidance. This was especially true for the

parents'/guardians' daughters. There was a noticeable and consistent difference between

young men and women regarding to motivation and independence. As highlighted in earlier

examples relating to the motivation subtheme, parents discussed their difficulties motivating

their sons to take high school seriously. This was not the case with parents/guardians who

spoke about their daughters. One father explained why he gave his daughter space to exercise

authority over her education:

All her scores are in the high 80s to mid 90s, a high 80s, the mid 90s and a few 100s

here and there. There's no reason for me to get up to being involved. I wanted to kind

of show her independence, for her to handle it herself, for her to be responsible and

do it by herself. (Participant 18)

Other parents/guardians, in similar instances, allowed their students space to be academically

independent once they proved they could be trusted. In six different cases across families,

participants noted that they were more engaged in the academics of their sons rather than

their daughters. When asked if this increased engagement was linked to gender, they

152

unanimously disagreed. Instead, they connected it to the personality and age of their

daughters. For example, Participant 23 linked her daughter's independence to her age:

I feel that when the kids are in elementary, like if you don't show up for their parents

teachers conference because they have all of their little work that they want to show

to you, it's like the heart gets broken because, "Oh, you didn't come see." Now I have

to bring it home, but I feel like when they're in middle school and high school, they

don't really want to be bothered. They don't even want you to come and speak to their

teachers because they feel like they are too grown. (Participant 23)

Behavior/discipline. The final major concern that families had for the children in

high school related to behavior and discipline. With twin boys in high school, Participant 3

shared many worries about their school behavior. As a result, she had become very stern with

them, constantly checking in with their teachers to make sure they were behaving

appropriately.

A lot of parents, they don't know. Like I said before, they don't check in on their kids,

they don't monitor their work or monitor how their behavior is in school or anything.

Me, I keep up. I make sure they're doing what they're supposed to do. They behave,

they're doing their whole work, they're behaving how they're supposed to behave and

they're not part of the problem. They are part of the solution.

Concern about the behavior of their children caused some families to have reactions similar

to those of Participant 3. By increasing their engagement, they felt they had more control

over their children's behavior. Participant 13 made it a point to be physically present at her

son's high school. By doing so, she believed it made him more aware of his actions:

153

It's very important because I think the, the way they see things, it affects their

behavior as well. Being like a visual parent that is always there and always present

can have an effect on them and their behavior and the way they do things.

Violence. The decisions that young men and women make in high school can be very

impactful, which is why families in the study shared multiple concerns for their children.

While some families may be able to increase their engagement in order to help improve their

children's academic performance, motivation, independence, and behavior, some areas of

concern are out of their hands. For example, violence—behavior involving physical force

intended to hurt people—cannot always be prevented. This violence occurs within the

schools children attend and the neighborhoods in which they live.

Violence within neighborhoods. When the families sent their children to school

every day, they feared for them. Some families did not see their neighborhood as a safe place

to live. With the schools being located in the same neighborhoods where students felt unsafe,

families remained in fear of what could happen to their children at any given moment:

So, so much going on in the world, they need to get together, stick together, and they

need to just get a grip on our kids because there's just too much going on with police

shootings and they just need to get it together. (Participant 3)

Families already understood that their children were at risks. Being Black and living in low-

income urban neighborhoods, they faced a reality bigger than what can be contained within

the walls of a high school. As educators work to support students academically, families

teach their children how to live and survive:

Knowledge is power. You should be engaged even if no matter what level of

education or socioeconomic status you have, you should be engaged because you'll

154

hear something that you can contribute to no matter how big or small. You don't have to be a phd to know, hey, all of the kids in this neighborhood, are at risk for getting shot because they didn't understand or know their rights, didn't get the education or the knowledge of how to speak, how to defend themselves, how to approach people. That's a big deal. It's a big deal. (Participant 21)

Violence within schools. In the same way that families feared for their children's safety in their neighborhoods, they were concerned for the safety of their children in school. Rather than neighborhood gangs, families indicated they worried about what other students and teachers could do to their child. Participant 10 explained his concern for his son each day he sent him to school:

> We need to pay very close attention to black communities, how other kids and teachers are interacting towards your kids because you know, we have racial problems going on, so we don't know what's going on and how they are treat your kids. If your kids get bullied, you have to find out about stuff like that.

Attending school in a hostile educational environment disrupts a child's learning (Coates, 2015). Participant 19 spoke about how difficult it was for her daughter to attend a new high school where students were constantly fighting and misbehaving:

> When she stepped into high school for the first day, she came from having the same friends for eight years. So that was a big change for her. But then when she got in there and see hearing all the cusses and all the fights every other day there is a fight. And it's usually with the black kids, the Hispanic and few whites, but it's usually with the black kids. So, I mean we just, we just talked to them and make sure they understand. And so a lot of the teachers are not educated enough to understand what a

155

white or a black kid is going through when they sit in that class and they are being

bullied. (Participant 19)

While none of the parents/guardians seemed to suggest that the lives of their children were in

imminent danger, they still had concerns about their physical and mental well-being. Indeed,

families wanted their children to live in an area where they could feel at peace.

Life outcomes. The last theme for this textural area was *life outcomes*, defined as

families' concerns about where their children would end up after graduating from high

school. This theme connected to all of the other themes within this textural area.

Fear of prison or death. Families shared concern about the livelihood of their

children if they did not complete school. As emphasized in Chapter 1, statistics point to

negative outcomes for many young Black men and women (George, 2015; Morris, 2016).

Unfortunately, families in this study were not ignorant to these possible life outcomes, and

they made their children aware of them as well:

Because I had two boys in the beginning and I've always told them, you know,

unfortunately the way society is, you have two strikes against, but I'm going to ensure

that you get what you need to succeed. I was determined that they would get a good

education and they will be strong men and an asset to society. Not a statistic—not

going to happen with my kids. (Participant 14)

The families in this study made it clear that they wanted to see their children prosper. Past

research studies have found that more than upwards of two thirds of incarcerated youth are

Black or non-White (Ford, Kerig, Desai, & Feierman, 2016). Fearing that their children

could suffer the same fate, parents/guardians fought to keep them from becoming a statistic.

Participant 8 shared her thoughts on the support needed to change this narrative:

156

They need that support and there will be less children in the street, less gangs, people, kids are dying, you know, from whatever was going on and there will be less or none of it. Or they can cut that, eliminate violence if they have activities for them—dance, basketball, volleyball—you know, more resources for them.

Graduation/college. As Participant 8 highlighted, Black students lack the resources they need to be focused in school and academically successful. As past research has found, non-White students face increased school discipline and have access to fewer academic resources (Howard 2015; Murphy, 2010). Participant 6 spoke about what it was like to send his student to school each day knowing that his child had fewer resources than students at well-funded schools:

Well, because it's usually black and minority families that have lower grades. Their graduation rate is not as high as a White children. Asian children even, um, and it's just like a cycle that's repetitive. You have these kids of color graduating high school with or dropping out of high school even at a much higher rate and then you just contribute more into a low income a society that's dominated by people of color and that infrastructure continues to be unsupported. It's like a positive feedback loop. It's an exponential in this case, so you have kids not being supported, therefore you don't get money, which is what supports you. So they get even less support and then it just snowballs.

The study participants were well aware that their children could have more and better resources. Despite these racial inequities, however, they preferred that their children to stay in and complete high school rather than drop out.

157

Dropout/pushout. Black high school students are more likely to drop out of school if they are consistently pushed out (Christle et al., 2005; Doll et al., 2013). As parents/guardians in the study tried to increase the likelihood of their children achieving positive life outcomes, they encouraged them to stay in school. Participant 3 explained why she feared her son dropping out of high school: "And eventually if you drop out of high school, you don't get your diploma, you don't get your GED, you're not going to be able to get a job. So, it's going to spiral downhill." By increasing her son's awareness of the potential life outcomes of not dropping out, Participant 3 aimed to give him the support he needed to persevere. Similarly, Participant 25 emphasized how imperative parental support is in creating stronger, more positive life outcomes:

> Having that parental support could be the difference between mediocrity and excellence or it can be the difference between dropping out and graduating. It can be the difference between a kid who loves learning and feel supported on all sides and the kid who kind of just goes through the motions for school.

Lack of opportunities. In so many ways, families were aware of all of the concerns they should have for their children. Multiple families made note of key supports needed to collectively increase the life outcomes of students. Participant 14 noted, "Our children deserve a good education just like everybody else. No, it doesn't matter where we come from. We are a people, we are smart." To ensure these young Black students were getting the support and resources needed, families were willing to step up.

Each of the three textural areas—influences and forms of technology, perceptions of family engagement, and family concerns for their students—

158

illuminated families' experiences engaging in their children's education. By understanding such experiences, educators and practitioners can identify key interventions and mechanisms for supporting Black students. Chapter five, which covers the structural findings, will discuss how Black families experience communication technology as well as some of the interventions and mechanisms that can improve their experience.

CHAPTER 5

STRUCTURAL FINDINGS

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　—Maya Angelou

How Black Families Experience Engagement

The three structural areas covering how the families in this study experienced engagement in relation to the research question included (1) experience with communication technology, (2) engaging in urban public schools, and (3) understanding and responding to family concerns. Each of these structural areas can help education practitioners understand how Black families experience opportunities for engagement through communication technology.

Experience with Communication Technology

In this first structural area, the following themes emerged from the archival data, individual interviews, and focus groups: changes in technology, use of communication technology, and issues with technology. Table 9 lists the themes for this structural area, their basic descriptions, and their supporting subthemes.

Table 9

Structural Area: Experience with Communication Technology

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Changes in Technology	Impact of technology on family engagement	- Technology is convenient - Technology is faster - Technology increases communication
Use of Communication Technology	The reasons and ways families use communication technology	- School closings/updates - Absences/tardiness - Checking grades - Checking homework/assignments - Using technology to verify student experience
Issues with Technology	Problems and Issues families have had using communication technology	- Information overload - Lack of timeliness - Not tech savvy - Teacher's capability to use technology

Changes in technology. Families agreed unanimously that there has been an overall shift in technology, due primarily to dramatic changes in the past ten years to technological development and access to the Internet (Common Sense Media, 2013). Families also noted that family engagement looks very different than it did 10 to 20 years ago because of the new communication technology tools families and schools have been exposed to since then. For the purposes of this study, the *changes in technology* theme was defined as the impact of technology on family engagement. The supporting subthemes included the ways technology is convenient, technology is faster, and technology increases communication.

Technology is convenient. One of the first findings suggesting that Black families in the Greater Boston area support communication technology was related to its convenience. One of the earlier textural themes indicated that families who were struggling to be engaged

had trouble balancing their work schedule. The convenience of communication technology, as described by the participants, allowed them to remain informed wherever they were located. For example, Participant 8 explained, "Mostly if the meeting needs to be face to face, the teacher will let you know. If it's something that can resolve on the email or text, there is no need to talk." The families were accustomed to connecting with teachers from where they were at any given moment. Moreover, if the matter did not require their presence, they preferred the convenience of communication technology:

> Unless it's like a serious situation where I need to see someone face to face or talk to a teacher face to face. But if it's nothing serious, then like email communication, text communication, like automated texts or phone calls, that's fine for me. (Participant 20)

Other participants made similar comments. Though it may not be convenient in every circumstance, communication technology can save time for both families and teachers, and families generally find it easy to use. Participant 9 spoke in depth about this:

> It easier versus like having to like actually go to the school or something. Like, I like having options overall and with them with the options being things that I use daily that actually makes things way easier, easier in a number of ways, easier for me to participate, stay connected and engaged. So, typically the teachers will write a little note on there or something. If they would like to meet or talk, I could send them a message as well on, through, the portal, but could let them know that I would like to meet with them. And so that's typically easier way.

Families made it clear that communication technology is convenient because it is flexible, saves time, and can be used from wherever families are in real time. In a way, the families appreciated communication technology because it allowed them to be in two places at once. For example, as Participant 24 explained, "it makes it much easier because I feel like I'm being involved without having to physically be at the school and not just classes." Based on responses from the participants, this notion of not having to be physically present in order to be engaged was a major factor. Participant 2 also valued the convenience of communication technology:

> I really feel like they are able to give you the feedback, you know, maybe in the comfort of their own home. Teachers sitting in bed, sending a couple emails out to the parents. So I feel like it just gives that little extra care. It makes the teachers seem like they're really caring about your students. More caring and more accessible for the parents and students.

Technology is faster. Another feature of communication technology that parents/guardians found useful in connection to convenience related to how fast they could use it. Participants found this to be especially true when comparing their children's high school experience to their own. For example, Participant 10 explained, "When I was younger, before my parents know about something, it took forever, now it's faster." Families indicated that they appreciated the speed of communication technology methods, allowing them to receive information sooner. Participant 12 noted, "It's been great. Like I mentioned before, the email responses are fairly quick. Even the phone calls as well, and we get stuff in the mail, but that's rare."

As schools transitioned from traditional one-way communication methods such as mail and newsletters, families in the study adjusted to the speed of two-way communication, even finding ways to incorporate it into their workday:

Well, my job, especially what I do, I'm on the computer so it's very easy for me to jump, you know what I mean, from my emails, answering them to a phone call, a setting aside time. So, it definitely helped me answer quicker. (Participant 11)

As noted previously, Participant 11 was a mother of three children—two in elementary school and one in high school—and her time was limited. Working as an administrative assistant at a hospital, she took brief moments between work tasks to connect with her children's schools via communication technology.   Some parents/guardians claimed that using communication technology such as email or cell phones was easier for them:

I used to pick up the phone and call and wait and be on hold. Whereas, sending a message takes only a couple of seconds while depending on the length, but let's say at least a minute, the message takes. (Participant 17)

If communication technology was accessible to them, it helped families stay informed even if they had busy schedules throughout the day. Most importantly was how quickly they received responses from teachers. Parents/guardians emphasized that the teachers' promptness encouraged them to use community technology:

So, it's kind of, I want to be able to talk to the teachers too and so far they've been very responsive. Anytime I've emailed they emailed very, very quickly back. Yeah. I have no complaints at all. (Participant 24)

Technology increases communication. Since communication technology was fast and convenient for most families, it resulted in increased communication between schools

164

and families. The increase in communication can also be attributed to the language-translation features built into some of these communication technologies. For instance, families can use Google Translate to translate websites and emails, and some parent portals are available in multiple languages. As Participant 11 noted:

First of all, I feel like it is so different, you know. If I was to compare, you know, when I was younger to now that I have my children, um, I feel like it's so much easier now to communicate with the teacher than it was when I was younger just because, like I said, my mother being a housewife, my father working full time, she had the language barrier. So, I still like if they had this back in when I was younger, there's Google translator. So, you know what I mean. I feel like that be something that she could have done. It didn't have to, you know, I guess depend on me translating what the teacher was saying compared to now, you know, we have this um, a technology that definitely helps me now, like I said, as a single mother to communicate and be able to keep in touch and engaged way better than if I had to go in person every single time for sure.

While collecting documents for the data archive, some of the findings related to the efforts of some schools' districts were pleasantly surprising. Not only did some districts make sure that all of their information was available to parents in every language, but they also had web pages will well-developed use interfaces. Out of the nine school districts from which documents were collected, three made information available in multiple languages and also had translation capacity. Other school districts, however, had very low-quality information available for parents and families online. Participant 25 viewed communication technology from the perspectives of both a parent of a high schooler and a teacher.

165

I will say that between when I started teaching and now, I've definitely seen an uptick in the communication because it's easier to communicate. So parents will reach out more if they have questions sometimes even kind of trivial still reach out and ask things that are going on in the classroom, why their kid didn't turn into something or how many days they're getting. Even smaller things. I find that the parents are more willing to reach out because communication makes it easier to do that kind of stuff. (Participant 25)

Use of communication technology. Twenty-two of the 25 participating families (88%) reported that they used communication technology. Each family used it for different reasons, including (but not limited to): checking for school updates or closings, checking to see if their children were absent or late for school, checking the homework and classwork assignments that were due, checking test and semester grades, and verifying students' reports about their academic performance overall. During the 25 individual one-on-one interviews, families were asked "In what ways, if any, have you been engaged with your child's school through communication technology? How do you think each of these methods impacted your ability to be engaged?" Participants were also asked, "How have you used communication technology?" The most common reasons given by families for using communication technology are shown in Figure 13.
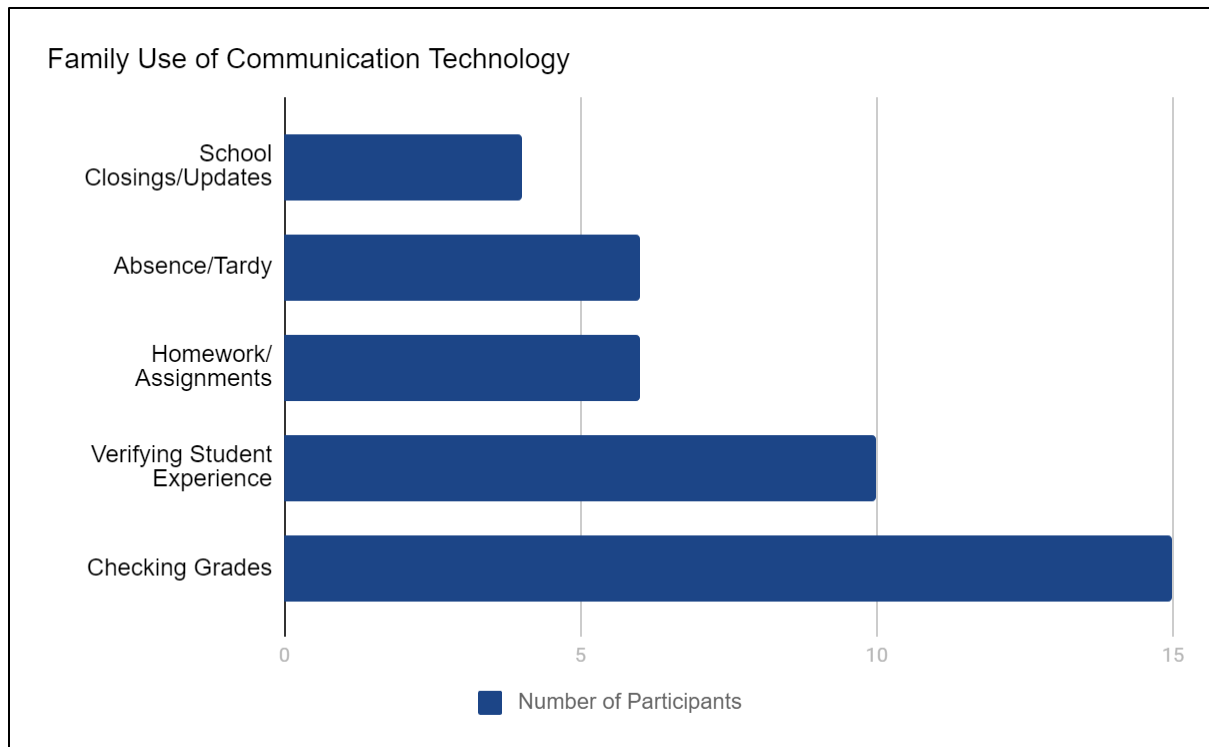
Figure 13. Family use of communication technology.

School closings/updates. Of the 25 participants, four reported that they used communication technology to get information about school closing to receive updates. Some of this information was sent to them through parent portals, emails, or via text messages:

I'm able to keep track of school announcement of events, like if they're having a

parent council meeting or if they are doing any sort of whole school event like for

special occasions and stuff like that. I'll get notified of that. Or even if he's late to

school. Well they don't do late calls anymore. Right? If he has detention, they used to

call for middle school kids. At least they would say if that—so I would know. How

it's like a little different but it definitely makes it easier to stay up to date with what's

going on. (Participant 25)

167

As the participants indicated, the school updates included a wide range of announcements, but whether or not it applied to information the parent or guardian needed at that moment, the information they received kept them notified about all that was available to them. Even if they were not interested, receiving the information may have sparked their interest in using the opportunity at another time. Participant 25 described the wide range of information and communication methods that her son's high school used: "If they're weather alerts, school closings, they'll send out texts, things like that. They are also on Twitter and Instagram, which I like, so I follow." Distributing school updates and notifications through multiple communication and messaging platforms was seen as effective by parents/guardians:

> Now there's all sorts of text messages going out backed up by emails, and they're even daily, not quarterly or monthly. I get daily phone calls letting me know whether or not [my children are] on time for school, absent or if there are any conferences coming up. They just really keep me involved. (Participant 9)

Absences/tardiness. Of the 25 participants, six reported that they used communication technology to find out if their children were absent from or late for school. In most cases, families of late or absent students were not phoned, as they were in the past; rather, families received a text message alert. Other families reported using similar technology. Participant 15 explained, "They have a portal that we can chat to check in. We use that for attendance. Issues of kids are going to be absent or late." For some families, these parent portals were used to check not only student attendance, but also student progress:

> Everything from updating absence, tardiness to updating me in their grades and different classes to where they're slacking, the tutoring information if it's needed, how

many assignments are they missing, if there are any projects when it's due, a lot.

(Participant 11)

Although families might have initially received a message about their student's attendance, this communication encouraged them to learn about other features of the phone applications and parent portals, since all of the information was accessible from their smartphones. As Participant 24 said,

So much more easily accessible now, which makes it, you know, I can see the piece of class from my phone, I could see if he's late. I didn't see, you know, if there's things that the teacher has assigned and I don't see them checked off, I can actually acquire directly to him like, oh, why don't you have this project done?

Checking grades. As seen in the previous comments from the parents/guardians, many of the communication technology methods, including phone applications and parent portals, also allowed families to check their student's grades. For example, Participant 13 noted, "I do, I look at it to check, for the progress notes and report cards." Of the 25 participants, 15 reported that they used communication technology to check their children's grades. In fact, a majority of the families reported that they mostly used the technology to check grades—which is not surprising, considering the importance of student grades (Woessmann, 2016). Students' grades are a measure of their academic performance and can impede their progress. Based on the participants' responses, once the grades had been released by the schools, families were notified immediately:

So they'll email us to say, "Hey, you know, grades are going to be up and available on so and so date." And then you can take that initiative to go to the portal when you're ready to view grades and things like that. So that's useful. That's nice. (Participant 15)

169

Because most families used the technology primarily to check grades, this may explain why they were motivated to use it check on assignments that were due as well. As Participant 22 explained, "Besides that, I'm always just looking at what's going on and things that they are doing, how their grades are and assignments, things of that nature."

Checking homework/assignments. Six of the 25 participants reported that they used communication technology to check their children's homework and assignments. They also gave examples of what it is like using communication technology for this purpose. Participant 9 provided details about her experience:

> They usually put his grades on there too so I could check out the test scores. I could check out if his homework was turned in and then it'll also let me know if, like, improvement or support is needed around different subjects and stuff like that.

Families reported that tracking their children's progress allowed them to have an understanding of the students' academic performance before the final-semester grades were reported. In doing so, they could be more proactive about supporting student's academic needs. Participant 12 offered the following example:

> If I want them to keep track of like our homework assignments and stuff, I can get on the APP or the website and I can track and see how she's doing. Even her, she has access to whatever link that they have and she can keep track of her grades and see what she needs to work on. And I like that because I know growing up for us, we didn't have that. We would have to wait for report cards to come out before, now we can know where our grades are sooner. (Participant 12)

Families explained how features such as checking student progress and getting links to support helped to pinpoint where their students needed help. If they had access to

communication technology, they could use the tool to get ahead of issues that may have arisen before the final grades came out. Participant 13 described what it was like navigating the parent portal:

> When you sign into Aspen, you could see their grade, you could see what class they are failing in, you can see what classes they were excelling at. So it'll give you their grade, their homework, the average for the homework in the form of a percentage. It will just basically tell you and the teachers everything you need to know.

Using technology to verify student experience. The families in the study had accessed the communication technology so frequently that they had started using it to verify their students' school experience. In the past, the student's progress came by word of mouth from the student if the family was not in consistent contact with the teachers. However, because the communication technology was fast and convenient, and enhanced communication, parents/guardians had the option of getting information directly from the source. In fact, 10 of the 25 families agreed that they used communication technology to verify if students were being honest about their reported actions and progress. Participant 18 gave an in-depth explanation of how and why he did this for his daughter:

> There are apps and then obviously the test scores when they're taking tests and when they have things going on. I look at those, at least the ones that I'm given, and with the APP I can check online to see where they are. And being a month into school, I'm waiting until we really get deep into November, December to kind of see if the momentum is the same, where it's going, if it's trending up or trending down. So, I'm kind of assessing. I'm giving her the space for her to do it alone. I trust but verify. But I'm verifying what I'm looking behind the scenes to make sure that she's not lying. I

already know what assignment she has, what tests she has. So, when I ask, I already

know the answer to the question, I just want to see what the answer is going to be. So

far the answers have been consistent with what I know already and so I can feel like I

can trust her to do it herself. But I'm checking, but I'm verifying. I'm looking.

(Participant 18)

Based on responses from other Black families, it became evident that using the parent

portals to verify student experiences was indeed a trend. Participant 19 gave a similar

explanation:

Well, I mean because I couldn't be at work and I can just check in to see what the

homework is going to be and that way when I do call her I can ask "And what did you

do? Your homework?" And she told me yes. And I can ask her what was it about, I

know if she's telling the truth or not. You can just log in and the teacher gives you a

step by step what they went through for that day and helps you know that your child

is doing what you sent her to school for.

Families emphasized that they did not use the technology because they did not trust

their children; instead, they used it to keep abreast of their children's day-to-day needs even

if they did not have the time to physically be available. Similar to Participant 19, Participant

21 used the parent portal to see what was being covered in his son's classrooms.

Oh, Google Classroom, it was an eye opener for me. I always wanted to know what

my son's doing. As he got older, he shies away from high school or even mom, I don't

need you. And I'm sitting there trying to figure out what's going on in school every

day. Google classroom, are you kidding me? I get to see he's got math, geometry, etc.

He's got this that is due or this past due. It opens your eyes without having to make a

172

phone call. Can I talk to the teacher tomorrow when I'm making a visit? Can I come

in to see you at two? Without prying the child. You open up the technology and it's

all there. That's a big deal from wherever I'm sitting.

While the parents/guardians were at work, they could be just as informed about their child's

academic progress as families who showed up in person. In fact, if the tools were being used

correctly by teachers and families, those families may have been more informed. Most

importantly, as Participant 21 emphasized, the use of technology shifts the responsibility for

back-and-forth communication between the family and the school away from the student. In

the past, families with non-communicative students lacked strong relationships with teachers

and administrators (Merkley et al., 2006). With communication technology, families have

more agency. Participant 8 gave an example of how she took advantage of this:

The moment that they call me and I have to make sure that she's in, you know, and

then if she wasn't in there, so I would know that she wasn't at school that day. Then I

find out why she wasn't in school that day because I know I dropped her in school, or

I know you took the bus to school so I asked her "Why did they call me to tell me you

are absent?" So I like it, or they send you an email and messages just pop up. I like

that, so fast.

Issues with technology. The last theme in this structural area was *issues with

technology,* defined as problems and issues families experienced using communication

technology. While communication technology can be fast and convenient, not all families

who interact with it have a positive experience. Some families in the study reported feeling

severely distressed and discouraged using phone applications, emails, and parent portals.

Such negative reactions informed the following subthemes: information overload, lack of

173

timeliness, lack of tech savviness, and teachers' proficiency using communication technology.

  Information overload. Families indicated that they received so much information from teachers and schools that it had become too much to consume all at once. Analyzing the archival data, it was apparent why families felt this way. Most schools and districts made a considerable amount of information available through online platforms and communication technology, including school and district websites, blogs, news feeds, newsletters, e-newsletters, email lists, phone applications, social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) and text-message alert systems.

  Each day, families can be contacted through multiple platforms about a wide array of information. Participant 13 explained, "I get … a lot of frequent emails. Sometimes I get texts or calls with voicemails." When classroom teachers add phone applications to these email communications, it can be overwhelming for parents/guardians. As Participant 6 noted, "We probably don't want to receive a million tags from all parents in the class for the students in the class. So it needs to be another solution for that." One of the participants, who also worked within the K-12 system in the Greater Boston area, had thought of this issue extensively. In addition to hearing complaints from families, she had been on the receiving end of this excessive communication:

> It got to a place where it is pervasive, or just excessive. I've heard of situations where [the school] contacted parents multiple times a day, sending multiple emails a day, like that kind of thing. I think it would be annoying. I guess it's not bad. It's better than no communication, but it could be irritating. (Participant 25)

Despite the imperfections of communication technology, families like Participant 25 preferred to continue using it rather than receiving no communication at all. When Participant 2 was asked if she had seen a difference in communications, she responded, "Yes, I really do think so. More technology, more information going out and seeing more things."

Lack of timeliness. Ten participants spoke about this subtheme during their interviews. As families became accustomed to the speed and convenience of communication technology, they also become more sensitive to delays. Sometimes these delays were associated with websites or portals. Participant 13 explained, "I feel like it's, there's like some sort of delay. I don't know if it gets updated as frequently or how frequently they do it." At times, this lack of timeliness was frustrating, with some families even resorted to not using the technology at all because it was not updated enough at their children's high schools:

> I enforced texting because I found that that was better because of the parent portal was never updated. So that was a waste of my time this way to the too many emails to go through. So I really don't do email. I found that I kind of make them do texts with me because that was what worked for me and I got a faster response. Because with email, you have to wait at least 24 hours if they check that email. Um, and like I said, the other one, the parent portal, they never updated it, so it was a waste of time. Extreme waste of time. (Participant 14)

Participant 14 was not the only parent or guardian who complained about slow email responses. Participant 6 had the same problem in his brother's school district: "Email is kind of slow, like a conversation and trying to get like answers out of email can take days because some people don't respond to their email until the next morning or things like that. So we need something that's quicker." Although parent portals were available in his district, he did

not use them. In using email to communicate with his student's high school, he gradually grew frustrated with the rate of response. Generally, when families did not receive information due to a lack of timeliness on the part of the school, the parents/guardians became worried. Participant 16 explained how this made him feel:

> The school or the administration, before information gets to parents, they are not very good at communicating eminent, I won't call it an emergency, but pressing issues. So even though they do try, I don't think with the resources that they claim to have and the kind of school that they claim to be running, they could do a lot better.

Oftentimes, the lack of timeliness could be attributed to the school administrators and teachers. Some of the teachers were not comfortable using technology for several reasons. Participant 16 explained further: "A lot of teachers are afraid of the technology. It's a change of how they use it, especially the older teachers."

Teachers' proficiency using technology. On several occasions, participants expressed their frustration with teachers who could not use the communication technology that they were advertising to parents and families. One mother spoke about this extensively:

> It's just like we are already busy as it is. And then you're, you're sending me to a portal that may or may not work. Most of the time they didn't work. Most of the time the teachers didn't even update what needed to be in there. So what's the purpose of me taking time out of my schedule when you're not even doing your part? And it was often, I could see maybe once, maybe twice—often. Like that's crazy, you know, and, and I, me, myself personally, I'm not a tech person, but if I'm taking my time out, you need to be doing your part and they weren't. So what's the purpose of it? So I don't get

it. Especially nowadays. It's just too much for people to do. We have too much to do. (Participant 14)

In this case, Participant 14 was very frustrated with her daughter's school because she had taken the time to learn and check a system that no one was using. She was not alone in her thinking. Participants 10 and 24 each worked with teachers who were not comfortable with communication technology but were still using it. Families also spoke about this during the focus group.

- Participant 10: "Part of the resources might be having—being able to hire a tech savvy, tech savvy teachers."

- Participant 16: "There you go, that's another point."

- Participant 10: "So easy to use as possibly you could possibly make it. But if they're not tech savvy, they're just not going to use it anyways."

Frustrated with teachers who did not use communication technology, families suggested considering the technology skills of new educational practitioners in their hiring practices.

Lack of tech savviness. Eleven parents or guardians made either direct or indirect reference to not being tech savvy. When asked, "Do you use email or a text to connect with your children's teachers?" one parent responded flatly, "I don't use any. No email" (Participant 19). As Participant 24 commented, "I feel like probably the vast majority of parents aren't that tech savvy." Some of the parent/guardians connected their technology capabilities to their age; as a result, participants like Participant 1 preferred traditional methods such as phone calls and personal one-to-one connections:

I am very old school. I call, I call if I have to do something, I call, I'm leaving a

message, I'm asking, I'm requesting a call back and I want to talk to you live. So I

never used any of that….But I don't when it comes to communicating and if I have

questions that I need answers to, I prefer to call and speak to someone personally

instead of having to do it in an electronic fashion. I don't like that.

Throughout their responses, families made their preferences clear. Those who chose not to use communication technology used alternative solutions to their problems. Participant 1, for example, preferred to take the time to meet and speak with her daughter's teachers. In some nontraditional families, older relatives were the guardians, and as Participant 25 explained, communication sent to them can get lost:

Some kids live with their grandparents or some older family member, so sometimes

there's a communication can get lost in that situation. But in general, I do think it's

definitely a more helpful way to, stay in contact with families and to allow them to

reach out to the school.

Although some argued that families with order parents/guardians should receive additional accommodations, others disagree. Some older parents/guardians are still trainable and can ultimately become comfortable with communication technology. Participant 16 defends these older individuals:

I mean grandma is using texting these days. Grandma knows how to use the internet.

If grandma can do that, what makes you think mom cannot? So, they need to do

better. They need to find ways of spreading the word out there and let families know

that, look, we have these technological capabilities. Come to us, ask us questions,

we'll get it to you. No, but unless they do that, then it's always going to be lacking.

178

One parent/guardian spoke about her experience training an older relative to use communication technology. Although it was difficult at first, the relative eventually learned and became more proficient with it. Her experience teaching her older relative was proof that older family members can learn and contribute the family engagement.

> Stressful, you know, I can't be too hard on her because it's new. She's not used to it. And just as she taught us basic things now that was very stressful for her, it's really easy to do so because getting into our emails, it's so easy. We, we would think she would catch on just like that, but it takes time and repetition for her to get used to it. And just texting in general. That was, that was serious. So serious. Um, but I can definitely say she got better. She's good at it. She called me all the time to help her to walk her through it. (Participant 20)

Finding solutions is important because families are not opposed to dismissing technology that is giving them difficulty. It is better to train teachers and families who are struggling rather than disseminate communication efforts in multiple directions with minimal returns in the form of family engagement. Some families will never be happy with technology. Participant 10 explained his overall frustration.

> I would change the whole technology thing because now there's the interaction, but we can use it in a positive way also because we are busy right now. We all doing different things. We can use it, but that doesn't mean it's the perfect or it is the best way, but we use it anyway.

Participant 10 felt obligated to use communication technology. Educators need to get to a place where they understand how families are engaging through communication technology.

179

By understanding families' experiences, high school educators will be able to modify their remaining experience in positive ways.

Engaging with Urban Public Schools

In the second structural area, the following themes emerged from the archival data, individual interviews, and focus groups: identity, racism and stereotypes, and experience with family engagement. Each of these themes, including their basic descriptions and supporting subthemes are included in Table 10.

Table 10

Structural Area: Engaging with Urban Public Schools

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Identity	Characteristics of the students and families that describe who they are as people	• Socioeconomic status • Faith/spirituality • Immigration status • Political beliefs • ESL/language barrier • Gender • Older vs. younger
Racism/ Stereotypes	False misconceptions of Black families and their children	• Racism between schools and families • Overcoming stigmas • Equality/equity
Experience with Family Engagement	Indicators that influence how families experience engagement	• Care • Respect • Struggle/support

Identity. Each participant was asked, "How has your gender, race, class or other identity impacted your experience as a parent/guardian?" In response, 24 of the 25 families

spoke about the ways various parts of their identity have impacted their experience as parents/guardians. *Identity* in this study was described as characteristics of the students and their families that describe who they are as people. The different parts of their identity that participants mentioned included: socioeconomic status, faith/spirituality, immigration status, political beliefs, ESL/language barrier, gender, and older vs. younger.

  Socioeconomic status. Eleven families spoke about socioeconomic status, either in reference to themselves or to families about whom they shared concerns. For example, Participant 6 spoke about his concern for families with low socioeconomic status and the implications that it has for their level of family engagement.

> I'm going to say family engagement is getting worse for low-income areas as opposed to places of higher income because you know, there's more infrastructure for those with higher income. It's like a cycle. So if you have this low-income area and there is no infrastructure around the schools or whatever, that cycle is going to continue. There's going to be no family engagement. It's going to keep passing on from generation to generation.

As a young parent/guardian, Participant 6 recognized that his income and the income of families in his neighborhood impacted their ability to be engaged. Based on his observations and his engagement experiences, he recognized the close linkage between his engagement and his socioeconomic status. Similarly, Participant 1 commented on the impact of socioeconomic status on family engagement:

> It depends on where you fall into [the] social economic bracket. So, if you're not there, there's no way to reach you at all. So, I think you can reach certain individuals. And in the sad part about it, the people that fall on the lower tier of the social

181

economic bracket, they are the ones that need it the most because they didn't want to have you working retail jobs and not as engaged with their kids or level of education might not be they all, yeah, they have it all. They are getting hit from all sides and then they can't afford internet and now they're not getting information about their kid.

Faith/spirituality. Five families mentioned that another aspect of their identity that was connected to their engagement was religion. These families indicated that their Christian beliefs informed their approach to family engagement. It impacted not only what they taught their children when they were at home, but also the type of curriculum and instruction they wanted them to receive when they were at school.

I just hope the next generation, just keep on engaging, engage more, you know, teach our kids, know who they are, where they're from, their history is something I do at home. Especially being in a Christian home, Christians just teach about Christianity only. But my book is open to the world where I teach my kids about the world and teach them the value of being a Christian. (Participant 22)

As Participant 22 mentioned, religion was very important to him, and he wanted to pass it down to his children. Although high schools teach students curriculum that is based on state standards, he also wanted to teach them values and lessons from outside the school. Participants made similar points during one of the family focus groups:

- Participant 21: "Therefore, it's, it's deeper than that. It's like I'm doing my responsibility at training my child on how to be, who they are and what to say."

- Participant 14: "Right. At the end of the day, I'm sending her to you to teach her about the things that she's going to need in life. But if there was a foundation, with God or Christianity…"

182

- Participant 1: "exactly…"

- Participant 14: "Absolutely."

Based on their responses, Black Christian families sought a balance between what their children were taught at home and what they were taught at school. In this study, families with religious values felt they had to supplement the instruction their children received in school because they recognized the connection of religion to their identity and they wanted their children to value that as well.

Immigration status. Eleven families spoke about how their immigration status or that of their parents impacted how they experienced family engagement. Immigration status, in the case of these families, was tied to many other factors such as employment, accessibility, languages spoken, or comfort interacting with teachers. Participant 15 explained her experience related to immigration status:

> Well, let's see. First-generation, my mom was a single mom, new to the country, worked multiple shifts, so I was pretty much on my own, you know, good kid, didn't get into any, any trouble in school. So there was very, there was hardly any need for her to be involved in the school. Um, I don't remember her attending teachers meetings. I'm sure she did, but—so there was very little involvement I would say.

Families who were new to the United States still had the same or similar experiences as Black families who immigrated in the past. For example, Participant16 highlighted that his identity as an immigrant was multifaceted:

> So mine could be multiple layers. Number one, somebody who's not from here as an immigrant, even though I naturalized and became an American citizen almost 10, 15,

20 years ago, there is still that otherness. You still feel like an intruder sometimes

when you get to these schools where the predominantly white families and you are

just one of five minority families or more attending these schools. You always feel

somehow like an intruder, but I think for me the first layer is I always never

considered myself in terms of otherness, partly because I'm coming from a

background where I never experienced racism in my country.

Whereas Participant 15's parents experienced hardship related to finances and work,

Participant 16 dealt more with feelings of not belonging. Either way, as with the other

participants who spoke about immigration, they did not have positive experiences interacting

with their children's schools, thus reducing their level of engagement.

Political beliefs. Although the families were never asked about their political beliefs

or political affiliations, the subject of their political identities came up nevertheless in the

interviews. For example, Participant 6 believed the decisions made by schools correlated

with the priorities of the dominant Democratic political party in Massachusetts. This became

obvious to him when he moved from another state with different political views on

education:

When I moved up here and started noticing like how the schools up here operate. So,

I think, um, a lot of like school decisions are based in politics and it's definitely the

political party of that state has a huge influence on like the education system of that

state.

Other participants made observations about politics, but most of them pertained to the then-

current President of the United States. Families consistently made references to him when

speaking of their insecurities about and sense of belonging within their children's high

schools. For example, when asked about how identity impacted her level of engagement, Participant 13 explained: "I think like right now with the situation with the president, you know, everything is just kinda affecting, you know, color and race and everything. I think it does play a role and the way things are right now." Another interviewee, Participant 24, made a similar reference as she explained perceived divisions in her son's school: "I remember it being kind of kind of divided. I imagine now under Trump's culture it might be a little bit different."

ESL/language barriers. Participants referenced language most frequently when discussing their identity. Specifically, 14 people made reference to speaking English as a second language or facing a language barrier. As revealed through the demographic survey, 14 families (56%) spoke a language other than English as at home, including Haitian Creole, Spanish, and Cape Verdean Creole. As Participant 5 mentioned, "The communication piece is critical when comes to speakers of other languages. That's where it gets kind of tricky." Black families who speak English as a second language because they may shy away from engagement because of language barriers. Participant 6 commented on his family speaking English as a second language:

> Again, because of the language barrier and they just don't want to get involved in those kinds of things. It's more of like a level of comfort, you know, it seems since they're a Latino, they what, they would rather just like kind of stay off to the side and then if there's an issue they'll come in but they're not going to be like involved go into every parent teacher board meeting and constantly communicating with them and actually trying to push the school in a different direction.

185

For some families, the language they spoke was a major hindrance to their engaging with their children's high schools. One interviewee, Participant 17, revealed that her mother had not been engaged in her school because the only person who could understand her was school janitor. For that reason, she spoke with him each time she stopped by the school, but never connected or formed relationships with the teachers. One parent spoke about her experience stepping up and helping families who did not know how to speak English:

> I went to a meeting for the kids at their school, then they said they need somebody who speak Creole, who speak English to help Haitian parents because they have the services there for them, but they don't know how to use it, either they are afraid or something, but they don't use the services that's available for them. So they wanted somebody who can engage them, or help them come to the meetings and work as a liaison. (Participant 8)

By volunteering, Participant 8 had become very engaged in her children's schools, and she had helped several other parents as well. Her efforts served as a bridge of communication that would not have been there had she not come to that first school meeting.

Older vs. younger. Families also identified age as having an impact on their ability to be engaged. Oftentimes, participants made reference to age when discussing the role that communication technology plays in family engagement. Some of them believed that being young parents/guardians had allowed them to adapt to the technology:

> Because I'm younger, you know with this generation we're more technology driven, but I feel that way because I am not an older parent. Because I'm a younger parent, for me it's easy because I have my emails on my phone, you know, everything is pretty much right in my hands. (Participant 23)

186

Parent/guardians who were comfortable with technology, such as Participant 23, tended to be part of a younger age group. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many parents/guardians remain digital immigrants of technology while their children are born digital natives (Kirk et al., 2015; Prensky, 2001). Digital immigrants who also identify as older parents/guardians may need additional support to stay abreast with current communication technology. As Participant 24 noted:

> If you don't know that though, you can be completely in the dark about what's going on or I imagine, you know parents or a guardian who are elderly or don't have anybody there who knows technology are still relying on the old ways and even now like not getting a paper report card. If they don't know what to do then they probably want to get it. Maybe they can special request it or something, but it's important to know how an app works.

Throughout the data collection, documents were searched for clarity and usability. It was important for me to take this step because I wanted to put myself in the shoes of parents and families who were both young and old. For most of the school districts, links to parent portals, tutorials, and text message alert systems were hard to find. This lack of usability can make it difficult for someone to find ways to engage with high schools through communication technology. Due to the wide range of families accessing the technology, the best way for them to get connected is to ensure that the technology is fast and comprehensive.

Gender. The final part of their identity that families discussed was their gender. Seven of the participants (28%) identified as male, and 18 (72%) identified as female. Both males and females described the difficulties they had had with family engagement in relation

to their gender. Participant 11 gave an example of how difficult it was for her being a single

mother:

> Being a single mother, definitely I felt like I had to. I have to show that I can be as
>
> strong as if I had a partner (Participant 11)

Despite the lack of male support, Participant 11 was determined to figure out how to parent

effectively as a single mother. Although she lived in Dorchester, she woke up three hours

early every day in order to get her kids ready for school, bring them to school, and then get to

work on time in Cambridge—a demonstration of her will and determination as a single

mother. Fathers in this study also spoke about how their identity as a male impacted their

family engagement:

> It does play a role because as a man and black, you know, we live on the society that
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> we don't really have that much respect as black and especially as a man who has
>
> dreads, you know, like people look at you different. Yeah. So you gotta make sure,
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> like your action, you know, shows you are different. So, make people think that the
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> way you think about, you know, make sure like you raise your kids in the right way
>
> and be proud. (Participant 10)

Racism/stereotypes. Racism and stereotypes were closely linked to the identities of

the families involved in this study. For this research, racism and stereotypes related

specifically to misconceptions of Black families and their children. In addition to facing

difficulties with family engagement due to class, religion, immigration status, political

beliefs, language competency, gender, and age, the families also faced barriers due to their

race. Most families spoke about the intersectionality of their identities and the hardships they

had faced as Black parents/guardians. The subthemes supporting this theme included racism between schools and families, overcoming stigmas, and equality/equity.

Racism between schools and families. Some parents/guardians in the study spoke about racism they felt from teachers and administrators at their children's high schools. This racism ranged from families being judged by their skin complexion to families being treated differently because they were Black. Seven families referenced skin complexion in their interviews. Participant 22 commented:

So we have two different, just because I'm black, don't just because I am black, don't think I am like everyone else. I see things so much different than everyone, we are the same color, but we have different mentalities… If you're light skinned, you get a better job than someone who's dark skin.

Families spoke about the burden of being Black in the Greater Boston area. Each day, as they represented themselves, they remained critically conscious of their skin color. Even within the Black community, as Participant 22 mentioned, there was discrimination and segregation based on skin tone. One mother gave an example of how her daughter discovered this within her school:

She went through that last year where one of her good friends was this little Black girl. This little White girl would call her names like, "Oh, you're ugly because you're really black….. You're ugly, you're really black. And your hair is this and that." And my daughter asked, "Mommy, why is she saying that to her? Um, does that make me better because I'm light skinned?" (Participant 19)

Participant 19 was heartbroken to hear about this incident that occurred at her daughter's school. Having conversations about racism with her daughter was disheartening because she

did not want her daughter to grow up experiencing the same discrimination she faced when she was young. Participant 1 shared her aspirations for future Black families in urban schools:

> I just wish they would take us all out of that one box that they place us in and get to know individuals individually. You know what I mean? Get to know the person and before you make assumptions just because of the color of their skin or what you think might be going on at home because of what you've been programmed to think. I just wished that they would just kind of, you know, give us the same, the same respect and the same consideration that they give our White counterparts.

Even in the 21st century, Black families within the Greater Boston area are still feeling mistreated. They are witnessing these incidents occurring within their children's the high schools as they seek opportunities for engagement. In addition, families see occurrences of racism in the context of a lack of resources and opportunities, and a decrease in the quality of education their children are receiving:

> I think black kids are being left behind. I don't think the same effort, the same resources are made available to black kids that are given affluent white kids. So I think Black parents have to make up for the difference. Black parents have to find information, they have to find the resources, they have to figure it out. I just think it's super important for fathers, for mothers and fathers in black families to really be, um, being engaged in their children's education because you have to make, do you have to close that gap a little bit? You can't depend on these educators to do the job for you because some of them are racist and they're there, they'll do their job and they're not calling the children nigger in their face racist. But they're their closet racist where

190

they don't put as much effort into the black kids as they put into the white kids. So I think a black parent, you have to make the make up the difference. (Participant 18)

Overcoming stigmas. As mentioned by Participant 18, some families, for numerous reasons, are working to fill the opportunity gaps left by their children's high schools. Some are working to overcome stigmas placed on them. The two subthemes supporting this theme relate to perceptions of Black families' involvement and perceptions of single mothers.

From the first day they walk into school, Black families must break down several barriers and preconceived notions about themselves, such as the belief that Black families are not involved. In addition, once they are involved, according to the families interviewed in this study, teachers and administrators react in shock:

They tend to think that we are not interested, not involved in our kids' education. When I do participate, sometimes you can see that they are surprised to see, actually meet me. "Oh, she's a wonderful lady," and just knowing that there's a face, a parent to go with this child. So that's one of the struggles that I face, but nothing too much. They don't mean that, like I said, Black mothers or fathers, especially fathers just participate and show up, you know, that happened and they feel like, "Wow, there's something great we have more races participating." (Participant 2)

Participant 4 had a similar experience. As she increased her level of engagement, teachers and administrators spoke to her as if such engagement was rare. As Participant 4 explained, teachers can believe they are being encouraging, but their actions reflect judgment of parents and families:

People look at us as like we're not already, they're very judgmental and I've noticed a few times that, you know, speaking on the phone and then when you make eye to eye

191

you can see a different reaction where they did not expect you to be a color. Yeah….

It's funny because I've received so many compliments. It's like, "Wow, you're really

involved," and I'm kinda like, well aren't other parents who, and it wasn't more of

like a race that I felt, but I sometimes felt as though, you know, maybe I am in that

category, but you know, where they're judging. So sometimes like the compliments

kind of feel like insults. Yeah. Like, "Oh, you're so involved." Why wouldn't I be?

As some of the Black families in the study were working hard to be engaged and normalize

that engagement, teachers and administrations were still making them feel patronized. Their

drive to become more engaged was not just connected to proving teachers wrong;

collectively, they sought to do and be better. In addition, some families reported that their

motivation to be engaged came from their hopes of seeing their children prosper

academically and professionally:

I think parents are more engaged. They are trying to make sure that they [their

students] can get the best education because they know that without education you

basically can't do anything, you know, in this world. Like you say, people look down

on you. The jobs that you will get can't even help to stay above poverty level much

less trying to have a family on them with no education. So I think a lot of parents are

trying to encourage [their] kid to go to school and go to college and, you know, try to

make something out of themselves. (Participant 2)

As the Black families in this study tried to become more engaged, those efforts were not

always openly received by teachers at their children's high schools. Multiple families spoke

about the reactions of teachers and administrators when the parents/guardians made any

192

effort to be engaged. At times, the reactions and comments from teachers conveyed their surprise or confusion by the actions of the families. Participant 1 commented:

> There was an incident at school with the male student and my daughter where he actually put her hands on her because they got into an argument and I think that the school was taken back when I called a meeting. They felt that it was okay to let it go. This is all probably normal. This is something that they deal with at home or part of their community. And I called for a meeting with the principal and everyone I felt was important to be there and I let them know that, hey, I'm not the typical black parent. I am very involved in her life if you haven't picked that up already, and I am concerned about what's going on and what is the school doing to protect her. So, I had to make my presence known and I had to let them know that it's not what you think I am.

For these families, the teachers' reactions emphasized the importance of being engaged. The families wanted to normalize Black family engagement in order to improve the experience of all Black families since the stigma that "Black families are not engaged" is a barrier for parents/guardians. By increasing their efforts, they feel that they are proving that stigma false.

Single parents. Five Black families spoke about the stigmas associated with being a single parent. Some indicated that they had been misidentified as a single parent, while others commented on the troubles of being a single parent:

> Well, this is the whole discrimination thing. I think when teachers see you, they look at me and they look at my daughter and it's like, they think I look young for my age. So they automatically think I probably had her at 15 and I just get discriminated

against immediately when they see us. I'm sure they think, "Oh yeah, it's another, you know, single mother probably dropped out of school, probably uneducated, you know, all those stereotypes." I think immediately that's the thought that comes to their mind—could be wrong, but that's how I feel. (Participant 1)

When unpacking this statement, Participant 1 offered more insights into her frustration. She explained that she had a very interesting dynamic with her daughter's teachers. Each time she met a new teacher, the teacher would always make comments about how she looked or about her age, although she was in her forties. Participant 1 felt as though there were so many stereotypes about her, and the teachers assumed that she was a single parent. She also described the frustration she felt when teachers assumed that her daughter's father was not around just because her daughter was Black. She was very adamant that her children came from a two-parent home and that she provided a very structured environment for her daughter. Participant 1 and Participant 24 shared the same struggle advocating for their children while facing the single-parent stereotype and other stigmas that come with being a Black parent/guardian. The difference between them was that Participant 24 was actually a single mother:

For me, like, obviously I'm not with his dad, and so being a single mom, I feel like I've had to kind of fight harder for him to be more of an advocate for him. His dad is in his life, but he's—how do I put this delicately?—he is alive, he's there and he's, he actively has a relationship with him, but when it comes to anything that's actual parenting, it's always fallen on me. Everything from financial aid to academically too. And he didn't even meet his teacher until the graduation. So as far as like going up to the school and I'm doing the hands on stuff, that's always fallen on me and it's, in my

194

opinion, a tough, honestly, probably for the better, but because he has some things he used to work on, but I would say it's made it, which made it more of a mission for me to make sure that I'm involved … because I don't want people to be prejudiced against him because of whatever the situation.

All of the responses from participants in this subtheme showed that though they wanted to be engaged and wanted to form relationships with their children's high schools, the consistently poor perception of Black families serves as a barrier to making those connections.

Equality/equity. A few families spoke about the divide they felt regarding the treatment they or their children received at school. Whether because of their skin color, education level, or culture, they felt they were treated differently. One mother, Participant 21, commented on an instance of unfair treatment while she was seeking help for her son at his school:

I'm biased in terms of discrimination. Automatically it is assumed that because you have less education, you're not as smart or you don't need that much for your children. That's a big deal. Had I been the graduate student when I really, really needed it back then instead of having to get to the attorney, I'm sure I could have just walked in, showed them a business card and it would have gotten a lot quicker than just being a black female, high school educated from Mattapan. That makes a difference. I knew that innately back then.

Due to the unfair treatment she received, Participant 21 was obligated to hire a lawyer to help her advocate and find justice for her son who was being discriminated against. In hindsight, she believed that she would have felt more comfortable advocating for her son if she had had

195

a college diploma or a professional job title. Embedded in this comment is a call, issued by many of the Black families in this study—to educators to recognize who parents/guardians are at face value, and to treat them the same as affluent and/or White families. For example, Participant 16 explained:

Plain and simple, because there is the assumption that one size fits all. You know, what you tell white families should … suffice for black families, and that is not the case. There is, one, the issue of technological divide. Two, there is an issue of resources. Three, there is an issue of geographical access and locations.

Experience with family engagement. The next theme that arose within this structural area was experience with family engagement, centering primarily on indicators that influence how families experience engagement. As families in this study shared their experiences engaging with their children's high schools, they referenced the following subthemes, each of which is expanded upon in the following sections: care, respect, and struggle/support.

Care. To be engaged in children's high school experiences, both families and educators must show that they care (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Families must show that they care about their student and their academic performance, and teachers and administrators must demonstrate that they care about the students and building relationships with their families. For instance, Participant 8 said, "You [i.e., parents/guardians] are the first teacher…. So, if you're not involved in the children's life, the teacher is not going to care either." Some families seemed to share this perspective that the actions they took impacted how teachers viewed and treated their children. These same

196

families believed that taking actions such as showing up and voicing their concerns would improve how their children were cared for in school:

> I'm not bashing teachers to say teachers don't care, but I think when you have to answer to the parents [face to face], you really step it up. You [i.e., teachers] think, "So and so's parents going to be asking me questions. I'm responsible for this kid. I can't just let this kid sliding under the radar without my knowing what's happening." So when you know the parents follow up, you're more likely to follow up with that kid and know what's happening. (Participant 16)

> ***Respect***. Families also spoke about the importance of respect. As with care, families thought respect was necessary for parents/guardians as well as teachers. Some maintained that in showing respect for students and their education, the students would have a better academic experience:

> So it is hard sometimes. Not all teachers, I love teachers, but I said it's up to you as parents to have the teacher respect your kids, not just love your kids but also respect your kids. You are the one to make that happen. (Participant 8)

As Participant 8 explained, families play a role in the level of respect that teachers show to their children. Most often, when families spoke about respect, it was in reference to the *dis*respect they felt from teachers and educators regarding their race, skin color, and culture:

> A lot of times because we have traditionally been marginalized, a lot of people like to say that, you know, race doesn't matter, color doesn't matter, but when you say that you ignore the real problems that arise from, you know, historical racism and institutionalized racism, you can just, you saying that it doesn't exist, only perpetuates

the problem. So, it needs to be acknowledged and it, it has to be dealt with. You can't

just wish it away. (Participant 5)

For some of the families in this study, having respect for them meant respecting their identity and culture. Some Black families, such as Participant 5, argued that teachers and educators cannot disregard their race because it is part of them. Similarly, Participant 7, connected education to the respect needed and merited for Black students:

Because in the society, our color already is an issue where I think education is the key

for us that make us wherever we go. If we don't have the education and we have the

color, it makes things more difficult versus if we do have an education because you,

you have knowledge wherever you go, they will respect you more than would have if

you don't have anything at all. (Participant 7)

As reflected in Participant 7's comment, education helps to level the racially uneven playing field between Black families and White families (Murphy, 2010). Some families in this study felt that education can increase the respect shown by others reducing the chances their children would struggle as much as they did growing up.

Struggle/support. In describing their struggles around family engagement, many families in the study spoke about the lack of connection with and support from their children's educators. Participant 18, for instance, felt very engaged in the lives of his children but still did not have a relationship with teachers; in fact, he did not even know his daughter's teacher's names:

I have to admit I don't even know their names. I don't even know who they are. I

didn't go to the parent teacher conference. I think they have thousands, like 3,400

kids in that school and so I was not going to be one of the parents there. If every

single parent shows up, at least one. I just wasn't going to do that. So I haven't. I

know their profile, but I haven't met any face to face and so I'm not interacting or

engaging with them. I'm paying attention in terms of looking at their websites and

looking at the assignments and looking at the grades, but in terms of one on one and

exchanges, I haven't had that.

As Participant 18 indicated, communication technology had helped him stay informed about

his daughter's academic performance, requirements, and expectations, but his engagement

stopped. As a result, despite the use of technology, he still struggled to find support because

he did not have a formal connection with the school. Even when his daughter's high school

arranged parent teacher conferences, it felt too overwhelming for him to attend or feel

welcome. Participant 1 shared a similar experience regarding the use of communication

technology as a form of engagement:

It makes it easier for busy people. Like, okay, I could see your grades, I can kind look

at the classes and it's very helpful in some respect, but for me, if I'm having an issue

or if it's something that, if I need to speak to a teacher about some concerns of mine, I

don't like emailing because I don't want you to answer me back … via email. I want

to listen to your tone. I want to see, you know, that's how I feel I can get a good grasp

as to "Is this teacher really engaged?" Does he really care? Is he shrugging my

daughter off or my concerns off? So I need to hear you. I don't like emails. Don't like

it.

Participant 1 made it clear that communication technology did not suffice for the connection

and sense of engagement she wanted to feel in relation to her daughter's teachers. To feel

199

such a connection, she needed to feel a sense of emotion and authenticity from the educators. In her case, engaging through communication technology could not do that for her.

Understanding and Responding to Family Concerns

In this third structural area, two themes—understanding and recommendations—emerged from the individual interviews and focus groups. As families reported what they experienced and how they experienced it, they developed a series of recommendations from which schools, teachers, and other parents/guardians could benefit. These recommendations were used to summarize their experience and conclude this chapter. Each of the themes, including their basic descriptions and supporting subthemes, are included in Table 11 below.

Table 11

Structural Area: Understanding and Responding to Family Concerns

Theme	Basic Description	Subthemes
Understanding	Seeing Black families with informed knowledge	• Understanding the Black student experience • Understanding the Black family experience • Cultural understanding
Recommendations	Ideas families shared to increase family engagement in high schools	• Recommendations for teachers • Recommendations for schools • Recommendations for communication technology • Recommendations for other parent/guardians

Understanding. From the interview responses of the Black families in this study, there emerged a clear call for teachers and schools to make more of an effort to understand them, even though educators and administrators might not be able empathize with how they

200

experience engagement. The theme of understanding was supported by the following three subthemes: understanding the Black student experience, understanding the Black family experience, and cultural understanding.

   Understanding the Black student experience. Families shared that their students were experiencing high school based on perceptions of them. From theses families' perspective, it was difficult for Black students in urban schools to be accepted due to their identity. Participant 6 shared his opinion about how teachers view and treat Black students:

> Your child is just a hoodlum or he's just always making trouble so the parents don't want to like go back and forth with them because they don't even want to listen to what's really going on. They could be troubled youth dealing with something at home and expressing it at school by lashing out. So I feel like they pretty much gave in or gave up, but they're putting a lot less attention than they should be. They don't, they're downplaying the issue and severity of it. (Participant 6)

As Participant 6 implied, rather than judging Black students based on their outward appearances, educators should make an effort to understand Black students and their experiences to better support them. In addition, from his perspective, attempting to understand students holistically can better support them when they are struggling emotionally. One father explained why he believed teachers do not understand Black students:

> The staff is all White. There's one or two Black teachers here and there, but the staff does not represent the kids. So these teachers have no idea how to engage. You're not black. You don't know how to engage a black child. You might not even know how to teach one. You might not even know how to engage them. (Participant 18)

In the view of Participant 18, educators have trouble understanding the Black student experience because they are not Black themselves. Coming from a different background causes them to view Black students through another lens. According to Participant 18, it is easier to understand people who share the same or similar experiences as you. In the same vein, Participant 14 believed that by understanding Black students better, educators will most likely treat them better:

- Participant 14: "I was making sure that everybody, not just my kids, because I knew how they treated our children and it was unacceptable to me."

- Researcher: "And by our children. What do you mean by our..."

- Participant 14: "Children of color."

The perspective of Participant 14 was similar to that of other Black families in this study. In discussing the experiences of their own Black children, they also shared concerns about other Black students. Indeed, some Black families viewed all Black students as their own children.

Understanding the Black family experience. In order to understand the experiences of Black students, some of the participants argued that high school educators must also understand their families. As Clark (2015) maintained, Black students are highly influenced by their families. If educators do not make an effort to understand Black families and their experiences, as Participant 1 explained, their knowledge is reduced to what they have learned about them from other sources (Fujioka, 2005; Musambira & Jackson, 2018).

I think it's the media, television, like any information, it's the way that actors portray themselves on, on TV. It's, you know, it's just information that's being put out there. It's called programming for a reason. You're programming the brains of everyone to

202

think a certain way. So when you go on TV and you see like Black families with the

dad's in jail or you know, this one's getting shot every week, it looks like a

dysfunctional family and you know, everyone's poor or it's—so that's the idea that

everyone adopts, that every black family functions that way.

Participant 1 was frustrated by the lack of understanding that some educators had

shown about the experience of Black families. This lack of understanding was easily

observable the interactions between families and teachers. Participant 15 provided an

example of a time she felt misunderstood:

I think there have been instances where, you know, teachers or administration will try

to brush you off, you know what I mean? And maybe catered to the White families

for whatever reason, or you know, they may think that you don't know how the

system works because it is a system and then if you're not really playing that game

and being a part of that system that you discounted, you're left out.

Cultural understanding. To understand Black families and students, one must

understand their culture (Robles, 2011). In this context, culture is defined as values, beliefs,

and practices shared by Black families (Carpenter-Song, Nordquest Schwallie, & Longhofer,

2007). Some of the families in this study spoke about times when they felt misunderstood

because teachers did not understand their culture:

I'm like, why would the teacher assume you are Spanish? Why would she give her the

homework in Spanish instead of English, we are speaking English in the class? And, I

kind of rubbed it off. So I think she made a mistake, you know, and handled it the

wrong way. But of course, in my head I'm like, why would she assume just because

you're light that you were Hispanic. (Participant 19)

203

Participant 19 worried that her teacher had assumed her daughter was Latina simply because of her daughter's skin tone. She was frustrated because her daughter's teacher had potentially made assumptions about her without asking or trying to get to know her. This interaction exemplified a scenario that could have been better handled if the teacher had more cultural competence (Beagan, 2018). Participant 19 was not alone in her struggle:

> People still look down at Black people in a time where they shouldn't. I remember once I had a meeting with one of my kid's teacher at the school. She's a psychiatrist and I told her, "Listen, I am Black, but I need to know that I'm not American. I'm Haitian. I see things differently. I understand things. I am a free man, I'm black, I'm not American, I'm Haitian. Just because I am Black, don't think I am like everyone else. I see things so much different than everyone, we are the same color, but we have different mentalities." (Participant 22)

Black families in this study are called for teachers and educators to gain a better understanding of their race. By improving their cultural competence, teachers can also improve their relationship with the families of their students (Garneau & Pepin, 2015). Participant 11 explained why teachers having a better understanding of Black culture is very important to her and to other families:

> Why is this so important? Um, culture wise, I feel like, you know, we have different, different ways cause of our culture, how we raise our children compared to like Americans. We fought to be where we are. So if you don't voice that and, give our opinions … we will get hurt. There's no way of hearing our situation, our form of raising our kids or our forms of communicating and enforcing what should it be done. (Participant 11)

204

Participant 11 believed that without cultural understanding of Black families, their children would be at higher risk. In order to help teachers gain this understanding, Participant 11 felt that families should voice their concerns and communicate what they need.

Recommendations. Throughout the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, participants provided multiple recommendations to teachers, schools, and other parents/guardians. The recommendations fell within four subthemes: recommendations for teachers, recommendations for schools, recommendations for communication technology, and recommendations for parents/guardians. Although they were asked about family engagement and communication technology, they shared multiple recommendations about other related issues that deeply impacted them. Before families addressed ways to improve their engagement through communication technology, they shared issues and problems that impacted their children in high school. Each of these recommendations, as well as how many families made them, are shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Recommendations Made by Families

Subtheme	Recommendation	Number of Participants[*]
Teachers	1. Reach out	13
	2. Improve technology skillset	6
	3. Hire Black teachers	5
	4. Be more flexible with time	5
	5. Be accountable	5
	6. Show respect	2
	7. Be aware of issues	2
Urban Schools	1. Support parents with limited English	10
	2. Be more welcoming to Black families	9
	3. Improve school curriculum	8
	4. Embrace culture/religion	7
	5. Treat Black families equally	5
	6. Communicate more	2
Communication Technology	1. Improve technology capabilities	17
	2. Give access to resources	12
	3. Advertise communication technology	3
	4. Make human connections	3
Parents/Guardians	1. Be more engaged with schools	7
	2. Communicate with teachers	4
	3. Gain technology skills	4
	4. Build relationships	2
	5. Provide support/guidance	2
	6. Advocate for students	2
	7. Monitor student behavior	2
	8. Minimize technology use	2

Note. [*] Number of participants, out of twenty-five, who made this recommendation. Recommendations made by fewer than two people were not included.

Recommendations for teachers. The Black families in this study made several

recommendations to teachers who work in urban schools. Out of the top seven

recommendations, the most frequent was for teachers to reach out. The families wanted

teachers to make more of an effort to build relationships with them and their students. In

doing so, some families believed that other issues associated with a lack of family engagement would gradually be resolved. Participant 14 recommended the following:

Actually get to know what the parents' needs are, what the family's needs are, and I know it's a lot, there are a lot of students but there's a lot more that kind of could go together which will make it not seem like so many. And that could be addressed. I don't know if they'll do it.

Participant 14 recognized how important it is to see teachers making a more deliberate effort to reach out to her—despite her doubts about them actually doing so. Some participants voiced that it would be easier for teachers to reach out if the schools hired more teachers of color:

I think first of all, that they should hire more teachers of color, they should reach out to families in—don't just assume because a parent can't make it or doesn't show up for me too, that they're not interested, they don't care about their children's wellbeing. I think that they should make a better effort of reaching out and trying different ways of times, different methods of engaging families. Like don't use that one size fit all method of having an open house on this one night from this time to that time that all families can make that time. So be creative in how you approach families like that.

(Participant 15)

Participant 15 believed that teachers do not understand Black families the way they should, for two main reasons. First, they are not understood because there is a lack of outreach, and when teachers reach out they do not consider the multitude of differences among families. Second, if the teachers the school hired were more diverse, those teachers would be more

likely to understand how to connect with Black families. Participant 18 spoke in depth on this issue.

> Diversity doesn't start from the bottom up. It starts from the top down, right? So if your frontline isn't diverse, what are we talking about? Why are we here wasting our time? Talking about diversity when your frontline does not reflect it, so it's the same thing. Everyone's trying to figure out how they engage. Yeah, I get it. Teachers have to care.

Participant 18 connected the lack of diversity in administration at his job to the lack of diversity in teacher representation at his daughter's high school. He emphasized how staff diversity can only be improved if the administration cares to address it. He then went on to explain:

> I think the majority of the students in every public school are (what White people refer to) as colored. And by that meaning Black Latinos, um, well others. But yet the staff isn't diverse. The staff is all White. There's one or two Black teachers here and there, but the staff does not represent the kids. So these teachers have no idea how to engage. You're not Black. You don't know how to engage a Black child. You might not even know how to teach one. You might not even know how to engage them. You have a school that is predominantly minority, or a color other than White, and the entire staff is White.

As a Black father of a Black daughter, Participant 18 made it clear that the lack of Black teaching staff at his daughter's school disturbed him. In the same way that he saw the effects of a lack of diversity at his workplace, he saw it at her school. In addition, he saw how the

208

individuals with power and authority at her school, those who made a majority of the decisions, did not look like or represent his family.

Recommendations for schools. Some of the families' recommendations were not directed toward the teachers, but more toward the school. As previously mentioned, families shared that these issues were related to family engagement and were just as important to them. The top three recommendations (made by at least eight families) included supporting parent/guardians with limited English, being more welcoming to Black families, and improving the high school curriculum. Participant 14 gave an example of what changes to the curriculum she wanted to see in her son and daughter's high school:

> My son ended up on the National Honor Society. Wow. Okay. My daughter, she, like I said, I've been reading [to her] since she was three years old. We have jewels and they need to listen and see that instead of taking everything away from it, give it to them. You know, you're taking away the arts, you're taking away libraries. They are taking away things that could just encourage them to want to come. You know there's a child that wants to play the piano, but you took it away. Now he thinks school sucks.

Families who described themselves as very engaged recognized multiple issues within the schools; among them was the need for improvements to the curriculum. In addition, many families spoke about ways to improve the school culture and make it more welcoming to Black families in urban schools. Participant 4 gave an example: "Don't be afraid to like, come speak to me. Don't hesitate. There's a place for everybody here, all races and welcomed, you know, doesn't matter what your background, color of your skin." According to Participant 4, in order for families to feel welcomed, schools need to encourage staff to

209

connect with families instead of fearing them. At times, families feel that high school teachers and administrators are too afraid to speak with them because they do not know how to approach them. Participant 1 believed that the fear of teachers and administrators may stem from the internal assumptions that educators make about Black families:

> Get to know the person and before you make assumptions just because of the color of their skin or what you think might be going on at home because of what you've been programmed to think. I just wished that they would just kind of, you know, give us the same, the same respect and the same consideration that they give our White counterparts.

Despite being aware of the assumptions that teachers and administrators make, it still pains Black families to see the difference in how they are treated and received at their children's high schools. One way for teachers and administrators to disarm themselves of their assumptions is by communicating with Black families. Doing so, according to Participant 5 believes, will bridge the gap between them and help Black families feel more welcomed in the schools:

> I don't know how to describe it, but that's the purview of the school will take care of things over here. There is a gap and it needs to be bridged. Okay. Because we're trying to take this huge population of people and move them forward. We need to understand that it's a partnership. It's not us telling you what to do or shouldn't. It doesn't work as well that way—it works better as a partnership and that means that, you know, administration in the school has to learn more about families and learn how to communicate with them. So they have to bridge that gap and, and realize it's a partnership, you know, not like a hierarchy.

Participant Five expressed that Black families do not feel welcome or comfortable in their children's high schools because there is not a true partnership between families and schools. Instead, there is a power differential that leaves families feeling a lack of connection. In the words of Participant 14, "Family engagement takes two pieces, not just the family. And if we're not welcome or don't feel welcome, then it's irrelevant." In sum, Black family engagement is not possible if families do not feel welcomed or feel part of the school community.

    Recommendations for communication technology. Several participants made recommendations related to the application of communication technology. These recommendations were directed not only toward the schools, but also to the creators of the communication technology such as software engineers and educational technology companies. Participant 25 spoke extensively on the ways schools can change the application of communication technology to improve the family engagement experience:

> Everyone's technology isn't the same from household to household, so I have seen situations where if something is distributed exclusively by email, but a couple of kids don't have a computer at home, they may not be able to access it. I know some schools provide Chromebooks to all their students so they can access everything that's being sent to families. I've encountered at my school a couple of situations where I sent an email and a couple of kids' parents just didn't respond because they don't have a computer or they don't know how to. They should also consider streamlining. I do think that would be helpful for schools to routinely do a technology survey where they can see what types of technology families have access to at home and then kind of edit the way that they communicate accordingly.

211

Here, Participant 25 offers several recommendations from both the delivery and receiving end, with a primary focus promoting access to communication technology for Black families. By loaning computers, streamlining, and administering a technology survey, schools can give each family an equal opportunity to engage. Participant 16 shared the same perspective:

> They need to do better. They need to find ways of spreading the word out there and let families know that, look, we have these technological capabilities. Come to us, ask us questions, we'll get it to you. No, but unless they do that, then it's always going to be lacking.

Both Participant 25 and Participant 16 believed that increased access to communication technology will increase opportunities for Black families to use it. To improve or increase access, however, they believed that schools should first reach out to families and identify how they are interacting with it. Similarly, Participant 21 shared ideas about how families can gain greater access to communication technology. In addition to distributing a technology assessment to determine the technological capabilities of parents/guardians, Participant 21 wished to see the technology available in multiple languages.

> The only way I would disagree is if it's not in every language that somebody can speak. If it's not in Haitian Creole, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, that's when I would disagree. Because if you're going to make it accessible, you have to make it accessible for all of the parents. So if it's not in a language that's accessible to them, if it's in English and it's not something that's equivalent to reading the *Boston Herald* for a fifth grader can read, then yeah, I would disagree. How would they understand?

Some families spoke about ways to make communication technology more interactive, allowing families to connect with teachers on a more personal level. According to

212

these families, the technology would be more convenient and effective if it made the teachers more accessible to them. Participant 21 offered additional feedback on how the technology could be more interactive:

Make it so that there is a relationship on the other side. So whether it's a chatline that's open 6:00 to 8:00 PM or … virtual office hours, that would be very helpful. Virtual office hours from 6:00 to 8:00, so I know that, hey, most parents don't get home till after 5:00, but you know, from 6:00 to 8:00 you could quickly chat with the teacher. You can ask, "How's little Johnny doing and hey, he needs to practice this and geometry." That would be very helpful, I think, because parents chat on their Facebook all the time. They would do that if they had access to it. A chatline during times where they're not at work themselves, when they're not busy or they want to do it, but they don't have time or they're at work instead of having to pick 8:00 to 9:00, 9:00 to 10:00, 11:00 to 12:00. Oh god, I can't pick it because I can't miss another day of work. If they had the virtual meetings, more parents will be engaged. Minorities especially.

Other families made similar observations. They expressed a desire for more ways to speak with teachers, not only throughout the school day, but also in the evening when they had more time. Some shared their frustration about receiving information about events, grades, and assignments but not being able to ask questions about it. At times, this made them feel as though the information flowing through phone applications and parent portals was one-sided:

It would be nice if you could, like, … pull up his grades and I'm able to click on it and say you know, this C right here, why is that … and then put in the comments

there and that the teacher could speak directly to that. That, I think, would help

because then it makes it easier to find out what was going on. (Participant 25)

As evidenced by the experience of Participants 21 and 25, families were looking for more

ways to speak to teachers and administrators through the school's phone applications and

parent portals. This was also emphasized during one of the focus group interviews. Families

gave examples of how this could be done:

- Participant 14: "They have not anything in from my daughter for months or weeks

    or whatever. Let me have a button to say, well what, what's going on? Why

    haven't I heard anything at all? Yeah."

- Participant 9: "So it can be two way."

- Participant 1: "Or they could reach out to the parents. We notice you didn't use

    parent portal, whatever portal or whatever. Is there a reason why? Is it not user

    friendly? Just maybe when you're having that teacher-parents conference, have

    the teacher touch base—"

- Participant 21: "Right away!"

- Participant 1: "With the parents that's not using it. By the way, you'd know we

    have … [a] parent portal, why aren't you using it? Is there a reason why? And you

    sign up with me right now?"

In this conversation, the families in the focus group interview suggested that there should be

some type of "button" for checking in. For families using the parent portals and phone

applications, they could alert teachers when they had not received any new information. They

could also use the technology if they wanted to inquire about a problem. Overall, they

214

wanted teachers to more accountable to the communication technology. In the first focus group interview, participants spoke about accountability to and assessment of the technology.

- Participant 1: "At the end of the year, are they assessing? Are they looking at the technology or whatever form that they're looking on reaching the parents and kind of doing metrics on that to see the amount of parents responded...put it in a database and they need use that to improve upon."

- Participant 21: "Exactly. 37% said this. We need to do something and then find out why funding from City Hall about this"

- Participant 1: "Exactly, demand they do surveys."

Based on their responses, participants wanted urban schools to conduct more assessments of the use of communication technology by both parents/guardians and teachers. By identifying how families and teachers were using and interacting through the technology, some families believed it will would help administrators make more informed decisions about the implementation of that technology.

Recommendations for other parents. Many families in the study took responsibility for themselves and their actions. Some explained how important it was not only for them to be engaged, but for other Black families to be engaged along unified front. In fact, being more engaged was the most common recommendation that participants offered to other parents/guardians. Eight families recommended being more engaged, followed by communicating more with teachers, building relationships, and supporting and advocating for their children. Each of these recommendations were highly interrelated. Participant 18 explained why there is such a strong need for Black family engagement in high schools:

You have to be aware and you have to see and you have to be able to even see that, that there's a problem that the teacher is putting more effort into other students in there [than] yours. And if your kids are asking for help and they're not getting it, you have to figure out why they're not getting that help. And so I think it's super important for, for parents to be … involved.

Participant 18 believed that engagement can also help parents/guardians be more in tune with their children's school experience, allowing them to discern when their students need more support and advocacy. Without this level of engagement, participants involved in this study believed that Black students were at greater risk. Participant 21 believed that collective family engagement was necessary for supporting the growth of all students in the school:

Knowledge is power. You should be engaged, no matter what level of education or socio-economic status you have, you should be engaged because you'll hear something that you can contribute to no matter how big or small. You don't have to be a PhD to know, hey, all of the kids in this neighborhood are at risk for getting shot because they didn't understand or know their rights, didn't get the education or the knowledge of how to speak, how to defend themselves, how to approach people. That's a big deal.

In addition, all families played an important role in their children's high schools, and no two parents/guardians offered the same input about family engagement. There was general agreement, however, that by working with teachers, administrators, and other parents/guardians, more stakeholders would be involved in decision making benefiting their students. Each of the recommendations made by the Black families centered on bettering

their communication in an effort to improve the quality of their children's high school

educational experience.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

We continually judge the whole from the part we are familiar with; we continually assume the material we have at hand to be typical; we reverently receive a column of figures without asking who collected them, how they were arranged, how far they are valid and what chances of error they contain; we receive the testimony of men without asking whether they were trained or ignorant, careful or careless, truthful or given to exaggeration, and, above all, whether they are giving facts or opinions.
—(DuBois, 1898)

Technology is oftentimes seen as a great equalizer as it enables all families to be active participants in the educational experiences of their children. However, the intersectionality of students' and parents'/guardians' race, gender, and ethnicity cannot be ignored since the systems in which individuals work are systematically engrained with bias. In this study, 19 of the 25 parents/guardians reported that even in the absence of direct face-to-face contact, racism was still deeply felt and experienced. This finding (among others) highlights the essence of the Black family participants' experience with engagement.

This concluding chapter begins with a brief overview of the preceding five chapters, following by a discussion of the research findings as viewed through the lens of capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995). I then discuss the implications of the study and its findings for best practice, policy, and future research. This is followed by a consideration of the limitations of the study based on my experience conducting the

research. Finally, the chapter ends with final reflections on directions for future research on Black family engagement and communication technology.

Summary of Findings

Each of the preceding chapters provided insights that responded directly to the research questions and sub-questions. The first chapter delved into the key focus of my research: Black family engagement in high schools through the use of communication technology. Chapter 2, comprised of four major sections covered a literature review of classroom communication technology and its effectiveness from families' point of view as well as justification for why critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011) were chosen to guide this research. Chapter 3 provided a thorough explanation of the methodology used for this study. The next two chapters covered the findings from this research.

Textural Findings

Chapter 4 comprised the first findings chapter, beginning overview of the families who participated in this study. Each of the data sources from Chapter 3 contributed to the findings of the research and provided insights into the study. Several themes arose from the interviews and archival data. These themes fell into three areas that identified *what* the families were experiencing (i.e., textural experiences) and three areas that identified *how* the families were experiencing it (i.e., structural experiences). Chapter 4 only covered findings related to textural experiences. The three textual areas covering what the families experienced in relation to the research question included: perception of family engagement, family concerns for their students, and influences and forms of family engagement. Each of these areas was divided into themes and subthemes, and explored in depth.

219

Structural Findings

Chapter 5 was the second findings chapter, covering how the Black families in the study experienced engagement (i.e., structural experiences). The chapter was divided into three structural areas that arose from the analysis of the interviews and document archives: experience with communication technology, engaging in urban public schools, and understanding and responding to family concerns. Related to the third structural area, a set of recommendations from the Black families emerged. These recommendations were addressed primarily to teachers and administrators to help them understand the realities of Black families and how those families experience opportunities for engagement through communication technology.

<center>**Discussion of Findings**</center>

The primary research question of this study was, "How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technology?" To respond to this question, I developed four sub-questions, each of was influenced by critical race theory and capital theory. These theories will be used as a lens in discussing the findings.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in order to study how Black families experience communication technology, it is important for researchers to use capital theory to understand the relationships families need to facilitate the use of technology products (Bourdieu, 2011). Capital theory is also important for identifying how the social assets of families, such as their level of education or intellect, impact how they experience communication technology (Bourdieu, 2011). Furthermore, critical race theory is key to revealing the racial and power-related barriers that hinder the improvement of Black family engagement through

<center>220</center>

communication technology (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The first two sub-questions of this study (discussed in the following sections) were based on critical race theory.

How Do Black Families Within the Greater Boston Area Define Their Own Needs in Relation to Their Race in Order To Be Engaged in Urban Schools?

The Black families in this study mentioned several needs related to their race that were not being fulfilled and that therefore served as barriers to their engagement with their children's high schools. Participants identified four main needs, as discussed in the textural findings of Chapter 4. These needs—which, unfulfilled, represented stressors and barriers to their family engagement—included: 1) accommodations for work demands, 2) human connections to teachers and administrators, 3) their access to technology, and 4) training to effectively use communication technology. Each of these needs is correlated to one another, and they each indicate that urban Black families are in need of connection and support.

Accommodations for work demands. According to critical race theory, each of the needs discussed by participants reveals the racial and power-related barriers that hinder the improvement of Black family engagement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The first need was related to accommodations for participants' work demands. As noted in Chapter 4, 19 of the 25 participants noted time constraints resulting from their work schedule. Due to these constraints, families indicated that wanted more flexibility, on the part of schools, regarding meetings, school events, and times when they could connect with their children's teachers. Several interviewees emphasized the difficulty of balancing family engagement with their outside work schedules. Some of the Black families in the study were obligated to work multiple jobs and/or long hours, leaving less time for them to be engaged in their children's

school experiences. These extreme work demands were due partly to employment status, and partly due to family income (Irvine, 2010; Murphy, 2010). In the United States, Black families are in the lower tier of income distribution (Hamilton & Darity, 2009):

> For black families and other families of color, studying and working hard is not associated with the same levels of wealth amassed among whites. Black families whose heads graduated from college have about 33 percent less wealth than white families whose heads dropped out of high school. The poorest white families—those in the bottom quintile of the income distribution— have slightly more wealth than black families in the middle quintiles of the income distribution. (Hamilton, Darity, Price, Sridharan, & Tippett, 2015, p. 3)

Looking at these findings through the lens of critical race theory—which "centers the narratives of people of color when attempting to understand social inequality" (Howard & Navarro, 2016, p. 259)—educators should consider the ways the work constraints of Black families impede their ability to be engaged. However, in order for teachers and administrators to understand the narratives of these Black families and to work to reduce the inequities they face, they must first build a connection with them.

Developing a human connection. The second need voiced by the parents/guardians in this study was to feel a human connection with teachers and administrators. As referenced in the textural findings of Chapter 4, Black families are motivated to be engaged in the academic experiences of their children. Twenty-three of the 25 participant interviewees reported being more engaged than their parents were when they were in high school. As family engagement has increased, so too has the use of communication technology. Black

families, however, do not see technology as a substitute for connecting with teachers and administrators.

One of the main reasons why Black families have faced difficulty forming connections is directly linked to racism. For example, 19 out of the 25 parents/guardians shared experiences of racism both in person and indirectly. From the perspective of critical race theory, Black families are entering schools where White people hold positions of authority, namely as teachers and administrators (Vaught, 2008). In fact, although less than 50% of K-12 students nationwide are White, over 80% of teachers and administrators are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The Black families in this study indicated that this overrepresentation of White educators in urban schools has led to a lack of connection and cultural understanding. This connects to other research on White teachers working with urban student populations (Jupp & Slattery, 2012; Sleeter, 2017; Ullucci, 2011). For instance, some teachers have spoken about White resistance to (Crowley & Smith, 2015) and fatigue from (Flynn, 2015) learning about race and culture. This lack of connection makes it evident that the poor relationship between the Black families and White teachers is felt both sides.

Expanding access to technology. The third race-related need that Black families described was access to communication technology. Specifically, study participants voiced their concern about the lack of access to technology. Their needs ranged from technology devices to Internet access at home to connecting to school-sponsored software applications. These findings reinforced other results in the literature on access to technology (Common Sense Media, 2013; Penny, 1997; Warschauer et al., 2004). As Warschauer et al. (2004) noted, there is a drastic difference in access to technology between Black and White families.

As a result of this digital divide, Black families with low socioeconomic status are in jeopardy of remaining on the lower end of the social and educational gap.

From the perspective of critical race theory, marginalized groups, such as Black families, "have sought education as a pathway for economic mobility, economic empowerment, political voice, and social transformation" (Howard & Navarro, 2016, p. 254). Lacking access to the technological tools for remaining current and informed can disempower Black families and reduce their economic and social mobility. Thus, in their recommendations to schools and teachers, 12 of the 25 participants voiced that wanted to see more efforts from the schools to increase access to technology. Families also wanted more training on how to use communication technology.

Training for communication technology. Families spoke about their need for more training opportunities around the effective use of communication technology. While families were aware of phone applications, parent portals, and email communication, many were unsure of how to maximize the use of these technologies. For example, in using communication technology to check on their students' academic performance, 15 of the 25 families reported that they use it to check grades specifically. Five of the nine school districts in this study used Aspen Follet as the application for their parent portal. Those families who did know how to use the Aspen Follet parent portal were unaware of its other functionalities; when used efficiently, families can check the academic progress of their students, check their student assignments, check grades, view the students' attendance data, manage events and assignments using the calendar, view and edit student profile information, view student

conduct, download family resources, manage parent/guardian settings, and link their mobile devices to automatically receive notifications and alerts (Aspen Follet Community, 2019).

Critical race theory allows researchers to inquire how racism correlates with inequities in education (Howard & Navarro, 2016). The Black families in this study were passively given access to communication technology to aid them in their engagement with their children's high schools but were not shown how to use it. Examining the document archives, only two of the nine school districts made online training available to families, and only one offered training in multiple languages. As convenient as the technology appears to be, teachers and administrators, as reported by the participants, were inconsiderate of how it sets Black families behind as they took for granted these structures and processes that mainly advance White and affluent families (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Sleeter, 2017; Vaught, 2008). If the needs of these Black families are not met and urban high schools continue to operate using flawed communication technology, their level of family engagement will decline.

To What Extent Does Racism Impact Black Families Once Interacting with Urban Schools Through Communication Technology?

Racism has been present in education long before communication technology was developed (Kilimci, 2009; Skiba et al., 2011; Warren, 2014). While communication technology has helped to remove several barriers related to communication (Merkley et al., 2006; Miretzky, 2004), time and energy (Murray et al., 2014), and lack of awareness (Wilima & Sanchez, 2013), it still cannot address other important barriers to Black family engagement. For example, other barriers, such as low socioeconomic status (Murphy, 2010;

Van Velsor & Orizco, 2007), lack of access to resources (Reynolds et al., 2015), and language (Taylor, 2016) cannot be overlooked but have been.

Several families in this study noted that communication technology makes information much more accessible to them. Families who reported this compared their current information availability to when their children were younger and parents/guardians did not have access to parent portals, social media, and phone applications. Other families compared it to their own high school experience in assessing their level of family engagement. The families felt that communication technology made information more accessible because it is fast, convenient, and can be integrated with tasks they already perform on a daily basis such as checking email or using their phone.

However, critical race theory challenges this idea of communication technology being accessible, fast, convenient, and easy. Using the theory as a lens, I also looked at counterstories of Black families that called into question majoritarian narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002 as cited in Sleeter, 2017). When looking at the purpose of communication technology—to transmit information to families in a timely fashion—many parent/guardians, teachers, and administrators consider it a success, but one must question how educators measure success. One must also inquire if communication technology, which impacts all stakeholders involved in the high school education of young Black students, works for everyone. If it does not work for a small portion of the population but works for most, is it truly effective?

Racism can impact Black families in multiple ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Vaught, 2008). While computers and technology devices display no bias themselves, there are still people behind that technology making decisions on who creates it, what it does,

whom it helps, how much it costs, how it is accessed, who uses it, and how it is updated. It

has been well documented that Black families have less access to technology than White

families do (Common Sense Media, 2011, 2013; Mouza & Barrett-Greenly, 2015; Wilson,

2014). In light of this imbalance in technology access, as reported by some of the study

participants, it is harder for Black families to connect with their children's high schools, thus

pushing them further away. This in turn decreases their level of engagement and their ability

to support and advocate for their children.

Although families appreciate the convenience of communication technology, it does

not remove all of the racial barriers they face. If the technology available is the primary

source of communication for Black families but they cannot afford it, access it, or understand

the language in which it is made available, its purpose is void. Therefore, while

communication technology in urban schools was ostensibly implemented to support all

families, it can be argued that Black families facing economic and racial barriers were not

thoroughly considered. The problem, according to critical race theory, is that technology is

part of the various structures and processes that perpetuate Whiteness, but it has become so

normalized that its use is taken for granted (Sleeter, 2017).

What Opportunities Available to Black Families Have Limited Their Access to

Communication Technology?

Families in this study raised numerous concerns regarding racism, family

engagement, and their needs related to race. Some families found ways to address these

concerns, but others had not. Throughout the focus group interviews, the families agreed

unanimously that they had limited access to communication technology. Referring to the

preceding sub-question, families found it difficult to engage through communication

technology if they did not have Internet access or if they did not own up-to-date

technological devices such as computers and smartphones. According to those families, little

to nothing had been done to improve their access. The following are four interview excerpts

from that validate this claim:

- "We have a barrier. It's not going to reach all the parents because it depends on

  where you fall into the social economic bracket. So if you're not there, there's no

  way to reach you at all. So I think you can reach certain individuals. And in the

  sad part about it, the people that fall on the lower tier of the social economic

  bracket, they are the ones that need it the most because they have you working

  retail jobs and not as engaged with their kids or level of education might not be

  high. They are getting hit from all sides and then they can't afford the internet and

  now they're not getting information about their kid" (Participant 1).

- "I have the resources but I don't know what happens when someone who doesn't,

  you know, and I could see that family where communication is not happening at

  all until they get the report card like, 'Oh my goodness, what happened here? Like

  how come I didn't know?' Well, they don't have a computer or a cellphone. How

  were they informed?" (Participant 4).

- "Plain and simple because there is the assumption that one size fits all. You know,

  what you tell white families should be suffice for black families and that is not the

  case. There is, one, the issue of the technological divide. Two, there is an issue of

  resources. Three, there is an issue of geographical access and locations. The same

  events that happened, they're saying black families don't have access … because

  the areas they are living is very far to reach. They should have iPads and internet

hotspots available for families to rent. If a family doesn't have computers, iPads

and they're getting cheaper, even if it's first generation, second generation, then

they can still access the internet. You can rent it out, take it for the entire

semester, free of charge because they have the resources" (Participant 16).

- "You have to make it accessible for all of the parents who have a child that is a

   minority or any child." (Participant 21)

According to social capital theory, being part of a network or community can greatly

benefit families (Bourdieu, 2011; Coleman, 1988; Oztok, Zingaro, Makos, Brett, & Hewitt,

2015) because they can gain knowledge and support and then to transfer this knowledge to

their children (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). The four ways that parents/guardians transfer

knowledge include technology linkages, alliance-parent interaction, personnel transfers, and

strategic integration (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). In theory, by being part of the school

community, Black families should have more opportunities to gain knowledge and resources

to support their engagement. Yet, in reality, there is still a lack of opportunities for families

who have limited access to communication technology.

Thus, the Black families in this study called upon schools to provide more

opportunities for engagement. Urban high schools can play a role in this by advocating for

Black families and using their networks to better distribute resources. This reflects the

concept that "bridging social capital recognizes that actors, including families, are embedded

in networks with others in neighborhoods and workplaces, and with school personnel"

(Parcel & Bixby, 2016, p. 87). If urban schools in the Greater Boston area serve as bridge of

social capital between schools and families, Black students will benefit academically.

229

In What Ways Have Urban Schools in the Greater Boston Area Tried To Help Black Families Learn About Engagement Through Communication Technology?

In line with cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011), if urban schools help Black families learn how to use communication technology, parents/guardians can take advantage of being engaged remotely while feeling less pressured to be available in person. Even if they have a busy work schedule or other competing priorities, they can still remain aware of how their children are performing by using email, parent portals, and phone applications (for example). As a result, Black families can gain cultural capital while their children receive the supports they need from their parents/guardians and schools to progress in their education (Bourdieu, 2011).

Most families in this study, however, reported that their children's high schools have not tried to facilitate their engagement with teachers and administrators through communication technology, though they are interested in receiving it. In addition to a lack of training, a majority of families reported that there was no formal communication from schools encouraging them to use parent portals and phone applications. Neither the structural nor textural findings provided evidence indicating that urban schools in the Greater Boston area have done enough to help families, let alone Black families, learn about communication technology.

As discussed previously, the document archives also did not show evidence of schools pushing for families to use and engage with communication technology. Although each of families interviewed had access to school-sponsored parent portals, some of them were not aware of that and how the portals could can help them. In addition, families who had tried to explore the communication technology on their own were disappointed to find

that oftentimes their children's teachers lacked the skills needed to use it effectively. Some parents/guardians reported that the parent portal was sometimes left blank, teachers admitted to not knowing how to use it, and those teachers who did use it rarely updated it.

Theoretically, cultural capital comprises non-economic resources for helping people to gain social mobility. If used effectively by teachers and families, communication technology can help families improve their social mobility and support their daily engagement with their children's schools (Bourdieu, 2011). Through communication technology, cultural capital can be converted into economic capital, and using the technology can help to mitigate the lack of social capital (Bourdieu, 2011; Robles, 2011). For this to happen, however, urban schools must challenge themselves to use communication technology effectively and provide teachers and families with more learning opportunities. Taking on this challenge, will play a critical role in Black families' social, academic, and economic attainment (Carter, 2003).

Implications

This study's findings have three main implications. First, Black families are thought to be less engaged in urban schools because their children tend to perform at lower levels than their White peers (Murphy, 2010). This is untrue: Black families want to be engaged in their children's academic growth. Participants unanimously agreed on the importance of family engagement, despite facing multiple barriers such as racism and a lack of accessibility and economic resources.

Second, though urban schools incorporate communication technology as a response to the barriers keeping all families, including Black families, from being engaged, they have failed to fully accomplish their goal (Hoffman et al., 2015). Communication technology has

addressed certain barriers such as time (Murray et al., 2014), awareness (William & Sanchez, 2013), and fragmented communication (Merkley at al., 2006). It has not, however, eliminated other barriers related to lack of access (Reynolds et al., 2015), language (Taylor, 2016), or low socioeconomic status (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Third, while communication technology can serve as an effective way for families to communicate and acquire information about current school events, it is not making parents/guardians more engaged. As mentioned previously, family engagement is the "collaborative relationship between families and schools, and between schools and the community" (Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016, p. 7). Families using communication technology are more informed, but the technology cannot replace relationships and personal connections that families need and desire to have with teachers and educators. Each of these findings have major implications for research, practice, policy, and pedagogy.

Implications for Research

Researchers have studied family engagement (Ferguson, 2017; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010; Williams & Sanchez, 2013) as well as the integration of communication technology into family engagement (Krach et al., 2017; Olmstead, 2013). By researching the use of communication technology in Black family engagement at the high school level, this study made a unique contribution to the literature. Previous research related to this study included topics such as: communication between families and educators (Olmstead, 2013; Razak et al., 2016); barriers to family engagement (Ferguson 2017; Taylor, 2016); family engagement from preschool to eighth grade (Calzada et al., 2015; McWayne et al., 2013); family engagement at the high school level (Reynolds et al., 2015; William & Sanchez, 2013); addressing family engagement without technology (Hoffman et al., 2015; Wong-Villacres et

al., 2017); and communication technology in classrooms (Krach et al., 2017; Martinez, 2016).

By examining the use of communication technology in Black family engagement at the high school level, this study addressed a gap in the literature. Although researchers have clearly demonstrated significant and growing interest in this research area, several key factors and stakeholders have been overlooked. In recent studies, research mostly focused on K-8 schools or studied communication technology—but not from the parent/guardian perspective. In addition, my study captured the voices of Black families, whose views are generally under-examined (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008).

Implications for Practice

The Black families in this study shared a strong interest in engaging with their children's' high schools and connecting with their teachers. Based on their interview responses, schools can encourage and embrace this engagement by considering families' daily practice. The findings of this research connect to the work of Henderson et al. (2007) and their four versions of family-school partnerships. This model was designed to help practitioners identify ideas and starting points for improving partnerships between families and schools (Henderson et al., 2007). The four partnership types reflected in this model are fortress schools, come-if-we-call schools, open-door schools, and partnership schools.

Fortress schools. Central to the concept of fortress schools is the belief that: parents belong at home, not at school. If students don't do well, it's because their families don't give them enough support. We're already doing all we can. Our school is an oasis in a troubled community. We want to keep it that way. (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 13)

233

The fortress-school "model" is the opposite of best practice. As Henderson et al. (2007) explained, it is the worst type of partnership that schools can have with families since schools that practice the model do not invest in their parents/guardians, nor do they recognize the value of family input in improving the academic experience of students. Some families in this study reported feeling as though they were pushed out and undervalued. Families also connected this feeling with student independence, meaning that their perception of being pushed out was not just a result of the school's actions.

Fourteen of the 25 participants spoke about the need to trust and respect their children's independence because they were approaching the legal adult age of 18. This suggests that the reasons families felt part of a fortress-school model were due to a combination of factors, including being undervalued by schools and students pushing families away in order to establish autonomy over their education. Urban schools in the Greater Boston area that reflect this fortress model can improve their practice by looking at the findings of this research, by consider Black families' desire to be engaged, and identifying ways to foster student independence while maintaining ongoing relationships and communication between families and teachers.

Come-if-we-call schools. According to the come-if-we-call school model, "parents are welcome when we ask them, but there's only so much they can offer. The most important thing they can do is help their kids at home. We know where to get community help if we need it" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 17). The textural findings (Chapter 4) spoke to the role families played in the academics of their children at home rather than in school. The findings implied that some of the families were part school communities that reflected the come-if-we-call model. Walker et al. (2005) highlighted the division between home involvement and

234

school involvement. Urban schools that fit the come-if-we-call model make it difficult for families to recognize how the components of engagement at home and at school work together. All of the participants indicated that they engaged with their children at home, asking about school, helping them with homework, and providing them with guidance. For many families, however, this effort did not carry over to schools. To improve this practice and transition out of this model, schools must show families that their engagement is valued. They can do this by inviting Black families to share how they academically support their children at home so they can exchange ideas that support the individual needs of students.

Open-door schools. According to open-door school model, the mindset is that "parents can be involved at our school in many ways—we're working hard to get an even bigger turnout for our activities. When we ask the community to help, people often respond" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 16). Interview and focus group responses rarely reflected this model; only two of the 25 participants made reference to open-door partnership. Typically, parents/guardians indicated that their involvement in their children's school was limited to parent-teacher conferences and parent-teacher association meetings. As noted earlier, most families were part of come-if-we-call schools that made only limited efforts to build relationships, address differences, support family advocacy, and share power with parent guardians.

Partnership schools. In the partnership-school model, "all families and communities have something great to offer—we do whatever it takes to work closely together to make sure every single student succeeds" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 15). In such a partnership, schools make a conscious and conscientious effort to connect with families and the

community. In order to connect with Black families, schools must address differences and embrace their Black culture. As reflected in the structural findings (Chapter 5), many families shared how difficult it was for their children to be accepted at their schools due to their identity.

Families also expressed frustration about the lack of understanding that schools had shown. This lack of understanding was reflected in the interactions between families and teachers. Both in the individual interviews and focus groups, parents/guardians (22 of the 25 participants) expressed that they felt culturally misunderstood by teachers. Only one mother, Participant 8, felt that her daughter's school embraced her culture and language by making her a parent liaison for other families who spoke French/Haitian Creole. The school not only showed her that her input was valued, but it invited her to use her skills to recruit, train, and support other families. In the partnership-school model, schools intensify their efforts to honor families' contributions by addressing their differences (Henderson et al., 2007). Although this is only one way to improve practice, in order to embrace Black families, schools can start by following the recommendations of families in Chapter 5 and following Henderson et al.'s (2007) guidelines. One way to begin addressing differences and embracing culture might be to have translators available at all times to help families who have difficulty understanding how to use parent portals and phone applications that are primarily in English. Even if the school had limited resources, by taking an approach similar Participant 8's school, it could utilize and empower the Black families within the school community.

Implications for Policy

In Chapter 1, I argued that the voices of Black families are needed to analyze the use of communication technologies for family engagement in high schools. Specifically, the

voices of Black families are needed to better understand how to make productive changes to the relationships between families and schools. In doing so, underrepresented youth from non-White families can have the same chances of staying in school and being academically successful as their White peers (Jeynes, 2007; Murphy, 2010). If the Black student education experience and the Black family engagement experience is not equivalent to the experience of White students and their families, administrators cannot employ the same model and policies, and expect the same outcome.

Black families do not need special accommodations, but alternative policies are needed to support their children academically. For example, as educators and administrators make policies, they should be informed about how their decisions might impact families differently. Again, as Participant 16 commented, *"There is the assumption that one size fits all. You know, what you tell White families should … suffice for Black families, and that is not the case."* The rise of communication technology has changed the way families receive information about their students. Regardless of their access to technology, ability to use it, or socioeconomic status, families are now, by implication, expected to receive updates online. As practices such as these become normalized, they turn into policies due to emerging social demands (Pucci, 2016). Thus, it is very important for schools and administrators to consider the implications of their policies for all families. Black families, whose experiences with engagement are not part of the dominant narrative, are often not taken into consideration (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

Ethical policy design and implementation require a thorough consideration of "system-level, organizational, and individual capacity; organizational networks and environments; the specificity of policy; and the ambitiousness of the instructional ideas

advanced by policy" (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016, p. 248). Furthermore, there are multiple stakeholders that are impacted by the decisions and policies of school administrators (Horvat et al., 2003; Kogan, 2018). Black families are usually not part of the decision-making process, but the impact of these policies disrupts them disproportionately (Laura, 2015). Therefore, policymakers must consider how Black families experience opportunities for engagement through communication technology before demanding and normalizing its use.

Implications for Pedagogy

To improve teaching practice two major objectives should be sought: improving cultural understanding and being mindful of how teachers use communication technology. The implications of both of these objectives are explained in the following sections.

Improving cultural understanding. The most disparaging structural finding of this study, as expressed by the families, was the lack of connection and cultural understanding of teachers. The study revealed that communication technology can neither solve nor cover up preexisting problems that Black families have with urban school systems. Rather, these problems can and should be addressed in part by improving teacher practice (Hampton, Guillermo, Tucker, & Nichols, 2017) as well as changing hiring practices and hiring more teachers of color—though of course these measures alone will not be enough to eliminate racial tensions between Black families and a majority-White teacher population (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Based on this study's findings, as well as the results of similar research, there is a strong need to improve teacher practice by enhancing teacher training in cultural humility (Flynn, 2015; Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). New teachers and educators are still coming

238

into classrooms underprepared or unable to foster a culturally inclusive classroom (Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, & Kunter, 2015; Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). While it is unlikely that Black children and their families will conform to the American education system (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2015), it is highly likely the non-White population will continue to grow in urban cities across the United States (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Therefore, current and future urban K-12 teachers and educators who wish to teach this demographic of students must make more of an effort to learn about their cultures (Kumashiro, 2015). However, for this learning to be effective, teachers must openly and authentically believe that there is a need to change their approach to understanding cultural diversity (Hachfeld et al., 2015). Similarly, urban teachers must give careful consideration to how they connect with Black and culturally diverse families when they are unable to communicate with them in person.

Mindfulness of communication technology use. As many K-12 schools move toward communication technology, it is important for teachers to consider how it is used. While communication technology, such as parent portals and phone applications, can arguably complement traditional methods of engaging with families, it cannot be replacement for traditional methods such as in person meetings, phone calls, and paper communication. For some families, as indicated in the textural and structural findings, communication technology simply does not work for them.

Some Black families still need or prefer face-to-face support if teachers and administrators opt to use communication technology. As mentioned earlier, more training must to be made available and accessible to families in person as well as in languages they feel most comfortable speaking. Furthermore, as teachers use communication technology in

239

the classroom to improve their teaching practice, they must try to accommodate families who are not ready for those means. As Participant 25 mentioned, these accommodations can be provided most effectively by sending out a family technology assessment at the beginning of the school year to determine what technology families have access to at home, as well as their comfort level with it.

Finally, if urban teachers are encouraged by schools and administrators to use communication technology in their classroom, they should have the technological skills to use it effectively. If teachers use the technology properly, families will be able to check their students' academic progress, student assignments, and grades, view attendance data, manage events and assignments using the calendar, and view student conduct. Furthermore, when the teacher updates any information on the parent portals and phone applications, families (ideally) will automatically receive notifications and alerts via email or on their mobile devices (Aspen Follet Community, 2019). However, if teachers do not know how to input the data, or the data are consistently out of date, as the participants in this study mentioned, families lose patience and interest in engaging with them through communication technology.

Personal Reflections on Research Process

My personal reflections on the research process connect back to my positionality statement. As a young Black professional who attended urban public schools in the Greater Boston area, I can contemplate how the changes in the current school structure might have impacted me. Looking back at my experiences, I could see my own family in the Black families I interviewed. My mother would not have been able to keep up with the fast pace and constant change of today's technology. As a recently immigrated household with a single

mother who had limited English when I was in high school, my family would have been pushed even further away from engagement by this change.

This research process helped me realize that some Black families have similar experiences to my own, but others had very different and positive experiences. Therefore, I could not categorize all participants in a single box (Maylor, 2009). The participants who had negative engagement experiences through communication technology inspired me, but the participants who had positive experiences encouraged me. Either way, each of the families contributed to the research in their own way, offering so much for me to build upon and learn from.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study had three main limitations relating to the viewpoints expressed by participants, the time allotted to conduct the study, and the methodology. None of the limitations, however, reduced the quality of the data findings or analysis.

One of the limitations of this study was that other stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, communication technology software engineers, and students, were not interviewed. I think the results of the study would have been more reliable if all members of the school communities were represented. In doing so, I could have obtained a fuller picture of stakeholder experiences. From the creation of the technology on the backend design to the use of the communication technology by all users (teachers, parents/guardians, and students), the results would have been more well-rounded. The main reason why teachers, administrators, communication technology software engineers, and students were not interviewed had to deal with accessibility and research priorities.

241

Accessing families for this research required a great deal of preparation. In addition to asking Black families for support in recruiting qualified participants, I had to send inquiries to educational practitioners, teachers, and administrators of urban schools in the Greater Boston area, which obligated me to form research relationships with gatekeepers to gain access to those closed settings (Maxwell, 2012). By using these gatekeepers, I found a sample of families with common lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To conduct the same recruitment process for teachers, administrators, communication technology software engineers, and students, I would have needed a much larger research team and budget. Therefore, parents/guardians were prioritized for this research since their perspectives had been understudied and sharing their experiences could lead to practices that were directly relevant to families. By capturing their concerns in their own voice, my research could inform school officials and help them learn what support looks like for these Black families.

The amount of time needed to conduct this research was also a limitation. Each of the interviews with parents/guardians was planned within two-hour time blocks so participants did not feel rushed. Two hours, however, was not enough to capture each participant's many years of experience. Despite the time constraint, to retain families and make sure they remained interested in the study, I maintained a positive relationship with them through email and phone contact. In addition, I made sure that my interviews were conducted respectfully and transparently, maintaining open and honest communication with participants. Taking this intimate inquiry, love-based approach allowed me to focus on "witnessing, engaging, and

laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape" (Laura, 2016, p. 219).

Had time allowed, it would no doubt have been instructive to interview families one year after the conclusion of the study to identify any change in their engagement. Some families may have developed an interest in communication technology if they had not before. Other families may have also begun to investigate the different functionalities of the parent portals and phone applications. At the time of the study, 20% of the families participated in parent-teacher associations. It would have been interesting to find out if they raised concerns about communication technology since their preliminary interview. During the focus groups, participants were asked if they had experienced any change in their interest or actions in using communication technology since their individual interview. Although they did not initially think of it, they did report that it was something for them to consider. Future researchers should therefore consider tracing the progress of families and their use of communication technology from the time their students were freshmen to their senior year in high school.

As noted in Chapter 3, I conducted 25 individual interviews with and two focus groups with Black families. In addition, I collected archival documents from the nine school districts within the Greater Boston area. Although I interviewed an array of families, my research would have benefited from a larger sample size using a quantitative research method. Within Boston Public Schools alone there are over 54,000 students (Boston Public Schools, 2016). This number quadruples when taking into account the number of students enrolled in K-12 in urban public schools throughout the Greater Boston area.

Hearing the voices of more families—albeit through quantitative data—would have supported the findings of this research. For instance, a survey distributed to every high school would most likely have enhanced the voices, and supported the claims, of the 25 participants. I did not initially choose to use a quantitative survey because numbers and statistics cannot help researchers accurately or adequately capture the experiences of Black families. Also, if Black families were not comfortable using technology, did not have access to technology, or could not understand the language used within the technology, the responses of those Black families would not have been accounted for in this research.

Conclusion

In many ways, this study of Black family engagement through communication technology was timely, and the need urgent. Due to the strong link between engagement and student academic outcomes as well as the prevalent and growing use of technology for family engagement in urban school contexts, this study was highly relevant. This research gave Black families the opportunity to speak about their engagement and to use it as platform challenging White domination in urban school administration (Vaught, 2008) and its educational and life consequences for their children. Based on their experiences, the Black families in the study shared many recommendations. Building off these recommendations, I offer in conclusion ideas for future research and key points to take away from this study.

Recommendations

Chapter 5 detailed the recommendations made by the Black families in this study; however, I believe it is important to lift their voices and reiterate their viewpoints (Crozier, 2003). Seeing that the findings were based on their personal experiences and that they were

244

seen as the experts in this research, the final recommendations should come from them (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The participants' recommendations were directed at three "audiences": schools, teachers, and parent/guardians. Regarding schools, parents/guardians would like to see more ways for families with low socioeconomic status to gain access to communication technology; they would like to see more teachers of color hired; and they would like more training in communication technology. For teachers, families would like for educators to make more of an effort to connect with them, to learn more about their culture, and to treat them with more respect and care, and offer more support. For other parents/guardians, the families voiced that they would like to see a unified increase in engagement among all Black families to normalize their presence, provide support to their students, and reduce the likelihood of poor life outcomes of their children.

Future Research

This study should be expanded in future research. Referring to the limitations discussed earlier, future researchers should consider collaborating with communication technology companies and software engineers to study this subject through wider lens. While this study adopted a narrow focus, it would be useful for urban school leaders and officials to see how each component of the study relates to all major stakeholders. In addition, by working with the engineers who create communication technology, educators can learn more about its original intent and its future directions.

Researchers can also learn more about the functionality and effectiveness of the communication technology from the perspective of software engineers. By collaborating with them, researchers can get official information about:

1. the number of families who are registered for the parent portals and applications in comparison to who actually uses them;

2. the school districts where the communication technology is utilized most actively;

3. feedback from families, teachers, and administrators that the education software companies have received;

4. the functionalities of the communication technology that a majority of families are using; and,

5. assessments that the education software companies have conducted as well as any changes and initiatives that have been developed as a result of those assessments.

If urban schools are increasingly considering using communication technology to engage with families, school officials should include education software companies in their evaluations of technology products. By taking a collaborative approach, all voices can be involved, and each stakeholder can share a different perspective, leading potentially to effective change for students and their families.

Key Points from This Research

This research asked, "How do Black families experience opportunities for engagement with their children's high schools through the use of communication technologies?" The voices of the Black families highlighted throughout this dissertation were lifted to the readers of this research. Their thoughts and ideas on their experiences highlighted their particular needs. While no two parents'/guardians' needs were the same, their collective voice called for an increase in outreach from school staff to families and for an expansion in educators' cultural understanding.

This research has shown that Black families are important advocates for their children and that families recognize the significance of being engaged in their children's high schools. Communication technology has contributed to their knowledge of their children's academic performance and school events, but it has not satisfied their need to feel connected and have a relationship with the schools. Families have become more informed through the use of communication technology, but that technology is not a substitute for the relationships and personal connections that families need and desire to have with teachers and educators. Forming relationships with Black families can help parents/guardians overcome systemic barriers to academic and personal success for poor minority students (Bryan, 2005; Henderson et al., 2007; Murphy, 2010). Innovation and technology can be fast and convenient, but student academic success is a process that must also value human connection and partnerships, and patience.

APPENDIX A

CITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS CONSIDERED FOR THE STUDY

Map of cities and neighborhoods considered for the study.

Cities and Neighborhoods Considered for the Study

Towns in Greater Boston	Miles Away from Boston
North Waltham, United States	1
East Boston, United States	1
Cambridge, United States	1
Charlestown, United States	2
Brookline Village, United States	2
Brookline, United States	2

Towns in Greater Boston	Miles Away from Boston
Jamaica Plain, United States	3
Somerville, United States	3
Allston, United States	3
Chelsea, United States	4
Everett, United States	4
Brighton, United States	4
Chestnut Hill, United States	4
Roslindale, United States	5
Mattapan, United States	5
Watertown, United States	5
Newton Center, United States	6
Newton, United States	6
Arlington, United States	6
Belmont, United States	6
Winthrop, United States	6
Milton Village, United States	6
Waverley, United States	6
Revere, United States	6
West Medford, United States	6
Malden, United States	6
Medford, United States	6
Newton Highlands, United States	7
Arlington Heights, United States	7
Nonantum, United States	7
West Roxbury, United States	7
Hyde Park, United States	7
New Town, United States	7

Towns in Greater Boston	Miles Away from Boston
Newtonville, United States	7
Waban, United States	8
Needham Heights, United States	8
Readville, United States	8
West Newton, United States	8
Melrose, United States	8
Newton Upper Falls, United States	8
Quincy, United States	8
Milton, United States	8
Winchester, United States	8
Stoneham, United States	9
Nahant, United States	9
Saugus, United States	9
Dedham, United States	9
Newton Lower Falls, United States	9
Auburndale, United States	9
North Weymouth, United States	10
Lexington, United States	10
Lynn, United States	10
Needham, United States	10
Wellesley Hills, United States	10
Babson Park, United States	10
Waltham, United States	10

APPENDIX B

METHODS OR TECHNIQUES USED IN PREVIOUS STUDIES

Type	Method	Study	Purpose
Quantitative	A quantitative study that uses A-B design	Martinez, Venessa, "Determining Whether Classroom Dojo Will Decrease the Number of Behavior Referrals" (2016)	To determine whether or not this program is effective in the classroom with the management of behaviors.
	Surveys/ Paper Questionnaire	Hoffman, L., Podikunju-Hussain, S., & Ridout, S. (2015). : Parents of English Language Learners Share School-Home Communication Preferences	To study the potential language barriers of digital school-home communication
	2 Part Survey	Lloyd-Smith, L., & Baron, M. (2010). Beyond conferences: Attitudes of high school administrators toward parental involvement	To examine the attitudes toward parental involvement of high school principals
	A prospective longitudinal student using surveys	Calzada, E. J., Huang, K. Y., Hernandez, M., Soriano, E., Acra, C. F., Dawson-McClure, S., ... & Brotman, L. (2015). Family and teacher characteristics as predictors of parent involvement in education	To examine the contextual characteristics as predictors of parent involvement among Afro-Caribbean and Latino parents of young students in urban public schools
Qualitative	In-Depth Interviews	Williams, T. T., & Sánchez, B. (2013). Identifying and decreasing barriers to parent involvement for inner-city parents.	To examine specific barriers to parental involvement from the perspective of parents and school personnel at a predominantly African high school.

Type	Method	Study	Purpose
	63 semi-structured interviews	Wong-Villacres, M., Ehsan, U., Solomon, A., Buil, M. P., & DiSalvo, B. (2017). Design Guidelines for Parent-School Technologies to Support the Ecology of Parental Engagement.	To understand the impact of existing parent-school technology's design aspects on the parental ecology,
	Follow up of the previous study	Murray, K. W., Finigan-Carr, N., Jones, V., Copeland-Linder, N., Haynie, D. L., & Cheng, T. L. (2014). Barriers and facilitators to school-based parent involvement for parents of urban public middle school students	To identify barriers to middle school parent involvement among a sample of predominately African American parents with low incomes and low levels of educational attainment whose children attend urban public middle schools.
Case Study	A Descriptive Case Study	Taylor, K. M. (2016). A Descriptive Case Study Examining the Perceptions of Haitian American Parents and the Perceptions of their Children's Teachers on the Parents' Involvement	The purpose of this study was to develop, implement, and describe Haitian parents' perceptions of their involvement in a structured parent intervention program and to describe the perceptions of their children's teachers concerning the parents' involvement in the program.
	A Mixed Methods Case Study	Reynolds, A. D., Crea, T. M., Medina, J., Degnan, E., & McRoy, R. (2015). A mixed-methods case study of parent involvement in an urban high school serving minority students.	The authors examine how role construction and self-efficacy (psychological motivators), invitations (contextual motivators), and life contexts influence a parent's decision to become involved within the context of an urban high school serving primarily Latino, African American, and immigrant children.

Type	Method	Study	Purpose
Mixed Methods	Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured focus group interviews.	Olmstead, C. (2013). Using technology to increase parent involvement in schools.	To analyze the relationship between parents' and teachers' perceptions of student achievement when electronic communications are used between parents and schools
Other	Literature Search, Functionality Testing	Razak, S. F. A., Abdurahim, B., & Mashhod, F. (2016). Keeping Parents Involved Using 360-Class Monitoring Application.	This study aims to provide an alternative for teachers and parents to communicate as well as alleviating the task as intermediaries from the students.
	Literature Analysis	Goodall, J., & Montgomery, C. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum	To present a model for the progression from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement
	Observation, Review of Teaching Methods, Comparison of Teacher Data	Krach, S. K., McCreery, M. P., & Rimel, H. (2017). Examining teachers' behavioral management	To examine teachers' use of behavioral logs and to compare that use against empirically-based methods used as part of the decision-making process within a PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports) framework.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND PROTOCOL FOR ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Interview Script for One-on-One Interviews

Interview # _____

Date: _____ / _____ / _____

Opening and Introduction

Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study on Black

Family Engagement in the Greater Boston Area. My name is Mariette Bien-Aime Ayala, a

PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Boston conducting this research in the

Greater Boston Area. Thank you for completing the demographic survey via Google forms.

This interview will take about 40-60 minutes and will include 20 questions regarding how

you experience opportunities for engagement in your child's school through communication

technology. Communication technology is defined as software or applications that serve as a

third party between families and teachers. These forms of technologies include email, parent

portals, 24/7 phone applications that provide real-time feedback to parents, and classroom

management tools that parents and families have real-time access to.

Interview Consent

All of your responses are confidential, and I will keep confidentiality of this audio

tape to be used only within the context of this study and be destroyed after the completion of

the study. You and I both signed and dated this consent form certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive the copy of this consent. Thank you.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any time during the interview you need to stop, take a break, or return to a previous question, please let me know. Remember you can skip any questions you do not want to answer. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequences. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Thank you.

With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview, so that I can accurately document our conversation. The entire interview will be audio-recorded but no one will be identified by name. Please remember not to use your name or any information that can directly identify you during the interview to keep your identity confidential. You may still take part in the interview if you do not want to be audio recorded. All recorded audio files will be destroyed after it has been transcribed which I anticipate will be within two months of audio recording.

Let's begin the interview (start recording).

This is an interview audio recording of Participant # _____ in site
_____

Interview Protocol for One-on-One Interviews

For One-On-One Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents					
#:	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
1.	On a scale of 1-10, to what extent was your family engaged in your academic experience? a. How was your parent's relationship with teachers and administrators?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
2.	How did the level of your family engagement have an impact on you?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
3.	Do you believe family engagement has changed since you were in K-12? Why or why not?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
4.	On a scale of 1-10, how engaged are you in your child's academic experience?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
5.	How did you initially become involved with your son/daughter's high school?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students Teachers
6.	What role, if any, have had in becoming engaged with your child's high school?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students Teachers

Table header					
For One-On-One Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents					
#:	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
7.	How has being an engaged parent affected you personally (if applicable)?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
8.	Do you set aside time each day to connect with your child's teacher?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families School Administrators
9.	Is communication technology easy to apply to your day to day life with you and your child? Why or why not?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families School Administrators
10.	How did you end up with a leadership role at your son/daughter's high school? (potential follow up question if in Parent Teachers Association/ Parent University)	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families School Administrators
11.	What was the point where you felt like family engagement was important for you and your child?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students
12.	What was the most important reason that you feel that Black families should be engaged?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students Teachers

	For One-On-One Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents				
#:	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
					Administrators
13.	What is the one important thing people should know about why Black family engagement is needed in Boston Public Schools?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
14.	How has your gender, race, class or other identity impacted your experience as a parent guardian?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
15.	What are some of the methods of engagement through communication technology that you are aware of?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
16.	In what ways, if any, have you been engaged with your child's school through communication technology? How do you think each of these methods impacted your ability to be engaged?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials

	For One-On-One Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents				
#:	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
17.	How have you used communication technology? In what ways, if any, do you disagree with using communication technology?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
18.	What has your experience been like using communication technology to connect with teachers? Is this experience the same with administrators?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
19.	What has your experience working with communication technology taught you about modern family engagement?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students School Officials
20.	What are your hopes for what should happen next as the next generation of parents continues to engage through communication technology?	25 Black Parents/ Families	Individual Interview	Coding/ Themes (Dedoose)	Parents/ Families Students

APPENDIX D

BUDGET FOR THE STUDY

Item	Purpose	Details	Cost
25 Gifts Cards (Individual Interview Participants)	Participation Incentive	Participant Choice of Target, Visa, or Amazon 25 - 25.00 gift cards	$625.00
20 Gifts Cards (Focus Group Interview Participants)	Participation Incentive	Participant Choice of Target, Visa, or Amazon 20 - 25.00 gift cards	$500.00
35 Individual Interview Transcriptions	Accuracy and Effective Turnaround	Rev.com | Transcription - $1/Minute 25 - 1 Hour Interviews (1500)	$1,500.00
2 Focus Group Interview Transcriptions	Accuracy and Effective Turnaround	Rev.com | Transcription - $1/Minute 2 - 2 Hour Group Interviews (240 minutes)	$240.00
Dedoose Software	Coding and Theming Interviews	Student License https://www.dedose.com/	$100.00
Flyers and Posters	Publications, Recruitment	Using: https://www.umb.edu/quinn_graphics (50 Flyers, 4 Posters)	$100.00
Food and Refreshments (Individual Interview Participants)	Comfort/Participation Incentive	Coffee, Pasties at Coffee Shop	$250.00

Item	Purpose	Details	Cost
		(10.00 per interviewee)	
Food and Refreshments (Focus Group Interview Participants)	Comfort/Participation Incentive	Water, Fruit Tray, Vegetable Tray, Pizza	$200.00
Audio Recorder	Voice Recorder, 8GB Digital Audio Sound Recorder Dictaphone, Digital Voice Activated Recorder with MP3 Player, High-sensitivity Dual Microphone, Multifunctional Rechargeable recorder for Lectures	Found on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Dictaphone-High-sensitivity-Microphone-Multifunctional-Rechargeable/dp/B07CRC3FCR/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?ie=UTF8&qid=1528644639&sr=8-1-spons&keywords=audio+recorder&psc=1	$25.00
Interview Materials	Group and Individual Interview Organization	Paper, Pens, Markers, Giant Adhesive Poster Paper	$100.00
Total:			$3,640.00

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

	For Focus Group Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents					
#:	Sub Questions	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
1.	How do Black families within Greater Boston Area define their needs in order to be engaged in urban schools?	Do you feel as though you have the support to be engaged in your child's school? Why or why not?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families Students
2.		What resources can help you increase your engagement in your child's school?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families Students
3.	What opportunities are being given to Black families that have limited access to communication technology?	Have you been presented with alternative ways to connect with your child's school other than through communication technology?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families School Teachers and Admin.
4		Do you feel as though your income or access to resources has prohibited you from engaging through communication technology?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families School Teachers and Admin.

		For Focus Group Semi-Structured Interviews with Families/ Parents				
#:	Sub Questions	Interview Questions:	Participant Sample	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis	Audience
5.	In what ways have urban schools in the greater Boston area tried to help Black families learn about engagement through communication technology?	In what ways have your child's school reach out to you to tell you how you can be engaged?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families School Teachers and Admin.
6.		What trainings/support has been given to you to learn about ways to be engaged through communication technology? Is it effective? Can it be effective?	20 Black Parents/ Families	Focus Group Interview	Coding/ Themes (Max QDA)	Parents/ Families School Teachers and Admin.

ARCHIVAL DATA CHART AND DATA ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Public Schools	Communication Technology Method	Type	Location
Boston Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Brookline Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Cambridge Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Everett Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	

Public Schools	Communication Technology Method	Type	Location
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Malden Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Medford Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Milton Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
	Text Messaging Alert System		
Quincy Public Schools	Parent Portal		
	Electronic Newsletter		
	Social Media	Facebook	
		Twitter	
		Instagram	

Public Schools	Communication Technology Method	Type	Location
	Text Messaging Alert System		

Archival Data Analysis Question

Boston Public Schools					
Communication Technology Method:	**Type:**	**Analysis Question**	**Yes/No**	**Notes**	
Parent Portal		Is there a comprehensible log-in?		
		Is there training available?		
		Is it connected to school website?		
		Is it mobile friendly?		
		Main Functions:		
Electronic Newsletter		How often is it issued?		
		Is it emailed or on school website?		
		Main functions:		
Social Media	Facebook	Is it public page? Is it frequently used by parents?		
		Are there any recent posts?		
		Main functions:		
	Twitter	Is it public page? Is it frequently used by parents?		
		Are there any recent posts?		
		Main functions:		
	Instagram	Is it public page? Is it frequently used by parents?		
		Are there any recent posts?		

Boston Public Schools				
Communication Technology Method:	**Type:**	**Analysis Question**	**Yes/No**	**Notes**
		Main functions:		
Text Messaging Alert System		Is it easy to sign up?		
		Are there instructions on the school website?		

APPENDIX G

DISSERTATION TASKS AND DUE DATES

Dissertation Timeline

Dissertation Proposal By August 2018			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year**	**Week:**	
Determine all Research Questions	April 2018	2	✔
Determine Methods	April 2018	2	✔
Declare Dissertation Committee with Urban Education Department	May 2018	2	✔
Email Committee Draft	May 2018	4	✔
Complete Citi Training for IRB	June 2018	2	✔
Complete SSRC Transdisciplinary Dissertation Proposal Development Program	June 2018	3	✔
Dissertation Approval	July 2018	4	✔
Complete Committee Recommendations	August 2018	1	✔
IRB Approval	August 2018	2	✔
Phase 1: One-On-One Interviews By January 2019			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year**	**Week:**	
Train in Qualitative Methods	August 2018	3	✔
Recruit Families ● Flyers	August 2018	3	✔

• Emails • Connections through educators and engagement specialists			
Send out Initial Demographic Forms	August 2018	4	✔
Create Fall Interview Schedule	August 2018	4	✔
Interview Data Collection	September to October 2018	4	✔
Memos for Each Interview	November 2018	4	✔
Transcribe Each Interview	December 2018	4	✔
Member-Check Each Interview	January 2019	2	✔
Phase 2: Focus Groups **By March 2019**			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year**	**Week:**	
Recruit Families for Focus Groups • Phone Calls • Emails • Connect with families who want to participate in groups	January 2019	3	✔
Send out Consent Forms	January 2019	4	✔
Create Interview Schedule	January 2019	4	✔
Create Group Interview Protocol Based on One-On-One Interview Trends	February 2019	1	✔
Interview Group 1	February 2019	1	✔
Interview Group 2	February 2019	2	✔
Memos for Each Interview	February 2019	4	✔

Item:	Month/ Year	Week:	
Transcribe Each Interview	March 2019	1	✔
Member-Check Each Focus Group Interview	March 2019	2	✔
Phase 3: Data Analysis By May 2019			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year**	**Week:**	
Review Memos from Each One-on-one interview • Read first for recollection • Read twice for notes • Extract key details	March 2019	3	✔
Review Transcriptions from Each One-on-one interview • Read first for recollection • Read twice for notes • Extract key details • Complete Member Checks	March 2019	4	✔
Develop Codes based on frequented themes	April 2019	1	✔
Code One-On-One Interviews	April 2019	2	✔
Review Memos from Each Focus Group interview • Read first for recollection • Read twice for notes • Extract key details	April 2019	3	✔
Review Transcriptions from Each Focus Group interview • Read first for recollection • Read twice for notes • Extract key details • Complete Member Checks	April 2019	4	✔

Develop Codes based on frequented themes	May 2019	1	✔
Code Focus Group Interviews	May 2019	2	✔
Complete Data Analysis	May 2019	3	✔
Preparation for Dissertation Defense By August 2019			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year:**	**Week:**	
Determine Initial Findings	May 2019	4	✔
Contact Dissertation Committee	June 2019	1	✔
Complete Write Up of Chapter 5	July 2019	3	✔
Contact Editor	July 2019	4	✔
Complete Revisions with Editor	August 2019	3	✔
Dissertation Defense By October 2019			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year:**	**Week:**	
Submit Final Draft to Dissertation Committee	August 2019	4	✔
Set up Dooms Day	September 2019	2	✔
Complete Dissertation Draft	September 2019	3	✔
Complete Dissertation Defense	October 2019	2	
Preparing for Dissertation Deposit			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year:**	**Week:**	
Create List of Revisions and Recommendations from Committee	October 2019	3	✔
Complete Revisions	November 2019	3	✔

Meet with Editor	November 2019	4	✔
Deposit Dissertation	December 2019	4	✔

After Deposit By May 2020			✔:
Item:	**Month/ Year:**	**Week:**	
Archive Interview Materials	January 2020	4	
Send Thank You Letters	February 2020	4	
Send Publication to Parents, GateKeepers, and Interested Audience	May 2020	1	
Graduation	May 2020	2	

APPENDIX H

IN-DEPTH PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant 1

Participant 1 was a mother living in Quincy, Massachusetts, with roots in Cape Verde. She was a 41-year-old married woman with three children. Her youngest son was in elementary school, her daughter was in high school, and her eldest son was in college. At the time of the study, she worked as a nurse but was nearing completion of her master's degree to become a nurse practitioner. During this interview, she and I focused on her experience with her children in high school. Although she was very comfortable with technology, she believed that technology was taking away from personal interactions between families, teachers, and administrators. She wanted to see more intentional effort and one-on-one interactions from the teachers. She was very optimistic about the future of public schools, but she did not think that technology could compensate for a lack of family engagement or family involvement.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was a mother living in Somerville, Massachusetts. She had one daughter who was in high school. She had just moved with her family from Florida, and she worked full time as technical support representative. She had lived in Somerville for less than a year, but she had already experienced the difficulties of living in a neighborhood facing gentrification and its attendant high living costs. One of the main notions she spoke about was that of the "24-hour student," such as her daughter, who get out of school at 3 p.m. and then attend for-fee programs and services that provided for them until 8 p.m. Based on her

experience, she believed that school hours were not realistic and prohibited families from being as engaged as they could be. She believed that by extending school hours, full-time working parents like her would have more time to connect with high schools.

Participant 3

Participant 3 was a mother of four who lived in Dorchester, Massachusetts. She had lived in the Greater Boston area her entire life. For employed, she had worked consistently as a cook for multiple restaurants. Her eldest daughter was in college, her youngest daughter was in middle school, and her two twin boys were in high school. Although her sons attended different schools, she remained extremely engaged in both. She was a very committed and proactive parent. With four children in different schools, she tried her best to maintain a strong relationship with each school both in person and through communication technology.

Participant 4

Participant 4 was a mother who worked as a full-time banker. She lived in Somerville, Massachusetts, and had been living in the neighborhood for over 10 years. She had two children, a boy and girl. She was an educated, working professional parent striving to provide the best experience for both of her children. Her son had recently started high school, and her daughter was in college. She spoke about the difference between her engagement during her son's experience in high school and during her daughter's past experience. The difference in engagement, she noted, stemmed from her son's lack of interest in school and his having a learning disability.

Participant 5

Participant 5 was a father of three who worked as an elementary school teacher in Randolph, Massachusetts. He had worked in this position for the previous four to six years.

274

In addition, he was a full-time graduate student studying in Boston. His daughter attended a public school in Boston as well. As a father and teacher interested in urban education, he was motivated and excited to share his insight. Not only did he use technology to communicate and speak with his children's teachers, but he also used it to communicate with families. When he was not at work, he used his skillset to connect with and support his children's academic work.

Participant 6

Participant 6 was a guardian who lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He had lived there for less than five years, but his extended family had lived there for decades before him. He was not a parent but a brother, and his perspective was unique—as someone who had the responsibilities of a parent but did not claim the title or the role. He worked full time as a restaurant server and was an electrical engineering student. His parents had moved to the British Virgin Islands for a job opportunity, and they had decided to send his brother to Massachusetts from Florida, a decision based on the accessibility to an excellent high school and support from siblings as the brother applied for college. The parents' hope was that the brother would become acclimated to Boston and Cambridge, making it easier for him to transition to college. As a young guardian, Participant 6 was very comfortable with technology, but he still felt disconnected from his brother's schools and the process of being engaged through communication technology.

Participant 7

Participant 7 was a mother who had lived in Boston with her husband and children for over 10 years. In addition to working as a registered nurse, she was also a full-time student. Her family was originally from Haiti, but most of them, including her mother, father, and

275

grandmother, had moved to Boston to be with her. She had two children; her daughter was in college, and her younger son attended high school in Boston. As a mother, her main focus was on relationship building. She initially became involved with her son's high school by simply asking questions, making phone calls, attending meetings, setting aside time to speak with school representatives and to chaperone events. Her interests in being engaged stemmed from her belief that education can improve the economic status of Black families.

Participant 8

Participant 8 was a passionate mother of five children. With the exception of her eldest daughter, her entire family had lived in Boston for the last 10 years. She lived with four of her daughters, one in college, one in high school, and her two youngest twin daughters in elementary school. As she explained, she was driven to see young Black children and families succeed in school. This passion had led her to accept a role as a coordinator and liaison for the Haitian Parent-Teachers Association. In this role, she helped recruit other Haitian parents and get them more involved in the academic experiences of their children. She did this work while working as a full-time chef. As a chef, she was frequently asked to cook for school events, and she tried to find different ways to be involved a couple times each month.

Participant 9

Participant 9 was a mother of a three-year-old but a parent/guardian of a young boy in high school. As a result, she felt as though she was learning along the way. She had become a parent/guardian to her step-son five years earlier. They lived in Boston, Massachusetts, and her son attended school in Cambridge. With the exception of receiving her college education in Salem, Massachusetts, she had lived in Boston her entire life. She valued high school

education, and she worked as a high school educator herself. As the supervisor of education and adolescent services in her school, she taught and had established multiple partnerships with high schools throughout the Greater Boston area. She also came from a family that valued education, with her siblings and mother working in K-12 schools. As a result of her experience, she valued creating personal relationships with her son's teachers.

Participant 10

Participant 10 was a father who worked full time as a surgical technician. He lived in Boston, but he worked at a hospital located over an hour away from his home. He had three children. His youngest son was in pre-school, his daughter in elementary school, and his eldest son in high school in Cambridge. He grew up in Haiti but moved to Boston with his eldest son when he was in his mid-twenties and his son was a toddler. Now, his eldest son had reached his father's height of over six feet, and he played high school basketball. Participant 10 was a very passionate father who tried to maintain a strong relationship with to his children through patience and communication. In doing so, he hoped that this relationship would foster a trusting bond.

Participant 11

Participant 11 was a mother of three children, two in elementary school and one in high school. She worked very hard as a patient access representative. At the time, she lived in Dorchester but did not feel that it was safe for her children, so she was in the midst of trying to move them to Medford, Massachusetts. Living in Dorchester, she woke up three hours early every day in order to get her kids ready for and bring them to school in Cambridge. She chose to send them to school in Cambridge because she wanted a better education for them. She wanted her son to grow up with a fair chance. She understood what it is like to raise two

brown boys in an urban Boston neighborhood, so she strived to find ways to set them up for success—for instance, by keeping them active in afterschool clubs, activities, and sports.

Participant 12

Participant 12 was a married mother who had a three-month-old son and a daughter in high school. She lived in Medford but worked in Cambridge as a clinical laboratory assistant. As she tried to adapt to having a new baby, she also had to figure out the best ways to support her daughter's high school experience. Her daughter started off attending high school in Medford, but she had a difficult time there. Participant 12 felt as though the school lacked cultural diversity and that her daughter, as a young Afro-Latino woman, was misunderstood. Instead, in order to help her find a more fitting high school, she sent her daughter to her alma mater in Somerville.

Participant 13

Participant 13 lived in Cambridge and worked as a medical assistant. She had a daughter in high school who played many types of sports (e.g., basketball) and was also involved in the school's culinary program. She tried to remain as engaged as she could be in her daughter's high school experience both inside and outside the classroom. Her motivation to be engaged came from her wanting her daughter to know that she was there not only emotionally but also physically.

Participant 14

Participant 14 was an inspiring and invigorating mother who lived in Boston and owned her own daycare center. She was very insightful and she shared a significant amount of information about her daughter and two sons. Her two sons had graduated K-12, but her daughter was in high school. Each of her children had an inspiring story; each had almost

278

died at birth due to complications of prematurity and had received life-saving surgeries. Here zeal and faith had pushed her through these hard times. As a single mother, she had done everything in her will to make sure her children felt and received the support they needed to succeed. Although she had three children, she supported several students emotionally and academically. She wanted to see all students, even those without parental representation, supported and heard.

Participant 15

Participant 15 was also very insightful. She came from a very educated background. She was a first-generation college graduate, and her mother was a single mom. When she was younger, she attended a small school and considered herself a well-behaved child. Being a teacher herself, she was able to observe and analyze the difference between family engagement today and when she was in school. She was also involved with the Parent Teachers Association, attending meetings, events, presentations, or other activities on any given day. She lived in Dorchester, but her children did not attend the local neighborhood schools. Instead, her daughter and son attend schools in the Greater Boston area that she believed have more programs and resources.

Participant 16

Participant 15 was a father of two living in Dorchester. He was not only a Black father, but also an immigrant from Gambia with a British education. He worked in Randolph as a math teacher. In addition, he was a full-time doctoral student. His son and daughter were both in high school, but they attended different schools because of opportunities offered them at their respective schools. On a weekly basis, he used his skills and experience to help his children learn math because he wanted them to have a strong understanding of the subject.

He spoke about helping his children and making sure he attended parent-teacher meetings and events. Due to his parent involvement and work commitment, he had put hobbies and personal activities, such as playing recreational soccer, aside to focus on his family.

Participant 17

Participant 17 was a mother of four children, though in her interview, she spoke about her three children who were in K-12 schools. She had two young boys who were 11 months apart. The younger boys attended elementary school and her older son was in high school. Her family lived in Everett, Massachusetts, which is just miles from the center of Boston. They had lived there for over 10 years. She worked in the education system as a community health educator. In addition to having a son in high school, she also worked with teenage students. Being engaged in her son's high school experience made her feel proud because she was both helping her son and connecting with him at the same time. She tried to find ways to stay academically involved. For example, each time she got a new job, she tried to make sure that her job was flexible enough to give her time to visit her son's school and connect with teachers during business hours.

Participant 18

Participant 18 was born in Haiti but moved to the United States with his two brothers when he was young. After migrating to the United States, his family grew with the birth of his younger brother and sister. Although he grew up with his four brothers and one sister, they all had very different experiences, in terms of academic experiences and also the neighborhoods they lived in during high school. For example, while some of the siblings attended high school in Boston, others (i.e., the younger siblings) went to high school in Melrose, whose schools are predominantly White and well-funded. Participant 18 had two

daughters of his own, and he had made it a point to always look out for their best interests and keep them away from danger. He was a motivated and engaged father who worked for an insurance company in downtown Boston. His youngest daughter was in elementary school, and his eldest daughter was a freshman in high school.

Participant 19

Participant 19 was a mother of two working full time as a store manager for a U.S. retailer of aftermarket automotive parts and accessories. Her eldest daughter attended high school in Everett. Her family had lived in Everett for the previous eight years. Although her job kept her from providing day-to-day academic support, every moment she was not working, she was with her children, supporting them during evenings and weekends, and in summer hobbies. Her children were involved in both dance and gymnastics, and had been very successful in these activities and in school. Arguably, these girls would not have been as successful inside and outside the classroom as they had been without their mother's positive impact. Every single moment outside of her work she devoted to them. Whether at work, at home, or volunteering, all of her time went toward supporting them.

Participant 20

Participant 20 lived in Milton, Massachusetts, and worked as a certified nursing assistant. She was interviewed with the help of one of her three children, her daughter, a college graduate. Her eldest son was in college, and her youngest daughter went to high school in Milton. Her eldest daughter was helpful because, six to seven years earlier, she had been in the same high school taking the same classes as her brother and sister. The two daughters were seven years apart, and the eldest was able to cite major differences in her mother's parenting style compared to she was in high school. To accommodate the difference

in engagement styles, the eldest daughter actively helped her mother learn how to use technology such as email and text in order to connect with her sister's high school.

Participant 21

Participant 21, a mother of three young boys, was a ball of energy. She has lived in Mattapan, Massachusetts, for over 33 years. At the time of the study, she was a full-time worker at Dana Farber and also enrolled in a master's in urban public health program. Her youngest son went to high school in Boston. He began his education in the Catholic school system, but he was soon pushed out and had since attended urban public schools. This was a disappointment for Participant 21 because she had attended Catholic schools for her K-12 education. During her early years as a mother, she identified as an uneducated Black mom, which, as she explained in her interview, affected her ability to support and advocate for her son. Now, however, she was not only in college, but she had been promoted at her job. Her experience had taught her how to be an advocate for her sons and had encouraged her to pay it forward to other families however she could.

Participant 22

Participant 22 was a highly active father who also worked full time. He was a father of five children who, as he explained, went above and beyond for them. Not only did he frame his work schedule around his children's school schedule, but, more importantly, he was concerned with and involved in their emotional and spiritual well-being. He had a Haitian background and had come to the United States when he was young. He grew up in Boston in the 1990s, during mass incarceration, and had little to no parent involvement due to a language barrier. As a result, he returned to Haiti, where he built a new life with his wife. They later moved back to Boston and had two girls and three boys. In his interview, he and I

focused on the experience of his eldest daughter who was in high school. He believed that he was very engaged, and he tried his best to ensure that his children had the support they needed while also giving them space to develop a sense of independence and autonomy.

Participant 23

Participant 23 worked in the hospitality management sector as a director of housekeeping. She was a mother to three boys and one girl. Her two oldest boys were in high school. Her boys were highly engaged in sports, and she cheered them on in their sports and their academics. Her two youngest children attended elementary and middle school. She grew up in Boston in a Haitian household, and when she was a student at West Roxbury High, her parents had virtually no relationship with teachers and administrators. Now, despite working over 60 hours a week, she found ways to remain engaged in her children's school experiences, whether through volunteering at a book fair or chaperoning different field trips.

Participant 24

Participant 24 was a single mom with one child in high school. They lived in Brookline, Massachusetts, and she worked full time in medical administration. She took pride that she and her son were very close to one another and that they had a positive relationship. In order to foster their relationship, she spent a lot of time connecting with him. She and her son's father met in the same high school her son was attending. Thus, her parenting sometimes reflects the experience she had when she was in high school because her son is going through a similar experience. For example, the school is still a predominantly White high school and still employs some of the same teachers she had when she was in high school. When her son was in middle school, he went to a private Catholic school known for being a feeder into advanced high schools. Most of the students who attend this middle

school end up in well-funded, rigorous schools. Her son, however, decided to attend a public school—the same one as his parents and a still reputable one. Since starting high school, he had become very involved; he took karate, was is in the school play, played football, and ran track. On top of all of this, all of his classes were Advanced Placement.

Participant 25

Participant 25, a third- and fourth-grade teacher, had three children. The eldest boy was high school, and the younger two, a boy and a girl, were toddlers. She understood family engagement not only from her perspective as a parent and a mom, but also as a teacher. She came from a background that was relatively unique compared to other Black people in Boston. Not only had she gone to college, but so too had her parents and grandparents. In addition, her family had been highly engaged in her education. Not only did she consider her parents very involved and outgoing, but, as she explained, they were loving and supportive. Her parents extended all of their talents to the other students at her school by volunteering for workshops and cultural events. Attending high school in Brookline, which is predominantly White, she was one of only four Black students in her high school. Her parents' support encouraged her academically, professionally, and now personally as a mother.

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