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**The Experience of African American Parents with the Special
Education System: A Review of Literature**

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Education System: A Review of Literature**

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Report

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Dedication

This project is especially dedicated to my dear husband, Oladotun Ayobade. You have been a great source of inspiration and motivation to me. Thank you for your love, encouragement, support and for always believing in me. I love you. I would also like to dedicate this work to:

To my sunshine, Feyisona Ayobade. I am immensely blessed to have you as my son.

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Abstract

The Experience of African American Parents with the Special Education System: A Review of Literature

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This study is a review of literature on the experiences of African American parents of children with disabilities in the special education system. The reviewed works span between 1990 and 2014, and the purpose of the review is to understand (a) the experiences of African American parents of children with disabilities with the special education process, (b) the factors impacting these parents participation in their children's education, (c) their experiences with special education professionals, and (d) their perspectives on the factors that hinders or facilitate their relationship with special education professionals. Thirteen studies met the inclusion criteria of being published in peer-reviewed journals or dissertations and investigating the experiences of African American parents of children who receive special education services. The findings suggest that parents' participation in special education processes and parent-professional relationships are influenced by factors

such as communication issues, cultural difference, support from the system, knowledge of special education law and procedures. I conclude this study by proposing recommendations for improving the experiences of African American parents in special education process.

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Introduction

Several studies have established a positive relationship between parental involvement in children's education and high academic outcomes, greater motivation to learn, improved scores on standardized tests, higher chances at graduating high school, higher chances at completing college education, and fewer behavioral problems (Brandon, 2007; Brandon & Brown, 2009; Epstein 2001). Therefore, parental involvement in general or special education remains critical to the academic success, behavioral and socio-emotional health of every child. For this reason, Epstein (2001) highlighted six ways that schools can encourage and sustain this kind of parental involvement for the purpose of increasing their students' chances at success. These include (a) providing parents support to participate in schooling, (b) facilitating homeschool communication, (c) providing parents with volunteering opportunities at the child's school, (d) encouraging parents to adopt home learning, (e) create an atmosphere in which parents can participate in school-based decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community to provide parents with resources that foster participation in school activities. Following Epstein's said parental roles, therefore, parental involvement in education cannot be limited to establishing a relationship with the child alone; it involves building collaborative relationships with personnel at the child's school as well as with the community.

Evidence shows that the positive outcomes are greater for children with or without disabilities when parents and school professionals maintain this kind of collaborative

relationship (Brandon, 2007). However, parental involvement in the schooling of children with disabilities and parents' collaboration with schools is not only recommended; these interventions are mandated by the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Act (IDEA) mandates that a collaborative relationship be established and maintained between parents and schools in the process of assessment, identification, placement, planning and implementation of Individualized Education Program (IEP), and the provision of other educational services (IDEA, 1997; 2004). With the passing of this law, parents are required to assume the role of partners, protectors and advocates for their children (Hughes, Riestra & Arguelles, 2008).

African American Parents and Special Education

Some scholars have argued that assuming this level of involvement usually presents a challenge to minority families— that is, cultural and linguistic minorities— as many from this group lack the skills, resources, and knowledge required to participate in many school programs (Harry, Kalyanpur & Skrtic, 2000). Like most parents, African American parents of students with or without disabilities participate in home-school collaboration by engaging in their children's education in diverse ways (Longue & Latunde, 2014). African American parents supervise their children's homework, seek community services for their children, advocate for their children, and participate in the decision making processes around their children's education (Hart, Harry & Klinger, 2005; Longue & Latunde, 2014). Nevertheless, when compared to other parents, African American

parents of children in special education programs demonstrate low participation in their children's education (Harry, 1992; Smith, Krohn, Chu, & Best, 2005; Rao, 2000).

Researchers have identified various barriers to the involvement of African American parents in their children's education, which include lack of access to information; socio-economic challenges; home-school communication issues; logistic challenges such as lack of transportation; residence in rural areas; lack of schools' commitment to students with disability; and poor parent-professional relationship (Brandon, 2007; Harry, Hart & Klinger 2005; Stanley, 2013; William, 2007).

Evidently, cultural background and family structure may impact how African American parents understand school participation, what their expectations are for participation and how they participate (Harry, 1992). In line with this thinking, Allen, Hart and McLaughlin (1995) found that African American families maintain a variety of structures that prove effective in providing positive learning environments for their children with disabilities. In their research, three families relied on the grandmothers to provide day care for their children with disabilities as well as assume parental roles during school events. In another twelve families, the authors found that supervising homework and making decisions at school were generally designated as the fathers' roles in their children's education. Further, McGhee and Tocci (1998) examined the experiences of 15 African American mothers in the early intervention services their children were receiving.

They found that thirteen of the fifteen mothers were knowledgeable about their children's disabilities and were aware of the kind of service that best suits their children's needs.

Contrary to these findings, the literature on the participation of African American parents in the special education processes shows that their level of involvement in their children's education remains considerably low when compared to Caucasian and Hispanic parents (Lynch & Stein, 1987). It is only reasonable to wonder the dismal participation of African American parents of children in special education services, despite their overall commitment to their children's education. In developing a framework for understanding the participation of African American parents in the special education system, Boyd and Correa (2005) suggests that three factors may influence the experience of African American parents in special education system: (a) sociocultural experiences of parents, (b) the development of bias towards professionals, and the level of parents' acculturation. According to these researchers, socio cultural experiences such as religious beliefs, extended family relations and disagreement with special education labeling may impact African American parents' decision to utilize special education services. They further explained that the parents' level of acculturation, which encompasses their level of education and socioeconomic status, also influences how parents familiarize themselves with the system. In addition, the development of bias towards educator, which is fuelled by negative interactions with professional and experiences with reception of services from the system, also affects how parents navigate the special education system.

Furthermore, Harry (1992) discussed four other common problems that might contribute to the development of these negative feelings and attitudes: distrust of the system, which is fueled by the parents' awareness of the overrepresentation of African American children in special education programs; apathy; logistic constraint and stressful life circumstances; and disagreement with special education classification. Therefore, the under participation of African American in the special education process derives both from a combination of an overexpectation of what the interventions entail and a distrust of the system, both of which do not bode well for their children with learning disabilities.

The frustrations that African American parents face can also be particularized to different aspects of the special education process. Six years after the enactment of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, 1975 (Public law 92-142), Boone and Smith (1981) conducted a study to ascertain the knowledge level of 13 African American parents of children with disabilities about the law. The authors found that the parents had challenges with understanding: evaluation procedures, due process hearings, their roles in developing an Individualized Education Plan, and the rights of the child to free and appropriate public education. Unfortunately, recent research has shown that many African American parents still experience similar challenges with understanding the same reauthorized law—IDEA (Thompson, 2014). As a result, lack of access to this crucial information may deter African American parents from being involved in the special

education process (Davis, Brown, & Manno, 2002; Zionst, Zionst, Harrison & Bellinger, 2003).

Despite IDEA's mandate for a parent-collaborative relationship, studies have shown that African American parents have continued to experience difficulties building successful relationships with special education personnel (Harry, 1992b; Huff et al, 2005; Rao, 2000; Zionst, 2003). Thompson (2003) suggested that the lack of meaningful communication between professionals and parents has been reported as a reason African American parents feel that their children are not receiving appropriate educational services. Other reasons cited for unsuccessful relationships with school personnel in studies include: negativity towards children and parents, lack of knowledge of cultural diversity and sensitivity, bias towards parents, lack of respect for parents' views and parenting style, difficulties with understanding education jargons, discourteous remarks by school staff during IEP meetings (Boyd & Corea, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1999; Rao, 2000; Wolfe & Duran, 2013; William, 2007; Zionst et al; 2003).

These findings become particularly disturbing when taken in light of data on the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Harry & Klinger, 2006; Thompson, 2003a). According to data from the U.S Department of Education (2003), Office of Special Education Programs, National Academy of Science report on ethnic representation in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002), and National Center for Education Statistics (2008), African

American students are not only overrepresented in special education programs, but they are also twice as likely to be identified in the Intellectual Disability and Emotional Disorders categories (Donovan & Cross 2002). Given the revelations from these data, there is an urgency in the need to appreciate the experiences and perspectives of the parents of these children in special education programs. Additionally, these data provide support to the suspicion of African American parents of the special education system. As a consequence, the experiences of and perceptions of these parents concerning special education might provide insights into how educators can increase the involvement of parents and families in special education programs; as well as provide better quality education to their children being serviced by such programs (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

Despite the compelling need to understand the experiences and perspectives of African American parents of children with disabilities, only scant literature has been published on the topic. In this vein, Davis, Brown, Bantz and Manno (2002) conducted a review of literatures from 1979 to 2002 covering the involvement of parents of African American students with special needs in their children's schooling. The purpose of their study was to determine (a) the quantity of empirical studies on the topic, (b) the overall quality and form of research on the topic, (c) outcomes of the studies and (d) efforts by the school and researchers to improve any of these factors. Although the contribution of such study remains indubitable, the absence of sustained engagement with the experiences of African American parents with the special education system remains worrisome. In many

ways, my study preoccupies itself with a similar concern as Davis *et al*—a review of literature around African American parents of students in the special education system. However, this review differs from Davis *et al* (2002) in significant ways. First, the purpose of this review is to analyze the *experiences* of African American parents of children with disabilities in the special education system. Second, in order to explore parents' experiences before and after the reauthorization of IDEA (1997, 2004), this review focuses on literature published from 1990 to 2014. Third, unlike the aforementioned review, this review is more detailed because it also examines literature on the different ways that African American parents interact with the special education system and professionals. Finally, this review includes more recent studies (up to 2014) as well as dissertations.

Purpose of the Study

The primary focus of this review is to understand (a) the experiences of African American parents of children with disabilities with the special education process (referral, assessment, placement and service provision), (b) the factors impacting these parents participation in their children's education, (c) their experiences with special education professionals, and (d) their perspectives on the factors that hinder or facilitate their relationship with special education professionals. Results from the studies reviewed will be synthesized to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of African American parents of children with disabilities with the special education process (evaluation, IEP meetings and service provision)?
2. What are the factors impacting the participation of African American parents of children with disabilities in the special education process?
3. What factors hinder or foster healthy parent-professional relationships for these parents?

Method

For this review, analysis of studies published between 1990 and 2014 that focused on the experiences of African American parents of children with disabilities in the special education process was conducted. Because there are few recent studies on this topic, three recently published dissertations were included in this review to get a current account of African American parents' perspective several years after the reauthorization of IDEA.

Literature Search Procedure

First, a literature search was conducted on major search engines like Psycinfo, Education Resource Information Center, (ERIC), Education Full Text, University of Texas Online library, and Google Scholar. The search descriptors and key words used include: parental participation in education, African American parents in special education, Black parents in special education, African American parents in special education, African America parents involvement in special education, African American parent's perception of special education process, African American parent-professional relationship in special education, African American families of children with disabilities. This search produced 12 journal articles and 4 doctoral dissertations.

Next, the following journals were searched: *Exceptional Children*, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *Multicultural Education*, *Families in Society*, *International Journal of Disability and Education*, *Journal of Special Education*, *Multiple Voices*, *Remedial and Special Education*, *Multicultural Perspectives*, *Mental Retardation*, and *Topics in Early*

Childhood Education, which were likely to publish research about special education and the experiences of cultural and linguistic diverse students and their parents in special education. This search of literature produced 7 articles. Further, the reference list of the articles was searched to locate additional articles that may meet the inclusion criteria for this review. This additional search produced 5 articles. Overall, the literature search procedure yielded a total of 28 articles and once the process was completed, all the 28 papers were examined to determine if they met the inclusion criteria the review.

Criteria for Literature Selection

After reviewing the abstracts of the 28 studies or articles, 13 of them met the inclusion criteria for this review. The criteria used for the selection of studies include

1. The studies must have been published in peer reviewed journals or published doctoral dissertations.
2. The participants in the studies are African American parents/families who have children that are receiving special education services.
3. The studies were focused on African American parents/families of children with disabilities who have experience with special education process of assessment, referral, placement, services and have relationship with special education professionals, parents' perception of special education, parent's participation in IEP meetings, advocacy, and special education placement.
4. The studies were published between 1990 through 2014.

5. The studies were data-based (collected through qualitative, ethnographic, case study or quantitative methods). Thus, literature reviews, research papers, research reports, and conceptual articles were not included in this review.

Data Analysis

After reviewing the studies, several ideas that are related to the research questions of the present study were identified from the literatures. Then, each study was coded based on the following characteristics: gender of the participants, children's disability categories, data collection method, sample size, location of study and socioeconomic status of the participants.

Results

Ten peer reviewed studies and three dissertation studies published between 1990 and 2014 were eligible for inclusion in this review. The peer reviewed studies were published in the following journals: *Multiples Voices, Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities, Journal of orthopsychiatry, Journal of Special Education Leadership, Remedial and Special Education, The Educational Forum, Exceptional Children, Topics in Early Childhood Education.*

Four studies focused on investigating the experiences of parents with special education professionals (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000). One (Welch, 2002) of the studies specifically focused on investigating the experience of African American parents who had received special education services and whose children are also receiving special education services. One (Zionst, Zionst, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003) study examined the perception of parents concerning cultural sensitivity demonstrated by school district. Four (Borum, 2007; Rao, 2000; Stanley, 2013; & Welch, 2002) of the studies examined the experiences of African American mothers who have children that are receiving special education services. One (Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991) study focused specifically on how low-income African American mothers of students with disabilities in a rural school district perceive special education and advocate for educational needs of their children (Stanley, 2013). One (William 2007) study focused primarily on the experiences of parents that challenged their local school

system's placement decision and the quality of special education services delivered to their children (2007). Finally, one (Thompson, 2014) of the studies was designed specifically to analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education.

Characteristic of the Studies

Participants and settings. A total of 105 parents/guardians participated in all of the studies reviewed and their years of experience with special education system ranged from 2 to 24 years. Ten of the studies (Borum, 2007; Dunmore, 2005; Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000; Stanley, 2013; Thompson, 2014; Welch, 2002; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al), reported the disability categories of the children of the participants; of all 96 children, 12 were gifted children, 13 were deaf children, 13 were students with intellectual disability, 1 was identified with emotional disturbance, 11 were students with autism, 9 were students with learning disabilities, 2 were identified with intellectual disability, 8 were identified with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, 1 had visual impairment, 1 had Down Syndrome, 4 had cerebral palsy and 21 had speech and language impairment.

Furthermore, three of the studies focused on investigating the experience of low income African American parents of children who are in special education programs (Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000). In the six studies (Borum, 2007; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000;

Thompson), that specified the gender of their participants, 43 were women, and 6 were men. Some authors reported the location of their research as New York (Rao, 2000), North Carolina (Huff et al., 2005) Washington, Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania (Borum, 2007), 2 studies (Zionst et al., & Harry et al.) reported their location as urban or rural settings and the remaining 7 (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Dunmore, 2005; Harry et al., 1995; Thompson, 2014; William, 2007; Welch, 2002) did not state the location of their studies.

Data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods were used in all of the studies reviewed; the researchers employed different research designs such as case study, ethnographic, mixed design and phenomenological designs to gather data from the participants. The data collection procedures used includes semi structured or unstructured interview, group interviews, observation, use of surveys, record reviews and written reflections (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Borum, 2007 Dunmore, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000; Stanley, 2013; Thompson, 2014; Welch, 2002; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003), informal conversations, participation in meetings and special education conferences (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000). Data were analyzed using coding procedure (Dunmore, 2005; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003), pattern matching (Welch, 2002), phenomenological reduction (Borum, 2007; Huff et al, 2005), structural synthesis (Stanley, 2013) and theme category analysis (Harry, Klinger & Hart, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000).

Parents Experience with Special Education System

Perception of the evaluation process. Three of the studies (Dunmore, 2005; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003) reviewed examined African American parents' perception of the special education evaluation/identification system. In one of the studies, Williams (2007) investigated how four African American parents perceived the efficacy of the special education services their children received. The findings from the case studies collectively revealed that the parents were concerned about the legitimacy of special education evaluation, the cultural disconnect of the services, misuse and abuse of protocol, and the life chances of African American children in the special education programs. Distinctively, all of the four participants shared strong reservations for the special education evaluation process; they believed that the evaluation process is flawed because it neglects the impact of factors like cultural background, the unique experiences and history of black children, family problems that may affect learning and the impact of language difference on the behavior academic performance of their children. Further, participants in this study emphasized that psychologist, teachers, and psychiatrist were responsible for the misidentification of their children because of their lack of understanding of the cultural background of the children they are evaluated. One mother recounted her frustration with her son' evaluation process:

I wanted to know if the school psychologist could find out what was going on with—what made him this sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When I got the report

back I was furious. It is a typical white woman's view of a black man. It was said that he was depressed, that could do harm to himself. The recommendation was for BEH—behaviorally and emotionally handicapped. (Williams, 2007, p. 254)

Similar concerns were expressed in a study conducted by Zionst (2003), parents also questioned the legitimacy of the special education evaluation process, they attributed their children's' misdiagnosis to the biases and stereotypes held by the professionals about African America parents and students. According to them, the teachers' perception of them as dysfunctional, incompetent and neglectful parents influenced their decision to label their children with emotional disturbance and intellectual disability.

Participants in Dunmore (2005), Rao (2000), and Williams's (2007) studies also questioned the assessment procedures used in the evaluation of their children. Many parents in these studies expressed concerns about the use of inappropriate assessment method in the identification process. For example in Rao's (2000) study, Rose—a mother of a child with intellectual disability—expressed her discontentment with one of her son's assessment, she recounted:

You gave a pegboard but he don't have a pegboard at home. Never once did she show that this sticks go in a hole. She said "he should know what to do with them". If he is not familiar with what do we know to do with this. He picked up all his sticks in a pile and gave them to her. What does john know about pegboard when he has never had one?

Rose concluded that the psychologist carried out assessment solely to accentuate her son's deficit instead of helping him.

In a three year longitudinal study, Harry, Hart, and Klingner (2005) used in depth interviews, observation of special education placement meetings and informal conversations to investigate the experience of African American parents with the referral and the placement processes. In this study parents indicated that the school excluded them from their children's referral and identification process because they believed their views about their children's disabilities does not count. Contrary to the professional's placement decisions, these parents believed that their children were misidentified and the placement decision could be accurate if the professionals took into account the lack of support from school system, pressure from families and community based circumstance that contributes to their children's learning and emotional problems.

Further, Dunmore (2000) interviewed ten African American parents of children with disabilities to understand their perspectives of placement process and special education services. Two parents whose children were identified with intellectual disability and emotional disturbance acknowledged that their children were misidentified but they agreed to sign the consent forms because they wanted their children to get help and support from special programs. The remaining eight parents indicated that their children were placed in special education programs without their consent, however, they decided not to contest the school's decision because they thought it may provide better education

for their children. However, after several years of interaction with system they concluded that their children were placed in special education to isolate them from good education.

Three studies (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Rao, 2000; Welch, 2002) examined parents' expectations from special education for their children. Some parents reported that initially they believed that the goal of special education was to give their child a chance to "catch up" (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995). Many parents recounted that they entered the special education system with the hope that it will be a temporary placement for their children to recover. However, over time, these parent's initial enthusiasms and expectation often grew into disillusionment and exhaustion from the process, as a result, they assumed the stance that special education has created both physical and academic segregation for their children (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Rao, 2000; Welch, 2002). Dunmore's (2005) also reported that many families believed that their children were misidentified but they refused to oppose the system because they believed that having individual education plans (IEPs) would provide better educational opportunities for their children. After several years of being in special education, these parents wanted their children out because believed they have neither encountered the academic benefits promised, nor refuge from the negative implication that comes with being label with a disability category.

Factors Impacting African American Parents' Participation

Socio-economics status. Parents in four studies (Harry, Hart, & Klinger, 2005; Halyanpur & Rao 1991; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003) reported that their financial status impacts their perception and participation in special education process. In Zionst et al.'s (2003) study parents stated being low income earners is a significant barrier to getting access to special education services for their children. When parents were asked about the various ways in which poverty impacts their involvement in their children's education: inability to afford the high cost of caring for a child with disability, inability to advocate for better services for their children, limited access to transportation, and the lack of access to advance technological resources were prominent on all the parents' list. Further, the low income parents in Williams (2007) and Halyanpur & Rao's (1991) studies believed that their low socioeconomic status caused professionals to exclude them from decision making processes, to develop negative views about them and to reduce the quality of services they provide to them. One mother stated:

All too often, if the student is from the low-income segment of our society, the parent is not involved in the initial drafting of the student's IEP. The IEP goes from a draft to the final stage in one meeting. The process is illegal, immoral, and grossly unethical. All that the school system really is interested in is the parent's signature on the IEF. Once it's there, the system has covered their legal rear. The child's future then starts on a narrow one-way journey to nowhere fast. What I've just described happened to my son and me.

Many parents in these studies believed that living in poverty was a sufficient reason for educators to form negative opinions about them as well as to classify them as incompetent parents who lack value for education.

Lack of understanding of special education laws, procedures and rights.

Parents in 7 studies (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Borum, 2007; Dunmore, (2005); Halyanpur & Rao, 1991; Thompson, 2014; Welch, 2002; Zionst et al, 2003) reviewed, expressed concerns with understanding special education procedures and laws such as IDEA. In the four (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Dunmore, (2005); Halyanpur & Rao, 1991; Thompson, 2014) of the seven studies, parents stated that the lack of understanding of their rights as parents and their inability to understand special education procedures makes it difficult for them to actively participate in the decision making process, especially during IEP meetings. In the IEP meetings parents confront many issues, the problem of understanding what the law says and how it works was common especially amongst parents with limited education. Thompson (2014) interviewed 8 African American parents about their knowledge of IDEA, he found that the despite all the participants' belief that it was important for them to know the law, only three of them felt that they had a good working knowledge of IDEA. The other five participants stated that they didn't know the laws governing special education process and their rights as parents because they didn't understand the information in the documents they were given by the school and the IEP team members never explained it to them.

Problem of communication between parents and school personnel. The problem of communication with school personnel was a major issue that repeatedly came up as an obstacle to African American parents' participation in special education process and other school activities. In the studies (Allen, Harry, & McLaughlin, 1995; Dunmore, 2005; Harry, Hart & Klinger, 2005; Thompson 2014; Welch, 2002) reviewed, parents shared professionals lack of good communication skills such listening, sharing, and answering questions especially during decision making process and IEP meetings discourages them from being involved in their children's education.

In a study designed to describe and analyze the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have male children receiving special education services in schools that located in San Diego County, Thompson (2014) found that many parents were frustrated with teachers' poor communication skills and the fact that when teacher did contact them, many times it was to complain about their children's behavioral problems instead of giving them reports about their children's progress. Parents in this study also complained that teachers did not clearly articulate information regarding their expectations for participation and participants often felt that staff members do not provide them enough information about their children's academic progress or the actual hours of services their children were receiving during school on a daily basis. In other studies, parents reported that the difference in communication style and excessive use of jargon and difficult "English language" and focusing on their own agenda during IEP meetings

overwhelms them from actively participating in discussions (Dunmore, 2005; Rao, 2000; Stanley, 2013)

Perceived racial discrimination. Five studies included discussions about racial discrimination and its impact on parents' involvement with the school system in their investigation (Dunmore, 2005; Huff et al. 2005; Thompson 2014; Welch 2002; Williams, 2007). In these studies, African American parents perceived that the negative treatment they received from school staff is fueled by racial bias and stereotypes they held for African American parents; they further asserted that there is a connection between racial discrimination, special education placement and the poor quality of education their children received from school. For instance, Huff et al. (2005) reported that the participants in their study were especially upset when recounting the racial discrimination they experienced when working with White and Hispanic educators. These negative interactions were regarded as adversely impactful and significant by 8 parents in Huff et al.'s study. Further, participants in Williams (2007) study indicated that they doubt the efficacy of the special education evaluation process because they believed that racial stereotypes about African Americans influenced the school's decision to identify their children with intellectual disability and emotional disturbance.

In a similar study (Thompson, 2014), the author's research questions particularly addressed African American parents' perception of racism in the special education system and how it impacts their participation in school programs. She found that all the participants

experienced racial discrimination at some point in their encounters with school personnel or protocols and these negative experiences gave parents a sufficient reason to distance themselves from engaging in school programs.

Feeling of exclusion. Many parents of children receiving special education services in the studies reviewed reported that they felt excluded from the assessment, placement, IEP development processes. Allen, Hart & McLaughlin (1995); Harry et al (2005); Rao, (2000); William (2007), Stanley (2013) and Thompson (2014) all found that parents in their studies felt completely isolated and alienated from their children's decision making process especially during the assessment and IEP process. Despite their awareness of IDEA's expectations for parental involvement, many parents reported that during IEP meetings, professionals often display negative attitudes toward them because they do not want them to partake in the discussions. In a study conducted by Allen, Hart & McLaughlin (1995), parents reported that they feel powerless and are laid back during conferences because the school staff makes them feel that their main role is to receive information about their child's progress, answer questions and to sign the legal documents. For instance, the parents reported that when they missed a meeting, they usually receive a mailed packet of formal documents that required their signatures. They stated that it was common for them to be advised "not to worry" if they could not attend the meetings, because the documents would be sent in the mail to them for their signatures.

Rao (2000) and Thompson (2013) also found that parents who realized that their concerns about their children were not validated by special education professionals withdrew their participation from the process. In the same studies, parents reported that late notice of meetings, limited time for conferences, the emphasis on documentation rather than participation and the lack of mutual agreement on the schedules of appointment deters them from actively participating in meetings.

Residing in rural location. Stanley (2013) found that African American parents of children with disabilities who reside in rural areas have to contend with several constraints that impede their advocacy and participation efforts at greater levels than parents residing in urban and suburban settings. Stanley (2013) conducted his study to specifically examine the experience of African American parents of children with disabilities in rural setting, he found that residing in rural areas had a negative impact on the ability of parents to seek positive educational outcomes for their children. Mothers in this study indicated that the absence of formal support and advocacy groups in rural areas for mothers of children with disabilities seemed to be hindrance to the mothers' ability to widen their social networks and strengthen their knowledge of special education programs. For example, the four mothers stated that residing in a rural setting caused them to be reluctant to voice their concerns with schools because they do not want to place their child at risk of being treated unfairly due to their own advocacy efforts. In addition mothers indicated that specific rural factors, such as lack of public transportation,

inaccessible specialized services for their children, limited school options, and lack of advocacy groups deters them from actively participating in their children's education.

Professionals' perceptions of parents. Three qualitative studies (Harry, Hart & Klinger, 2005; Rao, 2000; Zionst et al.) examined African American parents' perception of their relationship with professionals and how it affects their relationship with their children's schooling. Many parents in this studies believed that the special education professionals they worked with had negative perception about them and low expectations from them and as a result, they exclude them from making decisions about their children's education. For example, in three case studies Harry, Hart & Klinger (2005) examined the causes of negative attitude of the school district to African American parents of children with disabilities. The researchers interviewed and observed both parents and teachers and they found that school personnel held negative stereotypes about Africa American parents. The authors reported that without having much information about these parents, school personnel described them in derogatory manners, they portrayed them as incompetent and dysfunctional parents. Further, they reported that parents' participation declined once they realized that school personnel held negative stereotypes and views about them.

Apathy and lack of interest. In two studies (Dunmore, 2005; Thompson, 2013), some parents reported they do not participate in their children's education because they have nothing to contribute to the process. When they were questioned about the reasons they have such feelings, they indicated that they feel that special education is complex

process, and they believe that the teachers, psychologist and other professionals involved are the experts who have the knowledge to make the best decisions for their children. In Thompson's (2013), one grandmother was questioned about the reason her grandson is not getting services, she reported that although her grandson qualifies for speech services, his IEP was never completed because her son and his wife were unwilling to complete the process because the process is too complex and they cannot follow through.

Factors that Fosters Parent-Professional Partnership

Cultural understanding and sensitivity. In five (Dunmore, 2005; Thompson, 2013; Welch, 2002; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003) of the studies reviewed African American parents emphasized the desire for cultural understanding and acceptance from the special education professionals they work with. In a two (Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003) studies parents specifically expressed a need for teachers to understand the difference between culture-based behavior and disability. They felt that teachers' ignorance of cultural differences resulted in misdiagnosis of their children and that professionals will be able to provide better services and nurturing relationships if they undergo cultural sensitivity training. Particularly, they suggested that professionals should receive thorough training on the intersection of culture and disability so as to enhance their ability to distinguish behaviors or learning problems that occur as a result of disability from those that are culture-based (Thompson, 2013; Zionst et al., 2003).

Responsiveness to family and child's needs. In responding to the question of how to improve the quality of services they received, many African American parents in the studies (Halyanpur & Rao, 1991; Zionst et al, 2003) reviewed suggested that parent-professional relationship can be enhanced if professionals are more considerate of the family needs (need for information, interpretation, emotional support, education about their rights), when planning and implementing services. Also parents suggested that professionals need to look beyond what their documents says, listen to family more, show empathy and provide services that are actually child-care centered.

In a study conducted by Halyanpur and Rao, mothers suggested two ways professionals can be responsive to their families' needs. The first is providing emotional support and planning: this includes helping parents to understand the special education evaluation, identification, placement, and classification process. Explaining oral and written information to parents in a language they understand, making them feel accepted and relevant, listening to their concerns and maintaining the same conversational styles with them. The second is providing specific services: this include tailoring and implementing school or home services to suit the families' culture, values and convenience.

Establishing rapport with parents/families. In two of the studies (Halyanpur & Rao, 1991; Zionst et al, 2003), parents emphasized that their relationship with educators and service providers can be improved if efforts are made to establish rapport with them and the other significant members of their families, they stated that being conversational,

accepting their difference, listening, and a sincere commitment to them and their children are qualities that fosters healthy relationship with the professionals they work with (Halyanpur & Rao, 1991). For example, in the study conducted by Halyanpur and Rao, (1991) to investigate the challenges African American parents experiences in working special education professionals, parents explained they are likely to trust and build a partnership with a professional who: engages them in a conversation instead of giving them instructions; who tries to understand their perspective by asking them questions, who accepts their parenting style and does not judge them.

Respect: In Zionst et al.'s (2003) and Stanley's (2013) studies, parents acknowledged that respect from school professionals will help them trust and build a collaboration with school system. They specified that respect for their values, their position as parents, their feelings, views about their children and the kind of service they desire for their children will help them nurture a strong partnership with the school system.

Factors Hindering Parent-Professional Partnership

Several studies reviewed examined the interaction between African American parents/families of children with disabilities and school professionals. In these studies school professionals include: school psychologists, special education teachers, speech therapists, school administrators, counselors, interventionists, case managers, general education teachers. Most of the studies examined suggest that the relationship between

African American parent and school professionals are strained as a result of many factors.

Following is the discussion of the factors.

Cultural difference. The studies (Rao, 2000; Thompson, 2013; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al., 2003) reviewed suggest that cultural difference between special education professionals and African American parents is one of the barriers to effective parent-professional partnership. African American parents felt that their children were unfairly placed in special education classes and disability categories as result professional's inability to distinguish between culture-based behaviors and behavior problems. Zionst, Zionst, Harrison and Bellinger (2003) examined 24 African American parents' perception of cultural sensitivity demonstrated by special education professionals. In that study, they found that a common challenge most parents experienced in their interactions with special education professionals is the lack of cultural awareness and understanding on the part of the professionals who are predominantly from the mainstream Euro-American culture. In the same study, parents suggested that there is a need for educators to go through cultural sensitivity and reciprocity training to better prepare them for working with families from diverse cultures.

Furthermore, similar concerns were expressed in a study conducted by Thompson (2013) to examine the experience of African American parents of male children with disability. The participants reported that due to the lack of awareness of cultural difference

on the part of teachers, their children were unfairly stereotyped or blamed for not being what Caucasian teachers considered as normal.

Communication problems. In 8 (e.g., Allen, Harry, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Thompson, 2014) of the 13 studies reviewed, the problem of ineffective communication was prominent when parents discussed the barriers they experienced with working with special education professionals. For most of the parents in these studies, ineffective communication meant the use of educational jargon by professionals, not responding to questions, the use of complex English sentences and saying too much. In three studies (Allen, Harry, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Thompson, 2014), parents reported that lack of clarity of written information, not providing enough information, inability to understand the results of assessment, and ignoring of questions makes them feel alienated from the whole process of special education. For example, in a study conducted by Thompson (2014), parents complained that teachers and principals did not clearly articulate information regarding their children's academic performance as it was stated in their IEP goals and that makes feel that the professionals do not care about their children. Consequently, these parents stated that they believe that special educators do not have their children's best interest at heart and they do not deserve their trust.

The use of disability classification and labeling such as emotional disorder, mental retardation, and learning disabilities was another issue parents highlighted about

communication difficulties with professionals because they do not understand the classifications or can relate them to their children's disabilities (Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Rao, 2000).

Lack of support from the system. In a study conducted by Zionst et al (2003), the urban African American parents who participated in the study reported that the failure of the school system to take up the role of educating them and their community members about assessing community-based assistance program has led them believe that professionals are disconnected from the reality of the challenges they face as parents of children with disabilities. In another study by (Thompson, 2014), participants who had problems with the IEP process indicated that they do not have access to information about the services their children should receive because the school always give or refer them to the documents they cannot read or understand. Many of them reported that are frustrated with system because the professionals assume the roles of expert, yet they fail to provide enough information to advocate for their children.

In Huff et al (2005), the authors investigated the perception and experience of African American parents of gifted children in the Gifted and Talented Program (GATE). They reported that all the 12 parents in the study expressed dissatisfaction with educational intervention (classrooms and pull out programs) the school provided for their children, particularly they indicated that the school personnel lack adequate training and

support to effectively implement this programs and as result, their children are underserved. One parent lamented:

I don't think the schools, they don't have the psychological understanding of what gifted children go through. And, I would like to see some type of training. I think if the teachers were sensitive in the program and the principals were more sensitive to the needs -- the psychological needs and emotional needs of gifted children -- that they could diminish some of that [stress] in schools. It seemed like a waste of some kid's potential. If they already learned something, why should they spend a year and not learn anything new?

Further, the parents in this study also reported that they belief that the teachers are unaware of individual differences in terms of student talents, are inexperienced with students' uneven development, and unfamiliar with personality and cultural characteristics of gifted African American children.

Disrespect by professionals. In seven (Allen, Harry, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart & Klingner, 2005; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000; Thompson, 2014) of the studies, perceived disrespect for parents by professionals was a central discourse to why parent have unsuccessful relationship with special education professional. Most of the parents in these studies did not feel respected by the teachers, psychologists, and the staff they work with. They presented a wide range of reasons they felt disrespected by special education professionals: lack of respect for parents' views about child's disability; lack of

respect for culture and religious practices; tone of impatience and sarcasm during meetings; use of derogatory remarks to address parents; insensitivity to parent's feelings and values, professional's focus primarily on the deficits of the children instead of strengths; and a discounting difference of parenting styles by professionals were some the reasons the parents highlighted. Importantly, parents also reported that shared ethnicity with professionals did not ensure respectful treatment; they recounted a lot of discourteous treatment from personnel that are from the same ethnicity as well as those from different ethnicities (Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Rao, 2000).

Many times, the issue of disrespect for parents by professional can lead to withdraw of children from special education programs, particularly, in a study conducted by Rao (2000) to investigate the interactions of low income African American single mother of a child with intellectual disability and the special education professionals she worked with. He found that Rose's—the participant—decision to withdraw her participation and her child's from special education process was fueled by the disrespect she experienced from the special education team she was working with. She stated that the two service providers she worked with often insult her, judged her parenting style and invalidate her concerns and desires for her son.

Perceived negativity toward children. In of the studies four (Borum, 2007; Halyanpur and Rao, 1991; Rao, 2000; Stanley, 2013; Zionst et al, 2003), parents indicated that professionals' negative attitude towards their children discouraged them from

trusting the professionals and participating in school meetings. Most of the parents in the studies felt that the special education system and the professionals that implement the services mainly focus on a child's deficit instead of the child's strength. According to the parents, negativity from teachers towards their children took various forms such as planning interventions that overly dwells on a child's the disability instead on focusing on their strengths, blaming the child or parents for his/her disability, making derogatory remarks about the child's behavior, and requesting that the child need more discipline. For example, three mothers of children with ADHD in Stanley's (2013) study reported that in addition to the stigmatizing attitudes educators displayed towards their children, the actions (suspensions, punishment) of the administrators constantly reminded them that their children were not wanted in the school.

Discussion

Because African American children represent a large percentage of students in special education programs, an understanding of the parents' views of the special education process should be an integral aspect of professional preparation and professional practice (Harry, 2008). This review was conducted to understand the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have children with disabilities that are receiving special education services. A total of 105 parents/guardian who participated in all the studies reviewed and their years of experience with special education system ranged from 2 years to 24 years. A discussion of the findings from the review follows.

African America Parents' Experience with Special Education Process

In the present study, three themes were identified as pertinent to discussing the experiences of African American parents with children in the special education system: (a) parents' perceptions of the evaluation process, (b) parents' expectations from special education programs, and (c) parents' perceptions of special education services and programs.

Findings reveal that African American parents shared deep concerns about the special education evaluation process of their children. Many parents that participated in the studies (e.g., Dunmore 2005; William, 2007) mistrusted the evaluation process because it neglects factors like cultural background; the unique experiences and history of African

American children; differential access to good education; family problems that might affect learning; and the impact of language difference on the behavior and academic performance of their children. Additionally, parents reported the use of inappropriate assessment methods in the identification process. Overall, even though these parents agreed that their children needed help, they believed that the evaluation process was flawed because the professional conducted it without their full involvement. The prevalence of such experiences in which parents continue to feel excluded from the evaluation process argues for increased diversity training for special education professionals. Such differentials as language, access to learning and learning resources, cultural difference become critical indices for creating more responsible and responsive special education programming for African American children. .

Further, the historical realities the shape African American parents' interactions with the special education system need to be taken into account in galvanizing their involvement in the system. For example, it is likely that these parents' mistrust of the special education system stems from their knowledge of the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs and their past experience with educational segregation (Harry, 1992). Therefore, interventions that would motivate these parents to get more involved with the special education system must necessarily remain comprehensive in its scope, accounting for the realities of their historical exclusion as well as some of the symptoms of that exclusion. In other words, given the history of educational

segregation, special education programs need to take more seriously the suspicion of African American parents of the system— whether this is explicitly stated or implied.

Indeed, African American parents often have expectations of the special education system that are far removed from the purpose and mission of special education programs. Findings from this study shows that many parents enter into the special education system with hopes that it will be a temporary placement for their children to recover before transitioning to general education. One potential explanation for this may be because special education's medical model of understanding disabilities as a deficit that should be diagnosed and treated often conflict with parents' views that their children are just different and not deficient. Three studies (e.g. Allen, Hart & McLaughlin 1995) reported that over time, many parents' initial enthusiasm and expectations often grew into despair and exhaustion from the process because of they believed that special education constituted both physical and academic segregation for their children. This experience may derive from parents having inadequate knowledge about their children's disability or simply their living in denial. As such, professionals need to invest in maintaining active communication with parents about the program, possible interventions that might be recommended their children, and the prospects of their children transitioning from special education to general education. In addition, professionals need to follow up with up-to-date information about their children's progress or challenges. This kind of communication will achieve the effect of reducing if not eliminating unrealistic

expectations that these parents have of special education services. It will also make them feel incorporated into their children's learning processes. Importantly, when parents are guided to a realistic expectations of what the process entails, they might be able to cultivate long-term home interventions of their own (if need be) for their children with disabilities. Finally, this communication process might eliminate the implicit connection that some parents might make between historical educational segregation and methods of special education programming.

Factors Impacting African American Parents' Participation

This study analyzed the factors impacting the participation of African American parents of children with disabilities in their children's schooling and special education process. Some factors identified in the studies reviewed are socio-economic status, lack of understanding of special education laws, procedures and rights, parent-school communication problems, perceived racial discrimination, feeling of exclusion, residential location, and professionals' perception about parents' participation, apathy and lack of interest. Four (e.g., Halyanpur & Rao; Zionst et al, 2003) out of the 13 studies reviewed showed a correlation between socio-economic status and African American parents' participation in special education processes. Many parents reported that the lack of financial resources affected their ability to care for their children. Financial lack also impacted their access to transportation school meetings, as well as their ability to advocate for their children and command respect from school personnel. In particular, these

findings suggest that poor African American parents perceive their low socioeconomic status as a reason why school personnel disrespect them and exclude them from participating in special education processes. The cultural capital discrepancy between African American parents and professionals constitutes a basis for these parents' perception about this kind of discrimination. According to Harry (1992), families with higher socioeconomic status are often able to actively participate in and navigate the quagmire of special education system because they possess cultural capital— values, resources, language and culture— that are similar to those of special education professionals. Conversely, poor African American parents who do not possess such cultural capital often feel that professionals disrespect and devalue their opinion and, thus, they may have difficulty navigating special education system (Harry, 1992). It is therefore important that special education professionals remain cognizant about the ways that differences in socioeconomic status might not only affect their interactions with these parents, but also how this status differential might foster assumptions about these parents' investments in their children's education. As research has shown, low participation of low-income African American parents might occur more from lack of financial means or deficiency in the cultural capital required to navigate the special education system than from apathy.

A related reason for African American parents' low participation in the education of their children with disabilities is the poor understanding of special education laws,

procedures and rights. This gap in knowledge constitutes a major deterrent to these parents' participation, and it emerged as a recurring theme in 7 out of the 13 studies reviewed (Allen, Harry & McLaughlin, 1995; Borum, 2007; Dunmore, (2005); Halyanpur & Rao, 1991; Thompson, 2014; Welch, 2002; Zionst et al, 2003). The consistency in parents' accounts across the seven studies shows that the parents were not adequately informed about the law, their rights and the procedures involved in special education. Unfortunately, the results in the most recent study (Thompson, 2014) corroborates Boone and Smith's (1981) earlier study in which they found that all the 13 African American parents they interviewed had challenges with understanding evaluation procedures, due process hearings, and their roles in developing Individualized Education Plan. These two results, conducted 33 years apart, suggest that much progress is yet to be achieved in educating African American parents about special education programs. It is also possible that the level of education of the parents in these studies impacted their ability to understand the special education processes and laws. Given this reality, it might be productive to elevate the significance of information dissemination in the training of special education professionals as well as emphasize the need to cultivate a variety of communication techniques to cater to the cultural diversity of the parents with which they interact.

In the present study, three factors were found to be related to the interpersonal relationship of school personnel: parents-school communication problems, feeling of exclusion and perceived racial discrimination. In seven out of the thirteen studies reviewed

(Dunmore, 2005; Allen, Harry, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Hart, & Klingner, 2005; Stanley 2013; Thompson, 2014 & Welch, 2002) many parents said that they could not participate in their children's education because of the communication barriers that existed between them and school staff. Additionally, many parents noted that they felt educators deliberately excluded them from participating in making decisions that affected their children. In responding to the question of why professionals exclude them from decision making processes, many parents reported that most negative encounters they had, including being excluded by professionals (especially by White professionals), was driven by racial discrimination. These allegations of racial discrimination might be mitigated against through active and open communication between parents and professionals. Indeed, schools and professionals need to work hard towards forging collaborations with parents, particularly when such collaborations are frustrated by allegations of racial discrimination. In some cases, these parents' poor participation in the special education process simply has to do with logistic constraints on their part, than with the competence or ethics of the professionals. One study (Stanley, 2013) found that African American parents residing in rural areas experienced difficulties with participating in school meetings and finding advocacy groups. Two studies reported downright apathy and disinterest in (Dunmore, 2005 & Thompson, 2014) as a deterrent to parents' participation in the special education process.

Overall, African American parents in this study believe that they are not active participants in their children's education. These findings are important because it sheds light on the challenges that African American parents of children with disabilities face in participating in their children's education. It also reveals the ways in which educators disenfranchise parents from the special education processes of referral, assessment, and placement. In general, the findings from the studies suggest that African American parents desire to participate in their children's education. However, intersecting factors such as economic disadvantage, racial discrimination, residential location, relationship with school staff prevent them from meaningfully participating. Importantly, the consistency of these findings— from the oldest (Halyanpur & Rao, 1991) to the most recent (Thompson, 2014) literature in this review— suggests that same barriers to parental participation identified 25 years ago remain active till date.

Factors Hindering Parent-Professional Relationship

This study analyzed literature to identify barriers to effective parents-professionals collaboration. Cultural difference, communication problems, lack of support from the special education system, disrespect from school personnel, and perceived negativity towards parents and children constitute some of the barriers to effective parents-professionals collaboration.

As I mentioned previously, in five out the thirteen studies reviewed (e.g., Williams, 2014; Zionst et al. 2003), researchers found cultural discrepancy between African

American parents and professionals who are predominantly from the mainstream Anglo-American culture. Many parents in these studies thought that the lack of cultural understanding and acceptance on the part of professionals contributed to negative attitudes exhibited by school personnel towards them and their children. This discrepancy leads to their children's placement in special education and a disrespect of parents. Interestingly, the issue highlighted may be not really related to cultural insensitivity on the part of professionals who could also be African Americans or share similar cultural values with African American parents. It is possible that this clash occurs because special education culture— culture of medical model of disability— overly contradict African American parents views about their children's disability. The medical model sees disability as a deficiency that must be diagnosed, classified/labeled based on its deficit and treated. Oftentimes parents disagree with this approach.

Also, because the culture of special education is modeled after the mainstream middle class white culture, the level of acculturation of African American parents to this culture might mediate the way they process their interactions with special education professionals. In thinking about how cultural difference impact parent-professional collaboration, it is important to note that both parties are operating within a cultural context that make it difficult for them to have successful collaborations (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). On the one hand, professionals are required to collaborate with parents as partners because of their legal rights based on the IDEA principles (individual rights,

equity and freedom of choice, Harry, 1992); this might not go well with professionals that prefer to assert their positions as experts. On the other hand, some cultures do not appreciate or operate upon the principle of individual rights and freedom of choice and African American culture might be classified as an example of such cultures (Harry, 1992).

This study also found that communication issues impacted parents-professionals collaboration. Parents reported that the use of jargon, difference in communications styles, lack of clarity of written information, and the practice of eliding questions during IEP meetings contributes to the development of a negative relationship with school personnel. It is likely that a mixture of cultural difference, difference in values, definition of respect and past experiences are responsible for the perceptions held by these parents.

Additionally, results from three (e.g., Allen, Hart & McLaughlin, 1995) studies out of the thirteen reviewed shows that parents perceived that negative parents-professionals interaction is fueled by lack of support from the school system. Parents in these studies indicated that the schools' failure to educate them about their children's disability, validate their concerns about their children's progress, and failure to provide quality education for their children led them to believe that school personnel cannot be trusted. One potential explanation for this problem is that parents overly rely on professionals as "experts" to provide them with relevant information; professionals, on the hand, expect parents to take initiative in their children's education by requesting these information. Again, although IDEA require that professionals provide parents with information about their children

diagnosis, the parents' level of education and socioeconomic status might influence their processing of these information, and even how they define support.

Taken together, the findings from this synthesis of literature suggests that much has not changed about the experience of African American parents with special education process in the last 25 years. The review of current literature in the present study reveals that similar barriers to parental participation and parent-professional relationship identified 25 years ago are still very prominent till date. In addition, findings from this study suggests that African American parents of children with disabilities are not well supported by special education professionals. While several authors have made recommendations for improving African American parents' participation in their children's education and fostering parent-professional partnership (Harry, 1992; Brandon, 2009; Zionst et al, 2003; Fish, 2008; Lea, 2006; Thompson, 2003a; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008), the participation of these parents in the special education process has continued to decline. And, this is despite the IDEA reauthorization, which mandates parent-professional collaboration and the inclusion of multicultural education in professional training curriculum. The explanation for this may lie in the culture of special education (individualism, equity and freedom of choice, Harry, 1992), which often conflicts African American families' cultural values and beliefs (Harry, 1992; Harry & Kalyanpur (1999).

Factors Fostering Parent-Professional Relationship

In addition to the factors hindering African American parents' participation in their children's education, the present study also identified some facilitators to healthy parent-professional collaboration. In five of the studies reviewed (Dunmore, 2005; Thompson, 2013; Welch, 2002; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003), African American parents emphasized the desire for cultural understanding and acceptance from special education professionals they work with. Specifically, they suggested that professionals should receive thorough training on the understanding of the intersection of culture and disability so they will be adequately equipped to provide culturally responsive services.

Furthermore, many parents in the studies reviewed (e.g. Halyanpur and Rao, 1991; Williams, 2007; Zionst et al, 2003) suggested that parent-professional relationship can be improved if professionals learn to be considerate of the needs of the family (the need for information, interpretation, emotional support, and education about their rights), when planning and implementing special education services. Parents in Zionst et al.'s (2003) and Stanley's (2013), acknowledged that respect and empathy from school professionals will foster trust and improve their relationship with the special education professionals with whom they work. They specified that respect for their values, their authority as parents, their feelings and views about their children and the kinds of service they desire for their children, will help them nurture strong partnership with the school system. Importantly, this finding suggest that African American parents are aware of the various ways professionals can support them in providing the best services for their children and they

also understand the qualities that a competent professional should possess. Professionals on the other hand, need to be cognizant of skills they are lack and seek professional development to better prepare them to provide responsive services to African American families.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

There several limitations in this study that should be considered when interpreting the results and planning future research. First, a total of 13 studies conducted over the last 25 years and 105 participant's experiences and perceptions was examined, thus, caution should be taken when interpreting and generalizing the results from this study.

Importantly, about 80% of the participants in this study are mothers. Future research should focus on investigating the experiences of more participants and fathers in special education system as it may help us understand the dynamics of gender in parents' experiences with the special education process.

Second, the literature reviewed and the issues highlighted were specifically restricted to the experiences and perception of African American parents. More studies should be conducted to investigate the experiences of professionals who work with African American parents of children with disabilities. These studies would provide diverse perspectives to understanding the interactions of African American parents with professionals and the special education system as a whole.

Further, qualitative methodology was used to gather data in all the studies reviewed. While the use of interviews, observation, and informal conversations are effective methods of understanding the African American experiences and perception about special education, there is a need to analyze studies that used other methods of enquiry. Following the analyses of 13 qualitative studies conducted by interviews, it appears that it is likely that factors like frequent interactions with participants, researcher's bias and the length of research may influence the results of qualitative studies. Alternative methods of investigation (e.g., quantitative or mixed designs) may minimize the effects of these factors.

Finally, most of the findings in the studies reviewed, presented the negative perspectives of parents about professionals. More research examining the perspectives of African American parents who experience positive relationship with educators and service providers may provide some information on how to promote effective parents-professionals relationship for this category of parents and parents from other ethnicities.

Implications for Practice

The present study reveals that same barriers to parental participation and parent-professional relationship identified 25 years ago are still very prominent today. In response to the barriers identified, recommendations are made for school leadership, school personnel and African American parents who have children in special education programs.

Recommendations for school leadership and professionals. Based on the issues African American parents identified as reasons for their continual decline in participating

in special education processes, it is evident that teachers, counselors, administrators, service providers, case managers and other professionals need to provide more support to enable active participation and collaborative relationship with these parents. Because problems with communication is one of the most prominent reasons parents gave as to why they have unsuccessful relationships with professionals and their lack of active participation in their special education process, school leadership should consider providing professional development programs that specifically address issues with communicating with African American parents. Also, it is critical that school personnel be trained on communication practices (listening, avoid use of jargon, asking questions, encouraging dialogue,) that are effective with this category of parents. Parental empowerment programs should also be provided to: train parents how to communicate effectively with the school system, practically show parents what parents-school partnership means and effective ways to be involved and advocate for their children.

Furthermore, the findings from this study suggests that discrimination and the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part professionals are contributing variables to low parental involvement. It is important for educators to acknowledge that families' cultural beliefs and cultural values affect their understanding, acceptance, and perspectives of disability and how they access services (Blanchett, Harry & Klinger (2009). School leadership should consider providing educators and service providers training on African American culture. In these trainings, professionals should be educated about the history, values, lifestyles,

language, communication styles, the challenges that African Americans faces as a minority group and the diversity that exist within the group. With these trainings, professionals may learn how to effectively communicate with African American parents. Additionally, School should ensure that printed and oral information are explained to parents in language they can understand and remember.

To reduce problems of disrespect, and feeling of exclusion from their children's education, educators and service providers need to continually assure parents that their participation, desires, hope and dreams for their children are very important and valued. Importantly, educators should ensure that they provide adequate information to African American parents about their children's progress, and sufficient opportunities to advocate for them.

Finally, educator and service professional regardless of their ethnicity need to acknowledge that intersecting factors like race, socio-economic status, level of education, past experiences, stereotypes and biases may impact their interactions with African American families. As a result, they should be conscious to relate with each family based on their disposition and their unique needs.

Recommendations for parents. African American parents of children with disabilities need to make extra effort to become actively involved in their children's education. Harry (1992) proposed new parental roles in special education: parents as assessor, parents as policy maker, parents as presenter of evaluation report, and parents

as advocates. It is critical for African American parents to confront their difficulties and assume these roles to get the best services and education for their children. Joining advocacy groups, using the legal means to seek redress, soliciting information from fellow parents who are well informed and making their views count during IEP meetings will provide the skills and resources they need to effectively adopt the role describe by Harry (1992).

Conclusion

This literature synthesis outlined the complex challenges that African American parents of children with disabilities face in the process of participating in the special education. Examining literature on the subject from 1994 till date has helped to highlight and understand the variables that impede and facilitate successful relationship between these parents and the professionals that work with their children. This study reveals that the structure of special education system, socioeconomic status, parents past experiences with professionals, knowledge of their rights and special education laws, and their expectations from the system are likely to impact African American parents' interaction with special education process. Additionally, this synthesis of literature reveals that the discrepancies in values, culture and beliefs of African American families and those of special education professionals constitutes an enduring impediment to the establishment of a healthy and active collaboration between both parties. Based on this information, it becomes crucial that the field of special education and its professionals stay cognizant of

the ways that these variables impact parents 'involvement in their children's education.

Additionally, this knowledge might provide the basis for the development and

implementation of responsive services to African American families.

Table 1
Study Characteristics and Themes Identified for Parents Participation

Study	Sample size	Income level	Data Collection	Location	Socio-economic Status	Communication Problems	Lack of Understanding of Laws ^a	Perceived Racial Discrimination	Feeling of Exclusion	Residing in Rural Location	Professionals Perception	Apathy and Lack of Interest	Cultural Understanding	Responsiveness to Family needs	Rapport	Respect
Thompson, P. (2014)	8	Moderate to Low	Interview, Observation	San Diego	X	X	X	X	X							
Stanley, (2013)	12	Low	Interview	NR		X	X		X	X						X
Dunmore, (2005).	24		Interview	NR		X		X	X			X	X			
Borum, (2007)	12	Low	Interview	Washington, Maryland			X									X

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Sample size	Income level	Data Collection	Location	Socio-economic Status	Communication Problems	Lack of Understanding	Perceived Racial Discrimination	Feeling of Exclusion	Residing in Rural Location	Professionals Perception	Apathy and Lack of Interest	Cultural Understanding	Responsiveness to Family needs	Rapport	Respect
Halyanpur & Rao (1999)	4		Interview, observation	NR	X	X	X	X							X	X
Harry, et al (1995)	24	NR	Interview, Observation	Urban		X		X	X		X					
Huff, et al (2005)	12	High to Low	Interview, survey	NR		X		X								
Rao, S. S (2000).	1	Low	interview, observation	New York	X	X			X		X					
Welch, A. B. (2003).	4	NR	Interview, observation	NR		X	X	X					X			

Table 1 (continued)

Zionit, et al, (2003)	24	High to Low	Interview, observation	NR		×	×	×				×	×	×	×
Williams, R. E. (2007).	4	Low	Interview	North Carolina		×	×		×	×		×			
Harry, et al, (2005)	12		Interview, observation	NR		×	×			×		×			

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