

“They think you’re lazy,” and Other Messages Black Parents Send Their Black Sons: An Exploration of Critical Race Theory in the Examination of Educational Outcomes for Black Males

Rema Reynolds
Azusa Pacific University

Parents play an integral role in the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of their children. We know that school success has been associated with parents’ involvement and engagement¹ practices. Studies have shown that despite socioeconomic disparities, children whose parents are involved perform markedly better than those whose parents are not. Little research has looked exclusively at parent involvement and its effects on the educational outcomes of Black males. A qualitative study conducted with Black parents and their involvement and engagement practices as the focus proved that this relationship warrants scholarly attention using Critical Race Theory as a tool for examination. Parents in this study were involved in their children’s educational processes in ways not always validated or valued by schools. Instead of engaging in conventional forms of involvement such as volunteering in the classroom, parents spent time and resources supplementing their children’s education at home. Subtle acts of racism manifested through microaggressions were detected by parents when interfacing with school officials² and these exchanges prompted candid conversations with their sons. According to the parents in this study, deliberate messages about racism and educator expectations were often critical supplements for their Black sons in order to ensure educational success.

¹ The term “Involvement” used in this work refers to school-sanctioned, school authored activities in which parents participate. The term “Engagement” is conceptualized as encompassing those activities parents structure for themselves and their self-directed relational interactions with school officials. See Reynolds, 2009 for a distinction between the terms involvement and engagement in relation to parents’ activity in schools.

² “School officials” refers to personnel with decision-making power in schools such as administrators, counselors, psychologists, teachers, and program coordinators, and any other District personnel with whom parents might interact.

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rema Reynolds, Assistant Professor of School Counseling and School Psychology, Azusa Pacific University, 901 E. Alostia Ave, P.O. Box 7000, Azusa CA 91702-7000, Email: rereynolds@apu.edu

Introduction

This paper comes from research centered on Black parents and their relationships with school personnel. The topic is pertinent for two reasons; (1) to add to the scant literature regarding Black parent engagement, (2) to center our attention on Black middle class¹ students who are in need of scholarship devoted to their educational outcomes. Black middle class parents, such as myself, may need to disrupt traditional means of involvement in schools in order to realize greater educational outcomes for their children, particularly their Black sons. The manner in which this is conducted by Black parents, this advocacy on behalf of Black males, served as the primary focus of the research project and will be discussed briefly within this paper. My experiences interacting with school and district officials have reinforced for me the need for this research focus. Knowing the system of education, I purposed to send my children to “good” schools. They started their educational careers in a District in which I taught at the time. The magnet elementary school they attended was located in a suburban, predominantly White, middle class neighborhood. The need for my intervention became apparently clear fairly quickly. We thought we found a great school but we were wrong. High school-wide test scores were not indicative of the cultural sensitivity of the educators in the classrooms. The choice did not dissipate conflict and our son invariably brought the most. Shortly after our arrival, I got the dreaded call from our son’s teacher. Consider the following vignette taken from a previous article (Reynolds, 2009) that gives an account of my first encounter with school officials regarding my son:

The trouble started in kindergarten. He was in love with his teacher, a tall white woman, but the feeling was not mutual. Marcus wanted to answer all the questions all of the time. She did not recognize the oral tradition from which my son comes, and was unable to channel his strong communication skills. One awful day, his teacher called me to tell me that my son was “continually defiant.” Her words came hot, as if she were spitting venom through the phone. My heart dropped. Where had I gone wrong? Why was I getting this call about our sweet little Marcus? “There must be some mistake,” I thought. I went to see his supposed defiance in action.

I slinked along the wall to the classroom door, peering in undetected. The teacher spotted me and promptly summoned my son over to the carpet for reading time. “Marcus, do you want to come over and join us for circle time,” she called out in the pleasant voice he had come to love. Marcus looked up from his work and politely replied, “no,” tucked in a corner of his bottom lip for optimal concentration, and returned to his task. She shot me a smirking glance. The look said, “See. I told you he was defiant.”

¹ The term “middle class” has numerous interpretations according to social-scientific, sociological, and behavioral categories. Citing the work of Pattillo-McCoy (1997) the economic determination of middle class is derived based on an income-to-needs ratio, which is based on income that is twice the federal poverty level, which for 2004 was designated at \$18,850 for a family of four. Sociological conceptions of middle class are equated with occupation and income (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Poulantzas, 1974) and stipulated that individuals with white collar jobs and some college constitute middle class. Behavioral classifications of middle class cite people who own property, vote, marry, and attend church as middle class. For purposes of this work, middle class is defined as individuals whose household income ranged from \$40,000-\$95,000, which according to the U.S. Census Bureau is considered the income range for the middle 20% of all U.S. residents.

I stood there stunned. I had just witnessed a cultural disconnect². Perhaps if such an exchange had occurred at the playground or at the local ice cream shop, I would not have been so angry. But this was occurring at school, where we know the stakes are high and such labels of defiance can have detrimental effects for children, especially for Black boys (Davis, 2003; Howard, 2008; Fashola, 2003; Ferguson, 2003; Foster & Peele, 1999; Garibaldi, 1992; Noguera, 2003).

Culturally, Black parents generally give directives (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). White parents tend to give choices and expect the child to choose the desired option (Delpit, 1988). This teacher was raised by such parents and brought the practice of questioning to her classroom. The practice did not work for Marcus. After her smirk, I modeled for the teacher the intonation and phrasing which would elicit the response she wanted. In a kind but firm voice, I said, “Marcus, put your things away and go over to circle time.” Marcus looked a little panicked when he first saw me. But when he saw my smile, he quickly responded to my directive, stopped his task, and walked over to circle time with his peers in the orderly fashion the teacher coveted. The teacher was amazed. I smirked in return--and ducked back out the door (Reynolds, 2009).

The teacher gave directives from then on, and Marcus went on to have a tolerable kindergarten year without crucial incident. What if I hadn’t gone to the school to see for myself? What kind of year would he have had if I trusted the school to do right by my child? What if I did not recognize the cultural clash? What if I internalized the incident as my fault for not raising a compliant child? What would have happened then?

Later, as a counselor and administrator, I served on a committee reviewing cases of students referred for expulsion. I saw so many Marcuses all grown up. They were expelled for one reason or another. We reviewed their cumulative files looking for patterns of disciplinary misconduct. The documentation started in kindergarten.

I saw my son’s eyes when I looked into the faces of the young men before me. I realized that if I were not a parent willing to engage school personnel, my son could have easily been on the other side of the table. I could have been sitting there forlorn and sorrowful, wishing I had recognized danger and intervened at the first sign of trouble. I consistently bring this incident to my son’s remembrance to illustrate the basic challenges he faces each in school and society. The Black parents in this study articulated similar stories in reference to their sons. They related their experiences with school officials, their interpretation of those interactions, and the subsequent instruction they provided their sons in an effort to safeguard from future negative incidents and in attempt to waylay perceive school plans to sabotage the successful education of their Black sons. These parents seemed to recognize what most educators and some scholars miss; race and racism are mitigating factors that provide salient explanations for the experiences Black males have in U.S. schools; explanations that position race and sex at the center of the dialogue. Black parents in this study viewed the world through a lens prismsed with considerations of race, racism, and sexism and invariably, they critiqued their experiences in schools with use of a critical race framework.

² A cultural disconnect may occur when individuals from differing cultures interact. Schools in which the cultural backgrounds of teachers differ from students and parents in the school because of racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or economic reasons are particularly susceptible and more likely to experience cultural disconnects.

Literature Review

One of the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which initially emerged from the field of critical legal studies (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Delgado, 1995), is the normalcy and permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). Critical race theorists assert that racism is and has been an integral feature of U.S. life, law, and culture, and any attempt to address and eradicate racial inequities must be grounded in the socio-historical legacy of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). It is through this lens of race and all its implications that CRT challenges racial oppression and subjugation in legal, institutional, and educational domains. Central to this analysis is the notion of Whiteness as property. This property can have detrimental effects for those without that particular real estate, as we know that normative behaviors are dictated by those in possession of the property, and failure to adopt those norms and adhere accordingly may prohibit development of positive relationships. An example of possible outcomes was discussed in relation to the vignette presented earlier. CRT interrogates the positionality and privilege that comes with being White in the U.S., and seeks to challenge ideas such as meritocracy, fairness, and objectivity in a society that has a legacy of racial discrimination and exclusion (Crenshaw, et al., 1995).

CRT used within the field of education is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to examine and disrupt race and racism found in the schooling system (Solórzano, 1998). The theory allows an interrogation of how Black parents feel race and racism have influenced their sons' schooling experiences and educational outcomes. CRT examines racial inequities in educational achievement in a more focused, probing manner than multicultural education, critical theory, or achievement gap theorists by centering the discussion of inequality within the context of racism (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2003). CRT also serves as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). Critical race scholars theorize about race along with other forms of subordination and the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. These thoughts are particularly pertinent as it relates to Black middle class males in schools as we see clearly the plausibility of this group facing probable oppression and subordination surrounding issues of race, class, and sex.

Power differences and conflicts that minoritized families experience in schools are oftentimes due to the multiple manifestations and subsequent clashes of culture in school settings, including ethnic culture, the culture of schooling, and capitalist culture. CRT posits that schools tend to maintain the ideals and beliefs of a capitalist culture, positioning the cultures of minoritized people as subordinate (Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). CRT is useful in examining the experiences of Black males in public schools given the fact that the study from which this paper is derived addresses issues of race and class, and a theoretical framework that explicitly acknowledges the salience of race and sex in everyday life, including schools, is necessary in order to capture the nuances of this intersection as it pertains to Black males.

Using CRT as a theoretical framework for examining the experiences of Black middle class parents is imperative because race has been, and remains largely under theorized in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Race is also a topic that individuals often avoid when discussing the experiences of people of color living in the U.S. Cornel West (2004) states "To confront the role of race and empire is to grapple with what we would like to avoid, but we avoid that confrontation at the risk of our democratic maturation" (p.41). An explicit acknowledgement

of race and racism in educational theory and practice contributes to a unique analysis and a richer, more comprehensive examination of the challenges Black families, particularly Black males encounter in schools if we wish to engage in an authentic democratic tradition the educational system was founded upon initially.

Recognition of the roles that race, and racism, have played in the central cultural and structural forms of oppression that permeate every social, economic, and political institution in the U.S. is critical when dissecting racism's historical legacy and contemporary remnants for all citizens (Howard, 2008). This deconstruction has obvious implications for those hampered by racial oppression and inequity because many have experienced schooling in a manner that has had negative, at times detrimental, consequences for them. Educational researchers can play an important role in examining these circumstances in order to improve educational outcomes for all children because in many ways, children of color, particularly Black males, find their experiences and opportunities being shaped largely by issues of race and gender.

Yet society consistently fails to engage in conversations about race, suggesting instead that we now reside in a "colorblind" society. This inference is problematic and potentially destructive, sociologists contend, (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Tatum, 1997) as it serves to further silence the voices of those on the margins who continually seek inclusion in schools and society. Thus, a theoretical framework centered squarely on the salience of race, racism, sexism and power, and the education of racially diverse students in this country allows parents, students, researchers, and educators to have a necessary conversation (Howard & Reynolds, 2008) and give voice to the unheard. This conversation regarding Black parents, their experiences in schools, and the subsequent instruction they deliver to their sons is long overdue.

Educators often assume that Black parents' culture, values and norms do not support or complement the culture of education (Delpit, 1995; Edwards *et al.*, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2001; Yan, 2000); thus, many educators, along with policy-makers, have come to accept the idea that Black parents are more of a deficit to their children's educational development than an asset. This belief reflects a superficial understanding of the varied contexts in which parents are raising their Black sons. CRT can help us understand the complexity of the confluence of race, class, and sex in relation to African American males in schools. Parents seem to have an understanding of this complexity, and an awareness of how these concepts of race, racism, sexism, and classism coalesce to cause an inchoate and ambiguous relationship between families and educators. This study allowed them to elucidate their experiences and the knowledge gained from them.

CRT And Counterstorytelling

CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda *et al.*, 1993) and allows for the incorporation of counterstorytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Counterstorytelling is a methodological tool with a history in communities of color that use oral interpretation to convey stories and struggles often not validated by the dominant culture. The tool draws explicitly on experiential knowledge so that parent voice can be a focus of this study.

Counterstorytelling and the inclusion of narratives as a mode of inquiry offer a methodology grounded in the detailed particulars of the social realities and lived experiences of racialized peoples (Matsuda, 1993). Delgado (1999) refers to counterstorytelling as a method of telling the stories of individuals whose experiences have not been told, and a tool for analyzing

and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is naturally included in the dominant discourse. Given the academic outcomes of middle class students, paradigms must be created which allow the voices of their parents to give account of their experiences in schools.

We know that research on middle class Black parents and their engagement in schools is scant. However, even more noticeably absent is their voice within the literature. Missing from scholarly research is first-hand, detailed accounts from Black parents themselves, about the roles that they believe power, race, and racism plays in their experiences as parents advocating on behalf of their children, particularly their sons. It is the value of experiential knowledge that may offer important opportunities for new research paradigms; particularly those centered on the manifestations of race and racism. The use of narrative and storytelling offers what Linda Tillman (2002) refers to as "culturally sensitive research approaches" for people of color. Tillman describes these approaches as "interpretive paradigms that offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-constructions of multiple realities and experiences, and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African Americans" (p.5). Allowing the perspectives of Black families to be given and analyzed furthers our understanding of parent-school relationships and the multiple variables that serve to facilitate or impede them.

Educators often lament Black parents' lack of school site presence and school activity participation. They question whether Black parents promote learning at home, and many may also question the extent to which Black families care about their children's school achievement (Edwards *et al.*, 1999; Fields-Smith, 2005; Noguera, 2001; Yan, 2000). These inquiries, though deficit in nature, may be valid as, again, there is little literature that adequately addresses these questions. Through this project which gives voice to the this unique population, Black parents, I endeavored to provide an insider's perspective in relation to these assumptions and give critical insight into the challenges this particular group of people may encounter when engaging schools on behalf of their children. This paper elucidates parents' responses to perceived racism. The reported experiences of Black parents in this study resulted in explicit preparatory conversations with their Black sons regarding race and sex and their possible effects on the educational process they could experience.

Methods and Data Sources

Although NCLB highlights parent involvement and school accountability through the use of test data, frequently overlooked in the reporting and investigation of school achievement is the status of non-White and non-Asian students in middle class schools, hence the analysis of Black middle class students and their parents. In order to gain greater insight into the lives and experiences of this particular group, it is essential to gather knowledge directly from the source or unit of analysis—the parent's themselves.

When recruiting participants, I posted fliers in the front offices of the ten secondary schools in Coolwater to serve as a call for participation. I initially estimated that the office would yield a cross-section of parents. All parents who come to the school for myriad reasons, from talking to school officials to checking their students out for a doctors' appointment, have to stop in the office. My plan was to select the first six to eight respondents to those fliers who self-identified as Black and middle class. However, only one respondent came from this method. I then visited PTA and School Site Council meetings of the ten secondary public schools and verbally solicited volunteers from those parent organizations. That method yielded five more respondents. At that point, however, participants were able to refer me to other potential

participants they said would be willing to assist me in this study. I then relied on my own social networks and those of the parents I interviewed to recruit parents who fit the criteria. At that point, word of mouth or snowballing, a method of sampling in which participants are identified by successive informants or interviewees (Schutt, 2001) was utilized. I informed all participants about the focus of the study and gave each an opportunity to agree to participate.

Using a qualitative case study approach with a phenomenological lens for analysis, Black middle class parents were interviewed to explore their reported experiences in public secondary schools within a suburban town called Coolwater. In an attempt to capture the unique characteristics with rich, detailed description of the experiences Black middle class parents have in public schools the case study approach offers, the number of cases was limited. In sum, sixteen self-selected parents with a total of nine single case studies. The qualitative data was collected from a series of interviews and a focus group discussion with sixteen Black middle class parents whose children attend secondary public schools in a suburban community in the Greater Los Angeles area. My aim was to represent the cases authentically, on their own terms to amplify the voices of those whose experience as well as perspective often go unheard (Rothman, 1986).

Data Analysis

In order to answer research questions that called for a detailed examination of the experiences of Black parents' relationships with public school officials, I used descriptive theory, which covered the scope and depth of the case being described (Yin, 2003). My unit of analysis (Yin, 2003) was the perception of engagement as informed by Black middle class parents (Scribner, 1984). Phenomenology provided a method of philosophical investigation with which to limit the description of the lived experiences reported by participants through extensive interviews (Chamberlin, 1969).

Interviews and the group discussion with the focus group were taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were then analyzed using a descriptive method and phenomenology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to illuminate and derive meaning from participants' perspectives and experiences and capture the essence of those parent-school relationships. I kept notes during conversations with each of the participants. As interview and focus group data began to accumulate, inductive analyses of recurring themes across individuals and groups materialized (Moustakas, 1994) making it possible to analyze parent-school relationships for the six to eight families along a continuum of involvement to engagement. As parents gave their perspectives regarding engagement and their lived experiences as Black parents in middle class schools, different definitions/meanings of engagement and its manifestations; different types of engagement; reasons for engagement; and an explanation as to the varying degrees of engagement emerged from the data. Using a phenomenological approach to data analysis allowed for the construction of such themes and schemes that may be utilized to develop best practices for parents wishing to participate in schools at different levels.

Limitations

In examining this particular group, there are a few limitations to the study. The first limitation is my own bias that I bring as the primary investigator. As a Black middle class parent with children attending schools similar found within this work, I have had my own experiences

that have the potential to collide or intersect with those of the participants. As a researcher, I was ever vigilant and mindful of the objective of this project – to hear their voices and account for them – and consistently remind myself to adhere to that goal with the scientific, systematic objective methods employed in this study.

Again, I kept my sample size small in order to capture the nuanced richness and depth of the lived experiences the families will share throughout this project. Because the sample size is limited to nine case studies, findings will not be generalizable. Breadth from a wide cross section of parents would not serve the purposes of this project however, or assist in answering the research questions posed.

A third limitation involves my selection process. Restricting my sample to a specific location also restricts diversity. Respondents already have like or common characteristics based on residency. While I believe that their reported experiences within those schools in that particular community will vary, there were some similarities based on the location of the study. Variance also may have been slightly compromised due to my decision to include the first qualified respondents within the study. We know that those charged with parenting children can range from foster parents, to caretakers, to grandparents, to single parents. The small number of participants coupled with the decision to take the first to respond, may have limited variability within the sample and, possibly, limited variability in the data collected.

Results and Discussion

The participants in this study continually reported incidents of disparate treatment that they perceived to be indicative of racist attitudes and beliefs school officials espoused. Though parents cited diverse examples of discriminatory treatment, they all cited racism as the root causes of the unpleasant experiences they had within schools. When interfacing with school officials, parents often felt that their exchanges were wrought with misunderstanding and unspoken hostility. More damaging and most effective in serving as an impediment to a healthy relationship were the implied negative messages Black parents received from school officials regarding their sons.

Malcolm is a seventh grader with parents who regularly make their presence known in schools their children attend. Mrs. Sain, Malcolm's mother, serves as room parent, a position that sees her responsible for phone trees, bulletin board construction, and classroom party planning. Mr. Sain, Malcolm's father, is a police officer and the resident guest speaker for career nights. When asked to recount his experiences with school officials, Mr. Sain offered this exchange as an example:

Then she looked at his test scores and his reading level and was surprised. After realizing his test scores the teacher began to repeatedly say that there weren't any behavioral problems. She made it seem like all Black boys have behavior problems and couldn't act the right way. And what Malcolm didn't realize is that he's being evaluated on every little thing and that he's being watched constantly. What Malcolm needs to realize is that being a Black kid in the education system, he's going to be watched and carefully monitored. All eyes are always going to be on him. And he's going to have to fight the pressure and perform.

Critical race theorists explicates the causal root of Malcolm's teacher's initial suspicion and subsequent surprise about his academic success and her anticipation and ready acceptance of

his underachievement. School officials' lack of positive regard for Black males, the absence of a belief in Black males' ability to achieve, the doling out of harsher punishments, rendering of derogatory and demoralizing comments, the consistent slight when it comes to providing them leadership opportunities, the overrepresentation in special education programs designed for those with discrepancies in learning, and the reluctance to refer them for advanced classes regardless of class (Howard, 2008) must be examined if we wish to counter the underachievement of this particular segment of the Black population.

This pattern of underachievement has perilous, far-reaching implications for Black males in particular that limit their opportunities for happiness and success. A longitudinal study conducted by the Harvard University Civil Rights Project (Orfield, 2005) revealed that retention, primarily in lower grades, disproportionately affects Black males who are the most likely students to be retained (Orfield, 2005). The report contends that by ages 15-17, approximately half of all African American males have been retained at least once. Several sources have highlighted the fact that grade retention is often one of the strongest predictors of school drop out (Rumberger, 2000). Hauser (1999) found that students who were retained at least once, in any grade, were significantly more likely to drop out of school than those who had not been retained. A critical race examination can serve to question the roles teachers and their academic and behavioral expectations of Black male students may play in thwarting the achievement of Black males.

CRT may also serve to highlight issues affecting Black males in reference to discipline policy and procedure. The "zero tolerance" policy designed to curb school violence has had racial ramifications as Black and Latino males are overwhelmingly those subjected to its implementation most (Howard, 2008). According to the 2000 Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) report, Black students are 2.6 times more likely than White students to be suspended from school. The OCR data also reveals that Black males are more likely to be expelled from schools than any other racial or ethnic group. The U.S. Department of Education reported that in the year 2000, Black students accounted for 34% of all out-of-school suspensions and 30% of all expulsions, with the overwhelming majority of these students being male, a disproportionately large number for a group of students who make up only 7% of the total student population.

Research shows that students who have been suspended or expelled are increasingly likely to drop out of school, and more likely to become involved in the juvenile penal system (Fenning & Rose, 2007). The confluence of persistent low achievement, and soaring suspension and expulsion rates of Black males has led some to contend that there is a "school-to-prison" pipeline that has been constructed expressly for them. CRT can question the probable and plausible criminalization process exacted against young Black males in schools today. Indeed, Malcolm's teacher could very well, even unconsciously, contribute to this pipeline with her assumptions regarding Black males and their behavior in school. The fact that she kept *excepting* Malcolm from the other Black boys in her class because of his acceptable behavior speaks to her expectations of him and others like him. If a child's academic achievement is based on the teacher's expectations, parents like the Sains *must* become involved if parents, students, educators, and researchers wish to interrupt and disprove the poor perceptions held by school personnel, or to ensure that their child's needs are met despite them.

Double Consciousness, Microaggressions, and Black Boys

The subtle, perhaps subconscious behavior of the teacher, her treatment of Malcolm based on her expectations of him, can be explained by what scholars have termed microaggression (Solórzano, 1998, Pierce, 1974). Davis (1989) defined microaggressions as “stunning acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority.” (p. 1576). In response to the microaggressions parents often detected but could not name, the Black parents in this study repeatedly made reference to what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as a double consciousness or this practice of looking at oneself through the eyes of others and performing self-checks regularly to ensure that personal behaviors do not substantiate possible stereotypes those of the majority often subscribe to in relation to the minority. They reported conscious attempts that they made to appear credible to school officials such as dressing in suits when they had to visit schools.

For example, several parents in this study constructed deliberate, intentional presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) when conferring with school officials. Goffman’s work is useful here because it offers a symbolic interactionist perspective, emphasizing a qualitative analysis of the interactive nature of the communication process. Knowing that they expected a, “loud talking, neck rolling, finger shaking Black woman dressed in sweats”, Ms. Duncan, a parent in this study, put on “professional clothes” and spoke in soft tones when she interacted with school officials regarding her children. She wanted to appear “non-threatening” so that they would hear her and know that she knew what she was talking about.

Mrs. Baker, another participant, spoke to her son often about the perceptions school officials espoused in reference to Black families. Her son had an understanding of the importance of presentation and its links to credibility. He asked Mrs. Baker to come to school in her work clothes so as to form a positive impression on the school officials he interfaced with daily. According to Goffman’s self-presentation theory, these parents engaged in impression management, a process whereby people try to control the impressions others form about them. It is a goal-directed conscious or unconscious attempt to influence the perceptions other people may form of their image. The goal for the parents was to present themselves in ways they would like to be thought of by the school officials with whom they interacted for an expected end; the parents wanted their sons’ needs met by school officials.

The participants also spoke candidly to their sons about the stereotypes Black males have to contend with when they step on school campuses. They articulated these stereotypes and their repercussions in clear ways so that their sons understood what they were up against in the classroom. Mrs. Baker gives an example of a microaggression she witnessed:

Mrs Baker: I brought it my son’s attention to actually, when they went to Sacramento, and I went as a parent chaperone. The kids were in the airport and you know, they were just acting. And each parent had a group of kids that they chaperoned. These other kids were just running amuck. No one said anything. But as soon as my boys, African American, started getting a little loose, they had something to say.

I said to my son, ‘See Vance, that’s what I’m talking about. That’s the thing that you need to be aware of, because you will say, you know that such and such was doing such and such, and you’re absolutely right. I’m not discrediting you. I don’t want you to think I don’t believe you. But you’re going to be watched more often, more frequently and with more intensity than the next kid.’

You know, I just think there's a lot of bias on consequences, you know, things like that, it always seems like it's, a Black child violates or overrules, the consequences are always more severe than – and I say that because my boys always communicate that.

I have to prepare him for life. And this is the hardest part of parenting; nobody shared with me. I would not have ever known that I would be in such personal distress that sometimes I'm like just in tears and praying, 'Lord, help me, guide me to teach them because this is something that you can't prepare'.

And it can be life or death. Literally.

As Mrs. Baker elucidated, for many Black boys, racial microaggressions received from classroom teachers can manifest themselves in numerous, and at times, unexpected ways. Future research centered in a critical race theoretical framework should question the ways in which racial microaggressions present themselves in low expectations for Black males within schools. All parents in this study described interactions with their sons and school officials rife with microaggressions. With the exception of one case, participants identified specific microaggressions that they had to unpack and explain to their children. Black boys often received explicit warnings from their parents regarding differential, often discriminatory treatment they should expect from educators entrusted with their academic and social development.

Ms. Meredith: I always tell him, well, I tell him that it's harder out here for minorities. First they see you, they see the color of your skin, and I believe that as a society they think they – you know what I mean when I say 'they' – think less of us and think, you know, we're not smart. You know, they think you're lazy; they think you're going to be a slacker, and you got to show them that you're not.

These explicit conversations were had repeatedly between parents and their sons. Parents expressed a special challenge in managing their sons' educational processes as compared to their experiences with their daughters. All reported that navigating the educational terrain for their sons proved much more difficult. All parents interviewed in this study also expressed explicit parallels they could conclude between life in and out of schools for their sons. Consider Mr. and Mrs. Washington for example;

Mr. Washington: And I do believe that Black children have, they walk in the door, Black boys walk in the door with a stigma. They just do. So I think they already just have that, no matter where they are.

We tell him, 'You walk in the door, you're going to be noticed, so everything you

do, you can't do what someone else does because everything you do is going to be magnified, they can see it because you stand out'. We try to communicate it as a challenge, not as a negative, it's a challenge.

0

Mrs. Washington: There was a fair at Remington Park, this was last year, a carnival, and we let him go with his friends but I picked him up. I picked him up and right when I was going home, the police came. Well, Aaron said somebody started to fight. But then there were some Black boys walking away from a police car and I just told him, I said, 'it's

like ten o'clock at night and it's sad, but they {the Black boys questioned by the police} were probably not doing a thing, but you can't just walk down the street like a group of Asian kids can. A group of White kids, you know, that might be OK, but you have to think about that that may not be the best thing to do at ten o'clock at night'. So that part, I mean, I do still tell him those things because it's about survival.

Mr. Washington: So he knows, because if he doesn't, if he walks into – because kids are going to really kind of try to assimilate, so if they see another group doing something then their group will do it. But he doesn't know that, if your group is an all Black group, you may not be able to do that. Why? Because they're going to be watching you. Why are they watching us? Don't have an answer. I just tell him 'you're going to stand out and they're going to keep their eye on you'.

Mrs. Washington: Yes. And those who make decisions, it's going to be either an administrator, a police officer, someone that's security on a site, they're adults. So what they're bringing to the table is not, is not friction that's going on among the kids but they're bringing their own biases to the table, so when a police officer, administrator, rolls up they're biased. 'Oh, oh, why are the Black kids together?' Why? It had something to do with the way they were brought up. They bring their prejudices to the table.

Parents in this study seemed aware of the idea that perception is reality from which people form ideas and expectations for behaviors (Rose, 2005). They witnessed the power of perception within their interactions with school officials. Parents in this study, like the Washington's, warned their children of the concept of "guilt by association" and told their sons to separate from their Black friends if their friends seemed to be getting a little too loud or rambunctious. All the parents felt uneasy about advising their sons not to congregate or associate with other Black students, but given the circumstances, the fact that they stood out due to the small number of them on campus, parents felt this advice necessary for academic success.

Implications

The stories of the Black parents in this study bring to bear important questions about the roles researchers, school officials, and parents may play in disrupting school practices and policies that continue to marginalize Black males, thwart school, and academic success.

Researchers

CRT has within it a tool by which minoritized³ people are provided a space to give their narratives. Counterstorytelling provides agentic power to offer competing experiential evidence and combat preconceived notions school officials possess about Black families. (Edwards *et al.*,

³ *Minoritized*, unlike minority, emphasizes the process of *minoritizing* and insists that the relative prestige of cultures are constituted in social relations of power and agency (Mukherjee, et. al., 2006). Those who are *Minoritized*, unlike minority, emphasizes the process of *minoritizing* and insists that the relative prestige of cultures are constituted in social relations of power and agency (Mukherjee, et. al., 2006). Those who are minoritized are subordinated in power relations by those belonging to the dominant culture (Tettey & Pupilampu, 2006).

1999; Fields-Smith, 2005; Noguera, 2001; Yan, 2000). The counternarratives offered a rare look at the parent-son relationship in relation to schooling. As Black parents attempt to understand and contend with racial microaggressions that may be evidenced in school policies and practices, researchers can assume a critical role by providing them voice, a space to express their experiences. Researchers can facilitate uninhibited descriptions of their encounters with school officials that yield important insights for minoritized students.

Often the participants of this study were stunned and confused, compelled to reflect and attempt to discern whether they could ascribe the averse experiences they had with school officials to any plausible explanation other than racism. This process caused stressors other families of the dominant culture may not have to contend with when interfacing with school officials. Future research that uses aspects of CRT to analyze the experiences of minoritized people should continue to interrogate the manifestations of racial microaggressions in schools as they relate to families of color.

A CRT methodological framework may prove an optimal tool to use to examine the experiences of Black parents and their sons because it allows the creation of supportive intellectual spaces in which Black families may own their experiences and reposition themselves as authorities. This repositioning disallows the common rhetoric that sees their realities described and defined by dominant paradigms. The accounts of these parents, the narratives offered by them, illuminated the experiences of Black males in schools and offered a glimpse into their homes where attempts made by parents to ward off threats against their sons were recounted. Only with their voice, the stories of the families, can researchers be allotted these accounts that provide a richer analysis of the educational experiences Black males have in schools. Parents are key players when considering the educational outcomes of Black males. Including them in the discourse is vital to understanding the condition in which Black males find themselves within U.S. schools holistically. Only with this broadened scope will solutions inclusive of all consequential factors be derived.

School Officials

School officials—teachers, counselors and administrators—should consider these findings and reflect upon the hows, whats, and whys of their communication with Black middle class parents. Too often, when contact between school officials and parents is made, the concern is focused on inappropriate behavior. In a study conducted by Finders and Lewis (1994), parents reported that they only heard from the school when there was a problem with their children. And then, no solutions were offered, just a report of the inappropriate behavior in which their children were involved. This practice alone serves as red flags to Black parents, alerting them to possible injustice or unfairness and facilitating or exacerbating feelings of distrust. The participants in this study spoke about this common occurrence in relation to their sons repeatedly. The first point of contact between school officials, especially the leaders of schools, the administrators, should set the tone for the type of relationship desired by the initiator of the contact. If school officials indeed would like a collegial, collaborative, mutual working relationship with Black families, a concerted effort to make a positive contact within the first weeks of school, preferably before any trouble can be reported, should be made. An introductory meeting between parents and school officials before Back-to-School Night which may fall too late in the year to avoid an initial negative contact, could easily be facilitated by school personnel and could foster the trust necessary for a working relationship between educators and families.

CRT sheds light on how both the macro- and microenvironments of schooling are permeated with cultural values, allowing the manifestations of racist beliefs to take on both institutional and individual forms (Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). This light is needed for school officials to recognize their role in these manifestations. Professional development addressing culture and disconnects between families and educators should be constructed and implemented in schools Black males attend. If school officials are to realize an authentic, democratic, mutually expedient, reciprocal partnership with Black families, issues they have around race must be confronted and addressed. In this study, race superseded any factor in determining how parents and school officials related to one another and how parents perceived treatment their sons received in schools. School officials must decide to face the often uncomfortable reality that racism still exists and is manifested in their relationships with students of color, particularly Black males. Only with this reckoning and proceeding work to face the truth with strategies to address the reality, will school officials be able to position themselves to provide quality educational experiences to Black males and alter the deleterious outcomes currently perpetuated.

Parents

Finally, parents must be recognized as full partners (Fullan, 1998) in the education of Black males. The participants in this study offered critical insight into the teacher-student relationship as it relates to Black males and were able to identify racism as a prominent dynamic. Parents, unlike researchers and educators, after naming race and racism within their interactions with school officials, are positioned to offer Black males the tutelage necessary for their success in schools. Black parents passed on to their sons examples of racism they had either experienced or witnessed through microaggressions played out on school campuses. With those examples came explicit explanations, root causes for the mistreatment they had experienced and could expect to continue to endure. These Black parents provided their sons lessons in low teacher expectations, disparate disciplinary treatment, and disrespect demonstrated by school officials in an attempt to undergird them with the self-esteem and practical, safe responses when incidents of discrimination occurred. That these participants gave their sons the tools by which to identify and name racism is powerful. The insidiousness of microaggressions is located within the subtlety in which they are cloaked. Often when faced with these affronts to humanity, the victims are left to process alone the experience. Without a name, racism becomes personalized, internalized and detrimental to the psyche and sense of self. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), counterstorytelling can serve to redeem the voices and validate the experiences of those who have been the targets of racial discrimination. They state:

Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence, or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination once named, it can be combated. If race is not real or objective, but constructed, racism and prejudice should be capable of deconstruction (p.43).

The accounts of the participants of this study expose and illuminate the ever-present nature of racial microaggressions in the experiences of many Black families in schools and discount assertions that Black parents do not promote learning at home nor care about their children's school achievement. To the contrary, these parents were vigilant and diligent in identifying racist

practices and policies and providing their sons an education on how to respond in a way that maintains their humanity and dignity.

Much can be learned from these parents. Historically, Black people have had to employ a double consciousness for survival. Not much has changed. With perpetual campaigns for daltonism and continued assertions that we are now living in a post-racial society, Black parents need to persist in this type of parenting that empowers their sons with provisions to name and combat racism or, at the very least, sidestep its effects on their personhood. This relationship between parents and their sons, this instruction and guidance offered surrounding issues of race and racism, can serve to facilitate the reversal of the educational trends we continue to see with Black males. Parents have the power to shape and mold the self-image of their children. Candid discourse addressing the myriad methods used to damage that self-image and produce school failure is powerful practice that cannot be neglected. Parents and educators should work in concert to convey these messages of courage and hope in the midst of the dire effects racism has had in our schools for Black males. Perhaps, armed with this knowledge of self within a racist world, Black males can then begin to hold educators accountable for the educational malpractice exacted against them and find success in a system not meant for them.

References

- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York: New Press.
- Davis, J. E. (2003). Early schooling and academic achievement of African American males. *Urban Education, 38*(5), 515-537.
- Davis, P. (1989). Law as microaggression. *Yale Law Journal, 98*, 1559-1577
- Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory. An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (Eds.) (2000). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1996). *Protean literacy: Extending the discourse on empowerment*. London: Falmer Press.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Edwards, P.A., Pleasants, H.M. & Franklin, S.H. (1999). *A path to follow: learning to listen to parents*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Fashola, O.S. (2003). Developing the talents of African American male students during the nonschool hours. *Urban Education, 38*(4), 398-430.
- Ferguson, A.A. (2003). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Fenning, P. & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline: The role of school policy. *Urban Education, 42*(6), 536-559.
- Fields-Smith, C. (2005). African American parents before and after Brown. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 29*(2), 129-135.

- Finders, M. & Lewis, C. (1994). Why some parents don't come to school. *Educational Leadership*, 51(8), 50-54.
- Fields-Smith, C. (2005). African American parents before and after Brown, *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 29(2), 129-135.
- Foster, M., & Peele, T.B. (1999). Teaching Black males: Lessons from the experts. In
- Fullan, M. (1998). *The meaning of educational change: A quarter of a century of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1992). Educating and motivating African American males to succeed. *Journal of Negro Education*, 61, 12-18.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Hauser, R. (1999). *Should we end social promotion? Truth and consequences: Working Paper 99-6*. Madison, WI: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Howard, T. C. (2008). Who Really Cares? The Disenfranchisement of African American males in PreK-12 schools: A Critical Race Theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*.
- Howard, T. C. & Reynolds, R. (2008). Examining parent involvement in reversing the underachievement of African American students in middle-class schools. *Education Foundation*.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco: JosseyBass
- Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68.
- Matsuda, M.J., Lawrence, C., Delgado, R., Crenshaw, K. (1993). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. San Francisco: Westview Press:
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Mukherjee, A., Mukherjee, A., & Godard, B. (2006). *Translating minoritized cultures: Issues of caste, class and gender*. *Postcolonial Text*, 2(3).

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN EDUCATION

- Noguera, P. (2003). The trouble with Black boys: The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American males. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 431-459.
- Noguera, P. (2001). The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American males. *Motion Magazine*.
- Noguera, P. A. (2001). Transforming urban schools through investments in the social capital of parents. In S. Saegart, J. P. Thompson, & M. Warren (Eds.), *Social capital and poor communities* (pp. 189–212). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Orfield, G., & Lee, C. (2005). *Why Segregation Matters: Poverty and Educational Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Civil Rights Project.
- Parker, L., Deyhle, D., and Villenas, S. (Eds.) (1999). *Race is...race isn't: Critical race theory and qualitative studies in education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Pattillo-McCoy, M. (1999). *Black picket fences: Privilege and peril among the Black middle class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pierce, C. (1974). Psychiatric problems of the Black minority. In S. Arieti (Ed.), *American handbook of psychiatry* (pp.512-523). New York: Basic Books.
- Reynolds, R. (2009). *SCHOOL MATTERS: Active parents key to Black students' success*. New York: New American Media. Retrieved January 1, 2010, from: http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=cdc93db9aa65a9741b7ce8a8d6512c51&from=rss.
- Reynolds, R. (2009). *Holla if you hear me; giving voice to those we have missed: A qualitative examination of Black middle class parents' involvement and engagement activities and relationships in public secondary schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Rothman, K. (1986). *Modern Epidemiology*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Rose, M. (2005). *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Penguin Group USA
- Rumberger, R. (2000). *Who drops out of school and why?* Paper presented at the School Completion in Standards-Based Reform: Facts and strategies workshop, National Research Council, Washington, DC. (July 17). Available: University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Scribner, S. (1984). Studying working intelligence. In B. Rogoff & J. Lave (Eds.), *Everyday cognition: Its development and social context* (pp. 9-40). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Sleeter, C. E., & Bernal, D. D. (2004). Critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and antiracist education. In Banks, J. A. & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). *Handbook of research on multicultural education*. (pp. 240–258). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Solórzano, D. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 121-136.
- Steinberg, L. Dornbusch, S., & Brown, B. (1992). Ethnic differences in adolescent achievement: An ecological perspective. *American Psychologist*, 47, 723-729.
- Tatum, B. (1997). *“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books
- Tettey, W. & Puplampu, K. (2006) *The African diaspora in Canada: Negotiating identity and belonging*. University of Calgary Press.
- Tillman, L.C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African American perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 31(9), 3-12.
- Villenas, S., & Dehyle, S. (1999). *Race is race isn't*. Boulder: Westview
- West, C. (2004). *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Yan, W. (2000). Successful African American students: The role of parent involvement, *Journal of Negro Education*, 68(1), 5-22.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Designs and methods* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Yosso, L. T., Solórzano, D., & Parker, L. (Eds). (2002). *Critical Race Theory and qualitative research*. *Qualitative Inquiry* 8(1).