Reversing the Dehumanization of Families of Color in Schools: Community-Based Research in a Race-Conscious Parent Engagement Program

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Abstract

Parents' involvement in their children's education is widely understood as a key component of educational success. However, schools typically expect parents to engage with the school system in ways consistent with White, middle-class parenting and behavioral norms and in ways that are deferential to the school's agenda. In this article, we report on findings from a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) project—the Parent Mentor Program—in a racially and economically diverse small city in Central New York. The project uses a race- and class-conscious framework to (1) understand barriers to the involvement of parents of color, and (2) reframe parents' role in the school system as advocates whose primary purpose is to bridge cultural disconnects between White teachers and students of color. Drawing upon ethnographic methods of focus groups, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, we argue that the Parent Mentor Program, in which marginalized parents of color assist in high school classrooms, increases the engagement of parents of color in the school system, produces a close-knit community that reduces parental isolation and that fosters a collective understanding of shared experiences of injustice, and positions parents of color as empowered advocates who work collaboratively with White teachers to promote educational equity for children of color.

Key Words: parent involvement, racial injustice, school discipline, parents of color, African American, Latina, Latino, families, Parent Mentor Program

Introduction

How can parents of color[1] who are marginalized in school settings advocate for their children when those children are subjected to punitive, exclusionary discipline[2] in schools? This question prompted university researchers, a community activist, and a community schools coordinator in Rivertown,[3] a racially and economically diverse small city in Central New York, to begin designing the Parent Mentor Program—a race-conscious, community-based parent engagement program—in the summer of 2013.

The Parent Mentor Program was conceptualized to create a path for parents of color to connect with the schools and advocate for the equitable education of their children, rather than merely negotiating the terms and scope of their children's school-based punishment. The program is a family engagement project using a family–school–community–university collaboration that combines university leadership and community coalition-building to create and sustain dialogues in the community to work toward racial equity in education, with the ultimate goal of undoing disproportionate discipline and racialized inequity in the school system. The project is guided by a community-based participatory action research paradigm, or CBPAR (Berg & Lune, 2012; Swantz, 2008), with the purpose of (a) increasing engagement among parents of color and school personnel, (b) informing the school district's initiatives to increase cultural responsiveness, and (c) fostering an environment which can afford parents of color the social and cultural capital[4] they need to interact with the school system and advocate for the educational needs of their children.

The Parent Mentor Program diverges from most parent involvement programs which typically adopt a race-neutral perspective, and in doing so, expect parents of color to take on the conceptual models of White, middle-class families—essentially requiring parents of color to assimilate to a Eurocentric school culture in order to participate in their children's education (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Cooper, 2009; Crozier, 2001; Levine-Rasky, 2009). Furthermore, parent involvement programs typically expect parents to be deferential and compliant with the school's agenda (Cooper, 2009) rather than being significant partners in guiding conversation and action in schools. The Parent Mentor Program, in contrast, seeks to place parents in charge of their school engagement while operating from a race-conscious perspective that acknowledges how the school system often marginalizes and dehumanizes families of color. Rather than focusing solely on the achievement of students of

color, the program seeks to organize parents of color as advocates in the school system that collectively push toward structural change in the school's treatment of students of color, with implications for improving the opportunities to learn afforded to these students.

In what follows, we situate our study within the existing research on parent engagement, contributing a unique approach that foregrounds race and social class in understanding and intervening in the treatment of parents of color in the school system. We investigate the extent to which the program succeeds in building a relationship between parents and school personnel based on reciprocity and engages parents in a way that is strength-based, appreciating the unique skills they bring as advocates for their children while validating their participation as decision makers in their children's education rather than expecting them to defer to the school's agenda.

Toward Race-Conscious Parent Engagement

Dominant models of parent involvement are based on the behavioral norms and values of White, middle-class families (Levine-Rasky, 2009). Most educators base expectations for parent involvement on specific acts of engagement such as helping children with their homework, volunteering at school-sponsored events, or attending parent–teacher conferences (Jeynes, 2010). It is assumed that White, middle-class families engage with their children's education in ways expected and valued by the school, while families of color, particularly Black and Latino families, are often perceived as uninvolved in their children's academic lives (Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2001). A more thorough conceptualization of parental involvement extends beyond the education system's deficit model of families of color and includes the impact of home, community, and school environment on a child's education (Christianakis, 2011; Jeynes, 2010; Stitt & Brooks, 2014; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). School personnel often fail to recognize the contributions and the efforts of parents that take place outside of the school context which contribute to a child's academic success (Stitt & Brooks, 2014).

In much of the parent engagement research, there is an underlying assumption that all parents are the same, failing to acknowledge the unique experiences of families of color (Crozier, 2001). The exception is the research on community-based parent engagement work done in Latina/o communities, which focuses on the unique experiences of marginalization Latina/os face based on race, gender, and immigration status and provides examples of strategies used to work for change in public schools (e.g., Beckett, Glass, & Moreno, 2012; Dyrness, 2008; Warren et al., 2009). Our research builds upon the work of Fuentes (2013) and Cooper (2009) who focus specifically on African

American and Latina mothers' strategies of engagement, foregrounding both race and social class as significant determinants of parents' experiences with the education system.

School districts across the U.S. often maintain a stance of disengagement with families of color because deficit-model thinking has led to assumptions by school personnel that parents of color are unable to make meaningful contributions to their children's education (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Noguera, 2001). This perception of parents of color, coupled with the fact that a disproportionate number of students of color live in economically disenfranchised households, often with parents who have limited education, creates an environment where parents may feel less competent and sometimes intimidated when attempting to engage with school professionals (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). The disconnect between low-income parents of color and schools is further heightened by the lack of racial and cultural synchronization (Irvine, 2003) between parents of color and schools when they fail to code switch or culture switch (Delpit, 2006) to the dominant White, middle-class school culture when interacting with school personnel.

Racial and cultural disconnects—or incompatibility between home and school cultures—produce challenges for students, parents, and school personnel (Coggins & Campbell, 2008) which often lead to disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of students of color (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The Parent Mentor project was inspired by a parent mentoring approach used in elementary schools, the Logan Square Model (Warren et al., 2009), but differs in that parents are not mentored by the school personnel; rather, parents act as cultural mentors placed in classrooms to assist in building lasting relationships between students, teachers, and parents of color based on principles of culturally relevant pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Lisa Delpit (2006) argues that it is imperative for teachers, who are predominately White, to explore and learn about the foreign and unfamiliar cultures of the children in their classrooms. The Parent Mentor Program seeks to assist in this effort by helping parents of color facilitate the connection between the White teachers and the children of color in their classrooms. Outside the classroom, teachers, community members, and university personnel mentor the participating parents as they work to bridge the cultural and racial disconnects between predominantly White teachers and their students of color.

The Rivertown Community and School District

The Rivertown City School District, situated in the small city of Rivertown in upstate New York, has 5,601 students enrolled in its seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Over the past 10 years, the

district has experienced an increase in racial and cultural diversity, an increase in poverty, and a decrease in graduation rates—particularly for students of color, economically disenfranchised students, and students with disabilities. Students of color represent 52% of the students in the school district (27% Black, 13% Hispanic or Latina/o, 9% multiracial, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander; NYSED, 2016). Of the student population in the district, 76% have been identified as economically disadvantaged, and the high school graduation rate was 54% in 2015 (down from 60% in 2014, and significantly lagging behind the 2015 New York state average of 78%; NYSED, 2016). One could classify Rivertown as a small city with urban characteristics (Milner, 2012), as the demographic shifts in the community are accompanied by challenges often associated with larger urban centers. As more families of color have moved into the community, there has been increasing concern about the disproportionately low graduation rates and high discipline referral rates for students of color. Particular attention has focused on Black students, as they represent the largest subgroup in this community and have been negatively and disproportionately represented across educational outcomes.[5]

The Parent Mentor Pilot

The Parent Mentor Program intentionally reaches out to parents of color who are financially poor and have felt marginalized in their efforts to interact with the school system on behalf of their children. In the first year of the program, we placed four low-income Black parents (all mothers) in classrooms to assist the White teaching staff in engaging the students of color in their classrooms. We recruited teachers on a volunteer basis, and three volunteered in the first year. Initially, parents were present in the classroom for two hours, one day per week. At the end of the first year, the teachers who had participated were enthusiastic about the project and requested that the parents be in their classrooms more frequently.

Prior to parents entering the classroom, we provided them with over 20 hours of initial group mentorship training. The training consisted of (but was not limited to) the following topics: confidentiality, teacher's perspective, cultural competency, family engagement 101, an introduction to school climate and culture, goal setting, a holistic look at professionalism, and trauma-informed practice. Parents were given a small stipend for professional clothing and offered an opportunity to attend a local beauty school which offered them free salon treatments for their hair and nails. In addition, throughout the school year, the parents were given individualized support, as well as weekly processing/training meetings where parents shared their experiences of the past week in the school and classroom with the group. The Parent Mentor Program

training was developed with the input and cooperation of teacher participants, school administrators, community leaders, and parent participants. Teacher participants also led the training section entitled "Teacher's Perspective," which introduced parents to the school and classroom setting through the lens of teachers' experiences.

The Parent Mentors have an active role in the classroom, working to encourage student engagement as well as positive communication between the teacher, the students, and their parents. The Parent Mentors stand outside the classroom to greet the students as they arrive, giving these parents an opportunity to connect with students and do a quick "temperature check" to see how they are doing. Parents provide additional support to the teachers who, because they have a number of responsibilities, are not always able to observe which students may need help or to anticipate behavioral problems before they become disruptive to the classroom. Parents also encourage students to stay focused on their class, and they interact one-on-one with students who need extra help. These parents are some of the only adults of color[6] in the school building, which positions them to offer a race-conscious cultural frame of understanding and enables them to bridge the cultural disconnect between students of color and school personnel. In addition, they make phone calls home to the parents of the children of color in their classrooms, highlighting the strengths and value they witness in their children. In this way, they often provide the only positive connection these marginalized parents have with the school, thereby encouraging school engagement on a parent-to-parent level.

Research Methods and Conceptual Framework

This research reports on the results of the pilot implementation of the Parent Mentor Program at Rivertown High School. This study examines the relationship between education, cultural capital, and the social positioning of families of color as they attempt to become involved with the school system to advocate on behalf of their children. The study seeks to understand how parents, teachers, and community stakeholders can develop a partnership that gives parents a meaningful voice and a presence in the educational setting so as to create structural change in the school culture. The study also seeks to determine the impact of placing parents of color in a classroom with White teachers who are racially and culturally different from the children of color in their classrooms. These parents can play a role of encourager and problem solver as they help teachers to navigate the social–cultural nuances of the children of color in their classroom which often lead to teacher–student conflict and the subsequent suspension or expulsion of students of color.

This research is informed by a conceptual framework combining the methodological approaches of CBPAR (McAlister, 2013; Swantz, 2008) and critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Thomas, 1993) with the theoretical approaches of critical liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 2000, 2004; hooks, 1994) and critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In an attempt to approach research populations from a humanized perspective, critical community-engaged research intentionally blurs the distinctions between researchers and researched. In this research project, university faculty collaborated with community members as co-researchers to identify relevant areas of research, collect and analyze data, and interpret findings for the benefit of the community. Research becomes more relevant to the needs of specific communities while also contributing to a generalized body of knowledge.

In our work, we link the method of CBPAR with the principles of critical pedagogy, which contends that educational and social transformation must originate with those oppressed by its structures (Freire, 2000). Critical pedagogues acknowledge that while education is often a source of oppression, it is also a potential site of empowerment and individual and societal transformation (Freire, 1998). We use a Freirean approach in this study to structure and make ethnographic sense of the teaching–learning process in the parent group. The goal is the development of critical consciousness, or "conscientization," which is "a deep examination, through dialogue with others, of the legitimacy of the social order in terms of access to socioeconomic resources and opportunities" (Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004, p. 82). Rather than beginning with abstract theory, Freirean "culture circles start from the very issues which affect participants' everyday lives" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 9).

In our program, the process always begins with a discussion of the parents' educational experiences and concerns, building generative themes which guide discussion in subsequent sessions. While the focus of our parent group is distinct from Freire's original culture circles, which focused on the development of literacy among illiterate Brazilian peasants, it is important to note that Freire never intended for his methodology to be adapted verbatim to diverse contexts; rather, he encouraged teachers to "adapt, borrow, and recreate what will be most beneficial to individual students and/or groups of students in particular settings" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 34). However, the main components of the critical consciousness process—creating generative themes, problem posing, dialogue, problem solving, action, and reflection (Souto-Manning, 2010)—are present in these parent meetings. As parents begin to name the world (Freire, 2000) through the lens of their collective experiences with the school system, they generate plans of action—intervening in the school in specific ways—that are then reflected upon at each weekly Parent Mentor meeting, solidifying the

relationship between action and reflection that is at the heart of Freire's notion of praxis.

Freirean methodology is compatible with the theoretical approach of CRT, as critical pedagogy acknowledges "the importance of problematizing the gendered and raced experiences of participants in the culture circles, as these are at the root of much oppression" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 32). CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) foregrounds race to foster commitments to social justice by challenging the dominant ideologies of objectivity and colorblindness, acknowledging the pervasiveness of racism, valuing experiential knowledge, and questioning the notion of meritocracy within the educational system (Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leonardo, 2009). CRT privileges the importance of alternative narratives—critical race counterstories (Guinier & Torres, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002)—that "challenge majoritarian stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities" (Yosso, 2006, p. 10). According to Yosso (2006), critical race counterstories have four possible functions: (1) to "build community among those at the margins of society;" (2) to "challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center;" (3) to "nurture community cultural wealth, memory, and resistance;" and (4) to "facilitate transformation in education" (pp. 14–15). Such counterstories are the foundation of the development of Freirean critical consciousness and are the focus of the narratives generated by the parents in our group.

Along with recognizing the pervasiveness of systemic racism in institutions, CRT, CBPAR, and critical pedagogy share the theoretical principle and methodological practice recognizing that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy have insights into the structural arrangements that perpetuate oppressive hierarchies. CBPAR builds on this by making the assumption that the parents as co-researchers in the project have unique knowledge that makes their contribution to the research project—in its design, data analysis, and creation of meaningful knowledge and pathways for action—invaluable.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative studies, the positionality of the researcher is an important component in the research process. The positionality of the researcher influences how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). This research was conducted by a Black woman who is also a parent of two children and a White woman who does not have children. Our scholarly interests converge in that we have both studied the role of race and other forms of structural oppression in educational institutions. The Black female researcher brings to this research an acute understanding of the racialized construction of Black parents within the U.S. society and in educational settings.

This emic perspective of the Black researcher who has navigated the education system as a student, educator, and parent allows her to strengthen the alliance and trust of the participants and to understand the experiences shared by the parents. The White female researcher, while having grown up in privileged, predominantly White and middle-class communities and schools and never having experienced the kind of dehumanization faced by Black families, has since gone through a racial awakening process toward witnessing whiteness (Tochluk, 2010), learning about and deconstructing privilege, understanding how racism manifests in everyday life, and teaching other White people about White privilege.

Member checking and peer debriefs, which included parents and community members along with school personnel, helped to ensure that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants' voices. As researchers, we established an increased level of trust and comfort with the participants because of our willingness to self-disclose and build relationships on a personal level. For the Black researcher, sharing her experiences as a Black parent navigating the same situations as the participants helped to relax the participants and normalize some of their experiences. For example, sharing the experience of walking into a school to advocate on behalf of her daughter only to be greeted with a pronouncement that the teacher refuses to see you unless the visit includes the school resource officer (police officer) helped the participants to see that the Black researcher has also experienced dehumanization when attempting to advocate for her children. As the Black researcher has had experiences that both collide and intersect with the participants of this study, one fundamental charge as a researcher is to be vigilant and mindful of the goal of the research, which is to privilege and account for the voices of these participants whose voices are often silenced, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and placed at the margins (Dillard, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tillman, 2002). The White researcher positions herself as a White ally, listening to and learning from the parents' stories, and leveraging her White privilege to speak up at the district level about the racialized patterns in school that were revealed in the parents' counterstories.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our study is a critical ethnography of the Parent Mentor Program and its relationship to the school system with regard to reversing the dehumanization of parents of color as they attempt to advocate for their children who are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline such as suspensions, expulsions, and arrests. Ethnographic research, in which categories of meaning

are derived from participants' emic understandings, necessarily involves an iterative process in which research questions are rearticulated and refined as data collection takes place (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). The emic meanings of informants and the categories that emerge from initial data collection inform the refinement of research questions, which, in a community-based critical ethnographic project, are specifically tied to understanding and addressing a problem or set of problems articulated by those marginalized by institutions (Carspecken, 1996; Thomas, 1993). Therefore, in our project, the research questions emerged from the initial implementation of the program. Through hearing the parents' stories, we learned that the parents felt marginalized and disrespected in the school setting and that the only interaction they had with the school was when their children were being disciplined. These themes then informed the way we proceeded with both the implementation of the project and the development of research questions that guided further data collection and analysis.

The following iterative process was followed as we refined the project, its emerging themes, and research questions:

1. Assisted by licensed social workers and social work students, we conducted home visits to interview and recruit parents for Community Cafés, which are a series of gatherings aimed at understanding the needs and concerns of the community (Community Café, n.d.; Blitz, Yull, Sola, & Jones, 2016). The families targeted by these home visits were families identified by school administrators as "vulnerable" because of their children's attendance and performance at school. The families were notified prior to the social workers and university students coming to their house; most of the parents came to the cafés, which were set up to be accommodating to the parents' needs (i.e., providing dinner and childcare).

2. The families who had been recruited via home visits attended Community Cafés, whose primary purpose was to gain preliminary insights into community needs and concerns about the school system. These Community Cafés were conducted using a set of questions to facilitate practice-oriented focus groups among community members. Goals of the Community Café model include developing a shared understanding about concerns and creating mutually agreed upon goals for action. The framework of CBPAR informs this model, as the dual goals of data collection were to learn more about the families and to bring them together to explore their interest in collective action (Berg & Lune, 2012). Using a grounded theory approach for initial inquiry, contact with each parent built a conversation around four *grand tour* questions (Brenner, 2006): (1) What is it like to be raising a child in this community? (2) Can you give an example of a positive experience with the school? (3) Can you describe a difficult experience with

the school? (4) If you could talk to the superintendent or principal and you knew that they would really listen and not judge you, what would you want to say? The parents' feedback revealed two areas of concern: (1) the negative school climate, particularly as it impacted families of color; and (2) experiences of zero tolerance disciplinary practices, which appeared to disproportionately affect Black children in the district.

3. From this pool of families, potential Parent Mentors for the pilot study were recruited and vetted via an interview process conducted by researchers and community coordinators. The sample of Parent Mentors was a snow-ball sample recruited primarily via community referrals. In addition to demonstrating professionalism and enthusiasm for working with teachers and students, Parent Mentors had to meet the following selection criteria: (a) have children in the district; (b) be available to spend time in the school building during the school day when classes are in active session; (c) attend a week-long training meeting; and (d) be available between 6 and 8 hours per week.

4. During the initial training week with the Parent Mentors, and following the IRB informed consent process, we conducted audiorecorded focus group interviews with parents, focusing on the same four *grand tour* questions from the Community Cafés. The themes emerging from these focus groups determined both the direction of the program as well as the research questions.

5. From these Community Cafés and focus groups, we developed and refined the following ethnographic research questions: What are the concerns of parents of color with regard to engaging with the school system? In what ways do their experiences prior to the Parent Mentor Program inform their understanding of and engagement with the school system? What barriers to entry/engagement do they face? What impact does the Parent Mentor Program have on the parents who participate? In what ways, if any, does the program raise critical consciousness among the Parent Mentors?

In an iterative process, step 4 then informs steps 2 and 3, refining the program and data collection as research questions are refined further. These research questions are significant because we anticipate that the knowledge gathered in this study can inform practitioners and researchers in education regarding ways to improve the parent engagement process through parent–school–community partnerships that promote relationship building with parents from marginalized communities, which, in turn, is anticipated to result in greater academic and social opportunities for children of color.

We used open coding methods in combination with CRT to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data were broken down into smaller sections and assigned codes based on themes that emerged; the data were separated based on assigned codes. Codes were refined after cross-examining data, and in the final coding process the data were placed in thematic categories. Participants were consulted about the emerging themes as a form of member checking.

Lastly, selective coding was utilized to elucidate detailed examples and accounts, which helped us to solidify and cluster the data into the themes presented in the Findings section of this article. In the findings, we present excerpts from the participants' responses verbatim to preserve the essence of their voices.

Pilot Study Participants

A total of four parents—all of them mothers—participated in the first year. All mothers self-identified as African American and were single heads of household, and at the time of this pilot study they were all unemployed. Their children were in Grades 1–12. All except one parent had completed high school, one was a certified EMT, and one parent had dropped out of high school. Table 1 provides more information about the parent participants in the program (all names have been replaced with pseudonyms).

Table 1. Scope of the Program and Year 1 Participants

Parent Mentor	Education	# of Children in District	Child(ren)'s Grade Level	Class/# of Students in Class	#of Positive Phone Contacts With Other Parents (calls/week)
Karen	High school dropout	3	6th, 9th, 11th	English / 21 students	8
Nancy	High school	1	11th	Math/ 22 students	6
Leah	High school	2	6th, 8th	Afterschool Study Hall/ 18 students	6
Nikki	High school and EMT certified	4	2nd, 4th, 5th, 8th	Global Studies/ 22 students	7

The teachers who volunteered for the program in the first year were all ninth grade teachers, who taught mathematics, global studies, or English. One parent worked with the afterschool program in a study hall classroom run by the school social worker. The school administrators identified teachers who volunteered to participate. The teachers were organized as a ninth grade cohort, and the afterschool social worker conducted a study hall where the students voluntarily participated.

Findings

In this section, the themes are clustered into two overarching areas. The first focused on the parents' experiences with the school district prior to their involvement in the Parent Mentor Program. Within this area two themes emerged: (a) feeling unwelcome and dismissed as uncaring, and (b) experiencing racial injustice and exclusionary discipline. The second area focuses on parent-specific outcomes resulting from their involvement in the Parent Mentor Program and is revealed through the following subthemes: (a) building a village: from isolation to building a community; and (b) keeping children in class to get their learning by any means necessary. The themes and quotes presented preserve the essential aspects of the participants' experiences—their counterstories of attempting to engage with a school system that frequently dehumanizes them and their children from the moment they walk in the door.

Context Prior to Parent Mentoring

Feeling Unwelcome and Dismissed as Uncaring

The Parent Mentor Program reaches out to parents of color who have often felt that they are dismissed as uninterested or uncaring when it comes to their children's educational progress. Parents noted that they generally felt unwelcome in the school settings in Rivertown; they contrasted their experiences with the Rivertown schools with their experiences in other school districts, mostly in larger cities. Nikki, a mother with four children in the school district who was originally from South Carolina observed that,

> Where I come from, parents used to be able to come sit in the back of the classroom and be attentive. In the South, you can go and peek into the class if there's a problem or you want to just stop by. And now, it's like, they're reading, and they don't want to disturb, and it kind of kicks parents out of their school life, and you aren't as involved as you want to be. If you have a free hour in your day, you can't just pop in and see how your kids are doing.

Parents noted that this feeling of being unwelcome was palpable from the moment they entered the school building, when they were met with hostility and suspicion from school staff. Karen, a mother of five with four children attending schools in the district, shared, "When I go into the elementary school, it's like they don't even want to let you in the building; they greet you saying 'Why are you here?' not, 'Can I help you?'" The parents shared their sense that they were not welcomed into the school community even when they tried to participate in traditional parent involvement activities, such as PTA meetings. Leah, a parent with two sons in the middle school, reflected on her personal experience and the example of her own mother's involvement in the PTA as compared to her own experience:

> My mom was PTA president of my elementary school for years, and then we move up here, and she goes to my little brother's PTA meeting, and everything was different. We tried it twice, and it wasn't working out, and that was the end of it. They didn't welcome us here. They shunned her out. Me personally, when I try to go to curriculum night, they [PTA folks] still aren't welcoming. They're like, "You can just pay your five dollars and not come to the meetings." I go to arts night and speak to their teachers, but that's enough because they don't want us to be involved.

Nancy, whose son is a senior in the high school, shared a similar sentiment about attending curriculum night at the high school:

> And that's what I didn't like about curriculum night either. It's just so weird. That's why they always feel that Latinos and African Americans don't care about their kids and don't show, but it's actually because they only offer it one night, and we're busy. The parents are almost all Caucasian. They make it in a certain way, and then they wonder why people don't show up.

While these experiences of school-based marginalization were key to the founding of the Parent Mentor Program, parents also noted the sense that individual teachers cared about their children and that when they were able to develop personal relationships with teachers, some of these negative experiences could be mitigated. Karen described how, when her oldest son was in trouble at one of the local middle schools, the football coach took proactive steps to connect with her on behalf of her son. "He didn't just reach out and tell me about his potential," she shared, "but he reached out and became a friend to my son. That meant a lot." Karen became emotional as she shared this story, indicating that this was a rare moment of humanization within a prevailing context of dehumanization and hostility. Leah shared that she had positive interactions with another coach at the same school who took an active approach

to addressing the bullying that her daughter was experiencing. He called her on the phone and "was almost in tears" as he described what her daughter was experiencing—indicating an authentic caring for her daughter. These positive experiences, however, were limited to exceptional adults at the school—in this case, both sports coaches rather than teachers—who went against the grain of the prevailing school climate.

Experiencing Racial Injustice and Exclusionary Discipline

Reflecting on their children's experiences with school in comparison to their own, the parents concluded that their own children did not enjoy or engage with school as well as they had. The group did not collectively pinpoint a single reason why this might be the case, but generated a list of possible reasons, including increased surveillance through the increased presence of dogs, metal detectors, and police in schools. Leah shared, "[When I was in school] it was more laid back, I would say. It is different now, the dogs walk the halls." Nikki, whose son attends the high school, shared that her son did not seem to like school, but she reasoned that his feelings of disengagement might be tied to the presence of metal detectors and other forms of surveillance: "I think I liked school and enjoyed it more, and I don't think my son enjoys it as much as I did. I think maybe he's a little less enthused [about attending school]…but I didn't have metal detectors and stuff like that, so that's different, too."

The parents also reflected on their common experience of being taught exclusively by White teachers. Karen captures their collective thoughts by sharing, "My teachers were Caucasian, so even that's still the same. You only get a handful of African American teachers. Even in the hood you only saw a couple of African American teachers. Only my kindergarten teacher was Black."

The parents believed that their children's teachers did not have enough "authority" in their classrooms, and this led to disciplinary problems. By "authority," the parents were talking about a teacher's connection to the children in the class; this disconnection led to class disruption, discipline, and often removal from class because the children did not respect the authority of the teacher in the classroom. As Nikki shared,

> It's like the teachers are younger; my son told me he was shocked that his teacher had a tattoo. He was like, "Ma, you're older than my teacher!" She's only 24! Before, your teacher be like 60! We never treated our teachers like some kids do now. We don't say shut the f up. Teachers used [to] be like our parents until we got home to our parents, you know what I mean? But now, it's like these kids don't respect teachers; my son was looking at the teacher's legs because she wore short skirts, not paying attention, you know what I mean. I think the teachers need to take charge and demand respect like back in the day.

Reflecting on the suspension system, Karen shared, "When you think about it, the teachers need to be more engaged. Now they just say, 'get out.'" Leah noted, "That's why I think it's kind of counterproductive with the suspension system, you know? You still need them to get their learning in by any means necessary, and for them to just kick them out of the class, it's like the teachers aren't doing their job."

Such stories of disproportionate discipline consistently showed up in parents' talk about the schools their children attended. They were clearly frustrated with what they perceived as the school's overreliance on punitive forms of discipline and the fact that they as parents were shut out of conversations regarding their children's behavior until the moment when school administrators were considering extremely punitive measures such as suspension or expulsion. They also noted that their children were unfairly punished for fights that were started by other children in the school (who were not as severely disciplined). Leah shared a story of racialized violence that resulted in her son being suspended:

> I'm just going to say bluntly that they gave my son a suspension on something that happened on school grounds. Basically a little boy was telling my son he was part of the KKK, and he was going to burn my house down. My son got tired of it, and he fought the little boy on school grounds; they suspended my son for five days, and I think the school didn't handle it right. They should have handled the little boy for the cause of why this happened. What caused this 12-year-old to be violent towards my child? I have letters from all these kids who said it was the other kid, and they still didn't do anything about it. I told my son, "Look, it's not what you do, it's how you do it. You should have told him to ride up. Bluntly tell him to ride up." He said, "You're right, mommy." We talked about different scenarios. I don't think the school did better when handling this boy. You can't be violent to people, because once you are, it's always gonna be your fault. We sucked it up.

Similarly, Karen shared a story of racially disproportionate discipline:

> I got into it with the principal at [local elementary school] because some boys jumped my son. I told the teachers, and the teacher said she was gonna talk to the parent, but nothing happened. Here, nothing happens. Anything you do is going to reflect on me. Now, the little boy smacked my son so hard that he left a handprint on his face. When I talked to the principal, she called the police and had me banned from the school for a whole week. I couldn't go nowhere on the property. I went back to her because I realized I handled it wrong. If this was mentioned to me before that kids were being mean to him, it could have been different. I

tried my best to do it the right way, but the principal said she didn't have time for that. So I agree that my son shouldn't have retaliated, but you're not gonna tell me that you're not gonna do anything to the other boy. I think my son had just had it. I didn't feel like that was fair. Because I argued with her, the other little boy only got lunch detention. I didn't get no meeting with nobody or nothing. He went back to school, and I had no other problems after that. Recently, we ran into each other, and we apologized to each other and hashed things out. It is what it is.

Nancy shared a story that had taken place in the high school in which a food fight resulted in the arrests of six Black students and two White students:

I actually have various ones [stories of negative experiences with the school], but the one that comes to mind is actually recent. My son goes to this high school, and last year they had a food fight. It was so many kids involved that they couldn't contain it. Listen, I understand, but you have police in this school. I try to teach my child not to be violent and not to bully kids, because your main goal here is to get an education, and that's what you need to worry about. So, he was in the lunchroom, and he said they threw milk on him, and it was going down his clothes, and he said at first he was walking away, but as he was leaving, the milk just exploded and went all down his face, and he said, "Mom, I wasn't gonna hit him until then." He hit someone, but they didn't recognize it. Recently, they took all the vending machines out, but I don't like how the school handled it. I'm a single parent, but I'm not going to ignore it. He got suspended for two days for standing on a table during the fight. I realize that's wrong, but what do you do when it's a riot in the lunch-room, and there's nowhere to run? Either you're going to be engaged in the fight, or you're going to run out. He chose to stand on the table away from all the drama, but he got suspended for two days. He wasn't on Instagram taping all the fights, that wasn't him. I asked him what hap-pened to the other kids, and they wouldn't let me meet with the other parents. There's something sick about that to me. How long did you give these students suspension who were actually engaged in the fight? You're missing too much work when you're suspended.

Stories like this were extremely common in parents' talk about their rela-tionship with the schools their children attended. The common thread that runs through these vivid stories of racialized school violence and punitive dis-cipline is a sense of frustration in being barred from direct involvement in the disciplinary process and of feeling that their children were unfairly targeted for disciplinary action even when they were innocent bystanders to incidents

in school. At the same time, these parents often ended their stories with statements of resignation such as "we sucked it up" or "it is what it is," indicating that they felt that there was nothing they could do to change the school's treatment of their children. Marginalized by the school from engagement with their children's education, these parents came to the program feeling that while they could not challenge these unjust incidents, ultimately their interventions showed them how to navigate these systems. For example, at least in their role as parent mentors—if not as parents advocating for their own children—they could begin to have a small impact on changing the school culture around the disproportionate disciplining of children and youth of color.

In the following section, we define the parent-specific outcomes resulting from the participants' engagement in the Parent Mentor Program. These findings include the following themes: (a) building a village: from isolation to building a community; and (b) keeping children in class to get their learning by any means necessary.

Experiences After Involvement With Parent Mentoring

Building a Village: From Isolation to Building a Community

Despite moving to Rivertown to obtain more safety for their children, ties to the community were substantially lacking for these parents. Some of the parents cited mistrust of other adults in the community as the reason for not connecting. This was exacerbated by the fact that very few affordable, culturally relevant social and/or educational programs exist for Black and Latino families in Rivertown, so the opportunities to connect with other families of color were severely limited.

Notwithstanding these initial feelings of isolation and mistrust, through the course of the first week in the training sessions, these mothers formed close bonds with one another very quickly. This process indicated that they had been longing for this kind of connection with people like themselves but had not experienced the opportunity to do so until then. The program was intentionally created to forge these kinds of deep bonds between parents so that they could approach classroom situations with solidarity and community. The ultimate goal of the program is to have the parents assume leadership entirely, to recruit other parents to join, and to own the process of changing the school culture, building a stronger community of active parents of color empowered to enact structural change in the school system. At the end of the first day of training, one parent shared, "We got to meet new people and get to know each other better instead of just being like, 'oh, there's another parent.'" At the beginning of the second day of the training, we again checked in with the parents to get their reflections on how the first day had gone for them. Karen shared simply

and profoundly, "I felt like I'm part of the world again," indicating both the sense of isolation that she had felt prior to the program and the feelings of connection that had already been forged on the first day. Nikki chimed in, "Well, I feel happy because yesterday went really well, and we're building up a good rapport, so it felt really good and really relaxing." In one vulnerable moment during a getting-to-know-you exercise during the third day of the training, parents were asked to pair up and discover something they had in common—something profound that went beyond a favorite color or whether they had pets. The parents did indeed share deeply with one another in this process, and it was revealed that three of the four parents had previously been in abusive relationships. An atmosphere of warm acceptance and compassion filled the room as the parents discussed this revelation. In another vulnerable moment, Karen shared that she had been having difficulty connecting with community prior to coming into the Parent Mentor Program, but now, "You couldn't have picked a better group of people to be around, and it's like we all came to be a family, even though some of us have family up here, but it's not like, really, they're family." By the end of the week, the parents were celebrating birthdays, sharing deeply, hugging, and shedding tears together in a way that belied the fact that they had only met each other at the beginning of that same week. Such strengthening of community among parents of color was the first step toward a systematic approach to working together to address racial inequity in the school culture.

Keeping Children in Class to Get Their Learning by Any Means Necessary

Parent Mentors' own experiences with their children made them keenly interested in the job of intervening on behalf of students to help keep them in class. Both parents and teachers noted that the presence of the parent mentors in the classroom and their ability to help reduce classroom disruptions was a key benefit for teachers who participated in the program. Mr. Seal expressed the sentiments of the teachers who worked with the parents, sharing that the presence of Black parents within these classrooms "had a positive effect on classroom disciplinary practices, since the parents are able to encourage students to stay on the assigned task and, when necessary, remove students temporarily from the classroom and talk to them and get them back on task." The parents' cultural connections to the students put them in a position to help the teachers understand difficulties students might be experiencing outside of school. As Nikki shared:

> Once I got to know the students better, I started telling Mrs. Norman about some of the conflicts that the students were having at home; sometimes when students would act up I was able to talk to them and calm

them down. There was this one student who was always getting picked on, and he just had enough and pushed a student that was messing with him in class. I got him and told him, "Let's go for a walk." We walked down the hallway, and we had a short discussion, but when we got back he was ready. I saved this student from being kicked out…fighting in class is an automatic suspension, but Mrs. Norman let me try a different way. We need push these kids into class, not push them out. They can't learn nothing out of class.

Leah shared about her attempts to keep students of color in the classroom:

I was walking by the Spanish classroom and heard a teacher yelling. By the context of what was being said, I could tell that it was in regard to a student's behavior. I popped my head into the classroom and asked the teacher if I could talk with the student in hopes of preventing the student from getting kicked out of class. The teacher agreed. I spoke with the student about getting themselves ready to follow instruction and get through the class period. According to the student the teacher was "trippin' for no reason" but ultimately agreed to go into the classroom ready to learn. I walked away feeling relieved that I was able to defuse the situation, sparing the child the difficulty of disrupted learning. Not too long after I was walking past the same classroom and heard the teacher yelling again; to my dismay, this teacher proceeded to remove five students in total from her classroom that day. The end result was that most of a learning period was squandered.

Further Results

The parents' narratives suggest that they felt that their work as parent mentors in the high school gained them respect that they did not feel they had prior to working with this program. As a result of the program, they walk into the school not as strangers or "those" people being scrutinized and critiqued, but instead they walk into the school with the confidence that comes with being a welcomed part of the school community. Leah shared,

When we first started, it was like, "we don't belong here; they don't want us here," but now they call us to help out in rooms with teachers we are not even working with…when I come to work now, I have my badge; I don't even have to sign in. I feel respected.

Nikki added, "The other day the principal introduced me to one of the guidance counselors; she said, 'This is Nikki, she is a Parent Mentor;' I felt proud." The parents also indicated that the tone of their interactions with school staff was changing towards the positive. As Karen shared,

Now that I have been there for a while, they [school personnel] are friendly; at first they were apprehensive, but now it's like I volunteer, but I always looked at this as going to work; it has been getting better and better with the people in the building.

While these narratives support that idea that the presence of Black parents within these classrooms has had a positive effect on classroom disciplinary practices, more data need to be collected, and the program needs to be implemented for a longer duration in order to gauge its effectiveness in transforming the school culture around disciplinary practices. At the end of the year, we met as a group with three of the teachers and all four parents who had participated in the program to hear their reflections on and suggestions for the future of the program. Comments were overwhelmingly positive, and all participants expressed their sincere gratitude for the opportunity to come together and build an authentic partnership based on mutual respect, trust, and advocacy for the children in their classrooms. The parents wrote thank-you letters for the teachers that they gave to them during this meeting, and the teachers were clearly moved by the gesture. Unprompted, Mr. Fisher, one of the teachers, made the following comments about the program:

Yeah, this is awesome. Well thank you so much; you know I gotta say, at the first, you know when we first heard about the program, and you're like, well, what's this gonna be like? And it's been really beneficial for me, too, because, like what I was saying with these guys, I don't catch every conversation that kids have or that, or even that you guys have with the kids, so, I think just having like that extra adult in the room and them seeing somebody who takes their time and wants to come in and be part of the school community, I think that can go a long way, and I can definitely see in the future this having net benefits as the program kind of branches out, and maybe more parents are in the building, maybe they're having more conversations with other parents about what's going on in the building, and I think it can really create buy-in in the community. So I'm really happy with the outcome of the program and what it ended up being. I thought it was completely positive, so, I'm happy to have the opportunity.

Mr. Fisher expressed that he initially felt hesitant about participating in the program because it was an "unknown step," but as soon as he saw the benefit of having assistance from parents in the classroom, he was convinced that it was a positive step. He also recommended that the program be expanded to other parents and classrooms in the future. Thus, we saw the beginnings of a parent–teacher community based on authentic relationships that we hope will

be beneficial to improving the educational and life chances of not only children and youth of color in Rivertown but the parent participants as well.

Discussion

Consistent with CRT, the stories shared by the parent participants function as counterstories to the dominant discourse and show parents who are fully engaged yet stymied when they come up against racist practices that place their children in jeopardy and maintain inequities in their schooling experiences. The participants in this study shared that their primary interactions with the school district prior to the Parent Mentor Program were only when they were contacted to address the disciplining and, often, subsequent suspension of their children, which is consistent with research that documents the experiences of parents of color nationwide (Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2001). When the parents went to schools to advocate for their children—even in the context of traditional venues like PTA and/or classroom visits—they experienced being treated with disregard and disrespect. Many Black parents, particularly Black mothers, are made to feel unwelcome and regarded as if they were the problem (Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2001). As Nikki shared, "Just walking in [the school], the stereotypes about Black people are projected on me before I even speak. I am approached in a hostile manner; I am treated as if I was a threat." The Parent Mentor Program brings parents into the school, and their mere presence often disrupts the prevailing deficit discourse that Black parents do not care about the education of their children (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2001). Whereas dominant discourses suggest that parents of color do not have the social and cultural capital to address Whiteness in a way that would be acceptable to schools, the Parent Mentors' presence in the classrooms and in the school situates them to directly combat and disrupt school practices that poise them as ineffective partners.

Pushing Youth Into—Not Out of—Class

While the parents' experiences with school personnel was one factor the collaborative team felt needed to be addressed, the parents' perceptions of disproportionate disciplinary practices their children were being subjected to were equally important. The stories that the parents shared were consistent with well-known narratives regarding the disproportionate disciplining of students of color (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2001; Skiba et al., 2011). Disciplinary measures resulting in suspension and expulsion of students pose a problem for students and for administrators continuing to struggle with the well-established academic

achievement gap between White and Black students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). Removing students from class equates to removing students from the opportunity to learn, challenging their ability to perform academically. As Nikki put it, "We need push these kids into class not push them out. They can't learn nothing out of class." Both African American boys and girls are impacted by the adoption of zero tolerance policies in the Rivertown School District in that what should be consequences of last resort—suspension and expulsion—too often become the mandatory sanction for even minimal infractions (Skiba et al., 2000). As a result, we have observed a local and national increase in referrals that involve law enforcement, creating conditions under which students find themselves on the "school to prison pipeline" (Elias, 2013). In response to the localized version of this situation in our district, we worked with parents of color, teachers, administrators, social workers, and community members to collaboratively envision and implement the Parent Mentor Program in Rivertown City School District, beginning with Rivertown High School.

Parent Mentor Program Impact

The parent participants indicated their work as parent mentors resulted in feeling a new sense of respect within the schools. The parents still expressed that from time to time they do feel a disconnect and a sense of alienation, but for the most part they now feel they are making an important contribution to the school community, helping teachers and other personnel make cultural connections with families of color. Noguera (2001) suggests the type of gains in social and cultural capital—such as those facilitated by the parents' involvement in the Parent Mentor Program as expressed by the parents—are essential for connections between the school and community to foster true family engagement with parents of color and for recasting them as important contributors to the education of children in the community.

The parents involved in the Parent Mentor Program became valuable assets to the teachers who worked with them and to other school personnel. They were able to leverage their cultural connections with the students to gain respect from students that may have shown little respect to the White adults they encountered in the building. Parents were seen as more empathetic and relatable, and they were able to parlay their relationships with students to successfully encourage a change in negative behavior of the students of color. The parents' work garnered support and respect from the teachers who would, upon the recommendation of the Parent Mentor, agree to allow the students to stay in class. Placing the four Black mothers in classrooms with White teachers, we began to see a transformation in the attitudes of both the parents and the teachers as they began to see each other as allies in the educational process.

Limitations and Implications

There are several limitations that should be noted for this study. The small number of participants ($n = 4$) limits the claims that can be made with regard to Black families in general. However, to address this issue, the researchers incorporated a robust CBPAR framework into the design and implementation of the study, allowing the researchers to provide an in-depth examination of this area of study. In addition, the study relied on snowball and convenience sampling, creating the possibility of selection bias. Because only mothers volunteered for the pilot study, we did not have the opportunity to fully situate the role of fathers of color in parent engagement. Another limitation of this study is that the perspective of the teachers is not fully explored. The parents are the focus of this paper; however, future research will include interviewing teachers and getting a more detailed understanding of their perspectives on the Parent Mentor Program. Furthermore, as the context of Rivertown is unique, generalizing the findings to other districts should be made with caution. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with the national pattern of the treatment of families of color in schools (Cooper, 2009; Crozier, 2001; Noguera, 2001).

As the findings suggest, the Parent Mentor Program has implications for parents of color as well as school personnel seeking true family engagement with disenfranchised communities. The Parent Mentor Program provides one model for practitioners and researchers in education which shows promise to improve the parent engagement process through parent–school–community partnerships that promote relationship building with parents from marginalized communities. The Parent Mentor Program has succeeded in producing a tightly knit community of parents who together feel less isolated in the community and more empowered by the work they do as Parent Mentors. This program shows the potential for developing a school climate and culture that is more inclusive by simply involving parents as collaborators in classrooms. Auerbach (2009) suggests that involvement of parents of color in the educational process is essential for communities to build the cultural competencies necessary to support racial equity in schools. The relationship building that occurs between White teachers and parents of color working together creates environments where prevailing deficit constructions of the parents as uninterested in their children's education can be challenged. Building effective collaborations with the teachers benefited the teachers, parents, and students, particularly those students whose misdirected behavior was "checked" by the parents, resulting in negative behaviors changing and students reengaging in the class.

Whether school personnel acknowledge or are intentional in the deficit constructions they make of families of color or not, the consequences are clear as seen in the low expectations for the achievement of children of color in general

and Black children in particular and in the continued deficit discourse that suggests education is not important to Black families (Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2002). When Black people are not welcomed into educational institutions, the ways in which the dominant culture understands their concerns is filtered through the lens of colorblindness that dismisses the historical and traditional ways schools have been unwelcoming to parents of color. The Parent Mentor Program offers another avenue to bring not only Black parents but all parents of color into the school in ways that can be both liberating to them and enlightening to the predominately White school personnel. The Parent Mentor Project can be seen as one tool among many that can be useful in the quest to achieve racial equity in schools.

Endnotes

[1] In this article, "parents of color" refers primarily to Black and Latino parents, due to the demographic makeup of the community and schools.

[2] We define exclusionary discipline as school-based disciplinary practices—such as suspensions (in school and out of school), expulsions, and arrests—that remove students from the classroom, thereby reducing their opportunities to learn.

[3] All names of locations, schools, and individuals are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants' information.

[4] Cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) refers to the social and cultural assets of a person (i.e., education, intellect, style of speech, dress, etc.) which promote social mobility in a society. Within the educational system in the U.S., the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers social status and power is that of the White, middle-class culture (Lareau, 1987). Parents of color who do not have or display these preferred cultural norms often find that the social or cultural assets they possess are not respected by school personnel, and they are disadvantaged and often marginalized by unequal systems of power when engaging with school personnel (Noguera, 2001).

[5] It is important to note that Black students are not the only group of students of color disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline. Latina/o students and biracial students also experience disproportionate discipline, but we focus here on Black students because (1) Black students are numerically the largest subgroup of students of color in the district; and (2) they face the highest rates of disproportionate disciplinary actions in the district.

[6] According to the building principal, Rivertown High School has a staff of 181 with 2 Black teachers, 1 Black long-term substitute teacher, 1 Black assistant principal, 2 Black teacher aides, and 2 Latino/a teacher aides. A total of 4% of all school personnel are persons of color. According to the principal, "This has been consistent for the last five years and reflects an increase in staff of color."

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