

# Can We Talk? Using Community–Based Participatory Action Research to Build Family and School Partnerships with Families of Color

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## Abstract

Research has demonstrated persistent, disproportionately negative educational outcomes for students of color, causing national concern in this area. School personnel increasingly understand the need to engage with parents as educational partners, but parents of color may feel marginalized in these efforts. This paper presents findings from a series of focus groups with middle-class parents of color in a small city in the Northeast United States. Using critical race theory, this research examines the parents' experiences in the community and with the schools. Findings regarding community include lack of cultural enrichment for families of color, isolation in the community, and experiences of colorblind racism and cultural ignorance. School-focused findings include lack of cultural competency in the schools, stereotyping, and racial disproportionality in school discipline. The discussion centers on the school district's strategic plan and the community–university partnership used as a vehicle for responding to these critical concerns.

Key Words: family engagement, disproportionality, critical race theory, families, community–university partnerships, students of color, parents, African American, Black, socioeconomic status, culture, cultural competency

## Introduction

Her pain, frustration, and fear were clear as the mother shared her story. Her 13-year-old son came home from school with a complicated question. In their overly busy two-career household, the parents had neglected to deposit additional money onto their son's school lunch card, and he did not have enough to pay for lunch that day. When the card was swiped in the cafeteria, the White woman behind the register gave the young Black boy a look he described as "mean," threw his hot meal into the trashcan, and replaced it with a peanut butter sandwich. Embarrassed, the boy began to walk away but noticed that the boy behind him, a White student, also did not have enough money on his card to cover the cost of lunch. This time, however, the cafeteria worker let him keep his hot meal with a warning to have his mother fill the card tomorrow. The two boys, friends since kindergarten, looked at each other in confusion. They joined their friends at the table and talked about the incident, wondering together how to understand it. Her son brought his question home, "Mom, is this what racism is?" The Black mother's outrage was evident:

I know he needs to learn about this, and he's 13, this is probably a good time. But who do I go to in the school? Which one of those White people is going to understand me? How are they going to relate?

### Engagement and Disconnection With Parents of Color

As the parent described above searches for people who will support her within the school, school personnel increasingly understand the need to engage with parents as educational partners to create an environment where children can thrive and achieve academically. Parents play a key role and are instrumental contributors to the academic success of students (Auerbach, 2009; Gibson & Haight, 2013; Noguera, 2001). Engaging parents in school activities and student learning is widely considered fundamental to high-quality early childhood care and education (Douglass, 2008). Parents' involvement is important for improving school engagement and student performance for middle school (Mo & Singh, 2008) and high school students (Ouimette, Feldman, & Tung, 2006). While incorporating parents as partners in the educational process is critical, the partnership is one in which parents of color are often powerless, silenced, and marginalized (Lewis & Foreman, 2002).

This paper presents findings from a series of focus groups with middle-class parents of color whose children attend a small urban school district in the Northeast United States. The focus groups were conducted in the context of a family engagement project using a family-school-community-university partnership model that combines university leadership and community coalition

building to create and sustain dialogues in the community to support excellence in education. The project is guided by a community-based participatory action research paradigm (Swantz, 2008) with goals to (a) increase engagement among parents of color and school personnel, (b) inform the school district's initiatives to increase cultural responsiveness, and (c) foster the positive racial identity development of students of color.

### **Disproportionality in Student Outcomes**

Like many school districts across the United States, in the district discussed here, Black students have been negatively and disproportionately represented across educational outcomes. While other students of color may be similarly impacted, particularly Latino and Native American students, Black students represent the largest non-White group in this community. Throughout the country, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended from high school and at least twice as likely to exit school without a high school diploma (Aud et al., 2013). Educational disparities have consistently been shown to exist independent of the socioeconomic status of Black families (Allen, 2010; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004; Skiba et al., 2014).

One attempt to address the achievement gap and improve the academic outcomes of Black students is to increase parent involvement in schools. Parents' involvement in their children's education has a positive impact on student academic achievement (Auerbach, 2009; Lopez, 2012; Noguera, 2001). Black parents, however, are often not thought of as good advocates for their children because it is assumed that they lack the knowledge, social capital, or interest in partnering with the school for their children's education (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). It is possible, however, that research on the involvement of Black parents is flawed because it generalizes the educational experiences of low-income children and their families to the entire Black population, missing the experiences of middle-class Black families (Allen, 2010; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004).

### **Traditional Parent Involvement and Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**

It has long been known that parents' involvement with their children's education is an important element of student success and positive educational outcomes (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Traditionally, educators have expected parents to participate in their children's education by communicating with the schools and by helping the children in the home. Parental involvement is often understood as parent attendance at school functions such as parent-teacher conferences and/or volunteering in school programs organized by the school (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Cooper, 2009; Lewis &

Forman, 2002). These norms are based on a Eurocentric model involving behavioral practices of White middle-class parents, who generally lead most of the programs organized by the school and establish the standard for successful parent involvement (Lewis & Forman, 2002). When parents of color do not participate in school events, they can be perceived as disengaged, uninterested, uninvolved, uncaring, or angry (Cooper, 2009). Examined differently, however, it could be understood that school districts are actually maintaining a stance of disengagement with families of color because deficit-model thinking has led to assumptions that the parents are unable to make meaningful contributions to their children's education (Cooper, 2009; Noguera, 2001).

In contrast to traditional methods of parental involvement, family engagement can be seen as a culturally responsive paradigm for successful parent partnerships. Family engagement does not prescribe to parents how they can contribute to the school, but rather listens to the parents to understand their concerns (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). As described by Ferlazzo and Hammond (2009), family engagement requires schools to develop a relationship-building process, where ideas are elicited from parents in the context of trusting relationships. The emphasis is placed on the reciprocal relationship among families and schools. A relationship-centered organizational system is vital to building effective partnerships with families to benefit the children's education (Douglass, 2008). As parents become more deeply involved in their children's educational process, relationships with the teachers and school personnel are improved, school climate is strengthened, and school culture becomes increasingly inviting (O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008).

### **Community Engagement**

In addition to family participation, the involvement of community members has also been noted as a critical resource for individual student achievement as well as for developing school climates and cultures that respond effectively to all students (McAlister, 2013). It is important to recognize that relationships among families and schools develop in the context of complex community networks that contain structures of power and resource access that directly impact both schools and families (Kroeger, 2005). In communities that are dominated by one racial or cultural group, these power structures need particular attention, and active family engagement practices with diverse groups of parents are particularly important. It has been shown that as diverse groups of parents and community members become actively engaged with the schools, the schools become more equitable, culturally responsive, and collaborative (Auerbach, 2009). High-performing schools tend to have a combination of many characteristics, including high levels of parent and community involvement

(Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Practices that focus on developing partnerships among family members, school personnel, and community stakeholders have been shown to predict positive student outcomes, including better attendance, the most basic prerequisite to achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

### **Understanding Race, Culture, and Colorblind Racism**

Racial achievement gaps in education are a serious concern nationwide. The discussion of race, however, has become marginalized in service of promoting a “colorblind” agenda (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013). Though well intentioned, the “colorblind” approach inhibits the ability of White communities to understand the social experiences of racial microaggressions, the daily injuries of racism, and the accumulated burden of racism-related stress experienced by people of color (Sue, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2012). Thus, “colorblindness” impedes genuine engagement and the development of partnerships to benefit children of color and unintentionally reinforces the subtle privileges of White skin. Colorblind approaches shift away from viewing structural racism as one of the primary causes of the problems that children of color and their families face and moves to more deficit-based explanations. As a result, social class, cognitive ability, lack of work ethic or morality, social capital deficit, and family structure lead the list as replacements for race as primary reasons presumed for racial disparities in education (Cosby & Pous-saint, 2007; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). These explanations support the idea that the persistent racial achievement gap continues because Black parents’ cultural values and norms are mismatched with a school culture that views the parents as the problem (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Feagin, 2006).

Race and cultural bias have an impact on Black families from all socioeconomic levels, and this affects parent involvement with schools (McAdoo, 2006). Middle-class parents of color experience racism as they seek to advocate on behalf of their children, and some avoid involvement in their children’s school to avoid problems (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Teachers are often White women whose own educational and life experiences are considerably different from the students in urban schools, and teacher education may not include developing skills that prepare them for racial and cultural diversity (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007). As a result, teachers can be skeptical of parents who are not involved in children’s schooling in ways that are familiar to them (Doucet, 2008). Parents of color who are not recognized as having the same social capital as White parents may be devalued and perceived as lacking skills and strengths (Allvidrez & Weinstein, 1999).

## The Current Study

Using critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework, this research examines the experiences of Black middle-class families with their children's schools. Based on an inquiry-driven method to inform relationships and communication among family members and school personnel (Kroeger & Lash, 2011), the present study aims to better understand the experiences of parents of color as a first step to engagement. CRT uses the lens of race to challenge the dominant ideologies of objectivity and colorblindness in order to foster commitments to social justice; it also values knowledge gained by experience and questions the notion of meritocracy within the educational system (Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leonardo, 2009). As a conceptual framework, CRT provides the analytical power to explain the persistence of racism in educational policies and practices, as well as the rationales used for and against confronting these practices in American public schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In this study, CRT allows an exploration of how Black parents understand the complexities of racism as it influences the school experiences and academic outcomes of their children.

### The Community and School District

The study was conducted in a small city with a population of less than 50,000. People of color make up approximately 22% of the population of the city, and about half of them identify as African American or Black. Poverty is a significant issue for the city where 30% of the population and over 40% of children live below the poverty level, which represents approximately twice the state average.

The school district has less than 6,000 students. Over 70% of students receive free or reduced price lunch, which is an indicator of the economic struggles for families, and this rate has been rising steadily. Over the past 10 years, the district has become increasingly racially and culturally diverse, has observed an increase in poverty, and graduation rates have dropped. Graduation rates and test scores in all mandated standardized testing areas are lower for students of color, along with those who are economically disadvantaged and those with disabilities.

Students of color represent approximately 48% of the students in the school district (24% Black, 13% Latino/a, 8% multiracial, 3% Asian), and while many are economically disadvantaged, the rates of poverty are nearly proportional to White students. The population of students with disabilities reflects the ethnic distribution of the district, with 14% of all students identified as having a learning disability. 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. Data presented here are part of a larger project that reached out to parents whose children were struggling in school, a racially diverse group but almost exclusively people living at lower socioeconomic status (SES). As data collection progressed, it became clear that parents of color were describing concerns related to race. To better understand the racial issues separate from other life stressors, the decision was made to hold focus groups with middle-class parents of color whose children were doing well in school.

### **Focus Group Participants**

Participants were identified through convenience and snowball methods, relying on social and professional connections to identify middle-class parents of color with children in the school district. Since there is no official definition of middle class (United States Census Bureau, 2010), this study defined middle class as having a stable and sufficient income that provided a comfortable lifestyle and no immediate concerns about financial insecurity. A total of 19 parents participated, including 14 mothers and 5 fathers. Sixteen of the parents identified as African American, two as biracial, and one as Black Latina. Fifteen of the participants were in two-parent families raising children together with their spouse. Their children were enrolled in 1st through 12th grades. The parents' professions included corporate upper and middle managers, entrepreneurs, and blue-collar trade workers; all were high school graduates, and most (80%) had bachelor's degrees or higher.

### **Methods**

The study used a community-based participatory action research approach which builds relationships among stakeholders, involving families, community members, school representatives, and researchers in the research process (McAlister, 2013). Five focus groups were conducted with different parents with children in the school district. Focus groups were scheduled to last 90 minutes, but went on as long as three hours with groups that had much to contribute. The groups were facilitated by two Black women, one of whom was a university faculty member and the co-principal investigator for the study, while the other was a community partner conducting family engagement as part of a grant-funded project working with the school district. A memorandum of agreement between the school district and the university and IRB approval for the study were both obtained.



The parents in the focus groups were asked the same four central questions used for the original parent outreach: (1) What is it like to be raising a child in this community? (2) Can you share some positive experiences you have had with the school and/or district? (3) Can you share some difficult or negative experiences you have had with the school and/or district? (4) If you could meet with the superintendent or principal and knew that they would really listen and not judge you, what would you want to say? An additional question was included in the focus groups to better understand the experiences of families of color: (5) How do issues of race and culture impact your relationships with the school system?

The discussions from the focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted by the two group facilitators and the principal investigator, a White woman who was the principal investigator for the larger project but had not participated in the focus groups. A racially diverse group of masters of social work students assisted in initial qualitative coding. Analysis proceeded in three steps: (a) open coding, assigning initial codes to condense the mass of data into categories, (b) axial coding, looking for concepts that cluster together and investigating connections between evidence and concepts, and (c) selective coding, looking for cases that illustrate themes and making comparisons or contrasts (Strauss, 1987). Following initial analysis, member checking was conducted through individual follow up with focus group members (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The themes were refined and enhanced based on the participants' feedback. Findings were discussed with the school district administrators and the district's board of education, and the collaboration provided additional data for use in future revisions to the school district's strategic plan for overall development and improvement.

## **Findings**

Themes clustered in two overarching areas. The first focused on the community experiences of families of color that create the context for their experiences with the schools. Within this area, three themes emerged: (a) lack of cultural enrichment for families of color, (b) isolation in the community, and (c) experiences of colorblind racism and cultural ignorance. The second area focused specifically on the schools and described the ways in which the parents perceived race as a barrier to effective school engagement. In addition to the positive experiences and the statements about what they would like the superintendent to know, themes of (a) lack of cultural competency in the schools, (b) stereotyping, and (c) racial disproportionality in suspensions and school discipline were identified.



## Experiences in the Community at Large

### *Lack of Cultural Enrichment*

Parents expressed feeling a cultural disconnect within the broader community. They noted that there were limited enrichment opportunities for children, such as museums and live theater that might offer examples of African American history or culture, and that existing programs did not address the cultural needs of communities of color. The parents prepared their children for school and for life by teaching them about culture and race but found little if any support for this in the community. As a result of living in a community that has little to offer them culturally, the parents took it upon themselves to create and provide culturally relevant experiences for their children. One mother whose son graduated from high school recently and whose daughter is entering 9th grade in the fall stated,

Once I realized that I was raising my kids in that environment that's not gonna offer [cultural enrichment] to them, I realized that I'm responsible to do that, to teach about becoming Black men, about their culture, and thank God I have the means to do it.

A father expressed his struggles with helping his five children develop a positive sense of culture, "I guess it is also your responsibility to teach them that they are Black. I guess [teach them] what does that mean, what does African American mean? What is African American culture?"

Other parents also shared their concern about a lack of access to relevant cultural outlets and the financial resources that are required to access culturally relevant activities. One parent expressed concern for peers for whom the cost was prohibitive, "For a lot of our people, that's not a possibility because not everybody has money."

### *Feeling Isolated*

A theme of feeling isolated within the broader community emerged as parents spoke about feeling like outsiders. Racial differences contributed to the sense of isolation, which was heightened for those who were relatively new to the area and struggling to make connections. For example, a mother who moved to the area as an adult stated, "It's lonely... We call it community, but there's no real sense of community; there's only a sense of community if you were born and raised in this area." Another mother who moved to the area when her two daughters were young expressed, "When I first came here I was so depressed. For about three to six months, I was in shock; I couldn't believe it. I used to ask, where is everybody? Where is [*sic*] my people?"

Many of the parents spoke about working to create a community for themselves and their children to support positive racial and cultural development.

One mother with a daughter just about to enter high school said, “[I am] creating the community that I want [my daughter] to experience, creating connections and extended family in the community so that she experiences having a village raising her.” Another parent stated,

I find that having a community of color is really important to me. I’m okay with working in an all-White environment; I’m not okay with my children being in an all-White environment. I find myself going above and beyond to find those outlets in which they can be with more people who look like them.

Additional motivation for building this community centered on creating a culturally safe space, removed from microaggressions of racism or cultural ignorance. As one mother of two noted, “I wanted to be in an environment where I didn’t feel I needed to explain myself; I wanted to feel and be with people who had a similar cultural understanding and background as me.”

Contributing to the isolation, the parents also discussed experiencing disconnections within the communities of color in the area, much of which was based on socioeconomic status or norms around behavior or culture. For example, one mother raising a son and a daughter stated,

It’s hard when you want to tell your child that you want to keep your culture and you want to keep your race, but at the same time you have to stay away from them [other children of color] because...they’re always in trouble.

Another mother raising two children added,

I’m one of those moms that be like, “mmm, don’t play with little Ray Ray, cause he be crazy”...I was like, you know, I’ll see little Ray Ray’s mom, Boomchica, and I’m like, uh-uh, I’m not messing with her, ‘cause she’s over there loud and crazy.

### *Colorblind Racism and Cultural Ignorance*

All focus group participants discussed experiencing various forms of racial microaggressions. Some of the injuries were related to a sense that many White people in the community pretend not to notice race or color and will do or say hurtful things without realizing that they are causing injury. All of the parents in the focus groups expressed their frustration with the sense of colorblindness in the community. As one mother stated,

I think the reality is that there is no response to me racially or culturally, there is no response at all. This is not ok because—let’s be real—most people don’t even know how to acknowledge the fact that I’m an African American woman.

A father also noted,

In [this city] you know that people of color have different experiences that, often, White people don't have. But for White people, because they don't have to deal with issues around color or race or stuff like that... they don't even think about it.

The parents also noted that people of color are negatively stereotyped in the community, much of which stems from broader cultural stereotypes and fear. A mother of two middle school students stated, "Sometimes I think in a community like this, it doesn't take much to sound like you're a Black Panther." One father with a 13-year-old son voiced his concerns, "I worry if there is a situation, a police officer's gonna look at [my son] and put him in that group that I think they tend to put all Black kids into: you're a troublemaker, you come from a broken home."

## **Experiences With the Schools and School District**

### *Positive Experiences*

It is important to note that parents highlighted several areas of strength in their children's schools and the district overall. They praised the overall curriculum as strong and noted that some teachers and other school personnel provided personalized attention to students and their families. As one mother raising a son and a daughter in the community stated, "I've traveled all over the world, Europe, everywhere. I came back here to have my children here, to raise them here, because I wanted them to have the solid education that they need." Parents also gave several examples of teachers going "above and beyond" to help a struggling student. A single mother with a son with special needs stated, "The school is always very responsive when I have a concern." Specific administrators were mentioned as being helpful, typically around their ability to be flexible and willing to communicate with the parents.

### *Schools Lack Cultural Competency*

The parents were unified in the perception related to one core area: they believed that the schools were not culturally competent. As one parent with a daughter in high school commented, "If they are teaching cultural competency, they need to put it into practice." According to these families, the schools did not seem to understand the population of students that they are educating. One mother with two sons being raised in their Muslim faith said there was a complete insensitivity to her religious customs, "How difficult is it for them to find a place for my son to pray?" Others noted the pain of racism, as a father stated, "The racism is a conflict and a distraction for the children to focus on learning." A mother talked about overhearing her daughter's lesson on history,

“The teacher was saying how slavery was necessary in order to, you know, raise up the foundations of America.”

A mother of a girl in elementary school illustrated a dilemma involving intersections of gender and body image as experienced differently in the context of race:

One day my daughter came to school, and she was wearing shorts... [and she] was asked to change clothes. They took her to the office, took clothes out of the lost and found and asked her to change. When she refused, the school secretary called me saying that my daughter needed to change her clothes because her butt was too big for those particular shorts. When I arrived at the school I was met by my daughter who was crying. I took her home and had to help her understand that there was nothing wrong with her body.

While this story could just as easily be told by a White parent, in the context of the perception of a lack of cultural competency—in this case concerning body image, sex, and Black culture—the event was experienced as racism. As in the story told at the beginning of this paper, the mother felt she had no one in the school to whom she could turn for support.

### *Stereotyping*

The parents' experiences led them to conclude that school personnel stereotyped children of color in ways that set them up for failure. Parents felt that teachers had lower academic expectations for students of color and that they are suspended too often and subjected to harsher punishments overall. In general, the parents indicated that their experiences with the schools caused them to believe that school personnel assumed that their children belonged to a monolithic Black culture that was negatively framed:

If a Black youth gets, let's say an 85, its “Oh yeah, that's great,” not “You can do better.”...I'm pretty sure if a White kid comes and gives them a 75 or 85, the “Oh, you can do better” encouragement is there. But I don't think it's there for the Black kids. Once...you're not failing, you bring something decent, and it's acceptable.

The parents communicated that they, too, were stereotyped, viewed as uneducated, and treated with hostility, often not experienced as a person but as a problem. For example, one mother with a son in elementary school stated, “That's why I was treated the way I was treated, they did not assume anything other than I was a stereotypical disadvantaged parent.” One father who has four children in the school district put it this way, “When I walk into my children's school, it's as if they are afraid of me; they believe the myth of the angry

Black parent.” Another mother whose daughter is in middle school made the point that stereotyping inhibited communication and partnership, “The school authorities believe that parents like us do not care about our children, but they are wrong; we do care, but you don’t hear us.”

### *Racial Disproportionality in Suspensions and School Discipline*

The parents were aware that state accountability standards require that the school district address issues of disproportionality. They also contended, however, that these responses were only being put into place because of state mandates, not deeply felt concern for the children. One parent who has successfully shepherded three children through the high school voiced his concern about the disproportionate number of Black students being suspended, saying, “Our kids need time in, not time out; learning takes place in the classroom, so we need to do whatever is needed to keep them in the classroom.” Another parent with two sons in the high school shared, “They find the smallest thing to send these children home, and they’re home for extended periods of time, for like days, five days, three days, four days.” The mother of a middle school student expressed frustration over her perceptions of the school’s inability to deal with childlike behavior with remedies other than suspension. She commented,

If they’re late, if they cause any problems in school, if they talk back, if they’re disruptive—first thing we do is send them home, and it’s like, really? These kids don’t need to be home, they need to stay in school.

### *What Parents Want the Superintendent to Know*

When asked directly what they want the superintendent to know, the parents were clear that they wanted to communicate that schools need more diversity among teaching and administrative staff. Increased diversity among school personnel would serve two purposes: provide the parents with people with whom they felt camaraderie, and provide the children with role models reflective of their communities. For example, a mother stated, “We need to see Black people [adults] in the buildings that we can talk to.” Another mother added, “There should be more teachers of color because sometimes White teachers don’t know how to interact with a student of color.” A mother with two young sons said, “The children need to have some type of mentors; the only way they’re gonna grow is to put the seed there. There are no Brown seeds here.”

The parents also advocated for increased diversity in the curriculum, stating, “You need to teach children about non-European cultures,” and “They should make African American history part of the curriculum.” One father of three advocated for comprehensive curriculum change, “Revamp the books, stop writing the books to coincide with this little picture that we want to create of America, and rewrite that. Change the curriculum.”

Finally, the parents wanted change in the discipline policies, with a mother noting, “They need alternatives to suspensions; they happen too often, and decisions are not fair.” A father with two sons stated his request in a manner that made clear that he felt the policies reflect a lack of tolerance for his family, “Please reconsider the no tolerance policy.”

### **Limitations**

The study relied on snowball and convenience sampling, thus the participants were generally known to one another, creating the possibility of both selection bias and social desirability bias in their responses to the questions. In addition, there were many more mothers than fathers represented, and the study did not include the experiences of kinship foster parents or of White parents raising children of color. The parents all had children in the same school district, and although findings confirm similar findings in studies in other parts of the county, the transferability of the findings to other districts should be made with caution.

### **Discussion and Strengths-Based Responses**

Consistent with CRT which incorporates storytelling as a key methodological tool (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and following formal analysis of the data, the university, community, and school district partners worked together to understand the stories told by the parents. They also told their own stories about race in the community and with the school district. The school district had recently hired a new superintendent, and these conversations became important to her process of understanding the school district and the community. Stories shared by the partners helped to add nuance to understanding the qualitative narratives from the parent groups, enriched the interpretation of findings, and helped inform strengths-based responses for change.

The school district developed a strategic plan to guide development and institute improvements in several key areas: teaching and learning; alternative education programs; highly effective teachers and leaders; parent/community engagement and ownership; and school climate and safety to support programs promoting student excellence. The entire plan was viewed through the lens of cultural competency and responsiveness, and school building administrators were tasked with identifying specific mechanisms for integrating culturally responsive approaches for education. In addition, each school building developed an internal plan that aligns with the focus areas. The community partners, a multiracial group that includes representatives from city government, an educational advocacy group, a grant-funded program providing social-emotional

supports in the school, and parents worked very closely with the university partner and the school district. These multifaceted constituencies met frequently and collaborated on a range of concerns to support the strategic plan.

## **Addressing the Parents' Concerns With the Schools**

### *Improving Cultural Competency*

The parents' statements of a lack of cultural competency in the schools are a symptom of the cultural disconnection between home and school culture often experienced by families of color. Beachum and McCray (2008) suggest that families of color sometimes find themselves in a cultural collision with teachers and administrators who communicated implicit messages to them that they are not welcome or valued in the schools. According to Banks (2001), movement toward cultural competency may be met with some resistance and apprehension from school personnel uncomfortable with learning about race and ethnicity. Integrating cultural competencies into the day-to-day activities within the school building and the classrooms, however, can have an impact on the academic achievement gap for students of color (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2004).

To understand their concerns firsthand, the new superintendent met with parents of color in groups organized by the community partners. These included both middle-class parents and those who were living in poverty with children who were struggling in school. These meetings were a first step in establishing consistent feedback processes among marginalized parents, school personnel, and district administration. In addition to these discussions, community partners worked with small groups of parents to help them draft proposals to submit to the school district for identifying their goals and communicating core areas of concern and success. The school district provided several educational presentations and resources to school staff to increase their understanding of culturally responsive practices, challenge stereotypes, and help them apply strategies that counter deficit-model thinking. The subsequent school-based professional development plans reflected an initial understanding of how staff can engage in dialogues among themselves and with outside experts on issues of race and culture.

### *Addressing Stereotypes and Supporting Healthy Racial Identity Development*

Consistent identity affirmation has a positive effect on the academic achievement of students of color in predominately White school settings (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). CRT researchers propose that Black parents play an important role in teaching their children strategies to resist racism and microaggressions they may experience in the community and the classroom. These efforts help



prepare their children to live in a racialized society and may include specific instructions on how to deal with racial incidents. It is incumbent upon the adults involved in child and youth development to help children develop a healthy racial identity in the context of ongoing racial offenses (Helms, 1995). Thus, it is crucial that school personnel understand the racial experience of students of color and be open to conversations with parents about experiences or perceptions of bias.

Cooper (2009) suggests that perceptions of African Americans based in deficit ideologies and stereotypical imagery often frame the interactions between Black families and education professionals. Cast as angry, uninvolved, and uncaring, Black parents are often seen as the problem rather than the solution to their children's struggles in school. As the Black middle-class families in this study have learned, they are often perceived as a member of a lower socioeconomic class who lack social capital and are disregarded and feared. Their children are also stereotyped and subjected to the same treatment and expectations as children who are financially poor. Families of color are not over-represented among the poor in this district, and yet the families in the focus groups shared experiences that imply that most Black families are negatively perceived as being members of a lower socioeconomic class. In this complicated dynamic, teachers may attempt to provide support and show empathy for the perceived struggles that Black students' experience but end up lowering their expectations for learning. Conversely, the perceptions of challenges in the lives of Black students may also contribute to teachers' lower tolerance for unacceptable behavior. CRT explains this phenomenon by suggesting that racism is deep-rooted in our culture, regardless of socioeconomic position. Disproportionate outcomes for students of color are, in part, a consequence of cultural disconnects among educators, students, and their families.

The school district sought to address the joint concerns about the experiences and outcomes of students who live with poverty and students of color from all socioeconomic status backgrounds by drawing upon support from community and university partners. Through data analysis and discussion, it was understood that some of the stereotyping stems from middle-class professionals not adequately understanding the daily challenges faced by people who live with poverty, along with limited understandings of cultural differences. Discussions with school personnel revealed that middle-class White professionals may consciously or unconsciously connect cultural differences related to race with behaviors or attitudes they have come to associate with poverty.

The district also recognized that students of all racial groups who live with poverty are often exposed to very high levels of environmental stress and have unmet mental health needs related to exposure to trauma (Klest, 2012). The

university partner provided professional development opportunities to help teachers develop strategies for teaching, classroom management, and family engagement that are responsive to toxic stress and trauma (Blitz, Kida, Gresham, & Bronstein, 2013). Culturally responsive approaches to education (Tanner, 2013) were embedded in all professional development processes. The district sought to integrate more flexible and responsive teaching styles and support innovations in discipline designed to teach desired behavior rather than punish.

### *Racial Disproportionality in Suspensions and Other Discipline*

Through numerous discussions with community members, leaders, and other stakeholders, the superintendent became aware of a larger community perception that the district was composed of students who were incapable of being productive members of society. In response, the superintendent reached out to the community to develop a unified concern for the development of youth of color, asking for the support of the community in realizing long-term solutions. District staff also engaged in professional development and programming that centered on the belief that learning is optimized through strong, respectful, and responsive relationships. Students and their families need to know that they matter long before there is problem that needs to be addressed through discipline.

The district formed an equity task force that included community and university partners along with key personnel from each school building. An outside consulting firm guided the task force's learning, bringing expert knowledge that can be vital in multicultural organization's development efforts (Hyde, 2004; Sue, 2008). Alternatives to traditional discipline, such as restorative justice (Morrisona & Vaandering, 2012), were considered as part of district goals to promote social-emotional development. The district also worked closely with the city's gang prevention unit to enhance nonpunitive responses to pre-delinquent behavior. Additionally, teachers were supported in developing skills and methods to address behavioral problems in a manner that does not escalate to removing the student from the classroom. Close attention to referral records helped identify teachers with higher than average rates of discipline referrals to help target professional development efforts.

### *Increasing Diversity Among School Personnel and Creating Role Models*

Hiring more people of color for all levels of staffing was an essential goal. Consultation with a community partner with expertise in human resources administration and affirmative action was an important part of the plan. Recognizing that diversified staffing is a longer term goal, however, the school district developed additional plans to ensure that all students had the opportunity to have positive role models who look like them. To this end, the district

instituted a mentoring program designed to attract diverse groups of adults to lead enrichment programs for youth. The university and local community college were important resources for this, since both institutions of higher learning had strong student groups for students of color and first generation college students. Working with the multicultural resource center of the university and educational opportunities programs of both institutions provided access to college students with a variety of interests and skills who shared cultural and family experiences with the youth in the community.

*Ensuring Cultural Diversity in the Curriculum and Teaching From a Non-Eurocentric Perspective*

The recent implementation of the Common Core Standards provided the opportunity and resources to revise curricula. The concerns raised by parents interviewed in this study regarding a lack of materials presented from a non-Eurocentric perspective were addressed by the district's Curriculum Council, through which changes were addressed systemically. The recommended changes move beyond single points of recognition and celebration of diversity to a depth of understanding through vicariously experiencing different cultures. One of the foundational design considerations of the Common Core Standards was the provision of opportunities for students to actively seek other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, evaluation of other points of view critically and constructively, and communicating effectively new understandings after reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of cultures. The goal of this initiative involves students experiencing worlds based on perspectives different from their own.

**Concerns in the Community About Race and Culture**

Since children arrive at school impacted by the community in which they live, developing the cultural competency of the community and creating a culturally rich environment for all community members is crucial. The parents participating in this study expressed concerns about lack of diversity and limited opportunities for their children to be exposed to environments that represent them culturally. In response, families created their own collective to socialize and experience their culture, which they note takes extensive time, energy, and money. Networking in churches, social gatherings, and traveling out of town, parents of color continuously engage in the work of racial socialization to prepare their children for life in a community dominated by the social and cultural values of White people (Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

Although some concerns articulated by the participating parents are beyond the school's control, improvements in the school community's understanding

and embracing difference can contribute to broader changes in the community as a whole. The community and university partners are exploring ways to extend education on race and culture into the community and to showcase the strength and vitality of all community members. Representatives from city government are central to this process as they are best positioned to address community concerns beyond the purview of the school district. The efforts begin with community conversations, where parents and youth of color are invited to share their perceptions of the community with the school district and stakeholders from the community. Inviting parents to participate in the conversation about changing the community's perceptions of and reactions to families of color can help overcome some of the sense of isolation and potentially increase the attractiveness of the community to diverse groups. The community has many strengths—a school district led by a team of concerned, committed, and creative educators chief among them—and each of the focus group parents reiterated that they live here by choice and choose to remain.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The steps taken by the school district discussed here are consistent with best practices for schools that focus on community and university partnerships for school improvement (U.S. Department of Education, Reform Support Network, 2014) and can be a guide for other districts addressing disproportionality. Strong partnerships with diverse members of the community can provide access to marginalized community members and offer insider consultation on the experiences, needs, and strengths of the community. Where possible, engaging with local colleges and universities to draw upon their resources and expertise can support school initiatives and contribute to strengthening the community overall.

A comprehensive school district strategic plan that integrates culturally responsive practices at each step is an important first step in addressing disproportionality. The work is complex and multifaceted, and a statement of goals and objectives that is treated as a living document—referred to frequently, revised as necessary—helps to clarify the mission and guides navigation through the process. Professional development for all school personnel that includes the history of race in America and highlights the social and cultural dynamics of privilege and oppression is beneficial. While race history is unique, learning about the subtle workings of culture and systems through this lens can also inform work with other marginalized groups, including students of various ethnicities, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) youth and parents, financially poor families, and students with disabilities.

It is also critical to unpack the complexities of poverty and race so that problems can be understood separately and through their intersections. Becoming informed about the physiological impact of toxic stress and trauma often associated with poverty helps school personnel to understand how this impacts learning and behavior. There is also a need to develop discipline policies and procedures that seek to include students in the school community through character development and social–emotional learning rather than excluding them with punishment.

Information on racial identity development is fundamental to education regarding child and adolescent development, and all school personnel can benefit. The microaggressions of racism contribute to the overall stress burden for children and adults, and youth need to learn healthy forms of resistance to establish a healthy identity. Strong parents of color are already attending to this with their children, but vulnerable parents may not be able to teach their children what they need to know about race. Support from the school can ensure the whole child is recognized and affirmed and that each family is honored as valuable to the community.

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