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ABSTRACT

Conventional scholarship frames parent involvement in schools as crucial for student success, often depicts Black and Brown parents as under-engaged, and implies their increased engagement would lead to the end of racial disparities in education. This study challenges this traditional discourse and introduces the notion of Racial Realist Parent Engagement. Racial Realist Parent Engagement is a practice and theoretical framing drawn from Derrick Bell's notion of racial realism and a qualitative multicase study of the school engagement experiences of 16 Black parents. These parent participants resisted antiblackness in their children's schools while simultaneously recognizing racism to be a permanent and inevitable aspect of schooling. Racial Realist Parent Engagement shifts parent involvement theory, policy, and practice to a more complex understanding of the purposes and benefits of parent engagement for Black and Brown families – and demands expansive racial justice policy for student learning.

Introduction

Black parents have valued, supported, and engaged in activism for their children's education throughout U.S. history (Anderson 1988; Donnor 2006; Siddle-Walker 1996) – and Black families have survived and resisted racism in schools all the while (DiAquoi 2018; Dumas 2014; Tuck 2009). This is well illustrated by Ms. Biona MacDonald, a Black mother and desegregation activist, whose story is told in Bell's (1992) article 'Racial Realism.' In this germinal piece, Bell makes an argument for law scholars – and Black Americans in general – to orient their beliefs, scholarship, and activism around the notion of racism being a permanent aspect of American life and society. He uses Ms. MacDonald's story to illustrate racial realist activism:

> The year was 1964. It was a quiet, heat-hushed evening in Harmony, a small, Black community near the Mississippi Delta. Some Harmony residents, in the face of increasing white hostility, were organizing to ensure implementation of a court order mandating desegregation of their schools the next September. Walking with Mrs. Biona MacDonald, one of the organizers, up a dusty, unpaved road toward her modest home, I asked where she found the courage to continue working for civil rights in the face of intimidation that

included her son losing his job in town, the local bank trying to foreclose on her mortgage, and shots fired through her living room window. "Derrick," she said slowly, seriously, "I am an old woman. I lives to harass white folks."

Mrs. MacDonald did not say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win out over the whites who, as she well knew, held all the economic and political power, and the guns as well. Rather, she recognized that – powerless as she was – she had and intended to use courage and determination as weapons "to harass white folks." Her fight, in itself, gave her strength and empowerment in a society that relentlessly attempted to wear her down. Mrs. MacDonald did not even hint that her harassment would topple whites' well-entrenched power. Rather, her goal was defiance and its harassing effect was more potent precisely because she placed herself in confrontation with her oppressors with full knowledge of their power and willingness to use it (Bell 1992, 378–379).

According to Bell (1992), anti-Black racism is real,[1] all around us, and permanent. While there are 'temporary "peaks of progress,"' he writes, 'Black people will never gain full equality' in the United States (Bell 1992, 373). However, Bell also insists that despite this permanence, we must continue resisting white supremacy. In fact, Bell explains, 'acknowledgement [that racism is permanent] enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph' (373–374). Bell illustrated this duality in racial realism – being aware of the endurance of racism while also fighting to end it – with the story of Ms. Biona MacDonald. He often retold his encounter with her in order to recall Ms. MacDonald's courage and commitment, her persistence despite no promise of justice, and most importantly, to illustrate the idea that fighting racism is 'a manifestation of our humanity' (378).

This article and my theorization of Racial Realist Parent Engagement (which will be further explained below) draws directly from Bell's notion of racial realism, a key theoretical construct of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and is based on the school involvement counter-narratives of 16 Black parents in Bur Oaks, a mid-sized city in the Midwestern United States. I also use the terms anti-Black racism and antiblackness to, as Dumas (2016) explains, get at the 'specificity of anti-Black racism' (12).[2] In sum, I found that much like Ms. MacDonald, Black parents in Bur Oaks engaged in their children's schools as racial realists; Bur Oaks schools were, as Dumas (2016) writes, a 'site of antiblackness' (17) – and participants resisted anti-Black racism as a permanent and inevitable aspect of schooling in the United States. The purpose of this article is to present evidence of Black parents engaging as racial realists, or practicing Racial Realist Parent Engagement, as well as consider the implications of using it as a framework for parent involvement discourse and policy.

Racial Realist Parent Engagement pushes on traditional parent involvement discourse, which frames Black and Brown parents as under-engaged and apathetic about education and/or emphasizes an overly-simplified assumption that increased engagement leads to educational equity. Education scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners have long touted the importance of parent involvement in schools (Epstein 1991; Hildago, Siu, and Epstein 2004), presenting it as necessary for student success – particularly for poor, working class, and Black and Brown children (Lopez 2003; Nakagawa 2000). Federal efforts to address race and class disparities in U.S. education, the most recent incarnations being the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), require engagement

among Title I- (income-) qualified families because of the ostensibly positive affects on student learning and achievement. Thus, over the last several decades we have seen increasing publications meant to assist schools in nurturing collaborative relationships with poor and working-class families (Chatmon et al. 2006; Henderson et al. 2007; Hong 2011; Oakes and Rogers 2006; Warren and Mapp 2011). However, despite Crozier (2001) warning against race-neutral parent involvement policy and practice, and Ladson-
Billings (2006) urging us to re-frame the achievement gap discourse as one of an education debt owed Black and Brown families, this scholarship typically minimizes or ignores the reality of race and racism in schools and rather emphasizes the need for individual teachers to simply be more welcoming or helpful.

Fortunately, we also have a small yet growing body of scholarship that counters dominant narratives of Black parent involvement, and an increasing number emphasize the salience of race and racism for Black parents as they engage in K-12 schools in the U.S. and the UK (Allen 2010; Cooper 2009; Chapman and Bhopal 2013; Cucchiara 2013; Doucet 2008; Gillborn et al. 2012; Jackson and Remillard 2005; Howard and Reynolds 2008; Posey-Maddox 2017a, 2017b, 2014; Reynolds 2010, 2014, 2015; Reynolds et al. 2015; Rollock et al. 2015; Vincent et al. 2012a, 2012b; Waters 2016; Yan 1999). For example, Cooper (2009) draws from Black feminism and womanism to examine working class African American mothers' educational care as resistance. Chapman and Bhopal (2013) use CRT to examine the ways Black and minority ethnic mothers in the U.S. and the UK 'play a crucial role as strategic agents in the advancement of their children's education' in the context of racism in schools and society (580). Posey-Maddox (2017b) found Black parents of all class backgrounds experience 'multi-spatial and cumulative' microaggressions 'occurring both within and across the various fields traversed in their daily lives and influencing parents' sense of belonging in and connection to community and educational institutions' (24). She concludes, 'family-school relations are not race-neutral' (Posey-Maddox 2017b, 45). This study completed with school-engaged Black parents in Bur Oaks builds on and contributes to this body of critical race parent involvement scholarship.

The notion of Racial Realist Parent Engagement is also related to and builds off a body of work that names and examines the racial reality of parenting Black and Brown children in the U.S., including the work of King and Mitchell (1995), who wrote about Black mothers experiencing the 'paradox of dilemma as choice, or the rock and the hard place' as they tried to protect their sons and 'prepare [them] to survive in a hostile environment' (9). Similarly, DiAquoi (2018) developed a Critical Race Life Course Perspective to study 'the talk' Black parents have with their adolescent sons about the reality of both historical and persistent racism in the U.S. DiAquoi concluded that 'the resistant capital that students and families bring with them to school should inform the relationship between schools and the communities that they serve' (51). Moreover, Matias and Montoya (2015) extended CRT to introduce Critical Race Parenting – or what they call ParentCrit – as praxis for parents and educators to raise critically conscious children within the context of systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Montoya and Sarcedo (2018) liken ParentCrit to a Sisyphean undertaking; it is unrelenting and exhausting.

Bur Oaks

Bur Oaks is a mid-size Midwestern city rated high on national livability scales; it has economic growth, well-regarded public schools, and a politically liberal reputation. In fact, many of the participants in this study moved to Bur Oaks as young adults looking for better opportunities after growing up in poor or working-class families in large Midwestern cities notorious for dubious public schools, high rates of unemployment, a dearth of affordable housing, and race and class segregation. However, despite its more positive reputation in some metrics, the Bur Oaks area not only had the worst Black-white disparities of anywhere in the U.S., but also Black Americans in the Bur Oaks area were 'worse off' in education, employment, income, and enfranchisement than Black Americans anywhere else in the U. S. during the time of data collection.

Like many U.S. cities, residential areas of Bur Oaks were largely segregated along race and class lines mirroring the city's redlining maps from the 1930s. Bur Oaks School District (BOSD) was comprised of primarily neighborhood schools with some busing and strategic school pairings for voluntary desegregation, which were implemented in the 1980s after the United States Office for Civil Rights found the district in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Despite the busing and school pairings, however, there remained a number of elementary and middle schools with majority working-class and poor Black and Latinx students, and others that were overwhelmingly middle- and upper-middle-class and white. BOSD high schools tended to be more mixed, but were critiqued for tracking practices that re-segregated the schools internally. Like most public districts across the nation, schools had varying reputations in terms of student learning and graduation rates, teaching quality, and safety. Parents often explained (and indeed district test scores seemed to agree) that the closer you got to downtown – where most of the more affluent and whiter neighborhoods were – the better a school's reputation.

Methodology

This is a qualitative multicase study completed in collaboration with 16 conventionally school-engaged Black parents, five of whom participated as focal participants and for whom I developed in-depth case studies. The phenomenon, or 'quintain' (Stake 2006), examined in this project is the experience of Black parents as they engage in their children's schools in the ways educators and policy makers say they want: participants volunteered in their children's classrooms and for field trips; participated in parent-teacher conferences; communicated with teachers regularly in person and via email and telephone; sat on school- and/or district-level leadership committees; joined traditional PTOs and parent groups for Black parents – including as board members or leaders; and attended and contributed to family events and fundraisers. Participants also engaged in less visible ways such as helping their children with homework and supplementing school instruction with home-based education, tutoring, and extra-curricular activities.

Participant recruitment and sampling

In addition to school engagement, criteria for participation included self-identifying as Black or African American and parenting at least one child currently enrolled in

K-12 schools in Bur Oaks. Participants were recruited with the help of community and BOSD teacher and staff recommendation; fliers and announcements at district African American parent group meetings; and snowball sampling. According to Stake (2006), the purpose of a multicase study is to better understand the complexity of a specific phenomenon in a 'diversity of contexts' (23). I used purposeful sampling to achieve maximum variation (Creswell 2007), or heterogeneity in terms of gender, socio-economic status, children's ages/grade levels, and school demographics. While many participants were considered middle-class (holding college degrees and having or being married to someone with professional careers) most grew up either working-class or surviving poverty, and several were working class at the time of participation Table 1.

Participants also lived in Bur Oaks neighborhoods of differing demographics, including primarily white middle-class neighborhoods, racially mixed working-class neighborhoods, and mixed-income housing developments. Likewise, parent participants' children attended a variety of schools across the city with various reputations and race and class demographics. While all participants resided within BOSD's attendance area and all had children with some experience in BOSD schools, two participants had moved at least one child from BOSD to area private schools, and one participant (Tasha, whose story is detailed below) interviewed shortly after her child transferred to a new school district in a different city. While most participants' families had resided in the U.S. for many generations, two participants were immigrants: Christina was of Caribbean descent and a first-generation immigrant from France, married to an African American – and Lydia was a 1.5-generation Black Latina married to a white American.[3]

Most participants (12 of 16) were mothers and only mothers agreed to be focal participants for in-depth case studies. Two related factors likely contributed to the overrepresentation of mother participants: (a) although the roles of parents are converging more and more in the U.S., mothers continue to be the primary caregivers of children (Parker and Livingston 2016) and (b) prospective participants who were mothers were more likely than the fathers to have flexible schedules and time to participate in multiple interviews because they more often worked part-time, were unemployed, or elected to work at home. Middle-class parents were also more likely than their working-class counterparts to participate in the study – particularly as focal parents – perhaps because the middle-class participants who worked outside their homes were employed with salaried jobs with flexibility to interview during their workday.

Data collection

Most data was collected over a 10-month period from September-July (a single school year). Case boundaries (Creswell 2007; Stake 2000, 2006) for this project were drawn along the lines of time, types of relationships, and relevance of experiences and events. Data includes participants' current (what happened during the study) as well as past experiences of school engagement; relationships with their own children and other students in the schools, school employees, volunteers, and other families; and events or activities broadly related to school, education, and parenting.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Parent Participant	Class growing up*	Education	Occupation	Children's Grades/Ages
Angie (FOCAL) single mother	poor in large Midwestern city	GED; licenses in cosmetology and home health care nursing	does hair and childcare out of her home; home health care nurse via temp agency	Mike – K Veah – 1st Sam – 2nd One adult child
Charlie Mae mother, partnered	poor in large Midwestern city	high school	special education assistant in BOSD; formerly a parent involvement coordinator	Steven – 7th Rachel – 20 Markus – 22
Christina (FOCAL) mother, married to Rudy	working-class, 2nd generation immigrant in France	bachelor's degree	stay-at-home parent	Nia – K Corey – 2nd
Georgia mother, married	poor in large Midwestern city	two-year college degree	retired prison guard & parole officer; high school athletic coach	Gloria – 12th Four other adult children
Jewel (FOCAL) mother, married to Robert	middle-class in Bur Oaks	master's degree	social worker, graduate student	Sparkle – K Maria – 7th Jasmine – 19
Lucas father, married	raised by middle-class grandparents in large West Coast city	PhD	professor	Marcus – 6th Thomas – 2nd
Lydia mother, married	poor in large east coast city, 1.5 generation immigrant	bachelor's degree	stay-at-home parent	Jude – 2nd Silas – 6th Miles – 8th
Michelle (FOCAL) single mother	working/middle-class in large Midwestern city	master's degree	university staff	Isabella – K
Monique divorced, single mother; co-parenting with ex-husband	working-class in large Midwestern city	bachelor's degree	athletic coach, small business owner	Vanessa – K
Patricia mother, married to Tony	working-class in suburban city in the South	two-year college degree	medical technologist	Sasha – 3rd James – 5th Jeremiah – 9th
Renee (FOCAL) mother, married	working-class in large East Coast city	master's degree	university administrator	Jas – 7th Bernard – 9th
Robert father, married to Jewel	poor in large Midwestern city	master's degree	business consultant	Sparkle – K Maria – 7th Jasmine – 19
Rudy father, married to Christina	poor in large Midwestern city	master's degree	university educator	Nia – K Corey – 2nd
Storm single mother	working-class in Bur Oaks	bachelor's degree	unemployed; looking for work	Dion – 2 Moon Girl – 2nd Black Panther – 4th Luke Cage – 6th
Tasha single mother, co-parenting with ex-husband	Working-class in large urban city	master's degree	university staff	Alex – 9th
Tony father, married to Patricia	Poor on rural farm in the South	bachelor's degree, plus two-year college degree	technology consultant	Sasha – 3rd James – 5th Jeremiah – 9th

* not all participants labeled their class statuses; these categories are named based on information disclosed by participants during their interviews (i.e. description of home life; parents' education and occupations)

Data for the five in-depth case studies included three to six open-ended interviews extending across the school year (with most interviews 1.5–2.5 hours each); participant observation and/or direct observation at least once (and as many as four times for two participants) as they engaged with their children's schools[4]; participant journaling to document experiences between interviews; and artifact collection. Interview-only participants took part in one or two 1–2.5 hour-long interviews. In addition to the data sources described above, participants also engaged in member checking during on-going data analysis. Four of the five[5] focal participants received drafts of their case studies and were invited to make comments or corrections, and all participants provided feedback about my representation of their narratives and emerging themes from initial cross-case analysis.

Data analysis

As suggested by Stake (2006), I documented detailed individual case studies with the purpose of understanding the complexity of each focal participant's school engagement narrative. In addition to creating these discrete and detailed individual cases, I engaged in a cross-case thematic analysis for all 16 participants that revealed four common themes. I began analyzing data during fieldwork by reading and creating memos on interview transcripts, field notes, and artifacts, and by coding and organizing preliminary findings (Creswell 2007; Maxwell 2005). I coded by hand using both *a priori* codes based on theoretical constructs of CRT, as well as emergent codes (Creswell 2007). Then I organized codes into categories/themes and subcategories.

On-going data analysis allowed me to collaborate with participants in the interpretation of interview responses and emerging themes via member checks (Creswell 2007; Stake 2000). The most robust member checking occurred with focal participants because of the on-going and more in-depth nature of our interviews. While an important methodological practice in general, member checking was particularly important given my positionality as a white scholar studying and making sense of racism and antiblackness. My interpretation and understanding of the significance of a story would shift or deepen after re-listening to audio recordings and transcribing interviews – and especially after receiving participants' responses to emerging themes and my follow-up questions.

Tuck's (2009) open letter about the violence of damage-centered research and call for scholars to engage in desire-centered research also shaped, pushed, and inspired my data collection and analysis, and writing of parents' narratives. According to Tuck, desire-centered research shows complex personhood of participants and emphasizes 'survivance' – or survival and resistance. In this regard, I aimed to represent Black families' individual and collective experiences of survivance in BOSD. I also approached reciprocity and relationships with participants similar to Paris and Winn's (2014) notion of humanizing research. I conceptualize this study as one I engaged in *with*, rather than on, about, or for, Black parents in Bur Oaks.

Reciprocity, researcher positionality, and reflexivity

I pursued meaningful and authentic reciprocity with participants in individual ways such as volunteering with them in their children's schools, and providing relevant information and research about schooling and education. For example, while conducting participant observation with Angie during an African American parent meeting where they began planning a new after school program, I offered information about how another elementary parent group in Bur Oaks organized and funded a similar program. If I met a participant for an interview at a café, I offered to purchase their beverage and food. I also offered to bring food or meet at a restaurant where I would buy our meal when an interview was scheduled during a mealtime. For example, Tony and Patricia, married interview-only participants, invited me to their home for a second interview on a weeknight during dinnertime. I offered to bring take-out of their choice for the family (they accepted), and that interview was conducted over dinner.

Sometimes reciprocity became more personal and was indicative of rapport between the participants and myself. For example, after data collection for the project was complete I invited Michelle, who planned to pursue a PhD, to collaborate on an academic project with me. I also invited Renee to a research presentation of a paper I wrote based on early case study data; she came to the presentation, then offered feedback via email and in person at a follow-up interview. In general, parents told me they participated because they thought the project was important and were hopeful this study would 'make a difference' with teacher professional development and in teacher education programs.

Despite engaging in desire-centered (Tuck 2009) and humanizing research (Winn and Paris 2014) – and, as Leonardo (2012) urges, following the scholarly lead of and writing for imagined audiences of critical Black and Brown scholars – Pillow's (2003) description of practicing a 'reflexivity of discomfort' (192) and the inherent messiness of representation within qualitative research resonates with me. I never felt quite satisfied with the ways I accounted for my positionality during data collection. An interaction with Christina at the end of her final interview illustrates well my reflexivity of discomfort: she asked me about my experience doing the research. Beyond telling prospective participants I was white before they agreed to interview, I did not discuss with them my on-going efforts to de-center whiteness in the project – but in that moment I decided to tell Christina I was concerned about the implications of my positionality as a white researcher. Similar to Bell's (1992) argument about the Rules of Racial Standing,[6] Christina quickly retorted that my being a white scholar representing Black participants' counter-narratives may pose problems for *me* – but for her it felt strategic. She believed having a white author could lend credibility to her and other Black parents' narratives in the minds of some white educators who were reluctant – or refused – to believe them.

Results

While four major themes emerged across participants' engagement narratives representing common strategies, motivations, and experiences, the most urgent was related to protecting Black children (including their children's classmates and peers) from anti-Black racism and ensuring they received high quality K-12 education. Participants were

acutely aware of BOSD's stark Black-white racial disparities in student learning, graduation rates, and discipline – and believed all Black families would inevitably experience antiblackness in schools. In addition to intervening when something went wrong, they pro-actively collaborated with school staff and took preventative measures by monitoring school experiences closely and showing up at every opportunity to communicate they had high expectations for their children's education – and the education of all Black children in the school. In fact, most participants spoke explicitly about resisting the dominant culture of competitive individualism and advocated for the improved education of all marginalized children in BOSD, including Latinx children, recently resettled immigrants and refugees, and those with disabilities. Participants' emphasis on collective justice calls to mind aspects of Collins's (2009) Black feminist theory, in particular what she calls 'othermothering.'

However, these parents' narratives also indicate their high levels of engagement do not always, as one participant put it, 'pay off' in the ways parent involvement discourse, policy, and traditional research might have us imagine. While most participants certainly found their advocacy and engagement improved their children's immediate school experiences, they also repeatedly expressed – often with exasperation, but not surprise – that despite doing everything 'right,' they were unable to fully protect their children from experiencing antiblackness of/at school. Included here are several representative excerpts of participants' school engagement narratives indicating the persistence of anti-Black racism in public schools despite their intensive school engagement and resistance. I begin with the narrative of one mother, Tasha, followed by shorter excerpts from several other participant narratives.

Tasha was a middle-class single mother of 14-year-old Alex. She had a master's degree and career in human resources, and co-parented with her ex-husband, who lived out of state. When Tasha and Alex first moved to Bur Oaks from a large East Coast U.S. city she heard about 'parents of color having difficulties' – but she assumed they would be fine because she knew she was doing everything right as a parent and was 'very involved.' Tasha remembers,

> I said, 'well, that's not going to be a problem with me because, you know, I started reading to my son when he was basically not even a day old … ' so when I started encountering problems I was like, 'oh my gosh.'

Racialized and bogus disciplinary actions and low academic expectations characterized Alex's K-8 experiences in BOSD. Tasha recalled going to 'all these people for help,' but 'no body would listen.' She even met with BOSD's superintendent and school board, but she felt they blamed her for Alex's bad experiences. 'They were like, "well, usually it's people who don't care, who don't take time with their kid" … And I'm like, "I'm at the school every single day!"' Indeed, Tasha volunteered in his classrooms, participated in the PTO, joined the district's African American parent council, and went to all parent-teacher conferences, all the while relentlessly advocating for Alex. She also collaborated with teachers and staff when there was a problem at school, observed in his classrooms, wrote letters and initiated meetings with building and district administrators, and a couple times moved him to new schools within the district, hoping for a fresh start.

Regardless, Alex continued to be, as Tasha described, 'targeted.' For example, in elementary school he was wrongly accused of and punished for stealing money from the school cafeteria. The cafeteria worker at the register told the principal, 'Alex stole it.' Knowing her son wouldn't steal, Tasha investigated personally. She spoke with the cafeteria worker and it became clear the principal had wrongly assumed it was Tasha's son Alex because he was Black; it was actually another Alex at the school – a white child named Alex – who the cafeteria worker saw stealing money.

Part of the way Tasha resisted the antiblackness at school was ensuring Alex experienced success and joy related to learning outside of school. They spent a lot of time at the public library, borrowing and studying books on subjects he was interested in. Tasha took him to a library research competition where he was able to utilize his expertise in oceanography. During her interview she proudly showed me an old newspaper clipping about him winning the competition.

For middle school, Tasha enrolled Alex in a brand new small public charter that emphasized innovative curricula, and Tasha was elected by parents to be the school's first PTO President. She got to work immediately representing its primarily Black and Latinx families and was proud of the racially mixed parent participation in meetings and PTO-sponsored events. She provided Spanish translation and interpreting, held multiple PTO meetings to accommodate parents' different schedules, and partnered with community organizations and leaders to provide resources on topics the parents were concerned about, such as internet safety. But after serving in the role for only half the school year, the charter's executive council, which was comprised of all white members, pushed Tasha out without explanation or parent or principal support – and replaced her with a white man. Tasha recalled,

> it was horrible because the whole PTO fell apart and then parents stopped coming to meetings. Black parents stopped coming. Latino parents stopped coming. And then you had, like, seven or eight white parents. And we had very few white parents at our school, and those were the only people going to the meetings … I was done.

While spending time with his father in a large coastal city the summer before high school, Alex asked Tasha if he could stay and start high school there. She remembers Alex saying, 'Bur Oaks really made me feel like I was worthless and they didn't care … I was really upset and felt ashamed.' Tasha consented to the move, and at the time of her interview she was in the process of transitioning out of her career in Bur Oaks and moving to be with him.

Tasha and her son Alex's story is just one example of the 16 participant narratives illustrating persistently low or anti-academic expectations and/or racist discipline targeting Black children despite parents' resistance, and regardless of their high levels of school involvement. For example, Charlie Mae, a working-class mother of three who was a former family engagement coordinator at an elementary school, and then employed as an instructional aid in BOSD – sometimes working at the very schools her children attended – shared a lengthy story about her children being 'pushed through' grade after grade without authentically being taught, despite her intensive advocacy, collaboration, and proximity to teachers as a fellow BOSD educator. Charlie Mae summarized, 'and so with all of the involvement that I've had I don't see the results that I would have expected to see.'

Lucas, a middle-class professor and father of two, was profiled in a local newspaper celebrating his involvement at his son Marcus's elementary school. In addition to volunteering regularly in the classroom, Lucas participated in all other opportunities for engagement including the school's PTO and the African American parent group. What wasn't shared in the newspaper article, however, was that Marcus – who entered Kindergarten enthusiastic and already reading – hated school and, according to Lucas, was 'ready to drop out' by second grade. Lucas and his wife initiated meetings with Marcus's teachers. After school staff insisted Marcus had 'behavior problems' that needed to be addressed with charts and stickers, the parents paid for a private IQ test. The results suggested Marcus was incredibly intelligent and was probably 'acting out' because he was bored at school. Lucas and his wife shared the results with Marcus's teachers. After several tense meetings where the teachers refused to acknowledge their mistake and adjust their curricula and disciplinary approaches, Lucas and his wife – reluctantly because of their desire to support public schools – transferred Marcus to a local private school which proved to be emotionally safer and more academically engaging for Marcus.

Renee is a middle-class mother of two who works in the education field. She was well networked in Bur Oaks and BOSD, and participated in countless councils, committees, and parent groups at both the district and school building levels. Renee was personally acquainted with district administrators at the highest levels of leadership, chatted with school board members at parties, and school and district staff contacted her for advice and invited her to speak on panels. However, being highly engaged – with great social, cultural, and economic capital within BOSD – did not protect Renee's children from experiencing lower or anti-academic expectations from educators.

Renee recalled teachers unwilling or unable to have high academic expectations and hold her son accountable in classes, regardless of her repeatedly requesting this and coaching them – and staff who continuously refused her mathematically gifted daughter, Jas, access BOSD's Talented and Gifted (TAG) program or other more rigorous math curricula for four years. 'She just kept telling me, "mom, I'm not learning anything,"' Renee remembered, shaking her head. During data collection for this study, Renee's on-going advocacy finally lead to the principal instructing teachers to allow Jas to take a math class one grade level higher. Jas excelled in the class. Reflecting on her feelings of defeat and frustration during her four-year fight for rigorous math curricula, Renee expressed with exasperation, 'I mean, I've been in all them committees … they KNOW me.'

Finally, Lydia, a middle-class mother of three whose children were educated in varying combinations of home, private, and public schools over the years, expressed a similar sentiment in her a story about tirelessly advocating for one son's access to accommodations for his disabilities in middle school. Teachers repeatedly told Lydia he was doing fine in his classes – but Lydia knew his learning, grades, and test scores suffered because of school staff's refusal to acknowledge his dis/abilities. Lydia believed her son's teachers were satisfied with his disengagement because this fit their low and anti-academic expectations for Black children. Lydia felt – despite providing documentation of his diagnoses – that teachers assumed she was unethically trying to get him a competitive edge or advantage in class, rather than needed accommodations. She explained,

I just recently told myself, if you're Black and you're not involved in your kid's school, you're a bad parent. And if you're Black and you ARE involved in your kid's school, you're suspect. You know? I'm like, 'damned if you do, damned if you don't, apparently.'

Intersections of race, class, marital status, and gender

An intersectional analysis (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1991) of these findings highlight that while all participants and their children experienced and resisted everyday racialized violence in BOSD schools across the district despite their high levels of engagement, their experiences are not a monolith. The frequency and intensity of parents' interventions in their children's schools seemed to vary depending on the ways race intersects with class, marital status, and gender. Middle-class and married parents most often framed their family's experiences of racism as incidents specific to particular teachers or events that had beginning and end points – with other parts of the school year – or other school spaces – being more tolerable, if not mostly positive.

For example, Christina, a middle-class married mother who was Co-President of her children's elementary PTO, mostly enjoyed her interactions with the school. While she regularly navigated and resisted whiteness on the PTO and described anti-Black incidents to be inevitable, they were also relatively discrete and seemed manageable for her and her family to address. After Christina heard a white father and PTO member, Greg, made racist comments about her son and other Black boys while volunteering in the classroom, she reported the incident to the principal, requested her son never again be in the same class as Greg's child, and stopped attending the PTO event he helped organize. While Christina continued to be concerned about Greg interacting with any children at the school ('that's the real problem,' she explained), she felt relatively confident her son and daughter would not have contact with him again.

Middle-class and married participants like Christina were more likely to have and use their social and economic capital to strategically make moves to keep their children away from emotionally unsafe school spaces – be it proximity to a school volunteer like Greg, requesting specific teachers (Renee explained that while officially parents were not allowed to choose their child's teacher, she made requests anyway), deciding to buy or rent a home in a particular school's attendance zone, moving their children to private school like Lydia and Lucas did, or even in Lydia's case, opting to home school.

Working class women and/or single-mother participants like Tasha, however, were more likely to describe anti-Black racism in schools as relentless and unending. Angie, a working-class single mother of three young children, spent so much time at their elementary school advocating for their education that she had to give up a full-time home health care nursing job for temp work. According to Charlie Mae, schools were 'war zones' for Black families. She likened her school advocacy to 'running in front of [children]' to shield them from gunfire on a battlefield. Georgia, a working-class mother of four, also used the term 'war zones' to describe K-12 schools in BOSD. And Michelle, a middle-class single mother who was at her five-year-old daughter's school daily, and was a PTO board member, summarized her daughter's Kindergarten year as 'a gauntlet of crap.'

While the four father participants Lucas, Robert, Rudy, and Tony – all of whom were middle-class and married – did not characterize their children's schools as spaces of unending and relentless antiblackness in the same way working-class and single mothers did, the fathers did articulate experiences particular to being Black men in the U.S. commensurate with other research about Black fathers' school engagement (Reynolds et al. 2015; Posey-Maddox 2017a). For example, Lucas was disappointed his son's teacher tasked him with disciplining children in the class while he volunteered. As a poet, Lucas hoped to help teach poetry to the second graders. Robert, a father of three, explained his efforts related to 'appearing non-threatening… when going in to meet with teachers [and] principals;' he adjusted the ways he held his body, the tone and volume of his voice, and the clothing he wore. Similarly, Rudy, a father of two, explained that after being blind-sided at work when his white supervisor disciplined him for 'having a threatening tone' with a client when they were in a everyday conversation, he was reluctant to introduce himself and talk casually with other parents at PTO meetings for fear they would be afraid of him; he would 'just sit back and talk to nobody.'

Discussion

While these mothers and fathers in Bur Oaks rejected anti-Black racism and whiteness in schools and attempted to protect their children from it, they simultaneously understood antiblackness to be a permanent aspect of schooling. These counter-narratives indicate Black school-engaged parents involve themselves as racial realists (Bell 1992). Like Ms. MacDonald, they relentlessly resisted and pushed for better education without believing their efforts would all-together 'topple whites' well-entrenched power,' (Bell 1992, 379). It is not that participants' children did not benefit from their parents' engagement. On the contrary, parents' monitoring, advocacy, and presence in their children's schools often had positive effects on teaching and learning – and forging relationships with school and district staff certainly seemed to make participants' advocacy more potent. Their narratives indicate, however, that Black parent engagement is not the panacea some insist. Racial Realist Parent Engagement acknowledges that high levels of Black parent involvement – including in the conventional and ostensibly school-requested and policy-directed ways – do not protect Black children from the antiblackness of schools such as lower or anti-academic teacher expectations, tracking, and racist disciplinary policy and practice.

While these findings echo arguments already made about parenting Black and Brown children in the U.S. – including King and Mitchell's (1995) discussion of parenting Black sons in an anti-Black society as dilemma as choice; DiAquoi's (2018) examination of racism over the life course for Black families; and the assertion of Montoya and Sarcedo (2018) that critical race parenting is a day-to-day Sisyphean endeavor – Racial Realist Parent Engagement is unique in that it focuses explicitly on one part of the parenting experience: school involvement. And unlike the ParentCrit work, which examines the racial reality of our broader society for parenting Black and Brown children, Racial Realist Parent Engagement examines the persistence of racism and white supremacy in school spaces specifically (Dumas 2014, 2016; Dumas and ross 2016).

Furthermore, Racial Realist Parent Engagement counters neoliberal racial progress narratives (Ray et al. 2017) and parent involvement discourses that suggest Black children would 'do better' in U.S. public schools if only their parents were more involved – and that teachers and school leaders simply need to better reach out to, welcome in, and collaborate with Black families (Henderson et al. 2007). We might wonder: when policy makers and school leaders require parents collaborate with schools, do they imply Black parents should engage in order to resist white supremacy? Or, when educators decide they need to 'empower' Black parents, do they mean encouraging them to tirelessly survive and resist the antiblackness they and their children experience in school classrooms, hallways, offices, and PTO meetings? Racial Realist Parent Engagement implores scholars, educators, and policy makers to reconsider the context and purposes of, and requirements for, parent involvement in the context of antiblackness. We need a bold and new recognition of Black (and Brown) families' racial reality in K-12 schools.

Racial Realist Parent Engagement does not, however, imply we should stop pressuring and training educators to meaningfully collaborate with Black and Brown parents in educating their children, nor discourage Black and Brown parents from being in their children's schools and challenging everyday racialized violence. Rather, it urges educators and policy makers to see and work to better understand the anti-Black (and anti-Brown) context in which families engage, and join them in their efforts towards educational justice through expansive policy for racial justice in student learning and parent-school relationships.

In her legal writing, Crenshaw (1988) explains expansive anti-discrimination law is concerned with the 'effects of racial oppression' and 'eradication of the substantive conditions of black subordination,' as opposed to restrictive visions of anti-discrimination law, which are less concerned with actual outcomes but rather process and prevention of 'isolated actions against individuals' (1341). One clear example of restrictive racial justice policy in this regard comes from Renee's fight for Jas's math instruction. Even with a recent BOSD policy meant to remedy the overrepresentation of white children in TAG by using additional measures of student success rather than only test scores, Jas was denied access because she did not pass the test. The irony of this was not lost of Renee and her husband; it was no surprise to them that after being bored year after year through elementary grades that Jas would not test two grade levels ahead in middle school. An expansive racial justice policy for TAG would ensure material equality – Black and Brown children's actual participation in the program – rather than simply having a process meant to prevent future acts of discrimination towards individual Black and Brown students.

Furthermore, a Racial Realist Parent Engagement approach requires an intersectional analysis to ensure schools center the experiences of those who are 'most disadvantaged' (Crenshaw 1989, 166). As Crenshaw suggests, if the narratives of middle-class and married Black parents like Renee, Lucas, and Christina are used for determining racial justice policy, then the realities of working class and single mothers like Tasha, Georgia, Michelle, and Charlie Mae would likely be ignored. Crenshaw (1989) writes, we should '[begin] with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit' (166).

Conclusion

Perhaps most importantly, Racial Realist Parent Engagement requires educators stop making Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous parents scapegoats for the so-called 'achievement gap.' In other words, those who practice and understand Racial Realist Parent Engagement know racial disparities persist not because of parents' levels of school involvement, nor even how welcoming teachers and school leaders are, but rather the education debt owed Black and Brown children and families (Ladson-Billings 2006). So, similar to the work of Gill et al. (2017), which indicates the 'racial realism ahead for some African American students, families, and communities' despite – or perhaps because of – neoliberal racial equity policy (172), Racial Realist Parent Engagement challenges policy guiding our schools today, such as ESSA, which require schools partner with parents without naming and reckoning with the reality of racism and whiteness there.

To date it appears educators and policy makers have largely ignored the anti-Black context in which parents engage when they make parent involvement policy and norms, train teachers how to better 'welcome' or 'help' parents in, or worse, shame parents for not 'showing up.' Taking a Racial Realist Parent Engagement lens for parent involvement policy and practice may be a promising step towards not only recognizing those Black parents who, like Ms. Biona MacDonald and Tasha, have been committed to and are engaged in their children's education by surviving and resisting anti-Black racism in schools, but also shifting policy-makers' emphasis towards expansive racial justice policy for student learning.

Notes

1. By 'real' Bell does not mean race is a biological fact (it is a social construct that is fluid and changing), but that racism has very meaningful and real consequences.
2. Dumas (2016) and Dumas and ross (2016) draw from Afro-pessimist ideas and scholars (Hartman 2007; Sexton 2008; Wilderson 2010) to theorize antiblackness in education policy despite 'living in an officially antiracist society' (Dumas 2016, 15), which they argue is needed because of the ways Black people are continually dehumanized with the persistence of what Hartman (2007) calls 'the afterlife of slavery' (6).
3. Lydia was the only participant who had children with someone who was not Black.
4. The number of participant observations varied depending on my availability and the scheduling of school events.
5. I provided case study drafts to all focal participants except Angie; I lost touch with her after data collection ended when she moved and her telephone number changed.
6. Citing Bell's Rules of Racial standing, Gillborn (2008) writes that 'radical analyses by whites [can] play an important role in challenging the assumption of "special pleading" and bias that greets Black radicalism' (199).

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