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Black Parent Engagement Through the Lens of Critical Consciousness

Marie Flore Stamps

BLACK PARENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

System justification, by which all members of the system believe the tenets of the system, affects how the intelligence and behavior of Black children are perceived as well as their outcomes. Moreover, as members of the system, Black parents who absorb and believe the negative deficit constructs may be prevented from effectively advocating for their children. This study strove to explore Black parents' critical consciousness through a workshop on Black parents' perceptions of racism in the educational system and their ability to resist it. The workshop was devised using Freire's critical consciousness framework to provide critical awareness with a potential critical action of resistance practices.

Through the lens of eleven remarkable and vulnerable participants identifying as Black mothers, data collected from workshop discussions and interviews revealed that critical awareness is inherent to the Black experience. Furthermore, while participants opted for traditional parent engagement models, such as visibility and presence in schools, it became evident that their practices were intentional and critical action, as they served to protect Black children and reshape system justification narratives about Black parents.

The findings demonstrated the toll Black parents experience simply by being Black in America and taking critical action to protect Black children and other Black parents. They also highlight the fatigue that these participants experience when existing in two opposing worlds, advocating for justice for their children while collaborating with the system designed to prevent justice. Oppressed and exhausted, Black parents cannot be tasked with transformation; instead, the systems that perpetuate injustice bear the responsibility of creating just and equitable schools.

Keywords: achievement gap, Black parent engagement, Black students, critical action, critical awareness, critical consciousness, system justification

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, who endured immense hardships both as a child born into poverty in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and later as a Black immigrant woman in America, where she was seldom recognized as having any worth. I now fully appreciate what I could not comprehend as a child. I have drawn from your strength, as well as the gentleness you showed at the end of your life. You are a testament to the power of evolution. This study honors your sacrifices, like many Black mothers, to create opportunities for your children. You have created a path to success for me, my children, and future generations. Our accomplishments are a result of your resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter I: Introduction

Because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and

effectively enough, you begin to do it to yourself. You become a collaborator, an

accomplice of your own murderers, because you believe the same things they do. They

think it's important to be white, and you think it's important to be white; they think it's a

shame to be Black, and you think it's a shame to be Black. And you have no

corroboration around you of any other sense of life. (Baldwin, 1975)

Background

In one school, while a white mother is calling upon a principal to reevaluate

developmentally appropriate expectations and classroom management practices after being told

that her 5-year-old son was *rough-housing*, another mother, a Black mother, perhaps in the same

school, is considering a special education evaluation after being told that her 5-year-old son is

aggressive and *disruptive*. Both boys displayed the same appropriate rough-and-tumble play

necessary in learning how to safely navigate social situations requiring physical contact and the

regulation of aggression (Storli, 2021). However, the byproducts of racism dictate outcomes.

Specifically, the effects of system justification, by which members of the system are conditioned

to accept its falsehoods (Jost, 2019), deeply affect not only how the behavior of each boy is

perceived but also how his mother perceives his behavior and her ability to advocate on his

behalf effectively.

Stereotypes surrounding race and socioeconomic status are embedded in and applied to

all systems, including education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result of deficit constructs about

Black people, they are often subject to attacks on their character throughout their lives, including

childhood (Bryan, 2020; Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021; Thompson, 2022). The false stereotypes about Black men as violent and criminal make Black boyhood unimaginable (Dumas & Nelson, 2016), as age-appropriate levels of physicality are deemed as menacing and malicious (Bryan, 2020; Carter, 2018). The narratives about Black women create spaces in which young Black girls are viewed as requiring less nurturing, older than their chronological age, and overtly sexual (Morris, 2019). Moreover, the deceptive constructs about Black anger result in misperceptions about tone, verbiage, and behavior, which results in subsequent harsher punishments for Black children (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021) and alienation and rejection of Black parents in the educational system (Cooper, 2009).

As designed by the dominant culture to secure their places of privilege, society is inundated with messages that support claims that Black people are inherently inferior, unintelligent, and undeserving of equity (Bogle, 2015; Felix, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020). The unyielding adverse outcomes of racism produce false deficit constructs about Black people and, while unsubstantiated, take root in the psyche of all members of the system, including the oppressed (Jost, 2019). Black parents are flooded with messages about Black children as *underperforming, incapable, or lazy* (Reyna, 2008). Black parents who have accepted, rationalized, and internalized these messages may be more willing to accept their children's poor performance as an unfortunate norm based on Black children's inherent flaws rather than challenging the injustices of the educational system (Reyna, 2008). These stereotypes and subsequent consequences are devised and reinforced by those in the dominant culture who fear the potential awakening of the oppressed and their demand for humane and equitable treatment (Wilkerson, 2020). According to Wilkerson (2020), to maintain the status quo and prevent resistance from the oppressed, the dominant class is dependent on system justification, a

mechanism by which the marginalized rationalize and justify the injustice and inequity of their lives, to minimize the pain of their oppression (Jost, 2019).

Black parents affected by system justification due to the internalization of deficit constructs about Black children and Black parent involvement are impeded from effectively resisting and advocating. Although there is no universal and accepted conceptualization of parental involvement, the educational system has historically viewed Black parental involvement mainly through two negative lenses. Black parents have been dubbed as *disinterested, disengaged,* lacking in the ability to participate in the educational lives of their children, or as *troublemakers* or *aggressive* when they question practices and outcomes of the educational system (Cooper, 2009; Parsons et al., 2018). Both arguments further discount the efforts of Black parents while perpetuating negative stereotypes about them.

In education, the internalization of deficit constructs as accurate negatively impacts achievement (Reynolds, 2010) and parent advocacy (Cooper, 2009) and places the onus on Black people for their outcomes. Furthermore, without counternarratives that repudiate those constructs, detrimental, long-lasting implications limit the quality of life, including happiness and success (Reynolds, 2010). To combat the absorption and legitimization of the deficit constructs created, Black people must participate in critical consciousness engagement, which offers a critical and honest account of their lived experiences from the lens of racism, including the opportunity gap in schools and the subsequent outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Miller, 2020). To be explored in this chapter is how critical consciousness development presents the possibility of freeing Black parents from the effects of system justification and the shame and guilt of Black student outcomes, as well as empowering Black parents with the leverage to tap

into their cultural wealth and demand social justice for Black children in schools and perhaps beyond.

Combating System Justification with Critical Consciousness

System justification presents a significant barrier to Black parents' ability to challenge the unjust practices of the educational system and effectively advocate for their children (Jost, 2019). A Black mother who feels powerless and has internalized the dominant culture's false narratives about Black achievement and the opportunity gap may be more willing to accept her own child's poor academic outcomes as a function of lack of intelligence or effort rather than challenge the racist and unjust practices of the educational system (Baldwin, 1975; Reyna, 2008). Additionally, Jost and Hunyady (2005) noted that system stakeholders utilize school mediocracy, a system justification ideal in which achievement is aligned with lack of effort and hard work, to justify adverse outcomes for low-status, marginalized groups as self-inflicted and deserved.

Although counterintuitive, the internalization of system justification beliefs prevents a Black parent from examining alternative contributing factors to their child's poor outcomes, such as poor-quality education and support services, lack of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical practices, or implicit and explicit racist and classist practices (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Moreover, parents may punish their children due to accepting the falsehood that poor outcomes are attributed to inherent characteristics like laziness (Patton, 2017). Punishment may replace other potentially empowering possibilities, such as requesting additional educational support and resources, demanding multi-cultural and multi-modal instructional and assessment practices, challenging the Eurocentric curriculum, or questioning explicit or implicit bias from the teacher or leadership.

Punishment and resistance have a significant history for Black people in America (Patton, 2017). While *massa* used punishment in the forms of whippings, hangings, rape, and murder to subdue enslaved Black people, inhumane punishment endures through current-day police brutality, mass incarceration, and continued murder, purposefully sending messages that resistance is not only futile but deadly. Degruy (2017) posits that Black people experience Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), where they are tasked with processing generations' worth of trauma. Experiencing PTSS while currently living the conditions of the trauma repeatedly not only distorts the reality of its source but has lasting and adverse physical, psychological, and mental effects that inhibit healing (Degruy, 2017) and subsequently suppresse agency to resist. The punishment that Black children endure in schools and at the hands of their parents serves as proof of the effects of PTSS.

Enslaved Black children were subject to the same punishments as their parents. As preventive and protective measures to decrease the far harsher punishments of *massa,* including death, enslaved Black parents used beatings and *whuppings* to tame their children into obedience, compliance, and conformity (Patton, 2017). While most current-day punishments of Black children do not result in death, the punishments of America continue to be harsh. In conscious or unconscious acts of protection and preservation, coupled with trauma and self-justifying beliefs, Black people use methods of that past to keep their children in line (Calarco, 2014; Patton, 2017) and may inadvertently redirect their children and themselves from resistance and to conformity through punishment.

Despite the internalization of system justification beliefs, there is a long history of Black parents' active advocacy to fight against an unjust educational system. Black parents have demonstrated pushback against system justification narratives about and subsequent

maltreatment toward Black children. Whether through individual acts such as engaging their children in racial socialization (Huguley et al., 2021), opting out of the public school system, or the collective efforts of public discourse and transformative activities (Depouw & Matias, 2016), Black parents have enhanced their children's academic experiences, build racial pride, and pave the way for future success, demonstrating a deep commitment to their children's education and well-being, to be fully elaborated upon in chapter two.

The Proposed Achievement Gap vs the Opportunity Gap

While it has been seven decades since the Brown v Board of Education (1954) ruling, guaranteeing Black children an equal education to that of white children, disparities in academic outcomes persist (NAEP, 1992). While coined the *achievement* gap, inferring that the outcomes exist because of the differences in ability and capacity between white and Black students, it is the opportunity gap that produces poor achievement outcomes and places Black students at a disadvantage (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have attempted to address the *achievement* gap but have yielded minimal gains for Black children (Hanushek, 2019). Though incepted over 30 years ago in 1992 to report on the state of education in America, the National Center for Education Statistics has consistently demonstrated vast disparities in the achievement of Black students. National Report Card data consistently demonstrates the vast difference between Black children and white children. Presented in Table 1 is the national report card data by race for reading and math scores by race for five racial groups (NAEP, 1992).

Table 1-1

2022 National Report Card Data by Race

	4th Grade Reading Scores	8th Grade Reading Scores	4th grade Math Scores	8th grade Math Scores
White	227	268	246	285
Black	199	244	217	253
Hispanic	205	251	224	261
Asian	239	281	257	306
American Indian	197	246	221	258

Apart from Asian and Asian/ Pacific Islanders who consistently score higher than white peers nationally, groups of color, including Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/ Alaska Native children, score below white peers. While similar in the gap difference, Black children have the most significant gap (NAEP, 1992). Compared to their white peers, Black children academically underperform, particularly those identified as low socioeconomic status (Hanushek, 2019). According to the National Report Card data for 2022, white 4th-grade children demonstrate higher levels of achievement than Black 4th-grade children, with Black children scoring 28 points lower in reading and 29 points lower in math on average. Similar data is reflected for 8th-grade scores, and the most recent data documented for 2019 indicates that the gap increases by 12th grade, with Black students scoring 32 points lower in reading and 31 points lower in math (NAEP, 1992). This trajectory is enduring. According to McDonough (2015), while white students are likely to continue to be at the higher end of the achievement curve, Black students will continue to remain at the lower end beyond secondary education. The impact

of such discrepancy accounts for the lasting effects on the quality of life that some might describe as inhumane in the world's purported land of opportunity, including inequitable income, housing, and health care (Wilkerson, 2020).

The achievement gap is deeply rooted in historical inequities, and national standardized assessments exacerbate this issue by attempting to standardize inherently diverse experiences. These tests presuppose that all learners share similar contexts, predominantly reflecting the experiences of whiteness, thus disadvantaging Black and other marginalized groups. Carter and Merry (2021) question the validity and fairness of standardized tests, noting they often reflect a singular perspective that excludes the understanding of learners from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds. Both the measures and results of standardized tests are skewed, negatively impacting marginalized groups. The efficacy of standardized tests must be reassessed, as they fail to account for the diverse experiences and quality of education among students, resulting in cultural and linguistic bias. The calculation of the achievement gap often overlooks the impact of systemic racism, including poor living conditions, lack of access to resources, and overall quality of life, which significantly affect learning outcomes, more specifically standardized test results, maintaining the proposed achievement gap (Carter & Merry, 2021).

In addition to sustaining the gap, the data from standardized tests sustains the negative constructs about Black people. A guiding presumption of the achievement gap is significant progress in racial equity, with equal access and opportunity for all students. This supports the idea that the sustained low performance of Black students, as measured by national standardized tests and resulting in the gap, is a function of capability and effort. Darby and Rury (2018) argue that the achievement gap fails to account for historical inequities that have affected the academic

outcomes of Black children, highlighting that racism has infiltrated all aspects of the education

system, preventing it from addressing the educational debt created by racism. The legacy of

slavery and the effects of racism endure. De facto segregation, rooted in the de jure segregation

of Jim Crow, still leads to inequitable funding and resources for Black communities, limiting

academic opportunities (Darby & Rury, 2018). As identified by Carter and Merry (2021), the

economic conditions of communities of color, such as the lack of educational resources and

enrichment programs, as well as systemic inequities, including food insecurity, lack of stable

housing, and poor healthcare all contribute to the performance of students of color. The

achievement gap is not one of performance but instead one of limited opportunity, a direct

consequence of these systemic issues, where historical and institutionalized racism creates an

uneven playing field for Black students (Darby & Rury, 2018).

Moreover, the outcomes preserve the deficit narratives about the intelligence and

behavior of Black people, which historically absolved the dominant culture from their inhumane

treatment of enslaved people. They persist in the expectation for Black children to "try harder" or

demonstrate more grit. While society claims progress, the system is designed to maintain

outcomes that uphold the hierarchy for the dominant culture; the achievement gap measures are

tools for that goal.

Leonardo (2007) suggests that standardized tests, designed to uphold whiteness,

intentionally ignore systemic inequities and use meritocracy to hoard access, resources, and

opportunity while ensuring that the status of people of color remains unchanged. Moreover,

standardized tests work to send negative messages about people of color. These tests serve as a

primary measure of academic success, emphasizing their results unduly. The achievement gap

perpetuates deficit-based messages about the abilities and potential of Black students, affecting

both the students and their teachers. This gap supports system-justifying beliefs that lead to lowered expectations for students of color within the educational system. It falsely legitimizes the unjust treatment of Black students and their subsequent outcomes while releasing the system of responsibility (Darby & Rury, 2018). Teachers' racial and cultural biases, whether conscious or unconscious, significantly impact their expectations and treatment of students of color, affecting grading and distorting perceptions of these students' potential (Leonardo, 2007). Racialized tracking further exacerbates this by disproportionately placing students of color in lower-level courses and special education based on biased referrals, thus limiting their access to advanced educational opportunities such as advanced placement courses (Leonardo, 2007). The educational system uses standardized tests to achieve two goals: diminishing access to educational opportunities for students of color while distancing itself from blame, thereby perpetuating negative deficit constructs about the intelligence and potential of Black people.

The persistence of the achievement gap underscores the need for a fundamental reassessment of standardized testing and its role in perpetuating educational inequities. These tests not only reflect but also reinforce systemic biases, disadvantaging marginalized groups and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about their capabilities. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that includes reevaluating the design and implementation of standardized tests, increasing awareness of racial and cultural biases within the educational system, and actively working to dismantle the systemic barriers and the system justification narratives that limit educational opportunities for Black students and other marginalized groups.

The source of inequitable outcomes must be challenged to close the proposed achievement gap, the opportunity gap. The advancement of the disadvantaged is contingent on the oppressed resisting norms based on inequity (Freire, 1970). The norms, although based on

falsehoods, are accepted with system justification. There may be little to no resistance, ensuring little to no advancement. System justification may keep Black parents, particularly those at the intersection of poverty, from questioning and inevitably resisting the systems that maintain the status quo, preventing the justified outrage, challenge, and advocacy for their children that should follow. These parents may be prevented from "gaining a credit" (Bourdieu, 2011) to effectively navigate in a system designed to affirm negative stereotypes about Black people. Moreover, this leads to a reinforcement of another false deficit construct about Black parents, in which the educational system creates doubt about Black parents' desire and ability to engage in their children's lives meaningfully (Reynolds, 2010).

Baldwin (1975) asserts that in a system that offers no corroboration to negate the highly held negative constructs about Black people, they too begin to perpetuate and live out those stereotypes. Freire's critical consciousness (1970) provides the path to uncover the necessary evidence that disproves the social constructs and reveals to society, especially to Black people, their wealth and brilliance. Freire (1970) describes three distinct elements of critical consciousness: critical reflection, critical transitivity or motivation, and critical action. As it relates to Black parents within the educational system, critical reflection can be regarded as their reflection and scrutiny of unjust and inequitable practices, such as the harsher discipline of Black students, inequitable distribution of resources, and lack of culturally relevant curriculum, that contribute to the achievement gap and Black student outcomes. Critical transitivity or critical motivation can be assessed through how Black parents perceive their abilities to challenge injustices and bring about change. The last component of critical consciousness, critical action, is realized in the empowerment of Black parents to engage in acts of resistance and advocacy. Critical consciousness applied to the educational system can illuminate the truths about the

experience and outcomes for Black students and parents, replace shame with confidence and empowerment, and subsequently result in resistance and transformative parent advocacy.

Defining "Black"

It is necessary to discuss the term Black itself to understand the effects of critical consciousness engagement on Black parent perspectives. Despite the variety of nationalities, ethnicities, and ancestries that encompass the diaspora, the term Black is used as a catch-all to describe those with darker skin pigmentation or originating from African descent. An entire continent, as well as all the places where her children were transplanted and culturally cultivated as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, is encapsulated in a little box. Black does not capture the cultural nuances that inform perspectives and behavior. Given that this study took place in New York City, historically described as a melting pot, it is essential to acknowledge the differences in attitudes between immigrant Black groups and intergenerational US-born Black groups.

While Black families with an intergenerational experience of America may recognize the long historical and continual struggle for equity in America, immigrant Black families often seek out America as a potential opportunity for a better life, creating a difference in their perceptions of racism. Intergenerational Black Americans with firsthand experience of racism are more likely to perceive racism as a permanent part of their existence in America (Thomas, 2009). Having witnessed the disparities in treatment and outcomes of Black people, these parents engage in ethnic-racial socialization, emphasizing a mistrust in institutions of racism to include the educational system (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2019). This is particularly true for Black Americans in concentrations of poverty who have endured the longstanding effects of racism (Wilson &

Gould, 2011). Conversely, immigrant Black parents may perceive the effects of racism as temporary and as a result of being a guest in a foreign country (Thomas, 2009).

With a vested commitment to the American dream, Black immigrant families may focus on perseverance and the need to work harder (Thelamour & Mwangi, 2021; Thomas, 2009), bypassing the elements of racism that deter achievement and success. According to Thelamour and Mwangi (2021), African and Caribbean immigrant parents may even share in system justification tenets that intergenerational Black Americans are to blame for their outcomes. Moreover, their ethnic-racial socialization may include admonishment of Black Americans and deterrence of their children from associating with them. Wilkerson (2020) argues that this division among Black people is an intended consequence of creating false hierarchies within the oppressed and preventing resistance. Mirroring the check box that blurs the unique facets of Blackness, the educational system applies racist practices equally and without consideration. For that reason, Black in this study refers to those who would figuratively and literally check the Black box.

Statement of the Problem

Systems of oppression are so omnipresent that the oppressed begin to accept, believe, and internalize the tenets behind the oppression as a means to soften the harshness of their realities (Jost, 2019). System justification for the parents of Black students, who have historically been left behind in education, presents a significant barrier to advocacy. Black parents who have accepted the negative constructs about Black children as accurate are deterred from examining alternative reasons or contributing factors to their child's poor academic outcomes, such as denial of access to high-quality education and support services, lack of curriculum that reflects and affirms the learner, or overtly racist and classist practices within the school (Reyna, 2000).

13

Similarly, given the faulty notion that the responsibility rests on a child's presumed lack of effort or motivation, parents may punish their child or agree to more restrictive placements without considering options such as seeking educational supports, demanding multi-cultural and multi-modal instructional practices, or challenging the curriculum and assessment practices, teacher, or leadership. Already worn down by the narratives about their children and themselves, these parents accept outcomes as part of their lot in life as Black people, as many minority people do, because of system justification (Godfrey & Wolf, 2015). Their assumed lack of response reinforces the negative societal messages of Black parents as disinterested or disengaged.

While parental involvement and engagement are documented as critical components in student success, the traditional measures of parent involvement are often aligned with the behaviors of Eurocentric, white middle-class families (Epstein, 1995; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Parsons et al., 2018), leaving Black parents vulnerable to scrutiny and criticism for how they "show up." Embedded in Epstein's framework (1995) are opportunities for parents to play a vital role in their child's education at school and home. However, the framework centers on family conformity to the expectations of the educational system, founded in inherent racism and inequity, the primary factor in the *achievement gap*. Schools are presumed to be the experts, particularly in moving families closer to the expectations, while undermining the cultural wealth families possess.

While white parents are afforded the power of voice when advocating for their children's needs, Black parents are met with disapproval and judgment. When Black parents engage as advocates or activists for their children, explicitly challenging the systems of inequity, schools label them as *aggressive* or *angry*, fueling the false tenets about Black parent involvement and preventing systematic change (Cooper, 2009).

14

Although substantial evidence demonstrates the active engagement of Black parents in the education lives of their children, to be detailed in Chapter 2, the current measures of parent involvement disregard or condemn those efforts. Those susceptible to accepting the false societal tenets about Black parent engagement are deemed *disengaged, disinterested,* or *uncaring*, while those who question the system are tagged with adjectives such as *aggressive* or *angry* (Cooper, 2009). Only Black parents conforming to the expectations of white America are rewarded with the possibility of being heard, but only if they are quiet. System justification supports conformity to the dominant class's expectations and prevents the necessary resistance and upheaval required for transformative change in schools. The disconnect between the cultural capital required to navigate Eurocentric American expectations and the cultural wealth of Black families and communities further widens the opportunity gap. It has long-lasting adverse effects that endure.

Purpose of the Study

While there is significant scholarship focused on Black parent involvement, engagement, and advocacy, it is often positioned through the white lens, highlighting supposed "deficits" compared to the European American expectation or in the context of how Black parents have integrated and adopted that model successfully (Cooper, 2009). Despite the cultural wealth and richness that exists within the various traditional models of Black parent involvement and advocacy, such as the communication of high academic expectations reinforced at home with firm consequences or questioning the teacher's connection to their children, this type of involvement is often overlooked or devalued by the educational system. The expectations of the school system for parents of color to engage in the educational process are based on the European American model (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This immediately places Black parents, and subsequently Black children, at a disadvantage. Black parents who do not conform to these

15

expectations are regarded as indifferent or unconcerned; those who engage by questioning the school systems are incorrectly labeled as problematic or aggressive (Cooper, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore Black parent engagement and advocacy when Black parents are positioned from a place of worth and power, enlightened with the truths about racism, its direct impact on Black student achievement and outcomes, and the systems at work to maintain the status quo. This action research study, with a critical consciousness workshop at its center, aimed to arm Black parents with a new critical awareness about the racist practices that perpetuate disproportionate poor outcomes for and negative constructs about Black children, Black parents, and Black people. This qualitative action research was designed to empower by providing a space that allowed Black parents to engage authentically from their lived experiences and perspectives while building capacity and confidence to advocate for Black children in ways resistant and disruptive to the educational system.

A fundamental assertion of Paulo Freire's conscientization, critical consciousness, is that liberation requires the full active participation of the oppressed. Freire posited that to shift power, the oppressed must be engaged in the processes of critical consciousness, including critical reflection, critical transitivity, and critical action (Freire, 1970). Applied to the outcomes of Black students in America's education system, structures of inequity can only be dismantled by Black parents' critical consciousness by which they reflect and analyze Black student outcomes, identify their ability to transform their abilities, and activate their agency through advocacy.

Research Questions

1) How do Black parents describe the structures that produce inequitable outcomes for Black students in schools after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe their perspectives about system justification in relation to the educational system?

b. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe the achievement gap and its roots causes?

2) How do Black parents describe their motivation and agency to act in the educational lives of their children after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe what they can do individually and collectively to address the achievement gap and its effects?

Research Design

This research study was designed as a qualitative action research study that examined how explicit critical consciousness engagement informs Black parents' views about how racism impacts Black student outcomes and explored any ensuing motivations to challenge the educational system. Using a transformative worldview approach, the hope of this research was to awaken Black parents' inherent power to resist racism and advocate for equity.

The participants of this study, Black parents of early childhood aged children, participated in the critical consciousness workshop. After the workshop, the action phase of the study, participants completed questionnaires sharing what, if any, insights and perceptions explicit critical consciousness engagement produced. In addition to the questionnaires, five participants were interviewed. Both the workshop and interviews were audio recorded. The data collected from audio recordings and the post-workshop questionnaires were analyzed and coded for themes. All procedures and methods are detailed in Chapter 3.

17

Limitations

Qualitative research poses limitations, such as difficulty in establishing validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The nature of the concepts to be examined in this study, such as awareness, motivation, and perception, are mentally constructed and subjective, lacking the measurability to establish internal validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). External validity, where results can be generalized, is similarly difficult to assess because of the small scale of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), credibility can be established through trustworthiness. A participant advisory group that served as member checking and research memos were utilized throughout each study phase to ensure trustworthiness. Additional limitations, such as my positionality that created insiderness, outsiderness (Young, 2004), and researcher bias, are detailed in Chapter 3, with all other limitations, ethical considerations, assumptions, and design controls.

Significance

Significant research demonstrates the effectiveness of critical approaches applied to Black students and schools. Similarly, there is adequate research about Black parent engagement in their children's educational lives. However, a substantial examination of explicit critical approaches applied to Black parents and their roles in their children's educational lives was lacking from the scholarship. Equally absent was the dialogic process, espoused by the educational system for parent engagement (Epstein, 1995) and required by critical consciousness, by which Black parents' perspectives are valued and viewed as necessary to create a just and equitable educational system.

In addition to providing an opportunity for Black parents to be part of the proposed two-directional dialogue, the Black parents in this study with a safe space where they were able to

share their authentic experiences of parenting Black children in a racist society while working alongside the same system in schools, illuminated their critical awareness of how racism impacts their children, their outcomes and their existence in the system. More significantly, in their vulnerability, participants exposed what Black parents endure in this dual consciousness, including guilt, doubt, pain, and fatigue. The findings of this study uncovered the motivations of Black parent engagement and unlocked perspectives otherwise obscurely hidden, which may serve to support schools in understanding the conditions that create the need for Black parents to engage in protective ways and how to create spaces of safety to unburden the load of Black parents.

Definition of Terms

This section of the literature review supports the reader's understanding of key concepts used throughout the paper. In addition to frequently referenced concepts, it includes jargon specific to the educational field and technical terms. This section is developed to provide the reader with context for the reading of the paper.

The following terms are used throughout the literature review.

Achievement gap. The achievement gap is the difference in academic achievement experienced by Blacks and whites, specifically the lower academic performance of Black students compared to white students. Coleman (1966) coined and described this gap, attributing it to the differences in family structures. Since then, the lens that captures this difference has broadened to include the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, resulting in outcome gaps, termed the *opportunity gap* (Carter et al., 2013).

Black. Though a social construct, it is through that construct that racism, a vital element of this study, exists. For this study, Black refers to people of African descent regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

Critical action. The action step in Freire's critical consciousness (1970), critical action accounts for the various forms of resistance taken by the oppressed to change oppressive conditions and outcomes. Critical action, as described in this paper, will be examined through the lens of critical parent engagement by Black parents and their ability to effectively advocate for their children by challenging the systems of inequity in schools.

Critical consciousness. Paulo Freire's (1970) critical consciousness is the notion that the oppressed must fully participate in their liberation. It requires complete awareness of and action against the oppressive and unjust systems that create inequitable conditions and outcomes for them. Critical consciousness involves three processes: critical reflection, critical transitivity, and critical action (Freire, 1970). This study used critical consciousness to analyze Black parent involvement as it relates to challenging system racism in schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory, initially applied to the legal justice system in the 1970s, is a theoretical framework grounded in unearthing and dismantling the root of disparities in Black outcomes, specifically examining poor outcomes through the lens that racism is a social construct embedded in all societal structures and systems. In schools, CRT provides counternarratives to the deficit models of Black student outcomes through the lens of systemic racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Critical reflection. The first and fundamental aspect of Freire's (1970) critical consciousness is critical reflection, by which the oppressed analyze and reflect on the systems of

oppression and unjust outcomes based on those systems. At the center of critical reflection is the awareness and analysis of the sources of inequality.

  Critical transitivity. Also referred to as critical motivation, critical transitivity is the process by which the oppressed's consciousness about their oppression and their ability to enact change for social justice shifts (Freire, 1970). Critical transitivity centers agency. In this study it is the belief by Black parents that they can be change agents in their children's educational lives and transform the educational system's unjust practices and structures.

  Cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (2011), cultural capital is understanding the rules and expectations of the dominant culture in society, which ultimately provides access and benefit to cultural, social, and economic advantages. Regarding parent involvement, cultural capital is the understanding of schools' spoken and unspoken expectations regarding involvement, specifically formal school-based activities, such as volunteerism or attendance of school events. It also refers to understanding the nuances regarding how parents are expected to behave in their interactions with school officials.

  Opportunity gap. Opportunity gap refers to the disparity in access to quality educational resources, experiences, and supports necessary for academic success. Shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and geographic location, it highlights how students from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds often face significant barriers to high-quality education due to systemic inequalities. In this study, the opportunity gap replaces the "achievement gap," which focuses on differences in academic performance outcomes by shifting the responsibility for those outcomes to the system's unequal distribution of opportunities and access (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Parent. While there is a long history of collaboration and reliance on extended family members, neighborhood community members, and the church in the rearing of Black children (Nguyen et al., 2016), in this study, *parent* referred to the biological parent(s), court-appointed guardian(s), and de facto parents who were the primary custodial caregivers responsible for a child's educational needs.

Parent involvement (parent engagement). According to the NCLB (2002), parental involvement is **"**the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including assisting their child's learning; being actively involved in their child's education at school; serving as full partners in their child's education and being included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child." Epstein's framework of parental involvement (1995) includes six types of *caring: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making,* and collaborating with the community. This paper asserts that while schools desire all parents to adhere to the traditional Eurocentric models of parental involvement, Black parents must adopt a model outside of the system from which the inequities were created.

System justification. System justification is the acceptance, belief, and internalization of the tenets behind oppression by the oppressed to soften the harshness of their realities (Jost, 2019). In this paper, system justification was applied to the rationalization of Black student outcomes, by which Black parents view poor achievement outcomes through the lens of negative stereotypes about Black children and subsequently are limited in their response to the educational system.

Conclusion

  System justification impedes the progress of social justice in schools by maintaining the negative deficit constructs about Black students and Black parental involvement. In addition to the repercussions carried out by the educational system, Black parents who internalize the tenets of oppression are limited in their advocacy responses, while those who challenge them are met with harsh criticism. Given the history of outcomes for Black people in America, the oppressed must become full and active participants in their liberation. With the potential to empower Black parents with truth, critical consciousness was positioned as a path to liberation in this study, specifically through the activation of agency to resist the educational system and the demand for just and equitable treatment and resources of Black children. This paper details the action research study, initially designed to impart critical awareness and promote disruption of a racist education system through Black parent resistance practices. Furthermore, it details the preexisting critical awareness, the nuanced application of critical action by Black parents, its role in protecting Black children and parents, and the complexities of Black parent engagement.

Chapter II: Elements of Critical Consciousness in Black Parent Engagement

Described in Chapter 1 are the effects of system justification and the potential limitations they impose on Black parents' ability to accurately attribute racist practices of the educational system to Black student outcomes and their abilities to challenge such outcomes. Framed through the lens of a racist educational system, the disparities between the academic outcomes of Black students compared to white students are attributed to a lack of intelligence or determination rather than a result of the enduring inequitable practices that advantage white people and sabotage the progress of Black people. Notions such as grit and perseverance redirect the focus from the uneven distribution of resources and racist practices to place the onus of poor academic outcomes on Black students. Similarly, Black parents who are often undervalued and unwelcome at schools are labeled as uncaring and disinterested (Cooper, 2009), while the efforts of those who advocate outside the expected norms of engagement are marginalized or criticized. As designed, system justification effects bring shame and guilt to Black people; in schools, Black children and their parents are subject to questions about their capabilities, intentions, and efforts.

The deficit narratives about Black intellect coupled with those that question Black parents' desires to be involved in the education lives of their children and their capabilities to do so permeate society. These messages may constrain Black parents from effectively assessing the racist and classist condition of the educational system and pushing back against it. While there is substantial research on Black parent engagement, it is positioned from a colonized Eurocentric-American lens (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Models of parent engagement rely heavily on conforming to schools' expectations, such as volunteering, attending in-school events and programs, and participating in parent associations (Epstein, 1995), which often disadvantage Black parents or reinforce negative stereotypes. In this action research study, critical consciousness engagement is

24

proposed as a countermeasure to the effects of system justification and a tool to release Black

parents and their children from false deficit narratives that undermine their inherent value.

Critical consciousness engagement may illuminate for Black parents the power they possess to

challenge the inequities of the educational system.

Traditional Models Reinforce System Justification

While parental involvement and engagement have been documented as critical

components in student success (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Jeynes, 2011), the traditional

measures of parent involvement are often aligned with the behaviors of Eurocentric, white

middle-class families (Epstein, 1995; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Parsons et al., 2018), leaving Black

parents vulnerable to scrutiny and criticism for the ways in which they "show up." Embedded in

Epstein's framework (1995) are opportunities for parents to play a vital role in their child's

education at school and home. However, the framework centers on family conformity to the

expectations of the educational system, with an emphasis on in-school involvement, specifically

volunteering and joining parent organizations (Epstein, 1995). Parents with limited access to the

cultural capital that dictates the norms of involvement are disadvantaged (Lee & Bowen, 2006;

Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Feeling rejected and unwelcome, these parents are less likely to

participate in these traditional Eurocentric-American forms of parent engagement. While Black

parents may engage in the academic lives of their children in ways less aligned with schools'

expectations, their participation is devalued and discarded (Jeynes, 2011; Yamamoto &

Holloway, 2010), reinforcing the false constructs that Black parents are disinterested in the

educational lives of their children.

As structures in a system of racism, schools inherently support power imbalances that

deter Black parent participation (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Schools are presumed to be the

experts, reinforcing a one-directional relationship that moves families closer to their expectations (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010) while undermining the cultural wealth families possess. Coupled with the negative perceptions about Black parents (Cooper, 2009; Reynolds, 2010), the efforts of Black parents are often met with harsh criticism or rejection. While white parents are afforded the power of voice when advocating for their children's needs, Black parents are met with disapproval and judgment. When Black parents engage as advocates or activists for their children, explicitly challenging the systems of inequity, schools label them as *aggressive* or *angry*, furthering the false tenets about Black parent involvement and preventing systematic change (Cooper, 2009).

Critical Black Parent Engagement

Despite the persistent efforts of the dominant culture to deter Black resistance and the enduring negative narratives about Black parent engagement, Black parents have historically engaged in the educational lives of their children. While there is only a small body of research that has explored the explicit and intentional application of critical consciousness as it relates to Black parents, in a need to protect and advocate for their children, Black parents have engaged in those elements crucial to liberation as described by Freire (1970). Freire (1970) posits that it is only through conscientization, specifically critical reflection, critical transitivity, and critical action, that the oppressed can take full part in their liberation.

A review of the scholarship about Black parent engagement, to be explored in this chapter, reveals that Black parents have always participated in critical consciousness engagement at some level but do not necessarily follow the framework of Freire. In fact, given the pressing need to guard their very existence, it is plausible that Black people have not been afforded the space to consciously consider their condition, recognize their power to change it and transform

systematically. Instead, it is more probable that Black parents have engaged in critical

consciousness without full awareness and out of necessity to protect their children.

Critical Reflection/ Critical Awareness

A review of the literature indicates that critical reflection, the foundational element of

Freire's critical consciousness (1970) is essential to all Black parent critical engagement. It

requires a level of awareness by the oppressed of their oppression, a state that can be suppressed

by system justification (Jost, 2019). Involved are metacognitive processes, such as recognizing

the false constructs designed to reinforce oppressive conditions and identifying one's perceptions

and behaviors that contribute to the system (Freire, 1970). Integral to liberation, critical

reflection creates a new space to develop opposing constructs that challenge oppressive tenets

and practices. Applied to the educational system, Black parent critical reflection would include

awareness and possible analysis about practices that culminate with the achievement gap, such as

the inequitable distribution of resources, overrepresentation of Black children in special

education, the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy, or the harsher and more frequent disciplining

of Black children. This awareness provides the opportunity to consider the proposed

achievement gap from a different, more critical lens that distributes blame toward the system

from which it was designed rather than inherent to Black people.

Research suggests that Black parents participate in various forms that demonstrate critical

reflection, such as racial consciousness, racial socialization, racial bias socialization, racial

realism, counter-storytelling, and counternarratives, with the most prevalent being racial

socialization and racial realism. For some Black parents, in many cases, mothers, racial realism,

and racial bias socialization were tied to the safety of their children. In the examination of the

protective care work of mothers, Elliott and Aseltine (2013) found that Black and Latina

mothers, specifically those within lower economic statuses, engaged in racial realism was central

to mothering to ensure the physical safety of their children due to the harsh and violent

environments and conditions in which they lived. According to Depouw and Matias (2016),

racial realism and racial socialization are essential to critical race parenting for the explicit

intention of teaching children resilience and resistance, as they are 73% more likely to be

murdered at the hands of police than White children, based on society's negative stereotypes.

Diaquoi (2017) notes that "the talk" that Black parents have with their sons has historical roots in

the racist and violent era of Jim Crow. While "the talk" of Black parents today has elements of

racial pride, there continues to be the need to address safety in the rearing of Black boys. Calarco

(2014) highlights that Black parents are in a state of constantly encouraging their children to

conform and temper their demeanor and responses in order to avoid harmful consequences.

Essentially, Black parents are tasked with toeing the line of affirming Blackness while protecting

their children from the harmful and sometimes violent consequences of racism.

Racial pride paired with racial socialization, in the form of counter-storytelling, the

preservation of identity, and connection to ancestral roots, was also present in articles coded for

critical awareness. Diaquoi (2017) indicated that "the talk" of Black parents to their sons

contains elements of reaffirming the inherent good of Black people. Black parents recognizing

the effects of racism through a curriculum absent of positive images of Black people engaged in

racialized compensatory cultivation, where they shared counternarratives as well as activities that

provided rich accounts of the Black experience through a positive lens (Delale-O'Connor et al.,

2020). These efforts were explicit in dismantling the negative stereotypes or lack of positive

images in the curriculum about Black people to build a positive identity associated with the

greatness of Black people. Critical awareness and reflection through racial bias socialization by

Black parents yielded increased racial pride as well as increased structural attributions for disparities in academic achievement by their Black adolescent children (Bañales et al., 2020). Similarly, students who self-reported a high level of ethnic-racial socialization both from their parents and their environment were also more likely to report discrimination and identified as engaging in more critical reflection, had more agency, and engaging in critical action such as social justice work (Byrd & Ahn, 2020).

Embedded in the work of Black parents to build racial pride were counternarratives and counter-stories of the worth of Black people. In a study of African American mothers' socialization beliefs, Suizzo et al. (2008) found that eight of twelve African American mothers of early childhood children were explicit in their efforts to share African American history with their children through a positive lens, specifically the strength and endurance of African Americans. Counter-stories serve to remove the individual attributes often assigned by society for the gaps in achievement for Black students and reassign the blame accurately to the systems and structures of a racist and oppressive society. African American mothers' counter-stories about their lived experiences of inequity provided credence to the lived experiences of their children, specifically their negative educational outcomes and subsequent outcomes, by illuminating the deficits in the Common Core State Standards and lack of quality teaching (Ellison, 2019).

The literature reveals that not all components of Freire's critical consciousness are necessary for Black parent critical engagement; however, it also exposes that critical reflection is central to all engagement that challenges the current condition. Freire believed this awareness took place through dialogic processes (1970); however, in many cases, critical awareness is born

from the need to protect in the face of a current threat or the pattern of historical injustice that has plagued Black people in America.

Critical Transitivity/ Critical Motivation

While critical reflection has been a continual thread in the fabric of Black parent engagement, critical transitivity is the least documented element of Freire's critical consciousness in the literature about Black parent engagement. Critical transitivity, referred to as critical motivation by contemporary scholars, is a shift from an oppressed consciousness to an awareness of one's ability to enact change for social justice (Freire, 1970). Critical motivation centers around the oppressed's belief that they can be change agents in their liberation (Freire, 1970). In an educational system that constantly disempowers Black parents, critical motivation would be the belief that despite historical outcomes and the false narratives about the limited intellect and capabilities of Black people, Black parents recognize the intrinsic cultural wealth and power they possess to bring about transformation within sociopolitical environments to include the educational system (Diemer et al., 2015). DuBois (1903) posits that when the consciousness of one's power within the social structures of inequity is awakened, one must assert that power to bring about change and good. Aligned with critical motivation in Black parent engagement are concepts such as self-efficacy, hope, radical hope, racial pride, collectivism, aspirational capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital.

Although Freire (1970) indicated that critical motivation is the pathway from crucial awareness to critical action, it was seldom overtly identified in the literature as crucial to making this leap. While critical motivation may be implied, it is present in some research as essential to the process. French et al. (2020) described collectivism, radical hope, strength, and the agency to resist as imperative to address not only the liberation of the oppressed but as a means toward

radical healing for People of Color and Indigenous individuals (POCI) who have endured the detrimental consequences of oppression. Suizzo et al. (2008) identified the power of critical motivation when recounting the sense of agency of a mother, among 12 African American mothers, recognized the need to challenge the curriculum but feared being perceived as the "angry Black woman", felt empowered to challenge the school and successfully conducted a lesson on African American history.

Marchand et al. (2019) described critical motivation as self-efficacy and applied it as Freire does, recognizing that the oppressed have so few experiences of control that they must believe that they can enact change to engage in critical action. French et al. (2020) further posited that critical motivation must extend to envisioning limitless possibilities and political efficacy. Collectivism and collective cultural wealth are additional avenues to political efficacy. The collective efforts of the oppressed hold the potential for creating counter spaces of hope and affirmation (French et al., 2020) and the development of navigational capital and resistance capital through community cultural wealth to build empowerment (Budhai & Lewis Grant, 2022; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020). Freelon (2022) captured the power of critical motivation through Chicago parents fighting to keep Black schools open and their ability to galvanize parents to challenge the school district and demand a seat at the decision-making table.

Despite critical transitivity and critical motivation being the least critical consciousness elements identified in the literature about Black parent engagement, Freire posits that hope, an element of critical motivation, is required for transformation (1997). Specifically, "the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion" (Freire, 1997, p. 8).

31

Critical Action

Presumably, the most transformative component of critical consciousness is critical action. According to Freire (1970), critical action accounts for the various forms of resistance taken by the oppressed to challenge and transform the systems of inequity that create their oppression. Given the variety of actions that Black parents could take to challenge an unjust educational system, criteria for Black parent critical engagement include but are not limited to the following critical actions identified in the literature: parent empowerment group, collective public discourse, protest, marches, transformational work, enrichment, demands, refusal, and resistance. Additionally, while counternarratives and counter-stories were identifiers for critical awareness, they were considered critical action if their purpose was to enact change.

In a study exploring the educational involvement of African American middle-school parents across six urban public schools, Hughley et al. (2021) found that parents who were aware of Black children's disadvantaged position in schools focused their efforts on promoting equity through collaborative efforts. Recognizing that their schools were under-resourced and lacking academic rigor and reflection in the curriculum, African American parents worked with their children at home to enhance academics, build racial pride, and expand the mindset for future success (Huguley et al., 2021).

According to Freire (1970), critical awareness and transitivity empower one to challenge and resist oppression through critical action. Black parents have always advocated for the educational rights of their children. Depouw and Matias (2016) noted that activism in protests, marches, and collective transformation work is embedded in critical race parenting. Watson (2022) provided a historical case regarding how Black mothers have always had a sense of urgency. Skipwith v. NYC Board of Education (1958) demonstrates the perseverance of Black

parents armed with the substandard conditions of Black schools in Harlem. Armed with navigational capital in the form of the law, Bernice and Stanley Skipwith, empowered Black parents, took critical action by first refusing to send their daughter, Charlene Skipwith, to an unsatisfactory school and then seeking justice through the legal system, citing a violation of their 14th Amendment rights (Watson, 2022).

Though legal action can change law and policy for the larger community, critical action of any magnitude plays a part in the liberation of the oppressed. Working-class parents in Chicago were able to resist the unjust practices of school closures in their Black communities by mobilizing other parents to make their voices heard, attending hearings and community meetings, and organizing protests in district spaces to challenge the disinvestment in Black communities (Freelon, 2022).

Critical action can take the form of resisting the false tenets of oppression. Woodson and Thompson (2020) gathered from their literature review that Black fathers are often seen as lacking when compared to the expectations of the dominant culture; however, using Critical Race Theory to filter the measurement of fatherhood provides perspective and illuminates the different ways in which Black fathers engage in the lives of their children. The false societal perceptions of Black males act as barriers for Black fathers to engage authentically with their children, as their behaviors are often pathologized. Recently, Black fathers have reclaimed and reshaped the narratives about their fatherhood through public pushback and discourse on social media about how they engage with their children (Woodson & Thompson, 2020).

Defined as the behaviors taken to bring about transformative change in systems of oppression (Diemer, 2015; Freire, 1970), the literature demonstrates that Black parents have utilized critical action with the educational system. The proposed action research study is to

determine how using a critical consciousness framework intentionally advances and strengthens the critical action that has already begun. This may inform the ways in which Black parents engage and what actions they take. Critical reflection or critical transitivity may pave the path to critical action, evidenced by resistance to an oppressive system. However, the literature about Black parent engagement indicates that for some, the action is to further conform to the systems' expectations. Black parent critical consciousness engagement may intervene and redirect the efforts of these parents.

Rejected Black Parent Action

While critical awareness and critical motivation hope to result in critical action, the literature reveals that not all Black parent actions are critical actions and are somewhat in alignment with the traditional Eurocentric American framework for parent engagement. For some Black parents, the critical awareness and critical motivation signal an urgent call to meet the expectations of schools and society. This type of Black parent action includes in-school engagement, volunteerism, communication with teachers, and PTA/ PTO. This criterion is influenced by Epstein's model of parental involvement, specifically the three elements that focus on in-school involvement. Despite meeting the traditional expectations of the educational system, some Black parents' efforts were still minimized or met with criticism. Additionally, the literature also reveals instances where Black parents held sentiments aligned with narratives, although false, supported by traditional models of education and parent involvement, aligned with system justification constructs.

An ethnographic study of four Black poor and working-class mothers revealed that critical awareness, such as the critical critique of exclusionary racist practices, leads to parent involvement in more traditional ways, such as volunteering and increasing communication with

teachers (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Similarly, Bolgatz et al. (2020) noted that Black parents in a predominantly white institution recognized the deficit constructs both around their children's abilities to compete academically, as well as about the role of Black parents, and in turn increased communication with teachers and attempted to increase in-school participation to combat the false narratives. Although aligned with school expectations, Black parents' efforts were not welcomed and often questioned.

Even when conforming to traditional school-centric expectations, the efforts of Black mothers were devalued, ignored, and pathologized to reinforce deficit stereotypes about their role (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Middle-class Black parents who believed their children were in "quality" schools felt it crucial to participate in in-school activities, such as PTA/Os and school board meetings to assess school practices. However, these parents also noted that their efforts and presence were unwelcome. This led to some families' hands-off participation in the school; however, this distance also prevented advocacy and resistance, a likely intended consequence (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Still, in a politically liberal school district, the voice of Black parents is muted unless aligned with the agenda or ideas set forth by White parents. In the PTOs, Black parents were met with both classism and racism; their efforts to address inequities were redirected to focus on the needs of White parents (McCarthy Foubert, 2020). The PTOs often illuminated the restrictive vision of equity the schools had. Despite the focus on Black students and families' needs in the EP and AAPC, the governance in the hands of the school district resulted in similar outcomes with minimal, if any, shared decision-making by Black parents (McCarthy Foubert, 2020). In a race-conscious parent involvement initiative, the Parent Mentor Group, designed to engage Black parents in ways meaningful to them, they were assigned as mentors to White teaching staff

to better understand Black children (Yull & Woodson, 2018). While this was to position Black parents as equal partners with control in the educational lives of their children, many Black parents voiced feelings of being disrespected or devalued.

The feelings of being undervalued, overlooked, disrespected, and rejected by the educational system and in America have echoed in the Black community for centuries. Even when Black people play by the rules of White America and conform to expectations, they are met with criticism. Conformity misses the opportunity to challenge the expectation and demand transformation. While the literature suggests that elements of critical consciousness engagement are occurring, it also serves as strong evidence for a revolution in the ways Black parents engage with the educational system and calls for critical action on the terms and needs of Black people.

Black Scholars' Contributions to a Critical Lens in Education

Critical pedagogy, which burdens education for social change and the liberation of the oppressed, is often associated with Freire's critical consciousness. While Freire's critical consciousness is the chosen framework of this study, there is a historical tradition of Black scholars applying a critical perspective to the liberation and advancement of Black people. As this paper seeks to highlight the brilliance of Blackness, the work of Black scholars as pioneers in this movement must be recognized. Several Black scholars have contributed to this work; however, I have chosen to acknowledge the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, James Baldwin and bell hooks in this paper.

Central to the liberation of the Negro, DuBois (1903) first introduced the concept of double consciousness, by which Black people are conflicted with dual opposing perspectives of themselves, that which is dehumanized and devalued based on the white culture and that which they hold to be true about their lived experiences of Blackness. DuBois (1903) believed that to

transform the condition of the Negro in America, Black people would have to become critically aware of their *two-ness* in order to discard the false perspective. Arising from this newly defined understanding of themselves and their state, Black people would be compelled to critically analyze their outcomes and take action to demand civil rights (DuBois, 1903). DuBois' approach to liberation has elements of critical consciousness that predate Freire's formal model.

Applying his critical approach to education, DuBois (1903) believed that equal to the power it had to reinforce the social and economic systems to maintain the status quo, education, with its potential to ignite critical thinking, had the power to rectify the state of the Negro. Fundamental to this social change was the unlearning of ignorance, explicitly racism. Influenced by scientific advancements, DuBois (1940) believed that knowledge through the educational system could also advance the state of the Negro and transform humanity. In a segregated nation, DuBois (1933) argued for Black education to serve as the central point of critical consciousness, offering Black history that included both the struggle of the Negro in America and the greatness of the Africans and African Americans and their ability to persevere.

Like DuBois, Carter G. Woodson (1933) also believed that the state of the Negro was in direct response to America's ignorance and miseducation, specifically as it related to a curriculum designed to mislead both the Negro and the white masses to uphold white dominance and question the worth and abilities of the Black people. "The same educational processes which inspire and stimulates the oppressor… depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will" (Woodson, 1933, p. 12). Woodson (1933) contended that education bearing significant blame for the Negro's oppressed condition was charged to reconcile its ills by dismantling the curriculum; he proposed an emancipatory curriculum for the Negro steeped in the richness of his own

culture, history, and achievements. This critical perspective on curriculum, existing prior to the

term critical pedagogy, set the tone for critically analyzing curriculum that upholds white

supremacy and established the foundation for culturally relevant curriculum.

James Baldwin echoed the sentiments of DuBois and Woodson in his call for teachers

themselves to examine the education system. While Baldwin was relentless in his demand for all

aspects of society to be critically examined, in a 1963 speech, he challenged teachers to consider

the purpose of education to maintain society's values (Baldwin, 1963, as cited in Baldwin, 2008).

After describing how a Black boy develops in a society faced with constant questioning about his

worth and human rights, Baldwin (1963, as cited in Baldwin 2008) tasked teachers to support the

Black boy in unlearning the tenets of a racist society, dismantling system justification and

critically examining his condition. "I would teach him that he doesn't have to be bound by the

expediencies of any given administration, any given policy, any given morality; that he has the

right and the necessity to examine everything" (Baldwin, 1963, as cited in Baldwin, 2008, p. 19).

Although influenced by Freire's notion of critical consciousness, bell hooks was a

brilliant scholar in her own right. Hooks expanded the framework to consider elements of Black

feminism and the principles of intersectionality, a term later coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Regarding education, hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of the charge given by the

scholars mentioned above, stating that a central goal of education is to serve as a practice of

freedom. While she noted the role of education in keeping marginalized groups oppressed, hooks

(1994) asserted that classrooms possessed the opportunity for liberation. While teachers were to

critically examine how they created or were complicit in maintaining barriers, at the forefront of

the task of teaching was to support students' abilities to think critically and transgress against

what kept them from freedom and self-actualization (hooks, 1994). According to hooks (1994),

engaging students in such a manner widened the possibilities for students to develop their abilities, critical motivation, and creative ways to participate in their liberation, critical action at work. Central to hooks' (1994) philosophy was the necessity for marginalized students to contribute to transformative pedagogy, advancing not only Black student management but also student-centered pedagogy.

While this paper names only a few, several Black scholars and intellects have contributed to advancing critical discourse and action related to racism in education. A central element among the Black scholars included in this paper and beyond is the critique of the capitalist concepts that focus on individualism; rather, they issue a call to collectivism and a sharing of strengths and resources. Black scholars committed to this work recognize the interweaving of ideas and theories as part of the advancement of Black people. I am grateful and honored to call upon their ideals and frameworks in the pursuit of liberation and equity in schools.

Synergetic: Critical Consciousness and Critical Race Theory

Critical consciousness serves as the theoretical framework that drives this study at the microsystem level for the individual participants; of equal importance is Critical Race Theory (CRT), the macrotheory that creates the lens for understanding how systemic racism exists and impacts all facets of life. Initially conceptualized by Black scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell to critically examine the disparities in the legal outcomes of Black people (Capper, 2015), a premise of CRT is that racism should not be reduced to the isolated acts of prejudice and hate based on race. Rather, racism is all-engulfing, permeating the entire system to include every institution, its structures, its policies, and those within it, applied precisely to maintain the outcomes for both white and Black people. While CRT was developed to examine Black people's outcomes in the legal system, it has been applied across non-dominant cultures. It illuminates

racism as a foundational thread in the fabric of America since its inception, through both colonization and slavery, systems guided by a sense of false superiority justifying inequitable treatment of non-white races.

Aligned with the integral element of critical reflection that demands a deep analysis of oppression, its mechanism, and its outcomes (Freire, 1970), the tenets of CRT (Bell, 1974; Capper, 2015; Harris, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 1998; hooks, 1994; Miller et al., 2020) applied to the educational system in this study are as follows:

Permanence of racism highlights race and racism, while social constructs, as constants in every segment of life that create an inescapable power balance. In schools, this is evidenced by the structural discrepancies such as segregation, funding, and distribution of resources, as well as the biases found in curricula, assessment, instructional, and disciplinary practices, resulting in persistent inequitable outcomes for Black students.

Whiteness as property illustrates how whiteness grants advantages and access through property rights and ownership by those who possess the power. The educational system serves to maintain this power. It perpetuates racial inequity, not only by whose knowledge is valued and taught but also through practices that continue to deny access and maintain power imbalances, such as employing discriminatory practices that prevent power, such as harsher discipline and punishment.

Intersectionality recognizes the intersection of race with other social identities, such as class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and disability. Existing for some at these intersections are unique experiences of inequity. Specifically, the negative narratives and persistent outcomes further marginalize these individuals. A Black woman from a lower socioeconomic household may encounter several forms of discrimination as a parent within a

school system that perceives the individual identities of race, class, and gender from deficit lenses.

Counter-storytelling offers alternative narratives that validate the experiences of Black people and debunk falsehoods about the source of their oppression. In schools, it serves as a tool not only to unlearn but also to develop counternarratives to system justification, providing another perspective on understanding academic outcomes for Black students, specifically through racism, its roots in America, and the Black experience.

Interest convergence proposes that racial justice cannot be achieved unless the interests of the oppressed are in direct alignment with the interests of those in power. As it relates to critical consciousness, Freire posits that, in fact, the humanity of both groups, the oppressed and the oppressors, is contingent on dialogue. The recent assault on CRT as a potential tool to combat racism in schools further elucidates the educational system's minimal interest in efforts that may leverage equity for Black students.

Historically, Black student outcomes have been examined through the lens of lack as it relates to Black students' intelligence and Black parents' disengagement. Educational success has been measured against achievement indicators with minimal regard to the racist and classist inequities of the educational system, reinforcing blame on Black parents and families. Black pedagogical theorists Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate's (1995) application of CRT to schools consider how systemic racism, enacted through the daily implementation of policies and practices, directly and negatively impacted Black educational outcomes. In education, CRT provides the framework by which all members can be engaged in the work of identifying, challenging, and dismantling structures of injustice and inequity.

Critical consciousness and CRT present the oppressed with systemic and strengths-based means to understand and challenge enduring negative social, economic, and political outcomes ascribed to Blackness in America. It holds the power to free Black people from persistent perceptions of low worth created by system justification. In education, critical consciousness illuminates for Black students and parents how systemic racism has been weaponized to distribute resources, including achievement in schools inequitably. It provides an opening to examine the outcomes of Black students through a lens of limited opportunity, white privilege, cultural capital, and power structures. Given how the educational institutions of the United States continue to preserve the outcomes for both white and Black people, critical consciousness and CRT can work in tandem to provide Black parents with an honest and accurate account of the historical and current conditions of Black people in America, and a new space for the resistance and transformation of such systems.

Conclusion

The scholarship demonstrates that Black parents have always actively participated in their children's lives. Moreover, Black parents demonstrate a strong will to advocate for their children, using principles of critical consciousness. Critical awareness was identified as an element in all Black parent engagement, indicating that Black parents are cognizant of the injustices they and their children face within the educational system and beyond. Black parents also developed critical awareness within their children through racial socialization and sharing counter-stories about the richness and beauty of Black people.

Freire (1970) posited that critical transitivity, here identified as critical motivation, is necessary for the oppressed to engage in critical action. However, a review of the selected literature indicated that less than half of the time parents engaged in critical action was explicitly

connected to critical motivation. The literature review showed that parents engaged in critical action through various actions, including challenging unjust practices, engaging in PTA/Os, attending school board meetings and hearings, protesting, and taking legal action to reclaim their children's rights. The literature also revealed that even when Black parents engaged in action, at times, their actions were paired with behavior aligned with Eurocentric American expectations. However, this did not change the perception of the school or teachers favorably and, at times, furthered the system justification constructs.

The literature not only repudiates the false negative narratives about Black parents, it recognizes the longstanding efforts of Black parents to not only support their children but to challenge the inequitable practices of the educational system. While critical consciousness elements are present in the behaviors of Black parents, it is not always explicit or intentional.

This qualitative action research study aimed to examine how and if the engagement of Black parents in critical consciousness engagement overtly bolsters their perceptions about racism in schools and system justification, as well as their perceptions about their abilities to advocate for their children and transform an unjust educational system. The action of this study was a critical consciousness workshop designed to serve critical awareness and the intention to evoke critical motivation and critical action. Elements of critical consciousness were measured by comments made during the workshop, an open-ended questionnaire, and interviews of Black parents' perspectives on Black student outcomes and subsequent perspectives about resistance and advocacy practices to combat injustice within the educational system. The following chapter details the research methods utilized to conduct the qualitative action research study.

Chapter III: Methodology

In this paper, the impacts of system justification on Black student outcomes, perception of Black parent involvement, and Black parent advocacy emphasize the need for radical transformation, not only in the systems of inequity that create false negative constructs about Black people but in the ways in which Black parents resist and challenge those systems. The literature has repudiated the false narratives about Black parents' ability and willingness to actively participate in the educational lives of their children today and historically. Elements of critical consciousness, including critical awareness, critical motivation, and critical action, are a part of the lived experiences of Black parents, whether innate, intentional, or by force. However, the literature has also revealed that despite the efforts of Black parents, inequity in performance and outcomes persist. Even when parents conform to Eurocentric American expectations, they are met with criticism and judgment.

Freire (1970) posited that critical consciousness is essential for the liberation of the oppressed. While the elements of Freire's model are present in the scholarship, it is evident that critical consciousness engagement must be implemented more overtly and intentionally. The inherent wealth of Black families and communities creates a short path to critical consciousness engagement through action research. Action research strongly emphasizes empowerment, lived experience, and transformation within oppressive social systems, with those oppressed controlling the transformation (Cohen et al., 2018). The model lends itself to Black parents actively and explicitly learning about the root of their outcomes to dispel false narratives, as well as profoundly reflecting on the educational system and one's power within it. Aligned with a

transformative worldview, action research offers a transformative opportunity (Cohen et al., 2018) for change in theory and practice.

This qualitative action research study offered Black parents an opportunity to reflect and analyze the source of Black student outcomes through a critical consciousness workshop, with the potential to transform their perceptions about the power they possess to challenge that source. In this chapter, the design of the qualitative action research study will be detailed to define the purpose and significance of the study, positionality, the research methods, site selection, procedures for the sampling of participants, a description of the interview protocol, procedures for data collection, data management and analysis, internal validity measures, limitations, ethical considerations, and the conclusion. The post-workshop questionnaire and the interview protocol are found as separate appendices.

Purpose of Study

This qualitative action research study examined how explicit critical consciousness engagement informs early childhood Black parents' perceived perspectives about the achievement gap, its root causes, and the power Black parents possess within the education system. Aligned with the tenets of critical consciousness and the key elements of the transformative worldview, action research seeks to transform through cycles of reflection and action. It can change theory and practice (Cohen et al., 2018). The model lends itself to Black parents actively and explicitly learning about the root of their outcomes, dispelling false negative narratives, and deeply reflecting on the educational system and their power within it.

Research Questions

1) How do Black parents describe the structures that produce inequitable outcomes for Black students in schools, after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe their perspectives about system justification in relation to the educational system?

b. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe the achievement gap and its root causes?

2) How do Black parents describe their motivation and agency to act in the educational lives of their children after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe what they can do on an individual level and as a collective to address the achievement gap and its effects?

Positionality

This study was conducted in part due to my experiences as a Black, first-generation Haitian American woman from a low socioeconomic household whose worth was devalued in school and the larger society because of racism. I have constantly been positioned to defend my intelligence, my physicality, my race, the very essence of my existence. Confronted with relentless deficit constructs about my being, I could not escape system justification and began internalizing the negative narratives about me and other Black people. As an educator within New York City's Department of Education for five years and an additional 18 years in the field of education, my experience has allowed me to witness, as well as play a part, in the marginalization of Black students and families, while perpetuating judgment and blame on them for their outcomes.

It is only through a personal critical consciousness and awakening, as a result of being a Black mother forced to protect my three children, that I have begun to unlearn the falsehoods and

uncover the worth and excellence of my people and myself. A fundamental belief guiding this study was that Black people's explicit critical reflection and examination of their experiences, conditions, and outcomes through the lens of racism would produce a similar awakening about injustice and evoke their inherent power to resist.

Lived experiences of racism and marginalization have shaped my deep desire to create paths of liberation, specifically opportunities to empower Black parents to enact change in their lives and the lives of their children. Aligned with the transformative worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and critical inquiry (Denzin, 2017), this study was designed to bring about social and political transformation to the lives of the Black people through them. I wanted to elucidate for Black people - especially Black parents and, subsequently, Black children, that our unfortunate outcomes are not intrinsic to the Black experience; instead, they are a result of systematic racism. Moreover, through this work, I aimed to illuminate our inherent brilliance. Truths uncovered may have or will empower parents to resist, advocate, and take critical social and political action within the educational system and beyond, a key element in the advance of the oppressed in critical inquiry (Denzin, 2017).

Sharing the same racial, cultural, and linguistic background of the participants and a hope for Black people, I recognized the partiality I carried into this research study. Specifically, my experiences as a Black student, mother, educator, and administrator influenced my desire for participants to respond positively to the critical consciousness workshop; I held great hope for their awakening, the awakening of *my* people. However, central to this awakening was truth, which was manifested in reflective practice to maintain the objectivity and integrity of the study and to ensure that the experiences and voices of the participants were accurately unfolded and interpreted. The rules of conduct required for research were strictly adhered to, including respect

for all persons, beneficence, and justice. In addition to IRB guidelines and professional integrity, safeguards were implemented in this study, including the audio recording of the workshop, discussions, and one-on-one interviews. In addition, a participant advisory group of four participants provided context and gave meaning to the data. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Molloy University thoroughly reviewed and approved the research protocol, including the research design, methodology, and procedures to adhere to ethical guidelines to ensure that all participants' well-being, rights, and privacy were protected (see Appendix A). The participant advisory group served to check researcher bias and ensure that findings accurately interpreted the data. Given that research has not always treated Black people with dignity and respect, the participant advisory group also provided a layer of trust for the participants.

Research Design

This qualitative action research study was designed to provide a safe space in which Black parents could develop critical consciousness about the systems of racism and inequitable practices that negatively impact educational outcomes for Black children. I explored if and how this engagement illuminates for Black parents the truths about the root causes of Black student outcomes and how perceptions about their power within the educational system challenge those outcomes. Innate to action research brings reflection and potential change for participants and the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Recognizing myself as a cog in systems that produce inequity in schools, this action research study also allowed me to critically examine my practices and the tenets behind my decisions, to break any practices that prevent my resistance or create barriers to the resistance of Black parents in educational environments where I serve. This study brought about a new understanding in theory and in practice of how I can effectively co-

construct with Black parents to create environments where they are valued and respected for their cultural wealth and expertise in the educational lives of their children.

While qualitative research is established as a legitimate form of inquiry, lacking the measurability of quantitative research, it has only been accepted as such within the last few decades (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rather than the ostensibly concrete statistics used to test and confirm theories in quantitative inquiry, qualitative research focuses on a deep understanding of concepts, experiences, and perceptions. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), critical characteristics of qualitative research include the following: natural setting, researcher as the key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive and deductive data analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account.

Key Elements of Qualitative Research

As this study sought to understand the perspectives of Black parents of early childhood children, the site selected was an early childhood program that the participants had attended in the past or were currently attending during the study, serving as the most natural setting to explore these concepts. As the researcher, I served as the key instrument of the research, collecting data through multiple sources to develop a deep understanding of perceived Black parent perspectives. Open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and audio recordings were triangulated to extract themes using inductive data analysis to include 1) themes repeating ideas through exact words, 2) repeating ideas that become themes, and 3) themes to form theoretical constructs about Black parent experiences with critical consciousness. After the themes were created, deductive analysis was used to capture any additional data that supported the themes constructed. To ensure that the themes generated were authentic to the participants'

voices and not overshadowed by the researcher, the participant advisory group collaborated in the final interpretation of the data.

Much of the research about Black parent engagement in the educational lives of their children reflects the deficit constructs developed through white expectations. While significant literature recognizes the ways Black parents have advocated in their children's educational lives, the explicit application of a critical approach, specifically Freire's critical consciousness, has not been fully explored as it relates to the motivations of Black parent engagement. This study sought to illuminate a holistic account of their lived experiences and perspectives, providing a more positive account of Black parent engagement through critical consciousness.

Site Selection

The site selected for this study was a community-based preschool providing 3-K, Pre-K, 4410 special education services, and a toddler program. The school is funded by New York City's Division of Early Childhood Education, New York's State Special Education Department, and New York City's Department of Health. The site was in a metropolitan New York City area in the borough of Queens, in a community primarily comprised of people of color, with those who identify as Black making up approximately 67% of the population, according to the 2020 census. Compared to the 23.4% of people in New York City and 20.7% in the borough of Queens who identified as Black or African American alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), this community had a high percentage of Black people. According to current 2023-2024 school data for the site, 67% of families identified as Black only comprised a mix of Black/ African American and Caribbean/ West-Indian families, including immigrant and first-generation families.

As described in Chapter 1, the term Black encompasses many nationalities, ethnicities, and heritage, particularly in New York City. The site itself reflects this diversity. While 67% of the families attending the school during the 23-24 school year self-identified as Black, they represent several countries. In addition to those with a long family history of living in the United States and identifying as African American, families also have roots in the Caribbean, including Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and Barbados, and African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt. This still does not capture small groups of families of African descent from other countries that do not have a strong cultural presence in the community. The differences create various cultural constructs and perceptions based on their lived experiences. While I acknowledge the importance of each unique contribution to this discussion, America does not delineate between nationalities or subcultures, nor does it distribute its application of racism to a specific Black group. For these reasons, all participants were considered Black.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the median income for this community was approximately $90,000 in 2020; however, the zip code captures a large area encompassing both ends of the economic spectrum. The school selected had more than half of its families qualifying for a childcare subsidy based on income at the time of the study. Current data from the 2023-24 school year reveals that 68% of families qualified for childcare subsidies because of low socioeconomic status. The site is densely comprised of participants matching the criteria for race and socioeconomic status, with the potential to yield findings that provide insight into the experiences of other Black communities with similar demographics.

Sampling

Participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. In this study, "knowledgeable people" (Cohen et al., 2018) were Black parents both in their experiences of

Blackness as it relates to racism and the unique demands of raising Black children. Initial parameters for the participant pool included current and past Black parents of the community-based preschool qualifying for the income-based subsidy and those Black parents of early childhood students, specifically those not having children born before 2016. The purpose of selecting Black participants who did not have any children beyond the second grade was in direct response to the disenchantment with schools that many Black parents report. According to Cooper (2009), Black parents feel unwelcomed, disrespected, and undervalued by schools. The selection of early childhood parents was an attempt to mitigate the potential of a participant pool that had accumulated several years of such encounters, with a potential skew in how critical consciousness intervention shapes perception. The consideration of low-income status was an attempt to lift the perspective of those most vulnerable at the intersection of poverty and racism, as well as those most affected by racism in schools.

Recruitment

Participants were pooled from a school management database, Child Outcome, Planning and Administration (COPA), which has been used by the selected site since 2017, housing the demographics of approximately 1400 families. The database includes current and prior families who attended the early childhood program. While the database houses information for three schools within the larger organization, the sample obtained was for the site which serves a community in the borough of Queens. While two of the three schools were initially considered for this study to increase the participant pool and increase diversity, the school located in a different borough created barriers of practicality for meeting in person and the elements of building trust and community. The third school was closed in 2019.

The potential participants were sorted using three criteria from the database. First, families were sorted for children whose birth years are from 2016 through 2022 or younger to identify families within the early childhood age range (birth through 2nd grade). From those results, the data was sorted for those who identify as Black. Finally, the third level of sorting included families eligible for the NYC childcare subsidy based on income. The results yielded 373 parents falling within the three parameters. Of those parents, only 216 could be contacted via email, inquiring about their interest in participating in a qualitative action research study involving Black student outcomes, racism in schools, parent advocacy, and participating in a one-time workshop. From the email blast, 13 parents responded via email, including three current parents indicating interest, five current parents declining, three former parents indicating interest, and two former parents declining.

Recruitment flyers indicating the purpose, design, participant pool eligibility, and incentives were placed throughout the school. Given my leadership role within the program, families made initial contact with the family worker to decrease any perceptions of coercion in participating in the study. Once initial contact about interest was made with the family worker, participants were advised to see me for more information. Nineteen parents with children enrolled in the program were called, emailed, or met with me to ask questions about the study.

The family worker advised me that despite the initial outlined parameters for the participant, there was high expressed interest from other Black parents, including those who did not identify as Black, those who did not qualify for the subsidy, and those who both had children within the early childhood range (birth through 2nd grade) and older children. The family worker indicated that these parents felt excluded; I told the family worker to direct those parents to me.

Revising Participant Group Parameters

Several current parents within the school fell outside of the study parameters and expressed their feelings of exclusion. When meeting with these parents individually, I asked if I could gather their thoughts about the study to reconsider the participant group's parameters. Sharing the sentiments of other parents with children both within the early childhood age range and older, a Black mother of 3 children ages 4, 12, and 15 explained: "We [parents with children older than early childhood ages] probably need this more because we are just tired… tired of fighting and not winning." A mother's argument encapsulated the thoughts of some parents who did not qualify for the subsidy, "They don't care what car you drive or if you live in a house or the projects. They see us as Black, that's it. So, money doesn't really mean anything." This parent would become a participant in the study. There was also some pushback regarding the need for participants to identify as Black from other people of color. Parents identifying as Latine and South Asian also voiced concerns that the exclusion from this study was a form of racism, as they, too, encounter bias and discrimination. A parent identifying as Hispanic stated, "I think we get it [racism] more because, since Trump, it made everyone think that every one of us is an illegal or a criminal."

The challenge of parents' feelings of exclusion gave rise to new considerations about widening the parameters of the participant pool. While initially designed specifically for parents of children of early childhood age, most respondents had children both within the age range and older, not recognizing that the 2016 marker was the oldest birth year their children could be. Additionally, the indication that these parents of older children are "tired" resonated with me as a justified reason to include any Black parents with children within the pre-k to 12 system as "knowledgeable people" (Cohen et al., 2018) because of their experiences of racism with the

54

educational system. The expressed willingness to participate in a potential shift regarding

engagement practices within the educational system with their younger children made them ideal

candidates for this study. Similarly, the parents not qualifying for the subsidy wanted equal

access to this study as they felt that all Black parents, despite income, face inequity in the

educational system. Their desire to engage in discourse and potential strategies to address the

educational system was valid reasoning for allowing them to participate in this study.

While many other marginalized groups suffer the effects of racism, the associated

stereotypes do not always parallel the experiences of one another, nor are the racist practices

applied in the same way. Although the initial eligibility requirements were broadened to include

any Black parents within the pre-k through 12 educational system, parents identifying as other

than Black were not included in the study, as it focuses on the unique experiences of Blackness

and racism in the educational system.

Final Participant Group

The proposed goal was to have 8-12 parents as the study participants. Of those who

expressed interest, 14 consented to be part of the study. These participants were given a consent

document that described all elements of the study, including the purpose of the study, the study

design, incentives, participant expectations, rights regarding confidentiality, and the right to

terminate at any time. Six participants signed consent before the workshop, and the others signed

consent on the day of the workshop.

On the day of the workshop, two of the 14 participants called to advise me that they could

not participate due to illness. A participant walked out of the workshop during the first session,

terminating her participation. The final participation count was 11 Black parents, all identifying

as mothers.

Incentives

Given the history of malice against Black people in research, Black people may rightfully distrust research and be apprehensive about participating in it. For these reasons, not only was this research study design straightforward and practical, with most of the study occurring throughout one morning, but participants were also offered incentives in the form of additional resources beyond the critical consciousness workshop. Specifically, participants received a resource book and accompanying activity book that has statewide programs geared to parents of early childhood children, as well as gift certificates to The Nature Company's open play, which grants them and their children to 2 hours of play at the venue, to include a workshop with live animal and access to the play gym. Participants had up until April 2025 to use these certificates.

Additional incentives included breakfast, lunch, and childcare for the duration of the workshop. Breakfast was offered from 9:15 to 10:00, prior to the workshop, for both parents and children. Similarly, lunch was provided to participants and their children around noon. As all but one participant had at least one early childhood aged child, childcare was offered in a different part of the school building. A total of 8 children participated in the childcare offered. The childcare team consisted of 3 teachers already part of the program, with familiarity with many of the children. The children watched a movie, worked on art activities, and played within classroom centers for the entirety of the workshop.

As a result of the potential trauma that participants may have experienced during or after the research study, participants were also connected with a social worker, whose information was provided at the beginning of the workshop when she introduced herself. Participants were advised that if they utilized the social worker's service, it would be confidential, and the only information provided to the researcher would be the number of participants who utilized the

56

support. No information regarding sessions with the social worker would be disclosed. This assurance and the social worker's contact information were reiterated by the social worker at the end of the workshop. The one participant who left the workshop declined conversation with the social worker or me at the time of her departure and up to today. No participants have utilized the social worker's service up until this point, as the social worker has indicated that 0 participants have contacted her during or after the workshop.

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this research study included audio transcripts of the critical consciousness workshop and discussions, the mid-workshop questionnaire, the post-workshop questionnaire, and the audio transcription of the semi-structured interviews.

Action Phase- Critical Consciousness Intervention (Session 1)

The participants engaged in a two-part, three-hour critical consciousness workshop on February 24, 2024, from 10:00 to 1:30, with a 30-minute working lunch. While a three-part workshop series was considered, a one-time workshop divided into two sections was determined to be the best option to increase participation in all parts of the study, mainly because the participants are parents of young children. A one-time session also ensured consistency in what participants heard in real-time.

Initially considered for the workshop were specific topics such as explicit and implicit bias, overrepresentation of Black students in special education, over-disciplining of Black students, racialized tracking, culturally relevant pedagogy, and other current issues related to structural racism as they appear in educational settings. However, given the scope of such topics and that each necessitates its thorough discussion, the workshop included two cycles of lecture

57

and discussion of broad topics regarding racism in the educational system, facilitated by an expert in the EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) field.

In addition to an emailed copy of the proposal for the facilitator to become familiar with the workshop's aims, the facilitator and I discussed the premise of the workshop on three occasions to prepare. Topics included system justification, the achievement gap versus the opportunity gap, examples of racist practices in the educational system, and parent advocacy practices to include resistance strategies.

Prior to the start of the workshop, I introduced the facilitator, a Black woman with two decades of experience in education focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion. With her experience, she navigated the inherent tension that can arise when an outsider, especially a researcher, engages with a group of Black people. She demonstrated humility, dissolving any sense of hierarchy and establishing an environment of equality for all participants. By sharing her own experiences of racism and her perspectives and actions as a parent, she created a space for genuine connection, fostering trust and openness among the participants. Her willingness to share authentic personal experiences made the workshop a space where everyone felt valued and heard.

At the start of the first session, I reviewed the consent items and the purpose of the study. I also discussed how my positionality, specifically as a Black mother, drove the study. Included in the initial introduction were a defining of key terms such as racism in the context of this study, a comparison of the achievement gap and the opportunity gap, and system justification coupled with the example of the two mothers of the young boys described in chapter one.

The first session centered around the history of racism within all spaces and systems, including education. As it relates to education, racism was identified as a key factor for negative

Black student outcomes, specifically the proposed achievement gap. The achievement gap was reframed as the opportunity gap. The facilitator, participants, and I shared personal experiences of explicit and implicit biases within the education system and beyond, including the treatment of Black people in healthcare, employment, housing, and financing opportunities. A consensus that racism touches each facet of life for Black people was shared. Moreover, the group discussed the associated negative stereotypes about the intelligence and effort of Black people, specifically how these impacted teacher's perceptions of Black students and Black parents.

Members of the workshop group shared incidences of explicit bias, implicit bias, and microaggressions with the education system as experienced by themselves and their children. Noteworthy was the shared experience of teachers' voiced astonishment about the high intelligence or exemplary behavior of their Black children, further highlighting the deficit lens through which Black children are being perceived. Participants expressed their fears about racism and its effects on their children's confidence, feelings of belonging, and performance both in Black schools and PWIs. Alongside this narrative was the sharing of strategies to maintain Black pride and the brilliance of Black people through home discussions and "Black" experiences outside of the schools in response to curriculums absent of those elements.

During the first session, the need to build strong support systems was considered through identifying allies within the school staff and networking and collaborating with other Black parents. Several participants shared their experiences of building community by playing the part of pseudo-mothers when other parents could not be present. These participants viewed this role through the lens of protection of Black children as well as countering negative narratives about Black and Brown parents. This discussion created the opportunity to examine how schools expect parents to engage and how they judge those who choose not to or cannot engage in such a

way. Most believed that the presence of some Black parents highlighted Black parents' willingness to be present for their children. In this case, when a teacher who believes the system tenets that Black parents are unengaged or uncaring has an experience that is contrary, isolates this experience as an exception rather than challenging the stereotype. We further discussed feelings of shame and blame that accompany this judgment and how it creates a division that creates a groundless model of "good" Black parents.

Other topics referenced during the first session of the workshop included de facto segregation in schools, the lack of diversity in the staff and student populations in schools, the challenges of balancing work, life and the expectations for parent engagement, experiences of Black students with disabilities, the benefits and challenges of disclosing one's education and profession to schools, the need to "mask" Blackness to meet as well as disprove societal constructs, perceptions of the aggressive or "angry Black woman," and the fatigue that comes with being both challenged and feared as a Black women. While some participants continued to converse about the topics described above during the working lunch, the tape recorders were paused until the second session.

The workshop was audio-recorded to ensure the participants' responses were captured as accurately as possible. These responses were then used in tandem with the mid- and post-workshop questionnaires to identify codes and themes.

Mid-workshop Questionnaire

Considering participants' physical and mental needs, in between the two sessions was a 10-minute break, allowing participants to care for personal needs. (Participants were reminded that they could take a break or excuse themselves at any point during the workshop). This break was followed by a working lunch of approximately 30 minutes, during which the participants

could reflect on completing the open-ended mid-workshop questionnaire related to the themes discussed in the workshop's first session (see Appendix B).

Historically, Black people have not always had a voice in the research about them; using a qualitative questionnaire amplifies their authentic perspectives and provides meaning to their lived experiences. The qualitative questionnaire included open-ended questions about their perceived attributions to the disparities in Black student outcomes, racism in schools, and system justification beliefs. The data collected from the questionnaire was also used to revise the questions for the semi-structured interviews.

Action Phase- Critical Consciousness Intervention (Session 2)

The workshop's second session focused primarily on parent engagement and advocacy practices, with two main perspectives: the traditional model of parent engagement, which emphasizes the collaboration between parents and the school, and a resistance model in which the parent critically and openly analyzes school structures and practices. The facilitator led the discussions around the importance of traditional engagement and advocacy, such as attending PTCs, becoming familiar with the curriculum, and making themselves visible within schools. I led the discussion points related to challenging the school system, such as asking teachers to identify opportunities for reflection in the curriculum, asking educators to justify instructional practices as they relate to individual children's learning styles, inquiring about the cultural competence training of teachers, and requesting a place and voice in decision making. This discussion resurfaced the concerns about the perception the latter model evokes. The facilitator and researcher shared the importance of mindfulness and self-awareness when navigating difficult conversations to prevent such perceptions. Circling back to shame and judgment, I expressed the importance of balancing the need to make others comfortable with advocating

authentically for Black children. Again, this session was audio recorded, with consent, and I took field notes during the workshop.

Post-workshop Questionnaire

At the end of the second session, participants had another 10-minute break to care for personal needs. Similarly to the mid-workshop questionnaire, participants were given a post-workshop questionnaire (see Appendix C), which they completed on-site, except for 2 participants who later emailed them in the interest of time.

Participants were asked to complete a form to indicate any interest in participating in the study beyond the workshop, specifically for individual interviews or to be part of a participant advisory group that would serve as member checking.

Interviews

Five participants indicated interest in participating in individual interviews. The interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient to the participant. Three participants opted to be interviewed at the site, and 2 participants requested Zoom interviews. All participants were asked if the interview could be audio-taped, to which they all consented. Interviews ran from 32 minutes to 46 minutes. Through the semi-structured interview protocol, participants shared their perspectives about three significant themes: their experiences with the educational system as a student or a parent, their reflection on the critical consciousness workshop, and their perspectives on their Black parent engagement (see Appendix D).

Participant Advisory Group

The participant advisory group, consisting of 4 participants, met as a small group to give meaning to identified themes and to ensure the authenticity of the findings. This group served as a form of member checking. This member-checking process served to validate the interpretation

of participant responses. Given how Black people have been treated historically in research, the participant voices needed to be heard accurately. At the onset of the study, the group's diversification was to be considered if several participants expressed interest in participating. However, given that all participants identify as Black mothers and only 5 participants expressed interest, all interested parties were invited.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the workshop discussions and interviews were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription, and the questionnaires were manually transcribed. The transcriptions were then uploaded to Dedoose to identify common themes among the participants' responses about perspectives and potential changes in response to the critical consciousness intervention. Using Auerbach and Silverstein's grounded theory approach, I coded the transcribed recordings and transcriptions of the questionnaires using Dedoose, with three levels of analysis, to include: 1) repeating ideas through exact words, 2) repeating ideas that become themes, and 3) themes to form theoretical constructs (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006).

Participant Advisory Group's Role in Data Analysis

The participant advisory group comprised of 4 participants, of which 3 were also interviewees, met via Zoom to review the findings for approximately 45 minutes. I shared the identified theoretical constructs to assess if my interpretations were aligned with the participants' experiences. Specifically, I shared the following themes: critical awareness as a part of their Black experience, their parent engagement as critical engagement, and the feelings of guilt, doubt, and exhaustion expressed as a result of parenting a Black child in a racist society. While there were no ideas or concepts that required more clarification from the participants, I gave the group participants several opportunities to ask for more clarification or elaboration from me and

to express points of contention. The participant advisory group members agreed with the findings and were grateful for the space to authenticate their feelings. The one point of debate was "giving a pass" to Black parents choosing not to engage (later discussed in chapter 4). The meeting did not contribute to the data; however, it highlighted the importance of safe spaces such as the workshop space as well as the meeting itself, as each of the 4 participants expressed that they had eagerly waited for the meeting and requested that we meet as a large group again.

Limitations and Trustworthiness

Given that the concepts explored in this study were abstract and mentally constructed, internal validity could not be readily established (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Internal validity requires the assessment of concrete and measurable concepts. Critical consciousness and the participants' perceptions and motivation could not be assessed this way. Similarly, as with most qualitative studies, particularly on such a small scale, external validity in which the findings can be applied to the world outside the study is also limited (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Findings were bound not only by the sample size but also by the use of purposive sampling, which decreased the range in the participant pool. However, with qualitative research, trustworthiness, rather than validity and reliability, is how credibility was established. The use of the participant advisory group as member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), combined with peer debriefing, support from my dissertation chairperson, and research memos, supported the trustworthiness of this study.

Of concern was that the potential factors to be explored in this research, specifically critical consciousness and the activation of agency for parent advocacy, might have further limited the number of participants or affected their willingness to disclose authentic information about their experiences due to stigmatization or feelings of disempowerment (Cohen et al.,

2018). A key factor in selecting the critical consciousness intervention was to mitigate such concerns by exposing the truths about Black student outcomes, releasing parents from the associated stigma, and empowering them for future action.

Of equal concern were the key characteristics of parents who would willingly participate in and potentially seek out such a study that could directly influence the findings, such as prior or personal experiences within the school system, the propensity to participate in activism or social justice change movements, or the unique commonalities that exist among participants as they are living within the same community and may share like experiences and dispositions about racism in schools. For the same reasons, the Hawthorne effect, in which participants may alter their authentic responses or behave differently because of the awareness that they are observed and group contagion, presented additional limitations to the generalization of findings to other populations.

Additional limiting factors included issues of insiderness, as I share the same racial, cultural, and linguistic background as the participants within the site selected. Despite the benefits of these connections, they may have created elements of insiderness, described by Young (2004), where participants withhold information or explicit details due to a presumed understanding of lived parallel experiences. Existing simultaneously may have been issues of outsiderness based on presumed hierarchies, such as perceived differences in levels of education or socioeconomic status or distrust of the researchers based on historical factors, which may have presented as deterrents to parent participants' full disclosure in sharing authentic experiences (Young, 2004). Again, the potential to arm parents with their powers to take future critical action was an attempt to moderate such effects.

Ethical Considerations

A researcher's primary responsibility is to safeguard the health and well-being of participants and ensure that no harm is inflicted as a result of the research. While this is a reasonable expectation for Black people, this has not always been the case, giving credibility to their mistrust of research (Scharff et al., 2010). Every aspect of the study was scrutinized to ensure no harm was done.

Incentives and Vulnerable Populations

Given the potential apprehension of Black people to participate in research studies, incentives were offered to recruit participants, including admission to an early childhood venue, childcare for the duration of the workshop, and breakfast and lunch. Two ethical concerns arose about the incentives: the participants' vulnerability and free choice. For the participants of this study who are at the intersection of Blackness and poverty, living with food insecurities, food may be an enticing incentive that may deter some from choosing to decline. For this reason, additional breakfast and lunch bags were available on the day of the workshop for any parent with a child currently enrolled in the school. Another concern regarding incentives was the potential of participants feeling obligated to continue for the entirety of the study, despite the discomfort, after accepting an incentive. Participants were informed of their right to terminate participation at any time at various stages of the study, including in the consent form, before the workshop, midway through the workshop, and before interviews.

Adverse Emotional and Psychological Responses

The critical consciousness workshop lent itself to an ethical examination, as the topics covered were sensitive. The potential revelations about the conditions and outcomes of Black people, as well as the roles we play to maintain them, particularly those subject to system

justification, might have caused trauma. Rather than creating a path to liberation, the workshop's content could have brought unintended consequences, such as shame and guilt. For this reason, within the consent was a disclaimer advising participants about the nature of the workshop's content. I also reviewed the various topics to be covered prior to the start of the workshop, and participants were reminded that at any time they felt uncomfortable, they could end their participation. Participants had access to a social worker both during and after the workshop should they want to discuss feelings brought on by this study. The social worker advised participants of her services and contact information before the start of the workshop, also confirming confidentiality and that their information would not be revealed, even to me, the researcher, but only the number of participants accessing the service would be disclosed. The social worker services were free of charge. While the disclaimer is a proactive measure to decrease potential harm, access to the social worker was a response to mitigate any possible adverse emotional or psychological effects ensued by the study.

Confidentiality

Removing participants' identifiers from documents and maintaining data and audio recordings in an encrypted database added a layer toward protecting participants' anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, confidentiality could not be guaranteed amongst participants, specifically that they would not reveal the identity of other participants and what they had shared, including possible harmful or damaging information, to those outside the study. While there were no formal methods compelling participants to refrain from discussing what transpired during the study or who participated, the expectation of confidentiality of all participants was discussed explicitly several times throughout the study.

Researcher Bias

As described in the role of the researcher, my identity as a Black first-generation Haitian American woman from a low socioeconomic family profoundly influences my work. In quantitative research marked by neutrality, objectivity is not inherent to transformative qualitative research. There is no claim of neutrality; through this research study, I held a critical hope for the liberation of the participants with whom I share many commonalities. However, essential to liberation is truth; the use of a reflexive approach was employed throughout the study to prevent observer bias. In addition to research memos that detailed my process and reflections, I sought feedback from the dissertation chairperson, serving as a peer debriefer. Protective measures such as audio recording, note-taking, and member checking were employed to thwart bias and increase the trustworthiness of the findings. The participant advisory group, through member checking, assessed themes to increase the accuracy of interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The use of the participant advisory group and peer debriefing served to triangulate findings and increase the study's trustworthiness.

Conclusion

Sixty-nine years removed from Brown v Board of Education's decision to overrule the 1896 Plessy "separate but equal" decision, the effects of racism and inequitable practices in schools continue to plague Black children. Immersed in a racist system, all its participants, including Black people, cannot escape its beliefs, even if false. There is a reliance by both the dominant culture and marginalized to uphold deficit constructs regarding Black achievement, which places the blame and guilt for the outcomes of Black people on them, suggesting inherent flaws of Blackness. While it serves to absolve the dominant culture of its transgressions against Black people, for Black people, although counterintuitive, system justification continues to crush

68

the potential of awakening as it is a means of self-preservation by which the harsh realities of their lives are tempered.

As a result of system justification, Black people are subject to believing false narratives about the Black condition (Jost, 2019). Black parents may attribute poor achievement outcomes for their children as inherent flaws of Blackness (Reyna, 2008) rather than question or challenge the system in which these outcomes are permitted to occur. The responsibilities of the educational system to serve children equitably have been replaced by system justification concepts such as grit and perseverance, again shifting accountability to the underserved and marginalized. System justification deters critical examination of the unjust and racist conditions and contributing factors that create the opportunity gap, which the dominant culture refers to as the achievement gap. In addition to the onus placed on Black people for their outcomes, the abilities, and willingness of Black parents to take an active part in the educational lives of their children have been questioned and criticized, deeming them as uncaring, incapable, or ineffective (Cooper, 2009). As part of this action research study, Black parents were presented with an opportunity to view and reflect on the conditions that create the outcomes of Black students through a critical lens with the hope that it would provide a path to freedom from negative societal constructs and empower them to respond and advocate critically within the educational system.

Societal constructs uphold the deficit narratives about Black parents as it relates to the achievement outcomes of Black children, as disinterested and unwilling to participate in the educational lives of their children (Cooper, 2009). Despite the cultural capital and wealth that exist within the various traditional models of Black parent involvement and advocacy, such as the communication of high academic expectations reinforced at home with firm consequences or

questioning teacher's connection to their children, this type of involvement is often overlooked or devalued by the educational system (Lee & Bowen, 2006). The expectations of the school system for parents of color to engage in the educational process, based on the European American model, immediately place Black parents at a disadvantage, again questioning their abilities and capabilities.

Although deficit constructs persist in placing the onus for the achievement gap on Black people, including narratives about the lack of Black parent involvement, a review of the literature rejects these narratives as false. It reveals that Black parents have always actively participated in the educational lives of their children but, from the dominant white lens, deemed as inadequate. The literature also reveals that elements of critical consciousness have been fundamental in Black parent advocacy. However, limited studies have documented the relationship between engagement in critical consciousness and Black parents' perceptions and advocacy practices, highlighting the need for such a study. Using critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) as a framework for the action of this research, a critical consciousness workshop, participants were engaged in an uncovering of how racism and inequity plague the educational system, with the possibility of liberation from guilt and shame of Black outcomes while empowering them to respond to the injustices in the educational system through critical actions of resistance.

If schools aim to prepare one for life, they should serve as the incubators of all the values humanity espouses—equality, democracy, justice, and fairness. Purpel and McLaurin (2004) purport that there is no greater goal in education, including the attainment of knowledge, than the engagement of questioning and critical analysis of injustice. The rationale justifying this research study was to create a path of empowerment, resistance, and advocacy through critically analyzing the injustices affecting Black students and parents. The initial hope of this study was to

70

illuminate to Black people and society the power that Black people possess through the activation of agency and resistance to the systems and structures of oppression in schools to transform the outcomes of Black children. Unexpectedly, this study also revealed the nuances of Black critical action and the emotional toll experienced by Black parents as a result.

Chapter IV: Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings of my qualitative action research study which explored how critical consciousness engagement impacted Black parent perceptions about the root causes of the Black student outcomes as well as their perceptions about their abilities to employ resistance practices to challenge an educational system that results in such outcomes evidenced by achievement gap. Initially, the study aimed to foster a transformative shift in participants' perspectives, explicitly leading to resistance advocacy against racist structures and practices that perpetuate outcomes such as the achievement gap. However, the data uncovered the complexities of Blackness and Black parenting that deter resistance. The participants of this study, all identifying as Black mothers, illuminated the tension of the line they toe between demanding justice for their children while collaborating with a system designed to strip it from them. Two themes emerged from the data: Critical Awareness as Inherent to the Black Experience and Black Parent Engagement as Critical Action. Through the participants' lived experiences and perspectives, this chapter illuminates the multifaceted challenges faced by the Black parents in this study, both in their attempts to collaborate while simultaneously confronting an unjust educational system.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 11 people, all identifying as Black mothers. Each participant had a direct connection to the research site, a community-based organization providing early childhood education programs. Two identified as past parents, seven identified as current parents, and 1 was an incoming parent. Three participants were current teachers at the site, and 1 was a former parent and staff member. Some overlap existed between these

connections. The participants had various levels of education and occupations; however, 7

indicated occupations within the educational system. They were recruited via email and in person

to participate in a 3-hour critical consciousness engagement workshop at the site, with additional

opportunities to participate in one-on-one interviews and serve on a participant advisory group.

All 11 participants attended the 3-hour workshop on February 24, 2024. Five engaged in

continued discussion immediately following the work. While 7 participants agreed to one-on-one

interviews, due to scheduling, only five interviews were conducted in March 2024. Of those

interviews, four participants were part of the parent advisory group, which served as member

checking to ensure the authentic voices of the participants were heard. Table 4.1 contains a

snapshot of the participants' demographic information, including pseudonyms, their ages, the

ages of their children, level of education, occupation, and cultural background.

Table 4-1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Age of Children	Level of Education	Occupation	Cultural Background
Charrise	46	7, 17, 22	Master's	Social Worker	Haitian
Jayda	41	19 months	Master's	Early Education Administrator	Afro-American
Soraya	33	3	College	School Support Staff	Bajan-American
LaShauna	42	2	Bachelor's	Student	Jamaican
Sade	45	2, 4	Bachelor's	Unemployed	African
Monique	34	7	Associate	Educator	African American
Keisha	32	3	Bachelor's	Online Tech Support	Afro-Caribbean
Quinniya	31	Three months, 5, 12	Associate	School Aide	African American
Tameka	57	15	Master's	Teacher	Guyanese
Aliyah	36	5, 13	Community College	Teacher Assistant/ Aide/ Data Specialist	Black
Iyana	40	8,6,4	Master's	Teacher	Nigerian

Research Question One:

How a Critical Consciousness Workshop Informs Black Parents Understanding

Critical Awareness Is Inherent to the Black Experience

Freire (1970) asserts that the oppressed must be active participants in their liberation, beginning with a critical awareness of their oppression. Through this critical awareness, they can understand the system and structures designed to cause their oppression and begin to take actions that challenge oppression and bring liberation. The critical workshop of this study was devised to provide participants with a new critical awareness, specifically about the racist structures and practices within the educational system and their impact on Black student outcomes. However, through the data collected from workshop discussions and interviews, it became clear that these participants, steeped in inescapable racial inequity, had a deep understanding of how race and racism negatively affect their children both in schools and beyond. With critical awareness of their oppressed conditions and the all-too-common potential outcomes in schools and beyond, they divulged their fears. While new critical awareness was not gained due to the workshop, some system justification myths were debunked. From the data collected and analyzed, an overarching theme in response to research question one emerged: Critical Awareness Is Inherent to the Black Experience, with three subthemes: *Racism Provides Critical Awareness, Awareness Translates to Fear for Black Parents,* and *Awareness Does Not Always Debunk System Justification Myths.*

Racism Provides Critical Awareness

While this study aimed to arm participants with a heightened critical awareness of racism about the systems that function to maintain disparities in Black student outcomes, workshop transcripts, questionnaires, and interviews revealed a collective understanding among

participants of the systemic factors that negatively impact the success of Black students, prior to participation in this study. Drawing from firsthand encounters as parents and individuals reflecting upon their childhoods, participants shared experiences that unconsciously created critical awareness by illuminating the systems at work to perpetuate the proposed achievement gap and inequitable outcomes.

Analysis of the data made it evident that the participants gained minimal new awareness about the deep-rooted systems and structures within the educational system that disproportionately affect Black students. In fact, on more than half of the questionnaires, participants noted that they did not gain new insights about racism in schools. Their accounts of racism within the educational system highlighted the various inequities, including lack of access to resources and opportunities, a curriculum absent of reflection and celebration of the Black experience, explicit and implicit bias with school staff, and the resulting disparities in Black student outcomes. Participants divulged several accounts that they declared to be blatantly racist, both within Black educational institutions and PWIs. From the racist verbiage, such as "Blackie", Soraya remembered being called by a Black male teacher after a summer break in the Caribbean to Monique's experience of a school questioning her daughter's high achievement score on an assessment as accurate, participants shared the constant experiences of racism that forced critical awareness and reflection.

Keisha detailed the collective experience of the Black students in her graduating high school class, in which their futures were discarded by a racist college advisor and a school that was blind to her actions. Despite winning a collective fight to push back against the outcomes of racism, Keisha expressed the pain and hurt that remains for her and her peers.

We had teachers that were tired. We had teachers that were waiting to retire. And we had

teachers that didn't live in our community. And they did not care. They didn't like us….

My graduation year, the students had to band together and get rid of the college advisor

because she was telling all the Blacks to just apply to the community colleges. 'They will

accept you and you don't worry about it.' And we're like, 'Is no one going to do

anything? We just have to fight for ourselves.' And we built a wall in that high school.

And we're all still angry. We're all still angry about what we have to deal with [crying].

Soraya had a similar high school experience and suffered racism at the hands of a

Hispanic assistant principal who had continuously antagonized Black students. She recalled the

barrage of insults and interrogation she suffered at the hands of that assistant principal the

morning of a Regents exam for a dress code violation of wearing a hat. Soraya recounted:

His insults were directly towards my race. I was animalistic or I was aggressive. And…

insubordinate. That's what he said…. It was a blizzard that day, we had just walked in

and the bell rings, and I'm looking to take a Regents exam. I want to go take a test; it was

important. This little thing, none of that matters. But this is the thing you want to focus

on right now?

Workshop participants noted that this might have been an unconscious or conscious attempt to

thwart Soraya's success on the exam and beyond. The facilitator proposed:

And the domino effect. The whole idea that you'd miss an exam that impacts all the

things that could come. This deadline, this application process. But the fact that you

missed the exam is what the school probably wouldn't want to focus on in that moment,

despite the fact that this man is cutting people out, in the building where there's

children… there's trust that's supposed to be there. But now I can't trust you… that's painful. That's painful.

Aliyah described this breach of trust when the school refused to work to understand her eldest son's learning style and needs, coupled with a lack of partnership with her to identify solutions. The school recommended that they give him medication. While Aliyah decided to take action into her own hands and make modifications for him at home, she verbalized the grueling decision that many parents have suffered in response to the wrongful and over-identification of Black children with disabilities. Aliyah reflected:

Imagine if I did listen to them…come to find out the medication that they were going to have him on, he would have been pissing on himself. It would have stopped him from growing... And that's what they're so quick to do with our kids. Without that [schools partnering with parents] our kids are going to get lost in the system and they do.

A similar experience witnessed by Sade was the fight her cousin endured within a school several of her children had attended. The school appreciated her cousin's participation when her older children conformed to norms. However, when her younger son demonstrated a different approach to learning and behaviors, the school no longer sought to partner with her. Her cousin, determined to maintain her son's uniqueness, found a school that harnessed his energy through basketball, which led to academic success. Sade assessed the first school as potentially racist as there was a mold that each child, as well as each parent, was required to fit into, and those outside of that model were rejected.

Soraya observed that the contrasts in both the interpretation and treatment of behaviors are dependent on race, where white students are afforded safe spaces to be and express themselves, while Black students are seen through different lenses. She noted:

Young Black children who are seen in any way unimaginable are treated with meds and

judgment, while "other" students are given safe spaces to talk and vent and grow and be

vulnerable. It takes a level of vulnerability to allow yourself to be taught and to learn and

absorb information so if the environment does not allow that safety, children can't accept

the information that's helpful. They may feel like they're being attacked….

Quinniya spoke to the potential that internal bias has in creating spaces in which Black children

behave defensively in response to constant attacks on their character. Quinniya indicated that the

"professionals," carrying and applying the stereotypes of the system to Black children, view

them as threatening. The professionals respond to this perceived threat with passive-aggressive

responses. Black children then begin to respond in ways that parallel the stereotype.

Aliyah shared an account of a teacher working to remove her support as a behavioral

paraprofessional for a young Black boy, but her efforts were driven by what Aliyah refers to as

her racist Karen lens. While Aliyah advocated for the continuation of support, particularly

because the student was enduring the additional trauma of watching his mother die, the teacher

was unwilling to consider the situation holistically, an element that Aliyah believes plays a role

in Black student outcomes. In addition to the indifference to the boy's situation, the teacher

rationalized the change by telling Aliyah it would "look good" that they were decreasing

services. The boys' mother called on LR to continue to fight, stating, "This white lady, she's

destroying my child." Aliyah recalled the feeling that the teacher and school lacked empathy.

There was no consideration of this boy's current situation or future, which was already

underestimated, and she had to "fight" in place of the mother's presence. "It's kind of like we

have to fight for our own. We really do because they have it in their heads that he doesn't need a

para, and by high school, he's going to drop out." Despite Aliyah's advocacy, services were

removed, and within a week, regression to include violence occurred. She indicated that these types of outcomes that reinforce system justification tenets are common because White teachers refuse to consider the trauma that comes with Blackness. In this case, there were layers of trauma that went unaccounted and unaddressed. Aliyah noted the lack of willingness to recognize Black outcomes, "They're not like the white kids where you can say, everything's going to be all right."

Tameka revealed similar views about the differences between Black and white student outcomes. She indicated that her son, who attended a PWI, questioned his abilities as well as his belonging in a school where there were few Black students, and the school's color blindness resulted in a curriculum free from his reflection. Several participants recognized that white students do not have to search for a celebration of who they are in schools, given that it is the dominant culture. However, some participants, like Tameka, also shared the desire to offer their children better outcomes that would not come from the community schools where Black students attend because of the lack of equitable resources and opportunities. In her interview, Monique went further to consider not just the unbalanced resources in Black schools but the state of predominantly Black neighborhoods, which should work to enhance the efforts of the neighborhood school. She posed:

> Why is Southside not funded the way that Queens Villages or Belrose is? Why are there no supermarkets? Because we don't talk about that. Do you not think that all kids deserve libraries? Why are all the resources plugged into one neighborhood that already has resources? And luckily, being in New York, you have a wealth of free things at your disposal, but what happens when do not you have the schedule for it? Can you make it to a three o'clock piano lesson that's free at the library, if you have to work? It all goes back to race and wealth.

Workshop participants acknowledged that racism created a catch-22 for Black families trying to ensure the best possible outcomes for their children. While it does not exist for all, the Black parents who could choose to place their children in PWIs with more resources and opportunities would also have to constantly consider their child's sense of belonging and confidence. Soraya, contemplating on where to enroll her daughter in the upcoming year, articulated the struggle:

> Outside of being the parent that reinforces their Blackness and the beautifulness of who they are and home-educating them in ways that the school may be lacking, you don't want them to be uncomfortable for eight hours a day…. How do we manage to really take care of our kids in that way and protect them, knowing that they will not or may not be accepted in these spaces?

The facilitator echoed the sentiments of many participants' concerns about a Black child's self-esteem and the decision to pursue, remain, or leave a school that crushes confidence:

> You have a window, that window that we talked about where our children's passion for learning can be snuffed out and diminished. If you feel that if he stays there a minute longer that, his self-confidence is impacted, and that his self-esteem is impacted, because he's not in an environment that nurtures his needs and his ability, that can have a long-term impact on him.

Several participants indicated that as grown women with children of their own, racist experiences from their childhoods impact how they navigate the world today, including their efforts to keep their children confident and proud of their ancestry.

Microaggressions were also common spaces where critical awareness was formed. Participants expressed similar experiences of receiving what appeared to be compliments from teachers about their surprisingly "well-behaved" children or "very intelligent" children. The

surprise indicated a certain exceptionality about their children while also confirming false but

accepted negative stereotypes about Black children as less intelligent, lacking effort,

misbehaved, or aggressive. Black parents and Black parenting were also under the fire of

microaggressions, with participants deemed as *articulate, engaged, present*, and *good parents,*

corroborating the belief that Black parents are absent, unengaged, and incapable of participating

in the lives of their children. In her interview, Sade shared that even the beauty of Blackness was

questioned through compliments about her skin color and facial features. While the participants

expressed a deep understanding of microaggressions, the facilitator and I reiterated how

microaggressions function to support system justification and the deficit beliefs about Black

people. Moreover, exceptionality was highlighted as a mechanism to quell challenges to system

justification and create judgment and divisiveness among Black people.

Awareness Translates to Fear for Black Parents

With critical awareness of racism comes the fear of its outcomes. Participants in this

study were able to vocalize through their understanding of racism and the inequitable practices

that contribute to Black student outcomes, the fears they have for their children. While

participants completed the questionnaires independently, many identified the same contributors

to the disparate outcomes of Black students, such as the inequitable distribution of resources,

negative stereotypes and teacher bias, a curriculum lacking in a truthful account of Black history

both in the United States and beyond, a curriculum and school staff absent of reflection and

celebration of Black cultures, and apathy for the Black experience to include poverty, historical

lack of access to power, and trauma. Recognizing the factors that influence Black student

outcomes, participants shared their anxieties about having Black children in the educational

system and this country.

81

Collectively, the participants voiced fears of their children experiencing racism firsthand in school and beyond. Without a crystal ball, they all believed with certainty that their children could not be protected from racist encounters. Already experienced by her 13-year-old son, Aliyah shared how infuriated she felt when he was teased about his locks. While she turned that frustration into an opportunity to build confidence, she is still fearful for her youngest son and how his appearance will be met. In her interview, Soraya divulged an experience that was difficult for her to forget. She witnessed a white child question a Black child about why she was so dirty about the color of her skin. Soraya was astonished by that interaction and noted that it was not the fault of the white child but was reflective of her environment, creating anxiety about the ethos of the spaces where her daughter would be.

A shared fear among the participants was the loss of Black identity, as well as diminished confidence that comes from being in an environment that does not value you, evidenced by a Eurocentric curriculum. This was a particular fear of those in PWIs or those considering that path to secure more opportunities. However, participants shared that even in schools in Black neighborhoods, Blackness was often watered down to celebrations in February to honor Black History Month. In her interview, Keisha pointed out the additional work Black parents must do to ensure their children understand the greatness of Blackness. She referenced the idea of Black children having to exist between two ecosystems by which, for 8 hours a day, they cannot be authentic in Blackness because it is a world that does not value them and then can only experience a celebration of Blackness when they are home. She elaborated:

> I do have those fears of her being in an environment where it's a total disconnect. Then all she is seeing of Black culture, Caribbean culture, is just us, because we don't want you to be in a bubble. I don't want it to be that you just understand Blackness when you come

home and then you just mask when you go outside, because you exist in two different ecosystems.

Coexisting with the fear of loss of Black identity was a sense of anger about how Black history was portrayed in schools. The unwillingness of the educational system to delve fully into the historical aspects of slavery and racism, as well as the contributions of Black people, was a point of frustration for several participants. Participants agreed that a curriculum free from the truth creates a space where Black children doubt themselves; moreover, in response to poor educational outcomes, they blame themselves, further deteriorating their self-esteem. Some of these children then question their worthiness to pursue their passions and careers. Keisha shared her disconnect to school, specifically within an "obscene" curriculum, unable to see herself and options for her future. She recalled:

When I was in high school, a lot of kids that were just like, I got my high school diploma, and this is what I was supposed to get. Now, I'm going to go get me a job. But what else do you want to do? And they just honestly couldn't tell you anything because they couldn't see themselves doing anything else, because they don't see anyone else doing anything else. So being able to read history where it shows you Black people, it shows you the diaspora, it shows you what Black history looks like in other countries, it gives you a sense of pride and makes you want to carry further on…. It's so important that Black children and all children feel included culturally and historically involved in their schools and their academics because once there's a disconnect…

Pride was associated with the achievement of both historical Black figures and oneself. Participants agreed that the stereotypes about Black people deterred the educational system from seeing their brilliance and, subsequently, the potential in their children. Jayda noted that the lack

of belief in the ability and intelligence of Black students creates preconceived notions that are engrained despite the demonstrations of greatness. LaShauna shared her fear that these biases strip Black children of the opportunities to succeed. She stated, "Black student outcomes result from the system that is eager to fail them without implementing strategies." Participants identified the cycle that exists between removing opportunities to experience pride and self-confidence, disconnect from the learning environment, and lack of success predesigned long before Black children enter educational spaces.

Alongside the common concern of their children facing failure, both currently and in the future, participants contemplated the cost of pushing their children to strive academically. They recognized that the experiences during K-12 education heavily influence their children's success in college and beyond. This heightened awareness extended to the long-term outcomes for Black individuals, such as the achievement gap, disparities in income and housing, and overall happiness, leading to anxieties about their roles as parents. While each participant emphasized the importance of academic achievement for securing a positive future, some expressed sadness at the loss of childhood for their children in the present, which many felt was absent from their childhoods. In addition to the constant push for excellence, participants engaged in racial socialization, preparing their children for a racist world, including the classroom. While deemed as necessary, Aliyah encapsulated the sentiments of regret:

> My 13-year-old, how strict I am with him! Because I'm always telling him, if I don't do it with you, when you go out there, they're going to chew you up and spit you out…. Then he'd be like, 'Mom, come on .'I'd be like, 'No, because I'm sorry if this is too hard for you in this house, you're not going to make it outside."

The fear of breaking the spirits of Black children was palpable, bringing many of the participants and me to tears. Monique and Soraya described their daughters as having bright spirits and outspoken personalities. Each verbalized the worry that conformity in a system that rejects individuality would replace their self-esteem and abilities to engage in personal advocacy. Keisha questioned the role she might be playing in shaping her daughter's spirit, whether maintaining or impairing it, through her actions. She recognized the potential that her daughter could acquire commonly learned behaviors utilized by Black people to fit into society.

From the workshop discussions, questionnaires, and interviews, it was not only apparent that they had a critical awareness about the system inequities of the educational system but that the awareness was connected to a deep understanding of the challenges that lay ahead for their children, to include negative perceptions about their intelligence, biased or racist teachers, and a curriculum that was void of truth and reflection. The participants' fears extended beyond that of their children experiencing racism but included those elements that carve away at the essence of their children. Critical awareness created dynamics in which participants engage in measures, at times lamentably but necessary, to preserve, prepare, and protect their children from the unjust world and prevent poor outcomes.

Awareness Does Not Always Debunk System Justification Myths

While participants demonstrated critical awareness of the racist, unjust structures and practices within the educational system that subsequently created valid fears about the futures of their Black children, there were system justification tenets unconsciously absorbed to be true, contrary to their verbalized beliefs. Prevalent were the system justification myths about the level of effort required for Black people to achieve, the validity of the achievement gap, and perceptions about the intelligence of Black people. The reflection among participants about their

beliefs highlights the pervasive nature of system justification constructs that impact all members of the system.

Despite expressing their belief that there were no differences in intelligence between Black children and white children, some participants indicated that prior to the workshop, they believed that the achievement gap was reflective of student performance, and that accounted for the differences in referral to special education. Quinniya noted that before the workshop, "The IEPs in Black and Brown communities were properly justified and analyzed." Similarly, LaShauna believed that race played a factor in achievement. Jayda's questionnaire revealed that she previously believed, "Our demographic is behind in achievement because of what we do and what we don't do." Participants indicated that the critical consciousness workshop created the space for them to examine these beliefs. Specifically, they could think about why they had those beliefs, resulting in a shift in perspective. LaShauna indicated on her questionnaire, "No achievement gap existing, instead Black students are not given the same opportunities and confidence that is given to white students. Quinniya went on to attribute the proposed achievement gap "to the lack of strategies and techniques that school personnel and teachers possess especially in underserved communities."

Aligned with the questioning of Black intelligence is the questioning of the efforts of Black people to achieve. Discredited for some participants was the myth that disparate Black outcomes are a result of laziness on the part of Black people. While participants noted that Black people needed to work harder, it was no longer attributed to a lack of effort but rather to an unjust system that requires Black people to work harder to achieve less. Soraya suggested that Black people must work harder to be seen or heard in any space, including schools. Tameka noted that societal expectations make it so that Black children have to perform in even more

studious and behaved ways than white children just to be accepted. Some participants could reflect on their experiences of judging Black people through the lens of laziness. Keisha denounced, "If I can do it, you can do it." Iyana, too, recognized that when all other factors remain the same, Black people still have to work harder to obtain the same results. In her readjusted perspective, Iyana stated, "If not for the experience [the workshop], I wouldn't have easily recognized what is expected of me versus what is expected of others given the same circumstances." Jayda went further to counter the system justification myths about intelligence and effort and reclaimed Black brilliance:

> We as a people are brilliant and we do not have to fit in to stand out. We stand out in our uniqueness and brilliance. We have contributed to this society in many ways, and everyone benefits from our contributions while still looking down on us as a minority.

> Other debunked myths centered around the experiences of Blackness and racism. During the workshop, Tameka proposed that if Black people were more open and made others more comfortable, perhaps society would understand them better. In response, we discussed our responsibilities as Black people to just be and that we were not required to make people feel comfortable, with an underlying system justification that we are somewhat intolerable. Conversely, participants noted that we were not required to quietly accept false negative constructs. As a result of this discussion, Jayda remarked that she no longer felt the need to "grin and bear it to be in education, corporate America, or places of prestige… just to be accepted."

> Subconsciously, all members of a system, one that seeks to create hierarchy and division, absorb the system tenets. During the workshop discussions about "absent" parents surfaced alongside accepted underlying system justification tenets about Black parents as uncaring or disinterested. At times during the workshop, there were unconscious judgments about parent

involvement, specifically those unable to participate. Even at the workshop's inception, some participants questioned the turnout and began questioning the justifications of nonparticipants. The workshop model is aligned with Epstein's model of parent engagement, which relies heavily on direct parent interaction with the school through participation in meetings. It was necessary to identify how system justification was at work, remove the hierarchy set through exceptionality, and honor those who could not or did not wish to participate. This became another debunked myth, with many recanting their judgments and recognizing the various forms of participation.

While several participants endorsed themselves as "woke," as described by Aliyah, the debunked myths illuminate the complex relationship between critical awareness and the internalization of system justification constructs. Even those who are highly attuned to systemic racism are not guaranteed freedom from absorbing system tenets. Moreover, they highlight the need for spaces of critical dialogue that challenge members of the system to reflect upon their own beliefs and how those beliefs impact action.

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Research Question Two:

How a Critical Consciousness Workshop Impacts Perceived Motivation to Act

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Black Parent Engagement is Critical Action

At the onset of this study, critical action was posed in direct opposition to traditional models of parent engagement. While the traditional model, as proposed by Epstein (1998), calls for collaborative engagement and active participation, critical action framed within Freire's critical consciousness (1970) is positioned as a form of resistance against the system of oppression, here the educational system. As explored in Chapter 2, Black parents have always participated in the educational lives of their children in both traditional and critical forms. The data revealed that participants perceive traditional engagement as critical action. Many cited their

presence as a form of protection both for their children as well as other Black children.

Moreover, participants leveraged traditional engagement to counter negative system justification

stereotypes about Black parents as *uncaring* or *disinterested* or the "angry Black woman."

Through workshop discussions, questionnaires, and interviews, data identified exhaustion as an

element specific to Black parenting that may hinder resistance practices. Three subthemes

emerged from the data: *Critical Action through Traditional Engagement, Elements of Black*

Parenting, and *Barriers to Resistance*.

Critical Action through Traditional Engagement

The data revealed collective sentiments that highlight the ways in which the participants

recognize active parent involvement in schools as critical action. Physical presence in schools,

indicated as "visible" and "present" by several participants, demonstrated their care for their

children and willingness to partner with the school. While several purposes for engagement in

schools were revealed, the participants shared their deep desires to be active participants in their

children's educational lives, a striking difference from system justification tenets about Black

parents. Keisha shared the value of what presence means to her daughter, which is why she will

change her work hours to be present. She explained:

> Being able to show up, that resonates with me a lot, because I will make the time. I will
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> ask my boss, 'can I switch hours', because I understand the importance of just showing
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> up and seeing that brightness in a kid's eyes of knowing that someone is there for me. It
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> means so much to them. And then it means so much to you. So just making that effort
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> every time as much as I can.

Sade attributed school presence to a better connection between school and homes, emphasizing

the message it sends to children:

Whenever you're required to be present, to make sure that you do, because that's really important for the kids…. like that relationship is important. Just because when they see you, they will see that you're more you're engaged and that you really care about everything that's going on in the school…. I know the few parents who do assist, they do have better outcomes from the kids. Because the kids would know that my mom is going to school all the time… she's going to know and there are going to have consequences. But then the kid who knows that the parent doesn't go to school, or doesn't communicate with the school, they will feel like they can get away with it.

Sade later noted that being more involved with school personnel would produce better results for children. Specifically, she said that school presence armed parents with more insights about the curriculum and strategies to address concerns.

Physical presence also served as a function of protection within the school. As indicated in Chapter 2, many Black parents felt that visibility served as a deterrent to racist practices. LaShauna indicated that active participation and visibility established a bond and sense of trust with teachers and administrators, providing a safeguard for her son. Monique indicated that her presence was mainly motivated by her desire to be an active part of her child's education. However, her presence allows for protection, "Don't play with my kid because I am very much here, and you know who I am." Similarly, Charrise recounted her efforts to establish her presence in her daughter's school to ensure adherence to her daughter's IEP. Charrise expanded, "They see my face, and I'll be up in there all the time, so when I have to, they listen to what I have to say."

For Aliyah, her active engagement within the school protected her son, who was being bullied, and shifted her dynamics with the school. Despite the tragic circumstances, her constant

presence created the bond that established expectations that everyone on the team was responsible for him, both protecting him and guiding him. Aliyah stated, "So now it's not only me raising him, it's them raising him too. Because they know the type of mother you are…. We know your mom don't raise you like that…. You have to make your voice be heard." Participants shared that, too often, they were not welcomed, taken seriously, or dismissed. Furthermore, participants discussed the preconceived stereotypes that the school staff already have, and as Monique stated, "You get that feeling that the school they want you to be disengaged." For this reason, many participants felt it necessary to challenge and perhaps disprove negative stereotypes through their physical presence.

As described in Epstein's model (1998), many participants advocated for in-school participation, stating that it bridges the gap between home and school. Both Jayda and Tameka hoped participating in school events would build relationships within the school community, emphasizing connections with staff interacting with their children. Visibility and presence, as indicated by participants, took several forms, including attending in-school student events, parent-teacher conferences, PTA/PTO meetings, and SLT meetings. Charrise, a member of every parent group in her daughter's school, explained that as a parent of a child with an IEP, she wanted to be "in the know" as things change all the time. "All the PTAs and SLT meetings and anything they have, I am there so they see me…. So, no surprises. I am surprising you." Every participant expressed the perspective that in-person engagement was beneficial, with many agreeing that it was equally, if not more important, to be present when everything was going well so that when issues arose, there was already trust for both parties. As noted by Aliyah, "pop-ups" and "pull-ups" where she would be at the school unannounced and without a specific purpose served to send a message to both her son and the school that she was deeply connected and a part

of the team. Participants also associated in-school engagement as part of "a village" (later

discussed in the section entitled Elements of Black Parenting) to build relationships with school

staff, make connections with other Black parents, and serve as stand-in mothers or "aunties."

The need to change the system justification narratives about Black parents as uncaring or

disengaged also served as an additional motive for presence and visibility. Soraya acknowledged

that she did not want to be identified as an uncaring parent, stating, "They be thinking we don't

know and thinking we don't care. So, the more I'm in the classroom or in the teacher's face,

she'll know I care." Charrise shared, "Unless they see us, they think the kids have no parents or

parents who don't care. I'm not about to have them thinking that."

Monique noted that she was "standing in," taking pictures, and sending texts, not for so-

supposed disengaged parents but for those who were balancing work and parenthood and who

very much wanted to be standing in her shoes. She stated, "It's not just a visual for the kids but

also for the staff who might not see us as present." She went on to say that she felt it necessary to

always clarify for the teachers and administration why a parent was not present, often

emphasizing their professional responsibilities, to counter the stereotypes school staff often carry

about Black parents.

Although visibility and presence were indicated as crucial aspects of Black parent

engagement, participants also emphasized the significance of communication. Whether through

school apps like Class Dojo, phone calls, text messages, or in-person visits, participants believed

that it was essential to communicate with teachers about their children, academic expectations

and curriculum, and strategies to support academic success. Like the concept of "pop-ups," many

participants highlighted the importance of not waiting for crises to arise to connect with teachers

and staff, asserting that constant communication fostered trust and openness for addressing issues when they do arise.

The insights gained from the data revealed the significance of traditional methods of parent engagement as critical action for these Black mothers. In addition to meeting the desire to be deeply involved in the educational lives of their children, their engagement intentionally served as protection for their Black children as well as challenged negative stereotypes about Black parents. Both in-person participation and communication served as mechanisms to celebrate and protect their children, reshape system justification narratives about Black parents, and build relationships specifically to promote better outcomes, thus serving as critical action.

Elements of Black Parenting

Through data analysis, practices specific to Black parenting surfaced as elements of critical action. A practice employed as critical action was the cultivation of a community, specifically "a village," comprised of other Black parents, neighbors, and school staff. Other elements of Black parenting identified by participants parallel several referenced in Chapter 2 to include racial socialization in the forms of racial pride and exposure to Black cultural experiences to foster a positive sense of self, particularly in a world ready to crush it. Lastly, but most impactful for the group, were feelings of guilt and doubt associated with having to prepare their children, some as young as three, for racist interactions. Difficult for parents was the coexistence of practices reinforcing the beauty of Blackness and the Black experiences alongside practices preparing their children for a world that does not always recognize it.

Cultivating a Village. The African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child," an extension of the bible verse Numbers 11:1-17, "They will help you bear the burden of the people so that you do not have to bear it by yourself," has long permeated Black communities (Reupert

et al., 2022). The village approach advocates reliance on the extended community to ensure that children are nurtured and thrive, particularly in times of crisis. Participants in this study intentionally cultivated villages to ensure their children's protection and success. Many identified themselves as pseudo-parents and "aunties" as part of the villages of other Black parents unable to be physically present at the school. Participants recalled the benefits of their villages as youths and how villages play a role in their parenting experiences. Monique noted that the beauty in the village might be found in the need for it due to racism. She said, "The beautiful thing about the Black culture is we have embedded in us…. The outside world is not for us, and we know it. We are all in the same boat, and we'll look out for each other…all kinfolk."

Many participants recalled anecdotes of nosy neighbors and parents at school during their childhood, reporting back to their parents. Among the participants, it was concluded that the village helped to shape and protect them. Despite finding them intrusive, participants noted that these villagers inquired about schoolwork, questionable friends, and their whereabouts. The facilitator even remembered a neighbor "clocking" when she returned home from school several minutes late and reporting it to her mother.

Several participants noted that in lieu of the presence of other Black and Brown parents, they were "aunties" and stand-in mothers. Charrise referred to herself as "always someone's mother," recognizing that not all parents could attend school functions, but all children could have someone to support them through a community of pseudo-mothers. She noted, "I am there for all the Black parents, really anybody's parent. And I am in everybody's business, so I am there for the other kids, too." Aliyah reiterated Charrise's sentiment and spoke of those families who may not be available but are in desperate need of an adult to be present at the school, specifically because of their child's behavior. She made it a priority for these students to keep

checking in on them and acted as "fam" (family). While the participants identified as "aunties" did so willingly, Monique honestly shared the heavy "burden" of balancing showing up for her child and those who could not.

Villages also extended to include school staff, most often support staff, such as a security guard or lunch aide, who served to "keep an eye out" and monitor their children and the school's actions. Soraya recalled that a school security guard protected her from a harsh punishment following a school administrator's verbal attacks; the security guard had recounted to Sade's mother the insulting words of the administrator, arming her mother before a meeting. Several participants noted that they had created bonds with school staff who informally kept tabs on their children and "served the tea" about the ongoings in the school. Charrise noted that her daughter's school recognizes her village. She said, "They don't play with me. I got eyes everywhere."

It takes a village, a phrase native to Black communities traditionally refers to the responsibilities of the community to support families in raising children through guidance and the shaping of values. While found to be true, in this study, the village takes on a more significant protective role in its attempts to safeguard Black children from racist acts in schools as well as protect the integrity of Black parents. The data illustrates the role of the villages in the Black parent critical action. During the workshop, some participants noted that we were creating a village, particularly as we were addressing a state of crisis and trauma. This supports the notion that the village may also affirm, offer a safe space, and foster resilience within Black communities.

Racial Socialization. A shared sentiment among participants was the desire to emphasize the beauty and brilliance of Blackness to their children as well as prepare their children for racist

experiences. Participants indicated that Black parents had to do more "work" than what was expected of any parent to safeguard their children.

A key element of Black parenting, particularly when there is an absence of reflection in the curriculum, was to build confidence and self-esteem based on Blackness and Black features. Aliyah stated that she "worked" with her son, constantly referencing his locks as those of a lion's mane and reminding him of the strength of Black people. Soraya expressed that although her 3-year-old daughter does not have a clear understanding of race or racism, she knew that she wanted the exposure to be on her terms in the most positive way possible. Soraya explained:

> At this age, she doesn't she doesn't understand that Black people are not a monolith…. She's like, Mommy, but we're Brown. Right? I know, Baby, but people associate us with a different color. And I am trying to explain that to her. Her being so young and impressionable. I don't want her to be in a space where somebody may say, 'Why is your hair like that?' I try to tell her our skin is beautiful and brown.

In the development of racial pride, participants indicated other factors specific to Black pride, such as monitoring the actions of their children to ensure they had a good sense of self as it relates to race, such as observing what type of doll their daughter selected or how she wants to wear her hair.

Several participants included the importance of authentic history, highlighting the genius of Black people to build racial pride. Many participants shared their efforts to expose their children to music, arts, cuisine, and cultural aspects of the diaspora. Sade, at a particular intersection of race and religion, identifying as a Black Muslim, stated that she was intentional in embedding practices both from her native land as well as religious practices, despite the challenge of finding experiences that highlighted both. Aliyah emphasized the importance of

providing historical models of Black excellence to stretch her son's belief in himself, particularly since the curriculum does not. She said:

> If they play the guitar and they play the violin, they're not going to present to him with African Americans who do that. So you bring that to him. You show him the people that are his culture that do play the piano…. they are out there, but they're not going to show you that.

Soraya echoed similar thoughts, stating that the exposure beyond what Black children are presented with expands the world. She said:

> We have to show what the other cultures of us look like, what those other lives are, so you can have a broader spectrum of what the possibilities are…. Her having the access to know that there are different things that exist and that there are different careers that exist... That I'm just going to venture out and be the first person in my family to do X, Y, and Z, and actually have the gall to want to do it.

Illustrated were the multifaceted efforts of the participants to increase their children's understanding of Black excellence and culture and expand their potential outcomes. Engaging in such practices, many participants became more conscious of Black history and the brilliance of Black people, highlighting the value in continuous exploration and uncovering of one's history and identity.

Doubt and Guilt. As participants revealed their engagement practices, guilt, and doubt surfaced as elements of Black parenting. Regarding racial socialization, participants questioned their level of engagement in such practices as their children are young. As one participant remarked, "I am probably doing too much", another responded, "But we probably doing too little." Some participants expressed uncertainty in engaging their young children in racial

socialization and their guilt of potentially taking a piece of their innocence. Despite its necessity, Aliyah reflected on her efforts to prepare her sons for a racist world and connected it to her own experience of growing up too quickly. She remarked, "I want you to be a kid because I wasn't a kid. I feel bad." Soraya also shared that she questioned the extent of how to racially socialize her 3-year-old daughter, noting that these interactions often interfered with her joy in parenting. She said, "You want to enjoy your kid. It is so hard." Aliyah, an educator and mother, discussed the balance of racial socialization and racial pride:

> I stand in a weird place. As a teacher, I am like, we are really doing the best we can. When I can, I am like, I have to include this child's heritage and culture and language if I know it, but as a parent, I am like, I have to prepare this kid and my kid for the real world. It is a catch-22. That kid, just like my kid, has to deal with the real world. Like you said, the system you are talking about is everywhere, and I don't know if it's going to change".

In her racial socialization, Keisha noted that she had devised systems and practices to ensure she was not associated with the negative constructs about Black people. Guilt surfaced as she considered the impact of what her daughter might absorb and replicate. Tearfully, Keisha shared her routine of *masking* to gain acceptance in her workplace and then morph back into her Blackness. She expounded:

> I have had to work in marketing spaces where they're appealing to us. You can come as yourself but four weeks after no, no, no, we don't need that [Blackness].... How do I teach my daughter to deal with that? ...I work in that space where I get off the train, and you have to take your skin off. How do I not bring that home? Do I keep that where it is?

I'm going to shut it off. Yeah. How do I teach my child to still be optimistic about future

spaces?

In their vulnerability, participants exposed the challenges inherent to parenting Black

children, explicitly navigating the doubt and guilt about engaging children in racial socialization.

This highlights yet another aspect of Black parenting, which requires a delicate balance between

preserving the innocence of already compromised childhoods and the joy of parenting alongside

preparing Black children for a racist, unjust world.

Barriers to Resistance

While participants recognized the importance of challenging an unjust educational

system, they expressed hesitancy about employing resistance practices. Two participants

indicated that they did not know enough about the curriculum or instructional practices to

challenge educators; however, the key factors influencing decisions to challenge the educational

system were often related to participants' fears of being perceived negatively. Given the choice,

participants indicated they would utilize more traditional forms of parent engagement rather than

resistance practices. Some participants believed that they were representing Black people and

emphasized the importance of decorum to avoid reinforcing system justification stereotypes

about Black parents. The need to maintain positive relationships within the school also

influenced resistance practices. Lastly, fatigue from an existence plagued with racism and the

need to exist within it was also uncovered as a potential barrier to resistance.

Not the Angry Black Woman. A primary concern for some participants in the

employment of resistance practices was the potential to be perceived as an angry Black woman.

While participants maintained that they try to refrain from justifying this stereotype, they also

revealed that this persona is created by a system that does not respond to traditional models of parent inquiry by a Black woman as it does a white woman. Charrise explained:

> Well, if I was a Karen, it would be fine. I could be acting all crazy and asking to speak to the principal and then they would do what they are supposed to do right quick and then you know it's all good. But like we were saying in the meeting, if I say something I am aggressive. I am angry. I am blaming it on them instead of doing my part. So, I just figure it's better to just show up and play nice so if I have a question, I am already on their good side, and we work like that.

Sade went further to explain that despite that it is the system that breeds the anger of Black women by dismissing them, they must remain in control and suppress their emotions to be respected. She emphasized the need to be mindful of preconceived notions about Black women and combat them respectfully. Sade elaborated:

> I mean you have to be able to not be the angry mother, even if, you know, you are angry. So, you just have to stay in control even when the reason why you are loud is because no one is, no one is hearing you or seeing you. And I don't want to add to that stereotype of, you know, angry Black woman…. Control and self-control, and there is patience as well in order to be able to speak about the issues that is bothering you, rather than being seen as an angry person because the emotions can be very overwhelming sometimes. By being able to control yourself and just speaking intelligently in order to have that thought and that issue that you have come out in a proper way and not to be heard in a negative or angry, you know, does not have it come out like that. So that is why you have to be in control so they don't turn it around.

The desire to preserve the integrity of the Black woman resurfaced as a motivator for participants' actions or nonactions, with many indicating that they went against their instinctive responses to frustration to avoid a stereotype.

Soraya indicated that her physicality also played a part in her response. She described herself: "I have never been small…. So, I know that my appearance gives off, to some people, hesitation, and I'm just over it. And I'm a loudspeaker; I'm a Bose speaker. And I have resting B-face." Soraya believed that her appearance, coupled with stereotypes about Black women, created a straight path for people to typecast her as an angry Black woman. Wanting to counter this image, she stated that she was intentional in politeness. Moreover, she believes that when others are met with this polished, polite person who is contrary to their beliefs, it bothers them. Soraya said, "I know that it is about how to approach a situation and control my thing…. And you don't like that I'm coming off nice."

Maintaining Positive Relationships. In addition to the efforts to combat the negative constructs of Black women as aggressive or problematic, participants noted that they often gave educators the benefit of the doubt before attributing practices to racism. Aligned with other participants' responses, Iyana and Monique preferred to give "grace" or "the benefit of the doubt" and focus on the immediate situation involving their children. Participants noted the importance of maintaining positive relationships with teachers and school staff, as these were the people responsible for the care of their children. "Because there's oftentimes where we have to battle or balance that advocacy versus just active rebellion but also understanding like our kids has to go here." Monique and Sade both suggested that, most often, microaggressions were out of "ignorance." Monique indicated that she often gave teachers a chance to self-correct, noting

that she was not responsible for educating others about racism, "I'm not responsible for the entire Black nation." Iyana echoed the sentiment, "It's just too much."

Exhaustion. The too-muchness of it all encapsulates what emerged as another barrier to resistance: exhaustion. In addition to the obligations of all parents, these Black mothers revealed the tiring efforts that come with raising Black children in a racist society. Including the identified elements specific to Black parenting, such as racial socialization, seeking and attending experiences steeped in cultural richness, networking to cultivate a village, acting as pseudo-mothers in another's village, and coping with the emotions of guilt and doubt, participants exposed the accompanying exhaustion. These Black mothers, already engaged in the tiring efforts of parenting, indicated that raising a Black child in a racist society requires even more than what is already required. As revealed, Keisha explained:

> It takes a lot of back-end work that you do have to do as a parent, which you should be doing anyway, but you [Black parents] have to do more on top of that to make sure your kid is up to date on what your history and knows what people like you look like, what we're currently doing today in our community, or just career-wise so that your child can see themselves past their surroundings to figure out what their own future can be…. It's so much to do.

Alongside the doing of Black parenting is the emotional trauma that Black parents endure, both as those in the direct line of racial attacks and as the protectors of their children. Participants exposed the inescapable critical awareness of their conditions and outcomes and the grief and fear this evokes. Despite this, they are expected to collaborate and contribute to a world that rejects their intelligence, effort, beauty, and essence. Commenting on her experience as a parent, the facilitator explained, "The exhaustion is real. And sometimes you just have to own

102

that. I need a minute, sometimes. And that's okay. Because the expectation is that you take it off, and you show up with a smile." As Keisha spoke about her "masking," the group considered how difficult it is to morph your essence constantly. What happens with each masking?

The cognitive dissonance experienced by these participants toeing the extremely fragile line between system justification and critical consciousness creates fatigue. These Black mothers live in two opposing worlds, advocating for justice for their children while consciously collaborating with the system designed to prevent it. As Monique indicated, "And when you are part of the oppressed group, you don't unsee it? You don't unfeel it. So even if it's not blatant racism, you have that feeling of, 'I'm not welcome here.' Once you know, you can't unknow." Reconciling critical awareness with collaboration is tiring. As Keisha tearfully put it, "It's fucking exhausting". Balancing the efforts to safeguard Black children through their physical presence in schools, the cultivation of a village, playing their roles as aunties in other villages while also processing the trauma of their own racist experiences and shouldering the emotional burden of guilt and doubt raising Black children in America is exhausting. The fatigue experienced by these participants may be why there is no energy left to expend on active disruptive resistance.

While initially conceptualized as disruptive practices, the data reveals that critical action, as demonstrated by these participants, may be a form of resistance subtle to the observer, as intentionally designed by the participants. These participants have chosen to resist in ways that do not add to their physical and emotional load, already heavy and exhausting. Rather, empowered with critical awareness, they have consciously and intentionally chosen to resist to improve outcomes for their children while attempting to maintain their limited peace and energy.

Conclusion

This chapter delineated the results of a qualitative research study that explored the impact of a critical consciousness workshop on Black parents' perceptions about the root causes of disparate Black student outcomes, such as the achievement gap, and their perceived abilities to utilize resistance practices. Through the lens of these remarkable and vulnerable participants, all 11 identifying as Black mothers, it became apparent that critical awareness is inherent to the Black experience. Although providing a safe space desperately needed by these women to release the emotional trauma of parenting Black children in America, the workshop did not provide a new critical awareness.

Regarding research question 1, no new critical awareness about the root causes of Black student outcomes was identified by participants. The participants, Black mothers submerged in a racist system that touches every aspect of their lives, had a keen critical awareness about their condition and outcomes, including how racism shapes Black student outcomes. The fears that come with this critical awareness, such as present achievement and future career success, were highlighted alongside the fear of breaking the spirit of Black children. While no new critical awareness about racism in schools surfaced, several system justification myths were debunked.

As it relates to research question 2 regarding participants' motivation and agency to act in response to a racist educational system, participants opted for more traditional models of parent engagement, such as visibility and presence in schools, than proposed resistance. Black parents' engagement was identified as a form of critical action as it served to protect Black children and reshape system justification narratives about Black parents. The participants also highlighted elements specific to Black parenting, such as creating "a village" and engaging their children in racial socialization. Guilt and doubt surfaced as feelings associated with the potential of

compromising childhood. The participants also indicated exhaustion as part of the Black experience, specifically the experience of raising Black children in a racist society, which may impede resistance efforts. The study highlighted that transformation cannot solely rest on the shoulders of the oppressed, already burdened and exhausted. Instead, a comprehensive system overhaul is required to dissolve the need for dual consciousness. In the next chapter, I summarize the qualitative action research study, discuss my findings, discuss implications for future research, and make recommendations.

Chapter V: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

While the application of Freire's model of critical consciousness in this qualitative action research study did not yield critical action in the form of resistance as anticipated at the onset of the study, the implications of the findings illuminate the experience of the participants and potentially other Black parents, through a critical lens. The participants exposed me to the critical awareness that many Black people carry as they cannot escape the relentless pervasiveness of racism. Also uncovered were engagement practices that served as critical action, although more traditional and collaborative than resistance practices. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, was the expression of the emotional trauma that these participants suffer in the nurturing of Black children in a racist world, including fear, guilt, doubt, pain, and exhaustion. In this chapter, in addition to considering recommendations, the limitation of the study, future implications, and my expansion of awareness as a Black mother, I will briefly summarize the preceding chapters.

Summary of the Study

In Chapter 1, I discussed the pervasive effects of system justification, particularly how system justification narratives influence the perceptions of Black children and parents and Black parents' abilities to advocate within the education system effectively. The chapter also highlighted the potential of Freire's critical consciousness theoretical framework to foster critical awareness, increase critical motivation, and drive critical action in the pursuit of liberation. The purpose and significance of the study underscored the need to dismantle system justification tenets and empower Black parents to resist racist structures and practices to create equitable outcomes for their children.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 exposed how traditional models of parent engagement coupled with negative stereotypes about Black parents can reinforce system

106

justification. Using the lens of critical consciousness to understand the ways in which Black parents have engaged in the lives of their children, the review affirmed that each element of critical consciousness has been a part of Black parenting. Whether a response forced by the injustices of an educational system or serving proactively to protect their children, Black parents have demonstrated critical awareness and taken critical action. The scholarship also revealed that despite Black parents' efforts, they were not always met with respect or acceptance, demonstrating the potential need to approach the education system in a different, more critical way.

In Chapter 3, I described the research design and methods for this qualitative action research study that explored the impact of a critical consciousness workshop, the action, on Black parent perceptions about racism in schools and Black student outcomes as well as their perceived abilities to advocate for justice in the educational system. Included in that chapter were the rationales for decisions made throughout the process, reflecting my positionality as a Black mother advocating for equity for my three children. Data collection and data analysis procedures were also described in Chapter 3.

Detailed in Chapter 4 were my findings, specifically two overarching themes that spoke to the two research questions driving this qualitative action research study:

1) How do Black parents describe the structures that produce inequitable outcomes for Black students in schools, after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

   a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe their perspectives about system justification in relation to the educational system?

b. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe the achievement gap and its root causes?

2) How do Black parents describe their motivation and agency to act in the educational lives of their children after participating in a critical consciousness workshop?

a. After participating in a critical consciousness workshop, how do Black parents describe what they can do on an individual level and as a collective to address the achievement gap and its effects?

The first overarching theme, Critical Awareness Is Inherent to the Black Experience, spoke to the first research question and had three subthemes: *Racism Provides Critical Awareness, Awareness Translates to Fear for Black Parents,* and *Awareness Does Not Always Debunk System Justification Myths.* The second overarching theme, Black Parent Critical Engagement, with the subthemes *Critical Action through Traditional Engagement, Elements of Black Parenting,* and *Barriers to Resistance*, speaks to the second research question.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this qualitative research study suggest that Black parents have a critical awareness of racism and its negative impact and consequences on the lives of their children without explicit methods of acquiring awareness. Inherent to the Black experience in a racist society, Black people are subjected to racial injustice within all structures of the system, including the educational system. Findings suggest that Black parents recognize how the injustice translates to racist practices. Of those practices, the Black mothers in the study overwhelmingly understood that their children's intelligence would be questioned, their efforts thwarted, and behavior misinterpreted at the hands of teacher bias, both explicit and implicit.

Awareness resulted in fears for their children and drove specific modes of parent engagement with the hope of ensuring success in school and beyond. The findings support the scholarship that demonstrates unique elements of Black parenting. The "village" exposes the benefit and need for connection among Black parents and families as forms of protection and community. At the same time, racial socialization practices are utilized to preserve the beauty and richness of Blackness collectively as well as build the pride of their children in an educational system lacking in mirror opportunities. While these were not elements of traditional models of parent engagement, they served the same purpose for their children, such as fostering confidence and belonging.

While there were elements of maintaining positive relationships with school staff, when applied by Black parents, some traditional practices of parent engagement, such as presence in schools, suggest that compliance and collaboration may be a form of critical action. In this study, critical action was proposed as resistance; however, participants' actions were intentional to protect Black children and narratives about Black parents. Despite its purpose and need, the "burden" or emotional cost of employing such practices indicated a dual consciousness in which these Black mothers recognized that they were playing a game designed for them to lose but wanted to give their children the opportunity to beat the odds. As two participants stated, Black parents are "playing nice" while secretly weeping.

The emotions expressed in words and tears by many of us, including me, during the workshop only account for a small fraction of what is experienced internally as we navigate both worlds. In addition to the knowing and the subsequent inability to unknow, pretending to be unconscious of one's reality to stay in the game is exhausting. The inner turmoil created by the cognitive dissonance created by the dual existence of secretly resisting and simultaneously

"collaborating with your own murderers" (Baldwin, 1975) is nothing short of exhausting. The exhaustion may be a factor as to why collaboration, the least resistance path, resonated more than resistance practices for these Black mothers.

Surprising Findings

Differences in Cultural Upbringing

The difference in the perception of racism between participants who experienced it first-hand as a result of generations in America compared to those more newly immigrated was a surprising finding. Those experiencing racism throughout their existence in America were more easily able to assess practices as racist. At the same time, those who were born or grew up in the Caribbean or African countries were less likely to assign structural attributions to negative interactions. Sade and Iyana, born in African countries, and LaShauna, a native of Jamaica, noted that being raised in spaces free from racism did not assign racism to the challenges encountered in the educational system. However, they each noted that the workshop challenged them to reconsider race and educational equity assumptions. Iyana shared:

> I'm the benefit of the doubt person who I'm always half glass full.... It has something to
> do with the fact that I was raised in Nigerian households. So, my parents don't name
> racism. They don't identify those things. They see themselves separate from African
> Americans. So the way that I was brought up, I don't see what everybody else sees right
> away…. So when it came to my son, I'm like, maybe the teacher knows what she's talking
> about [academic challenges], but as I'm sitting here talking and listening to what
> everybody's saying, I'm thinking just because it's a Black school doesn't mean that they're
> at their best.

Black Spaces Are Part of the System

The idea of Black spaces as safe places also produced unexpected findings. While considering where they experienced more racism, participants admitted that they naturally felt safer in Black spaces, such as schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods. However, as the group considered how outcomes for Black students in those schools were reflective of racist practices, some participants vocalized their awareness that Black teachers and administrators can also play a part in the system that creates the opportunity gap. Keisha questioned if racism exists in every space. She asked, "Are you saying that a space like this, filled with Black people who are about Blackness, would still be racist?" Keisha expressed surprise when I revealed that as members of the system, there were probably elements of racism within the design of this study, as well as the school, due to my conditioning. This highlighted the importance of applying critical lenses to our experiences as Black people. As an educator, administrator, and researcher, it was a reminder to scrutinize my practices critically to assess the principles in which they are grounded.

While each participant had an awareness of the pervasiveness of racism and its effects on Black children, many were surprised but relieved to have their feelings validated by other Black mothers. Aliyah verbalized what many others had noted:

> We know we all have to be feeling like this, but we never talk about it or we joking about it. So sometimes you have to check yourself, like are you crazy, but no. It's good to know that we all going through the same thing.

Black Spaces as Healing Spaces

Despite the "village" model, several participants expressed feelings of isolation in the process of raising a Black child in America. As we discussed shame and guilt as elements of

system justification, the feeling of being alone could exacerbate them, specifically if one attributes racist experiences as personal rather than structural or systemic. While safe spaces have always been necessary for the oppressed constantly under attack, the participants' feelings reflected the need for spaces that explicitly recognize and unpack the attack and validate the experience.

Every participant desired to be in spaces that mirrored the honesty and vulnerability shared during the workshop. Several indicated that given the amount of energy exerted on raising Black children, as well as the stereotype of the "strong Black woman," they seldom had the time, space, or opportunity to think about or express their feelings about anything, specifically racism and Black parenting. The findings highlighted that there is a desperate need for a reprieve from the "doing" of raising Black children in the form of communal support where they can process and release among "our people."

Limitations

Although the findings of this study are specific to the participants, 11 Black mothers, they have provided at minimum validation to and for the participants themselves. The findings are not meant to be generalized given the small scope; however, they are meant to provide insight into what many Black parents may understand to be their conditions and potential outcomes, as well as how they may feel parenting Black children in a racist educational system. They may add to the scholarship by creating a starting place for a much-needed conversation about Black parent critical engagement through the lens of Black parents. Given the small scale of this qualitative action research study, it serves as a snapshot; administrators and schools are encouraged to use their discretion in identifying what aspects of the study apply to their parents.

Another limitation in applying critical consciousness, specifically critical awareness, arises from the participants' professional backgrounds. Unintentionally, eight of the eleven participants have some connection to educational institutions through their professions. It would be naive to assume that this does not provide them with a unique insight into the racist systems and practices embedded within the educational system. Their proximity to the educational realm may explain why no newly acquired critical awareness was reported in the study. This limitation challenges the assumption that all Black parents inherently possess critical awareness and underscores the need to replicate this study with participants from a broader range of professions to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for the Researcher

Action research is designed to transform through cycles of reflection and action. This qualitative action research study provided the opportunity for critical reflection about how my practice as an educational administrator either supports system justification or facilitates critical consciousness. Although there are many elements beyond my control, such as the distribution of resources or curriculum selection, there are many that can be assessed through a critical lens to transform experiences and outcomes for the families in my program. Alongside the practices that directly impact how Black children are received and treated in schools, such as hiring staff that reflect the community, ensuring that curriculum is supplemented with rich and diverse materials and experiences that parallel their lives, and evaluating assessment and disciplinary policies for bias, this study has illuminated for me the need to provide spaces of respite for Black parents.

The engagement with parents is often targeted to meet a specific objective developed by the "system," excluding the parents from voicing their needs. Even when I have asked parents to

participate in the shared decision-making process of selecting the content and method of engagement, my response was a compromise based on an arbitrary goal I had developed for them. In honoring the expressed desires of participants to connect with those who share and validate the lived experiences and associated emotional trauma of parenting a Black child in a racist society, without judgment, my reflection must yield actions that are explicit in filling this need. Resounding from this study is a desperate call to create spaces of healing. Moreover, these spaces can serve as a community-building tool for Black parents to develop strategies to advocate equity in the educational lives of their children and devise self-care practices that sustain them.

Recommendations for Schools

Schools can leverage critical consciousness as a powerful tool to overhaul parent engagement practices for Black parents, initiating a transformative process that addresses systemic inequities. By first acknowledging the historical and societal power dynamics, schools can create an environment that honors Black parents' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. This entails implementing culturally responsive practices, fostering safe spaces for open dialogue, and forging authentic partnerships with community organizations. Moreover, through ongoing professional development, educators can deepen their understanding of critical consciousness and its implications for equitable parent engagement. By empowering Black parents as advocates for their children's education and involving them in decision-making processes, schools can foster meaningful collaboration that uplifts the entire school community. Ultimately, by embracing critical consciousness, schools can catalyze a paradigm shift towards inclusivity, equity, and shared responsibility in the education of Black students.

As highlighted in the findings, the creation of Black healing spaces is a transformative initiative to address the systemic inequities and psychological impacts experienced by Black parents. These spaces would serve as sanctuaries within schools where Black families can share their experiences, heal from racial trauma, and build community resilience. These spaces must be cultivated by and for Black people. Schools must convey the importance of these spaces to the entire school community to reduce scrutiny and perceptions of exclusion often associated with spaces and opportunities for people of color.

The benefits of Black healing spaces for Black parents and schools are significant. For Black parents, these spaces provide a vital platform for expressing concerns and experiences without fear of judgment, leading to improved mental health, a stronger sense of community, and greater empowerment to advocate for their children's educational needs. For schools, these spaces can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment. By addressing the needs of Black families, schools can improve trust and communication between parents and educators, which is essential for student success. In addition, these spaces can help reduce racial disparities in educational outcomes by providing targeted support and resources to those who need them most.

Implementing Black healing spaces has the potential to fundamentally reshape the educational system's understanding and engagement of Black parents. Traditionally, educational systems have operated under assumptions that do not fully recognize or address the unique experiences of Black families. Participants indicated that the educational system lacks critical awareness about Black parents' needs and how they wish to be perceived, welcomed, and partnered with. Simple yet crucial factors identified include kindness, compassion, and an openness to understanding Black perspectives. Alongside healing spaces, advisory councils co-led by members of the healing space and school staff can be established. By integrating these

115

spaces, schools can adopt a holistic approach that values and incorporates the perspectives of Black parents. Educators, school staff, and other parents can participate in these councils to build critical consciousness regarding the unique challenges Black families face. Collaboration with local community organizations can enhance these efforts by bringing in external expertise and resources. Insights gained from these healing spaces can inform broader systemic changes, ensuring the educational environment is supportive and actively combats systemic racism. Thus, Black healing spaces catalyze widespread educational reform and social justice.

While this study, as well as the existing scholarship, indicate that Black parents possess a critical awareness, the educational system not only lacks an awareness about the specific forms in which Black parents engage but also the undertaking and the protective nature of these forms. There is a limited understanding of the conditions created by the educational system that necessitate "the village" or the heightened presence in schools to safeguard Black children from mistreatment. The absence of awareness underscores that contextual differences regarding parent engagement are often overlooked. Moreover, this lack of recognition prevents the alleviation of the burden on Black parents. Alongside the work of engaging Black parents in a meaningful way, the onus and responsibility for transformation must be redistributed back to the schools through continuous reflection and professional development where educators and administrators can understand how system justification influences their practice. Freire (1970) proposed that liberation, equity, and justice could be realized through critical dialogue to include the oppressed and the oppressor. While integral to the process, Black parents must be released from the shame, guilt, and responsibility of Black student outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

Given the persistence of disparate Black student outcomes and the findings expressed by the Black parents in this study, there is much to be understood that has yet to be explored about Black parent critical consciousness. Immediate research would include narrowing this study with its initial parameters only to include parents of early childhood aged children. While these participants provided rich insight into Black parent critical consciousness, they may carry with them the disenchantment described in Chapter 1 and prolonged fatigue that makes it even more difficult to resist in more aversive ways. A longitudinal study presents the opportunity to assess the role of rest in resistance. If Black parents have spaces of respite, essentially rest stops, where they can unload the pain and emotional trauma of living Blackness in a racist system while sharing in community, does that generate the energy to resist or create collective resistance practices?

Although the participant group was homogenous in its identification as Black mothers, some findings indicated perceptual differences about Blackness and racism based on how removed they saw themselves in relation to immigration to America. Future studies should consider the complexities of Blackness to include immigration status and country of origin. Future research also must include those identifying as fathers, particularly as the narratives about Black fathers have been negative. Although it was established that Black in America is Black, other considerations for research would be to look at those at specific intersections of Blackness that create additional layers of marginalization, such as parents experiencing poverty, those at the intersection with limited English proficiency, those identifying as having a disability, and those identifying as members of the LGBTQIA+ community to ensure that the nuances of each particular group are honored.

Conclusion

       At the onset of this research, I was filled with a hope, a critical hope that critical awareness would result in critical action that took the form of resistance in the educational system. I developed a new awareness from the personal stories and perspectives of the beautiful, intelligent, and vulnerable Black women who participated in this study. It became evident that my initial hopes reflected system justification beliefs in which the oppressed are responsible for transforming the conditions and outcomes, not of their doing. This does not suggest that the oppressed should not actively participate in their liberation, resisting injustice and demanding equity. However, the critical workshop served to remind me of a critical awareness regarding the complexities of being Black in a racist system and navigating a dual existence.

       Living in a system designed to perpetuate injustice directly impacting one's life is tiring. However, the magnitude of fatigue compounded by awareness of the inequities and recognizing that one must play a part in that system to protect her child and maintain her sanity is brutal. In exhaustion, there may be no energy or room to contemplate uphill battles. For these participants, the path of least resistance was needed to prevent complete burnout.

The experience of Blackness in America, the fight to advocate for one's Black child, and its subsequent guilt, doubt, and exhaustion require the system, not the oppressed, to create educational spaces in which Black children and Black parents experience equity and restoration through one conscious existence.

       Initially conceptualized as disruptive advocacy or revolt, this study advises that resistance occurs in various forms. Critical consciousness emphasizes the importance of awareness and reflection on social injustices, leading to action against oppressive systems. The participants of this study highlight how Black parents develop and utilize critical consciousness to navigate and

resist the systemic inequities within the educational system. It also unveils that while critical

consciousness is essential for understanding and addressing these inequities, it does not

necessarily presuppose radical action. Instead, it enables Black parents to engage in meaningful,

manageable resistance within their already taxing lives, expressed in everyday actions, dialogues,

and engagements that collectively create substantial impact without the need for overtly radical

measures. Findings underscored that critical consciousness allows for strategic and sustainable

resistance, given a taxing existence and the dual burden of protecting their Black children and

themselves from systemic racism. It provides a framework for Black parents to advocate for

justice and equity without compromising their well-being. By understanding and utilizing critical

consciousness, Black parents can navigate the educational system more effectively, ensuring

their actions are impactful yet manageable, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable

environment for their children.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY

Patricia A. Eckardt, PhD, RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board
Professor, Barbara H. Hagan School of Nursing and Health Sciences
E: peckardt@molloy.edu
T: 516.323.3711

DATE: January 29, 2024

TO: Marie Stamps
FROM: Molloy University IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [2141023-1] Black Parent Engagement through the Lens of
                        Critical Consciousness
REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF NOT HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
DECISION DATE:

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy University IRB has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the research as defined in 45CFR§46.101.

ACTION RESEARCH ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

You may proceed with your project.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If there is a proposed change to the project, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy University IRB of any requested changes before implementation. A change in the activities may change the project from not human subject research status and requires prior communication with the IRB.

The finding of the project may be published if NO individual level or identifiable data are used. An example of text for publication in a journal could read: "This activity was acknowledged by

the Molloy University IRB and deemed to not be human subject research as defined the Common Rule 45 CFR part 46, subpart A."

Projects that do not meet the definition of research (as defined the Common Rule 45 CFR part 46, subpart A) still require an annual ongoing report of the project if the project extends beyond a year (see Annual Non-Research Ongoing Project Report Form).

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckardt@molloy.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Mid-workshop Questionnaire

1. What are some system justification beliefs that you had prior to the workshop?

2. What, if any, system justification beliefs did you previously hold prior to the workshop and now question?

   a. How has your perspective changed about them?

3. What differences, if any, do you think exist between Black students' outcomes and White students' outcomes in schools?

   a. If there are differences that exist between Black students and White students in schools, what do you attribute the differences to?

4. What do you think are some causes of Black student outcomes in schools?

5. What should schools do to improve the outcomes of Black students?

Appendix C: Post-workshop Questionnaire

1. Are there any new ways in which you would engage with schools after the information presented in this workshop?

    a. If so, describe them and why.

2. Describe how the school system should engage with Black parents.

3. Take a moment to reflect on the workshop and discussions of the day. What are your reflections?

4. Are there any new insights that you have gained from participating in today's workshop?

    a. What, if any, components of the workshop do you disagree with?

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

I. Experiences with the educational system

1. Can you describe your experiences with the educational system as a student and parent?

2. What inequities, if any, do you believe exist in the educational system?

    a. What do you attribute those inequities to?

    b. Do you have specific fears about your children within the educational system?

II. Reflection of critical consciousness workshop

1. Describe what ideas, if any, were most surprising from the critical consciousness workshop.

2. Describe any perspectives about the educational system that changed after the critical consciousness workshop and how they changed.?

    a. If your perceptions have changed, is there anything you believe should be done differently in the educational system?

III. Perspectives on Black parent engagement

During the workshop, we discussed different forms of parent engagement. We talked about practices that push back or resist the system, such as questioning the curriculum and instruction or calling out teacher bias. We also talked about practices that lean into collaboration with the system, such as becoming more involved with the PTA or volunteering for various roles within the school.

1. Describe which, if any, form of parent engagement resonates with you and why.

2. Are there any practices that you would remove or add to the way you engage with the school system due to the workshop? If so, why?

135

Depending on the response to I3,

      a. Based on your earlier response of_____, what can you do as a parent to

           address those fears?