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Shedding Light on Racial Realist Parent Engagement through the Experiences of Black Families and Othermothers

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Abstract

As educator-scholars committed to building family learning communities rooted in principles of educational liberation, McCarthy Foubert's book *Reckoning with Racism in Family-School Partnerships* caught our attention because of its promise to expose the challenges of systematically racist ideologies about family-school partnerships, to confront these issues during a toxic time in race relations and elucidate the narratives of Black racial realist parents. Our reading and discussion of the book were informed by our own experiences as an inter-racial reviewing team with shared commitments to anti-racist family engagement.

Keywords

Black parents' narratives of school engagement, school governance as white property

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Shedding Light on Racial Realist Parent Engagement through the Experiences of Black Families and Othermothers

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As educator-scholars committed to building family learning communities rooted in principles of educational liberation, McCarthy Foubert's book *Reckoning with Racism in Family-School Partnerships* caught our attention because of its promise to expose the challenges of systematically racist ideologies about family-school partnerships, to confront these issues during a toxic time in race relations and elucidate the narratives of Black racial realist parents. Our reading and discussion of the book were informed by our own experiences as an inter-racial reviewing team with shared commitments to anti-racist family engagement.

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Introduction

Lydia, a middle-class mother of three, explicitly named a double-standard for school-engaged Black parents:

I just recently told myself, if you're Black and you're not involved in your kid's school, you're a bad parent. And if you're Black and you ARE involved in your kid's school, your're suspect. You know? I'm like 'damned if you do, dammed if you don't, apparently. (p. 14)

We begin our review with a narrative from the participants to intentionally center the voices and experiences of Black parents and the unnecessary tax that comes alongside parent engagement.

Using the concept "racial realist parent engagement," McCarthy Foubert (2022) describes the ways that Black parents in a Midwestern predominantly White school district were acutely aware of anti-Blackness in/of school and, at the same time, needed to engage to ensure high academic expectations for their children.

As educator-scholars committed to building family learning communities rooted in principles of educational liberation, this book caught our attention because of its promise to expose the challenges of systematically racist ideologies about family-school partnerships, to confront these issues during a toxic time in race relations and elucidate the narratives of black racial realist parents. Our reading and discussion were informed by our own experiences as an inter-racial reviewing team. Rebecca Rogers is a White literacy researcher and Teacher Educator. Kelly Byrd is a Black Speech Language Pathologist and family literacy researcher. The book piqued our interest because of our shared commitment to family literacies and learning that truly support collective education liberation. We appreciated that the book shines a light on the narratives of Black families in the Midwestern part of the United States who are living in the midst of the ongoing realities of anti-Black violence in schools which include:

ensorship of racial realist curriculum, the school to prison pipeline, the underrepresentation of Black teachers in the profession, and continued racial violence against Black families in expectations, opportunities, and school governance. We witness and experience these dynamics in our own daily work as educators and parents/othermothers working in public school systems. Several threads run across our dialogue about and review of the book: truth-telling of Black parents' narratives of school engagement, the "overwhelming whiteness" of school-family partnerships, the promise of collective and collaborative forms of parent governance, and the strength of the research design.

Review

First, some context. The book is a year-long multi-case study (2014-2015) of 16 "highly engaged" African American parents and their experiences with the PWI of Burr Oaks School District (BOSD), located in the Midwest. It also includes follow up data collected five years later (2019) and more in-depth case portraits of five participants. McCarthy-Foubert (2022) addresses some of the complexities of being a White researcher and educator conducting research with African American parents and the ways her social positionings can be used to amplify the parents' narratives (p. 74). A strength of the research design is the longitudinal nature of the multi-case study. For the initial study, McCarthy Foubert (2022) used ethnographic methods to understand Black parent engagement across an academic year (2014-2015). She then returned to conduct interviews with the same parents five years later. This allows us to see the life course of parent involvement that shifts based on parents' experiences with school systems. While dominant logic might subscribe to the idea that as children progress into middle school, parent involvement becomes less intense because of the structure of schooling. Yet, McCarthy Foubert illustrates that there may be another reason at play; that is, that Black parents are pushed out of school engagement because of continual and pervasive anti-Black violence in daily interactions, institutional opportunities (e.g., shared governance), and policies (e.g., access to advanced courses, testing for gifted).

Parents shared truths in their narratives which may not otherwise readily surface publicly for educators and policy makers reading this book. Parents described the tax they endured as they engaged with their children's education. For example, two parent participants organized a luncheon with the Empowering Parents (EP) group. The intended purpose of the luncheon was to encourage more parents to participate in the EP group, and to give Black parents an opportunity to voice their needs so that the organization could adequately advocate for them. The diligent efforts of the parent participants to succinctly capture the expressed needs of the parents in attendance at the luncheon, were extinguished when the (White) principal of the school determined that the focus of the EP group should be: "to bring more Black parents into the building and provide better training to make them better parents" (p. 40). This type of dismissive response to parental requests and needs presented a tax on the parent participants. Additionally, it contributed to parents feeling unseen, undesired, exhausted, and misrepresented.

Jewel, one parent participant, while being a long-time PTO member, described her experience with an otherwise all-White board, "I don't think they see me. So, I know they don't see children that look like me" (p. 44). While this participant took up the role as an advocate for Black and Brown families in the school, it was clear her consistent presence as a PTO member did not translate into changes that acknowledged those children and families.

Tasha, a parent participant that was elected to a leadership role as PTO president, experienced what the author described as the "most severe white resistance." She was removed as president and replaced with a White father that did the "bare minimum." Tasha expressed:

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

Parents expressed other instances of feeling taxed. Even as the parent participants proactively worked for equitable experiences for their children and other children and families, their efforts were gratuitous, not understood or valued up by those expected to be in alignment. For instance, a White female principal, at an elementary school in BOSD, set the agendas, meeting dates and resources for the EP group at the school. The meetings were intended to “make them [Black parents] better parents.” The Black parents’ proposals were rejected, and their ideas met with no acknowledgement. The principal and teachers implied that Black parents disengage due to feeling apathetic about their children’s education. This statement was one of many racist fallacies that misrepresented Black parents and contributed to the negative feelings around parent engagement.

The parents were clear that anti-Black racism was pervasive and persistent. It infiltrated all aspects of Black parent’s engagement in school and surfaces as: race evasiveness, individualism, zero-sum thinking, opportunity hoarding, silent tracking, low and double-expectations, and more. Jewel, a Black parent at the high school expressed being glad they hired a Black principal who, in turn, hired more Black staff members but this does not remedy the years of microaggressions she faced as a Black parent in the school. She put it this way, “Just to see other people that look like me that are greeting me, [I think], ‘This will work. I don’t have to remind you that I’m not a crackhead!’” (p. 59).

McCarthy Foubert (2022) shows that even when the parents were taking active roles in PTO and affinity groups, volunteering, creating and leading initiatives and were being elected to top positions, they were constantly reminded that restrictive and still-restrictive notions brought forward by white supremacy would keep them in check. Along with this, came the emotional labor that engaged Black parents needed to withstand, expressed as needing to “protect themselves,” “annoyed,” “fatigued,” and “skeptical” (p. 47). Michelle said she tried to hide the anger she experienced in response to racism at PTO meetings because she worried that expressing it could end up negatively affecting the way teachers or parents treated her daughter at school. But, she explained, “You get home and you’re like, ‘This is possibly the craziest shit I have ever heard in my life’” (p. 47).

Using her intersectional privileges as a White education/researcher, McCarthy Foubert (2022) unveils the tactics used by the overwhelmingly White structures, policies and practices of schools which act to sabotage Black parents’ contributions. She illustrates how meetings were scheduled which resulted in Black parents having to choose between attending the African American Parent Council or the PTO (p. 52). This represents the “dilemma as choice” notion which is that “the contradiction implicit in Black mothers having no choices” (King & Mitchell, 1955, pp. 44, 59 as cited in McCarthy Foubert). Another example of this comes from Jewel’s case. Her youngest daughter, Sparkle, qualified for the gifted program. Yet, Jewel decided to prioritize her daughter’s established peer community and her mental health over that of the advanced curriculum.

Foubert McCarthy makes the case for engaging the collective and untethering educational equity from parent involvement, especially the forms that have been created by those historically included in the system. The parents she interviewed were critically aware of the kinds of individualistic parent involvement such as “opportunity hoarding.” This refers to the pattern of activity prevalent in White, upper-middle class parents who find ways to access educational, enrichment and extracurricular opportunities quickly, often based on their cultural

capital and insider information (e.g., knowing teachers or the schedule or the release date of information). This resource hoarding creates a kind of silent tracking whereas those with privilege gain more enrichment and those without resources are shut out of these opportunities.

By way of contrast, McCarthy Foubert (2022) illustrates how the Black parents worked toward collective engagement in four spaces: their everyday involvement with schools, in schooling and childcare decisions, in broader community engagement, and within parent groups. In these spaces, parents engaged as “community othermothers” which is a form of collective and communal caretaking rooted in an ethic of care. As McCarthy Foubert wrote, “they resisted assumptions that parents will – or should – only act for their own children in school. Rather, they saw and had empathy for children experiencing systems of oppression and marginalization within BOSD; they noticed their needs and showed up for them” (2022, p. 32). Another example comes from Rudy who was inspired to “keep an eye on things” and pour into other children the way they had poured into him” (p. x). Christina talked about how she and Rudy took Maya under her wing. Rudy requested that Maya and Nia have Ms. Flowers as a teacher. Understanding the importance and dynamics of kinships is illustrated when Maya refers to Christina as Auntie. Angie is attentive to when a child is upset and tries to find out why they are having a bad day. Foubert highlights the ways that participants in the study stood in the gap for other children. These acts may seem small but are incredibly meaningful to Black parents and stand in exact opposition to dominant constructions of parental involvement that focus on advocating for your own child’s needs.

Participants also shed light on how a collectivist ethic could manifest itself in parent groups including PTOs and district wide parent groups. One participant, middle-class named Christina, was elected as co-president to the PTO. Under her leadership, they formed an Equity and Social Justice Committee, hosted a discussion on talking with children about race, and added a budget line in the PTO budget for the affinity group for BIPOC families. All the while, she disrupted deficit stereotypes about “uninvolved parents” and educated White parents about the “intense advocacy needed to ensure the child received a high-quality education within BOSD” (p. 38). She and other Black parents challenged PTO initiatives that would only benefit the children of the parents in attendance at the meetings. Black parents leveraged their knowledge, resources, and energy in the interest of Black, Brown, immigrant, and working-class students.

Importantly, McCarthy Foubert learned that collectivist initiatives were rarely well received and were often blocked. McCarthy Foubert (2022) acknowledges that she doesn’t have all the answers but wants to move the conversation forward by presenting three interconnected ways to create more liberatory family-school partnerships: untethering education quality and parent engagement, reorienting school communities to collective educational justice and creating expansive equality in shared school governance.

When untethering education and parent engagement; McCarthy Foubert (2022) suggests that schools “authentically partner” with Black and Brown families. In doing so, schools must determine how serious they are about truly educating their children and serving their needs. Additionally, schools are called to stop furthering erroneous deficit narratives about parent participation. For partnerships to be viable and sustained, education must serve Black and Brown families in the same way it has served White families for years.

McCarthy-Foubert, calls attention to the fact that “white families systematically benefit from the traditional individual orientation of family-school partnerships” (2022, p. 69). She proposes that when reorienting school communities to collective educational justice involves schools understanding that equality benefits everyone; schools most proactively resist ideologies of “competitive individualism” and work towards coalition-building among communities and families.

Lastly, in considering liberatory family-school partnerships that include expansive equality in shared school governance, McCarthy-Foubert offers us a way to move restrictive practices along a continuum of more expansive practices to achieve equitable and racially just school communities. We appreciated the table developed by the author to demonstrate that instituting expansive change requires a shift in “overwhelmingly white” thinking, but there must also be system level shifts as well (2022, p. 70).

Conclusion

This book sheds light on historical trends in anti-Blackness within the domain of family engagement initiatives. We recommend this book for school board members, Teacher Educators, K-12 educators, and parent groups. Reading the book in study or inquiry groups may heighten the reflection and critical dialogue necessary to take up the author’s recommendations for liberatory family-school partnerships.

Reference

McCarthy Foubert, J. L. (2022). *Reckoning with racism in family-school partnerships: Centering Black parents’ school engagement*. Teachers College Press.

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