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(Re)emerging Racial and Class Inequalities:

The Neoliberal Project in Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Sociology

by

Aaron Crawford

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

(Re)emerging Racial and Class Inequalities:

The Neoliberal Project in Education

by

Aaron Crawford

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Vilma Ortiz, Chair

Extensive research has been dedicated to documenting the long history of racial tension and

discrimination of African Americans within the U.S. educational system. Much less is known

about the strategies that have emerged from school districts and the African American families

they serve, to grapple with this legacy of racial mistreatment. Using five years of ethnographic

data, collected from a middle-school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), this

dissertation argues that for African American parents the racial and class inequalities they

experience in the broader society are reproduced and exacerbated in public schools by

inadequate school policies and insufficient school funding as they participate in their children's

educational experience. First, I find that African American parents develop a racialized *dual

disposition* to meet these challenges. African American parents dual disposition consists of two

opposing stances, a desire to work with teachers on behalf of their child and needing to develop

racial monitoring strategies to guard against their children's racial mistreatment at school. Next, I find that the school districts' adherence to a racially colorblind ideology, renders much of these parents' participation invisible and their involvement is seen as insufficient. In addition, the colorblind ideology constrains what teachers can communicate to African American parents. Therefore, at district-wide school events geared towards providing Black families tools to navigate the academic landscape issues such as racial discrimination are left unaddressed and unspoken. Teachers and school officials replace discussing these racial inequalities by prioritizing individual -Black parent- responsibility and by extension endorsing the individual deficit model. Finally, I find that the drastic defunding of public education creates what I refer to as a *resource deficiency* within schools. Instead of an individual deficit among parents, I argue that teachers and school officials lack the necessary resources within schools to address the needs of the diverse families they serve. This study demonstrates how the racial and class inequalities found in the broader society are reproduced and exacerbated in public schools as Black parents participate in their children's educational experience. These findings have important implications for understanding the, at times, tense relationship between Black families and schools.

This dissertation of Aaron Crawford is approved.

Jeffrey Prager

Gail Kligman

Gilda Ochoa

Vilma Ortiz, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

"*Keep on keepin' on*" I remember my grandmother saying to me after hearing about one of my educational accomplishments. For me, embedded in my grandmother's words was a dual sentiment that she always tried to convey: nice job on the work you've done and now use that victory as strength in your next pursuit.

This path towards receiving my Ph.D. in earnest began at San Francisco State with the intellectual push from my advisor Professor Andreana Clay. She provided tremendous support and inspiration and served as the first African American professor that I wanted to emulate and saw a bit of myself within her. Professor Clay's intellectual curiosity and pedagogical style served as an important early model of what the life of an academic could look like. I am very grateful and appreciative that she took on the advisor and mentor roll during my undergraduate experience.

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I would be remiss if I did not send a special thank you to Joy Viveros. Thank you for the endless hours you spent helping me edit and revise my academic work. In addition, I would like to say thank you for helping me think more critically and thoughtfully about my educational experience as well as my educational trajectory and possibilities. You were instrumental in shaping how I think about my place in academia.

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Amy, thank you so much for being a great friend and a writing accountability buddy. This dissertation would not be half as complete without your Saturday morning 'eyeball' texts holding me accountable. Thank you so much for being a great listener and providing so much laughter. My graduate school experience would have looked completely different if not for our countless trips to Coffee Connection and Tanners, being roomies at ASA and having much needed Fat Friday!

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To my brother Sean, I want to say a huge thank you for your encouragement and excitement for me to go on this wild academic journey. I appreciate the jokes and laughter that you provide as well. They definitely helped to get me through some of the more challenging days. I also appreciate you sharing different music and musicians with me, going way back to my first time hearing an artist named Jill Scott that you recommended. I cannot count how many times I have relied on a Jill Scott song to get me through! Most of all thank you for your support.

Collectively, all of you and those who I did not have time to name inspire me. You all help me continue to do what my grandmother said so many times before she passed: "Keep on keeping on". I love you grandma and granddaddy!

Aaron Crawford

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    2017 Distinguished Teaching Panel, Instructional Development, UCLA

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    2015 How to Stay Effectively Organized, Sociology Department, UCLA

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introducing William Edward Middle School

William Edward Middle School is nestled in a largely residential area of West Los Angeles. William Edward is a large, two-story brick building that is separated from the street and sidewalk by a front lawn spanning well over one hundred feet. Towards the back or southside of the campus is a large grassy quad-area where students often choose to eat their lunch instead of inside the cafeteria. East of the quad-area are several unattached bungalows that serve as classrooms for sixth-grade students. On the west side of the campus is a large parking lot with a sign near the entrance informing visitors that it is dedicated for employees only. Therefore, parents and all other visitors must find parking on the street which on occasion can cause some tension among the drivers.

William Edward's immediate locale is surrounded by numerous middle- and lower middle-class households with an average annual income of $56, 946. Thirty seven percent of these households earn at least $75, 000 per year. However, William Edward's district boundaries extend beyond this locale to encompass a predominately working-class section of West Los Angeles so that its student body reflects a socio-economically and racially diverse population. In addition, William Edward draws an even more diverse set of students through an application program known as School for Advanced Studies (SAS).

William Edward is a magnet school which means that it is allowed to receive 'gifted' students from other school districts under the SAS program. William Edward is one of nine

schools in the district participating in this program. Under SAS, parents throughout Los Angeles can apply to have their child attend William Edward if they do not live within the district boundaries. According to the LAUSD application, students are eligible to apply for a transfer from their school of residence to a School for Advanced Studies if their school of residence verifies that they have demonstrated either "ability in certain critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, have particularly high-test scores, or have been identified as gifted by an LAUSD school psychologist."

A few weeks prior to the first day of school each year, parents form a long line that extends from William Edward's front door down the main entrance sidewalk and around the building another twenty to thirty feet. Parents line up in this formation to drop off an application for their child to attend William Edward via the SAS program. As parents vie for admission, this long line has become a point of pride for school administrators who make multiple references to this spectacle during the first few weeks of the school year. The SAS program indicates the desirability of William Edward to families outside of its attendance area.

At William Edward, I conducted field research between 2011-2016 regarding how race and social class impact the experiences of Black parents as they navigate the academic landscape on behalf of their children. I had the opportunity to interact with parents, teachers, staff and administrators during the course of my research. The observations and analysis in the following chapters derive from my extensive research and time in the field at William Edward.

William Edward's School Grounds

As you enter the front double-doors of William Edward, you are confronted with a sizable check-in table that spans about six feet wide. Sitting behind the table is the hallway

monitor/greeter. During my first two years this position was filled by Ms. Pearl[1] who is African American and in her late sixties to early seventies. After my second year of volunteering Ms. Pearl retired. The position remained unfilled for the entire following school year. During this time numerous staff and volunteers -including myself- would rotate sitting at the front entrance desk greeting and assisting parents and other visitors.

On top of the check-in table are two clipboards. One clipboard is for student use only. Students who arrive late must sign-in and students who are leaving early with a parent/guardian must sign out. The other clipboard is for parents or other visitors to use. After parents' sign-in, the hall monitor reaches into the drawer and gives the parent a yellow 'hall-pass' sticker. The yellow sticker grants parents and other visitors' permission to be on school grounds.

As you pass the check-in table, there are four main areas where parents, school personnel and students mainly interact. The central and most interactive location is in the Administrative Area which consists of the main office, the principal's office and student services. The main office is the first door in the hallway on the right.

Main Office – Administrative Area: Outsider/Insider Status Matters

The status as an outsider or insider is well monitored throughout the school grounds. As mentioned, outsiders are literally marked as they must wear a bright yellow visitor's sticker or be accompanied by someone who works at William Edward. However, one's designation as an outsider or insider is most significant in the Administrative Area. As an outsider (i.e. parent, visitor) in the Administrative Area, you are purposefully only allowed access (both physically and visually) to a rather limited area. Doing so serves to protect both the sensitive information

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[1] All of the names assigned to the participants are pseudonyms to protect privacy and confidentiality

within the Administrative Area offices as well as protect school officials from encountering the heavy foot traffic through the area.

As you walk into the main office one of the first things you see is a very wide and rectangular countertop. This countertop is about two and a half feet tall, sits directly in the middle of the office, spans the width of the room and is strategically placed as a barrier to divide the outsider foot traffic from those on the inside. There are two small swingable doors on either side of the large countertop that allow insiders to enter and exit this area of the main office. On top of the countertop are various leaflets and information packets for parents that draw them in and creates a welcoming feeling while limiting their spatial access.

From the perspective of the visitor, up against the wall and to their immediate left are a set of chairs that serve as a waiting area. Adjacent to the chairs and built into the far-left wall are the mailboxes. All teachers, school officials, and staff have a mailbox. To the visitor's right is a wooden console hanging against the wall that serves as another information station for parents. This station is packed with leaflets advertising various extracurricular activities in which parents can enroll their child. Directly in front of them and behind the large dividing countertop is the desk of the school secretary, Mrs. Tate, who is African American and in her late fifties to early sixties. To the right of Mrs. Tate is the principal's office. However, the principal's office - particularly for first time visitors- hides in plain sight. The principal's door swings outward and is generally slightly ajar or wide open. The inside of the door is plastered with small signs offering inspirational quotes and educational advice and could pose as the door for any administrative official. Only when the door is closed can the visitor see the frontside of the door with the laminate that reads "Principal's Office". However, when the door is shut that signals he is in a meeting and cannot meet with visitors who do not have an appointment.

To the left of Mrs. Tate is another desk positioned up against the wall where student helpers- called Teaching Assistants (see chapter 5) -and sometimes volunteers sit and help Mrs. Tate answer phone calls. Slightly in front of the TA's desk is a hallway. At times, from the visitor's perspective, barely audible discussions can be heard emanating from the hallway. However, the offices and people remain completely out of view. Therefore, the outsider is spatially restricted to the waiting area and visually can only see Mrs. Tate and the student TA's.

Insider Status: Making the Invisible Visible

There are actually three desks behind the large dividing countertop, but only two are visible from the outsider's point of view. The first is Mrs. Tate's desk that is positioned directly behind the dividing countertop. Mrs. Tate's desk is L-shaped so that she can vacillate between the small stacks of paperwork on the right side of the desk and answering the phone which is set up on the left side of the desk. Sitting in the center of the L-shape is her computer, with a large monitor which does not obscure her vision from the incoming foot traffic on the other side of the countertop barrier.

The second desk (from an insider's vantage point) is located to the right of Mrs. Tate. This desk has a telephone on the left-hand side, some stationary in the middle for taking handwritten notes, and a fax machine on the right-hand side. This desk is largely relegated to the student TA's. A computer was never placed on this desk because the staff and administrators believed it would become a source of distraction for the student TA's.

The third desk is located behind Mrs. Tate. This desk is largely invisible to an outsider because there is a partition placed at the front of the desk which blocks the desk and chair from the view of an outsider. Mrs. Tate has also decorated the partition with photos and plants which

further obscure outsider's ability to see the third desk. According to Mrs. Tate there were two part-time administrative assistants that worked at this desk. However, these two positions were terminated due to the 2008 furloughs and budget cuts. Therefore, this third desk went largely unused. As I began to volunteer and my outsider status transitioned into an insider status, this third desk became somewhat 'my' desk. If there was a project for me to work on or a message for me, I often would hear Mrs. Tate say "Aaron, I put it back there on *your* desk". The desk had a phone, a computer and several drawers that I would frequently use to place projects in that I was working on. Another task I would help with was listening to the communication intercom for the walkie-talkie which was placed on the windowsill right behind 'my desk'.

Main Office as Home Base: Communicating within William Edward

In the main office we have an unassigned task of listening to the communication over the intercom to help notify (or clarify) if someone is being paged but is not responding. When one school official is paging someone, it is protocol to state your assigned number and then the number of the person you would like to communicate with. After the request is made by one school official the other confirms and acknowledges the request by saying "10-4". However, if someone is being paged and they are not responding, we in the main office (or base) can repeat to the person being paged that they are being paged because, at times, some signals from the radios are too weak and they cannot hear the page except from the mainframe in the main office. The main office can also notify the pager and let them know that we can hear the page but their intended interlocutor cannot. From there the main office would generally tell the pager that we will keep an eye out for the person they are looking for.

Seventh-grade Area

On either side of the administrative area are hallways that access the seventh grade (area) classrooms. The hallway to the left of the administrative area is dotted with seventh grade classrooms in Language Arts, whereas the hallway to the right of the administration area consists of seventh-grade Math and Science classrooms. Although the administration area divides these seventh-grade classrooms, the Math and Science as well as the Language Arts classrooms are all referred to as the Seventh-Grade Area. Magnet classes and non-magnet classes are in the same classrooms or side-by-side. Also, in the Seventh-Grade Area is room 128. Room 128 is located across the hall and two doors down from the main office. Room 128 is a large classroom that is the most desirable location for parent-teacher conferences mainly due to its size. Room 128 is also used for those preparing packets, such as those for New Parent Orientation (see Chapter 3); these require space and the room is also close to the main office.

Eighth-Grade Area

Across the hall from the student services office is a stairwell that leads up to the second floor. Clustered on the second floor are all of the eighth-grade classrooms from English to Science to History. All of the classes including Magnet classes are located on the second floor. Therefore, the second floor or Eighth-Grade Area is its own distinct and contiguous space connected by an elongated hallway of adjacent classrooms. Two other important rooms located in the Eighth-Grade Area are Ms. Soto's office and room 228. Ms. Soto, who is Latina and in her late twenties, is the translator specialist. However, the only empty office for her to occupy was an 'old' language arts auxiliary room that, according to Mrs. Tate "had been empty for years". This location for Ms. Soto was not conducive for the role she played in the school. As the main translator, Ms. Soto mostly interacted with the main office, student services, counseling office,

and the school psychiatrist. All of these offices are located downstairs in the Administration Area. Therefore, it became quite common to see Ms. Soto carrying large stacks of papers or pulling a small cart so as to avoid having to run up and down the stairs all day. Room 228 was another unused classroom that served as a backup space for completing large projects such as the distribution or 'rollout' of the student iPads (see chapter 5).

Sixth-Grade Area

Similarly, the Sixth-Grade Area is its own distinct space. However, this area is located on the other side of campus and physically removed from the Administrative Area. The sixth-grade area is represented by nine mobile classrooms that are positioned adjacent to but physically outside of the brick and mortar building of William Edward. The nine mobile classrooms are called Bungalows. Each Bungalow is rectangular in shape, houses two separate classrooms, with two separate entrance ways, but which are located under the same roof. For instance, in Bungalow #1, the door on the left is Mrs. O'Brien's room; she teaches sixth-grade English. The door on the right is Mr. Kline's room where he teaches sixth-grade Math and Science. Given the physical distance between the Sixth-Grade Area and the Administration Area, interactions between sixth grade teachers and administrators are reduced compared to the interactions of their seventh- and eighth-grade counterparts.

William Edward's Student Demographics

William Edward has a very diverse population in terms of the family's racial and class backgrounds. William Edward has an enrollment of 1,600 students. Of these students, 42 percent are Latino, 26 percent are African American, 18 percent are White, 11 percent are Asian and 3 percent are Filipino/Pacific Islander/Native American. Approximately half of the students (55

percent) attending William Edward are eligible for free or reduced lunches, an indication of the extent of low-income, and, to some extent, working-class families. Three-fourths (73 percent) of Latinos receive free or reduced fee lunches, as do 57 percent of African Americans, 38 percent of Asians and 22 percent of White students. Parental education among families at William Edward is varied in that roughly 13 percent do not have a high school degree, 22 percent obtained a high school degree, 20 percent have some college, 25 percent have a bachelor's degree and 19 percent have a graduate degree or better (California Department of Education 2013).[2]

William Edward's Teacher Racial Composition

The racial composition of the teachers at William Edward stands in stark contrast to the families they serve. At William Edward, there are seventy teachers, three assistant principals and one principal. Among the seventy teachers, 72 percent are White; 12 percent are Latino; 10 percent are Black; and 3 percent are Asian. Throughout the duration of this study, several teachers either retired or transferred to different schools, but the racial composition stayed relatively constant. Among the principal and the three assistant principals,[3] two are White, one is Latino and one is Asian American[4]. Therefore, for African American parents, the bulk of the parent-teacher interactions occur across racial lines. In fact, when Black[5] parents enter the school as 6th grade parents, less than one percent of the teachers they interact with are African American. In 7th grade, the percentage of African American teachers jumps up to twenty-one

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[2]California Department of Education website- www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/glossary09c.asp#gd15
[3] Throughout this dissertation I lump the principal in with the assistant principals -under the umbrella term school officials- so as to maintain their anonymity. Because the position of principal is only occupied by one person, including too many identifiers will undermine securing anonymity for the individual principal as well as the entire school.
[4] During my first two years, three were White and one was African American.
[5] Throughout the dissertation the racial categories of Black and African American will be used interchangeably.

percent. However, this number drops back down to less than one percent during 8th grade. Therefore, African American parents rarely interact with African American teachers. Parents' lack of access to institutional social capital (i.e. teachers, school officials) significantly impacts the educational pathways they construct for their child. Thus, the formation of a parent-teacher relationship becomes very important.

Parent-Teacher Partnership at William Edward

At William Edward, parent and teacher' relationships are often referred to as a parent-teacher partnerships. The parent-teacher partnership is heralded as one of the most significant relationships affecting the educational achievement of students. Teachers and school officials see this partnership as an opportunity to work alongside parents during students' educational experience and to have parents reinforce what is taught in school at home. William Edward distributes leaflets informing parents of various ways to get involved such as joining the parent-teacher association (PTA), attending school sponsored events such as Back-to-School night, parent-teacher conferences, and for parents with children entering the 6th grade, they can attend the New Parent Orientation during the summer. The parent-teacher partnership is also used by school officials and teachers as a mechanism for parental 'accountability' in improving the disparities in student academic achievement.

Measures of Academic Performance

In California, students' standardized tests scores are based on their Academic Performance Index (API). In 1999, the California Department of Education established the API as its "new academic accountability system" to measure the academic performance of students in

second through twelfth grade.[6] The API is determined by converting a student's performance on statewide assessments (such as the California Modified Assessment which measures English-language arts, mathematics, and science) into points on an API scale. Based on the API scale, students receive a single score which ranges from a low score of 200 to a high score of 1000. Students scoring an 800 or above on the API are deemed proficient in these areas of study and have achieved the target goal set by California's Department of Education for every student. Students that score below 800 do not meet the requirements for proficiency and are lumped into the category of below proficiency.

API scores are important because they were extensively used to describe schools and characterize them as successful or underachieving during the period I collected data. I collected extensive data on the annual Academic Performance Index (API) tests scores at William Edward as well the LAUSD. I researched archival data on the California Department of Education's database and I was able to recover annual test scores for William Edward from the API's inception in 1999 to 2013. However, 2013 was the final year that California schools used the API system to measure students' academic progress.

In 2014, California completely overhauled its measuring system by abandoning the API and switching to the California School Dashboard, the shorthand for which is 'Dashboard'. Unlike the API, Dashboard does not just assess standardized test scores. Dashboard also bases student performance on the number of days a student does not attend school (chronic absenteeism) and how often the student is suspended (suspension rate). Moreover, Dashboard does not distribute numeric assessment scores like the API. Instead students receive one of five

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[6] https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/

descriptive evaluations that range from very high to very low. These assessments are then correlated into a color-coded final assessment that represents the student's academic evaluation. Therefore, I do not include data from the Dashboard model in this study because the measurement indicators (i.e. suspension rate, chronic absenteeism) are completely different from the API which will markedly impact students' overall assessments. Moreover, there are no one-to-one correlations between the API numeric scores and Dashboard's descriptive assessments.

Racial Test Score Gap across LAUSD and Black Parent Accountability

I define the racial test score gap as the differences in API outcomes between African American students and their White counterparts[7]. The average score for African Americans is 858. African Americans scored nearly 100 points less than their White (953) counterparts and over 100 points less than Asian (972) students. African Americans as a group were deemed proficient in English and Math as they scored well above the requisite 800, yet they still lagged over 20 points behind the overall school average. Therefore, within William Edward even though African American students on average are proficient, they are still interpreted by school officials as 'underperforming' based on the school's standards.

African Americans at William Edward have higher API scores than those in LAUSD generally. In 2005, African American students across LAUSD averaged the lowest test scores (602) across all racial/ethnic group and almost 200 points behind White students (800). In 2010, the racial test score gap continued for African American children (663) as they scored nearly 50

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[7] I use White students as the comparative racial group when analyzing test scores for two important reasons. First, although Asian students are the highest performing racial group within William Edward and LAUSD, White students are also 'high performing' and have a student population that is closer to the overall size of African American students than that of Asian students. Second, within the literature White students have long been the comparative group for African American students and therefore maintaining this comparative dyad will position this research to make some important contributions to that literature.

points lower than the overall LAUSD average for all students and almost 200 points less than their White counterparts who scored (849). In 2013[8], the average score for African Americans did increase by thirty points to 697, yet they continued to score below all other racial/ethnic groups in the LAUSD.

Targeting [Black] Parents as the 'Problem' within LAUSD

The 2002 landmark federal education policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)[9] laid the groundwork for targeting parents of 'underperforming' groups to play a central role in addressing the racial test score gap. NCLB required schools to develop concrete strategies to have parents act as 'equal partners' with teachers to address educational inequalities among students. However, the vague language used within the equal partners mandate creates ambiguity over what an equal partners' dynamic should look like. Therefore, school districts (e.g. LAUSD) and individual schools (i.e. William Edward) are given tremendous autonomy in constructing the dynamics of this partnership. Given the differences in API outcomes for African American students across LAUSD versus within William Edward, the dynamics of this equal partnership play out differently for Black parents at the district level than that at the individual school.

My Research Project

The research questions guiding this dissertation are: In what ways does race play a central role in shaping how African American parents engage in their child's educational experience? How are racial inequalities found in the broader society reproduced for African American

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[8] I use 2013 data here instead of 2015 because, as mentioned, it is the last year that the California Department of Education collected API data. In the subsequent years the Department of Education switched to a completely new system. See the methods section under data collection for further explanation of the differing measurement systems.

[9] For a deeper discussion regarding the mandates within and impact of No Child Left Behind see Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010).

parents within schools? What impact are neoliberal educational policies having on African American parents as they participate in their children's educational experiences?

This dissertation argues that race creates a qualitatively different parental involvement experience for African Americans, which sits outside of their White middle-and working-class counterparts. The racial and class inequalities that African American parents experience in the broader society are reproduced in schools as they engage in their child's educational experience. Further, neoliberal education policies exacerbate and will likely ossify these racial and class inequalities that African Americans experience in schools.

METHODS

Ethnographic Research

I conducted a five-year ethnographic research project at William Edward Middle School in Los Angeles that spanned the academic years of 2011- 2016. I observed both the day-to-day procedures and practices occurring at William Edward Middle School as well as the parental involvement strategies among families of different social class and racial/ethnic backgrounds. This dissertation focuses on African American families who are both working-class and middle-class and share many similar experiences despite class differences. I examine parental involvement strategies as well as their interactions with teachers and school officials within the academic landscape. My comparison is to the normative case of White, largely middle-class families which I refer to simply as White. I do not interview White parents or study White students so I am not speaking to the variation within Whites. Rather my focus is on the racialized and class experiences among African American families. Each family participating in this study had at least one child enrolled at William Edward Middle School.

I situate my ethnography within the grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Therefore, instead of relying on previous research to inform the development of my theoretical categories, my analysis is derived from "detailed, intensive and microscopic examination of the data" (Strauss, 1987, 10). During this data collection process, I also coded all the data by conducting a rigorous qualitative assessment of both the observations and notes from the field which allowed me to systematically locate trends in the data that could then be linked back to groups in the study. I conducted this rigorous assessing and analyzing of the data on a regular basis during my entire time in the field.

One example of how grounded theory informs the conceptual work is in the development of the concept of *hidden scripts* (Chapter 3). This concept, which had not been previously discussed in the literature on parental involvement, emerged through a process of triangulating teachers' interview responses with their actions 'in the field' during formal school events like Back-to-School night and New Parent Orientation. Using a grounded theory approach, I was also able to create linkages across categories (i.e. racial monitoring and hidden scripts) and construct 'conceptually dense' theories in the process (Emerson 2001).

Participant Observation at the School Site

The bulk of the data I collected drew from participant observation methods. I spent 578[10] hours, over the span of 24 months, volunteering as an administrative assistant in offices such as student services, the main office and during the after-school program Homework Help. During this time, I observed and interacted with parents as they came to pick up their child, while I

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[10] These 578 hours represent just the hours calculated for my time volunteering in the main office and student services. These hours do not reflect the additional time I spent volunteering during school events such as summer orientation, student tours of UCLA.

escorted them from the main office to various rooms on campus, and when they called the school with inquiries. The telephone was an important initial medium through which I interacted with parents. These interactions largely consisted of parents' queries regarding contacting a teacher/administrator/counselor, information about school activities or general questions concerning the daily school structure. However, parents would also call to report teachers' infractions regarding confrontations with either themselves or their child. After each volunteer session, I recorded extensive field notes documenting all of the interactions I observed.

Participant Observation at School Events

My participant observations also included observations during parent-teacher events throughout the school year. These events include Parent Summer Orientation, Back-to-School night (BTS), parent-teacher conferences, and African American Family Day. Parents' Summer Orientation is a two-day event that accommodates the more than 600 parents who attend. Orientation is for incoming sixth grade parents and provides data about the messages teachers relay to parents regarding the ways they should participate in their child's educational experience. I volunteered for two consecutive summer orientations. I also attended the African American Family Day Event. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has offered this annual event for three consecutive academic years (2013-2015). William Edward Middle School along with four other middle schools and six high schools in the district were invited to attend the annual event. On African American Family Day, I relied heavily on participant observation and informal interviews with parents and teachers throughout the day.

In-depth Interviews with Parents[11]

I conducted formal in-depth interviews with 20 African American working-and middle-class parents. Three-fourths of the parents I interviewed are working class. The interviews with the parents were audio-recorded and ranged from one to two and a half hours. These interviews were conducted in public places such as restaurants, libraries and at William Edward Middle School. The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that asked parents to talk about parental involvement (e.g. what do you believe you can do to be the most helpful in assisting your child with their educational experience, barriers to communicating with teachers (e.g. can you describe a situation where you felt the school could have done a better job of communicating with you?), and challenges they experienced during the involvement process (e.g. can you describe a situation where you had to 'step-in' or intervene at school on behalf of your child?).

Structured Interviews with School Officials

I conducted 23 interviews with teachers and administrators from William Edward. All interviews took place at William Edward Middle School and were audio-recorded. The interviews with teachers and school officials also consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that asked about their expectations of parents (e.g. regarding parental involvement, describe how a parent's role changes when their child is in middle school, instead of elementary.), their assessment of 'good' parental involvement (e.g. discuss some examples of things a parent can do to have a positive impact on their child's education.), the role of race/diversity in building parent-teacher partnerships (e.g. describe how being a -White, Black,

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[11] See Appendix B for interview guide.

Latino or Asian-American- teacher helps you build partnerships with parents.), and a teacher's role in relation to parental involvement (e.g. describe the role you play in building a strong parent-teacher partnership.).

Informal Interviews with School Officials

I also conducted informal interviews with teachers, administrators, and staff about the parental involvement strategies and expectations they had for parents. Over the course of my five years at William Edward, I conducted informal interviews with all 70 teachers[12]. Similarly, I conducted informal interviews with parents regarding the involvement strategies they developed for themselves. Also, parents were asked to assess the interactions between themselves and the teachers at William Edward. The informal interviews were generally 'impromptu' discussions that I initiated. Many of these conversations emerged in less formal settings such as hallways, parking lots and waiting areas in the administrative offices. Informal interviews were an indispensable part of this research in that they allowed me to follow up with parents and teachers after I observed their interactions. Therefore, I was able to triangulate the interactional data I observed which aided in increasing the accuracy of my findings and analysis.

Navigating My Positionality

At William Edward, my race, gender, educational status and age played a significant role in shaping how I navigated this space. However, race was central to understanding and navigating my positionality at William Edward. For me, engaging in a self-reflexive analysis of race requires that I simultaneously keep track of interracial and intra-racial interactions.

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[12] The number of teachers at William Edward changed slightly from year-to-year but the range during my five years was between 58 at its lowest and 70 at its highest.

On Being African American and Navigating my Field Site

Being African American at William Edward allowed me to easily access specific intra-racial conversations and situations. For instance, an African American teacher's aide named Mrs. Stevens would periodically come by the main office to say hello to Mrs. Tate and me. Our conversations would often quickly move to discussing current events, particularly events involving race. Mrs. Stevens, Mrs. Tate and I had numerous discussions regarding the tragic outcome of the Trayvon Martin case as well as the infuriating and sad killing of Michael Brown, an 18 year-old African American young man who was unarmed and gunned down by police in the street. Mrs. Stevens would occasionally mention, and as the years went by remind me that she participated in the civil rights protests as a little girl growing up in the deep South. She would often leave the main office with some encouraging words regarding how happy she was that I as a young (from her perspective) Black man working on my doctorate and for me to stay the course. It is worth noting that I never discussed what happened to Michael Brown or any other unarmed African American killed by the police with any staff, faculty or school officials who were White and none of them ever inquired.

Keeping track of both intra-racial and interracial interactions keyed me into the overlap of occupational hierarchy and race. Early on, I observed that there were few African American teachers and, after my first year at William Edward, there were no African American school officials outside of the dean. African Americans were largely clustered into staff positions such as facilities and custodial workers, cafeteria personnel and administrative assistants. Moreover, the informal versus formal names by which employees were introduced to me reinforced this hierarchy. For instance, during my first several months volunteering, I would be introduced to staff members, many of whom were Black, as Ms. or Mrs. and then their *first name* (i.e. Ms.

19

Kendra, Mrs. Stacey or Mr. Jeff). By contrast, all of the teachers and school officials were introduced formally using their last name such as Ms. Weston or Mrs. Tucker.

I actively pushed back against this reinforcement of what I interpreted as a linguistic and unwittingly racialized hierarchy. Upon my second or third time meeting a staff member, I would ask if it was okay if *I* addressed them using their last name[13]. Each staff member, particularly African American and Latino staff, seemed to enjoy me using their last name instead of differentiating between them and school officials. The only Black staff members that preferred otherwise were Ms. Pearl, and two facility workers named Jeff and Tommy.

Ms. Pearl asked me to keep calling her Ms. Pearl instead of using her last name because she liked the sound of her first name better. Jeff and Tommy (who were both African American and were roughly the same age as me) asked me to drop the 'Mr.' altogether and just call them by their first names. They said the only people at William Edward that they wanted using Mr. were the students. Although using only last names re-introduced a formal conversational context, I would circumvent this speech convention on occasion by initiating or prolonging informal conversations regarding T.V. shows, movies, fun local restaurants/bars or current events. Over the years I noticed that Mrs. Tate would start to introduce staff members to the student TA's by using their last name instead of the aforementioned Ms. and then their first name.

Being an African American Male: Navigating Invisibility, Visibility and Hyper-visibility

Others' perceptions of me and how I was 'seen' versus how I wanted to be seen, particularly as a Black male, were heightened while I was at my field site. One school official, Mrs. Tucker, spoke candidly to me that one of the reasons she was glad that I decided to

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[13] It was quite normal to ask someone or for someone to ask me what my name was the second, third and sometimes even fourth time meeting.

volunteer (in addition to helping out) was that students could see and at times interact with a young African American male pursuing higher education at UCLA. In addition, because I generally wore a button-down shirt with a nice pair of jeans to William Edward, my 'presentation of self' was one that she hoped some of her students might try to emulate, or perhaps students would become more interested in the academic aspect of attending college.

Mrs. Tucker was well aware based on the discussions she heard in the halls that many of William Edward students' frame of reference for UCLA revolved almost entirely around sports players. Therefore, Mrs. Tucker aimed to make me *hyper-visible* to the students at William Edward and would introduce me as a graduate student at UCLA. Doing so, at least from Mrs. Tucker's perspective, would encourage the students to rethink or reconceptualize what space African Americans – particularly Black males in my case- could occupy at a large university. While I participated in this hyper-visibility, I was at times concerned about being cast in this one-dimensional manner. Therefore, I would often include that in middle- and high school I played sports as well. In this way, I was pushing back against the principal's slightly reductionist narrative and trying to convey to the students of color that they can participate in both the academic and athletic aspects of college.

Outline of Dissertation Chapters

In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature that is theoretically aligned with this research. In this section, I incorporate the literature that speaks to African Americans dual experience of being rendered invisible (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997, Howard and Reynolds 2008,) and being hyper-visible as a problem (Fields-Smith 2009)) for society. I draw from the education literature to discuss how schools reproduce this feeling of invisibility for Black parents (Dumas 2009). I also include the educational literature articulating how Black parents are constructed as a

problem as they engage in their child's educational experiences. Then I situate Black parents'

experiences with schools in the larger context of neoliberalism. This shapes an important

question for my research: what does the parent-teacher partnership look like for African

American parents within an educational system guided by neoliberal policies?

The second half of this chapter describes the ethnographies that my research theoretically

and conceptually build upon. I discuss how studying race as an outsider (Lareau, 2011) poses

significant challenges but can also benefit this process (Duneier 1994). I describe how a

researcher's insider status regarding race can be a tremendous asset (Patillo 1999, Lacy 2007)

but can also be the source of barriers to navigate (Contreras 2015, Zavella 1996).

In Chapter 3, my research describes how African American parents develop a racialized

dual disposition[14] to meet the unique set of challenges Black parents encounter during their

child's educational experience. African American parents' dual disposition consists of two

opposing stances, a desire to work with teachers on behalf of their child and needing to develop

'racial monitoring' strategies to guard against their child's racial mistreatment at school.

However, teachers' adherence to a colorblind ideology renders much of these African American

parents' participation invisible; their involvement is seen as insufficient. Exacerbating this

significant aspect of Black parents' participation being ignored by school officials is the

interpretation of these parents as unproductive participants in the parent-teacher partnership

based on an unwritten evaluative set of 'hidden scripts.' I find that these hidden scripts which

can either enable (collaborative scripts) or constrain (combative scripts) parent-teacher

interactions are only divulged informally and therefore are unevenly distributed to parents.

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[14] In developing my concept of 'dual disposition' I draw on the seminal work of W.E.B. Du Bois and his theory of double consciousness (see chapter 2).

Parents that do not possess the social capital to access collaborative scripts tend to employ combative scripts (either unwittingly or out of frustration) that contribute to the breakdown in the parent-teacher partnership. I argue that the school's colorblind ideology coupled with these hidden scripts positions African American parents to be less effective participants in their children's educational experiences than their White middle-class and working-class counterparts.

In Chapter 4, I examine the district-wide event of African American Family Day and demonstrate how the presenters' (teachers in LAUSD) adherence to a colorblind ideology silences them from discussing the structural inequalities relating to race. The presenters' omission of a racial structural analysis of educational inequalities was supplanted with efforts to coach these Black parents to enact a docile disposition while interacting with teachers. This docile disposition, encouraged by the presenters, positions Black parents not as equal partners, but as relatively docile interlocutors with teachers "knowing" the solution to the problem. African American parents thus experienced a two-pronged reproduction of racial inequalities. On the one hand, the presenters engaged in reproducing the dominant narrative of African Americans (in this case parents) as a problem. On the other hand, the presenters' omission of race denies these Black parents from accessing a racial analysis and linguistic tools that could help these parents construct more durable educational pathways for their children. I argue that the presenters' inability to address Black parents' challenges or articulate solutions stem from the silencing effects of what amounts to a colorblind ideology. Ultimately, teachers and school officials' silence exacerbate the parental involvement challenges Black parents face.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the systemic structural policy of defunding schools has created a resource deficiency at William Edward. In turn, this resource deficiency produces what I term 'service gaps' within the school. Service gaps are marked by the removal or interruption of

communicative and/or pedagogical services offered within the school. William Edward tries to meet the challenges of these service gaps by maintaining a robust volunteer apparatus within the school. William Edward relies on volunteers to act as school personnel and help maintain the day-to-day functioning of the school. However, William Edward's reliance on volunteers to solve a service gap problem is only a short-term, temporary fix and creates a significant amount of precarity within the school.

Another important aspect of the service gaps that impacts parental involvement is the formation of a *communication hierarchy* within the school. The communication hierarchy privileges middle-class modes of communication (i.e. emailing) over working-class modes (e.g. phone call/leaving a message). Therefore, working-class African American parents tend to experience significantly delayed returned phone calls and interactions with teachers' meetings. Parents interpret teachers' delayed responses as signs of being unimportant and unwelcomed. This creates significant problems as parents and teachers try to create a 'partnership'. Therefore, working-class African American parents are positioned, by the communication hierarchy, to be seen as less effective "partners" at school. I also find that neoliberal policies are negatively impacting the educational system by exacerbating and ossifying the racial and class inequalities in education. I demonstrate how the race and class educational disparities laid out in my previous chapters become more deeply entrenched for African Americans as they participate in their children's educational experience.

In chapter 6, I highlight key findings from my dissertation. I discuss how the findings from this dissertation fill in gaps in the literature in areas of race, class, and education as it relates to the experiences of American Americans. Further, I connect my findings to a breath of discussions regarding how inequalities found in the broader society for African Americans are

reproduced as they interact with social institutions. I give a set of concrete recommendations for William Edward to incorporate into their day-to-day practices. These recommendations are designed to address some of the central issues and problems I lay out in chapters three through five. I also discuss the implications of my research regarding how the reconceptualization of the relationship between social institutions and African Americans could have a profound impact on reshaping the daily experiences of African Americans. Lastly, I conclude the chapter by suggesting some possible future research projects that would add to the myriad gaps in the literature regarding African Americans' educational experience in the U.S.

In the Methodological Appendix A, I discuss how I gained access to my research site. In the ethnographic literature, researchers often acknowledge that they had a difficult time gaining access to a group of people or a specific institution (Duneier 2001, Lareau 2011, Patillo 1999). However, researchers rarely provide thick description of what their process of gaining access to their field site entailed. Therefore, in this section I describe the strategies that I developed and then deployed to gain access to William Edward. I also discuss the mistakes that I made and the strategies that I employed to correct my missteps. After describing how I gained access to William Edward, I discuss how I was able to sustain access to my field site for five consecutive academic years. The strategies that I reflect on in this section will hopefully serve as a useful guide for future graduate students trying to navigate the tricky and often precarious terrain of gaining access to a field site.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Background

Two enduring racialized features of U.S. social institutions are the construction of blackness as a problem and the rendering of Black invisibility. In these institutions, African Americans are perceived to be inherently lazy and socially dysfunctional, and their blackness is interpreted as a physical threat. The emergence and malleability of African Americans racialization as a problem spans back to the institution of slavery. However, its perpetuation is a product of "large scale, interlocking social institutions" that reproduce and re-inscribe the narrative of African Americans as a problem (Collins 1990). For example, the Los Angeles Times has published numerous articles casting Black parents as a problem including one by Steve Lopez titled "Pushing Parents to Get Involved in Kids' Education". In the article, Lopez posits that Black parents "aren't doing their job" when it comes to engaging in their children's education (2011). These claims in print media utilize countless images of 'lazy,' disinterested Black parents not caring about the educational wellbeing of their child.

Simultaneously, African Americans' experiences are rendered invisible in societal institutions. At the turn of the twentieth century, African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) eloquently described this invisibility as a 'Veil' that conceals Black life from the dominant White racial group in society. Black authors have described this feeling as like that of an *Invisible Man* (Ellison 1952) as they move throughout these social institutions. A decade later, the significant role that three Black women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Johnson, played in helping to coordinate NASA's Project Mercury program, was rendered invisible until the aptly named movie *Hidden Figures* (2016) popularized their achievements. For African Americans, this invisibility is always coupled with and inextricably linked to being

racialized as a problem (West 1999), which illuminates the duality of their experience of being both invisible and hyper-visible. This duality or *double consciousness* (Du Bois 1903) is experienced by African Americans as being *in* society, but not *of* society (West 1999). Moreover, these controlling images (Collins 1990) of African Americans as a problem and not willing to do their jobs as parents become the commonsense narratives informing public perception regarding how Black parents *are* in the public sphere.

Racialization, Parenting and Education

Black Parents and Racial Barriers to Building Parent-Teacher Partnerships

The research on African American parents' school involvement has found that parents report an unwelcoming 'school climate' (Macleod 1987, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997, Howard and Reynolds 2008, Fields-Smith 2009). Throughout this literature, African American parents frequently reported feelings of hostility stemming from the school and being unwelcome in the school (Howard and Reynolds 2008, Fields-Smith 2009). In addition, researchers described that their participants reported feeling ignored by school officials leading to parents becoming frustrated and less motivated to try to cultivate a partnership with the teachers at the school. Parents in these studies also report encountering communication-based barriers such as delayed phone calls from teachers (Howard and Reynolds 2008). These findings of parents feeling ignored and unwelcome at the school are important in highlighting the disconnect these parents feel. However, these researchers relied on parents' self-reports and did not have additional empirical data to demonstrate how these interactions produce this disconnect between parents and teachers. This dissertation begins to fill in this gap in the literature and demonstrates how the day-to day practices at the school significantly impact the process of building a parent-teacher partnership.

27

Black Parents Invisibility in School

In the literature on African American parents' participation, several studies show that a significant part of Black parents' participation goes unnoticed and therefore remains largely 'invisible' to school officials (Howard and Reynolds 2008, Dumas 2009, Fields-Smith 2009). These invisible forms of participation ranged from taking their children to museums, ensuring the child finished their homework, creating 'learning conducive' spaces at home as well as playing 'critical thinking' games where the parent asks the child 'what would you do if…'(Howard and Reynolds 2005, Fields-Smith 2009). Furthermore, for some of these invisible strategies, race is a central component. Fields-Smith (2009) reports that African American parents teach their children 'Black history' at home that dovetailed with topics they were learning in school. Parents in other studies described the importance of instilling in their child a positive self-image of their racial identity (Howard and Reynolds 2005). However, these forms of participation sit outside of the normative (White) parental involvement so they go largely unnoticed by school officials. Similarly, researchers like Lareau (2011), who conducted an ethnography of elementary schools in metropolitan Philadelphia, reinforce this invisibility by asserting that when holding social class constant "white and Black parents engage in very similar, often identical, practices with their children" (240). Lareau homogenizes White and Black parents' experiences by letting the role of race go largely unexamined.

Black Invisibility and the Colorblind Ideology

In schools, African American invisibility is exacerbated by the institutions' adherence to a colorblind ideology. Colorblind ideology or the deliberate nonrecognition of race (Pascoe 1999) spread across social institutions like schools as a response to the White backlash stemming from "racially inclusive reform policies" such as affirmative action as demonstrated in the Bakke

Supreme Court case (Harris 1993, Omi and Winant 2015). These reform policies were deemed unfair because they are seen as 'punishing' White people and as engaging in 'reverse racism' (Omi and Winant 2015). Therefore, the only way for institutions to be perceived as 'fair' was to be racially colorblind. Furthermore, it was argued that adhering to a racially colorblind ideology was beneficial for Whites as well as Blacks as it would usher in a non-ideological end of racism that reflected the civil rights mantra of not judging a person "by the color of their skin, but the content of their character" (King 1963, 219). For the educational institution, adhering to a colorblind ideology was conducive to their longstanding promotion of a meritocratic institution. The colorblind ideology fit well with institutional claims of meritocracy because schools could now assert that racism is a thing of the past. Thus, some educators could argue that any persisting inequalities were based on individual merit and groups not "taking full advantage of existing opportunities" (Lewis and Diamond, 2015, 8).

A significant number of research studies have examined the effects of colorblind ideology within institutions (Carbado and Harris 2012; Crenshaw 1991; Pascoe 1996). This scholarship, in part, posits that the colorblind ideology helps to conceal the structural privileges of Whiteness (Bonilla Silva 2003, Omi and Winant 2015, Harris 1993, Haney Lopez 2006). Scholars also argue that the privilege for Whites of not needing to think of themselves in racial terms (White 'transparency') creates a silence regarding race that further entrenches the concealment of racial inequalities (Haney Lopez 2006). By adhering to a colorblind ideology, these social actors engage in a concealment of privilege through nonrecognition (Pascoe 1999) where any disparities in terms of societal outcomes are due to differences in individual effort and not racial inequalities. This scholarship is indispensable to our understanding of how racial

inequalities get reproduced through the concealment of racial privilege[15]. However, much of this research leaves unaddressed what effect the adherence to a colorblind ideology has on social actors within schools. For instance, how does adherence to the colorblind ideology limit the way in which teachers' ability to have candid discussions with Black parents regarding issues related to race? Therefore, this dissertation addresses this gap in the literature by positing that the colorblind ideology has a silencing effect on teachers and school officials from publicly and directly discussing the significance of race in education.

Black Parents and the Social Reproduction of Inequalities

Social reproduction theory argues that the inequalities found in the broader society tend to get reproduced within social institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The reproduction literature has played an important role in illuminating the structural mechanisms that help reproduce inequalities for marginalized groups within society (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Heath 1984; Lareau 2011; Willis 1977). However, this set of literature places class differences at the center of its analysis and deemphasizes inquiries regarding how racial inequalities also get reproduced within societal institutions. This dissertation provides a small step in that direction by arguing that the racial inequalities Black families experience in the broader society are reproduced within schools. Black parents experience this reproduction of inequalities as they navigate the academic landscape on behalf of their children.

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[15] Countries like France are also grappling with the impact that the colorblind ideology is having on their Black population. For a deeper discussion see Norimitsu Onishi's New York Times article "A Racial Awakening in France, Where Race is a Taboo Topic" (2020).

Black Parents and Schools as 'Fields' of Contestation

According to Bourdieu (1984) 'fields' are social institutions that reflect a highly stratified social system within which social actors (parents) compete for power, status and social rewards (Bourdieu 1984). Field theorists primarily focus on understanding the competitive strategies parents use as they vie for power within these fields, such as schools (Lareau 2011; Lareau and Shumar 1996). These researchers shift the analysis away from the institutional actors-school officials and teachers- to that of the parents. The concerted effort, by field theorists, to mainly focus on the parents' strategies creates a gap in the literature regarding how the schools' day-to-day practices may exacerbate racial and class differences in parental involvement outcomes among parents.

Respectability Politics, Black Parents and Intra-racial 'Problem' Solving

Social actors in institutions can have a significant impact on parental involvement strategies and the parent-teacher partnership. Respectability politics, broadly speaking, is a strategy used by marginalized groups which advocates that its members carry themselves in a 'morally upstanding' manner throughout society (Higginbotham 1993). In doing so, its advocates posit that the actions of the marginalized group provide counterevidence to the claims of inferiority unleashed by the dominant group in society. Therefore, group members are to always 'be on good behavior' in front of the outsiders to demonstrate their likeness/similarity to the dominant group. Over time, proponents of respectability politics believe that their actions accumulate and become tools that help dismantle the hierarchical structure oppressing the marginalized group.

For African Americans, respectability politics operates as an intra-racial social policing of group members espousing the need for reform of individual behavior and attitudes

31

(Higginbotham 1993). A central intra-racial message ungirding this moral upstanding is 'do not

act the way dominant White society thinks you will act' (i.e. the angry Black man/woman). This

way of orienting oneself in society has at various times crystallized into a strategy for reforming

the structural system of American race relations by convincing dominant society to view and

eventually treat Blacks as equals. There is a long history of respectability politics among African

Americans that stretches back to the tension in the 1960's between the Southern Christian

Leadership Committee (SCLC) and the "newly" emerging leadership of the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee (SNCC)[16]. Respectability politics and the impact of this social policing

can also be seen in the writings of Du Bois (1903) where he states that when he is indirectly

asked the question *how does it feel to be a problem* he says, "At these I smile, or am interested or

reduce the boiling to a simmer" (4). Du Bois' reducing the boiling to a "simmer" is a response

tethered to respectability politics. Instead of getting angry and lashing out at the racist and

insulting question, Du Bois takes the 'moral high-ground' and reduces his rage to a simmer or

even at times just simply smiles.

Critics of respectability politics argue that it is a form of victim blaming, that silences and

dehumanizes the individual actor. The silencing and dehumanizing of the individual work in

tandem as they ensure that group members are never too angry or pissed off. Therefore, its

members adopt a disposition that is docile and never too upset in front of the dominant group in

society. This docility, however, creates a false sense of security because it thwarts the individual

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[16] In 1966, leadership within the two organizations represented by Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael respectively, were at loggerheads over the issue of respectability politics. John Lewis stepped down from the chairmanship position as an ideological division between himself and Stokely Carmichael became untenable. Lewis and Carmichael's internal-SNCC division erupted with Carmichael's call for 'Black Power' which was less concerned with taking a moral non-violent high ground to achieve equality. See Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (2003) for a fuller account of the tensions and divisions within the movement.

actor's agency and does nothing to challenge or combat the recurrences of mistreatment on the behalf of the institution.

African Americans as a 'Problem' In and For Schools

Numerous studies highlight the disproportionate punitive outcomes for black students (Ferguson 2000; Goff and Jackson et. al. 2014; Gregory et. al. 2011). Contemporary literature explaining these disproportionate outcomes argue that they are shaped by a structural discourse that tends to perceive the behavior of African-American children through an 'adultified' lens (Ferguson 2000) which in turn applies a more heavy-handed sanction to black children than their White counterparts even for similar infractions (Goff and Jackson et. al. 2014; Redding 2000). The suspension rate at William Edward is consistent with these findings. For example, in the 2012-2013 academic year African-Americans roughly made up 25 percent of the student population but had the highest out of school[17] suspension rate (nearly 4.5 percent) among all racial/ethnic groups and had the highest number of suspensions as well.[18] African-American parents therefore must navigate a school system that does not necessarily operate in their interest but must rely on this institution in order to have a positive impact on their child's life chances (Frankenburg 2000).

African American Achievement Gap, Black Parents and the Neoliberal Ideology

African American student's educational achievement outcomes are among the lowest, both nationally and in California, across all racial/ethnic groups. Philips et al. (1998) examined

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[17] School (ISS) records are generally kept by the school itself; however, during the duration of this study I was not able to retrieve those records from William Edward.

[18] Data from the California Department of Education. http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/SuspExp/defbyscheth.aspx?cYear=2012-13&cType=ALL&cCDS=19647336058226&cName=Palms%20Middle&cLevel=School&cChoice=sDef ByEth

these issues nearly a decade before and found that roughly half of the Black-White achievement gap "can be attributed to the fact that blacks start school with fewer skills than Whites. The other half can be attributed to the fact that blacks learn less [during K-12] than Whites who enter school with similar initial skills" (232). Phillips et al. lay bare the urgent need for researchers to identify "the factors that *cause black students to learn less after they start school* than their equally prepared white counterparts" (232). Since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) there has been a neoliberal turn to target parents of underperforming groups to 'step up' and play a central role in addressing this racial test score gap.

African American parents, under this neoliberal turn to target parents of 'underperforming' groups, are being constructed as a problem for schools. Black parents are conceptualized as being 'unproductive' -as opposed to productive- participants in their child's education (L.A. Times 2011). This binary logic of unproductive versus productive is informed by neoliberal ideology that conceptualizes individuals as either productive or unproductive workers (Harvey 2005). Under neoliberalism, unproductive or unemployed individuals are conceptualized as 'bad' because they require assistance from social programs. Therefore, social programs shaped by neoliberal ideology tend to reflect a punitive system, designed to punish people for being unproductive individuals (Harvey 2005). Undergirded by this neoliberal binary logic, African American parents are constructed as an 'unproductive' problem for schools that needs to be fixed.

The Neoliberal Project in Education

The neoliberal project in society, broadly defined, is to redefine the relationship between individuals and government (Harvey 2005). There is a concerted effort among neoliberals to redefine the relationship of individuals and public education. Neoliberalism significantly impacts

educational policy in its advocacy of fundamental changes such as privatization (Wrigley 2013, Ravitch 2010). The increased proliferation of vouchers (Wrigley 2013) for parents to be able to 'choose' the best school for their child and the explosion of charter schools (Ravitch 2010) demonstrates the significant influence neoliberal ideology has had on shaping educational policy. Spence (2015) argues that neoliberal educational policies of privatization, vouchers and charters are having a disproportionately negative impact on communities of color. Omi and Winant (2015) argue that neoliberals rely on colorblind ideology to 'turn a blind eye' to the racial harm and devastation these policies have on communities of color.

As significant, though less discussed, is the role of neoliberal ideology in influencing the development of the federal mandate referred to as 'equal partners.' This federal mandate requires that schools develop plans to have all parents act as 'equal partners' with teachers during children's educational experience. The logic undergirding the equal partners mandate is that if parents participate equally with teachers during children's educational experience, then their participation will reduce the disparate racial and class educational outcomes among students. Neoliberals point to the consistent findings among social scientists that increased parental involvement has a positive impact on children's educational outcomes (Jencks and Phillips 1998, Lareau 2003, Reardon 2011) to support their claims. Yet, neoliberals disregard that numerous scholars have also found that because working-class families have less access to resources (e.g. flexible work schedules and childcare) they tend *not* to be able to participate in their children's education in the same way as their middle-class counterparts (Chin and Phillips 2004; Lareau 2011; Ochoa 2013, Robinson and Harris 2014). Embedded in the equal partners mandate is the assumption that all parents can participate as 'equals' with teachers. There is scant research, however, that demonstrates or explicates what this equal partnership looks like on the ground

(Howard and Reynolds 2008) and how schools are conceptualizing and enacting the structural dynamics of this equal partnership, particularly for Black parents.

Reducing Resources for Public Schools

Many researchers studying public education have consistently found that there is a systematic effort at reducing public investment by defunding public education in the U.S**.** (Kozol 2005, Darling-Hammond 2010, Ravitch 2010). In 2000, for instance, California ranked first nationwide in the number of K-12 students it served, but 38th in per pupil spending (Darling-Hammond 2010). According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, a Sacramento-based policy and research institution, from 2007-2011, California cut 4,000 administrators, and an additional 4,000 pupil support providers[19] in addition to the 10,000 full time staff positions and 32,000 teachers. Given LAUSD's tremendous student diversity coupled with the No Child Left Behind equal partners mandate, it is crucial that schools are equipped with sufficient resources and personnel (staff, teachers, administrators) to aid parents in this process.

However, these drastic and widespread cuts have forced many schools to significantly reduce the services and resources they offer. While there is a breath of research documenting the amount of resources that are being stripped away from schools (Darling-Hammond 2010, Kozol 2005), a significantly less amount of research has documented how these reductions in resources have impacted the day-to-day practices and procedures at the individual school level. In addition, there is an extremely limited amount of research examining what effect this systemic defunding of schools has on Black parents and schools as they try to build productive partnerships.

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[19] http://lao.ca.gov/reports/2012/edu/year-three-survey/year-three-survey-050212.pdf

Building on Indispensable Theoretical Frameworks

Double Consciousness

This dissertation draws on Du Bois' (1903) 'double consciousness' as a way to interpret the experiences of African American parents. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness posits that African-Americans, at the turn of the twentieth century, held two opposing or 'warring' identities, an American and a Negro, while interacting in societal institutions. I situate my findings in Du Bois' theory of double consciousness and argue that African American parents must hold two different stances towards teachers, navigating the academic landscape, in the one hand, and deploying racial monitoring strategies to guard against their children's racial mistreatment, on the other. However, while Du Bois describes the challenges faced by African Americans in a segregated setting, my research explores the special and unique difficulties that African Americans face within a colorblind context.

Black Women's Dual Work

I also draw from Collins (1998) insightful argument that racial ethnic women's motherwork reflects the tension inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color. Collins further argues that middle-class White children's "…racial identity is validated by their schools, the media, and other social institutions" (Collins 302). This aspect is critical in that racial identity (being White) and achievement are intertwined, produced and reproduced in these varying institutions. Without these same social processes at work for Black parents, I believe that it is important to explore if African American mothers/parents develop and incorporate strategies that link racial identity and achievement into their parental involvement. Examining these strategies solely through a social

class framework would not capture the *dual work* of deploying racial monitoring strategies while actively and encouragingly participating in their child's educational experience.

Schools as Contested Landscapes

Analyzing schools from the conceptual framework of landscapes is important because it accounts for the 'situated practices' (Moore 2003) or the day-to-day procedures in an institution. Further, landscape theorists conceptualize social spaces as a 'duplicitous structure' where social actors (parents) and the situated practices of institutional actors are in continuous dialectical interaction (Berger 1972). Therefore, landscapes build upon, and move beyond, 'field' analysis by analyzing the actions of parents while also refusing to obscure the agency of institutional social actors. Through landscapes we can begin to understand how the day-to-day practices at the school impact the strategies deployed by parents. In addition, it contributes to the analytical and descriptive accuracy that is central to an ethnographic study.

Establishing Ethnographic Authority: Theoretical and conceptual challenges
Insider/Outsider Status

A crucial component of conducting an ethnography, and in constructing an accurate account of the group being studied, is participant observation –where researchers 'experience' and take part in the daily lives of those being studied. Participant observation is also seen as central to establishing 'ethnographic authority' or the privileged position of constructing a representational text of how a group of people experience and make sense of their social world (Clifford, 1983). Prior to the 1960's, researchers believed that simply being present in the field and observing their participants would grant the researcher sufficient insight to then construct narratives and make claims about the group being studied. However, placing a premium on

experience or participant observation tended to *mask* how the researcher's social position

impacts both the dynamics in the field and their interpretation of this experience.

Echoing this sentiment, Emerson (2001) argues that in both sociology and anthropology

this emphasis on observation and uncritical acceptance of a 'generalized author' was a common

feature of ethnographies. Emerson adds that ethnographers were heavily influenced by the realist

or a positivist perspective which rests on the assumptions that observational field work "involved

straightforwardly and 'objectively' looking at and recording objects that possessed pre-

established, fixed and invariant meanings" (20). Therefore, an astute ethnographer regardless of

their social position would be able to read and understand these social processes like a cultural

text.

However, the rise of identity politics during the 1960's and 1970's in the U.S. had a

'spillover' effect whereby group identities were being articulated and the once unquestioned

social position of the researcher was being called into question (Lassiter, 2005). Scholars began

to challenge the positivist assumptions underlying ethnographic methodology and problematize

the power dynamics-based on gender, race, social class -between the researcher and the group

under study. These challenges were coupled with counterarguments that claimed reality or the

social world is not a "pre-existing, objective entity and representation of a more or less accurate

mirroring of that entity; rather, reality and representation are related reflexively" (Emerson,

2001, 20). This reflexive approach called into question the researcher's social position and what

impact it may have on their ability to establish ethnographic authority. Pushing back against this

positivist interpretation of ethnographic methodology, numerous scholars argue that a

researcher's status as insider or outsider –along lines of race, gender, social class, and

generation- matter (Duneier, 1994; Lareau, 2011; Kligman and Verdery, 2011) and significantly impact their experiences in and interpretations of their field research.

Outsider Status and Race

A researcher's outsider status based on race can create a multifaceted dilemma for the researcher. Regardless of interpretive accuracy the outsider's text will be, at least to some extent, an account of the 'other' (Emerson 2001). In addition, the researcher's outsider status may complicate their ability to gain access to the field especially regarding issues of distrust (Baca Zinn, 2001). Furthermore, if the researcher's social position includes being a member of the dominant racial group, this further complicates the dynamics within the field. These interracial dynamics pose a significant challenge for the researcher in that any 'negative' characterizations of the group being studied run the risk of reinforcing the dominate stereotypes of these subordinated groups (Lareau, 2011). However, a lack of analytical rigor devoted to issues regarding race will likely receive scathing critiques as being insufficient or uninformed.

Lareau (2011) argues that she "takes the position that it is possible for outsiders of a group to study across boundaries" (10). Lareau's research examines both black and White parents and the strategies they develop in an effort to engage in their child's educational experience. Lareau's challenge seemed to be in her (mis)reading and interpretation of the racialized differences in her data. Lareau acknowledged that among her middle-class black respondents "parents sought to have their children develop a positive self-image that specifically included their racial identity" (240). Interestingly, none of her White middle-class respondents make similar claims. Yet, she concludes that 'race' does not play a significant role in how her black and White respondents develop their parental involvement strategies. Here, Lareau's status as an outsider may have hindered her ability to adequately assess how race played an important

40

role in shaping these parents' involvement strategy. Therefore, scholars need to key into certain cues (e.g. language, gestures) that are 'stand-ins' for or act as racial signifiers.

Duneier's (1994) study examining street vendors in New York City is also designed as a cross-racial analysis. While Lareau was quite confident that her research and data would not be significantly diminished due to her outsider status, Duneier differs in his self-reflexive analysis of being an outsider. Duneier states that "one of the most notorious gaps in American society is the difference between people related to race and the discourse revolving around this volatile issue" (Duneier, 168). For Duneier, among the varying differences between him and the group he was researching, race was the most divisive factor and bridging this gap would take tremendous analytical work. Part of this work for Duneier was establishing a sense of trust among the street vendors who were predominantly Black, poor and mostly 'unhoused' men (Duneier 1994).

Macleod (1987) argues that the problem of distrust can be experienced simultaneously as an insider and outsider. MacLeod, a White, middle-class professor, studied a group of black working-class high school boys (Brothers) and a similar aged White working-class group of boys (Hallway Hangers). While MacLeod was trying to gain the trust of the Brothers, he ran the risk of being perceived as a traitor or 'non-insider' to the Hallway Hangers, especially given their high level of animosity toward the African American group. MacLeod's experience highlights how a researcher's outsider and insider statuses, though a fixed category in terms of racial difference are both tentative and fragile relationships capable of breaking down at any given time.

Insider Status and Race

Being a racial insider of the group under study has many advantages. Lacy (2007) argues that as an insider a researcher may be better able to tease out where seemingly 'race neutral' acts are 'racially coded' socialization efforts between parents and their children. Lacy, examining the identity construction of the Black middle-class, finds that they seek to construct a specific race and class-based identity for their children by enrolling them in "Jack and Jill". Lacy finds that Jack and Jill is "an exclusive black social organization…[designed to] provide upper-middle-class black children with the educational, cultural, and social experiences traditionally reserved for upper-middle-class-white children" (171). As a racial insider, Lacy was keenly aware of the dual boundary work that this enrollment signaled. On the one hand, membership in this organization signals to other Black folks the parents' desire to stay connected to the Black community or at least Black spaces. On the other hand, enrollment in this organization does the class-boundary work of signaling a 'well-to-do' upper-middle-class status. Outsiders studying this group might easily misinterpret this membership as 'only' a class-based strategy.

Patillo's (1999) racial insider status also enables her to pick up on the context specific 'racially coded' symbols, cues and acts of her participants that is designed to signal a particular type of response from their interactants. Patillo, studying both the Black middle- and working-class communities in Chicago, found that community activists would deploy communicative 'rituals' of call-and-response that are specific to the Black church at large secular public meetings. As a racial insider, Patillo understood the historical import of the call-and-response tradition and was culturally well suited to interpret the 'caller's intended response from his interlocutors. Outsiders unfamiliar with this strategy deriving from the Black church could misinterpret its function in this secular public space.

However, one's racial insider status does not make them immune from mishandling their ethnographic authority. For example, Anderson (1999) in his book, *Code of the Street,* received a significant amount of push back for oversimplifying his African American participants as either being 'street' or 'decent' people. Anderson's lack of nuance and insight into the potential fluidity of his 'decent' and 'street' categories emboldened some of his critics to describe his work as treating "these flexible cultural orientations as fixed repertoires…[and] leaves unexamined the social mechanisms and paths whereby different persons drift toward this or that end of the spectrum, and what facilitates or hinders their sliding alongside it" (Wacquant 2002, 1488). As a racial insider, Anderson may have fallen victim to the moral dilemma of wanting to keep the 'decent' group of Black people pristine in his presentation of them and not reproduce the pervasive racialization of Black people as 'dangerous', 'uncouth', and ultimately 'problems' for society.

'Overcoming' Insider/Outsider Status

Duneier, a former student of sociologist Howard Becker, states that "most social processes have a structure that comes close to ensuring that a certain set of situations will arise over time," which Duneier refers to as the 'Becker Principle' (Duneier, 173). For Duneier, if one is meticulous in their observations, they will be able to capture these social processes despite the challenges presented as being an outsider. The significance of the Becker principle is that it affords outsiders this insight primarily because its perspective is from that of an outsider. A major limitation of the Becker principle is that it does not automatically shed light on why members of the group engage in these social, often racially specific processes. Nor is the Becker principle able to adequately interpret the group's actions. Therefore, Duneier early on in his research was not able to capture the racially coded 'symbols and meanings' that were central to

the street vendors' experience. However, Duneier later learned after he had built a rapport with Hakim the specific meanings of Hakim's actions.

The Becker principal also does not address the intellectual (and often moral) dilemma of the insider's status, particularly that of the Black intellectual. African American researchers (as well as researchers of color) are often presented with the dilemma of discovering 'negative' data about the group they are examining and needing to present it within a larger contextual society that consistently spews inaccurate negative claims regarding this group. The Black intellectual must navigate this dilemma by providing context, a nuanced argument that sidesteps reproducing old 'tropes' and debunks distorted racialized claims of other researchers that often are thinly layered racist attacks. Therefore, if ethnographic authority is able to be established, the text should express the dialectical process of social actors' actions and the ethnographer's interpretation, while also self-reflexively being candid about the differing dynamics in the field especially as these relates to the researchers' social position.

In the following chapter, I examine the diverging strategies of how Black parents racialized experience is incorporated into the parental involvement strategies they develop. However, the school's adherence to a racially colorblind ideology hinders teachers and school officials from 'seeing' race and therefore they do not recognize the centrality of race in Black parents' parental involvement strategies. Instead of working collectively in a partnership, Black parents and schools' differing interpretations and understandings of race are moving them in different directions.

Chapter 3

Diverging Strategies: Unreconciled Strivings between African American Families and Schools

Constructing a durable parent-teacher partnership is one of the most important relationships impacting middle-school students' educational experiences. For parents, learning how to navigate the academic landscape on behalf of their child is a skill they can acquire from this parent-teacher partnership. For example, parents trying to construct a University of California (UC) pathway for their child need to know that taking Algebra in 8th grade (middle school) is recommended for the University of California schools (UCs) because it serves as a prerequisite for the math classes needed in high school to be eligible for a UC. Therefore, constructing partnerships with teachers in 6th and 7th grade is important.

However, the durability of this partnership becomes tenuous when it is constructed across racial lines. Schools adhere to a colorblind ideology that actively refuses to 'see' race and class differences; they expect parents to play this supporting partnership role based on a 'normative' White middle-class involvement experience. Yet, African American parents grapple with a distinct set of challenges that sit outside of this normative White middle-class experience. For African American parents, *race* plays a central role in shaping how they participate in their child's educational experience. Along these lines, unreconciled aspirations among African American parents and teachers are moving them in different directions. These diverging strategies create the initial cracks that can cause an irreparable break in this parent-teacher partnership.

The Academic Landscape: Circulating Informative Scripts at William Edward

Navigating the academic landscape can be daunting, confusing and an arduous task for all parents as their 'role' and responsibilities continually shift during the different stages of children's educational experiences (i.e. elementary, middle school, and high school). At William Edward, parents must quickly learn the best practices to advocate for their child's placement in academically rigorous classes and scour the school's website to gather additional academic information. Parents must also begin having college readiness discussions with teachers, counselors and doing broader searches on the internet to understand the complexities of constructing a college pathway for their children which begins in middle school (and sometimes even elementary).

Enacting each of the strategies above represents a small fraction of the vast role parents must play within the academic landscape. Therefore, it is incumbent upon school staff and teachers to discuss the myriad expectations they have of parents as they engage in their child's education. William Edward formally disseminates information to parents regarding the academic landscape when parents first enter the school at New Parent Summer Orientation and then annually at Back-to-School Night.

William Edward's New Parent Summer Orientation is a two-day event that accommodates the more than 600 parents that attend. Orientation is for parents of an incoming sixth grader and provides information regarding the myriad ways parents are expected to participate in building a parent-teacher partnership. All of the parents are gathered together in the auditorium and are greeted by several school officials who explain the overarching mission of the school and expectations of the parent-teacher partnership. Then over the course of the next

two days, parents are divided into smaller groups in a color-coded system based on last name and their child's class schedule. Each small group takes turns visiting with their children's teacher as a way to establish a rapport prior to the official school year.

At the annual Back-to-School night, similar parent-teacher partnership messages are reiterated for sixth, seventh and eighth grade parents. It's important to ensure that your child is developing good study habits and investing in their academic trajectory. Back-To-School (BTS) night generally takes place at the beginning of the school year and is structured like a full school day but truncated into a three-hour event. During the event, parents get a chance to experience their child's daily class schedule at an accelerated pace. Parents are encouraged to visit each teacher's room on their child's class schedule. I attended three consecutive years of BTS and it was common for parents to inquire about homework assignments, studying techniques for their child, and making jokes about how they didn't remember being this tired running from class to class when they were in school. Regarding teachers, however, I consistently did not hear any discussions regarding the grievance process in any of the classrooms I visited.

Grievance Process: Unequal distribution and access

For parents, a critical aspect of the parent-teacher partnership is being able to have their grievances addressed by a teacher or school official. Parents' grievances tend to stem from problems in the classroom between the teachers and students relating to grades, confiscated possessions (i.e. cell phones), and for parents of Black or brown students, complaints regarding racial mistreatment. Yet, William Edward does not formally distribute information during New Parent Summer Orientation or Back to School Night regarding what the grievance process is for parents, that is, what the proper authoritative channels to use are in case there is a

'misunderstanding' or miscommunication between student/teacher or teacher/parent arises. Distributing this information would alleviate two central concerns for parents: who should the parent talk to about a potential incident and what resources are available to provide some support during this process. Access to this information is never disseminated in a formal or public setting like BTS or Parent Summer Orientation. This information is divulged in informal settings like the main office or during a hallway conversation. Therefore, the distribution and access to these strategies is unequal. Parents that are granted this information individually or that possess the social capital to access it have a much better chance of constructing 'durable' parent-teacher partnerships than parents who do not have access to this information.

Intervention – Sounding the Alarm on Missing Information

Mrs. Tucker, who is a White school official at William Edward with twenty-five years of school experience, was concerned that her school (and schools across the state) were not doing a good job of communicating their expectations of parents coupled with a robust set of involvement strategies to meet these challenges. Therefore, Mrs. Tucker wrote an Op-Ed in a widely circulated California newspaper to sound the alarm. In the article, Mrs. Tucker argued that parents want to be involved and that schools need to do a better job articulating what a successful parent-teacher partnership looks like. One of the areas Mrs. Tucker referred to is a dissemination of information describing what the grievance process for parents entails.

Mrs. Tucker published this Op-Ed prior to my research at William Edward. However, in an informal interview with Mrs. Tucker, she informed me that one of the main reasons for publishing the article was based on her experience, particularly with African American parents. Throughout her extensive school experience, Mrs. Tucker said she found that, across race,

parents who have had a 'negative' educational experience while they were growing up tend to carry a distrust of the school system now that they are parents. For African American parents, Mrs. Tucker said that their distrust is to be heightened when there are no school officials in the room that 'look' like them. Mrs. Tucker, unfortunately, retired the following year after this discussion because budget cuts were threatening to impact her retirement benefits.

Cultivating the Colorblind Ideology: Equal partners leaving race and class at the door

Navigating the academic landscape also includes participating as an 'equal partner' with teachers during children's educational experiences. At William Edward teachers and school officials, in accordance with federal mandates, are pushing to have all parents and teachers act as equal partners. William Edward circulates their equal partnership expectations for teachers and parents by sending home to each parent the 'Parent-School-Compact'. The Parent-School-Compact (see Figure 3.1) is a document that lists sets of strategies for parents and teachers to enact to help build a strong parent-teacher partnership. William Edward requires that parents sign and return this document to the school to indicate they have been informed and will adhere to the expectations.

At first glance, these strategies appear useful for the school and parents to adopt. However, the strategies listed on the Compact for the school to enact treat the diverse group of students and their parents that William Edward serves as a monolithic group occupying the same racial and social class backgrounds. For example, the school pledges to enact very general and nonspecific strategies like:

Figure 3.1 – Parent-School-Compact

As a parent I pledge to: (20 USC 6318[d][1]) (20 USC 6318[d][2])
- Provide a quiet study time at home, encourage good study habits, review homework and assignments, and ensure my child has all materials necessary to comp assignments.
- Talk with my child about his/her activities every day.
- Read all notices and information. Sign and return notices as directed.
- Know how my child is progressing by reviewing the planner, attending conferences, looking at schoolwork and progress/report cards, communicating with teach and being involved with the school through volunteering, participating in my child's class, and observing classroom activities.
- Support the school's Code of Student Conduct, cell phone policy, iPad policy, and dress code.
- Limit and supervise my child's TV watching, electronic games and recreational use of the Internet.
- Ensure my child reads at least twenty minutes a day.
- Inform the school when we see students engaged in inappropriate activities.
- Provide the school with current contact information.

_____   _____
Parent Signature   Date

As a student I pledge to:
- Come to school with my homework completed and the materials necessary to complete assignments.
- Talk to my parents about things I am learning in school every day.
- Give my parent/guardian all notices and information. Return signed notices as directed.
- Use my planner to record assignments and important information.
- Ask for help when I don't understand something.
- Follow my school's Code of Student Conduct, cell phone policy, iPad policy, and dress code.
- Limit my TV watching, electronic games and recreational use of the Internet.
- Read a minimum of twenty minutes a day.
- Let an adult know if there is a problem that may cause harm to myself or others.

_____   _____
Student Signature   Date

_____   _____
Homeroom Teacher Name   Grade

As a school we pledge to: (20 USC 6318[d][2])
- Provide high-quality curriculum and instructions aligned with CA Standards.
- Provide high expectations in an encouraging and supportive manner.
- Maintain on-going communication with parent's regarding child's progress.
- Provide additional assistance to students who are performing below benchmarks.
- Participate in professional development to improve teaching and learning.
- Create a welcoming and positive learning environment at our school.
- Talk with students and parents about the school's mission and vision.
- Ensure a safe and orderly learning environment.
- Support the partnership among parent(s), student, and staff.
- Provide appropriate training for teachers, staff, community and parents.
- Provide reasonable access to staff during parent conferences, Back to School Night, and Open House.

_____   _____
Principal Signature   Date

We promise to work together to carry out this agreement.

Maintain on-going communication with parents

Create a welcoming and learning environment at our school

Talk with students and parents about the school's mission and vision

Support the partnership among parent(s), student, and staff

Each of these strategies lacks any reference to the diverse group of families that William Edward serves. William Edward's refusal to include any references to race or the strategies the school will employ to meet these challenges is an important signal of the school's adherence to a colorblind ideology. The strategies William Edward creates for itself are filtered through the colorblind ideology and reading them one cannot tell if the families that William Edward serves are racially diverse or racially homogeneous. For Black parents, William Edward's cultivation of a colorblind ideology is problematic because African American parents grapple with a distinct set of challenges that sit outside of the involvement experience of their White counterparts.

The strategies that William Edward provides for parents elide the well documented challenges faced by different racial/ethnic groups, like African Americans, such as feeling unwelcome or being in a hostile school climate (Howard and Reynolds 2008). For example, William Edward could, at a minimum, incorporate language such as "We celebrate our diverse group of families that we serve and encourage you to help us develop additional ways we can promote our inclusivity". However, William Edward does not promote a similar strategy because it would undercut their attempt at cultivating a colorblind ideology within the school. Therefore, specific descriptors like diversity, race and even social class are all filtered out of colorblind ideology documents like the Parent-School-Compact.

Similar to the dissemination of information at BTS and New Parent Orientation, the Parent-School-Compact also does not mention the grievance process for parents. As a formal

document that gets mailed to every parent in the school, the Parent-School-Compact would be an appropriate opportunity to incorporate these grievance strategies. Doing so would ensure the equal distribution of and equal access to these strategies. However, these strategies remain hidden and their distribution and access is unequal.

Racial Monitoring: Black Parents Guarding Against Racial Mistreatment

The legacy of racial discrimination within schools has fostered a deep skepticism among many African Americans of being treated fairly by teachers and school officials. African American parents, therefore, deploy what I term *racial monitoring* strategies to guard against racial mistreatment of their children at school. Racial monitoring strategies are born out of a racialized experience African Americans endure as they interact with educational institutions.

For example, Gloria, an African American teacher's aide in LAUSD and mother with two daughters attending William Edward, articulated how the legacy of discrimination extends back to her grandmother's experience in education. Gloria reports that the intergenerational transmission of strategies passed down from her grandmother now inform Gloria's strategies with her kids. In our interview, Gloria states that:

> G: My grandmother used to be a teacher and she told me right off the bat, you watch your back if you're gonna work for LAUSD
>
> A: Oh she was a, she was a teacher in LAUSD?
>
> G: uh huh. And it was very hard for her back in the 60s and 70s being a black woman and educated…So she always told me just keep your eyes open. So I do.

Gloria explained that her grandmother encountered what she described as unfair treatment due to her race. Gloria's grandmother believed it was important to warn both Gloria's mother and subsequently Gloria of the possibility they too might encounter similar racialized treatment

within schools. Therefore, they should enact the racial monitoring strategy of "keep[ing] [their] eyes open" or being on the lookout for any racial mistreatment. Gloria says she now warns her two daughters of the possibility of being treated unfairly due to their race. She also tells her two daughters if they encounter this treatment, they should always let Gloria know so she can intervene on their behalf.

For Gloria, and many African American parents, having this frank and often painful discussion with their child about race and institutional discrimination and violence is referred to colloquially as 'the talk' (Coates 2015, Collins 1998, West 2001). The talk is a conversation (or conversations) between Black parents and their child and is a way to prepare 'for the day to come' (Collins 1998) when they might experience racial discrimination or violence merely for being black. The talk is a way for Black parents to communicate to their child that in certain spaces, they'll become hyper-visible to authorities because African Americans are racialized as a problem. The contours of the talk are vast as African-American parents try to prepare their child for these interactions that span across institutions like the criminal justice system, educational institutions, the medical field as well as during day-to-day public interactions or simply driving in their car (Coates 2015, West 2001).

Dual Disposition and Navigating the Academic Landscape

African American parents must navigate a school system that does not necessarily operate in their interest, but they must rely on this institution to have a positive impact on their child's life chances (Frankenburg 1993). As a result, African American parents must develop what I call a *dual disposition* as they participate in their children's educational experience. A dual disposition requires parents to simultaneously enact 'racial monitoring' strategies to guard

against children's racial mistreatment at school and navigate the complexities of the academic landscape. Dual disposition is not just 'extra', additional work. It creates a qualitatively different parental involvement experience.

For example, Mrs. Gilbert, an African American mother, deployed a racial monitoring strategy by requesting to directly observe the interactions in her son's classroom. Mrs. Gilbert discussed with a school counselor some reports from her son about not being treated fairly in class by Mr. Taylor, a White teacher in his mid-forties. After expressing her concerns, Mrs. Gilbert was granted permission to sit in and observe her son's class and monitor Mr. Taylor's actions while she was there. African American parents, like Mrs. Gilbert, find it necessary to intervene when there are racialized, educational problems, which teachers simultaneously fail to recognize. Thus, racial monitoring strategies are rendered invisible and not recognized as a form of positive parental engagement in the teacher-parent partnership. Yet, Mrs. Gilbert, unlike her White parental counterparts, has to enact a dual disposition of racially monitoring teachers' interactions with her son, while also trying to navigate the complexities of the academic landscape on his behalf.

Dual Disposition on Campus Cultural Day

In 2014, William Edward decided to host an after-school event in their Library called 'Campus Cultural Day'. Campus Cultural Day was constructed as a mini-museum that would expose students to a wide variety of cultures around the world. William Edward asked parents to attend the event with their child in an effort to engage in their child's educational experience. William Edward advertised the event to parents by hanging up signs near the main office,

posting the event on the school's website and including it on the monthly calendars that are disbursed to parents via the electronic newsletter.

Despite the emphasis on celebrating diversity, the day after the event I fielded a phone call from an African American parent who was very upset because she observed what she believed was unfair treatment towards her son and his friend during Campus Cultural Day. The parent began the conversation by saying:

> "I'm not sure who I should be talking to about this, but I wanted to make sure the school was aware".

The parent's uncertainty about how to begin the process of having her grievance addressed reflects the school's omission of formally distributing this important grievance process information. The parent explained that she attended the school event called 'Campus Cultural Day' with her son and his friend, who she said were both African American. At the event, the parent observed the facilitator who was "an older White woman," admonish a few of the black kids for touching some of the exhibits. However, the parent noticed that when the White students were touching other exhibits, nothing was said to them. The parent ended our conversation by reiterating she didn't know what to do, but "she wanted to make sure the school is aware this was going on". After we hung up, I informed one of the school officials about the parent's grievance, but to my knowledge nothing additional was done.

Here we see how African American parents' dual disposition creates a qualitatively different involvement experience than their White parental counterparts. This parent brought her student to the afterschool event, Campus Cultural Day. At the event, parents and students are meant to become academically and culturally enriched as they participate. However, African

American parents while engaging academically must also enact racial monitoring strategies to guard against the racial mistreatment of their child. After observing mistreatment of her son and not having any formal instructions on how the grievance process works, the parent on the phone had to enact an impromptu strategy of calling the school to report the teacher's infractions. The parent reiterating that she did not know with whom to talk about this, but she wanted to make sure the school was aware indicates both the importance of the situation and the need on behalf of the school to formally disseminate this information to parents. Further, this racial mistreatment experienced by the students and observed by the parent undermines parental enthusiasm and can stymie any subsequent participation on behalf of the parent, the child and the child's African American friend.

Moreover, the racial monitoring strategy deployed by the parent gets rendered invisible as these infractions are not systematized or cataloged in any meaningful way. The school official that I informed listened intently to me and after I finished describing the event, the school official said "alright," gave a brief sigh and then left the main office. I do not know if the teacher in charge of the event received any reprimands for her behavior. However, there were not any formal steps taken on behalf of the school to systematize these infractions or make visible Black parents' otherwise invisible racial monitoring strategies.

Hypervisibility and Uneven Suspension Rates

Differences in sanctions doled out to students of a different race for similar infractions was a theme I picked up on during my time at William Edward. African American parent's racial monitoring strategies made visible an otherwise invisible bifurcated disciplinary system. For instance, in 2012-13 the average suspension rates across all races at William Edward was 2.6%.

However, among African Americans it was 4.5%, among Latino students it was 3%, and for White and Asian students each group was less than 1%[20]. During the 2013-14 academic year suspension rates dropped across all categories down to 1% percent for Latinos; less than 1% for Whites and Asians; and 3.2 for African Americans (see Table 2.1). While suspension rates decreased across all racial/ethnic groups, the suspension rate continued to be highest among African American students. Moreover, even though African Americans only make up about 25 percent of the student population they had three times the suspension rate of any other racial/ethnic group on campus.

Table 2.1 Suspension rates by race at William Edward

Racial group	2012-2013	2013-2014
African American	4.5%	3.2%
Latino	3%	1%
White	≤ 1%	≤ 1%
Asian	≤ 1%	≤ 1%
All students	2.6%	1.3%
LAUSD	2.5%	1.5%

Source: William Edward Middle School

The issue of the suspensions of their children came up in my discussions with African American parents. For instance, Gloria echoed these racially disproportionate suspension rates:

> A: So, I've seen recently that the number of suspensions-
> G: uh huh (with a smirk on her face)
> A: and in particular-

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[20] However, it is important to point out that the district doesn't provide the disaggregated data which would hover around 1% for whites and Asians and even less for Pacific Islander and American Indian. They only report the categories Black, Latino, and All students.

G: the rates? And who was the most? Who was the most? We were.
A: It was black kids-
G: Exactly. And why is that?
A: (Shrug shoulders) I don't know.
G: ...you can see how some teachers interact with the kids. Some of them are culturally sensitive and some of them are not. I'll put it that way. Some of them are culturally sensitive [now *speaking slowly*] some of them are NOT.

Gloria speaks very candidly about her concern that some teachers may not treat all groups of students fairly. Her insider/outsider status as both a teacher's aide and a mother with two children attending William Edward provides her with an important vantage point to understand the complexities from both the role of educator and parent. Further, Gloria's insider status and knowledge of the suspension rates also emboldened her to flip the roles of the interview and turn me into the respondent when she inquired "And who was the most? Who was the most?" to see if I knew how disproportionate the outcomes are for African-American students.

Gloria's statement that some of the teachers are culturally sensitive and "some of them are NOT" becomes even more significant when we look at the racial/ethnic ratio of teachers to students. Roughly 75 percent of teachers at William Edward are White. This is contrasted with a student body that is nearly 70 percent Latino and black. Gloria's claim about 'cultural sensitivity' is a slightly veiled way of communicating how the intersectionality of culture and race impacts or creates a dichotomous punitive lens. I observed differences in school officials' ability to 'see' and react to two racially different groups' actions during lunchtime. As I discuss in the next section, one group of students, mostly students of color and male, encounter high levels of surveillance although acting in accord with school policy.

Hypervisibility During Lunchtime

During lunch period, all students have 30 minutes to get their food, eat and if there is any remaining time, they are allowed to get up and converse amongst each other as long as they remain within the cafeteria or the adjacent outdoor large grassy lunch area surrounding the cafeteria. Students are not allowed to meet up or roam in the hallways during lunch period at all. While socializing in groups is permitted, when students form into 'crowds,' it tends to attract the attention of adults on supervision as they are responsible to ensure the safety of the students and break up any altercation that may occur. Because the campus grounds are so spread out, the school officials have an area that they are responsible for and a radio (walkie-talkie). The radios enable each supervisor to communicate with the other supervisors as well as the main office in case of an emergency. In the main office, we are able to hear all of the communications over the radios because the main frame intercom is located in the main office. It is not uncommon for one supervisor to request that another supervisor check out what students are doing if it is outside of their coverage area. For example we may hear "7 to 4, can you see what that group of students is doing in the quad area there?" 4 then clarifies "you mean the ones in front of the textbook room here?" "yeah that group". "10-4". By stating "10-4" the interlocutor is letting their interactant know that they understood the request and they are terminating the interaction so they can fulfill the request.

On a relatively slow day during lunch period I hear an unrecognizable female voice come over the intercom. "There is a large group of students gathering over by the gate. I'm not really sure what they are up to. Anyone able to see what those students are doing there by the gate"? The request that someone check up on a large gathering of students is pretty routine, but the absence of the requester to use their numerical identifier is a bit unusual. The campus security

guard, Mr. Turner, an African American male in his late forties, early fifties then responds, "This is 5, I'm on it".

During the next period, the security guard walks into the main office and Mrs. Tate follows up on the lunch time call by asking Mr. Turner "what was going on out there"? Mr. Turner responds "nothing, the kids were just having a rap battle. It was nothin'." As he leaves the main office, Justin, an African American 8th grade student and teaching assistant, turns towards Mrs. Tate and begins to describe what took place. Justin says there were just a few of them out there and names about 5 or 6 other students. From the TA's report there were about 7-8 students in the group, three of whom are also TA's throughout the school. I can confirm based on knowing who the TA's are that at least 4 of them were African American. I was not able to discern the racial makeup of the rest of the group from the TA's recounting of the story.

Here the security guard quickly dismissed what was initially being reported as a potential disturbance/infraction as merely being a "rap battle. It was nothin'". A rap battle, coming out of hip-hop culture, generally consists of two people freestyling lyrics against one another in an attempt to outwit and out-boast the other freestyler. The two people tend to stand within a circle of spectators called a cypher and whoever gets more cheers/applause from the crowd is deemed the winner[21].

Mr. Turner's insight into what these students were doing and their innocuous performance was very important in this situation. A school official approaching this situation not knowing what a rap battle is may have interpreted the students' performance as being confrontational and/or a prelude to a physical altercation. Mr. Turner acted in the 'culturally

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[21] For a historical account of the various aspects of Hip-Hop including the 'cypher' (sometimes spelled cipher) see Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A history of the hip-hop generation*.

sensitive' manner that Gloria described in her interview. Even though the students and by extension their behavior became hyper-visible causing concern and anxiety for the supervising adult, the officer's social location equipped him with the insight and cultural understanding to assess that the students were not breaking any rules and therefore deserved to be left alone. However, if a different school official would have intervened the outcome could have been very different for the group of boys.

This group of mostly Black boys' biggest infraction was that they were standing too close to the gate in the permitted lunch area. In the context of attending a school where black students are three times as likely to get suspended as any other racial/ethnic group, this hypervisibilty is a powerful force that can transform something that "was nothing" and turn it into a suspicious act that warrants further surveillance.

Hidden Scripts: The Invisible Evaluation of Unproductive Parents

The vast omission by school officials of any formal or structured discussion regarding productive strategies for parents to use to have their grievances addressed creates a context where acquisition of this information is unequal. At William Edward, teachers' evaluation of parents' participation is based on sets of unwritten involvement strategies or what I refer to as 'hidden scripts.' This invisible evaluative system is, in part, what Mrs. Tucker was sounding the alarm over.

Hidden scripts are sets of unwritten involvement strategies that only get distributed informally by teachers and school officials. Hidden scripts can take the form of what I refer to as 'collaborative,' which are conducive for dialogue and a tool for repairing communication breakdowns in the parent-teacher partnership. However, hidden scripts can also be 'combative,'

which constrain interactions and tend to rupture the parent-teacher partnership. Teachers use these dual categories to evaluate parents' participation and distinguish what kind of participant – read parent- they are. For teachers, either you are a supportive (i.e. productive) participant in the parent-teacher partnership or you are an unsupportive (e.g. unproductive) participant. Only during my interviews with teachers did I hear about combative strategies that parents should try to avoid.

For example, during lunch period, I was invited by a few teachers to join and ask them any questions I had while they quickly ate. Realizing that I had heard from many teachers and administrators about what constitutes a 'supportive' parent and not much regarding what parents should try to avoid, I began our conversation with this inquiry:

A: What's your definition of an unsupportive parent?

Mrs. Johnson: [brief chuckle] the ones that want to only argue with you and try to defend their child even after you tell them all of the things the child did wrong.

Mr. Stafford: [first looking at Mrs. Johnson and then turning back towards me] the ones that are non-responsive to your phone calls home…[like] when teachers call home to tell the parents that their student is not doing the homework and is not doing well and the parent does nothing to participate on their end, that is highly frustrating.

I have observed Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Stafford speak at several school events such as Back-to-School night and New Parent Orientation. During these informative events, I have not heard any discussion regarding an unsupportive parent nor have I heard about strategies that parents should avoid while trying to have their grievances addressed.

Similarly, Mrs. Ellis who is the only African American counselor[22] at William Edward, utilized a story to convey her definition of an unsupportive parent. After being asked 'what is your idea of an unsupportive parent' Mrs. Ellis responded with

> "Ohhh…an unsupportive parent are the parents who, okay perfect example, so today I had a student not doing very well in school so the parents say so what can we do, what can we do, can you help me, I'm like sure… so I started putting their child on a daily progress report… today we're having a meeting about the child and we were talking about maybe different [classroom] placement for them and the parent was like 'you know my child has gotten a really good friend bases and I don't really want to move them into a different class'. This is very frustrating because you ask for help and then *you don't want to follow through on your end*."

For Mrs. Ellis, unsupportive parents are the ones that 'don't want to follow through on their end'. Mrs. Ellis even goes as far as to label this a 'perfect example'. Here we see that Mrs. Ellis gives what she considers to be a great solution to the parent. However, Mrs. Ellis becomes frustrated when the parent tries to co-construct this solution by voicing their concern about removing the child from their group of friends which from the parent's perspective may serve as a useful support system in the class. Although Mrs. Ellis is offering what she believes to be useful and sound advice, it is important to note that the parent 'not following through' is actually the parent not passively or obediently acquiescing to Mrs. Ellis' suggestion.

Across the examples given from Mrs. Ellis, Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Stafford, there begins to emerge a conflation of a 'bad' parent on behalf of the teachers. The teachers lump together parents who are physically present at the school, 'combative' parents who are not present/not involved, and parents who are unresponsive. This lumping together is

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[22] Mrs. Ellis left William Edward in 2013 for a counseling job out-of-state. After Mrs. Ellis' departure there were not any African American counselors working in William Edward's counseling office.

significant because parents who are engaged yet use strategies that are not 'deemed' conducive to the partnership process are viewed and treated the same way as if they are not engaging in the process at all. Further, teachers and administrators' comments and stories were littered with social cues highlighting inappropriate and unproductive strategies that parents should try to avoid. Yet, these messages were not formally discussed or made explicit to parents. Across all teachers the distribution of these 'unproductive strategies' was only disbursed in more intimate or less formal settings. This selective distribution of knowledge creates a context where acquisition of this information is unequal and leads to differing parental involvement strategies.

Enacting a Combative Script

In lieu of formal strategies or the hidden scripts, some African American parents "read" the school secretary in terms of a racialized and gendered script and interpret her actions as signs of empathy. For example, Mrs. Raymond, an African American parent in her mid- to late forties, walked into the main office inquiring about how she could get her daughter's cell phone back. Mrs. Raymond began by saying:

> "Hi, I need to speak with Ms. Dixon [an eighth grade, White, English teacher]. She took my daughter's phone away yesterday, that's the only way my daughter can get a hold of me. She didn't have the right to do that. Is she [the teacher] available right now?" Mrs. Tate, the school secretary, informed Mrs. Raymond that Ms. Dixon was in class, but she could fill out an appointment form or wait until after Ms. Dixon's lunch period and then speak with her about the phone. Mrs. Raymond seemingly upset, left the main office, then returned a few minutes later, and waited.

When the secretary saw the teacher, Ms. Dixon, come in to the office, she walked towards her and said "Ms. Dixon, this parent" but before the secretary could finish, Mrs. Raymond chastised Ms. Dixon for several minutes for taking away the student's phone and embarrassing the student in class. Finally, Mrs. Tate intervened and said:

"Mom, I know you are upset but at least let Ms. Dixon explain to you why she took the phone away in the first place". Mrs. Dixon walks over to one of the chairs near the door and sits down and Mrs. Raymond does as well. They continue with a quieter discussion, no longer in earshot.

At the end of their discussion Mrs. Dixon apologizes for inconveniencing Mrs. Raymond by not having a way to contact her daughter. Mrs. Raymond then acknowledges that her daughter can sometimes "be disruptive" and she apologized for not "hearing you [Mrs. Dixon] out first."

Racialized Scripts: Black Parents 'Reading' Mrs. Tate

Mrs. Tate's race, class and gender play an important role in the way she divulges the collaborative script to address the parent's initial concern. As tensions are already high, Mrs. Tate deliberately leads in with a gendered signifier of 'Mom'. Invoking mom works to (re)affirm and recognize Mrs. Raymond's position as an African American parent concerned about the wellbeing of her child.

Mrs. Tate as a black woman and middle-aged school secretary also embodies a racialized script that gets read as a sign of 'racial empathy'. Mrs. Tate's physical presence likely lessens the parent's concerns about being treated unfairly in this situation. Mrs. Tate's strategy of eloquently mixing gender signifiers with racial empathy and a

collaborative script, positions her as an indispensable intersectional broker in the main office.

Mrs. Tate's extension of this hidden script to the parent was critical to reducing the growing disconnect in communication between the parent and teacher. However, weeks after the situation was resolved, there were not any steps taken on the part of the teacher or other school officials to codify these grievance-based strategies or distribute them in a more formal and wide-spread manner to parents. For example, after a similar parent-teacher confrontation in the main office, Mrs. Tate stated that "If the opportunity presents itself I'm gonna try to tell them they shouldn't do that." Here Mrs. Tate is referring to the parent not allowing the teacher to fully state what her complaint was regarding the student before the parent tries to defend her child's actions. Mrs. Tate's declaration here encompasses an important and interlocking aspect at William Edward that contributes to the breakdown in communication among parents-teachers. School officials, teachers and staff do not systematize or disperse intervention techniques in a formal or widespread manner after they observe breakdowns in the parent-teacher partnership. Therefore, solutions to these problems always operate on an individual, after-the-fact level. When this occurs parents again have unequal access to this information.

Dead Ends and Pitfalls: Navigating the landscape

African American parents, in lieu of grievance strategies from the school, act as information channels (Coleman 1988) for each other. Therefore, African American parents circulate combative and collaborative scripts among each other. Sometimes, a parent deploys a combative script based on the recommendation of another parent. Unlike the previous outcome,

combative strategies can also cause an irreparable break in the parent-teacher partnership. These ruptures reduce the amount of social capital parents accumulate during their child's educational experience and can limit their effectiveness of navigating the academic landscape going forward.

For instance, Mrs. Allen, an African American working-class mother in her late thirties to early forties, came into the main office to speak to her son's history teacher, Mr. June, a White male roughly in his late forties-early fifties. According to Mrs. Allen, she had not received a return phone call about her son's grades after leaving Mr. June a message "over a week ago". Mrs. Allen interpreted the delayed response as a sign that the teacher was ignoring her or deemed her concerns unimportant.

However, Mrs. Allen did not realize that embedded within the school is a communication hierarchy (**discussed in chapter 5**), and calling and leaving a message is low on the hierarchy and tends to produce delayed responses. Unaware of this hierarchy, Mrs. Allen perceives this initial attempt to contact the teacher a dead-end strategy.

After listening to Mrs. Allen's complaint Mrs. Tate instructs Mrs. Allen to fill out an appointment form on the counter, place it in Mr. June's mailbox against the wall, and he will get back to her. Mrs. Allen gives an incredulous look and appears to interpret this as another dead-end strategy where her grievances would continue to go unaddressed. Frustrated and seemingly annoyed with these instructions, the parent responded by saying she had taken time off work to come down to William Edward and would rather wait to see Mr. June in person. Mrs. Tate, also engaged in a conversation on the phone, motioned with her hand for the parent to have a seat in one of the open chairs adjacent to the mailboxes.

After taking a seat, Mrs. Allen began to discuss with another African American parent already sitting in the main office, different strategies to use to have her grievances addressed. Mrs. Allen was informed by the other parent that:

> you don't need to wait to set up an appointment. You can just walk over to the teachers' room. You already got your [visitors] pass."

Moments later Mrs. Allen stood up and left the main office.

I did not witness the encounter between Mrs. Allen and Mr. June. However, a few days later, Mr. June and Mrs. Tate discussed the incident in the main office. Mr. June said he had a parent [Mrs. Allen] rudely come to his room in the middle of class, taking away class time from his students because she wanted to have a discussion about her son. Mrs. Tate replied by saying "I never told her to go to your class like that. We never do that. I told her to fill out the appointment form, put it in your mailbox and you would get back to her". Mr. June responded "Well no, you guys [staff/volunteers] did what you could. She chose to come and disrupt the class". Finally, Mr. June requested not to see the parent again and instead ordered the parent to use her son's counselor to be the intermediary between himself and Mrs. Allen.

Mrs. Allen's inappropriate behavior, which in part stemmed from her reliance on an inaccurate information channel, resulted in her developing a strategy that for Mr. June demonstrated a lack of respect and was highly disruptive. Here we see how Mrs. Allen's initial goal of communicating with her child's teacher swelled into the teacher and parent both feeling mutually disrespected by one another. This creates a new dynamic where the problems between the teacher and parent become the primary concern and likely need to be resolved first before the previously central concern regarding the student can be addressed. While the breakdown of one

parent-teacher partnership may appear to be not that significant, these ruptures have a ripple effect. Teachers frequently communicate with each other about problematic parents they encounter. This ripple effect can create additional barriers for the parent to construct partnerships with other teachers. This loss of institutional social capital only widens the divide in access to resources among working-class and middle-class families.

Flipping the Script: On Black Parents

Collaborative scripts are interpreted by teachers as conducive to dialogue and a great tool for repairing communication breakdowns between parents and teachers. However, I have also observed teachers 'flipping the script' and turning these unwritten rules on their head by interpreting Black parents' collaborative racial monitoring strategy as combative.

For example, Mrs. Gilbert, the African American mother who requested to observe her child's classroom, engaged in a collaborative script with the counselor to rectify the situation. However, due to miscommunication within the school, Mr. Taylor did not receive the message before the class started. When Mrs. Gilbert arrived at Mr. Taylor's room, he refused to allow her to even enter the classroom. Mrs. Gilbert, having secured all the appropriate assurances from the school officials, refused to leave. Mr. Taylor then called the campus security guard to have the parent escorted away from the room. This interaction between the African American parent and White teacher swelled into a highly contentious and racialized standoff that became a spectacle outside the classroom door.

Mr. Taylor's reaction to Mrs. Gilbert displays the racialized double bind African Americans' experience of being rendered invisible and simultaneously perceived as a problem.

Mr. Taylor dismissed and rendered invisible Mrs. Gilbert's racial monitoring strategy by not

using the classroom phone to verify if Mrs. Gilbert was granted permission to observe the

classroom. Instead his immediate reaction was to call the campus security guard to have Mrs.

Gilbert taken away. Mr. Taylor viewed Mrs. Gilbert as a threat and a problem and used his

authority to have her removed.

Gender and racial power dynamics play a huge role in shaping interactions and outcomes.

Mr. Taylor, a White male, used his physical body to block the entrance of 'his' classroom from

allowing Mrs. Gilbert, an African American mother, to enter. The parallels between this scenario

and that of the denied entrance of the 'Little Rock Nine' in 1957 from the all-White school in

Arkansas are striking[23]. In both cases, law enforcement was called on these African Americans

for enacting their agency and attempting to enter a space they were lawfully entitled to access.

To the school's credit, when school officials realized the problem regarding the

miscommunication, they quickly responded by requesting that the mother come to the main

office so they could apologize and rectify the situation. Mrs. Gilbert was then granted full access

to observe all her son's classes, and she enacted this school monitoring for several weeks.

Mrs. Gilbert's experience of being denied access to the classroom and then having the

police called on her illustrates the continued relevance of Du Bois' double consciousness for

African Americans. Mrs. Gilbert is *in* the school, but not *of* the school. By this I mean, her

physical presence at the school is seen as suspicious, can be called into question at any time and

quickly undermined. Mrs. Gilbert being denied access to the classroom undermined the

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[23] For a more descriptive account of the desegregation challenges faced by the "Little Rock Nine" see
Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers* (2004) and Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom
Movement* (2003).

legitimacy of her presence at the school and the extraordinary parental involvement strategies she had to deploy. Further, Mrs. Gilbert being removed by campus security (re)inscribes tropes of black criminality onto this mother trying to protect her son. In essence, Mrs. Gilbert gets punished and publicly embarrassed for enacting her racial monitoring strategy while her son looks on. As Mrs. Gilbert's son witnesses his mother's mistreatment coupled with his previous reports of being mistreated in the classroom, what remains unclear is how this will affect his perception of school, education and social institutions more broadly.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how African American parents grapple with a distinct set of racialized challenges that sit outside of the normative White middle-class experience. To deal with these challenges African American parents develop *racial monitoring* strategies to guard against any racialized mistreatment of their child in school. Some racial monitoring strategies can be deployed preemptively in the form of a 'warning' conversation. This racially candid conversation (colloquially referred to as 'The Talk') is designed to prepare Black children for racialized mistreatment as well as inform them of what to do during and after such a situation. Racial monitoring also took the form of parents directly observing the classroom interactions between the teacher and their child. In addition, Black parents called into William Edward to report the racialized mistreatment of their child by school officials. These self-developed racialized strategies signal a very different involvement experience than their White parental counterparts.

Colorblind Ideology within William Edward

My findings also show that William Edward's adherence to a colorblind ideology renders invisible Black parents' racialized experiences in the school. Even though African American parents notified the school about differences in treatment of students based on race, these infractions are not systematized in any meaningful way or cataloged and used as race-specific teaching opportunities for school personnel. By adhering to a colorblind ideology, it both blocks William Edward teachers from recognizing the salience of race for African American parents' involvement, and positions teachers to ignore highly relevant information regarding how African American parents structure their parental involvement strategies. Therefore, a significant aspect of Black parents' participation is either missed or misunderstood.

Hidden Scripts

I also find that there are 'hidden scripts' or unwritten involvement strategies that serve as an evaluative system that teachers apply to parents to determine what 'kind' of parent they are. For teachers, either parents use collaborative scripts and are a supportive (i.e. productive) participant in the parent-teacher partnership, or they enact combative scripts which constrain interactions and therefore the parent is an unsupportive (e.g. unproductive) participant. This binary logic plays a significant role in shaping parent-teacher interactions at school. Black parents who do not possess the social capital to access collaborative scripts tend to employ combative scripts (either unwittingly or out of frustration) that contribute to the breakdown in the parent-teacher partnership. Breaking this parent-teacher partnership limits these African American parents from accessing teachers as information channels who can advise them on ways to help academically struggling students and provide future suggestions for college preparatory

classes and exams. Therefore, working-class Black parents who enter the school with limited

resources, experience a reproduction of these inequalities as they often leave the school with

even less access to resources (i.e. institutional social capital) than their middle-class counterparts.

In the next chapter, the deleterious workings of the colorblind ideology are examined in

the context of how the school district attempts to celebrate African Americans by recognizing

their cultural heritage, but in so doing they ignore the racial challenges this group experiences as

they navigate the academic landscape.

Chapter 4

African American Family Day:
The Recognition of Culture and the Erasure of Race

In 2015, African American families from five middle schools and six high schools within LAUSD were invited to attend the third annual African American Family Day[24]. African American Family Day is an opportunity for the district to demonstrate to African Americans parents what their expectations are for building durable parent-teacher partnerships. Along these lines, LAUSD guided by the equal partners mandate takes the position that increased parental involvement will help shrink the gap in educational outcomes, specifically regarding test scores for African American students. Therefore, African American Family Day is seen as a day to further entrench that partnership process.

This effort partly comes out of a recognition of the racial differences in outcomes on proficiency measures. Across LAUSD, African American students consistently score below the state proficiency goal of 800 on California's standardized tests[25]. As previously noted, in 2005 across all LAUSD middle-schools African American students averaged the lowest standardized test scores (602) among all racial/ethnic groups. Five years later in 2010, this racial test score gap continued as African American middle-school students scored the lowest (663) across all racial/ethnic groups on these standardized state tests. In 2013[26], the average score for African American middle-school students did increase by thirty points to 697, yet they continued to score

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[24] LAUSD is made up of seven smaller districts and these eleven schools are all in the same local district within LAUSD. For purposes of anonymity, I do not reveal in which local district these schools are located.

[25] This dissertation takes the position that standardized tests are only one of many tools that schools should use to measure student performance and these outcomes should be treated as such.

[26] Here I use 2013 because it is the last year that California collected testing data using the API.

below all other racial/ethnic groups in LAUSD. African American high school students test scores followed a similar pattern of falling well below proficiency and behind all other racial/ethnic groups. Therefore, African American Family Day is meant to serve as an important space where teachers and school officials from across the district can discuss with African American parents these racial disparities in educational outcomes. Furthermore, this event provides the opportunity to develop strategies of how to construct durable parent-teacher partnerships.

However, at African American Family Day, Black parents experienced the duality of having their Afro-centric heritage symbolically recognized, while school officials largely ignored discussing race or how it impacts the parent-teacher partnership. African American Family Day celebrated Black families' Afro-centric heritage through colorful banners, distributing leaflets showcasing smiling Black families as well as guest appearances from several of Hollywood's Black stars. The celebration reflects the district's understanding of Blackness as a form of symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979) that treats race as a relic of the past to be appreciated, celebrated, worn like a light cloak and easily discarded. However, applying a symbolic ethnicity framework to African American's experience does not capture how race rather than ethnicity is a central feature shaping the lives of African Americans.

This event symbolically recognizes African American families and culture. Yet this Afro-centric perspective simultaneously fails to recognize, indeed erases race, particularly with respect to racial disadvantages and inequities and how these inequalities impact parent-teacher partnership. The glaring omission of race as a topic of discussion reflects the district's de facto adherence to a racially colorblind ideology. As discussed in the previous chapter, how race contributes to potential breakdowns in the parent-teacher partnership would be an excellent topic

75

for discussion. Instead, Black parents were viewed as *the* problem that needed to be fixed. During the workshop on Effective Parent/Teacher Communication, Black parents were coached to position themselves as *docile* participants while interacting with teachers. Each of the strategies proposed by the presenters in the workshop undermined parents' agency and promoted this perspective of docility or, if you will, servility.

Attending African American Family Day: Afro-centric culture on display

African American Family Day took place at a high school a couple of miles east of William Edward middle school early on a Saturday morning in April 2015. The atmosphere at African American Family Day was that of a heritage celebration of African American families. Flyers promoting the event were framed with bright Afro-centric colors of green, red, and gold around the border; these were circulated to each participating school months before the event. The Afro-centric colors of green, red and gold were now replicated throughout the check-in area. Banners, streamers and enlarged flyers donning the thematic colors of the event were decoratively placed throughout the space. These colors serve as a reminder to Africa's diasporic communities of the continent's bountiful landmass (green); the bloodshed of Africa's inhabitants (red); and the vast amount of precious resources embedded in the land (gold). Black is another important Afro-centric color which represents the people inhabiting the continent of Africa. At African American Family Day, Black folks and their various diasporic shades, were on full display as attendees, presenters, and guest speakers.

At check-in, there was a very long L-shaped table where each of the invited five middle schools and six high schools had an assigned spot. The spaces were designated by a sign placed in front of the table with the school's name printed in one of the thematic Afro-centric colors. Each school had one teacher or school official handing out packets to parents attending the event.

76

In William Edward's spot was the Dean, Ms. Martin, who is African American and in her mid to late forties. The racial makeup of the faculty/staff in attendance from William Edward middle school were three African Americans, two Latinos, and zero White teachers or staff. Ms. Martin instantly recognized me, greeted me with a friendly "Hey" and then inquired "why are you here? You should be home relaxing or something." I replied "the flyer looked interesting, so I thought I'd come check it out. And Mrs. Stevens recommended I should come". Ms. Martin giggled, handed me a packet and said "Of course she did"[27]. Then she told me to grab some muffins and coffee from the breakfast table before it was all gone.

As I waited in line for coffee, I turned and observed the full layout of check-in. I noticed that there were not any White teachers or school officials behind the L-shaped table handing out packets to parents. A Black teacher or school official was handing out packets for nearly every school. Observationally speaking, the entire layout at the event consisted of numerous dangling Afro-centric decorations coupled with predominately African American teachers and school officials, suggesting an awareness of creating a racially 'Black' space in a predominately White institution.

After grabbing a small breakfast, I sat at a picnic table in the check-in area and began to view the parent packet. On the front of the packet was an enlarged photo of the original flyer again adorned with the thematic bright colors. The green, red and gold color scheme served as a border framing a picture of the same African American girl from the flyer that now read 'Supporting Your Child's Full Potential'. I opened the packet which included: a parent survey; a map (floor plan) of the Technology building where the workshops would take place; and a

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[27] Mrs. Stevens is an African American teacher's aide in her mid to late sixties. She would come by the main office to chat and the vast majority of times our discussions would be at the intersection of current events and race.

program listing the beginning and ending times of each of the scheduled events. The first event beginning at 9:00 am was the Welcome Address where this Afro-centric celebration would continue with what the program in bold print labeled the "**Black National Anthem**".

Welcoming and Lifting Every Voice

I entered the large auditorium where the Welcome Address was underway. The principal of the high school, Mr. Ortiz who is Latino and in his mid to late fifties, was already introducing the five female African American students that would be performing the Black National Anthem. The Black National Anthem, so dubbed by the NAACP, is actually titled "Lift Every Voice". Originally a poem written by African American writer James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice" was coupled with an instrumental melody by his brother and became one of the lyrical centerpieces of the early civil rights movement. After the principal finished introducing these five Black students standing at the center of the stage, they began to sing:

> Lift ev'ry voice and sing
> 'Til earth and heaven ring
> Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
> Let our rejoicing rise
> High as the list'ning skies
> Let it resound loud as the rolling sea
> Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
> Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us
> Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
> Let us march on 'til victory is won

Parents in the audience accompanied the students by joining in singing from their seats. The first five lines of the song reverberated loudly in the auditorium as much of the audience – including myself- were familiar with these words. Parents sang if they knew the words or hummed along with the beat if they were less familiar.

The song seemed to match the celebratory feel and Afro-centric recognition of African American Family Day. As the students and the parents sang "Lift every voice and sing," it symbolized that everyone's voice was important and should be heard, not silenced. Moreover, the specificity of the Afro-centric recognition was the subversive choice to open with the Black National Anthem of "Lift Every Voice" instead of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at African American Family Day. This suggested to these attendees a racial awareness that the lyrics of "Lift Every Voice" would resonate more with African Americans' experience than would "The Star-Spangled Banner". Furthermore, this subversive act of prioritizing the Black National Anthem over the Star-Spangled Banner felt like a nod to the audience signifying the importance of centering Black voices.

Who participates? The symbolism of Black presenters

After the principal finished his welcome address, parents were able to choose from twelve different workshops covering topics such as "Effective Parent/Teacher Communication", "Transitioning from Middle School to High School", and "Parents' Guide to College and Career Readiness". Parents could attend any two workshops which were scheduled to last for 50 minutes each. The first workshop I chose to attend was called "Effective Parent-Teacher Communication".

On my way to this workshop, I walked past several rooms where presenters were preparing for their workshop presentation. Looking in as I passed by, I observed several presenters were persons of color and none were White. Walking into the Effective Parent-Teacher Communication workshop, I immediately took note of the racial composition of the presenters. Among the four presenters two were African American, one was Latino, and one was White. On average, African Americans make up only nine percent of all teachers within LAUSD

(LA Times 2015). Therefore, observing these workshops with predominantly Black instructors suggests the organizers were cognizant of who should staff the event.[28]

The four presenters were Mr. Williams, an African American, middle school teacher; Mrs. Hughes, an African American high school teacher; Mrs. Lynwood, a White high school teacher; and Mr. Romero, a Latino middle school teacher at William Edward. The racial composition of the presenters in the classroom workshop differ from the racial make-up of the schools where they taught. For instance, Mr. Romero teaches at William Edward where the racial composition of teachers is 72 percent White, 11 percent Latino and 10 percent black. Having a majority of black presenters at African American Family Day signals to parents a racial 'intentionality' on behalf of the planners.

This overrepresentation of African American presenters could provide a sense of racial ease where Black parents and mostly Black teachers engage in candid discussions regarding race and education. Such candid conversations could include allowing parents to voice how and why they believe breakdowns occur between parents and teachers particularly across racial lines. However, the institutional adherence to a colorblind ideology undercut this dynamic from unfolding. At African American Family Day, we see how a potentially empowering event for Black parents was undermined by institutional practices and African American parents experienced a reproduction of their marginalization within the educational institution.

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[28] At the second workshop I attended there was only one presenter, but he was also African American. However, I do not include data from that workshop because the attendees (high school parents) fell outside of the parental demographics I examine in this dissertation.

Nonrecognition of Race: It takes effort to be racially colorblind

In stark contrast to the racial recognition and celebration throughout the event, the presenters at the Effective Parent/Teacher Communication workshop avoided directly discussing issues regarding race during the nearly hour-long workshop. Instead, the presenters distributed two documents called "Effective Parent-Teacher Communication" and "Give Your Child Success in School". The words African American, Black, and Race did *not* appear in any of these documents. By extension, the documents did not include any information about specific barriers African American parents face in participating in their child's education. Nor did these documents include specific solutions that African American parents could use to overcome these communication barriers. However, in large print and square in the middle of one of the documents is: "It takes a village to raise a child. -African Proverb". Here we see the recurring theme of reaching back to recognize Black families' African ancestry, in this case as a way to bypass opening up a contemporary discussion of race and education.

Yet, these two documents are littered with a robust set of terminology derived from the education field and frequently uttered in educational researchers' analysis of building durable parent-teacher and teacher-student partnerships. Twenty-three 'education-based' words are offered such as "Trust, Encourage, Nurture, Affirm, Advocate, Champion, Inspire, Instill Confidence, and Impart Understanding" to name a few. These words are offered to parents as analytical and practical tools they can use to better understand their child's role as a student. These concepts appear necessary and sufficient when viewed through a 'normative' White middle-class experience. However, this extensive conceptual list is devoid of any particularities or specificities relating to African Americans experience. Reviewing these documents, African

Americans are not provided with a race-centered lexicon or race specific conceptual tools to understand how to navigate the academic landscape on behalf of their African American child.

The complete omission of race in these two documents is significant because it reflects the district's adherence to a colorblind ideology. The colorblind ideology silences the presenters on African American Family Day from engaging in public discussions regarding race. At African American Family Day where one of the stated goals is 'closing the academic achievement gap for African Americans', a deliberate nonrecognition of race becomes highly problematic.

Manufacturing Docility: Marginalizing Black Parents Voices

The overall structure of the Effective Parent/Teacher Communication workshop did not allow for much interaction between parents and teachers. The discussion was largely unidirectional with the presenters coaching Black parents on how to act. In lieu of recognizing and discussing race and the larger structural problems that stem from it, the focus of the workshop centered around how to 'fix' the individual behavior of Black parents.

The presenters' effective strategy for these Black parents was for them to take on a docile role while interacting with teachers. The presenters proposed a collection of strategies, each of which undermined Black parents' agency and positioned them not as equal partners, but as passive interactants with teachers. Each of the strategies disseminated at the workshop coalesced to construct a docile presentation of self for Black parents to enact. Coaching Black parents to take on this quiescent presentation of self, stood in sharp contrast to the boisterous, communal advocacy of 'lifting every voice'.

Assuming Good Intentions

An important facet of constructing a docile interactant was to provide an alternative and 'deracialized' interpretation of any observable teachers' infractions. Using the "Effective Parent-Teacher Communication" document (see Figure 4.1), the presenters began by issuing a re-interpretive strategy of 'assuming good intentions'. Mr. Williams began by stating that he wanted to start with the second listed strategy first because he believes it is the most helpful for parents. Mr. Williams read this suggestion aloud by saying when it comes to your child's teacher:

> *"Assume good intentions".* Mr. Williams added that "teachers are there to help you [parents] and not out to get you".

Telling African American parents to assume good intentions communicates to them that if your child encounters problems with a teacher and you suspect it is race related, act like it is not. Further, it attempts to 'sweep under the rug' problems within schools related to racial discrimination.

In addition, this racially colorblind strategy does not speak to the experiences of African American parents I interviewed and observed at William Edward middle school. This strategy deliberately ignores race, which is a central feature shaping African American parents daily experience. Moreover, it undermines what I term the *racial monitoring* strategies these African American parents deployed as a response to the racial mistreatment their children encountered.

At William Edward, an important aspect to African Americans parental involvement was their enactment of racial monitoring strategies. Through interviews and participant observation, I found that Black parents' racial monitoring included direct observation of classrooms, calling the

83

school to report teacher infractions, and having discussions directly with their children to educate and warn them about the possibility of experiencing this unfair treatment. For these parents, the legacy of discrimination and mistreatment of Blacks within predominantly White institutions has fostered a deep skepticism among many of them of receiving fair treatment in these always already racialized spaces. This strategy of 'assuming good intentions' disseminated at African American Family Day undermines the legitimacy of these parents' racial monitoring strategies. For instance, as I discussed in chapter 3, I talked with a parent who attended Campus Cultural Day and observed her African American son being reprimanded, but White students' similar infractions went unpunished. Here, assuming good intentions would silence this parent from speaking out and likely ensure that racial inequality gets reproduced and the perpetrator would go unpunished. Further, these messages suggest to parents that they passively endure racial mistreatment of their child and just assume that the teachers' actions were well intended.

Politics of Respectability

The strategy of assuming good intentions also affects Black parents' actions (and reactions) as they interact with teachers. Mr. Williams, as an African American teacher telling Black parents to assume good intentions, forecloses any discussion about teachers' racial mistreatment and shifts the discussion to examining the behavior of the parents as the problem. Mr. Williams' strategy to 'reform' the individual behavior and attitudes of these African American parents has deep historical roots nestled in a politics of respectability movement. The politics of respectability, or respectability politics, operate as an intra-racial social policing of group members espousing the need for reform of individual behavior and attitudes (Higginbotham 1993). A central intra-racial message undergirding this moral upstanding is 'do not act the way dominant White society thinks you will act' (i.e. as angry Black men/women).

This way of orienting oneself in society has at various times crystallized into a strategy for reforming the structural system of American race relations by convincing dominant society to view and eventually treat Blacks as equals.

Figure 4.1 Effective Parent-Teacher Communication
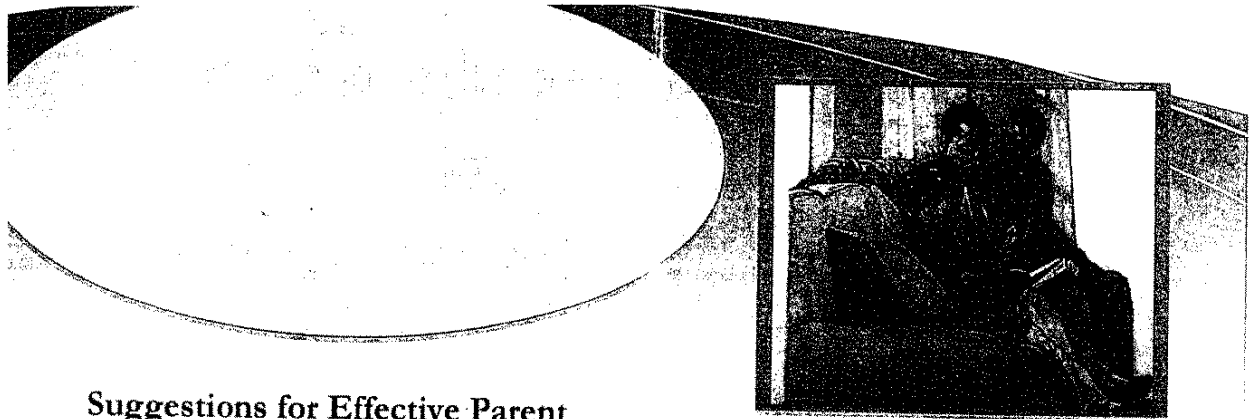
Suggestions for Effective Parent Conferences:

- Prepare for it in the same way as you might prepare for an important doctor's appointment.
- Assume good intentions
- Maintain appropriate privacy
- In general, parents are experts on their child; teachers on education

In this space, Mr. Williams and Mrs. Hughes are representative of Du Bois' idea of 'The Talented Tenth', referring to elite members of the Black community whose job it is to 'civilize these uncouth and shiftless' African American parents. Mr. Williams and Mrs. Hughes' internalization of being part of this elite status within the Black social hierarchy is apparent in how they interact with Black parents and re-inscribe the parent-teacher power dynamics. This

dynamic points to teachers as the educated, knowledgeable decision makers and parents as the docile, subordinate, and gracious recipients of this information.

Moreover, Mr. Williams' strategy of 'assuming good intentions' is not linked to any larger strategy to dismantle the structural racism and discrimination Black parents experience. By espousing respectability politics without connecting it to a larger strategic model of empowerment designed to dismantle the racial mistreatment African American parents experience, then enacting respectability politics becomes the goal in and of itself. Therefore, instead of these presenters addressing broader structural and racial issues, they are merely constructing a docile disposition for Black parents to adhere to during parent-teacher interactions.

Epistemic Status: Leading Black Parents to the K- Position

Black parents' lower status docility is also shaped by how they epistemically (Stivers and Rossano 2010, Heritage 2012) position themselves as they converse with teachers. Epistemic status or the amount of information a social actor possesses or has access to in relation to their interactant is an important aspect dictating how the interaction will proceed (Heritage 2012). Parents that have greater or equal possession of educational strategies with teachers are better suited to co-construct an equitable decision regarding their child's education. Parents that have less access to information can merely probe their interactants suggestions, but they cannot make assertions due to their or less information status.

Therefore, communication strategies that *only* advise parents to develop questions for teachers are positioning these parents in a lower status vis-à-vis teachers. For example, Mr. Williams reading his next strategy proudly stated that when it comes to meeting with teachers:

"*Prepare for it in the same way as you might prepare for an important doctor's appointment*". Mr. Williams followed this up by saying "*listen intently and come with a lot of questions*".

While this suggestion is helpful for parents as it encourages them to take interactions with teachers seriously, it insidiously advises Black parental docility during parent-teacher interactions.

Instructing Black parents to listen intently and come with a lot of questions sets them up to be in a less knowledgeable position than their interactant, in the territory of information or epistemic domain. The epistemic domain represents each actor's access to information of a given topic during social interaction. The more information one social actor possesses or has access to puts them at an epistemic advantage over their interactant and they can now dictate the contours of the conversation. Therefore, by advocating that Black parents merely come with a lot of questions these presenters are reproducing the marginalization of Black parents' voices.

Furthermore, having an epistemic advantage also allows teachers to use strategies that may not be useful for the parents. This linguistic control over the interaction occurs because as Heritage (2012) argues "unknowing speakers ask questions and knowing speakers make assertions" (11). Similar to the interaction dynamics during this workshop, unidirectional interaction shifts much of the informative power to the side of the teacher. Moreover, the presenters' strategy positions Black parents to be reactive instead of proactive participants in their child's educational experience.

Contradictions and Mixed Messages

Sociology of education researchers consistently find that working-class parents, regardless of race, tend to rely on a 'disconnectedness model' of schooling where they are the experts on their children, teachers are the experts on education (Chin and Phillips 2004, Lareau 2003, Robinson and Harris 2014). By contrast, middle-class parents have an 'interconnectedness model' or no separation between home and school. Researchers argue that because middle-class parents develop strategies around interconnectedness, they are more successful participants as this is the model that schools and teachers expect to see performed. Yet, at African American Family Day, Black parents are receiving messages that reinforce a disconnectedness model and therefore reproduce involvement strategies that are detrimental to the parent-teacher partnership.

Mr. Williams read his final suggestion on the list for parents by stating:

> "*In General Parents are Experts on their Child, Teachers on Education*". After reading it from the handout, Mr. Williams said "*You know how your children are. You know if they are good or bad at home. So, you're an expert on your child. Just like teachers are an expert on the teaching side*".

Mr. Williams' structuring this message as a dichotomous either/or also disempowers and marginalizes parents without a similar SES. Telling African American parents that they are experts on children and teachers on education reinforces a disconnectedness model (Lareau 2000) towards their child's education.

Mr. Williams' message of parents being experts on their child contradicts reports from teachers I interviewed at William Edward. In a small group interview with Mrs. Johnson, a White seventh grade teacher, and a few of her colleagues, I asked them to describe their idea of

an unsupportive parent. Mrs. Johnson, after a brief chuckle, said "The ones that want to only argue with you and try to defend their child even after you tell them all of the things they did wrong". For Mrs. Johnson, these parents' advocacy for their children is interpreted as 'combative strategies that cause dialogue between parents and teachers to shut down. However, for African American parents who attended African American Family Day, it would be quite logical for them to argue with Mrs. Johnson. Drawing from the Effective Communication strategies, African American parents have the right to continuously advocate because they (the parent) are the expert on the child, not (the teacher) Mrs. Johnson.

Within the academic landscape, the lower status assigned to parents can have tremendous consequences regarding the classes their child is assigned to via the tracking system (Oakes 1985) and/or the in-class resources they receive based on their Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Constructing teachers as the sole 'expert' in this process further marginalizes parents' voices especially those without access to the institutional social capital to help them navigate and understand their rights.

Teaching Personal Responsibility in a Void of Racial Analysis

With just a few minutes remaining in the allotted time for the workshop, Mrs. Lynwood and Mrs. Hughes hurriedly passed around the second document called *Give Your Child Success in School* (see Figure 4.2). Mrs. Lynwood and Mrs. Hughes quickly read aloud the ten strategies listed that these African American parents should use to effectively engage in their child's educational experience. However, the handout completely lacked any discussion regarding race and the words African American or Black again did not appear anywhere on the page. This *Give Your Child Success* document, similar to William Edward's *Parent-School-Compact*, reads as if it was filtered through the colorblind ideology. In turn, not once did Mrs. Lynwood or Mrs.

Hughes invoke any particularities regarding African Americans or the barriers they face when trying to enact these strategies. Mrs. Lynwood and Mrs. Hughes lacked a racialized discussion because the appropriating process (or sticking to the script) hindered them from doing so. Both the literal script of the document they presented and the schools' unwritten adherence to the colorblind ideology stymied these presenters from including race in the workshop discussion.

However, this *Give Your Child Success in School* document is structured a bit differently than the *School-Family-Compact* and therefore it sets the parameters for a different discussion. The *Give Your Child Success* document very subtly does two significant things; first, it shifts the conversation and focus from discussing effective and non-effective strategies within the parent-teacher partnership to a discussion that solely problematizes parents' role in this partnership. Second, due to the lack of any racial dialogue, the document creates an analytical void for the presenters to usher in a discussion of individual parent responsibility.

The coupling of these two processes of shifting discussion from schools and parents to solely the parents and linking the problem to a lack of individual responsibility reflect the desired outcome of the neoliberal 'Equal Partners' mandate. *Give Your Child Success* first narrows the discussion by omitting any reference to how the school's lack of resources might hinder the parent-teacher partnership. Within the document there is no mention of what resources might be lacking in the school that could disrupt this process. Nor is there any discussion of how to navigate the barriers created by a schools' *resource deficiency* (chapter 5). Parents are also not given any strategies on how to 'lobby' the district for more resources if they discover that insufficient resources in the school are creating significant disruptions in the parent-teacher partnership process. The omission of schools from this document subtly narrows the parameters

of the conversation to exclude the role of schools' resource deficiency in helping to create a durable partnership.

Furthermore, the document slyly omits teachers from this examination of problems within the parent-teacher partnership. Within the document there is no mention of what expectations parents should have for teachers within the parent-teacher partnership. Closing off this discussion is harmful because it limits how Black parents might conceptualize this partnership. In this space, these African American parents are not able to discuss, critique or expand on the roles teachers should be playing to meet them halfway in an 'equal' partnership. These strategies further entrench Black parents as docile participants who are supposed to accept the actions and strategies put forward by teachers without questions.

By excluding an examination of schools' lack of resources and teachers' role in the parent-teacher partnership, the presenters' discussion is now completely centered around what these Black parents are and are *not* doing correctly. Moreover, by omitting from the document any language regarding race, the presenters usher in a discourse of parental responsibility. This parental responsibility discourse only examines parents' actions within the parent-teacher partnership. Thus, when discussing problems related to this partnership process, Black parents' actions are critiqued and assumed to be the central problem that requires significant attention.

Figure 4.2 – Give Your Child Success in School

GIVE YOUR CHILD SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

Parents!   Parents!   Parents!

Some General Suggestions

1. Work from the beginning to keep in touch with your child's teacher.

2. Find out all you can about the reading program and keep abreast of your child's progress.

3. Have your youngster explain his or her reading program to you. Play the role of the patient listener and curious questioner.

4. Help your child study by providing space, time, supplies needed for lessons and assignments.

5. Encourage your child to participate in activities such as book fairs, library visits, and reading to younger children.

6. Express interest in your child's school activities by answering all questions, providing examples and some discussion. Try to avoid one word or short phrase answers, but instead give the child an experience through your talk.

7. Please don't use lessons, study, reading, or any school-related tasks as punishment. Neither should you use the teacher as a threat ("I wish your teacher could see you now").

8. Accept your child for his or her efforts by not comparing the child with brothers or sisters, neighbors or other relatives. Each child is unique and should be treated as such.

9. Plan learning activities and help the child see how these are all related to school and the learning that takes place there.

10. Remember, school is children's work. Schooling is preparation for adulthood and a productive life.

Mrs. Lynwood engages in this distancing of schools and teachers from also being part of the 'problem' when she reads aloud the first strategy. Mrs. Lynwood says, "It is very important to work from the beginning to keep in touch with your child's teacher" adding that "you want to do that early on in the school year". Mrs. Lynwood effectively communicates to these parents a useful time-oriented goal of starting early in the school year to try to communicate with their child's teacher. Yet, Mrs. Lynwood did not address how parents should go about doing this, what strategies they could use to accomplish this goal, what potential barriers they might run into and how to navigate those barriers. These narrow, half-developed strategies communicate to these parents that it is your responsibility to stay in constant contact with your child's teacher as well as your own personal responsibility to figure out how to do so.

After reading the final strategy, Mrs. Lynwood looked at her watch and said "wow, we've actually gone over by a few minutes. But if you have any questions about this information, we can quickly try to answer it". None of the parents raised their hand. The presenters then turned and looked at each other. Mrs. Lynwood turned back towards the parents and said "alright, well, then you're free to go". Several parents, and I, thanked the presenters for the workshop and then exited the classroom.

Guest Speakers as Ambassadors of 'Black Excellence': Recognizing race but forgetting gender

After the workshops, parents and students were invited to meet in the auditorium to listen to three special guest speakers. The recognition of race and creating a 'Black space' was on full display again. All three speakers were invited as ambassadors of 'Black excellence' and would provide some encouraging words of racial uplift particularly for the students. Two of the speakers -Jay Ellis, a young African American actor, and Wes Hall an African American

93

screenwriter and film director- are members of Black Hollywood and received a warm welcome

from the parents as well as the students. Both Jay Ellis and Wes Hall spoke for about fifteen

minutes, sprinkling in mention of the racial barriers they faced in the entertainment industry and

their ability to overcome and achieve success as parents nodded in agreement with their

message.

Although these invited guests spoke eloquently about the trials and tribulations in terms

of pursuing their dreams within their field as well as the importance of trying to pursue

excellence, the decision by the coordinators of the event to only invite men to speak was a major

misstep. Only inviting men to be guest speakers signals to the parents, students, and particularly

to the young Black girls that male voices are seemingly more important or are the voices

'worthy' of being heard when it comes to achieving excellence. Furthermore, African American

Family Day went to numerous lengths to create a 'Black space' but by only 'lifting up' male

voices they undercut a significant opportunity to present role models specifically for young

Black girls. In addition, two of their other invited guests were California Congresswoman Karen

Bass and LAUSD superintendent Cherly Hildreth. Both exemplify Black excellence and would

have been great additions to the speakers list. However, they were merely asked to attend but not

speak.

Conclusion

Symbolic Recognition of Race

African American Family Day created a dichotomous racialized experience for the Black

parents of having their African heritage celebrated but their current racialized experience be

ignored. Black parents' heritage and African ancestry were vividly on display at the event. Signs, banners' and streamers all donned the Afro-centric colors of green, red and gold. Although these symbols carry important meaning, they also treat race as a relic of the past or a form of symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979). Treating race as a symbolic ethnicity then allows the districts to celebrate and appreciate African American's Blackness, but then leave it behind when exiting that celebratory space. Therefore, symbolic ethnicity does not capture the centrality of race in African Americans' daily experience.

Colorblind Ideology

Black parents' race, particularly as it relates to education, was completely omitted from workshop documents and went unrecognized as a topic of discussion for the presenters. The presenters and by extension the district's adherence to a racially colorblind ideology blocked them from accessing the necessary analytical tool of race. This significant linguistic limitation produced a void in building or crafting a racial lexicon that these presenters could draw from to analyze how Black parents' can be effective participants in their children's educational experience. The presenters' non-recognition of race was most harmful because the process by which critical discussions of problems stemming from race and education were sidestepped. After sidestepping a discussion and analysis of race and education, the presenters swiftly moved to problematize Black parents' actions and offer them strategies on how to fix the problem.

Docile Participants

African American Family Day also provides a small but important window into seeing how Black parents are being directed and requested to participate in their child's educational experience, particularly under the guise of constructing an equal partnership between parents and

teachers. I show how Black parents at the Effective Parent/Teacher Communication workshop were coached to enact a docile presentation of self when they interact with teachers. Constructing Black parental docility was a three-pronged process.

First, Black parents were coached to always 'assume good intentions' as it relates to making sense of disagreements or conflicts between teachers and students or teachers and parents. Assuming good intentions operates as a deracialized interpretive lens for teachers' infractions. This way, Black parents should not get 'angry' because any incident likely stems from a mere misunderstanding.

Second, in order to reinforce Black parents' docility, they are coached to approach interactions with teachers 'with a lot of questions.' Questions are useful for probing and gaining more clarity on a topic, but they also signify that the person asking all of the questions has less information on the topic and is therefore in the inferior interactant position. Black parents' marginalization is then reproduced because they are no supposed to be assertive and dictate the direction of the conversation. In this position, Black parents can merely engage in follow ups and request more information from the dominant position of the teachers.

Third, the presenters instructed the Black parents to think of themselves as the experts on their child and teachers as distinct experts on education. Doing so re-inscribes the imbalance of power between teachers and parents and positions Black parents as less knowing and less powerful participants than teachers in the parent-teacher partnership. Collectively, these three strategies position Black parents to be docile interactants and reproduce African American parents' marginalization within schools.

The following chapter challenges the pervasive conceptualization of the individual Black parent as *the* problem. Instead, I examine how the resource deficiencies of the school are the central problem that create the conditions in which teachers and school officials do not have access to the necessary resources to adequately address the various needs of the diverse populations they serve.

Chapter 5

School Resource Deficiency,
Service Gaps, and the Communication Hierarchy

Introduction

The lack of resources within schools is in large part an outcome of a concerted effort on

behalf of neoliberals to blame the disparities in educational outcomes on the deficiencies of the

individual parents and simultaneously justify the reduction of public (i.e. government) spending

on education. In chapter four we saw this neoliberal logic manifest at African American Family

Day as Black parents' 'deficiencies' were treated as the main problem that needed to be

addressed. Overemphasizing Black parents as the problem helps to obscure an analysis of

structural inequalities, unequal institutional practices, and a significant lack of school resources

or what I refer to as a *resource deficiency* within schools.

Over the past two decades, public schools like William Edward have seen a significant

decline in school resources[29]. For instance, from 2007-2011 California cut 4,000 administrators,

and an additional 4,000 pupil support providers, 10,000 full time staff positions, and 32,000

teachers[30]. William Edward has been significantly affected by these cuts and the continued loss

of personnel due to more budget cuts. For example, from 2010-2015 several key staff members

such as the nurse, the librarian, as well as several administrative assistants all received significant

reductions in the number of days and hours they worked. Over this same duration of time

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[29] These reductions in public educational spending include state universities. See Michael Mitchell et. al. "A lost Decade in Higher Education Funding".
[30] http://lao.ca.gov/reports/2012/edu/year-three-survey/year-three-survey-050212.pdf

William Edward maintained an annual student enrollment of nearly 1,600 students, roughly 70 percent are African American and Latino, and on average one out of two students are eligible to receive free or reduced cost lunches. Therefore, providing an array of services is an important part of building durable parent-teacher partnerships.

The significance of the resource deficiency and the impact it has on William Edward is better understood through what I refer to as '*service gaps.*' By service gap, I mean the absence of a school resource that creates disruptions in the flow of educational services offered. Service gaps range from significant delays in the dissemination of information to parents, unreturned or delayed phone calls from teachers to being unable to provide additional academic support for students during after school programs. Service gaps do not just impact that one area of the school lacking the resources (e.g. the nurse), they also impact adjacent areas of the school where personnel get pulled in to 'cover' the resource deficient area. This shift in personnel to cover another area creates a new gap in service. These service gaps also put a tremendous strain on the teachers and staff at the school as they are 'stretched thin' and often required to do double the work without any increase in compensation.

An important example where the service gap significantly affects how the parent-teacher partnership develops is through what I term the *communication hierarchy.* As parents attempt to contact the teachers at William Edward, they tend to be unaware that the resource deficiency has created a communication hierarchy embedded within the school. The communication hierarchy differentially positions groups of parents in relation to quickness of response time as well as who (teacher, staff or student) will field their inquiries as they attempt to communicate with teachers. I find that parents using email (middle-class modes of communication) especially during school hours benefit the most from the asynchronous communication as teachers can access and respond

to these messages relatively quickly during their break period without leaving the classroom. These parents tend to have middle-class jobs that allow them access to computers and/or email during school hours. Conversely, parents calling the school (working-class mode of communication) and leaving a message benefit the least from this form of communication as it often creates a much longer delayed response from teachers. The delay is caused in part because paper messages are placed in the teacher's mailbox and teachers generally only have time to check their mailbox once or twice a day. These parents tend to be working-class who call the school, for instance, on their lunch break. Therefore, I argue that the communication hierarchy positions working-class African American parents to be less effective actors in the building of a parent-teacher partnership than their middle-class counterparts.

Due to the service gaps, faculty and staff at William Edward cannot offer their highly diverse population the array of resources they require. In turn, parents with limited access to resources to help navigate these service gaps become frustrated, tend to feel ignored, and disillusioned at the prospects of developing a parent-teacher partnership. Therefore, at William Edward the service gaps created by the resource deficiency ensure that parents with less access to resources will struggle the most. This chapter demonstrates how the school resource deficiency – not the individual parent - is the most significant barrier undermining the process of constructing parent-teacher partnerships and will help reproduce racial and class inequalities within the school.

Resource Deficiency and the Creation of Service Gaps: Main Office

In the main office at William Edward, Mrs. Tate is the only full-time secretary or staff member. Mrs. Tate informed me that there had been two other employees in the main office with her, but due to the recurring budget cuts over the last decade, both positions were eliminated and

now she is the only full-time employee in the office. The main office has numerous responsibilities that were manageable for three full time workers to accomplish. However, now Mrs. Tate is tasked with inputting the payroll of the entire school, processing all paperwork regarding placement of substitute teachers, ordering supplies for the school, workers compensation, leaves of absence, among many other smaller daily tasks. In addition to these tasks the main office receives the vast majority of the school's foot traffic and phone calls. Therefore, Mrs. Tate is essentially tasked with fielding every phone call and relaying every parental message to the appropriate teacher or school official because there is no voicemail system connected to the school's phones.

To offset the main office resource deficiency in personnel, eighth grade students are placed in the main office to assist Mrs. Tate. Eighth grade students at William Edward have the option of enrolling in the Teacher's Assistant class to earn credits. This class is an elective and seen by the administration/staff as a 'privilege' to the student. Students that enroll in the class (referred to as TAs) are placed in classrooms with teachers during their 'conference' periods to assist teachers with tasks like stapling, making copies and folding papers. Students are also placed in offices such as student services, the counseling office and with Mrs. Tate in the main office. Therefore, these students are also relied on to help fill in the service gaps at William Edward.

Mrs. Tate clearly articulates to TAs that she is the primary person to answer the incoming calls. Mrs. Tate stresses that students only need to help out if she is already preoccupied. However, Mrs. Tate is frequently engaged in one or more of her own duties or shifting over to cover a service gap in another area. This generally results in one of the two TAs assisting with phone calls quite regularly. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

"Good morning, William Edward Middle School, student speaking, how may I help you"? "I'm sorry Mrs. Gilroy is not available right now would you like me to take a message"? The student picks up a pen and slides the message pad a little bit closer. The message pad is made up of three identical small slips of paper with a place to record to and from whom the message is, a call back number, and a few lines for the message. Of the three available blank slips the student randomly chooses the one in the middle and begins to record the information from the caller. After the message is recorded, the slip of paper is torn out and placed into the teacher's mailbox.

Given that these eighth-grade students routinely field phone calls in the main office, they become normative participants in the process of building parent/teacher partnerships. Staff and administrators know the importance of these students' position as facilitators and in an effort to provide structure for the phone calls, the TAs are given a script that is placed on the wall above the telephone. The TAs are required to learn and use it during each phone call. The script on the wall reads: *Student says: Good morning (only if it is **before noon**) or*

Good afternoon, William Edward Middle School, this is a

student speaking, how may I help you?

At the beginning of the year, Mrs. Tate instructs all of her TAs that if a parent asks for a teacher, the student should reply "I'm sorry [the teacher] is not available right now. Would you like me to take a message"? During the first couple of months, Mrs. Tate frequently reminds her TAs to stick to the script and most importantly they can always and at any point during the phone conversation just transfer the call to Mrs. Tate and she will finish up the call. The script that the students are given is effective in reducing the potential for a problem or miscommunication arising during the interaction between the TA and the parent. However, the script constraints rarely allow students to inform parents of alternative strategies, like emailing teachers, that may produce more efficacious outcomes for the parents than the strategies the parent is already mobilizing. Although TAs help to fill-in this service gap, their participation and the information

they disseminate is quite limited in scope. These parent-student telephone interactions which frequently occur have the potential to provide communication roadblocks in building a solid parent-teacher partnership.

Resource Deficiency and Service Gaps: Nurse's Office

The resource deficiency at William Edward also negatively impacts other staff members such as the school nurse. During the academic years of 2013- 2014 and 2015- 2016, the school nurse was only on campus two days per week. Moreover, the academic year of 2014-2015 had the most severe reduction of only having a nurse on campus for one day each week. The absence of a nurse creates a service gap that then needs to be completed by another staff member as middle school students frequently sustain minor bumps and bruises, particularly in gym class. The nurse's office is two doors down from the main office and connected through a common back hallway. Due to this proximity, Mrs. Tate is generally charged with shifting over and sliding into the role of Nurse. For example, when a student comes to the main office because they need an ice pack or a Band-aid, Mrs. Tate must shift over and slide into the role of a nurse. In doing so, Mrs. Tate then must also leave the physical space of the front desk to go to the Nurse's office as well as abandon the task on which she had been working.

On other occasions, when a student has a headache or a slight stomach ache and wants to lie down that service will be denied to the student because there is no one that can stay with the student and supervise them. If the student insists they are not well enough to return to class, then Mrs. Tate will call their parents to see if they could come from work and pick up their child. Parents will generally inquire if their child can just lay down for a period, but Mrs. Tate has to inform them that the Nurse is not there that day to supervise the student. The parent then shows

up shortly thereafter and is visibly frustrated at the unexpected disruption and takes the child to student services to sign the forms to take their child home early.

Resource Deficiency and Services Gaps: Library

Another service gap that emerged from the school resource deficiency occurred in 2013 when William Edward had to cut the position of school librarian. The librarian, in addition to being a great resource during school hours, would help facilitate the after school program of Homework Help that was held in the library from 3:00pm to 4:00 pm. Throughout the 2011-2012 school year, I volunteered in the afterschool Homework Help program. During the school year, the local news, national papers, and National Public Radio (NPR) ran stories regarding the looming threat that LAUSD might fire the bulk of the district's librarians because "they are not teachers" and therefore were deemed nonessential[31].

During the 2012 -2013 academic year, the librarian and the library's hours were drastically reduced. Then during the 2013-2014 school year, the librarian position was eliminated and students were only able to access the library by having a teacher or staff accompany them. Therefore, students would no longer be able to quickly go into the library in between classes or during recess. For a student to visit the library, it would have to be scheduled in advance like a field trip and require the presence of a teacher. Furthermore, every time a teacher wanted to access the library, they would need to contact Mrs. Tate so that she could page a custodian via the walkie-talkies to unlock the library for the teacher. Filling in this service gap again removes

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[31] http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/05/27/136727774/l-a-schools-tell-librarians-youre-not-teachers

Mrs. Tate from answering the phones, responding to emails or assisting parents that come into the main office.

Resource Deficiency and Service Gaps: Counseling Office

A resource deficiency is also reflected in the total number of counseling staff. At William Edward, there are only three counselors[32]. Each counselor is responsible for roughly 400 kids and is expected to interact with anywhere from 400-800 parents/guardians. This extremely high ratio of parents-to-counselors becomes untenable at times, especially when report cards are sent out and large waves of parents are calling the school to speak with their child's counselor. William Edward's resource deficiency places a tremendous strain on the counselors' ability to respond as quickly as they would prefer. For example, one day as I was passing by one of the counselors' office I noticed a sweatshirt sitting on the back of the chair that humorously read in bold lettering "**I'm counseling as fast as I can**". I have never seen the counselor wearing the sweatshirt, so it is likely kept in the office as a symbolic representation of the resource deficiency and extraordinary demands of the job.

Moreover, counselors are tasked with coordinating parent-teacher conferences. William Edward's parent-teacher conference philosophy is that all parties need to be involved to get the full picture. Therefore, when a parent-teacher conference is needed the counselor invites all of the student's teachers to attend. From the school's perspective, this way the parent gets a sense of how the student is performing throughout all of her/his classes. However, coordinating these

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[32] There is an additional counselor Ms. Reed who *only* works with the Magnet students. The number of Magnet students fluctuates between 200 – 300 students per year.

conferences on top of the one-on-one counseling duties becomes a daunting task for one individual counselor to perform.

Service Gaps and The PTA Paid Temporary Support Staff

Although William Edward's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings do not garner significant attendance, the financial contributions that they inject into the school play a significant role. Over the span of four years, they were able to help fill in some of William Edward's service gaps by providing full financial compensation for three part-time school support workers. The PTA provided the financial compensation for the onsite information technology worker, Daniel, who helped teachers, staff and school officials with their internet and computer issues. The PTA also provided the funding for William Edward to have a support worker named Ms. Sanders, who is fluent in English and Spanish and acted as William Edward's primary translator. Ms. Sanders would provide translation during parent-teacher conferences as well as fielding phone calls from parents who preferred to communicate in Spanish. Lastly, the PTA provided the financial compensation for Rose, who was the greeter at the main entrance front door and was on the frontline for vetting visitors of the school.

However, due to a funding shortage, Daniel's position was reduced from four days on campus per week in 2013 to one day a week in 2014. In 2015, Daniel was let go and the position was closed altogether as well. At the end of the 2014-2015 school year, William Edward informed Ms. Sanders that the PTA could no longer financially compensate her position and the following year she was let go. For Rose, the school was able to tap into a small rainy-day fund and maintain Rose's position. However, her work hours were significantly cut from six to three Monday through Thursday.

Service Gaps and The Volunteering Apparatus: Creating an Inviting Environment

Volunteers play a central role in helping William Edward maintain its day-to-day procedures. Therefore, creating a sustainable volunteer apparatus within the school is paramount. Every year volunteers must fill out an application which includes taking a tuberculosis (TB) test and doing a background check for the safety of the students. After they are cleared, volunteers receive a badge from the district that grants them access to move about the campus freely. The district essentially assumes every school will be able to recruit a small group of volunteers and therefore suggests in memos that each school use their volunteers to help them with additional assigned tasks from the district. Thus, in an effort to recruit more volunteers, William Edward places a request for parents to volunteer in the Parent-School-Compact, treating it almost like a parental duty. Knowing how much the school relies on volunteers, at the end of each year William Edward shows their appreciation by having a well-stocked 'Volunteer Appreciation Lunch'. The lunch concludes by having teachers pass out awards for each of the volunteers.

William Edward's locale in a highly residential area seems to impact how the interactions between school and community are linguistically mediated. For instance, the monthly Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings have been renamed 'Parent Teacher Association and Friends of William Edward' or PTA/FWE. Including Friends of William Edward in the title of the monthly meetings at first may seem like a benign renaming, but this renaming is important as it signals to the community William Edward's desire to have them involved and invested in the school.

Volunteers provide resources and services in the areas of communication, financial services, technology, school related activities as well as auxiliary instruction. Volunteers are an important source of unpaid labor that the school relies heavily on for its day-to-day functioning.

Volunteers at William Edward fall into one of three categories: a parent volunteer-someone who currently has at least one child enrolled in William Edward ; a teacher volunteer-a person who is employed by the school, but engages in 'additional' labor at the school that goes 'unpaid'; or a Friend of William Edward- someone from the community with a 'weak tie' to the school who donates their time and labor to the school. Although the characteristics of each category are well defined, there is much fluidity among the designations**.** Often volunteers with weak ties start out as parents with strong ties but continue to volunteer well beyond their child attending the school. For example, one of the most important and influential people that has shifted categories is a volunteer named Ron.

The Significant Role of Volunteers: Ron – former parent volunteer

Ron, a White male in his early forties, is a Friend of William Edward who used to be a Parent-Volunteer when his daughter, now a high school senior, attended William Edward. During an informal interview with a parent named Scott at a PTA/FEW meeting, I learned about how deeply embedded Ron is to the technological structure at William Edward. Scott informed me that:

> "if you're interested in how the school and parents communicate, then you should talk to this guy (he points in Ron's direction). He runs the entire web system for the school. Yeah, [he] single handedly created our school's newsletter and all the information you see posted when you go to the school's website." I asked Ron about the accuracy of Scott's statement. Ron responded with "Yeah, it took a bit longer than I wanted it to finally get it up and running, but it'll work for now."

The significance of Ron's role as a volunteer cannot be overstated. Ron, as an unpaid worker, has saved the school a tremendous amount of money in cost for installation, repair work, and

basic day-to-day upkeep. Also, the online newsletter is a great communication tool that parents access daily to get updates from and about the school. However, while volunteers are a great resource for schools, they obscure the 'true' cost of running and funding a school that provides great resources and an excellent education.

The Significant Role of Volunteers: Claudia – parent volunteer

Alongside Ron, Claudia played a pivotal role in keeping the afterschool Homework Help running. Claudia, who is Latina and in her early forties, is a parent volunteer with a daughter in seventh grade at William Edward. Claudia was the main point person for the afterschool Homework Help program. Claudia would ensure that students signed in and out on the sign-up sheet and that they returned all of the library books they temporarily borrowed during the session. She also assisted students with their homework related questions.

The Afterschool Homework Help program, commonly referred to as Homework Help, took place in the school library Monday thru Friday from 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Students attending Homework Help had access to the library's sixteen computers which included a row of eight brand new Macs (all donated) and a row of eight PC's that were only a couple of years old. Students could also sit at one of the twelve large tables in the middle of the library and work on their homework or study quietly with their friends. Roughly forty to fifty students would attend each day. Students could ask for help from Claudia, myself as well Jim, who is a white man in his mid to late sixties and a former teacher for twenty-five years. Jim has had a longstanding relationship with William Edward as his daughter attended William Edward, according to Jim "many years ago" and now his granddaughter is a seventh grader at William Edward. Jim, Claudia and I regularly attended and assisted students during Homework Help. However, teachers and other parent volunteers would occasionally come by to help out.

One day during Homework Help, I had an informal interview with Claudia because I was

interested in why she volunteers and how long she was planning on continuing to run the

program. As I launched in with my inquiries, the realities of the resource deficiency redirected

our discussion. I began by asking Claudia:

A: Are you planning on doing Homework Help again next year?
C: If we have it. We may not have a library to have it in.
A: What do you mean?
C: They [LAUSD] are talking about closing down the library next year. We may not even
have a library. It's scary. It's been on the news and in the paper.

The following academic year the librarian and the library's hours were drastically reduced which

included reducing Homework Help to only Monday through Thursday. Then during the 2013-

2014 school year the librarian position was eliminated and students were only able to access the

library by having a teacher or staff accompany them. The Afterschool Homework Help hours

became significantly limited and spotty. The following two consecutive years students had to

check the schedule on the door each week to see if Homework Help was going to be offered that

week or not.

The Significant Role of Volunteers: Ms. Collins- teacher volunteer

Ms. Collins is a seventh-grade math teacher at William Edward, but she volunteers her

time after school to run a Math Homework Help program. The program is designed to help

eighth grade students with their math homework. However, Ms. Collins says that she spends

most of her time referring back to previous lessons from the textbook to ensure that students

understand those steps so that they can get caught up. The program runs on Wednesdays and

Thursdays for an hour and is located in Ms. Collins' classroom. Students must sign-in when they

arrive but it works on a first come first serve basis until the classroom is full. Although Ms.

Collins' classroom is often full, she struggled to remember a time that she ever turned a student away.

Ms. Collins does this work, which goes unpaid, because she knows that her students along with the students in other seventh-grade math classes benefit from the additional help. All seventh-grade students taking math are allowed to attend her program. Ms. Collins also knows that helping the students will go a long way to help improve their test scores for math in her class, and on their standardized test, as well as improve the overall API scores for William Edward. Moreover, doing this work is another way of showing the students that she cares about them performing well in Math as well as their overall educational experience.

The Significant Role of Volunteers: Aaron – friend of William Edward

As a volunteer, I helped staff members with many different day-to-day tasks of photocopying large sets of documents, answering the phones and assisting parents in the main office. However, I also assisted school officials by filling-in service gaps that were exacerbated by the district. Service gaps at William Edward are exacerbated when the district proposes a 'big idea' and then sends down a mandate for its implementation without providing additional resources. By big ideas, I mean proposing a significant change to the day-to-day practices at William Edward that impact every student, teacher, and parents as well. Two examples of these 'big ideas' are the rollout of the parent surveys as well as the student iPads. Below I describe my efforts in increasing the response rate for the parent survey.

My Role: Filling the Service Gap of Distributing Parent Surveys

In 2010, the district proposed that schools distribute survey questionnaires to all parents asking them a variety of questions regarding their experience at their child's school. The

district's goal was to compile the responses to create what they called a school report card.

However, each year the parent survey return rate would range from about fifteen to twenty

percent. For the 2013 -2014 academic year, the parent response rate for William Edward was at

fifteen percent. So, at the beginning of the 2014 – 2015 academic year the district began to put

pressure on the assistant principals and principals of low return rate schools, requiring them to

increase their parent response rate. However, that year William Edward only increased by three

percentage points to eighteen percent response rate. The central reason for this minimal increase

in response rate was due to the district not providing any additional resources for William

Edward to help them distribute the survey packets to the parents.

The following school year 2015 -2016, the district, in lieu of sending additional

resources, asked low response rate schools to find their own resources to accomplish the

district's goal. According to the assistant principal, Ms. Fletcher, the district sent out an email

stating "ask some of the volunteers to help you with the parent surveys". Ms. Fletcher, visibly

irritated, then added that "they [the district] are constantly telling us to have the volunteers help

out instead of them sending us some help".

Towards the end of our conversation Ms. Fletcher asked if I could help with the parent

survey distribution. I agreed to take on the project by myself, in part, so I could have an in-depth

and detailed understanding of what this process entailed. The packets were delivered in seven

medium-sized boxes. At first, I tried to take out the surveys and work on the project from 'my

desk' in the back of the main office so I could continue to help Mrs. Tate answer the phones.

However, after unpacking just the second box, my desk was completely covered and I did not

have any workspace. After notifying Mrs. Tate that I needed a bigger workspace, she somewhat

112

reluctantly suggested that I should use room 128 because I could spread out in there. For the remaining duration of the project, I worked across the hall in room 128.

To create a large enough workspace, I had to put three large tables approximately six-feet long and three-feet wide side-by-side. I then unpacked each of the large seven boxes. Inside each of the seven boxes were nearly two hundred surveys. Each survey was individually labeled with a white sticker at the top showing the parents' full names and the teachers last name and first name initial. Although the district did pack each box based on teachers last names (for example, A-D in box #1), the surveys were not physically separated within the boxes. Therefore, I had to physically separate the thirty-five surveys going to Mr. Anyon from the twenty-nine going to Mrs. Bass. In addition, I had to search for large manila envelopes at William Edward to place the surveys in so that I could distribute them to the individual teacher. I also had to ask the assistant principal to print out a current homeroom roster for each teacher and tape it onto the front of the envelope. Doing so would provide the teacher with a checklist to keep track of which parents returned their surveys. The roster printout that the district sent was from the beginning of the school year and each teacher's homeroom looked very different by April.

Before I could stuff each individual teacher's envelope, I had to check each individual parent survey against the 'master list' on the front of the envelope to ensure that each parent was receiving a survey. If this was not enough, there were also procedural issues to lookout for. For example, if a parent had two kids at William Edward – an eighth-grade student and a sixth-grade student -then only the (older) eighth grade student would receive a packet to take home. However, the district did not include the names of the students that fell in this category. Therefore, when I came across a student's name without a packet I had to put it aside and ensure that the older brother or sister received a packet. As a volunteer, I did not have access to this

113

information via the computer, so I had to wait and ask the assistant principal each time this came up. After stuffing all of the envelopes with the appropriate parent surveys, I placed each stuffed manila envelope in the teacher's mailbox for them to come pickup.

Over the next two weeks, Ms. Fletcher and I did routine check-ins with teachers to see if the parents had returned the survey. Teachers would also send home reminders via students to request that the parents send back the survey. After all of this work the return rate from parents skyrocketed to seventy percent. The district was so pleased with the increased response rate that they gave the principal a Most Improved Performance award. However, trying to exceed or even maintain this seventy percent rate is unsustainable without adding sufficient personnel to help with this distribution process.

Although volunteers like Ron, Claudia, Ms. Collins and me help fill-in some of the service gaps, there are other areas within William Edward where the resource deficiency is not offset by community resources. These areas are significant in that they tend to be the sites where resources are unevenly distributed to families and particularly parents. Therefore, parents with the most access to resources to draw from are better suited to offset the resource deficiencies of the school. In turn, these parents with the additional resources can make informed and potentially more advantageous decisions on behalf of their child than their counterparts with less resources.

Communication Hierarchy: The biggest service gap

At William Edward, sustained communication between parents and teachers is viewed as one of the most important ways to cultivate students' academic success and protect them from falling behind academically. William Edward emphasizes this message in the Parent-School-Compact. Of the nearly twenty items on the list for parents, '*communicating with teachers*

regularly' is seen as one of the most important. Likewise, the school promises its teachers will '*maintain on-going communication with parents*' regarding student's progress and 'support the partnership among parents, students and staff'.

The official protocol for communicating with a teacher, according to William Edward's webpage, is for parents to contact the teachers by either calling the main office or calling the counseling office and then leaving a message. I have observed these directives get reinforced at school events such as New Parent Orientation where administrators encourage the parents to "call the main office if you have questions for the teachers and the wonderful Mrs. Tate [secretary in main office] will be able to assist you". Although the school's website also informs parents that they can send an electronic message to the teacher by clicking the envelope icon adjacent to the teachers name, at the orientation there was no mention of this as an option for parents. Based on these directions, parents using this strategy believe that calling and leaving a message is the best method.

However, the resource deficiency hinders William Edward from carrying out the day-to-day practices to support these school officials' directives. Due to the resource deficiency, there is an insufficient number of office staff to field phone calls from parents. Yet, William Edward continues to present calling as the best mechanism for communicating with teachers even though 'on the ground' there is a tremendous gap in service. This service gap at William Edward creates a communication hierarchy within the school which, as previously illustrated, disadvantages African American students and their parents in their quest to establish productive parent-teacher partnerships.

Emailing their Way to the Top: The actual communication hierarchy

As parents contact the teachers at William Edward, they are likely unaware that there is a *communication hierarchy* embedded within the school. Counter to the website and the directives disseminated during New Parent Orientation, emailing (not calling) is the most effective communication strategy. Emailing receives the quickest response and the emailing structure provides an unmediated, asynchronous interaction with teachers. Therefore, email conversations can begin and end at the convenience of the parent and teacher. For example, Rhonda, an African American middle-class parent and former banker on Wall Street in her mid-forties with two kids at William Edward, described how she preferred to use email to communicate with teachers. When I asked Rhonda if there are communication barriers with teachers at William Edward, she stated that:

> R: There are. I mean I'm savvy on the computer, but I know not all parents are. But I think it's their [teachers] mode of communication. But it has to work with both people so if like the teacher's really comfortable with email and the parent's like what?
>
> A: Right, right, then it's not gonna work.
>
> R: Yeah. And for me some of the challenges it's just like the scheduling thing, but fortunately I have a job where I can leave…I have the luxury that I can ask for time off from my job and I generally, I don't think I've ever been told 'no' when it comes to my kids, you know what I mean so, but I know not everybody has that.

For Rhonda, emailing is the preferred communication strategy because as she notes she is 'savvy on the computer". Although she does say that scheduling meetings with teachers can be an issue at times, her middle-class job provides the flexibility where she can take off time from work when she needs to.

Parents like Rhonda that have jobs that allow them to email during the day generally receive the quickest responses from teachers. These parents tend to have middle-class jobs that

allow them access to computers and/or email during school hours.[33] These middle-class parents tend to receive quick responses from teachers because checking and responding to emails are much more convenient for teacher's schedules. Teachers can respond to a few emails during the day without even leaving the classroom. Teachers will generally respond to emails during their daily 'conference period' or period during the day in which they are free of their teaching duties. These conference periods are usually used to prepare for the rest of the day, respond to parents or run errands.

For example, in an informal interview, I talked with Ms. Fisher, the eighth-grade English teacher in her classroom during her conference period about effective communication strategies that parents can use. In our conversation she described to me why email is an effective strategy for parents to use. Ms. Fisher generally checks her email during both of her conference periods and tries to respond to a few emails each conference period[34]. Ms. Fisher then described for me a situation that had transpired earlier that day. She began by saying that a parent emailed her "about an hour ago to complain that her daughter received a U" on her progress report, which stands for unsatisfactory. The parent wanted to know why her daughter received this mark. According to Ms. Fisher, the mother stated in the email that her daughter was not an uncooperative child so she did not understand the grade and felt her daughter deserved better. Ms. Fisher then grabbed the school issued iPad off her desk to look up the parent's phone number and then waited until closer to the end of that period to call the parent back.

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[33] It is important to note that 'smartphones' are playing an important role in disrupting this disparity and enabling working-class parents to have sustained access to the internet throughout the duration of the day.

[34] This process of teachers checking their emails during their conference period was also expressed by many other teachers as well.

Here we see that middle-class parents or parents using middle-class strategies benefit from the unmediated, asynchronous structure of emails because they can fully lay out their questions and concerns and wait for the teacher to respond. In addition, these parents circumvent the constraints of leaving a message through a 'middle-man' who may misinterpret what the parent is trying to convey. That is, by emailing, parents also bypass the mediated interaction aspect of the hierarchy. Moreover, email also serves as a 'receipt' for the parent to document their attempt(s) to communicate with the teacher.

At the end of the fourth period, I see Ms. Fisher in the hallway. She tells me that she tried to call the mother at work and on her cellphone but did not get an answer. Ms. Fisher then called the student's father (who is also listed under the students contact/guardian) and spoke with him and was successful in resolving the issue. The father agreed with Ms. Fisher that his daughter could be 'quite chatty' at times and said that he will speak with his daughter about her classroom behavior. Ms. Fisher said she was glad that the parent did not become defensive and was willing to hear her out. Ms. Fisher added that she hoped the father would follow through on his end. Although Ms. Fisher waited until the end of her conference period to respond to the parent, the overall email response time was only a couple of hours and the issue was handled well before the end of the school day.

Calling William Edward: Experiencing the Hierarchical Delay

Counter to the directives on the website, calling the school and leaving a message for a teacher is lowest on the hierarchy and is likely to create a delayed response because unlike emails, these phone messages are placed in their mailbox in the main office and generally only get checked once or twice a day. Parents using this form of communication tend to be working-class and use this strategy because calling (for instance on a lunch break) is best suited to the

structure of their workday. For parents, this unknown stratification and by extension delayed responses from teachers tend to produce a feeling of being ignored by the school and a seemingly unimportant participant in the parent-teacher partnership.

One of the parents I interviewed, Theresa, a working-class African American parent in her late thirties with two children at William Edward, discussed her frustration at the effects of the communication hierarchy.

> A: Have there been any challenges to communication [with William Edward] or barriers that you've had?
>
> T: …you can call the school and leave a message and you might not get it answered. You might get it answered by some teachers, you might get it answered the same day. But with some teachers it's like did I not call you for a second, third time? Okay, now I need to ask for the principal 'cause you know. (slight pause) Or something, because I don't go away I'm like a squeaky wheel. So I think that (slight pause) are there barriers? Yeah there are barriers.

Theresa, unaware of the communication hierarchy, describes how her experience of calling the school and using the less effective strategy of leaving a message while sometimes bringing about the desired results can also cause tremendous frustration and lead to parents feeling ignored. Theresa clearly expresses this sense of frustration where she says "did I not call you for a second, third time? Okay, now I need to ask for the principal". Theresa's sentiments echo other working-class and African American parents from William Edward.

Working-class parents, unaware that they are using a less effective communication strategy, interpret the delayed or unreturned phone calls as teachers actively ignoring them. In turn, this disconnect between parent and teacher can cause an initial rupture in the process of trying to cultivate a parent-teacher partnership and will likely need to be addressed in order to move forward. If this problem between parent and teacher is left unattended, the parent will likely be less motivated to pursue a partnership with the teacher. In addition, navigating the

school's website to find a teachers' email can be very time consuming, especially when using a phone instead of a computer. Even as smartphones with email capability become widespread across class, many working-class parents with whom I talked still prefer to call the school than construct an email via their smartphone.

Communication Hierarchy: Analyzing the role of eighth grade students

As discussed earlier in the chapter, eighth grade students are placed in the main office to help fill-in the service gaps by answering incoming phone calls when Mrs. Tate is preoccupied. The role of students answering the phone is so routine that I have fielded many phone calls where the first question the parent wants to know is "are you a student"? One of the first times, I was posed with this inquiry produced a comical exchange between the parent and myself. I answered the phone by saying:

> Aaron: Good morning, William Edward middle school.
> Parent: Hi, are you a student or an adult?
> Aaron: (slight pause) Uhhh. An adult.
> Parent: Are you a reluctant adult? (brief chuckle) Because I know I am. (laughter)
> Aaron: (laughter) Yeah, something like that. How can I help you?

My initial pause was due to not knowing how to answer the question because I occupied both spaces of being a graduate student and an adult. However, the majority of my delayed reaction stemmed from never having been posed with that specific question, 'are you a student or an adult' while answering the phones. This particular phone call then keyed me into the central role students play (via phone calls) in building the parent-teacher partnership.

If a parent calls asking for a teacher and a student (Teacher's Assistant or TA) answers the call, then the student is required to reply "I'm sorry [the teacher] is not available right now would you like me to take a message"? The script that the students are given is effective in reducing communication issues between the parent and student. However, this communication strategy that the TA relays to the parent is low on the 'communication hierarchy' and thus not that effective as an initial contact strategy. Moreover, as noted, the script constraints rarely allow students to inform parents of alternative strategies that may produce more efficacious outcomes for the parents than the strategies they are mobilizing.

For example, a TA may sense that a parent has an urgent, but quick question. In this scenario emailing the teacher is likely a more effective strategy. However, stating this to the parent would require students to respond outside of the prescribed script. This rogue response could get a TA into trouble in that they may be seen by the staff as not willing to follow directions. Given that this student position is deemed a privilege, the TA runs the risk of losing it by being viewed as unwilling to follow directions from staff. Thus, communication via the telephones in the main office becomes a critical site where the distribution of information gets unevenly distributed as parents try to contact school officials and personnel.

Communication Hierarchy: The double-delay at William Edward

While the central focus of this dissertation is on African American parents, it is important to incorporate and discuss how non-English speaking parents are impacted by the communication hierarchy. Parents who required that school officials communicate with them in Spanish were negatively impacted by the hierarchy. At William Edward, lack of translation services are another important aspect of the service gaps created by their resource deficiency. This lack of services produces what I call the *double-delay*. The double-delay significantly

impacts parents and families that are either monolingual or prefer to communicate using Spanish[35]. At William Edward, there are only two staff members who in addition to fulfilling their duties within their own respective departments, are also paid to assist the administrative offices with parents and families who are either monolingual or prefer to communicate in Spanish[36]. One of the staff members is Ms. Sanders, who is Latina, in her late twenties and works in the counseling office. The other staff member is Mr. Soto, a Latino male in his late forties to early fifties, who also works in the counseling department. This resource deficiency has a tremendous impact on parents' ability to be effectively involved in their child's educational experience.

For example, if a parent calls the main office and requests someone who can speak Spanish, the instructions from Mrs. Tate are to first transfer the call to Mr. Soto. If he is not available, the call will 'bounce' back to the main office. From there, the instructions are to try transferring the call to Ms. Sanders[37]. However, in cases where neither is available, the call again comes back to the main office and we are instructed to transfer the call to Mrs. Tate who then addresses the caller. On these occasions, Mrs. Tate will generally respond by saying "I'm really sorry but there isn't anyone available right now that can speak Spanish. Can you call back in 20

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[35] Finding out the aggregate number of parents with this preference was quite difficult largely because staff/administrators estimations would vary. The best figure seems to be roughly 250 parents (15 percent) with this preference. This figure derives from the bulk set of information packets sent from the district office to be distributed to parents at William Edward. One of the sets included the parents name and the text was written in either English or Spanish, but not both.

[36] There are at least 4 other staff members and/or administrators who are bilingual in English and Spanish. Two of these staff members voluntarily extend their services to the administrative offices, but do not seem to be required contractually to do so.

[37] Here it is important to remember that Ms. Sanders is among the PTA compensated staff who was let go. Therefore, creating another significant service gap in the school.

to 30 minutes"? Each time this occurs, the callers (from my observational vantage point) seem

to acquiesce to the request as Mrs. Tate will generally hang up the phone without further

discussion or explanation required.

In these situations, this group of parents experiences a double-delay in participating in

their child's educational experience. The initial delay stems from the schools' inadequate

language/translation services where the parent makes the initial call/contact with the school, but

has to call back a half hour later and go through the same transfer process and then hope one of

the two employees are available. The second delay occurs even with a 'successful' transfer in

that this is the caller's first time being able to state the reason for their call and Ms. Sanders or

Mr. Soto may not be the correct person or office that the caller needs to speak with[38].

There are also instances where this double-delay produces immediate and explicit

feelings of frustration for the caller. This situation seems to arise much more often when a TA is

trying to help assist the caller than it does with a staff member as in the following excerpt from

my fieldnotes:

> During 3rd period the phones were really busy and Mrs. Tate had to go across the
> hall to speak with the Dean regarding an urgent matter. A T.A. named Stevie who
> usually works in a different office came over to the main office to help out. Stevie
> frequently comes over to help out during third period because she knows how to
> properly answer the phones in the main office and this is also a period when Mrs.
> Tate only has one TA instead of the usual two. As the phone rings Stevie picks it
> up and says "Good morning William Edward Middle School student speaking.
> How may I help you?" "Uhh, hold on please". Stevie then says to the other T.A.

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[38] It is important to note that both Ms. Sanders and Mr. Soto have been observed many times coming back
into the main office or going to student services and relaying important messages on behalf of calls that
were transferred to them from different offices including the main office.

Angela "They want someone who speaks Spanish". Angela, who is Mrs. Tate's
actual TA, tells Stevie to transfer the call to Mr. Soto. Stevie picks the phone back
up and says to the person on the line "Okay I'm gonna transfer you".

Stevie then dials the staff member's extension and hangs up the phone. Shortly after, the call is bounced back which is indicated by three short consecutive rings which slightly differs from the 'normal' incoming-call ring. Angela says to Stevie:

"the call came back try Ms. Sanders". Stevie picks up the phone and says "Hi, they
didn't answer, but I'll try someone else". Stevie dials Ms. Sanders' extension and
hangs the phone up again. She looks at Angela and says "I hope she's there". After
a couple of moments the call comes back again. Stevie picks up and says "Hi,
umm they weren't there either. Uhh…uhh, hold please". Stevie then says almost
like an announcement "they sound really upset".

At this point, I feel the need to intervene so I momentarily stop working on the project the assistant principal asked me to help her with. I stand up from behind the computer monitor and say to Stevie "I think you should get Mrs. Tate. She is talking to the Dean in the hallway". Stevie leaves to go notify Mrs. Tate. A few moments later Stevie comes back with Mrs. Tate following behind. Stevie picks up the phone to transfer the call to Mrs. Tate and then says "Oh, they hung up". Mrs. Tate then responds very matter-of-factly "I'm sure they'll call back later".

Here we see that the TA followed the transfer instructions correctly and yet this still produced a negative outcome for the parent. The schools resource deficiency of only having two staff members who can assist with fielding calls where the caller is monolingual Spanish, especially when these staff members work in an already highly impacted department, makes it so that the callers will not have their questions or concerns addressed during their initial contact with the school. In addition, the lack of sufficient personnel in the main office forces them to rely on the additional assistance from the TAs. While the TAs are very helpful in providing additional

support for fielding calls and assisting with foot traffic, it is important to remember that as eighth grade students they have a significant lack of office skills and basic knowledge. Also, the school officials instruct the TAs to closely follow the greeting and transfer directions which severely limits the help or information they can offer to parents calling in. The TAs not being allowed to deviate from the calling script especially when it is not working seems to only heighten parents' frustration and impatience with the situation. Even a Spanish-speaking TA would not be allowed to communicate in Spanish with a parent. If the person answering the phone was another staff member, they would have the freedom to deviate from this format when necessary and be encouraged to 'creatively' problem solve in an effort to address a parent's questions and concerns. Moreover, for this group of parents to even begin to have their questions or concerns addressed, they need several interactions, all highly dependent on 'success' during the interaction that precedes it to go smoothly. The situation otherwise can quickly derail the process and significantly delay their ability to be involved in their child's educational experience.

Conclusion

Resource Deficiency

The systemic defunding of public schools has created a resource deficiency within William Edward. During my research, I observed the school nurse's presence on campus having been reduced to only one day per week, the loss of the full-time librarian, the loss of Daniel, the onsite information technology (IT) worker, as well as the loss of Ms. Sanders, the school translator specialist all due to a lack of funding. These losses in personnel lower the morale of remaining staff since staff like Daniel and Ms. Sanders did not leave on their own accord but because of educational disinvestment. In addition, these losses in resources disadvantage student

learning, especially for those students who lack adequate social and/or economic resources at home.

Service Gaps

I found that the resource deficiency creates what I term *service gaps* within William Edward. Services gaps are the absence of or significant disruptions in the services that William Edward provides the diverse families it serves. These gaps in service range from student's inability to see the school nurse and delayed access to the library to counselors feeling the pressure to "counsel as fast as they can." Access to these services become yet more stratified and their distribution is uneven and unequal. Therefore, other school personnel must slide over and 'cover' the resource deficient area. However, this dynamic drastically impacts school morale as staff and faculty do not receive any additional compensation for doing double the amount of work.

Significance of Volunteers

I also found that volunteers are a critical and often invisible "labor force" who offset the negative impact of the resource deficiency. Volunteers at William Edward fall into three categories: parent volunteer, a teacher volunteer, or a Friend of William Edward who is from the community and only holds a 'weak tie' to the school. Volunteers provide the computer programming infrastructure for the schools' website, oversight of the Afterschool Homework Help program and answer phones and assist parents in the main office. As the service gaps increase, William Edward's need for volunteers also increases. Therefore, William Edward has created a volunteer apparatus within the school to help attract and maintain this necessary form of unpaid labor. The district also assumes the presence of volunteers within the school and in lieu

of sending William Edward more resources, the district pressures the school officials to use volunteers to help with the implementation of their 'big idea' projects. Therefore, volunteers' status as unpaid laborers obscures the true cost and challenges of running a successful school.

Communication Hierarchy

I found that at William Edward there is a communication hierarchy embedded within the day-to-day practices of the school. The official protocol for parents to communicate with teachers is to call the school. However, the actual hierarchy prioritizes emailing teachers which tends to be a middle-class mode of communication, which favors middle-class parents. Emails from parents receive the quickest response times and provide direct if asynchronous communication structure between parents and teachers. Calling the school, a communication mode conducive to the structure of working-class occupation, receives a much slower response time from teachers. In addition, due to this resource deficiency, parents who call William Edward will likely encounter an eighth-grade student on the phone. From there, the parent must communicate their concerns to the student. The student communicates the parent's concerns to the teacher in the form of a handwritten message which creates a precarious communication structure. Thus, the communication hierarchy positions working-class Black parents to be less effective actors in the building of a parent-teacher partnership than their Black middle-class counterparts. This, in turn, often works to the detriment of their children.

The resource deficiencies I have underscored in this chapter illuminate how funding cuts impact educational practices in public schools, which, in turn, undermine the stated goals of our educational institutions and the aspiration of parents and teachers alike in bettering the knowledge and skills of students. Service gaps undoubtedly contribute to the lower test scores and students' performance within the classroom as many of the day-to-day services William

Edward should provide are no longer available. The resource deficiency, not the individual

parent, produces significant challenges for teachers and school officials to create the learning

environments where parents and students can feel empowered and fully engaged.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that race creates a qualitatively different parental involvement for African Americans that differs from that of their White, largely middle-class counterparts. Moreover, the racial and class inequalities that African American parents experience in the broader society are reproduced in schools as they engage in their children's educational experiences. The district's adherence to a colorblind ideology renders invisible the racialized aspects of African American parents' involvement strategies. Black parents' participation is often interpreted by school officials as insufficient or problematic. In consequence, these parents are constructed as the problem that requires fixing rather than recognizing that school practices shape African American engagement on behalf of their children with teachers and administrators.

Introducing William Edward Middle School

In chapter 1, I provided a thick description of William Edward in an effort to contextualize the interactions between parents and teachers that I observed. In addition, I discussed how my positionality as an African American, male, researcher and graduate student impacted both my experiences and observations within the field. Among the categories that make up my social position, I discussed how race was the most salient in terms of impacting my interactions with parents, teachers, staff, students, and administrators.

Theoretical Background

In chapter 2, I presented the reader with theoretically relevant literature that is aligned with my research. In this review of the literature I drew from seminal scholarship on race such as

W.E.B Du Bois (1903) and discussed how his theory of double consciousness continues to permeate Black folks' experiences in predominantly White institutions. I included literature that examined the colorblind ideology and how it impacted the racialized experiences of social actors across racial lines (Harris 1993, Omi and Winant 2015). I also drew from the educational literature to discuss how schools reproduce feelings of invisibility for Black parents (Howard and Reynolds 2008, Dumas 2009). In addition, I provided the reader with ethnographies that my research conceptually and theoretically build upon (MacLeod 1987, Pattillo 1999, Lacy 2007).

Pervasive Racial Monitoring

In chapter 3, I demonstrated how African American parents deployed racial monitoring strategies at William Edward to guard against the racial mistreatment of their children. Some racial monitoring strategies took the form of requests to directly observe their child's classroom to watch out for and guard against teachers' mistreatment of their child. African American parents that requested to observe their child's classroom did so in response to reports from their child about being mistreated in class by a teacher. These racial monitoring strategies were deployed to personally observe the teachers racialized interactions with the students.

Black parents also called into the school to report teachers' racialized infractions as another form of racial monitoring. Parents who called the school to report racialized infractions generally did so after they became aware of a difference in sanctions doled out to students of different racial backgrounds for 'committing' the same offense. In addition, parents reported engaging in racial monitoring strategies during parent interviews, which occurred across generations as my respondent Gloria, for example, described her experience. Parents engaging in a 'preemptive' discussion with their children concerning the potential for racial mistreatment in school has a long history within the Black community. These frank and candid discussions are

130

reflective of a conversation between Black parents and their children colloquially referred to as 'the talk'.

For African Americans, "the talk" is not a single event but rather repeated conversations between Black parents and their child as integral and indispensable ways to impart an essential set of knowledge about how they may be perceived by other people in society and how to navigate these everyday forms of racial bias and racism. The "talk" can be structured preemptively, concurrently or following a racialized event. The contours of the "talk" are vast as these parents try to prepare and explain how to negotiate the duality of being rendered invisible through messages of inferiority, on the one hand, and hyper-visible by being constructed as a threat or a problem for society, on the other. These findings highlight how Black parents' racialized survival strategies are interconnected to their involvement strategies in their children's education.

My findings of Black parents racial monitoring strategies are significant as they demonstrate that African American parents grapple with a distinct set of racialized challenges to parental involvement that fall outside the White narrative. Further, these findings provide counterevidence to Lareau's (2011) social class theory that when holding social class constant "white and Black parents engage in very similar, often identical practices with their children" (204). Lareau maintains that a social class analysis of her black and White participants has much more explanatory power than race.

Lareau's privileging of social class over race in her analysis blinds her to the salient role of race in African Americans' parental involvement. In fact, some of Lareau's African American respondents also articulate enacting racial monitoring strategies, but their responses go largely unexamined. Ms. Williams, one of Lareau's African American middle-class parents, expressed

what I interpret as her 'dual disposition' when she states she must always "keep a watchful eye on both the curriculum and her son's overall school experience" (Lareau 122). Ms. Williams' racial monitoring of her son's 'overall school experience' included being mindful of teachers and students as she did consistent check-ins at the school. Ms. Williams consistent check-ins started after one of her son's White classmates told the Black children in the class "All you can be is garbage men when you grow up" but according to her son the teacher did nothing to counter this racist claim (122). Lareau missed the centrality of race in Ms. Williams' parental involvement experience.

Analyzing African American parents' racial monitoring strategy differs from the White parental narrative. White parents benefit from a structural racial privilege that does not typically require them to develop racial monitoring strategies for their students. Moreover, these differences in racial dispositions show how inequalities found in the broader society are reproduced in social institutions.

I situate African American parents' deployment of racial monitoring strategies as an aspect of their parental involvement. Doing so I find that African American parents develop and must rely on a *dual disposition* to meet the racialized challenges they encounter during their child's educational experience. African American parents' dual disposition is rooted in a racialized double consciousness (Du Bois [1903] 2003). On the one hand, when acting within the 'normative' (White) frame of parental involvement, parents' focus is to navigate the complexities of the academic landscape on behalf of their children. On the other hand, as African American parents, they must simultaneously monitor the school to guard against the racial mistreatment of their children, which few White parents have to do in consequence of their privilege reflected in the colorblind ideology.

This dual disposition sits outside of the normative (White) involvement narrative, because African American parents are unable to benefit from the structural protections afforded their White parental counterparts. As such, Black parents must forge involvement strategies that can vacillate between navigating the academic landscape and guarding against racial mistreatment of their child. Paradoxically, African-American parents experience a 'contradiction of dual aims' (Du Bois [1903] 2003) where the simultaneous enactment of these strategies based on their dual disposition mutually undercuts and weakens the effectiveness of each strategy. Black parents can never fully immerse themselves in either pursuit.

My research also demonstrates that Black parents develop this dual disposition in a context of a school that adheres to a colorblind ideology. Colorblind ideology flips the school's racial dynamic on its head by not recognizing racial difference. Consistent with much of the colorblind ideology literature (Carbado and Harris 2014; Pascoe 1996), my findings also show that adhering to this ideology blinds teachers from "seeing" the salience of race within African American parents' involvement. By adopting a colorblind ideology, schools are ignoring highly relevant information regarding how African American parents structure their parental involvement strategies. Therefore, a significant aspect of Black parents' participation is either missed or misunderstood. Yet, both interpretations lead to Black parents' participation being deemed insufficient and viewed as a problem.

An important window into the working of colorblind ideology is seen in school suspension rates. Consistent with much of the national suspension rate data, William Edward's suspension rate demographics show that their African American students are suspended at a higher rate than any other racial/ethnic group. However, William Edward's significant drops in suspensions for every group but black students require additional analysis. Some scholars would

posit that students in every racial/ethnic category, except African Americans, have significantly altered their behavior to be much more aligned with the rules and regulations of school policy (Ogbu 1986). This line of argument contends that Black students' "oppositional culture" or identities are antithetical to the behavioral expectations of teachers and school officials. Yet, other scholars counter this argument by positing that the adults and school officials interacting with the students significantly altered their interpretations of infractions for some groups while maintaining less flexible guidelines as to what constitutes infractions for African American students (Fergusson 2000).

The former argument regarding oppositional culture is steeped in a discourse of African Americans as inherently deviant. Particularly among the students of color who are working-class/poor, this deviance is learned and reproduced within a culture of poverty where values are out of step with the larger society. These arguments have been debunked by numerous scholars (Omi and Winant 2015; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Massey and Denton 2003). I also did not observe any evidence of this within my research. The latter argument regarding school officials' racially bifurcated interpretations, however, offers a nuanced approach to understanding the high rates of African American subjection to punishment within the institution of education as well as the criminal justice system. Similar to Ferguson (2000) and Rios' (2006) arguments that Black boys are subjected to a process whereby their actions are criticized much more harshly than their White counterparts, I argue that race produces a hyper-visibility of their Black bodies and by extension how their behavior is perceived at William Edward. At the same time, the behavior of other groups is less likely to be scrutinized through the same punitive lens.

At William Edward, I also found that there are hidden scripts or teachers' unwritten interaction expectations for parents. Hidden scripts serve as an evaluative system that teachers

used to the determine what 'type' of parents they *are.* From the teachers' perspective, parents are either supportive participants and use collaborative strategies or they are unsupportive participants and enact combative strategies that disrupt this process. Parents that did not possess the social capital to access collaborative scripts tended to employ combative scripts (either unwittingly or out of frustration) that contribute to the breakdown in the parent-teacher partnership. Working-class Black parents who entered institutions with less access to social capital more often deployed grievance strategies that contributed to tensions in the parent-teacher partnership and cut off their access to useful institutional resources (i.e. teachers and school officials) in the future.

Unequal Partnerships

In Chapter 4, I found that at the event "African American Family Day" race was only recognized symbolically through the incorporation of Afro-centric colors -red, green and gold- and the peppering of African quotes and proverbs on flyers and handouts. In this way, African American Family Day expressed race as a 'symbolic ethnicity' (Gans 1979), a way of identifying with a past nationality as if wearing a celebratory cloak for a day that can easily be cast off once the celebration is over was adequate. Race, unlike symbolic ethnicity, does not operate that way. When African Americans leave the event, their race is still with them; the hyper-visibility and invisibility inscribed in their racialized interactions are still with them and significantly shape their daily experiences.

African American Family Day also provided an important window into how the district conceptualized and enacted the federal equal partners mandate with Black parents. At African American Family Day, Black parents were constructed as the problem that required fixing. I

found that at African American Family Day, the presenters deployed three distinct strategies aimed at manufacturing a docile orientation among African American parents:

1) The presenters told the parents to always 'assume good intentions' regarding teachers' actions and attend parent-teacher conferences with a lot of questions and to listen carefully, they also emphasized that parents are 'experts on their children and teachers on their education'. Each of these presenters' strategies positioned Black parents to occupy a docile demeanor while interacting with teachers. This Black parent docility would effectively re-inscribe the uneven power dynamics in the parent-teacher relationship. That is, by enacting a docile disposition parents would position themselves to acquiesce to the actions of the 'all-knowing' teacher. Each of these presenters' strategies positions Black parents to occupy a docile demeanor while interacting with teachers.

Coaching Black parents to always assume good intentions regarding teachers' infractions delegitimizes these parents' concerns and their deployment of racial monitoring strategies. Assuming good intentions forecloses the possibility that race plays a role in influencing the teacher's actions. A docile or compliant demeanor provided a prepackaged deracialized interpretation of teachers' infractions by telling parents to always 'assume good intentions'. This re-interpretive deracialized framing undercuts the racial monitoring strategies that Black parents engage in to protect their child from being discriminated against and racially mistreated in school. Further, this suggests to Black parents that they passively endure racial mistreatment of their children and assume that the teachers' actions are well intended.

2) Parents are coached to simply "listen intently and come with a lot of questions" This also reproduced the marginalization of parents' voices by positioning them in the K-[39] (or less information) stance during conversational interactions with teachers. By coaching parents in this manner, the presenters also strip parents of their ability to potentially dictate the parameters of discussions with teachers. Entering a conversation with 'lots of questions' enables parents to probe the veracity of teachers statements, but as Heritage (2012) argues "unknowing speakers ask questions and knowing speakers make assertions" (11). Therefore, in parent-teacher interactions, teachers will always have the 'upper hand' and dictate the parameters of the discussion because parents are expected to only put forth questions and not make declarative statements to move the discussion to a different 'epistemic domain'. In this way, the docile disposition undercuts Black parents' agency, thereby shifting the assertive conversational power to teachers and reproducing the dominant teacher power dynamic.

3) Black parents are reduced to being knowledgeable only about their child, but not about their child's education. This message works in tandem with the positioning of Black parents in the K- conversational stance because it constructs parents as having one set of knowledge and teachers another. The docile disposition further solidifies these parents' marginalized role in their children's educational experience. That is, if teachers are the experts, then parents should acquiesce to their authority. Further, this demarcation of roles reinforces for Black parents a parental involvement perspective that is the antithesis of the expectations that teachers have for parents as these relate to the parent-teacher partnership. The docile disposition is presented to Black parents as a corrective strategy to help assist them with *their* problems. Yet, this

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[39] As discussed in chapter 4 the (K-) position indicates that the social actor within a conversation has less access to information on the topic being discussed.

disposition simultaneously creates problems that will then justify the need to propose more

corrective actions for African American parents.

Black parental docility ostensibly runs counter to the goals of the 'equal partners' federal

mandate. The logic undergirding the equal partners mandate is that if parents participate equally

with teachers during their children's educational experience, then their participation will reduce

the disparate racial and class educational outcomes among students. This federal mandate

requires schools to develop plans such that all parents act as 'equal partners' with teachers during

children's educational experience. I contend that this mandate does two specific things: first, it

transfers responsibilities from public to private. By this I mean that it rearticulates the problem of

the academic achievement gap from a public (i.e. schools) problem, to an increasingly more

private (individual family) issue. Secondly, the mandate sets up an argument that it is the

individual parent's responsibility to participate as equal partners; and if they do not, they are

making an individual choice that allows their child to fall behind. The focus in events like

African American Family Day then becomes the strategy by which the school 'fixes' the

individual behavior of Black parents as opposed to examining larger structural issues.

I found that the districts' adherence to a colorblind ideology has a *silencing effect* on

social actors within institutions that disrupts and even cuts off the distribution of information and

educational resources for many Black parents. Further, schools' racial 'blindness' also blocks

teachers from developing strategies to incorporate in their day-to-day practices that could assist

African-American parents and students. I find that this colorblind ideology silences other

teachers from discussing issues with African American parents central to their concerns. African

American Family Day provides the quintessential space to discuss issues related to race.

However, instead of using this space to develop strategies to reduce African American parents'

138

concerns, teachers feel obligated to 'stick to the script' and convey their messages using racially 'neutral' language. This neutral language reflects the logic of the colorblind ideology and teachers show their adherence to the ideology by appropriating (Foucault 2004) language from these 'colorblind' documents. Foucault (2004) argues that the appropriation process "links individuals to certain types of utterance while consequently barring them from all others" (411). For these presenters, this appropriating process stymies any development of a racialized vocabulary equipped to open and sustain necessary dialogues with African American families.

The overwhelming absence of White teachers at African American Family Day is striking because their non-attendance renders them invisible, even though they comprise the majority of teachers, they are thus unavailable to participate in constructive discussions about the breakdowns in parent-teacher communication. Moreover, because White teachers are absent, Black parents absorb much of the attention and blame. The large non-presence of White teachers and staff also pushes the responsibility of having these discussions about race and the exhaustive work that accompanies it, onto African Americans. Scholars of color have long described how they are put in a position to do this exhaustive intellectual and racial training by providing a metaphorical "bridge called my back" for their White colleagues (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983; Collins 1990; hooks 2000).

Resource Deficiencies

In Chapter 5, I discussed how the systemic defunding of public schools has created a resource deficiency within William Edward. I observed William Edward lose full-time positions for the school librarian, the information technology assistant, the school translator specialist, and the severely reduced hours of the school nurse. In addition, prior to my arrival, full-time

assistants' positions were not filled. These continuous cuts created numerous resource deficient areas within William Edward.

I also found that the resource deficiencies at William Edward reduced school resources that created disruptions in the services that William Edward offers the students and parents they serve. These gaps in service range from timely returned phone calls to the dissemination of information to parents. These services then become stratified and their distribution uneven and unequal.

Services gaps have a ripple effect in that they impact areas adjacent to the initial resource deficient area. My research demonstrates how personnel in close proximity to the service gap tend to get pulled in to 'cover' the resource deficient area. For instance, the school secretary, Mrs. Tate, frequently has to don the cap of school nurse when students require assistance for bumps and bruises they acquired in gym class. She is not qualified to perform more than such "maternal" forms of caring. When called upon to act in this capacity, Mrs. Tate must abandon her work and physically leave the main office to provide this support for the student. If parents call during this time they will likely have to call back later in the day or hope that one of the eighth-grade student Teacher's Assistant (TAs) is around to field their call.

However, not all service gaps are filled-in by just shifting one person to another area as was the case regarding the resource deficient library. Due to the unfilled library service gap, students could not casually visit the library to browse or check out books. Visiting the library for students was a cumbersome act that required putting in a request to their teacher, who then had to put in a request to Mrs. Tate. She, in turn, notifies one of the custodial workers via walkie talkie, and then the custodial worker closest to the library must abandon what they are doing and go

unlock the library door for the teacher. Filling in these service gaps put a tremendous strain on the teachers and staff as they are already stretched thin and often required to do double the amount of work without any additional increase in compensation.

I found that there is an extensive volunteering apparatus at William Edward. Volunteers play an important role in helping the school fill in some of their resource deficient areas. Volunteers at William Edward were either a parent-volunteer, teacher-volunteer who engaged in additional work well above and beyond their required duties, or a Friend of William Edward who was a member of the community with a weak tie to the school. Volunteers provided a significant number of services and resources such as maintaining the entire school website, after school homework help program, after school math tutoring, chaperoning school field trips to college campuses, answering phones and distributing information to parents. However, given that the volunteer apparatus is so extensive and resourceful, it masks or obscures the true cost of running a school effectively.

I also demonstrated that a critical aspect of the service gap was the formation of a communication hierarchy embedded within the day-to-day practices of William Edward. The communication hierarchy acted as a vehicle for reproducing class-based inequalities in schools. Middle-class African American parents tended to directly email teachers. By doing so, they utilized the strategy at the top of the communication hierarchy and it produced quick responses from teachers. Emailing also allowed for unmediated, asynchronous interactions with teachers so conversations started and ended at the teacher and parents' convenience. In addition, by using email, parents bypassed the strong possibility of having to interact with the eighth-grade TAs.

Counter to the directives from school officials and on the website, calling the school to leave a message is lowest on the communication hierarchy. Parents that used this strategy were generally working-class; this form of communication worked best with the structure of their workday. However, this communication strategy produced longer response times and/or significant delays in communication with teachers. Calling the school and leaving a message also only provided a one-sided 'receipt' of the phone call. If the TA or a staff member accidentally misplaced the message, then there is no proof of the call unless the parent had the foresight to request the name of the person with whom they interacted. In addition, calling the school frequently required that the parent would interact with a TA and trust this student to act as an effective communicator of their concerns to the teacher. As calling created delayed responses or miscommunication, these communication outcomes would create cracks in the parent-teacher partnership process that required mending or could lead to a significant breakdown in this process for these working-class African American parents.

Practical Implications: Restructuring William Edward

Time for innovation

In this section, I discuss ways in which William Edward can address the issues raised in this dissertation to better assist the families they serve, such as recognizing the deleterious effects of the colorblind ideology and of hierarchical communication practices. In so doing, it is important to highlight and amplify innovative and creative ideas that staff and faculty are engaging that deserve to be protected and cultivated within the school. One such example is Mrs. Fisher's annual plays put on by the drama club.

In addition to being the eighth-grade English teacher, Ms. Fisher is the drama teacher at William Edward as well. Drama class is open to seventh and eighth-grade students. Each year

142

Ms. Fisher develops a concept for the play, for instance, the school experience of an eighth grader. Then she and the students co-write a roughly hour-long play that they present to the school during the day and later on that night for the parents to enjoy. I attended two consecutive years of the student plays. Each time, particularly during the parents' show, I observed parents in the audience wiping tears from their eyes. According to Ms. Fisher, the parents have these reactions because "the plays help students express their emotions in ways that parents may not have known about or even understood". The scenes in the play range from a student experiencing their parents' divorce to a student failing a big exam and the student feeling like she 'is' a failure. However, the plays also incorporate a lot of humor as well. For instance, one scene depicted how students felt about the newly instituted LAUSD 'free breakfast' which consists of a cereal bar and a small milk. After eating the free breakfast each student, showing their displeasure, would make a humorous face and then sprint off stage towards the boys' and girls' 'bathroom' sign.

Although Ms. Fisher's plays were always well received by the parents and students, funding for the drama club was cut after the 2014- 2015 academic year. Ms. Fisher was visibly upset after finding out that her program would not be funded the following year. However, programs like Ms. Fisher's drama club could be a major catalyst in creating a more durable parent-teacher-student partnership. I observed numerous parents approaching Ms. Fisher after the show and expressing their gratitude for starting important discussions that may have otherwise gone unaddressed. Therefore, I suggest that William Edward should refund this program and use it as one of many tools to help enhance a durable parent-teacher partnership.

In addition, I have developed five concrete suggestions that William Edward could incorporate into their day-to-day practices that would provide parents a significantly better experience in developing productive parent-teacher relationships. First, William Edward should

formally disseminate grievance strategies for parents to use when they have concerns regarding potential teacher infractions against their child that they would like to be addressed. Distributing a set of grievance strategies to parents, particularly African American parents would help to alleviate some of the stress of having to figure out with whom to speak and how to contact them while already being upset about the possibility of their child being racially mistreated. Disseminating these grievance strategies will also reduce the chances that parents misdirect their frustration and damage their partnerships with other school officials that could have otherwise been avoided.

Second, William Edward should record and catalog 'racial incidents' and use them as teaching moments during staff meetings. After each racial incident that I observed or informed school officials about, I did not see anyone log the information in any meaningful way. William Edward could change this practice by conceptualizing these incidents as undermining the overall parent-teacher partnerships they are trying to construct. Therefore, messages from volunteers like myself regarding parents reporting they observed differing racialized sanctions for similar infractions could be logged into a general 'damage report' or 'racial incident' book. Then on a bi-weekly basis, the scenarios from the damage reports could be presented as teaching moments at staff meetings. In an effort not to 'embarrass' anyone, anonymity should be maintained by removing as much identifying information as possible. These teaching moments would be a very useful catalyst to discuss topics like implicit bias and the various ways it can manifest. At the beginning of each school year, teachers and staff should be required to attend a training on implicit bias that is catered by a local restaurant paid for by the district. Having the district provide catering would help to maintain the purpose of the event as an enjoyable learning experience as opposed to it feeling like a punitive lecture on behalf of the district.

Third, the scripts for the TAs in the main office should be revised in a way that reduces the inefficiencies in what amounts to a communication hierarchy. Here it is important to clearly state that more resources in the form of paid personnel are needed in each of the offices at William Edward. Fully staffing these offices are the only way to get at and combat the central issue of this service gap. That said, in the meantime, one thing William Edward can do is to allow TAs to recommend the email option to parents, which would help emphasize suggestion 1 that I discuss above. The table that the TAs sit at does not have a computer on it because the TAs might use it in a distracting or improper manner. I am in favor of having a computer on the TA table as long as the proper website blockers are installed. Unfortunately, due to the resource deficiency, Daniel the onsite IT worker was let go so installing these blockers for Mrs. Tate would present an initial problem. However, there are several staff and teachers who are computer savvy (such as Mr. Soto and Ms. Collins) and who would likely be willing and able to install website blockers that would only allow TAs to browse William Edward's webpage. Once installed, TAs could recommend to parents to email teachers and if parents needed assistance locating the webpage, the TA could help them navigate through William Edward's website. Making this change would also help to decrease the high volume of phone calls by removing the need for parents to place follow up calls to ensure that their previous message was delivered and received. Furthermore, William Edward could also add an additional 'language option' to their automated telephone response system for monolingual Spanish-speaking families. For instance, when a parent calls the school, if a Spanish speaker is unavailable, then the TA can transfer the call to the automated recording message that would let the parent know their call is important and give them a couple of options regarding when to call back.

Fourth, William Edward could use social media platforms and their social connections to local universities to put out a call for retired librarians and faculty to volunteer as librarians or assist with other service gaps such as the Afterschool Homework Help program. This call for volunteers could also include graduate students who would also participate in these programs and perhaps receive credit for so doing. The students at William Edward would greatly benefit from having access to this enormous amount of social, human, and cultural capital.

Each of these four overarching suggestions would go a long way to help improve the quality of service that William Edward could provide. These suggestions would open up a dialogue between parents and teachers as well as within the school among teachers and staff themselves. These suggestions could also reduce the gap in the communication hierarchy by informing parents of communication strategies that better map onto the day-to day realities of the school. However, these suggestions pale in comparison to the tremendous need for concrete resources in the form of added personnel at William Edward.

For William Edward to adequately assist the diverse population they serve, the school needs the reinstallation of a full time nurse, a full time librarian, at least two more full time counselors, a full time I.T. worker, two full time translation specialists, compensated after school programs run by teachers, two full time administrative assistants in the main office and another full time administrative assistant in student services. This set of resources does not include the resources that teachers require within the classroom[40]. Coupling these administrative and classroom resources would enrich the academic landscape at William Edward and allow for the cultivation of durable parent-teacher partnerships. The addition of these positions would, of

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[40] For a thorough discussion regarding classroom resources needed for teachers, see Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equality Will Determine Our Future (2010).*

course, enhance student learning opportunities which successive budget cuts have diminished. It is hardly surprising that test scores for underserved students (i.e. resource deficiencies) reflect in good measure the impact of these service gaps.

Better Serving Black Families: School district events and programs

African American Family Day has the potential to be a very useful event that can extend important tools to Black parents who can use them to strategically navigate the academic landscape on behalf of their children. However, much of the information disseminated during African American Family Day positioned Black parents as *the* problem that needed to be fixed. Therefore, it is important to reconceptualize how to make African American Family Day a space where Black parents leave the event feeling empowered to be able to effectively participate in their child's educational experience as well as construct durable parent-teacher partnerships that are co-constructed.

Reconceptualizing African American Family Day: Alternative workshops

Reconceptualizing African American Family Day as a space of empowerment requires two significant shifts. The first shift entails moving away from strategies that re-inscribe the hierarchical relationship of the all-knowing teacher and the obedient parent passively listening. The second requires the presenters to establish a conversation regarding race in their discussions with Black parents. One way to move away from this hierarchical relationship of the all-knowing teacher would be to incorporate a parent lead workshop that teachers attend[41]. Parent led workshops would provide the space for parents to articulate how they envision the parent-teacher

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[41] Credit for this innovative idea goes to Professor Ortiz who provided the suggestion during one of our meetings.

partnership and communicate some of the barriers in constructing their current partnership. Parents providing this instruction for teachers would be a significant way to tangibly demonstrate the school's good intentions to nurture parent-teacher equal partnerships. Other sessions specifically on race could be presented by external speakers and attended by parents, teachers, and staff alike.

Inserting Race into the Conversation

Another important aspect to empowering Black parents is to provide them with a linguistic tool kit to help them interpret and understand the complexities regarding racial disparities in education. Doing so would help prepare African American parents to navigate a predominately White institution on behalf of their Black child. Therefore, presenters should develop an educational-racial lexicon, present it to the parents, and then breakdown the significance of each concept. For instance, discuss tracking and its racial implications; low academic (teacher) expectations of students of color; and how student in-class behavior plays a role in positioning students (particularly students of color) in a specific academic track.

Bringing parents, teachers, and school resources into the collective conversation about solutions

There are several strategies from the current teacher-led workshops that if slightly altered could be used as an empowering strategy. For example, teachers can continue to encourage parents to contact their child's teacher early on in the school year. However, an empowering strategy should couple this message with recommended actions such as when possible email the teacher first. If emailing is not possible, then after leaving a message, the parent should be sure to get the other person's name for reference should a follow up call be necessary.

In addition, teachers' empowerment strategies could include recommended expectations that parents should have for their child's teacher. For instance, teachers could convey that parents should expect teachers to notify them or provide regular check-ins regarding student performance and evaluations. This way, instead of parents assuming good intentions, teachers would demonstrate their good intentions' through their actions.

Lastly, the teachers and parents at the workshop could discuss issues regarding lack of school resources that hinder the construction of the parent-teacher partnership and student learning. Doing so would engage teachers and parents in an important conversation and discuss strategies to diminish and/or eradicate these issues, including how both groups could collectively advocate for the incorporation of much needed resources in schools.

Broader Implications – Race, Education and Black Parents

As this dissertation demonstrates, race creates a qualitatively different experience for African-American parents as they engage in their child' educational experience. This is evidenced in the dual disposition that Black parents develop as they engage in their child's educational experience. There have been numerous examples at the national level where Black parents have had to deploy racial monitoring strategies. Media reports and other research have provided numerous examples of racial mistreatment. Two current examples of parents enacting racial monitoring strategies to try to protect their child from enduring further racial mistreatment stand out among the rest. The first case was in Missouri[42] where a Black parent accused a teacher

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[42] https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/missouri/articles/2017-11-14/teacher-on-leave-over-sunflower-seed-spitting-allegation

"of spitting a mouthful of sunflower seeds at [her daughter] an 11-year-old Black girl".

According to the Associated Press, the African American parent named Erica Sanders says:

> "her daughter was spit on while standing near several students at Lawson Elementary School. Sanders says she complained [that] Friday and that the teacher called to apologize. Sanders says the apology didn't make her feel any better. Sanders says she can't attend school with her daughter and 'sit there and guard her from someone she is supposed to trust'.

Erica Sanders describes African American parents' experience of having to enact a dual disposition as she describes the difficulty of having to "attend school with her daughter and 'sit there and guard her from someone she is supposed to trust".

Another national example of Black parents needing to enact racial monitoring strategies occurred in New York City[43]. According to The Daily News, a middle school teacher: "shocked and traumatized students in her social studies classes when she singled out Black students and told them to lie on the floor for a lesson on U.S. slavery- and then stepped on their backs to show them what slavery felt like".

Here again we see the need for Black parents to develop a dual disposition so that they can engage in necessary racial monitoring strategies. Yet, Black parents' monitoring strategies tend to get rendered invisible by teachers as they participate in their child's educational experience because these strategies do not fit the normative involvement experience. In turn, African American parents' involvement is deemed insufficient and Black parents are constructed as a problem for schools. African Americans also experience this duality of being rendered invisible and racialized as a problem in the broader society

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[43] http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/bronx-teacher-sparks-outrage-cruel-slavery-lesson-article-1.3793930

before they enter the school. The reproduction of these inequalities for Black parents as they engage in their child's educational experience has significant implications regarding this process and for the educational advancement of African American children.

African American parents' experience calls into question the benefits of schools' adherence to a colorblind ideology. Advocates for the colorblind ideology argue that it is a way for institutions to be 'fair' by not recognizing racial differences when it comes to school practices or policies. However, this deliberate nonrecognition of race hurts Black parents because race is a central feature shaping their experiences in and outside of schools. Teachers adhering to a colorblind ideology are not able to recognize the significance of race for Black parents or for that matter, students, because the frame that teachers are using to interpret parents' actions is intentionally constructed to render invisible social actions related to race. African American parents' invisibility within schools exacerbates their experience of this same racial inequality within broader society.

The Neoliberal Project in Education

The neoliberal project in society, broadly defined, is to redefine the relationship between individuals and government (Harvey 2005). There is a concerted effort among neoliberals to redefine the relationship of individuals and public education and rearticulate the race/class-based academic achievement gap. One aspect of the neoliberal project is the privatization of education. This is accomplished, in part, by rearticulating the achievement gap as an increasingly, individual family problem that is not the responsibility of the collective. This reframing of the problem requires the individual family to be the solution. Shifting the problem from the public sphere (schools) to the private is a central focus of the neoliberal project.

However, this reconceptualization of the race and class academic achievement gap as a 'parent problem' reproduces an individual deficit model approach (Valencia 2006) to education. A deficit model of education obscures an analysis of structural inequalities and unequal institutional practices by overemphasizing the deficits and deficiencies of the individual parent. As Valencia (2006) argues "given the parsimonious nature of deficit thinking, it is not unexpected that advocates of the model have failed to look for external attributions of school failure" (2). The parsimonious nature of individual deficit thinking as opposed to the resource deficiency in schools is central to the neoliberal project in education. This neoliberal reluctance to spend money to help fund public education is permeating each side of the political aisle and shaping their policy prescriptions for education.

During a Senate hearing in January 2017 with current Secretary of Education Betsy Devos, Republican Senator Young of Indiana declared that giving schools more resources does not create an effective educational environment. Young poses the question to Devos and then takes the liberty of answering it by stating:

> "What makes for an effective education environment? It *wasn't* the money spent per
> students. We tried that in this country…We know right there it's *not money*".

Senator Young decries that more resources for schools was not the problem because "we tried that in this country…We know right there it's *not money*" (2017). Parroting a similar message within the public discourse is the documentarian and self-proclaimed liberal Democrat David Guggenheim in his film *Waiting for Superman.* Guggenheim argues in the film that the U.S. has "tried increased spending on education and it has not solved the problem". Both Guggenheim and Senator Young are politically on opposite sides of the 'aisle', yet they echo a similar narrative that schools have enough money. Their declarations obscure and stand in sharp contrast

152

to the resource deficiency within schools that impedes student learning and school effectiveness. This dissertation demonstrates why such reasoning is deeply flawed.

Another important contribution of this research is the illumination of how intertwined neoliberalism and colorblind ideology have become in shaping educational policy. I argue that neoliberalism and colorblind ideology work in tandem to undermine potentially empowering programs like African American Family Day by supplanting it with a more punitive structure designed to 'correct' individual behavior of African Americans and leave the policies and practices of social institutions unaltered.

As schools construct Black parents as the central problem, they are, to underscore, doing so based on an individual deficit model of education (Valencia 2006). Yet, an individual deficit model necessarily obscures the structural problem of resource deficiencies within the school, exacerbated by increased defunding of public schools. This lack of resources creates significant gaps in services which, in turn, produce institutional practices that are hierarchical and tend to result in the uneven distribution of resources to the diverse families the school serves. Ultimately, the persistent inability to grapple with the structural problems of a colorblind ideology of race relations combined with resource deficiencies in schools is producing a (re)emergence of racial and class inequalities that if unaddressed will ossify into a permanent feature of disadvantaging African Americans' educational experience.

Appendix A

Gaining Access to William Edward

"I know that one of the biggest challenges of this project is going to be gaining access to parents, teachers, and the school."

-Aaron Crawford, January 2011

One of the most important yet under analyzed aspects of doing an ethnography is gaining access to your field site. Numerous ethnographers and scholars discuss how they gained access to either a large group of people or a small group of hard to access and understudied populations (Duneier 1994, Foley 1990, Heath 1983, Lacy 2007, Lareau 2011, MacLeod 1987, Patillo 1997, Willis 1977). A much smaller number of researchers gained and sustained access into the brick-and-mortar of a social institution, particularly in the field of education (Foley 1990, Heath 1983, Willis 1977) However, very few researchers who have gained and sustained access to their field site discuss for their readers how they gained access; what strategies they employed; what mistakes were made; and how they maintained or sustained their access to the field. In what follows, I try to address each of these questions by describing how I gained access to William Edward. However, it is important not to misconstrue my discussion here as a 'one-size-fits-all' suggestion. My goal here is to provide the reader with some navigational tools to include in their 'tool kit' (Swindler 1985) as they gear up to gain access to their field site particularly if it involves education.

The quote above is from my field notes on January 28th, 2011. After running into a second seemingly insurmountable roadblock in gaining access to William Edward, I was contemplating abandoning this potential field site and possibly the project as well. Yet, four weeks later I was discussing the start date of my research project with the principal of William

Edward Middle School. Recounting how I gained access to William Edward can only be achieved through a discursive mapping of the various people and places that created the necessary conditions for me to do so.

Calling and Visiting William Edward: Encountering Gatekeepers and Going Nowhere

I tried calling William Edward on Wednesday, January 19th; Monday, January 24th; and Monday January 31st to schedule a meeting with the principal. I figured this would most likely be the least fruitful course of action in that calling is probably the most typical way people attempt to contact the principal. In addition, merely calling as opposed to visiting the school does not exemplify a 'deep' level of interest in the school. The first time that I called I spoke directly with Mrs. Tate. I told her I was a graduate student at UCLA and I was wondering if I could speak with the principal about doing research at William Edward. Mrs. Tate replied that the principal was not available, but she would leave the principal a message.

The second time I called William Edward, I again spoke with Mrs. Tate. After I informed her who I was, Mrs. Tate immediately responded by saying, "I left your message with the principal and that's as much as I can do". I then replied "okay, thank you" and I hung up the phone. However, the third time I called I initially spoke to someone different. In my field notes I emphasized that they "sounded young". Looking back, I now know they were likely one of the eighth grade TA's (see chapter 5). After I asked for the principal, the person who "sounded young" transferred me instead to Mrs. Tate. This time Mrs. Tate in a much sterner voice stated, "I already told you that I left your message with the principal. That's all I can do. So you're just gonna have to wait for her call".

I also visited William Edward and stopped into the main office on two separate occasions. The first time I stopped by William Edward was on Friday, January 28,[th] in between my second and third phone call. When I walked into the main office Mrs. Tate was sitting at her desk and notably the only person in the room. Mrs. Tate greeted me by saying, "Hi, how can I help you?" I began by stating my name and why I was there. Mrs. Tate (now donning her metaphorical 'gatekeeper' hat) seemed to detect my voice or my 'story' or both and she quickly interrupted by asking, "are you the one that I've talked to on the phone?" As soon as I said "yes" she eagerly reminded me that she gave my message to the principal and finished by giving me a blank stare. I then thanked her, somewhat begrudgingly, and left William Edward feeling very deflated.

At this point in this process, I was unaware of the huge observational mistake I was making. Based on my first two calls and then in this in person, albeit quick, encounter with Mrs. Tate, I began to think that she might be the only staff member who works at the front desk in the main office. Although I made a note of my observation of only talking to and now seeing Mrs. Tate in the main office, I did not translate that into a potential gaining access strategy. By this I mean, I was not thinking in terms of areas of 'need' within the school that I could propose to 'fill' and use as an entry point into William Edward. I was so focused on the specificities of my project design and by extension the research proposal I had tirelessly crafted, any observation not within the scope of my proposal -how race and social class impact parents and teachers- I erroneously pushed into the background. However, for me, a very important aspect of gaining access was to position myself as being able to fill-in a *gap* or a need within the school. Unfortunately, I repeated this mistake during my second visit to William Edward.

During my second trip to William Edward just about a week later, on Thursday, February 3rd, Mrs. Tate's interaction with me was even more blunt and dismissive. As soon as I walked in the main office door, Mrs. Tate abandoned her discussion with a student mid-conversation and addressed me. I began by saying:

> "Hi, I spoke with you last week" but before I could finish my sentence Mrs. Tate cut me off and reassured me in a very slow and seemingly annoyed sounding voice that, "I told you the principal has your message and will contact you when she can".

Her look, which was just short of a glare, and her silence, were quite effective and rendered me speechless. I again was forced to retreat and begin planning a new strategy to gain access.

Here I was making two significant mistakes. My first mistake was that I showed up unannounced with a proposal that was completely 'one-sided'. By this I mean doing research at William Edward would only benefit me, particularly in the short term. Compounding this mistake was showing up unannounced and -what I would later understand by doing the research at William Edward- taking Mrs. Tate away from training one of her TAs, adding another task on to her 'need-to-do' list. From my vantage point, Mrs. Tate was 'just' talking to a student. However, she was actually training the student to help assist her with fielding phone calls. My unannounced visit disrupted that process and I became a multifaceted irritant for Mrs. Tate.

The second mistake I made was that I did not take into consideration that William Edward attracted numerous researchers in the area due to the school's high level of racial/ethnic and social class diversity. It had not occurred to me that a school that diverse would attract other researchers also attempting to conduct their study at the school. Therefore, trying to use the entry point of doing a research project was not an appealing proposition for school officials. It did not

provide any additional and much needed resources to the school. I would realize this mistake after I spoke directly with the principal.

Ethnography is about "being there"

Despite my mistakes, one strategy that helped to counter these previous missteps was my conscious effort to embed myself in the local community as much as possible. I walked around William Edward's residential area and made small talk with people when it felt appropriate to do so. In the end, this helped me develop a different access strategy. The next strategy I employed was to attend the Parent Teacher Association/ Friend of William Edward (PTA/FWE)[44] meetings and see if I could build some connections to the school that way. I heard about the PTA/FWE meetings from a resident of the William Edward area whom I encountered while walking around and trying to get a lay of the land.

Here it is important to quickly discuss how my positionality influenced my description of the people I encountered while doing my research. Often in ethnographic research, the researcher will refer to people who share pertinent information as 'informants' (Whyte 1993, Emerson 2001). However, the word informant is loaded with negative connotations, particularly as it relates to the criminal justice system and communities of color. Within the criminal justice system 'informants' are people who have 'flipped' or turned on a member (or members) of a group with whom they had formerly associated with and about whom the informant was now divulging key information to authorities. Moreover, this informant also generally 'flips' in an effort to get themselves out of trouble.

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[44] For a thicker description of the PTA/FWE see chapter 5.

Within communities of color, particularly among social movements, an informant is a person who is embedded within the group but is working with and divulging key information to the authorities (i.e. local police department, FBI, etc.) about group members as well as the planning of future demonstrations and mobilization strategies. In this context, informants pose as sharing similar social, political or economic perspectives of the group. However, their presence is antithetical to the group's interests as they are distributing information that will likely hinder the group's actions and possibly dismantle it. Therefore, as a Black man, the word informant is not useful in my ethnography as it does not capture my relationship with any of the people with whom I have interacted. Nor does the word informant convey the transactional context in which I received information about William Edward.

Taking all of this into account I prefer to use the word respondent or 'ally'. For me, a respondent is a bit more 'neutral' in that this person might provide information that is useful or not useful. However, an 'ally' in this context is someone who is aware of what I am researching or at least my status as a researcher and is offering information that is useful for my project. One of the first allies I encountered was an African American woman who resides in the William Edward area.

The following Sunday afternoon, three days after my first visit to William Edward, I decided to walk around the neighborhood of the school to become more familiar with the area. While walking I got a bit turned around and I was not quite sure how far I was from the school. I then saw an African American woman in her mid- to late forties dressed in workout attire and walking in my direction. I got her attention by asking, "Excuse me. Do you know how I can get to William Edward from here?" She replied "You tryin' to get to William Edward?" Given that it

was the weekend and I did not want to come across as suspicious, I immediately let her[45] know

my status as a student. I continued by saying:

> Aaron: Yeah, I'm a student at UCLA and I'm hoping to do research on William Edward.
>
> Resident: Oh yeah, I know William Edward. That's a good school.
>
> Aaron: Yeah that's why I want to research it. Find out what they're doing right.
>
> Resident: Oh okay, well its only about 5 blocks from here [*After giving the directions, she followed up by saying*] But it's Sunday, ain't nobody there.
>
> Aaron: Yeah, I know, but I can at least get a sense of the lay out. You know, how big it is. Things like that[46].
>
> Resident: Well, I know they have teacher and parents meeting each month.
>
> Aaron: Oh, do you go to the meetings?
>
> Resident: No, I just heard about them from living here in the neighborhood.
>
> Aaron: Oh okay. Well, thank you. I appreciate that.
>
> Resident: Not a problem and good luck with your studies.
>
> Aaron: Thank you.

After receiving this information, I went home and searched the school's website. The

information I received from this ally was accurate and the webpage stated that the meetings were

held on the first Tuesday of every month.

Finally Gaining Access

I went to two PTA/FEW meetings. The first meeting was on Tuesday, February 1st but it

was an unsuccessful attempt in that no one ever showed up for the meeting. I waited for roughly

forty-five minutes and then I decided to leave. The second PTA/FWE meeting, on Tuesday

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[45] In the dialogue I refer to her as 'resident' because she lives in the area and I never received her actual name.

[46] Here, I was acting as if I had not already visited the school in an effort not to cause suspicion or create confusion.

March 1st, was much more fruitful. In the end, I was able to speak directly with the principal about both my research and potentially gaining access to the school. However, navigating my way to the principal required a good deal of networking and quickly establishing allies to create the space and opportunity for me to speak to her. In what follows I present a relatively brief discussion about two key allies with whom I formed relationships, and then a much thicker description of the interaction and dialogue of how I gained access to the school.

While at the PTA/FWE meeting, I spoke with several different attendees, two of whom became important allies for me. The first person was Ron, who is the volunteer that solely operates and maintains the school's website (see chapter 5). I spoke with Ron before the meeting started while everyone was standing around waiting for it to begin.

The second person was Mrs. Hill, a white woman in her mid-forties with one child attending William Edward, who was also the PTA/FWE President. In fact, it was Mrs. Hill who made an announcement to the parents about needing volunteers. As the PTA/FWE meeting concluded, Mrs. Hill announced "Also, keep in mind parents, that we could really use some volunteers for this next half of the school year". At that moment, I recalled a discussion I had with two fellow graduate students about how they were volunteering at their field sites. I then took Mrs. Hill's announcement and began to rework it into a potential strategy to gain access to William Edward.

Mrs. Hill adjourned the meeting and I headed straight to the front where she and the principal were sitting to inquire about the possibility of volunteering at William Edward. Unfortunately, both the principal and Mrs. Hill were already speaking with other parents. I saw Ron to my right standing by himself, so I took this opportunity to follow up on our previous discussion:

Aaron: Hey Ron

Ron: Hey, so how did you like the meeting?

Aaron: It was good. I'm still a bit surprised that you do all this on a volunteer basis.

Ron: Yeah, well everyone here is great. And they really seem to appreciate it, so I get something out of it as well.

Aaron: I heard Mrs. Hill say that the school needs some volunteers. Can only parents volunteer or could I as a graduate student or you know, a community member?

Ron: I think so, check with Mrs. Webster, but I'm pretty sure you could. [*I decide to keep a close eye on both Mrs. Hill and the principal. At this point I am about an arm's length away from Mrs. Hill and two arm's length from the principal. I even turn the right side of my body towards them so I can 'slide in' when there is a chance. Trying to stall a bit and not seem weird or out of place I continue my conversation with Ron.*]

Aaron: So where did you do your undergrad work?

Ron: Also, at UCLA. Oh, I had such a great time. I got my BA and three MA degrees from there.

Aaron: Did you really?

Ron: Yeah

Aaron: What… [*Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Mrs. Hill was free and I didn't want her to leave so I continued by saying*] I'm sorry, excuse me for a moment, Ron.

Aaron: [*speaking now to Mrs. Hill*] Hi, Mrs. Hill. I'm Aaron Crawford. I'm a graduate student at UCLA and I heard you say that the school can use some volunteers. I was wondering if that is only open to parents or if I as a student could volunteer?

Mrs. Hill: Well, yeah, you could. What would you want to do and also, why are you interested in volunteering?

 Aaron: I'm doing research on schools, middle schools in particular, and I was thinking that volunteering would be a nice way to help out the school and gain access to it. Basically, whatever you guys need help with, I know I could help out with that position. [*I realize I may be coming across as 'full of myself' so I backpedal a bit.*] I'm not trying to say I'm amazing and I can do anything, but if you can give me a few examples of things that the school needs help with, I can tell you which one might suit me the best.

Mrs. Hill: Well, we need help with the phones in the main office. I know from firsthand experience, it is very hard sometimes to get through.

Aaron: I could help with that. I worked in an office for three years.

Mrs. Hill: Umm, Alright, well [*she looks over at the principal, but she is already talking to another parent*] how about you tell me a little bit more about your research.

I tell Mrs. Hill about my research project. Then, after a few minutes the principal is finished

talking with the parents and Mrs. Hill grabs her attention and begins by saying:

Mrs. Hill: Couple things to share with you. One, this is Aaron Crawford he is a graduate student at UCLA [*I waive and say hello*]. Two he, is interested in becoming a volunteer for us.

Principal: You are?

Aaron: Yeah, definitely

Principal: Okay, well what can you do?

Aaron: What do you need me to do? [*The principle smiles and I relax a little bit from fearing that my statement might not be well received.*]

Mrs. Hill: I was saying to Aaron that the main office can use some help with the phones.

Principal: Phones? No, leave that for the parents to do. We've got some fresh and young blood here. We've got to get him with the students. There's an afterschool program that we have where we help students with their homework. Do you have any experience at that?

Aaron: Yeah. In San Francisco, I did my undergrad at San Francisco State University and while I was up there, I interned at a family homeless shelter where I was one of the members of the homework help program.

Principal: Wow, that's great! So, what subjects would you want to help with? English, Math, Science?

Aaron: I think I would like to help with English, Math, or Social Studies. Those are probably my top three.

Principal: So, wait a minute. Are you also going to be doing research while you are volunteering?

Aaron: I'd like to.

Principal: You're not going to put us in another study, are you? Because we've got enough studies going on around here. People are constantly wanting to interview my students about this and that.

A: Well actually, for my research I'm interested in studying the relationship between the parents and teachers. In particular, do parents and teachers effectively communicate their expectations to each other, and how might this communication or lack thereof affect student

performance. [*The principal pauses. I am very nervous that she is going to say no. She turns and looks at me.*]

Principal: I have never heard of a study done like that. I like that idea. Sure, we'd love to have you come and volunteer. Okay, okay hold on. [*She looks me directly in eyes and then at my face. I'm a bit confused, but I'm so excited from her response I just go with it for a moment*.] I am just trying to mentally link your face with your name, Aaron Crawford, right?

Aaron: Right.

Principal: Alright Aaron. Here's what I want you to do. First let's all start heading out so we can get the school closed up. [*Ron, Mrs. Webster, the principal and I all head towards the exit. We stop in the hallway and the Principal continues*] Aaron, I want you to get a hold of Mrs. Wright in student services and let her know you talked with the principal and to help you get setup to volunteer.

Aaron: Oh, wow, thank you so much! I really appreciate it.

Principal: No, it's my pleasure. And you can stop by my office anytime.

Aaron: Thanks again! [*I start walking towards the doors to exit the school*]

Principal: Okay, we'll see you soon.

I walked out the doors beyond excited and filled with a sense of relief. A couple days later I stopped by William Edward and filled out the requisite volunteer forms. Shortly thereafter, I began volunteering at William Edward in the Afterschool Homework Help program.

Maintaining Access at my Field Site

From early on in my research I could see that William Edward was in desperate need of additional resources, particularly in the form of personnel. Therefore, one of the most important ways I was able to maintain access to the school was by filling in their need for personnel. Each year, I continued to observe new 'holes' to fill or what I term in chapter 5 as *service gaps.* After several weeks of volunteering with Homework Help, the principal asked me if I was still interested in also helping out with the phones in the main office. I told her yes and I began

splitting my volunteer time between assisting Mrs. Tate in the main office and working with the students after school during Homework Help.

I observed numerous service gaps while assisting in the main office. My ability to help fill in some of those gaps is unquestionably why I was able to maintain my access to William Edward. However, in addition to doing tasks in the main office and sliding over to help out student services, I also made myself available to work alongside school officials who were trying to create new programs within the school. One of the most exciting partnerships was working with Mrs. Davis, an African American science teacher at William Edward who was transitioning into her newly appointed and created position of student outreach specialist.

At the beginning of the school year in 2015, Mrs. Davis began instructing her first 'college bound' class that consisted of roughly 45 students who were predominately Black and Latino and almost evenly split among boys and girls. Knowing that I was a student at UCLA, she asked if I would accompany her inaugural 'college bound' class on a tour of UCLA in early October 2015. I agreed and Mrs. Davis began working on the logistics and booking several other college campus trips for subsequent weeks during October. However, Mrs. Davis was informed that there were not any tour slots left at UCLA because there were already several middle schools and high schools booked for that day. Therefore, the trip would need to be pushed back to the spring and this inaugural 'college bound' class would have to miss out on visiting UCLA. After a couple of discussions with Mrs. Davis, we decided (I offered, and she excitedly agreed) that I would take the students on a tour of UCLA.

I gave the students a good mix of the academic and athletic offerings of the campus. Using my social and cultural capital, I was even able to convince a Teaching Assistant at UCLA in the Public Policy Building to let the students quickly take a seat in one of the mini-lecture

halls on the first floor. Many of the students were able to sit down next to 'real' college students as they referred to them. Then, one boy, who was an eighth-grade African American student, looked over at a 'real' college student eating a sandwich and yelled out "You can eat in here?! Man, I can't wait to go to college!" Mrs. Davis and I looked at each other, smiled and then quietly laughed to ourselves. Seeing the students' excitement as they walked around the campus and knowing that Mrs. Davis and I had worked hard to co-construct this moment was a great feeling. In many ways it was moments like these that became the anchor sustaining my desire to keep returning to the field.

Important Takeaways: Approaching the Field

Gaining and maintaining access to a field site is a reciprocal endeavor. As you gear up to gain access to your site, it is important to think about what you 'bring to the table'. Try to put the specifics of your research project aside and force yourself to address the question, how will my presence help this organization, group, etc.? In addition, how might my presence cause problems or create tension for members within the organization? You are approaching the field with a litany of ways they can help you (i.e. data, publications, dissertation, degree) so think about how you can help them and then take the answers to this question and use them as strategies to try to gain access.

By putting forth this recommendation, I am not trying to discount certain aspects and expectations of the graduate school experience, such as publications. However, I am suggesting that you think -prior to going into the field- about how a publication may help the members of the group you would like to study. For instance, a publication could bring much needed recognition of a lesser known problem or an innovative idea. If in your candid assessment you acknowledge that a publication is much more for your benefit, then task yourself with thinking

about what skills and experiences you possess that can be similarly beneficial to the group under study as collecting the data is for you. I offer these suggestions as a way for us all to think about what 'type' of researchers and scholars we *are* and would like to become. Furthermore, I am challenging us all to think about our positionality and actions within the field. I contend that how we show up at our field site is as important as the data with which we leave.

Appendix B:

Interview Guide for Parents, Teachers, Staff and Administrators

Basic Interview Guide for Parents

Parent's awareness of expectations

Can you describe the type of parental involvement you think teachers expect from you?

-[47]How did you find out (come to the conclusion) about these 'expectations'?

-(If answer above is something other than school) Do you believe the school should have communicated this to you?

Have there been situations where you felt the school could have done a better job communicating with you?

-If so, how and in what ways?

Parental Involvement / Parents expectations' set for themselves

What do you believe you can do to be the most helpful in assisting your child with school (educational experience)?

Have you ever had to 'step-in' (intervene) at school on behalf of your child?

-What was it regarding?

Do you talk to other parents about their experience at William Edward? (**Social capital**)
-Do they have a child in your son/daughter's grade/classroom?

Were you able to attend some of the school events this year?, last year?
(open house, meet the teachers night, orientation for 6th grade parents,)-**academic**
(band/chorus concert, Olympics day?) – **extra curricular**

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[47] Note (-) mark indicates a probing or follow up question.

[Parents interview guide continued]

Are you a member of the PTA (F.W.E.- Family of William Edward)

-Do you hold a position as a board member?

How many PTA/FEW meetings have you attended (or have you attended any meetings) over the past year?

-How many meetings since your child enrolled at William Edward?

-Do you believe more parents should be involved?

-Why do you think more parents are not involved?

-In your experience have you found that some groups of parents are more involved than others?

*(8th grade parents) What are your thoughts of the principal?
- What are some differences you've noticed between this principal and the previous one?

Present Strategies for Future Goals

Do you envision your child going to college?
-For you, when does that preparation begin?
-Are there things you're doing now to get him/her prepared, or is it too early for that?

Parent's childhood educational experience (and attitude regarding education)

How would you describe your own educational experience (K-12)?

Are there some experiences that you feel have had an impact on how you approach your own child's education?

Interview Guide for Teachers

Teacher's expectations of parents

Generally speaking, how would you describe the relationship between the teachers and parents at William Edward?

Regarding this relationship, what are some aspects that you wish were better?

What 'things' can a parent do to have a positive impact on their child's education?

    -Do you communicate these strategies to parents? If so, how or in what ways?

I hear a lot of discussion about the importance of building a parent-teacher partnership. What can parents do to assist you in building this partnership?

    -Do you find that being a (insert their race here white, black, Latino or Asian-American) teacher help you build partnerships with parents? Can you elaborate?

    -Do you find that being a (insert their race here, white, black Latino, Asian-American) teacher hinders your ability to build partnerships with parents? Can you elaborate?

What do you tell parents is the best way to contact you?

    -If they answer email, has that presented any problems for the parents that you know of?

How would you describe an unsupportive parent?
    -What are some ways that parents have been unsupportive?

    -Do you try to communicate these unproductive strategies to parents? If so, how or in what ways?

Do you know of examples where William Edward (or yourself) has been successful in further assisting a student that was seemingly not receiving sufficient academic help at home?

Interview guide for Administration and Staff

[These questions will be posed in addition to the questions listed for teachers]

Assisting the parent/teacher relationship

Can you describe the role you play as it relates to parents and teachers?

Regarding parental involvement do you believe that parents should play a different role now that their child is in middle school as opposed to elementary?

-If so, what should be different now?

In terms of communication, what do you find are some of the best things that the school does?

-What are some ways that you think the school could improve?

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