May 2023

Three Sides to Success: Exploring How Inclusive Partnerships Can Nurture Robust Family and Community Engagement in the Classroom for African-American Students

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Three Sides to Success: Exploring How Inclusive Partnerships Can Nurture Robust

Family and Community Engagement in the Classroom for African-American Students

By

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Science in Education.

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2023

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which conscious family and community partnerships with middle schools can play an integral part of academic achievement for Black children. Family and community engagement play a critical role in a student's success as support, and knowledge of their scholar's strengths and interests can be an asset not only in the classroom, but to the scholar's overall academic success, which can "lead to higher educational aspirations and increased student motivations" (Bartz, et al. 2017). However, presiding narratives of disengagement and disinterest from Black parents in their scholar's academic life have been a historic detriment to many Black students. Despite extensive research exclaiming that Black families are indeed extremely supportive of their children's academic careers, and that Black families express interest in partnering with their scholar's school, Black families still remain on the outskirts of their child's education because "schools imply that students are victims of parental apathy to the goals of education" (Latunde, et al., 2016, p. 3). This study used a qualitative approach. Participants associated with one middle school in Northern California filled out a survey with open-ended questions, and in-person interviews were conducted with parents, community members, and students. All data was coded to identify emerging themes and patterns. Findings show that: 1) historic doubts lead families and the community to want more transparency from the school district, 2) families want healthier teacher–student relationships and 3) families want engaged leadership from school administration and from teachers and staff, and 4) families want an inclusive and open partnership that is focused on improving the quality of education. These findings have important implications for school-community partnerships focused on supporting the achievement of Black children.

Acknowledgements

This research project was completed in May 2023 after a taxing, yet stimulating three-year graduate experience complete with overcoming personal challenges, reaching demanding academic expectations, and balancing a newly established, small business. With that said, I'd first like to thank my Lord and Savior for ordering my steps to march forward during times when I physically and mentally couldn't go on. Next, I'd like to thank my love, my husband, for his undying support during this experience. This feat wouldn't have been possible without him. Third, I want to thank all my family–my Dad, sisters, brothers, Baby Knox, and Anita–along with my extended family and friends for all of your encouragement. Thank you to Miss Royce and all of my fellow teachers for all of your love and prayers for me to keep going.

Lastly, to my students past and present, it has been a pleasure being your teacher over the last few years. I started this journey for one reason: to deepen my knowledge of how to creatively challenge your minds so that you can soar beyond your wildest dreams. Many of you were around when I started this journey in 2020, listening in on college-level conversations or poking your heads into the camera during Zoom sessions, so I hope that your image of me during those times will inspire you to aim high and achieve all of your dreams regardless of the time or path you take. You can achieve anything!

A special thanks to Professors Birch, Stewart, Truesdell, and Lewis for all of your wisdom, professionalism, encouragement, and faith in your future teacher leaders. You guys have truly made a difference in my life and career!

Above all, this victory is dedicated to my Mother, who departed this Earth nearly twenty-five years ago before she got the chance to see me earn not one but two college degrees. While the pain still feels fresh at times, I know that you're proud. I love and miss you deeply.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples;" these words were uttered by Carter G. Woodson, American historian, educator, and author of the principled *The Mis-Education of the Negro* over seventy years ago, in regards to the state of education on Black children after Emancipation. Woodson, a staunch critic of American schools, believed that it was absolutely critical for Black children to be taught the history of their lineage, how to think critically, and the tools for self-sufficiency, which would nurture Black children into productive adults who would challenge oppressive systems, and work to advance the collective across all aspects. When Woodson released *The Mis-Education of the Negro* in the 1930s, twenty percent of Black children over the age of fourteen were illiterate while eighty percent of Black children possessed very basic reading and writing skills in spite of barriers such as low educational attainment opportunities, segregated schools, racism, and grim resources (National Center for Educational Statistics. 2023. p. 3). Today, the numbers paint a chilling picture of the current state of American education for many Black children with eighty-four percent of Black eighth graders performing "below proficiency" in mathematics and eighty-five percent of Black eighth-graders performing "below proficiency" in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP (2020). These numbers are a reflection of the educational system across the country for many Black children; couple this system with other socio-economic issues like income, occupation, residence, and racist in-school educational policies, the staggering data will only sabotage the generations of children who could, as

Woodson suggested, go on to achieve great academic success complete with the knowledge of critical thinking, self-sufficiency, and provide aid to advance their communities.

Statement of Purpose

Prior research has long recorded the discrepancies between Black families and school districts and perceptions of engagement from families in underserved communities. One study shared the historical abuse and manipulation faced by Black families in underserved communities through an explanation of systemic racism and bias within school districts-the voices and lived experiences of Black families have been discounted; their experiences attempting to navigate work, home life, and school life have all been ignored, resulting in miscommunication, mistrust, and mistreatment, which is often labeled as "disengagement" (Harrington, p.3) by school communities. Another study criticizes the current system of family engagement that favors the "dominant culture" of school communities while challenging school systems to procure more effective inclusive and equitable ways to improve family engagement regardless of race, socio-economic status, culture, or other markers. The study also calls for school leaders to first educate themselves on inclusive practices that will reflect the cultural beauties within their school community in order to increase family engagement from all families (Brion,2021, p.4).

While there are a plethora of studies that highlight the disconnect between stakeholders, and expose the detrimental effects to Black children's academic progress and success, there are strategies such as *Culturally Responsive Teaching,* that "builds the school success of ethnically diverse students" while "preparing teachers in pre-service education programs with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed" (Gay, 2001, p. 106).Numerous research studies have also been conducted using either a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method approach and

these studies have uncovered the problems and provided research-backed solutions. However, few studies are available with familial, community, and student-driven solutions that can work alongside the research-based strategies. This project will use the voices of families, their scholars, and the greater community to "speak to the school" on how all stakeholders can take a collaborative approach to positively increase the learning of Black children, which can contribute to narrowing the achievement gap so that Black children are adequately equipped with the necessary tools to compete in this world.

Overview of the Research Design

This researcher can attest to how a strong family and community support system in collaboration with the school community can build a solid, academic foundation that can undoubtedly influence academic growth and overall success. The researcher conducted this study with the background knowledge first as a student at the site over two decades ago then as a recent student-teacher within the school district, and wanted to study current experiences, behaviors, student-educator relationships, and the overall school culture. The researcher, an active community member, wanted to study the barriers faced by Black families today and understand the different ways in which the research could contribute to the betterment of Black children. The researcher wanted to be sure to include the perspectives of all stakeholders who are affected the greatest by the established disharmony.

The research was conducted outside of the research site due to privacy concerns, but the site sits in the center of a small, tight-knit, intergenerational community located in a small, Northern California city. The middle school site serves approximately 120 students–primarily students of color. Eighty-four percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch throughout the district. The district is forty-nine percent Black/African-Americans, seven percent White,

and thirty percent Hispanic/Latino while other groups represented just fifteen percent or less. Thirty percent of students are English Learners. The researcher interviewed six parents, four students, and four community members/organizations; also, over forty children were observed in which analytic memos were created by the researcher. All parental participants have children at the middle school, and are members of the community. All student participants were previous students of the researcher during their 7th grade year in 2021-2022, but are current 8th graders whose ages range from thirteen to fourteen years old. Three of the community members interviewed are directors of community-based organizations that were established to assist families with school-related issues while the final community member acts as a community liaison who connects resources to families within the school district. Racial/Ethnic groups represented in all participants are African-American/Black, with the exception of one community member who identifies as White. Table 1 sheds depth on the demographics of the parental and community member participants within the district and community.

Table 1
Demographics of Participants (9 participants identify as Black; 1 identifies as White)

	Role in Community	Current children at the middle school	Length of time in the district	Years in the community	Other children in the district (past or present)
Parent	Undergrad student/Assistant	1 (13 year old)	3 years	30 years+	1
Parent	Teacher's aid/runs a non-profit	1 (13 year old)	5 years	20 years+	1
Parent	Medical Asst. in community	1 (14 year old)	14 years	20 years+	0
Parent	Sales	1 (13 year old)	13 years	30 years+	1

	Role in Community	Current children at the middle school	Length of time in the district	Years in the community	Other children in the district (past or present)
Parent	Maintenance	1 (13 year old)	3 years	30 years+	0
Parent	Sales	2 (13 & 11)	5 years	5 years +	1
Comm. Mem.	BTG	0	3 years	3 years	
Comm. Mem.	HP	0	20 years	60 years+	0
Comm. Mem.	non-profit/alternative school	Children were pulled from school years ago	NA	70 years+	NA
Comm. liaison	non-profit/school district	0	5 years+	20 years+	

The research was conducted using a qualitative method that included several sources: families, students, and community members/organizations. The researcher used several methods of collecting data such as qualitative interviews, audio recorded for the purposes of transcribing, and researcher observation notes from sitting in on classes as well as analytic memos from data collection and analysis phases. These methods were used to collect data to not only hear the voices of those who are most affected (by listening to their concerns, interactions, criticisms, solutions and overall experiences with the middle school), but to also better understand what could be done, from their perspective, to solve the problem. This research study sought to answer the following overarching question:How can schools include the voices of Black families and communities to cultivate a genuine partnership where a robust, sustainable family engagement program will improve student achievement within middle school classrooms?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are crucial for understanding the breakdown between families/community and the local school, and the effects of the breakdown on Black children's academic performance. There is a wealth of information on how increased family interaction and engagement can help increase student achievement within the classroom. However, there is not a wealth of information on how families/parents/community members feel devalued and shut out of their children's educational experiences. Additionally, information on how school districts can open the communication lines to create engagement practices that will reflect lived experiences to equally benefit all, from the voices of Black families and community members, is not abundantly available. Families and community members have a myriad of ways that they can teach and connect with students and these strategies are needed in the classroom to better assist the performance of Black students. The researcher believes that once the stakeholders hear the solutions proposed by each contributing stakeholder, then a viable solution will have risen out of this study.

Research Implications

This project has the potential to advance educational equity and social justice for all students and create an opportunity for all stakeholders through strategies like *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and *Transformative Learning Theory,* both of which can be instrumental strategies vitally beneficial to the success of a student, especially a marginalized student, who may need all of the resources and support to meet or exceed high expectations in the classroom. When serving children who come from vulnerable backgrounds and have an array of needs, schools must utilize every resource available to reach these students to help them succeed, which includes partnering with their families and community members, who after all, are the

number one experts on how to reach their students. An equitable and inclusive partnership is not a far-fetched concept to implement considering the widely available strategies such as the aforementioned, but also the parental feedback need to be prioritized: getting to know the families as well as the fabric of the community in which the school serves, plan academic events to support students outside of parents' work hours, challenge students with a rigorous curriculum, practice more positive reinforcement, set high expectations for students along with a hosts of other parental suggestions uncovered by the research. Relinquishing power back into the hands of parents not only alleviates stress from teachers, provides fresh strategies from the minds of parents to use in the classroom, and establishes a positive teacher-parent bond, but will also empower students to show up and present their absolute best in the classroom.

An overview of the findings, outlined deeply later in chapter four, unveiled: a positive classroom culture that effectively responds to all needs of the classroom, open and honest school to family communication, and transparency to the public that will maintain accountability to families and greater community members to be included in the structural shaping of the school community and informed of any paramount decisions that need to be made for the students' best interests, school administration and staff will undeniably understand that forging partnerships with families and community members to implement both the aforementioned strategies along with participant suggestions is an absolute necessity to boost engagement and produce higher student outcomes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The topic of familial and community engagement in the classroom, particularly for Black students, has been thoroughly discussed and backed by extensive research. Black children need family and community support in the classroom to exemplify positive academic and social growth! However, despite the substantial research and evidence exclaiming the importance of family and community engagement, many Black families remain on the outskirts of their child's education while numerous schools continue to perpetuate racist stereotypes that cast blame on why Black students have failed to significantly narrow the achievement gap- "schools imply that students are victims of parental apathy to the goals of education" (Latunde, et al., 2016, p. 3). Additionally, the current system of family engagement strategies promote a "one size fits all" model of inclusion, without regard for the lived experiences of the vulnerable populations– particularly Black students– being served, such as "socio-economic status, class, culture, working class, immigration status," and other factors that might affect familial engagement (Brion, 2021, p. 2). The "lack of invitation" coupled with "limited opportunities to engage" and racism has reduced Black families to spectators of their children's education rather than bodacious partners, who can contribute a unique set of skills for growth within the classroom. Consequently, many families do not feel supported or included in their children's learning process, and often experience feelings of "isolation, alienation, and disengagement" (Bartz, et al., 2017, p. 5).

Growing up, the researcher had commonly heard that there are three parts to a successful student: the student, the family/community, and the school, and when all three entities actively work together, then there is no limit to how high a student can soar inside the classroom. It's past time that all school districts who are serving vulnerable Black children re-evaluate current

engagement policies and dismantle ineffective practices plus extend an invitation to all stakeholders to have a conversation on what fostering healthy, collaborative relationships looks like. There must be an authentic invitation where a genuine commitment is expressed to collaborate with each other to optimize success for Black students. Therefore, in this research project, the researcher set out to answer the following overarching question: *how can schools include the voices of Black families and communities to cultivate a genuine partnership where a robust, sustainable family engagement program will improve student achievement within middle school classrooms?*

Roadmap

The following is a review that first inquires and seeks solutions for the ways in which schools can include the voices of their most vulnerable populations, specifically Black families and communities, to nurture healthy, equitable and inclusive partnerships that will stimulate trustworthy family engagement programs to benefit student achievement. With this question in mind, the researcher first discusses the historical value of education as an indispensable tool to Black families since before the creation of the diaspora (the contextual background section). Next, a conceptual framework is mentioned in the second section to illustrate the research process and how the variables within the research connected to the researcher's ideas. The next section explains the lack of invitation and support felt by Black families to advocate for their children in the classroom (McClure, 2022). The section that follows exposes the ill-intent beliefs about the Black family's engagement and genuine interest in their children's education. The fifth section proposes a call to action for schools to create intentional and organic partnerships where familial and community voices are heard and incorporated into any action plans conceived. While some school supporters might refute the claim of scarce inclusive

opportunities for Black families, the research shows that current engagement practices have been formed from the perspectives of the school workforce and not of the families being served. When schools implement a "school-centric" (Bratz. et al. 2017, p.3) viewpoint that does not take into account the range of child-rearing and nurturing skills that Black families possess, their roles are reduced to simple functions like homework help or meetings (Williams & Sanchez, 2012). The last section, prior to the conclusion, highlights the slow moving, academic achievement gap that has barely narrowed between Black students and their white counterparts for a couple reasons, with the lack of equitable resources and investment in education for Black children being an important factor. A tool that could help move the achievement train along is the critical, hands-on engagement from Black families and community members/organizations, who can provide a rainbow of nurturing skills to help with critical issues like "school readiness, disciplinary actions, literacy test scores, math test scores, and graduation rates" (Harrington. 2022, p. 4).

Contextual Background

Education has been an instrumental tool for Black people since before the colonial history of the United States forced enslaved Africans onto the shores of the New World. There was no singular education model that followed a standardized curriculum prior to colonization and slavery, but there were different educational systems across many African civilizations that included a plethora of teachings–nature, astrology, farming, herbal medicine, storytelling, spirituality, and other subjects–that were necessary skills for indigenous Africans to master in order to "survive and advance their societies" (Mosweunyane, 2013, p. 52). From colonization to the Civil Rights Era and every historical epoch in between, education has been an instrumental tool for Black people, proving that Black families have always established a

significant presence in their child's education. Black parents and community members have always held a collective partnership in helping to educate the children of the community, but these roles that were once a staple contribution to the education of Black children have diminished over time, largely due to racism.

There have been many perceptions–rooted in historic and systemic racism–perpetuated by school districts of how Black families are not involved or actively engaged in their children's education. These misperceptions of "parents are too busy, parents just don't care about education, parents don't want to be involved" and other notions are not fact and further stigmatize Black families who are low-income, working-class, single-parent, and other types of families, which creates unfair and one-sided expectations of families. These unethical assumptions hinder a family's ability to equitably collaborate with schools and aid in their child's learning process and the ability to collaborate with teachers to cultivate a culturally diverse classroom (Bartz et al., 2017). Research has shown that school districts must dismantle stereotypical belief systems about families in order to successfully partner with families to sincerely help the children in the classrooms. There has to be an intentional focus from the school system on creating equitable relationships free of biases and creating true inclusivity within the classroom (Jacques et al., 2018;McClure, 2022).

Christopher Stewart, education activist and co-author of *On Code: A Toolkit to Navigate Education*, explains that parents have been "infantilized and disrespected" by the school system (Stewart et. al., 2018, p. 3). Stewart goes on to say, "parents were once considered the sole power in the lives of their children, and the school was an extension of home learning" (p. 3)- this was in regards to the erasure of a vigorous parental existence within the school classroom. All schools that are serving vulnerable Black children who come from diverse lived experiences

need to come to the realization that parents and community members are understanding and supportive of their children's education, so it is past time to relinquish the power in order to construct an intentional partnership where voices of Black families and communities are heard and put into action. Relinquishing power back into the hands of parents, and incorporating community organizations is the one way to foster a sustainable familial and community engagement program that will increase student achievement and positively impact student mental health and behavior. With intentional collaboration, parents and community members can ensure that their children are rightfully learning in a "safe, welcoming, and caring environment" where they "will not be racially stereotyped or the recipients of any other racial bias" (Bartz et al., 2017, p. 4).

Theoretical Framework

While formulating a theoretical framework to study the magnitude of engagement strategies that families and school districts can collaboratively formulate to benefit the performance of Black children in the classroom, the *Transformative Theory*, a "framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice" as developed by Jack Mezirow (Mertens, 2009/2010, p. 471; Mertens, Harris, & Holmes, 2009) served as the key foundation of highlighting the issues plaguing Black families and their children's struggle to assert agency rooted in equity and diversity within the classroom. The overriding belief within the *Transformative Learning Theory* is the *axiological* belief which, according to Merten, acts as an "enhancement of social justice, furtherance of human rights, and respect for cultural norms" (Mertens. 2010, p. 471). This is especially important as this research sets out to uncover the impacts of a one-sided relationship on the

school's most vulnerable population due to historical and systemic racist factors, while aiming to curate effective solutions through a qualitative approach.

The expectancy of school districts as solely responsible for educating children is false. The expectancy of little to no interest to engage from Black families and community members is also false. The disconnect between all stakeholders has done nothing but perpetuate stereotypes, fuel broken relationships, and has resulted in more rounds of the "blame game" than one can count. More importantly, the disconnect has resulted in ineffective familial engagement programs, causing Black students to suffer greatly. It is the researcher's hope that this theory creates a link between the families and community organizations, students, and parents where when all three are pulled "in a common direction, good things happen for students" (Bartz, et al., 2017, p. 8). By drawing attention to the historic, education, and racist contexts in which families–particularly marginalized Black families–have gone through, even in systems that are supposed to protect them, schools and educators will grasp the absolute necessity of first acknowledging the already present efforts of Black families to engage in the classroom;then, they might engage the families in partnering on all all the academic and behavioral curriculum. This theory will show that it is "imperative that school personnel and African-American parents work cooperatively with community agencies and other resources in the neighborhoods where the children reside" (Bartz, et al., 2017, p. 8) to maximize success, work to narrow the achievement gap, and deliver culturally responsive teaching and learning.

CRT, or *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, is an approach that purposely connects the classroom learning environment with a student's home life, language(s), and culture. Culturally Responsive Teaching encompasses cultural knowledge, skills to transform the class setting into a multicultural learning center where the otherwise non-dominant cultures are not the primary

focus, and offers the opportunity for all students to engage and soar academically. CRT can only be fruitful when the perspectives and lives of the non-dominant culture, specially Black families, are truthfully included in the curriculum. "Today, the lack of knowledge about and appreciation for Black culture creates social distance between African Americans and White Americans and is a deterrent to change," (Bowman, et al., 2018, p. 3) and this deterrent has shown up in the classroom in more ways than one. However, it is the researcher's belief that the *transformative theory* will be the tool to unveil the current, failed engagement practices that do not promote social justice awareness or action, and will intentionally and fully recognize that "the capabilities developed in homes and communities can be used as springboards for learning" (Bowman, et al., 2018, p. 4), if educators recognize a child's strength as well as the strength of their family.

African-American Families do not Feel Supported by their Children's School or District

Notwithstanding the lack of invitation to collaborate on creating equitable and inclusive policies to benefit their children, parents still show up for their students in a myriad of ways to offer their dynamic interests and skills. Psychologists and education researchers Nancy Hill and Diana Tyson, authors of *Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-Analysis Assessment of the Strategies that Promote Achievement,* concluded that there is an upward correlation between parental engagement and student achievement. In their research, Hill and Tyson identified strategies carried out by parents to support their children such as taking children to events and places that help their academic development (e.g., museums, libraries, college campuses, etc.), and establishing a learning environment in the home (books to read, educational games, etc.) Additionally, Hill and Tyson identified a key factor in schools

supporting students by "creating communication lines between parents and school personnel"
(Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 2).

Research shows that historic disenfranchisement, systematic marginalization, and
cultural diversity and language barriers serve to keep low-income families disengaged from
their child's school, inhibiting their ability to participate in their child's education (Field-Smith,
2005). Despite research that identifies family engagement as a significant component in
improving schools' abilities to serve their large populations of low-income students (Barnard,
2004), school systems, particularly urban schools, have actually led to the widening of the
achievement gap by failing to appropriately reframe family engagement (Watson & Bogotch,
2015). Actively engaging low-income families in the education of their children continues to
represent a significant challenge for educators, particularly urban school educators (Williams &
Sanchez, 2011). Schools must gain an understanding of appropriate methods for overcoming
these obstacles in order to ensure the success of all students by engaging all families.
According to the Children's Defense Fund, there were approximately twenty-six percent of
Black children living in poverty, or 1 in 4 children, so this is an important consideration seeing
as to how a solid amount of Black students are from low-income households, where education
can be used as a pathway to higher heights, so urban schools need to restructure their
engagement programs that will be constructed collaboratively to nourish students' academic and
social development.

Harmful Misconceptions Plaguing Black Families and Black Communities

In addition to the systemic belief perpetuated by schools that Black families are not
involved or actively engaged in their children's education, thus contributing to the lack of
academic achievement of many Black children, research has also shown that current

engagement practices have been ineffective because the practices cater to the dominant culture within the school, and do not take into account the lived experiences of the non-dominant culture such as single-parent families, low-income families, immigrant families, etc. (Brion, 2021). Moreover, without considering the lived experiences of the families or asking families what they need from the schools in order for families and their children to thrive, the possibility of growing genuine partnerships becomes slim and the feelings of disappointment, as well as judgment, occur when unfair expectations are placed on Black families by schools because the schools did not ask, "What do you need from us?" Schools need to acknowledge that parents and community members have an individual experience and unique knowledge that can be utilized in the classroom- "as parents adapt to different challenges, they develop different child-rearing strategies, many of which are misunderstood," (Bowman, et al., 2018, p. 4) so forming an inclusive partnership can not only create an opportunity for school districts to sort out any misunderstandings, but can also provide an equitable experience that would be beneficial for all children in the classroom. Authentic family and school partnerships reflect "respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power-sharing as part of socially just, democratic schools" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 729). Teachers, when discussing the issues contributing to the struggles of their Black students, often cite a lack of care or commitment from parents (Cooper, 2009); however, these assumptions about Black families are false (Cooper, 2009).

Many forms of school engagement are typically based on White, middle-class, and school-based activities such as attending conferences, participating in booster clubs, and other on-site contributions (Boonk et al., 2018). Schools must abandon the "school-centric" point of view that allows schools to "define what factors are in the programs" rather than from the point

of view of the parents whose "unique assets" can contribute to the academic growth of their children (Bratz et al., 2017, p. 5). The common misconception is that parents of marginalized Black students do not value education if they do not replicate these practices, which continues to be a barrier to successful partnerships between families and schools (Baker et al., 2016). Increasing teachers' understanding of the diverse behaviors that families use to show engagement can be a plausible remedy for promoting equitable schooling environments (Norris, 2018). Teachers and schools committed to eliminating current racial disparities should focus their efforts on increasing positive interactions with Black students and their parents by developing more collaborative family–school partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Meaningful Partnerships are Organically Grown between Families and Schools When Equitable and Inclusive Opportunities are Created by Schools

Parents can assert their power over their scholar's education and advocate for their children by demanding an equitable and open partnership with educators and schools. Additionally, schools can help empower parents so that they have agency over their scholar's education instead of perpetuating narratives that contribute to Anti-Blackness, which results in the blame game for low-performing results and lack of academic achievement. While research has consistently shown that parental influence in the lives of children is key to their successful outcomes, schools struggle with how to partner with parents. Parents of all backgrounds have valid complaints about the broken home-school relationships, but none have been more marginalized by this power imbalance than the Black parent (Stewart, et al., 2018, p. 5). There must be a full-scale reclamation of Black children by Black parents — and Black parents must be respected by every system that intends to serve them. School leaders and districts can partner with families to yield positive outcomes such as higher grades, likelihood to complete

homework, and positive student-teacher interactions (among other outcomes) by engaging families equitably in the school culture.

Additionally, when schools get to know the family dynamics of the children that they serve, then schools can become more inclusive and inviting of extended family which can also play a part in student achievement; this includes inviting community members, coaches, aunts and uncles, god-parents, mentors, siblings, etc. Invitation and access to extended family members can be valuable resources in aiding children within the classroom because extended family members can help fill areas where parents are unable, and where students need them in order to feel supported whilst maintaining established partnerships.

Parent engagement programs and school partnerships need to reflect the distinct support systems and resources available to Black families if all stakeholders want to see Black children succeed greatly in the classroom. There are already negative perceptions of Black families' alleged disengagement in the classroom, so incorporating the positive aspects that Black families can contribute will provide a connectedness that Black children need to succeed. Child rearing and engagement look different in every home, so many families have unique and "different strategies to manage their children's learning" (McClure, 2022, p. 46). Schools, school districts, and educators need to make a commitment to equitable family engagement by building welcoming relationships between staff and families where staff are available, and accessible so they could reach families both within the school walls and on a deeper, personal level. It is critical to the growth and overall health of scholars to develop a healthy partnership with schools where consideration for families' lives as well as their voices are welcomed. Research suggests that "...families become disconnected from their children's schools,

administration, and teachers" when "all stakeholders" are not invited to sit at the table to work in partnership for the benefit of the children (Brion, 2021, p. 3).

A healthy family presence in schools is bound by a mighty relationship with community members and community based organizations. From food drives to summer programs and everything in between, the community has always risen to fulfill the various needs of its residents. The community has always ensured that its members have had access to the things they need to lead sustainable and empowered lives where the community members would eventually become productive leaders of the community. Furthermore, significant community engagement understands the importance of inclusivity, which allows the community to use the input of "diverse groups to create solutions that are practical, and effective" (Bassler et al., 2008, p. 1). Community plays a momentous role in family engagement and can act as a link between families and school communities to ensure equitable treatment of both families and students both in and outside of the classroom.

Academic Achievement

Research shows the importance of family engagement to aid student achievement in the classroom, but in order to have real engagement, an intentional connection between all stakeholders—family, schools, school districts, and community members—needs to be established as well as an effective collaborative program that will benefit the scholars and yield results. An intentional connection between all stakeholders will aid in student achievement in the classroom and help to close the achievement gap between young, Black scholars and their counterparts. In order for all stakeholders to close the "narrowed achievement gap," Black children must be adequately equipped with the necessary tools to compete in this world, which means that schools must create an effective, family engagement program where schools are not

deciding the factors of the programs, but there's a "collaborative approach between parents/home environment, school personnel, and community resources" (Bartz, et al., 2017, p. 4). Research suggests that the point of a family engagement program is to "ensure that African-American parents' attributes are not stereotyped and thereby limit the effectiveness of school personnel to work meaningfully with them and their children." (Bartz, et al., 2017, p. 5) Furthermore, research suggests that when intentional and robust school-family-community partnerships are present, these partnerships can "lead to higher educational aspirations and increased student motivations" for many scholars (Bartz et al., 2017, p. 5). Established and effective partnerships between all stakeholders where Black families are heard, community members—an extension of family—play a vital role, and schools/school districts offer a hearty family engagement program along with other community resources is vital for "improving the lives of African-American children" and closing the achievement gap. (Bartz et al., 2017, p. 6).

Plainly, the current system of family engagement for low-income families within school districts has been ineffective, consequently hindering the academic success of many low-income scholars, particularly Black scholars in urban schools. The current family engagement strategies implemented within schools have largely been unsuccessful as a result of school districts not considering the current lived experiences of families, their socio-economic status, class, culture, working class, immigration status, and other factors that might affect familial engagement in their scholar's classroom. As a result, families do not feel supported or included in their children's learning process, which contributes to the slow academic achievement of many Black families in school settings. An overall weakness of the literature reviewed for this study, which the researcher will address through this project, is the lack of voices of the families regarding what family and community engagement looks like to them within schools. Since families are

the central focus of this project, the researcher centers their voices on what collaboration looks like, what equity and inclusion in the classroom looks like for them, and what kind of support is needed from faculty and staff. Hearing the honest perspectives from family members will help fill the gaps of miscommunication and alienation between families/community members and the school so that more healthy and effective relationships can be created.

A breakdown in communication between families/community members, and schools have existed for some time, which has resulted in the alienation of some families and their perspectives within school cultures. Consequently, this alienation has resulted in unintentional disengagement from families/community members in the classroom, and non-existent partnerships, leaving families in the dark regarding their children's education. The purpose of this research was to examine how focused partnerships through resolute collaboration and effective communication can cultivate vigorous family and community engagement in schools to aid in student achievement of Black students.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this research project was to determine the ways in which families and community members/organizations could sustain an inclusive partnership with schools to assist in the academic achievement of Black students. The researcher's life experiences were a contributing factor to this research project; however, the lived experiences of the participants, eerily similar to the researcher's experiences over twenty years ago, were the propelling factor for this project. The project helped develop an understanding of how the transformative theory in conjunction with a culturally responsive lens exposed the currently failing engagement practices where little social justice or action existed; there was an opportunity for recognizing the participants for who they are—autonomous humans who do not need judgement, but rather the space for agency within the school community, which supports the children's academic well being while simultaneously creating a link between all of the stakeholders; when all these stakeholders are pulled "in a common direction, good things happen for students" (Bartz et al., 2017, p. 8).

Research Questions

The research was conducted using a qualitative method that included several sources: families/students, community members/organizations, and faculty/staff. The researcher used several methods of collecting data such as qualitative interviews, audio recorded for the purposes of transcribing, and researcher observation notes from sitting in on classes as well as analytic memos from data collection and analysis phases. The following overarching question guided the interview questions in this study: *How can schools include the voices of Black families and communities to cultivate a genuine partnership where a robust, sustainable family engagement program will improve student achievement within middle school classrooms?* The

researcher wanted to understand and provide a space for the participants to declare their

solutions to effectively assert their power as partners and change-makers within the school

system.

Description and Rationale for Research

To aid in the authenticity of the project, and to ensure that all participants felt safe and

heard, the researcher made it a point to humanize all participants, especially the families, since

historically, families have been vilified the most. A humanized approach allowed for respect for

the human qualities of the participants to develop a deeper understanding of who they were in

those moments and from where they came. The role of the researcher in a humanized approach

is to bring about the critical engagement of participants as researchers and "listen to what the

participants are saying, how they are saying, and for what reasons" (Projects in Humanization,

2017, p. 11), while creating a space where ideas are shared. The researcher wanted to be careful

of "exoticizing" or "objectifying" the participants' lived experiences. It was important for the

researcher to develop relationships with participants based on trust, critical thought, and

understanding, in order to have the most engaging and honest dialogue during the interviews

(Creswell, 2018, p. 21). The goal was to create a trusting space so that participants felt

comfortable enough to be the primary speaker and engage in critical conversation, so that they

felt deeply part of the research and maybe even as co-authors.

As an alumna and student-teacher within the district, specifically at the middle school

site, the researcher was curious to learn how the students and their families felt about their

learning experiences up to that point, and if students felt that they had the required skills and

support to transition onto high school and thrive independently. Moreover, the researcher was

curious to know if scholars would "sink" rather than "swim" since there had not been a strong

familial or community presence on campus thus far, nor had there been an apparent partnership between all stakeholders to ensure that students were indeed ready to move onto a higher academic level. Ultimately, the researcher developed this qualitative project to fulfill these curiosities while simultaneously using this study as a "call to action." As such, the researcher chose to interview the stakeholders who are suffering the most, the families and their students, as participants, by creating a space for participants to propose worthwhile solutions based on their lived experiences.

Research Design

The humanizing approach was selected as the design of this research because the research "contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work, I live, and that researchers live" (Creswell, 2018, p. 9). The researcher wanted to shed light on issues that needed unveiling and chose to advance in partnership with the participants, so crucial systemic and social issues could be discussed from the participants' point of view while they maintain a sense of agency. Furthermore, the qualitative method coupled with the humanizing approach, allowed the researcher to "focus on the needs of the groups and individuals being served" to "construct a picture of the issues being examined, the people to be studied, and the changes that need to be made" (Creswell, 2018, p. 9). The findings were further used to understand the strategies which families and community members/organizations could utilize in an inclusive partnership that would not only change the trajectory of many marginalized students, but would also foster a new school culture that was constructed with all stakeholders involved.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

The participants in this study were not interviewed at the physical school site, however, participants are either faculty/staff members or families of students who attend the research site that inspired this study. The research site is a school in a small, Northern California city. No names were used in this study to maintain privacy; instead, participants were assigned numbers for identification. The tiny, two-school district serves roughly three hundred and fifty students– mostly students of color. The middle school site serves approximately one hundred and twenty students–primarily students of color. Eighty-four percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch throughout the district. The district is forty-nine percent Black/African-American, seven percent White, and thirty percent Hispanic/Latino while other groups represented just fifteen percent or less. Thirty percent of students are English Learnerscholars. This site was the inspiration and focus for two reasons: the researcher studied general studies there over twenty years ago, and the researcher was an unpaid intern at the site as a part of their student-teaching year.

Participant and Sampling Procedure

The researcher interviewed six parents, four students, and four community members/organizations; additionally, over forty children were observed in which analytic memos were created. The middle school site (name purposely withheld) was selected because during the researcher's student-observation year in the fall and spring of 2021-2022, the researcher realized that not much had changed since the researcher walked the middle school's halls over twenty years ago, in terms of how Black children's academic needs were not being met, and how family involvement/engagement in the classrooms was practically non-existent. The purpose of each sample population was to understand the perspective of the population being served, the families, their students, and the greater community, regarding how a

collaborative, equitable and inclusive effort in place of the current system can aid in student achievement for Black children.

A couple agencies that the researcher worked with are the HP and BTG (the names have been abbreviated). These agencies are staple non-profit organizations within the community that have been working to increase student achievement and provide positive outcomes for scholars to reach higher heights, such as college scholarships, for over ten years. BTG has been in operation for nearly thirty years. These organizations are composed of members who are either native to the community or who have been vital members for a lengthy period of time. Lastly, the organizations work closely with both families and the school site to cultivate a healthy partnership between all, to aid the children being serviced.

The researcher had established a good rapport with many parents during the researcher's time at the site, so the researcher recruited volunteers via email and in-person. Additionally, since the researcher was an employee of a separate, non-profit, after school program that conducts tutoring on site, the researcher encountered and interacted with many parents and community members, who were asked for their participation in an interview. The researcher conducted individual forty-five to sixty minute interviews with students, but alongside their parent's presence, as a part of the overall family interview. The researcher shared an introduction letter with an overview of the project that included time commitments to complete the interview. The researcher provided a description of the study and followed the informed consent process.

Methods

Before conducting qualitative interviews with all stakeholders, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, and what the researcher had hoped to accomplish. The researcher

assured participants that although their interviews were voice recorded, all data was stored in a safe, password protected computer belonging to the researcher and no information was shared outside of the interview session. Participants were assured that interviews were confidential and no real names were used in the data files or research reports. As a result of their participation, participants heard perspectives on creating a system that would foster collaboration between all stakeholders and aid in improving student achievement for Black children. Participants were made aware of the impact that a collaborative effort between all "stakeholders," and robust family and community presence, could have on a young scholar's performance in the classroom along with an overall positive effect on the classroom environment.

Data Analysis

The researcher first collected data through in-person observations between families, students, and community members over the course of three months. All of the families with the exception of two, which are two-parent households, are single-parent households and led by women. All family participants identify as Black. All of the student participants identify as Black and female. All community members identify as Black with the exception of one community member who identifies as White. The researcher observed, and took notes on educator and pupil interactions, classroom dynamics, student participation, and classroom behavioral/disciplinary issues. An analytic memo was written after each classroom observation that included coding analysis, and successful and failed strategies for students both academically and behaviorally in the classroom.

Throughout the interviews with stakeholders, the researcher highlighted phrases that stood out and aligned with the purpose of the research. The researcher made sure to highlight phrases that supported the purpose of the study, but also phrases that expressed satisfaction, if

any, and did not align with the purpose of the study. In highlighting both the negative and positive perspective of each participant, the researcher's goal was to be as transparent, open, and honest in the data as possible. Analytic memos were also written after the playback of each interview.

Coding was done during the in-person observations as well as during the interview process of each participant. The codes were divided into color-coded, themed categories during transcription of the recorded interviews; the researcher coded phrases, expressions, and recurring sentiments that aligned within each theme. Expected code words included: family, engagement, Black, accountability, standards, politics, barriers, challenges, difficult, inclusive, support, feedback, conflict, partnership, programs, involvement, extended family, community, communication, and learning. Additionally, if any words or phrases were mentioned, and had an impact on the participant's feelings, then those words were coded into a new theme and category. This was done for each interview.

Concept mapping involved separating the color-coded themes into sections. Concept mapping allowed the researcher to explore different ideas from the interviews along with the relationships between the experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the concept map made finding the ideas, key words, barriers, and possible outcomes–as suggested by the participants– easier to process and analyze for writing.

Validity

The researcher was the student-teacher of the student participants during the 2021-2022 school year. The researcher had established a professional rapport with both the family and community participants. This bias may have influenced recruitment and data collection as the researcher has a personal and professional desire to create a conversation between families,

community members, and the local school where sustainable practices of vigorous family and community engagement programs are created to enhance the achievement of Black students. Moreover, reactivity is a vital consideration because the researcher was a student observer turned student teacher, who may have had an unintentional influence on the setting of the student participants. Aware of this bias, the researcher intentionally implemented a couple different strategies to combat any threats to ensure that researcher position and purpose to the study were clear.

The first strategy used was triangulation. Triangulation allowed for a "diverse range of participants along with a variety of methods used to collect data" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Use of triangulation presented several methods of collecting data such as qualitative interviews, which were audio recorded for the purposes of transcribing, researcher observation notes from observing classes, as well as analytic memos from data collection and analysis phases. As a result, the researcher was able to analyze data to wade through any "sources of error or bias," as well as to search for shared concerns from participants, all while increasing validity to the study.

The second strategy used was intensive, long-term involvement. The researcher was able to observe the environment long-term for an even deeper understanding of the school site and the vulnerable population existing within the environment. Furthermore, recurring observations granted the opportunity for "more, complete data about specific situations and events" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) as the researcher was able to observe student and faculty participant interactions as each group adapted and responded to their environment, which strengthened the relationship with the participants and led to more accurate data collection.

Chapter 4: Findings

Since the inception of the United States, the African-American community has had to fight for basic, God-given rights and fundamental civil liberties to exist in this country. Black people have faced a long-standing tradition of fighting for inclusion, equality and autonomy in every facet of their lives. One component of this enduring battle has been the struggle for agency in education as input from Black parents have historically been excluded during decision-making processes for their children's education since the onset of slavery.

Black parents have been labeled with a disillusioned narrative that previews Black parents as unattentive, detached, and dispassionate parents, who do not assert an efficacious role in their children's academic development. Consequently, these narratives, fueled by stereotypical misconceptions, have greatly dismissed the vast, cultural and familial influence that Black families have to offer. These biased untruths have discounted the diverse and cultural strengths that the greater community and community-based organizations have to offer in school communities.

The purpose of this research project was to answer the following question: *how can schools include the voices of Black families and communities to cultivate a genuine partnership with a robust, sustainable family engagement program that will improve student achievement within middle school classrooms?* After interviewing, coding data, analyzing open-ended surveys, interview transcripts, analytic memos, and researcher notes, four primary themes were revealed: 1) stakeholders— community members, families, and students—declared that a safe and welcoming environment needs to be creatively and inclusively structured in the school community, 2) the greater community and parents have expressed a grave mistrust in the school district, so relationships need to be intentionally repaired and genuine communication lines need

to be established, and 3) both families and students expressed concern for the lacking presence of strong, healthy teacher-student relationships. Following, participants communicated their vexation in the present administration's unsupportive leadership performance both as the head of the school and with the families within the school community. Finally, community members/community-based organizations, families, and students all expressed their desire for an inclusive partnership that will allow for planned opportunities for families and the greater community to engage in the classroom and events throughout the school community.

A total of fourteen participants were included in this study. Six participants are parents of students at the local middle school, four student participants are 8th graders, and the remaining participants are community members within the greater community, two of which are directors of local community-based organizations, and one is a community liaison between families and the school district. Participants were chosen due to an expressed interest in being interviewed upon receipt of an email explaining the research project while other participants filled out a survey via Google Forms. The open-ended qualitative survey, specifically for families, asked them to: 1) describe their experience as a parent of a scholar within the school district, 2) share ways in which they have felt supported by their scholar's school/district, 3) note if their scholar's school had ever provided ample opportunities for engagement either in the classroom or school community, and 4) provide suggestions for their scholar's school to improve family/school collaborative relationships. All submissions were anonymous and did not require any identifying information.

A Safe and Welcoming Environment

The parents expressed a grave concern of not feeling welcomed in their scholar's school. "Many people don't feel welcomed, like they belong, like they're understood in the system.

They don't trust the system," explained a community member. Admittedly, a couple of parents revealed that this concern was heightened after a state-mandated order to merge the now dissolved K-8 charter school and the current, public K-8 school into one school. According to parents who also attended the public school in the same district, there had always been a divide between the affluent and the disenfranchised residents in the tiny community for as long as the parents could remember. Prior to the inception of the charter school over twenty years ago, the residents who had an abundance of resources could afford to send their children to K-8 schools outside of the district while their neighbors who did not possess the same resources, had to contend with the local school district's public K-8 school. Growing weary of transporting their children to outside school districts, affluent residents pooled their resources together to create a charter school that would serve children from the community while academically strengthening their own children. The two schools dug a deeper divide and further alienated the two groups despite sharing the same ZIP Code, and causing what participants labeled as "intentional segregation." In 2019, the state found that there was in fact segregation between the two schools, which impacted the quality education that many students should have been receiving so a desegregation was ordered. The two schools integrated and unified in 2021. Subsequently, a great deal of confusion, tension, and disappointment ensued- "Families from MC don't feel welcomed due to too much politics and too much distrust" (Community Member, 2023). When asked to describe an experience where they or their scholar might have felt unwelcomed, one parent explained,

> I had a lot of issues that I was facing in my son's classroom. I would bring up
> issues to the teacher, like regarding his homework, or how I can help him at
> home, I got the runaround. I got simple answers like "he's fine. Just take this
> sheet." And it would be one short sheet of homework that wasn't gonna help my
> son. I just felt like his teacher didn't know how to approach or communicate with

me so she didn't. I had to go to the principal many times to complain, but even
he would sweep my concerns.

Vexed and angered, another parent described her experience with the school and the problems

that she and her daughter have faced over the last year,

The school is poorly structured and there's no accountability for students, parents
and staff. There's a huge bullying problem! There are student safety concerns and
inaccurate record keeping. This school is an institutional environment destined to
either traumatize, or pacify the minors involved. Very unfortunate experience for
both the parents and students.

For many Black families, the feeling of belonging in an uneasy environment has historical roots

like the Civil Rights Movement, for instance. In spite of the "unorganized" and "poorly

structured" environment, as described by participants, Black families still have to persistently

show up for their scholars and advocate on their behalf so that they are receiving the finest and

most equitable education offered.

A Mistrust in the System

One consistent theme across the data was a lack of trust in the system [the school/school

district]. Trust in the school's administration and school board was already thin resulting from

what participants described as "broken promises" and years of "not having what we need."

Participants went on to explain that the public school had gone through a series of events such

as high teacher turnover, missing enrichment classes, and bullying and behavioral issues over

several years. However, following the unification of the two schools, participants had once

again, cautiously put their trust into the school administration and school board to produce a

diverse environment with an inclusive, equitable, and robust curriculum for their scholars; yet,

the data revealed that participants, once again, felt "let down" on a grander scale.

One parent explained,

The experience was a bit of a roller coaster. One issue is that this district is not
holding people accountable for their actions: the staff, the students or the

families are not held accountable. Kids not learning, the school not letting
parents know what's going on in the classrooms...it's crazy.

This mother, also a member of the Parent Alliance Committee–created to be a voice for families

within the community–expressed her grievances of failed promises and unmet expectations; she

went on to expound,

The same families that rallied for them [the school administration] they let down.
I sat through several meetings when families begged and pleaded for things to
change to help improve Black and Brown students' educational experiences and
there were little to no changes.

This parent's account mirrored the experiences of other participants, who felt like they were let

down by school leaders, subsequently causing communication lines and family-school

relationships to fall into disarray. Furthermore, parents disappointedly shared that academics

suffered as well as their children's mental health, and parents exclaimed that neither school

leaders, nor teachers took any accountability. One parent went on to note,

I think the lack of support from the administrators was the cause for my
frustration. Teachers do what admin allows, and as a result, communication
lacked, accountability lacked, learning suffered and behavior got worse.

Other participants had similar sentiments of feeling let down by school leaders resulting in the

aforementioned paragraphs; there was a domino effect. One participant, a community member

who is the executive of a non-profit that works with middle school students and their families

commented,

We [the school] have lowered the standards and expectations so far down that
I'm afraid we'll have a generation, yet again, of kids, students, who will not have
those foundational skills to thrive in high school, and…will, kind of, fall through
the cracks, especially our boys.

The community member goes on to say, "I'm especially concerned about our Black boys and

where they'll end up without these basic skills." Without an intentional collaboration between

families, the community, and the school community to formulate a conscious plan to completely

help and support the youth academically as well as emotionally, participants fear that their students will be "totally lost and unprepared for what life has to offer." The community member's concerns about the academic well-being of the children within the district are not too far as the line graph in he Figure One reveals that approximately twenty-one percent of students were proficient in reading/language arts, up from 2021 scores, where slightly under twenty-percent of children were proficient in the 2019 school year. The math data is even more grim as the scholars who are proficient in math took an incredible nose dive, landing at approximately fifteen percent, as shown in Figure Two. These numbers are screaming that the collective has to do something fast and efficiently that will allow the students to grow academically/

Figure 1
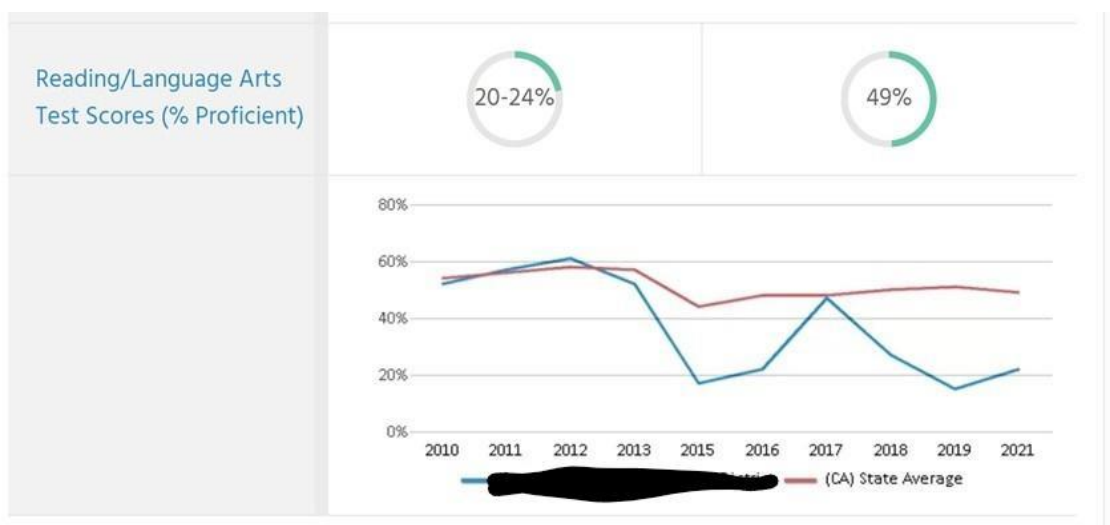*Performance data for eighth grade ELA Sausalito Marin City School District - Home (smcsd.org)*

Figure 2 Performance data for the overall district in comparison to the state average (K-8) Sausalito Marin City School District - Home (smcsd.org)

Substantial Healthy Teacher-Student Relationships

Scrutiny across the parental and student data revealed a significant concern for a lack of healthy teacher-student relationships in the classroom. Participants expressed that a lack of connection between educators and students has contributed to "chaotic" behavior, the classroom in disarray, and overall ineffective management. Parents have complained that the learning process has been greatly affected due to the behavior in the classroom, and when concerns were brought to administration, more "false promises" to remedy the problems were made. One parent communicated,

> In the beginning it was good, but there's a lot of drama there especially this past week and the teachers are not handling things. There are a couple of teachers who have it together, but a couple that don't have it together and the kids know…the kids know the teachers are frustrated.

Parents admitted that teachers are not solely to blame for the problems in the classrooms; instead, parents are wholeheartedly holding administration accountable for not working with families and students to establish high expectations, boundaries, and healthy discipline practices. One parent disclosed, "I think the lack of support from the administrators was the cause for my frustration. Teachers do what admin allows, and as a result communication lacked, accountability lacked, learning suffered and behavior got worse."

Concerning relationships, students were asked to describe their experiences with their teachers and connections made with the teacher. When asked if any scholar felt a connection with any of their teachers, and felt supported in their academics, Student A answered, "That school is just…they don't teach you anything…then they wonder why we so dumb. I like Mr. L. He has good control over his class and he's taught me a lot. They need new teachers though." When asked for Student A to speak a little more on why she feels that the school needs new educators, Student A also exclaimed, "Sometimes some teachers act like they're tired of us, like they don't wanna be here, don't wanna be teaching these kinds of kids. And sometimes they be cussin' under they breath too!"

Student B's sentiments similarly echoed Student A's data as Student B described her experience and connections made with her teachers,

> There's two, maybe three teachers I like. They try to make class fun. But then Mr. S, he's the worst. I really dislike him. He just yells at us, and makes us feel bad for not understanding math. He treats you like you have a problem when really, math is just hard. My Mom and I really can't stand him.

When asked if students could share why they felt connected to the teachers named as their "favorites," an occurring theme was that they "could tell the teachers really care about them."

When asked in what ways one could feel connected to their teacher, Student A responded, "like, Mr. L jokes with us and stuff. He calls me his little cousin, but joking. And he's cool with my Dad too."

Both parents and community members question just how prepared students are for their transition to high school. Participants have declared that strained relationships, disorderly classrooms, and poor accountability from administrators has resulted in "not teaching and educating" the children. Adult participants are concerned that the students are not gaining skills that will assist them in the next phase of their educational journey, and have not developed life-long skills. According to research, which corroborates participants' comments, "meaningful family engagement results in improved grades, higher achievement test scores, lower drop-out rates" and a slew of other positive outcomes when there is an increased engagement and partnership in the classroom (David, 2013, p.1-2).

School Leaders Need to Lead

As illustrated by parents and community members throughout this project, the inaction on behalf of school leaders to remedy familial and community concerns regarding crucial themes within the school community that are severely affecting the learning process as well as the overall well-being of students needs to be addressed and re-formed immediately.

When asked to describe the ways, if any, that families have felt supported by their scholar's school leaders, one parent responded,

> In the beginning, a lot of us had faith in the school leaders, but in the end, I feel like it was just…like politicians. When they were fighting for their jobs, we heard all the great things they were going to bring, but many things I never saw.

When asked if she has been able to establish a healthy partnership with any of her scholar's educators resulting in increased academic achievement, the same parent reflected, "I feel like it's hit or miss with the teachers. We have some really there to help the kids and work as a team

with the families to make the best experience for the student." Similarly, another parent

acknowledged,

> The school district is amazing at providing the basic needs for students and their families…like they help make sure families don't go hungry and are willing to support them in needs like that. I believe the educators at the school do a great job with the tools that they have. Some teachers are able to build a rapport better than others with families.

When students were asked to explain if they felt that their school leader was present, and

actively trying to form connections with them or their families, one student smirked, and

responded, "I don't even know that lady, and she don't even know my name. How can she get

to know me if she doesn't know my name?"

According to research, "making a commitment to equitable family engagement, and

building relationships between staff and families" (Jacques, et al., 2018, p. 4) can positively

impact the school culture. However, equitable family engagement is intentional and requires

that family engagement does not reert to "operating as normal," but implements standard,

inclusive practices that are reflected daily within the school culture. Building relationships

between staff and families counts on both educators and staff to be "welcoming, available, and

accessible" (Jacques, et al., 2018, p.9) in order to really reach families both within the school

walls and on a deeper, personal level.

Inclusive Partnership

One important aspect of family engagement that can lead to an inclusive partnership

between families, community members, and school leaders is engagement outside of school,

which is needed to make families feel at their most comfortable without additional stress or

pressure regarding their scholar. "The role of the school is to focus on the type of education

they're giving to the students and how well they're executing this," one parent reminded.

Another parent explained that "school leaders are to provide leadership, accountability,

guidance, structure, clear communication and resources to students and parents to help ensure academic, social and emotional success." Research suggests school leaders and districts can conduct home visits as a way to "establish a common understanding and goal for students" (Jacques et. al, 2018, p. 11). Furthermore, school visits–when done after staff are extensively trained–can show "respect for the family and home environment, as well as help to break a potential cycle of blame" for student learning challenges (Jacques et. al, 2018, p. 11). This allows for effective collaboration concerning ways for the scholar to improve academically in class, but it also shows the importance of school leaders being meaningful about connecting with students and their families.

Finally, the findings of this study show that there is serious discontent from stakeholders—families and community members—with the services being provided to their children by the local middle school. The greater community is displeased with the lack of transparency, inclusive partnership, lagging classroom management, and a present administration that can effectively, efficiently, and equitably lead the school community. The families, their children, and community members were able to soundly communicate their concerns along with their insistence of accountability, and steps to change the current state of familial and community engagement within the school community to establish healthy and trusting partnerships with families that will boost student achievement for Black students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that families and community members share a genuine desire to help their Black children to succeed in the classroom, and are willing to engage in their children's school community in any capacity needed such as building relationships with teachers, communicating openly with administration, and participating in classroom activities to support their children's academic success. Additionally, this study also indicates that blossoming relationships with both teachers and administration could be incredibly beneficial for many students who need additional support and care in the classroom. Participants share spirited accounts of their experience with their school community, and are able to passionately convey the expectations once held of their school community, which would unexpectedly balloon into disappointments, promises unfulfilled, and frustrations with lack of transparency and blurred communication lines that would ultimately strain relationships with families and community members and would prove to be overall disadvantageous for some students in the classroom.

The themes in this study are parallel to the findings in the literature review. One overlapping theme is a collaboration between families and schools with the community/community-based organizations creating an intentional space where honesty, openness, and fruitful restorative strategies are practiced to benefit families and students. This looks like getting to personally know students and families (through community dinners, weekend outings, positive phone calls home, etc.), and the lives that they live outside of the school. Another overlapping theme between the research and literature review is that deep teacher-student relationships need to be cultivated in order to have valuable classroom management, comradery, and so that students feel valued in the classroom. This looks like

establishing bonds (getting to know the students, talking with the students, having lunch, etc.) with students in order to curb misbehavior that disrupts the flow and learning of the classroom, but also illustrates to each student that their educator values their position as a part of the class while valuing the culturally diverse environment in which educators teach. The final theme in the study that is consistent with the literature review is that there needs to be enrichment programs that will offer influential opportunities for families and community members to resourcefully utilize their skills and knowledge in the classroom to positively affect their scholar's behavior and performance. This looks like the school community seeking to develop relationships with families and the greater community through inviting families and community members into the schools for observation, conversation, and collaboration, where families and community members can work alongside teachers to reinforce the classroom management strategies and promote the teacher's high academic expectations. Furthermore, enrichment programs should concentrate on nurturing an environment "where students affirm and appreciate their culture of origin while also developing fluency in at least one other culture" (Will & Najarro, 2022, p. 2).

These concerns echo findings from studies that spotlight the nearly stagnant achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts. On the subjects of math and reading, "the achievement gap has improved slightly more than in math, but after a half century, the average Black student scores at just the 22nd percentile in reading" (Camera, 2016, p.1) Proper education was supposed to be the "great equalizer" for generations of Black children and a catalyst towards upward economic mobility for Black children. This ideology had been drilled into many generations since Emancipation, yet, according to research, the pendulum has barely moved in closing the achievement gap in the classroom for Black students. An epoch

cloaked in restlessness, the Civil Rights Movement contained many Black families who bravely navigated discomfort along with discrimination in uninviting environments such as grade schools and universities. One notable example is Ruby Bridges, a then six-year-old, who had to be escorted by federal marshals onto the grounds of her Louisiana elementary school, courageously integrating the school in 1960 when dissatisfied parents vehemently opposed her attendance.

Implications for Literature

This research study has a number of implications for the literature on family/community to school partnerships for student academic achievement. This research was qualitative and included the voices of families who vividly expressed their perspectives of navigating a distressing relationship with their scholar's middle school. While prior research focused on parents' attitudes towards lackluster relationships with their educational institution, this research included the language of middle school scholars, as well as community members, who also expressed their perspectives of navigating disheartening relationships with the middle school. Additionally, this research provides the historical context upon which educators can build understanding and support of Black families' dedication to engagement in their children's learning and build a program that will reflect a true collaborative effort rather than continuing to engage in a program that was built for families without their input (Ambrose et. al., 2021, p.1).

The findings from this study address the research question *How can schools include the voices of Black families and communities to cultivate a genuine partnership where a robust, sustainable family engagement program will improve student achievement within middle school classrooms?* The implications for further research and practice fall within three main ways to do this improvement work in schools: relationships are repaired and transparent, an inclusive and

welcoming environment is created and maintained, and opportunities for creativity, engagement, and partnership among all stakeholders are provided. Additionally, strategies from the participants on what they would like to see intentionally changed by their scholar's school administration to better serve its families and the greater community are: more communication to relay both negative and positive behaviors and attitudes from scholars, more family-centered events outside of school hours, extra-curricular activities, and opportunities to decide on policies affecting children (i.e. behavior and curriculum policies).

Given the historical background of the school district and its relationship to its underserved community, the researcher was surprised that familial participants, who were once students within the district decades ago, felt that their children's treatment and current educational experience had not drastically enhanced since they themselves were kids. One parent described her scholar's experience as "the same ol' same ol'. These kids have more than we ever did and still are worse off than we was." In comparing their past experiences, parents felt that they were "a little more prepared" because they were taught by teachers who were of the community, and were "close" to their families. "You know, if we had some trouble then Ms. T would set us straight then our parents would set us straight," a parent exclaimed! "But they don't do that anymore. Some parents don't know what's going on."

The amount of understanding that the participants had for the teachers was unexpected. While participants held teachers accountable for a number of things such as ineffective classroom management, and not keeping parents in the loop in regards to what is happening in the classroom, participants acknowledged that the overall responsibility to set expectations of teachers and to establish a school climate free of mistrust and bias, and that is transformative

still falls on the shoulders of administrators. Furthermore, the researcher did not expect the data from the student participants to disdainfully reiterate the concerns of the adults; this was a perspective which was missing from the literature review. While parental voices were strongly present, critical, and offered solutions to school districts serving resilient children in urban settings in the literature review, student voices were missing. Student voices represent an equally important part of the conversation because it is the students who are directly affected by and navigate their school's climate daily, so their voices are crucial regarding disengagement and the possibilities of missing out on rigorous learning and meaningful connections. The students are the best experts in their learning, so their voices should be included as conversations of transformative learning occur within the school walls.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As declared earlier in this research project, the *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (or CRT) *theory* has the potential to to fill the gaps in knowledge to solve these problems for all stakeholders as this theory aims to honor diverse student backgrounds that will deliver "multi-perspective curriculum, maintain high expectations, appreciate different learning and communication styles, and use multi-instructional examples" (Will & Najarro,2022, pp. 3-4) It is not just about representation in the classroom through standard events like culture day, potlucks, incorporating diverse literature, and structured lesson planning as these are a couple aspects of incorporating CRT in the school, but it is about "fundamental shift in their pedagogy" to inspire students and engage families (Will & Najarro,2022, p. 5). These approaches to affirm identities should occur in every aspect within the school walls, which will not only positively impact the school's climate, but will also positively transform "students' understanding and engagement with academic skills and concepts" as students will be able to evaluate, analyze,

and apply deep-level understandings to issues that plague students' personal lives along with their community (Will & Najarro, 2022, p. 5).

Limitations of Research

Various limitations to this study exist. First, all of the participants with the exception of one are a part of the intergenerational, tight-knit community where they, too, were once students of the school site. Although the participants represented various experiences such as low-income, two-parent homes, and single-family homes, most of the participants who were interviewed are women who also assert a leading role in the care of their children's education. Furthermore, accountability, transparency, transformation, and collaboration might look differently at larger school districts whereas personal connections and collaboration might be easier to forge at smaller districts where intent is made. Another limitation could be the researcher's positionality to the participants and school site as the researcher is a community member who works in a separate location of the site, but was once a student of the focal site, so the participants might have relinquished different data than if a researcher from outside of the community had conducted the same study.

Directions for Future Research

Additional data from a teacher focal group would greatly benefit future research on this topic for a complete understanding of the problem, which, in conjunction with the other data collected, can be taken to the school's administration. Families and community members have been able to express their concerns and propose solutions to cultivating healthy, engaging partnerships for the academic sake of Black students, but teachers may be able to provide concrete challenges that they face in the classroom that could potentially affect their duty to collaborate with parents for optimal, academic success. Teacher perceptions, along with familial

and community voices, can be advantageous in holding schools—particularly urban schools serving marginalized Black students and other marginalized students—accountable for repairing the historic, systemic, and ineffective policies that have been failing children in exchange for an inclusive and equitable learning environment that encompasses a multitude of culturally diverse teaching styles, voices, communication styles, and real-life examples.

Conclusion

To summarize, there have been countless perceptions that society has maintained regarding low-income families, families of color, single parent families, and other families that do not align with the dominant culture. Moreover, these underlying biases have greatly impacted Black children in the classroom and continue to drive the achievement gap even further (McClure, 2022, p. 46). Black families have had to grapple with these harmful claims of disengagement, unequitable practices in the classroom, non-inclusive curriculum, and lowered academic expectations for an historical amount of time, yet Black families and communities still show up and are looking for effective ways that these perceptions can be dismantled in order to create healthy relationships between all stakeholders where the voices of Black families and communities are seriously heard in order to improve student achievement.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Family Participants

1) Describe your experience as a parent of a scholar within the school district.
    a) How has your experience been with the local middle school?
2) In what ways have you/your family felt supported by your scholar's school/school district?
    a) Have you felt like a valuable contributor in your child's education by your scholar's educator?
    b) Have you been able to establish a healthy relationship with your scholar's educator?
3) From your perspective, has the school provided ample opportunities for you/your family to engage in the classroom or school as a way to help your scholar?
    a) What do you perceive as your role for engagement to aid in student success in middle school?
    b) How do you communicate or engage with your scholar to aid in their academic achievement?
4) What is the role of the school leader(s) from your perspective?
    a) How can school leaders create more opportunities for family engagement?
    b) Describe any course of action/programs/services/activities engaged by the school that was beneficial for your family and scholar.
    c) What support do you need from your scholar's school for your scholar to succeed academically?
5) What are your educational hopes and overall goals for your scholar?
    a) How do you help your scholar in and out of school achieve these goals?
    b) In what ways do you interact/engage with your scholar at home?
    c) What lessons do you instill in your scholar to help your scholar achieve these dreams and goals?
6) Do you feel like your scholar's middle school has academically prepared and supported your scholar's transition into high school?
7) What suggestions do you have for schools to improve these family/school collaborative relationships?
8) Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about building these relationships/partnerships?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Community Members

1) From your perspective, what role does community play in aiding scholars to be successful in the classroom? As members of the greater community?
2) From your perspective, has the school provided ample opportunity for the community to engage in partnership to aid families in supporting their scholar's academic success?
   a. How can school leaders create more opportunities for community engagement with families and within the school?
3) What are your educational hopes and overall goals for the middle school youth with whom you work?
   a. How do you or your organization help the middle school youth achieve these goals?
4) What else do you think is important to share (or do you think I should know) about building stronger family/school relationships & improving family engagement?
   a. As a preventative measure that will aid in student achievement in the classroom?

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Students/Minors

1) How has your experience been as a middle school scholar thus far?
2) Do you feel supported (i.e. seen & heard) by both your teachers and school leader in your academics?
    a) Do you feel like teachers and staff have taken the opportunity to get to know you and your family?
    b) How can you feel more supported by your school staff & school leaders?
3) What types of activities would you like to see in the classroom that would enhance your academic achievements?
    a) Could your experience improve greatly (or even mentally & emotionally) if there were opportunities for your family/extended family to engage within the classroom?
4) What else should I know about your experience here?

Appendix D

IRB Approval Letter

DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY
of CALIFORNIA

Feb 6, 2023

Orianna Vaughn-Brown
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Orianna,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the

Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled *Three Sides*

to Success: Exploring how inclusive partnerships can nurture robust family and community

engagement in the classroom for African-American Students (IRBPHP Initial IRB Application

#[11099]).

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by

the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Michaela George, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP
Cc: Katie Lewis