

Engaging African American parents: insights from a cultural arts after school program

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Abstract

Purpose – Literature indicates African American parents can feel real or perceived discrimination that strains their interactions with teachers, resulting in them feeling alienated from their children's school.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an exploratory case study of two African American parents, who although guarded in their relationships with teachers, exposed their vulnerabilities to Project ESTEEM faculty as they requested support in resolving behavioral and academic challenges with their children. It is an exploratory case study in that the field notes were taken prior to defining the research question, positioning it as research that sets the stage for a future more comprehensive study. The researchers, as participant observers recorded field notes of events and interactions that occurred. The research question was, "What were the factors that influenced the relationships between the Project ESTEEM faculty and African American Parents? The subquestions were "What were the distinctions of alienation that challenged the parents' relationships in the schools? and "How were the factors that challenged the parents' relationships with teachers mitigated in Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with the parents?" A constant comparative method was used beginning with open coding, followed by identifying patterns, themes and subthemes reflecting the specific needs of the parents in relationship to the overall theme.

Findings – The stories highlight sociocultural contexts influencing the alienation of some African American parents in their children's education through an analysis of the relationships fostered with Project ESTEEM faculty.

Research limitations/implications – This case study reports the experiences of two parents from one community and school, participating in a specialized program.

Originality/value – The significance resides in the representation of alternate viewpoints in understanding the alienation experiences of African American parents from schools.

Keywords Education, Equity, Race, Identity

Paper type Case study



Introduction

There is a positive correlation between parent involvement in schools and children's performance and achievement (Jeynes, 2013; Trotman, 2001). However, there are varied

factors that pose challenges to parents' participation, opening them up to negative judgments and criticism (Brandon *et al.*, 2010). Low parental involvement is associated with parents who have lower education levels, lower socioeconomic status (SES) levels, problems with work schedules and transportation and a lack of understanding about the expectations of schools and teachers (Trotman, 2001). It is evidenced that among ethnic groups, African American parents have "lower levels of overt expressions of involvement than other parents" (Jeynes, 2013, p. 161). This further disadvantages the academic achievement of African American children, considering an equal education for African American students is dependent upon the alignment between African American families and schools (Morris, 1999). The most common concern of African American parents about their children's educational experiences center around the schools' racial climate. However, when African American parents have worries about the experiences of their children, they rarely know how to positively address these concerns (Thompson, 2003). Productive relationships between parents and schools can be difficult to establish and maintain; nonetheless, the development of relationships with parents of color is considered essential:

At the classroom level, it is vital that educators appreciate the fact that there is only a limited amount of progress that they can make with their students if they do not partner with parents in schooling children. Teachers may have the educational expertise, but they need the awareness that parents have of their children to maximize their instructional effectiveness. (Jeynes, 2013, p. 160)

White teachers, in particular, find it challenging to develop effective relationships with the parents of African American children. In fact, there is evidence that African American mothers hold contemptuous views of teachers from the public schools (Cooper, 2003). In Cooper's study, the majority of mothers who were interviewed considered public school teachers to be unprepared to succeed at teaching children in urban schools. Furthermore, the mothers reported that the teachers had evident biases toward the children they taught. There were some instances in which the mothers mentioned empathetically engaged teachers, but this was by far the exception rather than the rule. Most often, the mothers stated that their children's teachers had a negative effect on both their children's esteem and achievement. Teachers were also reported as having a negative impact on children's development of racial identity. Many of the mothers felt that the children sometimes experienced oppression, and these parents saw the schools as actively preventing their children from gaining the knowledge and skills needed for future success. Their recommendations were for sweeping new school policies that would produce true equality regarding the treatment of all students in schools. Cooper reflected this perception in stating, "Policymakers, teacher educators, and teachers will become complicit in reproducing inequality if they fail to demonstrate the courage needed to implement innovative and meaningful reforms [...] [that are viewed as] essential to offering children equal educational opportunity and restoring parents' confidence in urban, public schools" (Cooper, 2003, p. 114).

In a related research report, Cooper (2005) reported on African American parents who removed their children from public schools because of their frustration that public school teachers were simply not providing these children with the opportunity to compete in US society. No resources were found in the public schools that allowed African American parents to feel that they had a true, uninhibited, respected voice that could lead to positive changes for children of color in these schools.

Jeynes (2013) assert that while parental involvement has been determined to play a significant role in children's academic successes, educators must challenge deficit approaches to determine how to involve parents, communities and families in their children's education. The nature of the involvement of parents should also be informed by

parents; however, they are rarely included in these discussions. Reinvisioning the collaboration of families and communities in education is complex, requiring a shift from deficit narratives to ones that promote promise and hope (Boutte and Johnson, 2013).

Alienation and African American parent engagement

Research indicates that parents, for the most part, are interested in being involved with their children's education. However, Brandon *et al.* (2010) reported that some parents feel alienated from schools and feel real or perceived discrimination and strain when interacting with teachers, which could result in fear and even suspicion of the institution. Alienation is described as feeling out of place, experiencing discrimination or an uneasiness when engaging in discussions with teachers. These feelings of alienation could be due to cultural and linguistic differences resulting in some parents developing phobias about their involvement with their children's schools. In response to the waning numbers in the participation of African American parents, schools are developing and implementing initiatives aimed at reversing the trend with very little success (Thompson, 2003).

Seeman (1959) in an effort to develop viable distinctions of alienation for empirical study, identified five ways in which alienation has been used in sociological contexts. The first distinction, powerless, means an individual is distanced by a perceived lack of ability to influence outcomes. The second distinction, meaningless, means that the individual is distanced by an inability to interpret events to make appropriate choices. The third distinction, normlessness, means that the individual is distanced by the accepted values that are derived from private interests which set up a competitive environment that provokes distrust, leaving some individuals craving for reassurance. The fourth distinction, isolation, means that the individual is distanced by a low regard for the accepted and expected values in society. Finally, the fifth distinction, self-estrangement, means that the individual is distanced by an inability to find intrinsically rewarding gratification.

Several studies have been conducted to develop scales of measurement related to the concept of alienation, using these and similar constructs as factors for guiding the instrument development (Blumenkrantz and Tapp, 1977; Burbach, 1972; Reglin *et al.*, 2003; Dean, 1961). Brandon *et al.* (2010) in an effort to assist school systems with understanding the feelings of alienation that African American parents experience, conducted a study examining the alienation experienced by African American parents as they interacted in the educational experiences of their children. To identify factors influencing the alienation experiences of African American parents in their children's education, they modified the Barriers to School Involvement Questionnaire (Reglin *et al.*, 2003) and focused the questions on five problem categories, personal concerns, work, lack of interest, logistics and teacher/parent relationships. Although logistics and personal concerns were indicated by the parents to be the most significant factors, the researchers concluded that the five problem categories did not surface distinctively as influencing African American parents' interactions with their children's schools. The researchers pointed out that these findings are contrary to what was expected, as well as findings reported in other research studies addressing the alienation experiences of African American parents in their children's education.

Calabrese (1990) conducted a study examining the relationships of African American parents to determine the extent to which the parents experienced alienation. The researcher revised the Dean Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) to be more situational specific to determine the degree of total alienation, normlessness, isolation and powerlessness reported by the parents. Their study included 113 parents, 92 White and 21 African American. They found that the African American parents reported higher levels of total alienation, normlessness

and isolation than White parents, expressing that they did not feel welcomed at schools, that they were culturally out of place, or that their children's school environments were unfriendly.

According to Bourdieu (1997), assimilating into an organizational culture requires adapting to the mores and habitus of the domain, which are cultural and social patterns that define the expectations of a particular field or subculture. These cultural and social patterns exist as the capital that Bourdieu (1997) depicts as the currency that grants membership within a subculture. Bourdieu discusses three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital is accumulated wealth. Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied; objectified; and institutionalized. Embodied capital is obtained through time and effort. It is also inherited capital. Objectified is in the form of material possessions. Institutionalized capital is the value assigned by an institution such as a degree from a university. Social capital is membership in a network or group, having the credentials and backing of the group. According to Bourdieu, claims that downplay the power of capital for navigating society's fields are not informed by a realistic understanding of society's disenfranchising tendencies related to the possession of capital, and most importantly how capital is obtained. In this study, the primary field or subculture is the school with teachers as the agents representing the expectations or standards for deliberations within the school environment. According to Ross *et al.* (2018), productive relationships with African American parents are challenged by the systematic exclusion resulting from historic negative race relations in the USA. Ross *et al.* (2018) conclude that parents' racial identities function as the lens through which they discern all of their relations, which ultimately determines their levels of trust. We determined that insights on factors influencing some African American parents' engagement with their children's schools represent missing contexts from the discourses on African American parents' involvement. These contexts could play a critical role in revising the narratives and popular perceptions that there is a lack of concern.

Project ESTEEM

This research reports on daily encounters with two African American parents whose children were enrolled in Project Exploring Strategies That Engage and Empower Minority students (ESTEEM), an after school interdisciplinary cultural arts program for students in Grades 1–5. Project ESTEEM was developed by three female faculty members, two African American and one Caucasian. The primary goal of Project ESTEEM was to support the African American students in developing positive conceptions of their racial identities. In the community in which the students live, African Americans comprise 4% of the overall population. The remaining demographics includes 86.5% White, 6% Asian and 3% Hispanic or Latino origin. Project ESTEEM was developed out of concerns that the primary source of influence for African American students' conceptions of their ethnic identities are based upon images portrayed in the media. The school curriculum is devoid of cultural-related accounts or artifacts. Project ESTEEM was provided free and served about ten to twelve children per year. The daily activities included a students' sharing sessions during snack time, interactive read-alouds of ethnic and cultural children's books followed by a discussion of the book, an arts or academic activity related to the book and homework help. Each year, Project ESTEEM's activities centered around a theme. A few examples of the themes were, All About Me, The Best that I Can Be, Dare to be Different and the Renaissance Era. The daily read-alouds were integrated with vocabulary and comprehension literacy activities.

Project ESTEEM involved regular communication with the parents, which was crucial to the activities and outcomes of the program. On occasion, parents would get involved in some of the lessons. For example, Candace, one of the parents, came to the afterschool program dressed as Harriet Tubman in period costume and shared a story about Tubman's life. Parents understood that they were free to come to Project ESTEEM at any time during the sessions. At the end of each year, Project ESTEEM's activities culminated with a finale performance based upon the theme, with the children singing and performing plays related to topics that were studied, as well as sharing their writings or other projects completed, like dioramas. These performances became a significant aspect of the program for both children and parents. Parents' feedback about Project ESTEEM indicated that there were positive outcomes with their children as a result of Project ESTEEM activities. For example, one of the parents indicated that her daughter's drawing started to appear more realistic, with her drawing herself with a brown color, and her friends White, as opposed to all being represented as White in the past. There were other outcomes with the children that parents attributed to Project ESTEEM, such as students overcoming shyness, and children's eagerness to discuss their history, all outcomes that seem to imply that the program was achieving its goals.

However, the Project ESTEEM faculty discovered another outcome resulting from the Project ESTEEM program, an outcome that was unanticipated during its development. Project ESTEEM became an outlet for the parents, a place where they felt comfortable and spoke freely about their challenges and concerns. Project ESTEEM faculty developed constructive and meaningful relationships with the parents, particularly those who were struggling in their relationships with their children's teachers at school. The relationships that the Project ESTEEM faculty developed with the parents, particularly those who were struggling in their relationships with teachers at the school, prompted the faculty to document these interactions, recognizing their potential value to the discourses about their engagement. The goal is not to be critical of the teachers who were fulfilling their roles according to their expectations. Rather, the goal is to represent dynamics that are significant to critiquing the positionality of parents in these discourses, which is crucial to determining the quality of the relationships.

The Project ESTEEM's parents who were struggling in their relationships with the school regularly engaged with the teachers at the school. However, they were unsuccessful in their efforts to forge relationships that they believed would set their children up for success. Project ESTEEM, on the other hand, garnered the full engagement of these African American parents. Some could attribute this to the fact that the issue of race was front and center, or that Project ESTEEM was a strictly volunteer program and the parents' vested interests in the goals of the program could be considered the bedrock for the relationships. Thus, the student-centered shared responsibility element that defines healthy family school relationships as emphasized by [Clarke et al. \(2010\)](#) could be considered automatic because it was embedded within the core of the program. On occasion, when parents would come to pick up their children, they would take a seat and share events from their workday or share comments from their children about activities they enjoyed at Project ESTEEM. Some parents, on the other hand, wanted to discuss concerns that they were hesitant about addressing with their children's teachers. Sometimes in sharing their concerns, the parents would request our advice, and even our involvement if there was a situation in which they felt inadequate, or that their interactions with the teachers would not lead to plausible solutions.

These outcomes were not anticipated in the design of Project ESTEEM yet emerged as significant occurrences that altered our roles to that of participant observers as we

responded to concerns. We decided to explore factors leading to these outcomes in an effort to understand why factors that resulted in their obvious feelings of alienation in their relationships with the school were mitigated in Project ESTEEM. Seeman's (1959) distinctions of alienation and Bourdieu's (1997) theory of capital will be used to discuss the meanings embedded within their stories. In other words, what were the distinctions of alienation that challenged the parents' relationships in the schools, and how were these challenges mitigated in Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with the parents?

The stories from two Project ESTEEM parents are highlighted in this report of findings. The researchers determined that these outcomes highlight sociocultural contexts that influence the relationships between African American parents and schools, unveiling the elephant in the room that functions as the lens through which these relationships are filtered (Ross *et al.*, 2018). These insights can also be useful in informing strategies aimed at engaging African American parents.

Research design

This study examined interactions that occurred through Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with two parents who struggled with developing constructive relationships with their children's teachers at their school. The overarching question was "What were the factors that influenced the relationships between the Project ESTEEM faculty and African American Parents? This question was explored through the following subquestions:

- Q1. What were the distinctions of alienation that challenged the parents' relationships in the schools?
- Q2. How were the factors that challenged the parents' relationships with teachers mitigated in Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with the parents?

A case study approach was chosen for this research because it allows "complex social phenomena" to be processed as they naturally occurred (Yin, 1994). This approach can target an individual or a group and involve a variety of data sources such as life histories, documents, oral histories interviews and participant observations (Berg, 2001). Case study methodology can be either exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. This is an exploratory case study in that the field notes were taken prior to defining the research question, positioning it as research that sets the stage for a future more comprehensive study (Yin, 1994; Berg, 2001). Implications for future studies, as motivated by the findings of this research, will be discussed later. According to Berg (2001), exploratory case studies although the research questions can be later defined, must be based upon an organizational structure prior to the beginning of the research. For this study, the Project ESTEEM faculty, in addition to facilitating the daily activities with the students in the afterschool program, conducted the homework sessions at the end of the day. All of the conversations with the parents occurred at the end of the day when they arrived to pick up their children. The researchers, as participant observers were actively involved in the research setting, taking notes on their participation and also recording field notes of events and interactions that occurred. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) assert that there is no assumed correct way to write field notes because the process is more than reporting accounts of what was heard and seen. Observations invite the interpretations of the observer. Even writing about the same event could result in varied descriptions of the event. This is an important factor to consider since there are different accounts and versions of accounts provided by the researchers. In that vein, for this analysis every researcher's account was considered the whole story, rather than three distinct versions with facts that could be dismissed or debated. All versions were

used to confirm, disconfirm and provide support through the analyses. This was a necessary strategy, considering some observations were unique to each observer. For example, only one of the researchers noticed that Elaine, one of the parents whose story is represented in this study, seemed to shy away from one of the earlier mathematics homework tutoring sessions with her daughter. This notation, not observed by everyone, related to what was later realized about Elaine having a mathematics phobia that challenged her ability to support her daughter's homework.

Field notes were a common practice in Project ESTEEM for examining programmatic impact and also for informing modifications of activities. However, the focus on field notes extended specifically to parents when it was realized that the stories of the parents introduced sociological contexts that could prove valuable to the field. The researchers made a concerted effort to record events based upon their observations, recollections and involvement. The different observations reported across the accounts were considered a strength, rather than a discriminating factor. As would be expected, the researchers' experiences varied considering the types of engagement that occurred with the parents. Faculty engaged with each of the parents on different topics at different times. Two of the faculty were involved in the conversation in which the parent requested the faculty to make classroom visits to gain insight on her child's conduct during instruction. Tutoring sessions were divided between faculty to provide individualized attention to students. One, or possibly two of the faculty members would be in the vicinity to greet a parent when picking up their children and would hear the parent's concerns about their child and later share with the team. Field notes reported in this research were analyzed as a complete story representing personal encounters with the parents.

To code the field notes, a constant comparative method (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used beginning with open coding. Open coding consisted of an initial read through of the field notes, identifying patterns as they emerged. The field notes related to the two parents selected for this study were read through. Patterns were identified in the details of the encounters and discussed between the researchers. It was determined by the researchers that there was a dominant or overall theme for both accounts. However, there were different vantage points which were identified as subthemes that focus the details of the particular parent's account in relationship to the overall theme.

An overarching theme, "Distrust in the school system" emerged from the two parents' stories. The subthemes: Guarded communication with teachers and Guarded image with teachers, specifically relate the contexts that characterize the parents' distrust in the school system. While the details of the cases differed, the overall needs for each were similar. The researchers sought to ensure credibility and confirmability by reporting what was communicated and requested by the parents, noting their expressions during these interactions recognizing the potential bias in interpretations of these expressions and also recording our direct responses and actions related to the parents' requests in terms of the support we provided. We aimed to stay true to reporting the events as they occurred in an effort to avoid researcher bias or exaggerated inferences that would weaken the element of trust in the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

To answer the research questions, once the theme and subthemes were identified, Seeman's (1959) distinctions of alienation and Bourdieu's (1997) theory of capital were used to analyze the meanings embedded within the parents' stories. Seeman's (1959) distinctions of alienation was used to identify which of the distinctions contributed to the alienation for the parents within the school subculture. Bourdieu's (1997) theory of capital was used to identify any role that capital played in contributing to their distinctions of alienation at the

school, and the role that capital played in supporting Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with the parents.

Results

The interactions that occurred during the implementation of the program were fueled by the relationships that Project ESTEEM faculty were able to forge with African American parents from different demographic backgrounds. It was soon realized that Project ESTEEM, in addition to being a program designed to motivate students to think positively about their racial identities, was a place for the parents to exist without concerns about navigating their racialized and socialized identities during their interactions. They were able to feel mentally free to communicate without fear of judgments or the need to distance themselves from stereotypical expectations. As stated earlier, periodically, all of the parents, when picking up their children at the end of the day would take a seat or stand around and talk to the Project ESTEEM faculty. They would share reports of their children's achievements and experiences at school. They would share celebrations and disappointments. The realization of shared interests and goals for their children fostered meaningful and constructive relationships between the Project ESTEEM faculty and parents throughout their children's participation in the program (Clarke *et al.*, 2010). Often, parents would request the faculty's opinions and would also seek assistance in making sense of progress reports and feedback from teachers about their children. It was obvious that the hesitancy of some parents to approach their teachers with their concerns for their children, did not apply when sharing their concerns with us.

Distrust in the school system

Project ESTEEM readily became a close-knit group, bonding Project ESTEEM faculty with the children and the parents soon after it began. Two parents who requested the Project ESTEEM faculty to go the extra mile in supporting them in addressing educational challenges with their children by intervening at the school level are reported in this discussion. The parents' stories, Candace and Elaine, were selected for this discussion because of the level of advocacy required and the different contexts represented in the encounters. Candace requested the involvement of Project ESTEEM faculty directly with the teachers at the school. Elaine involved the Project ESTEEM faculty in interpreting feedback received from teachers following teacher conferences. Candace and Elaine's accounts unveil complexities that are not so evident, and therefore, not taken into account when processing their absences at school functions.

To support Candace and Elaine in addressing the challenges that they communicated to the Project ESTEEM faculty, we had to assume the role of participant observers. It was obvious from their request that they were uncomfortable and needed our support in mitigating stress factors that placed their sociocultural identities front and center. They were single African American mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Candace had a bachelor's degree, and Elaine had not completed high school, all characteristics that were misaligned with the norms that the public school system holds in high regard. Their distance from the norms alienated them from the social system that structures the expectations of the public school system. Candace and Elaine requested the involvement of the Project ESTEEM faculty to support them in processing feedback and in advocating for their children with teachers. We treaded carefully to maintain and respect boundaries, always demonstrating high regard for the expertise of the teachers and remaining true to our roles as supporters without engaging in discourses conveying confidential information. Because of the respectful nature of our collaboration, we were readily accepted and regarded

as partners. On occasion, teachers would come by the ESTEEM classroom at the end of the school day to drop off assignments or skills that they would like for the students to work on. The insights from the parents' stories provide contexts for re-framing deficit narratives toward narratives of promise and hope advocated by [Boutte and Johnson \(2013\)](#).

Guarded communication with teachers

Candace was an African American single mother with three sons and is a college graduate. Two of her sons were in Project ESTEEM. Candace always had a pleasant demeanor when arriving at the school site. She was hardly ever in a hurry to leave when picking up her sons. Candace loved Project ESTEEM and would volunteer to assist whenever possible. On one occasion, she dressed as Harriet Tubman and shared accounts of Harriet Tubman's life during story time. She shared with us how she researched Harriet Tubman's life to be fully prepared for her storytelling session with the students. It was obvious how much she enjoyed teaching the children about one of the significant martyrs of their history. Candace was also very outspoken. As a single mother of three sons who were in first, fourth and ninth grade, Candace was a busy mother. Her love for her sons was conveyed in her expressions when she would pick them up from the after-school program, and in their excitement to see their mother. However, in another reality, even with the smiles, Candace entered the doors of the afterschool program every day feeling a little anxious about the possibility of receiving disappointing feedback about her sons' misconduct during the afterschool program.

Each evening, Candace would enter the afterschool site hoping for good news about her sons' behaviors, which were obvious parenting challenges for her. Perceiving her anxiety, the project faculty would first aim to accentuate the positives and share challenges in a supportive tone that signified a partnership with her in addressing her sons' misconduct. Candace informed us that their behavioral challenges were also a problem during the school day. Occasionally, Candace would share reports from phone calls she received from teachers and administrators or feedback from parent teacher conferences about her sons' misconduct. Both of Candace's sons, Jerry and Marcus were challenging from a behavioral standpoint, which Candace communicated to us that if given a choice, Jerry and Marcus would have rather gone home at the end of the school day to play video games. Jerry, the first grader's behaviors were milder and more manageable. The majority of the phone calls and negative reports were in reference to Marcus's misconduct, which totally concurred with our experiences in the afterschool program. Candace was at wits end. Candace believed Marcus was a child with special needs and requested for him to undergo a series of testing to determine his diagnosis. Each time, the results indicated that he did not have a disability. Candace was convinced that the test results were wrong and would request repeated examinations. Each time, the test results indicated that Marcus did not have a disability.

Candace informed the Project ESTEEM faculty that she believed the teachers would sometimes exaggerate in their reports about her fourth grade son Marcus' misbehavior because of his racial identity. She felt that if her child was of a different race, the teachers would respond differently. She believed that the teachers were shirking their responsibilities with Marcus. While Marcus was occasionally overtly disruptive, for the most part his behaviors could be characterized as stubborn and uncooperative. Those behaviors often led to him receiving grades that did not reflect his capability. For example, during homework sessions, we noticed that Marcus preferred to solve mathematics problems in his head and was quite successful doing so. He would resist using problem-solving strategies that he was taught in school. One of the tutors challenged him with larger numbers to help him to see

that solving some problems would require the strategies that he was being taught; yet, he continued to resist.

Candace shared that sometimes when the teachers would call her during the day, she would not respond to their phone calls or their requests to come to the school. Candace believed that the teachers should make a more of a concerted effort to manage his behaviors. Finally, in her frustration, Candace requested the support of the Project ESTEEM faculty. The Project ESTEEM faculty worked with her to develop a behavioral modification plan for Marcus who was also involved in developing this plan for personal accountability. We engaged him in setting targets that he would also use to monitor and evaluate his progress at the end of the day to be reported to his mom. This behavioral modification plan began at the start of the school day and continued through the afterschool program. Marcus's teachers feedback was also taken into account from progress reports that were provided from teachers to Project ESTEEM faculty during his transition to the afterschool program. When Candace arrived to pick up her sons, we would share reports from teachers on Marcus' behaviors during the school day and during the afterschool program. Candace used these reports to make decisions about privileges and disciplinary measures for him at home, such as time away from the video games. Marcus and Candace's faces would gleam when there were positive details to report.

On one occasion, when the teachers were preparing the students for the state exams, Candace requested the assistance of Project ESTEEM faculty members during the school day. She asked that one of the faculty visits Marcus' classroom as a way of reminding him of the expectations that were agreed upon regarding his behavior. She received permission from the school to allow us to observe Marcus' behavior during the class for a few minutes. Overall, Candace did not think the classroom teachers made sufficient efforts to connect with him. While she shared her frustrations with parenting her sons with the Project ESTEEM faculty, she did not reveal them to their teachers, or her need to be supported in developing a behavioral modification plan. Candace did not tell the teachers that she did not know what to do about Marcus. She did not share with the teachers that she perceived negative aura because of Marcus' racial identity, yet she continued to attend parent teacher meetings and engage with them. Candace believed that Marcus would mellow out eventually comparing him to her older son Earnest, who she indicated was rambunctious like Marcus during that period in his life. On occasion, Earnest would accompany Candace when picking up his brothers. Our exchanges with him reflected the maturity that Candace spoke about. He was well spoken and goal-oriented in responding to our non-probing and supportive questions about how things were going with him in school. Each time when Earnest would come to the afterschool site, he demonstrated leadership and care as an older brother by instructing them to gather their things and assisting them to make sure they left nothing behind. He was supportive of his mother. Candace believed that she would eventually have the same or at least similar results with Marcus.

Guarded image with teachers

Elaine learned about Project ESTEEM from Candace, who recommended that she enroll her children. Elaine, an African American single mom came to Project ESTEEM unexpectedly one day with two sons, a toddler and Morris who was in fifth grade, and a daughter Joyce who was in first grade. She stopped by to obtain information about Project ESTEEM and to inquire about the possibility of placing Morris and Joyce in the program. Morris decided not to enroll; however, Joyce was very interested in participating in the program. At the first introduction, Elaine seemed very shy. She hardly smiled, and always had, what one of the researchers described, a somber yet anxious look on her face. She entered each day with her

toddler on her hip. While she did not say much, she said enough to inform us that she needed support, which is one of the reasons why Candace recommended the program. Elaine made immediate impressions on the Project ESTEEM faculty, primarily due to her unassuming yet determined demeanor. She trusted us upon meeting us, which we could assume was based upon Candace's endorsement and probably the nature of the program.

Elaine attended regular meetings with Joyce's classroom teacher. In the meetings, she was informed that Joyce needed to improve in mathematics. Soon after enrolling her children, Elaine shared with the Project ESTEEM faculty that she had not finished high school and that she was weak in mathematics. She asked us to help her daughter and made it clear to us that she wanted her daughter to go farther in life than she did. After Joyce was officially enrolled in the program, the Project ESTEEM faculty reviewed the feedback from her teachers to identify goals for her homework sessions. Joyce was cooperative during program activities and homework sessions. She responded very well to tutoring and was successful in achieving the mathematics objectives during homework sessions. One day, in one of the mathematics homework sessions, one of the researchers noted that Elaine physically moved away from Joyce and the Project ESTEEM faculty member who was working with Joyce on her mathematics homework. This occurred when an attempt was made to demonstrate for Elaine how she could help Joyce on her own. It was presumed that Elaine had mathematics anxiety. The Project ESTEEM faculty decided that Elaine should also be supported in overcoming her anxiety and enacted a strategy for slowly, gently getting Elaine increasingly involved when she entered the room while Joyce was doing mathematics homework. Centering solidly on engaging Joyce in using manipulatives, while computing first-grade addition and subtraction problems, the initial goal was to get Elaine to sit down and observe the session. When it seemed that she developed a comfort level with sitting and observing, the faculty member would demonstrate problems using manipulatives for both Elaine and Joyce, asking Elaine to participate (like "Elaine, will you hand us those teddy bears?"). Later, the use of manipulatives in finding the answer to a problem was demonstrated, and Elaine was encouraged to repeat the demonstration.

Eventually, Elaine began working with Joyce on mathematics problems on her own. The manipulatives were sent home with them so that she could work with Joyce on homework on evenings when Project ESTEEM did not meet. As the weeks passed, Elaine's uneasiness seemed to lessen. While she still appeared to be shy, she seemed to exude more energy when picking up her children. She would speak more freely with the faculty about her challenges and allow her young toddler to freely roam around the room. We noticed that although Elaine developed a solid level of comfort with Project ESTEEM faculty, she would become noticeably uneasy when she mentioned upcoming meetings with teachers. However, while she was uncomfortable about interacting with the teachers, she continued to attend parent conferences. Following the parent teacher conferences, she would bring the paperwork and feedback from the teachers to the Project ESTEEM faculty to gain a better understanding of Joyce's status and needs. She needed assistance with navigating through the information and looked to the Project ESTEEM faculty to explain how the information could be translated into a plan for supporting Joyce. She shared the reports with an expectation that the faculty and sometimes volunteers at Project ESTEEM would support Joyce in achieving the curricular objectives. Elaine was determined that her intimidation with academic expectations would not prevent her advocacy for her children's academic achievement. In fact, she divulged her vulnerabilities with Project ESTEEM faculty to fill the voids that she realized would prevent her from supporting Joyce's educational needs. In her continual visits with the teachers at the school, Elaine never shared her insecurities in mathematics and her need for support. She never shared that she did not fully understand the feedback that they

were providing about her daughter's progress. She never asked any questions for clarification. It seems that Elaine's shyness shielded her from her insecurities when in dialogue with the teachers. She did not trust them with this information about herself.

Discussion

Race as a social construction was a central focus of Project ESTEEM's design, referencing the role that media stereotypes, or what [Ladson-Billings \(2009\)](#) termed "conceptual blackness," play in inferring African American's disidentification with the expected norms, or norms typified through "conceptual whiteness." [Ladson-Billings \(2009\)](#) explained that socially legitimized norms are at the peak of a continuum, with individuals self-identifying according to their identification with these characteristics. The closer you are to the peak, the more approvable you are as a member of society. The messages conveyed by social norms are subtle yet pervasive and are the foundation for the rules that qualify acceptable beliefs and actions in society. Deviating from the norms amounts to not wearing the uniform. When individuals enter without wearing the uniform, there is a spotlight that shines on them, giving them an option to either stand in resistance or isolate themselves from it. Candace and Elaine were single African American mothers in what would be considered from low socioeconomic backgrounds with multiple children. All of the judgments associated with these sociodemographics are subtly assigned to them when they enter the school, a very "normed" arena. It appears that Candace and Elaine decided to avoid the spotlight, which resulted in them being very guarded in their relationships with their children's teachers. They shielded themselves and escaped the scrutiny while not confirming deficit views about their identities as African American parents.

To respond to the overall research question:

RQ1. What were the factors that influenced the relationships between the Project ESTEEM faculty and African American Parents?

The subquestions:

RQ1a. What were the distinctions of alienation that challenged the parents' relationships in the schools?

RQ1b. How were the factors that challenged the parents' relationships with teachers mitigated in Project ESTEEM faculty's relationships with the parents?

Were examined using [Seeman's \(1959\)](#) distinctions of alienation and [Bourdieu's \(1997\)](#) theory of capital. When applying [Seeman's \(1959\)](#) distinctions of alienation, it appears that the distinctions: powerlessness, meaningless and normlessness were the sources of Candace and Elaine's alienation from their children's school. Even further, normlessness seemed to be the hub for powerless and meaningless. From the onset, both parents' sociodemographic characteristics contributed to their states of normlessness with no chance of legitimization according to the standards. They were not wearing the appropriate uniforms. Both parents will be discussed according to how their stories evidence these distinctions and disrupted their relationships with the teachers, a major voice representing the standards and expectations for the school.

While Candace struggled with what she perceived to be bias in the teachers' responses and interpretations of Marcus' behaviors, her main struggle was with her frustration with not being able to curb his behavior. Candace's normlessness existed within her misalignment with the normed expectations for parents to control their children's behaviors, especially after having received phone calls from the school requesting her to attend to Marcus' behavior. Rather than admit that she needed support, she assumed a defensive

stance and masked this need from his teachers. Candace did not want to be judged by the system; therefore, she exposed her vulnerability to people she trusted. She felt powerless in changing the situation at the school level with the teachers, or with Marcus. She did not share her views with the teachers because she did not think that it would lead to different outcomes. She considered her engagement with the teachers meaningless in that she did not trust them to support her in developing a strategy that would work in her or Marcus' best interests. In addition, she did not believe that she would be able to forge a relationship with the teachers that would translate into a partnership with her in support of Marcus' education.

In addition to the above-mentioned sociodemographics, Elaine's normlessness was compounded by the fact that she had not completed high school, which further distanced her from the standards defining the qualities of a good parent. Good parents are expected to support their children's academic achievement. While Elaine was ill equipped to take the feedback and implement a plan that would support Joyce in meeting the objectives in mathematics, she was concerned about Joyce falling behind. She felt powerless in receiving results that would be in Joyce's or her best interests, so she sought and obtained the support that Joyce needed from other sources. Elaine quietly received the feedback from the teachers and did not ask follow-up questions or admit that she did not know how to help Joyce. She considered those interactions meaningless with the exception of gathering feedback about Joyce's performance to share with Project ESTEEM faculty. With the teachers, she guarded her insecurities while silently advocating for Joyce. While both parents experienced alienation when engaging with the teachers, the factors that influenced their alienation were resolved with the Project ESTEEM faculty. Parents from different sociodemographic backgrounds enrolled their children in Project ESTEEM; however, the differences did not restrict sharing across the group.

When considering the three forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu (1997), economic, cultural and social capital to Candace and Elaine's stories, their alienation could be attributed to their limited capital with the expectations for parents within the school subculture. While Candace had a bachelor's degree, which is capital awarded by an institution, like Elaine, her distance from the norms that define the expectations for parents within the school subculture challenged her membership within the subculture. As Ladson-Billings (2009) indicated their distance from the peak of the continuum caused them to feel self-conscious when participating as parents within the school subculture. Alternatively, when considering the relationships that Candace and Elaine developed with Project ESTEEM faculty, their status as parents was similar to every parent in the program. While they had different needs than other parents, they had full membership within Project ESTEEM'S afterschool subculture. The Project ESTEEM network afforded Candace and Elaine the social capital necessary to fully engage without hesitation in the program. The network also shielded them from anxiety associated with their limitations, allowing them to feel that they had everything they needed to leverage the support necessary for plausible outcomes for their children and themselves. At Project ESTEEM, they did not need the other forms of capital to be legitimized, so there was no spotlight shining on their uniform. They were wearing the uniform required for fully engaging in this subculture.

Thus, factors that influenced Project ESTEEM'S relationship with the parents could be summed up by the fact that the environment countered socialized constraints that would disrupt their full engagement within the subculture. When the parents entered Project ESTEEM, all of them had the required uniform. In other words, they did not need to second guess themselves because the standards governing Project ESTEEM's subculture recognized their identities as legitimate. Project ESTEEM faculty were conscious of social disparities and their role in disadvantaging certain groups. From its inception, Project ESTEEM's goals focused upon the system, having as a goal to mitigate the consequences

that individuals like Candace and Elaine feared would obstruct their children's path to receiving a quality education.

So, where are the African American parents? Why are they not involved in their children's education? The findings of this study imply that some may be struggling to relate or could be dodging the system to shield themselves from scrutiny. The parents profiled in this report regularly demonstrated personal interest in their children's education, as well as a solid and persistent willingness to support their academic progress. Their stories challenge the prevailing deficit narratives that judge parents from this sociodemographic's commitment to their children's education. While it appears that the doors of this school swung open for Candace and Elaine to be involved in their children's education, walking through the doors introduced a power dynamic that inhibited them from fully engaging in parent conferences with their children's teachers. Any misunderstanding or concern that they had about the feedback provided on their children's progress was never communicated with the teachers.

What were the factors that influenced the relationships between the Project ESTEEM faculty and African American Parents?" "How were alienating factors that discouraged African American parents from engaging with their children's schools mitigated in Project ESTEEM?" Trust was a major factor, and it could be translated as not having to navigate who they were in order to obtain the information or the support that they needed. With the Project ESTEEM faculty, the parents did not have to build credit – they had credit upon arrival. Thus, the mental and emotional fatigue that is common with negotiating social inferences related to individuals' racial identities, socioeconomic status or intellectual capabilities was mitigated through the relationships that they forged with faculty in Project ESTEEM.

Giroux (1992) introduces the idea of border crossings, describing borders as "epistemological, political, cultural and social margins that structure the language of history, power and difference." He advocates for border pedagogy, which aims to create spaces using different cultural resources, where new identities are formed within the existing power dynamic. Border pedagogy mitigates the socially constructed borders by realigning the distribution of power that positions knowledge and social relations. Border pedagogy alleviates socially constructed barriers through non-patronizing acts of legitimization. Border pedagogy provides an intermediary space in which individuals perceive a common ground, one that absorbs differences and deflects attention respectfully toward an agenda, which in this case is advocacy for children's education. While all parents regardless of their race, culture or socioeconomic status might encounter feelings of inadequacy when supporting their children's education, not fitting the profile near the peak of the continuum as described by Ladson-Billings (2009) adds another barrier. Yet, in spite of their distrust, Candace and Elaine met with their children's teachers and guarded their vulnerabilities, later approaching the Project ESTEEM faculty with their major concerns.

The researchers considered the experiences of the two parents in this study as significant, in that they represent a reality that is not accounted for in the commonly accepted "these parents are not concerned" narratives. While the levels of involvement and outcomes across the two parents profiled in this discussion were different, their stories represent views that bring to question preconceived notions about parents from the "other" groups' concerns for their children. Membership in Project ESTEEM and support from faculty were determined to be glaringly significant and positive factors. Elaine and Candace's lack of membership in the mainstream caused them to turn to Project ESTEEM faculty for validation of themselves and their children and then their concerns. Candace did not trust the school system to understand or value her real concerns with managing her children's behaviors. Elaine did not feel capable of assisting her child in overcoming her academic challenges. This study introduces into the discussion, the possibility that schools

as a societal institution can discourage the involvement of parents from certain racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These parents exposed their vulnerabilities in a place where they felt accepted and safe, where they did not feel the need to manage feelings and subtle judgments associated with not being in the norm. This could possibly explain why some of the parents from this demographic may choose to opt out of school visits and meetings with teachers altogether. The contexts, related through Candace and Elaine's stories, could be useful in supporting school systems in rethinking their efforts toward increasing the participation of parents from marginalized groups.

Project ESTEEM was organized around objectives that the parents could relate to, as well as goals that they had for their children. Thus, it can be stated that the factors that influenced strong family school relationships were foundational components in Project ESTEEM's structure (Clarke *et al.*, 2010). The contexts in which Project ESTEEM's activities were based upon, nullified the barriers associated with "not fitting the mold," legitimizing that space as non-threatening and supportive. The outcomes of this study point to the presence of a border pedagogy, in that there was an intermediary space that advanced the communication with the parents. The elephant in the room, the racialized inferences that disrupt and hamper meaningful and constructive exchanges between diverse individuals, did not need to hide in plain sight. These stressors were mitigated within the contexts and structure of Project ESTEEM. The Project ESTEEM faculty recognized and owned the historical, structural and social contexts that superimpose limitations on individuals and meritocratically scrutinize them under a facade of social equity. This realization led to the faculty's decisions to intervene on behalf of those who are most vulnerable, which at first thought during the development of Project ESTEEM, were the elementary students. The program's value to the parents was realized during implementation. Viewing the children and parents through social lens translated into a critical consciousness that Chubbuck (2010) indicates is necessary for achieving the desired outcomes for socioculturally disadvantaged students. According to Chubbuck (2010), teachers need to be able to see beyond their personal, racial, cultural and socioeconomic experiences and recognize how societal structures have imposed privilege and discrimination. In other words, they need to realize systemic oppression, and how it has influenced disparities that lead to varying outcomes among individuals who are determined to exist outside of the "norms."

According to Chubbuck (2010), this critical consciousness inspires educators to devote efforts to transform structures that translates into advocacy charged by a goal of interrupting cycles of consequences resulting from deliberate acts of crippling socialization. Seeing the children through these lenses, led to the organized effort that initiated Project ESTEEM, having as a goal to counter social elements that would prevent them from thriving. Seeing the parents through these lenses is what provoked the faculty to recognize the social justice mission in supporting parents who masked their feelings about their differences behind walls of distrust. While schools are organized around a different context and structure than Project ESTEEM, the findings of this study expose the propensity for social constructions to impede productive school family relationships with some African American parents.

Implications and limitations

As stated earlier, this case study emerged from experiences encountered in the program, opening the door for a more comprehensive study identifying factors that influence the engagement and disengagement from the parents' perspectives, particularly since the literature indicates that parents are seldom involved in these discourses. This study implies the value of a qualitative inquiry that invites the views of the parents as part of the discourse to expose meanings for critiquing the quality and effectiveness of parental engagement. The

findings of this study suggest that parents who initially might have been judged as disinterested in their children's education, were interested. Deliberating the sociocultural contexts that posed barriers to these parents' relationships with their schools could be valuable to fostering the critical consciousness that Chubbuck (2010) defines as crucial to addressing the systemic oppressive elements contributing to social hierarchies. The findings from this study point to a mission of social justice that brings to question social messaging that insinuate paths for groups of individuals only to disenfranchise them when they follow the script. This awareness is important for informing initiatives seeking to engage African American parents in their children's education.

The researchers acknowledge that this research occurred in an afterschool program designed to foster cultural appreciation and awareness, differing from activities that occur regularly in schools. However, the stories of the parents shed insight on challenges to relations with the teachers at the school. The researchers do not intend to claim generalizability with the results, rather the objective is to share outcomes that provide insight that could add value to deliberations on some African American parents' disengagement in their children's education.

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