Critical Education

Allies, Accomplices, or Troublemakers
Black families and scholar activists working for social justice in a race-conscious parent engagement program

Denise G. Yull
Marguerite A. F. Wilson
Binghamton University

Abstract

Our study seeks to document and examine the experiences of Black parents and activist scholars engaged in a three year a race-conscious form of parent engagement. This work seeks to disrupt the overwhelming disciplining of Black students who are positioned by teachers and other school staff as 'undesirable' and 'disposable.' The project has grown from a simple parent volunteering program to a multifaceted grassroots community activism project that works towards implementing restorative justice practices at multiple levels of the school system. Using a lens of anti-blackness, this critical ethnographic work examines the resistance faced by the scholar activist and Black parents as they challenge the disproportionate disciplinary practices in the school district.

Our scholar-activist project takes place in a small city in upstate New York—which we call Rivertown[1]—among a group of Black[2] parents who have been marginalized from the school system and whose children are pushed out of school through punitive discipline policies. We begin with several quotes from parents that capture the context of hostility that permeates the culture of the school district:

"We [Black people] are always the problem, the treat us like we are the problem, like we don't belong, you walk into a [school] building and it's like, why are you here? you definitely get that you are not welcome."

"I just don't think you should be suspending first graders, but they suspend our [Black] children for acting like kids, a White kid can tear up the room and nothing will happen."

"We can't keep letting our [Black] kids continue to be victims of circumstance and getting caught up and can't move nowhere, they push out our [Black] kids, try to force them to get a GED, they just want them out of the high school."

critirough. You put off going to your child's school a lot because you're not comfortable going. Upon arrival you're greeted in an unfriendly manner. You're talked down to like you're one of the students attending the school, not only do I have children throughout the district I also work in it and you encounter many things, there's a lot of favoritism for Caucasian [White] people in general...African American children were not being treated equal, you see our children are targeted, they get the more suspensions than the Caucasian children. I've witnessed first hand a Caucasian child spit on an aide, throw a chair and threaten her, all he received was a 2 hour time out in the ISS room, that is short for in school suspension. Now later that same day an African American young man said a few bad words and was given out of school suspension for 3 days, how's that fair? I myself have been hit, kicked, spit on and all these Caucasian children received was a day in school suspension room I hope and pray for change and equality, after all we deserve it, especially our children."

These narratives from Black parents in Rivertown point to a larger pattern of disproportionate disciplining of students of color in Rivertown; in 2016, Black students at Rivertown High made up 27% of the student body, but represent nearly 46% of the students that were suspended. Similar patterns are found in both the districts middle schools, with Black students representing 25% of the student body yet 43% of the students suspended (NYSED, 2017). The experiences of Black children in Rivertown closely mirror the national problem of disproportionate disciplining of students of color (Carter, Skiba, Arrendondo & Pollock, 2016; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Noguera, 2003) that has gained attention in conjunction with the recent highly publicized police murders of Black boys and men, which have raised important questions about racism, implicit bias, and the resulting criminalization of Black children in society and schools. The increased policing, suspending, surveilling, and disciplining of Black children in all institutions, including schools, is one of the many ways white supremacy persists at the structural level (Dohm & Ayers, 2016; Krueger, 2010). In Rivertown, our analysis

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[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.
[2] Black and African American are used interchangeably to denote people who identify as descendants of Africans.

examines the specificity of Black suffering in schools, and the cultural indifference and aversion to Black bodies within the education system (Dumas, 2016). To ground their argument for disciplinary codes based in zero tolerance, school administrators in Rivertown use the need to provide a safe school environment. School safety is an important issue that no one can argue against; however, the dilemma lies in the fact that the enforcement of disciplinary codes based in zero tolerance has consequences that are disproportionately directed at those students who walk in Black bodies (Advancement Project, 2012; Howard, 2016). The consequence of this systemic cultural prejudice, is the subjugation of Black bodies to a dehumanization process rendering them undeserving of emotional and moral recognition that is afforded those whose shared humanity is understood, i.e., students walking in White bodies (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Black children have been victimized by the adultification and dehumanization which has led to disparate disciplining in schools where they are treated not as children, but as potential threats to the safety and security of the schools they attend (Goff, et. al, 2014). Across the nation there are stories that attest to the demeaning and dehumanizing ways in which Black children are treated in schools. For example, in North Carolina (Edwards, 2017) and Chicago (Malm, 2014), teachers were reprimanded for referring to Black students as "nigger" and slaves. In Massachusetts some Black students were subjected to suspension and others were kicked off sports teams and prohibited from attending prom for wearing their hair in braids (Williams, 2017). In Florida a young Black girl who was being bullied because of her hair was told to either cut her natural hair or straighten it, refusing to do neither would result in her expulsion (Munzenrieder, 2013). These examples show how schools' creation of policies that prohibit culturally black hairstyles further alienate and demean Black students.

As police culture increasingly moves into schools, police encounters with Black students in schools appear to look more like police encounters with suspects in the streets (Advancement Project, 2017). This is evidenced in the fact that Black children face harsher disciplinary consequences than White children and are subjected to a higher use of force by school resource [police] officers in schools (Goff et al, 2014). National attention has been drawn to an increase in incidents where law enforcement officers operating in schools have physically assaulted Black students; in a school district in South Carolina a school resource officer overreacted to a young Black girl refusing to give up her cell phone, flipping her out of her desk and throwing her across the room (Fausset & Southall, 2015). Another example of extreme disciping of Black youth took place in Kansas City, Missouri, where the school security office handcuffed an 8 year old special needs child who was upset and crying uncontrollably after being bullied; the officer removed the student in handcuffs and took him to the principal. According to the officer, the second grader was handcuffed for his safety (Rappleye, Breslauer, Gosk & Abou-Sabe, 2017). In Prince William County, Va., a 14-year-old black boy went to a cafeteria cooler to get a milk he forgot to pick on his first trip through the serving line, and as a result a school resource officer arrested him on charges of disorderly conduct and petty larceny. The officer did not take into account the student's story, nor did he consider the fact that the student qualified for free lunch (Golgowski, 2016). These are just a few examples to support the heightened concerns over unjust practices which are too often experienced by Black students in schools.

School resource officers (SROs) are placed in school as part of the "safety" narrative to help sustain safe learning environments in an era when many parents and community members are fearful of the possibility of school shootings, yet SROs have contributed to the hostile and unsafe learning environments experienced by many Black students (Howard, T.C., 2017; Ryan, Katsiyannis, Counts, Shelnit, 2017). The punitive policies of discipline disproportionately

directed at Black children and the construction of Black parents and their children as subhuman when compared to their White counterparts led to the implementation of our Parent Mentoring Program in Rivertown City School District, which we describe in depth elsewhere (Authors, 2016). The project started as a simple parent volunteering program placing Black parents in schools to act as advocates for Black students amongst the White school staff but has grown into a multifaceted grassroots community activism project that works towards implementing restorative justice practices to address the racialized discipline experienced by Black students in the school system.

This paper critically examines the experiences of researchers and parent activists engaged in grassroots activism directed at challenging what Ferguson (2000) calls the adultification of Black children and their subjugation to disproportionate and punitive disciplining. When Black students engage in behaviors that are immature and characteristic of childhood, they are often seen by school officials as committing transgressions that are intentional and malicious which ends in disparate disciplinary practices (Ferguson, 2000). We look at the barriers Black parents and a multiracial team of researchers have faced when encountering an ideology of anti-blackness as they tried to push the school district away from the zero tolerance disciplinary practices which primarily targeted Black students in Rivertown. We analyze the project through the complementary lenses of critical liberatory (Freirean) pedagogy (Freire, 1998, 2000, 2004; Darder, 2007; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004; Souto-Manning, 2010), Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and BlackCrit theory in education (Dumas & Ross, 2016), and use these theoretical frames to examine our evolving positionalities as community and scholar activists working alongside Black parents to forge a grassroots movement pushing for racial equity in the Rivertown school district.

Theoretical Framework

Critical liberatory pedagogy originates with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who describes an iterative process of critique and action that moves to transform individual consciousness as well as the structural conditions that produce and perpetuate oppression (Freire, 1998, 2000, 2004). This transformation occurs through a collective pedagogical process in which participants (1) document the conditions of their lives and communities; (2) engage in problem-posing by questioning taken-for-granted explanations and assumptions about those conditions; (3) engage in dialogue to propose possible solutions; (4) come up with a course of action; (5) act collectively; and (6) engage in a reflection process about the action, continuing to critique and refine future plans for action (Souto-Manning, 2010). In this cyclical process, critical discussion and action around race and gender is particularly important, "as these are at the root of much oppression" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 32). The Parent Mentor project provided a venue for parents to practice this theoretical knowledge and develop as social activists in the school system.

Alongside critical pedagogy, the most basic premise of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) is that race and racism are endemic in U.S. society, reminding us that the markings of one's body, the color of one's skin can act to systematically disadvantage people of color while granting advantages to White people. Within the field of education, CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) functions as a critique of White supremacy and challenges the ideas of a "post-racial and colorblind" society which guide policy, practice and research in the field. Dumas & ross (2016)

suggest that while CRT is a theory of racism that often uses examples of racism experienced by Black people in the formation of its tenets, it is not a theory of blackness. A critical analysis of blackness (within an anti-black world) requires confronting the specificity of antiblackness as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, as an antagonism, in which the Black body is a despised thing in itself, being held in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White (Dumas, 2016; Gordon, 1997; Wilderson, 2010). In this paper, we use the construction of BlackCrit proposed by Dumas and ross (2016) to move forward our understanding of how the Black parents in Rivertown were marginalized, disregarded, disdained and dismissed in their encounters with the school district. Following Dumas & ross (2016), BlackCrit helps us address the racialized school discipline experienced by the Black children in Rivertown. Noguera (2008) asserts, "The disciplining event, whether public or private serves as one of the primary means through which school officials 'send a message' to perpetrators of violence and to the community generally, that the authority vested in them by the state is still secure. (p.198)." As Dumas & ross (2016) assert, BlackCrit enables us to interrogate the racialized disciplinary policies and practices in U.S. public schools as well as the institutionalized repression of Black students and their families.

The Parent Mentor Program: Context and Methods

The Parent Mentor Program began as an attempt to introduce a more race conscious parent engagement model to the school district by bringing Black and Latinx parents[3] into the schools and classrooms to work alongside White teachers. We had learned from the parents' stories that the entering of Black bodies into the school building often elicited disrespect and disregard. Parents were routinely viewed through a deficit lens and were treated as if they were responsible for their children's failures in schools. The reimaging of parent engagement through the Parent Mentor Program is seen as a way for parents of color to come together through a process of community building that would strengthen these parents' determination to resist the deficit constructions of them and their children.

The project paired parents who had been disenfranchised and marginalized in the school system with university researchers and community members to develop a program to bridge the cultural disconnect between families of color and school teachers, staff, and administrators. The goals were simple: Black families wanted to be accepted and respected when they engaged actors in the education system. Our goal was to facilitate this process without requiring parents of color to assimilate into whiteness—to modify their dress, speech, culture, and interactional styles—in order to be palatable to the white culture of the school (Authors, 2016). It is this assimilation into whiteness that most traditional parent engagement programs require (Cooper, 2009).

The parent mentor program places parents in classrooms two days per week for two hours each day to work alongside teachers. The parents objectives in the classroom are multidimensional. While they are observers in the classroom they also work with the students in the classroom, encouraging positive communication between students and teachers. The parents greeted the students as they enter the classroom and interact one-on-one with students who need extra help. The parent's anticipate disciplinary problems before they become disruptive to the

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[3] While our aim was to include a multiracial group of parents of color, we were only able to recruit two Latinx parents and fourteen Black parents. Therefore the narrative presented here focuses on the experiences of Black parents in the context of anti-Blackness.

classroom and redirected students who were engaging in any behaviors that could result in them being sent out of the class on a discipline referral. Drawing on a lifetime of experience navigating issues of race in and out of school, parents use strategies to intervene in situations and prevent students of color from being removed from the classroom.

Parent participants were required to have one or more children currently attending school in the school district and be a parent of color who self identified as Black or Latinx. The teachers participating in the study were selected from referrals made by school administrator, teachers and parents participating in the project. Over the course of four years a total of 16 parents participated in the project including 12 mothers and 4 fathers. fourteen identified as Black and two as Latinx. Twelve teachers participated in the study, eleven self identified as White, one identified as Native American and included five males and seven females.

The Parent Mentor Program is the primary research site for our ethnographic methodology, which seeks to understand and intervene in the disproportionate disciplining of students of color in Rivertown schools. The parent participants, in their role as Parent Mentors, also fulfill the role of key informants as they observe the classrooms in which they volunteer. Parents participate in weekly audio-recorded and transcribed focus groups, where they report on their experiences in the classroom. Parents also complete weekly activity logs and field notes to document their observations. Additional sources of data include interviews and written testimony from the former Rivertown superintendent, field notes from school board meetings, and field notes from conversations with informants from the larger community activist group that attended the school board meetings. We analyzed the data using the constant comparative method of qualitative coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and we conducted member checks with parent participants to test whether our interpretations were faithful to their experiences.

Developing Critical Consciousness and Parent Activism through the Parent Mentor Program

As we began the Parent Mentor Program in the first year at the high school, we inadvertently brought a colorblind and assimilationist frame to our work with the parents, aware that our presence in the school was tenuous and that, because of the heightened visibility of Black parents in an overwhelmingly White school space, their behavior would be scrutinized and would reflect on the program as a whole (see Authors, 2016, for a lengthier discussion of this dilemma). Because of this tenuous position, we deemphasized overt discussions about race in the first year; much of the language in the parent trainings and weekly meetings was racially coded. According to one parent, she initially resisted bringing a racialized frame to understanding what she observed in the school system, but as she gained firsthand experience with the daily practices of the school—particularly the middle school in subsequent years—she could not ignore the racial dimensions. She shares:

> "I try to be fair. I try to be open minded, and then I also remembered, I'm in a new place, where I know no one. So you can't just come and throw bad apples out, bad seeds out, you try to, you know, do things the right way. You know, it wasn't till I started working [at the middle school]. And I'm inside, and I start seeing how things are done. Like, our [Black] children are treated *crazy*. Crazy, our [black] kids are treated *terrible*."

Through sharing experiences in our parent mentor group, the parents have come to critical consciousness regarding the structural nature of the racialized disciplinary practices. Critical consciousness in the Freirean tradition, according to Souto-Manning (2010), is practiced through the process of problem-posing, where "participants question practices that are taken for granted within their own contexts, allowing them to become critically aware of the origin and meaning of the values they've grown accustomed to calling their own" (p. 37). Through this process, which in our case emphasizes a critical understanding of how race is treated in schools, participants come to understand the role of dominant ideologies in shaping their experiences, values, and meaning-making processes. Such an understanding involves becoming conscious of the structural nature of the problem, rather than uncritically accepting the individualized frame that school institutions use to make sense of inequities. Prior to the program, the parents had believed that their own children were solely to blame for the discipline they were subjected to at school. According to one parent in the third year of the program, in reflecting on the evolution of her consciousness,:

> "I look at it as a journey from changing from this struggling mom, who literally I'm like yelling at my kids like every other day because I'm getting a referral and I'm getting a phone call and, and so I'm just on *them*, like *please* I need you to make better choices, I need you to do better, I need you to just go to school, do you work, please just graduate! You know, just beg them please, literally [laughter from the group] stop giving me all these issues. And now I realize it's not *just* them giving me all these issues. You know, I won't be the parent to say that my kid is innocent, in these, in, you know, a lot of these instances because you have to start to learn how to make better choices, and it starts in middle school. But it's not just the child, it's more so the systemic issues that as parents we're probably not paying a lot of attention to. And then, if we want them to change, we have to, we have to make our voices heard, so it's not just coming into the school, I mean it's awesome to get in there and give kids what they're, what they're missing, give them connections and whatever, be able to understand them so much so to where they feel like, you know, please come to this important meeting with me because I don't feel like anybody else is gonna be able to like get through my words and really hear what I'm trying to say. So, that's great but, in order to change anything, we have to be able to stand up together, make our voices heard, so in order to do that, that's where the activism comes in."

Through direct experience with the school system in their role as Parent Mentors, the parents began to pay much more attention to the systemic issues and to critique the way the system treats black children. This heightened critical consciousness paved the way for moving the program from parent engagement to parent activism—from individual intervention to collective action.

From Parent Mentoring to Parent Activism: The School Board Meetings

In addition to involvement in the parent mentor program, critical consciousness among the parents also emerged as a result of becoming involved in attending and speaking at school board meetings. The first school board meeting we attended to support the superintendent whose progressive policies around racialized disciplinary practices were under fire. The superintendent,

who had been appointed in 2013, recognized the disparate race based disciplinary policies targeting Black children and embarked on a number of actions to attack this problem. The superintendent was open and honest about what she called "disproportionate rates of Black students in office referrals, suspension and special education" and demonstrated a commitment to helping her district understand the racialized disparities occurring in schools in the district, particularly with regard to disciplinary practices. Reflecting on her work in the district, the superintendent shared:

> "When I began working in this district, one of the first things I discovered was that the school facilities neither collected racial achievement or racial discipline data nor did they track patterns. I understand this was a reaction to the fear of recognizing the reality of the data and the possible reprisals the district could face. To remedy this I advocated for data to not only be collected but also shared with the community. I introduced professional development that focused on cultural responsiveness, poverty, and the importance of genuine parent involvement, the impact of trauma and chaos on early brain development. I brought Pedro Noguera to give the keynote speech for the district's convocation. I pushed hard to employ more black teachers and staff[4]. By raising the issue of race performance that was blatantly seen in data I received push back from the teachers and the school board as they were moved out of their comfort zone. The staff diverted blame for the disparate discipling of Black students responding by making comments such as , "their parents don't care", "they're never in school", "they don't do their homework", and on and on. They blamed me, making comments like "she only cares about Blacks" or "tell her a prospective candidate is Black and he'll get hired." The resistance I received was palatable, they resisted introspective examination of their instructional practices, policies and long standing biases and showed lack of will to change as they continued to silence and deny disparities in race-group academic performance and discipling."

We wanted to publicly acknowledge the superintendent's efforts to help Black children in the district along with her approval and financial assistance in support of the parent mentor program by having the parent mentors speak during the public comment period about the important role the program has played in their ability to engage the school. Our collective, which included parents, researchers and a community activists, gathered and prepared a statement that would be read by the parents thanking the superintendent for her support. As researchers who collaborated with the school district on other projects in the past, our experiences attending previous board of education meetings found them to be low key and held in a small room with a maximum of 20 - 25 people in attendance in addition to the school board members. Most of the attendees, like us, were there to present updates on their projects. When we attended with the parent mentors, however, we walked into the school board meeting and we were amazed to see that the meeting was being held in a large room with more than one hundred in attendance.

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[4] 6 According to the building principal, Rivertown High School has a staff of 181 with two Black teachers, one Black long-term substitute teacher, one Black assistant principal, two Black teacher aides, and two Latino/a teacher aides. A total of 4% of all school personnel are persons of color. According to the principal, "This has been consistent for the last five years and reflects an increase in staff of color."

We learned later that the Rivertown Teacher Association, a union representing teachers in the district, had organized this mass turnout of teachers and their families as a show of solidarity and to oppose the superintendent because of labor disputes. At the school board meetings we attended, some teachers also expressed concerns about the school discipline practices at one of the middle schools, although their message was the opposite of the parents' advocacy for restorative justice---which, when implemented skillfully and school-wide, can contribute to more positive relationships between teachers and students, reduce suspensions, and reduce the racialized discipline gap (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2014). Teachers argued that restorative justice practices, rather than being beneficial to the school climate, were another way of "letting kids get away with anything." Using the self-explanatory discourse of "safety" (after all, who doesn't want children to be safe(r) at school?), many of the teachers used the discourse of "safety" to justify *more* punitive discipline to keep the students under control.

In the context of this discourse on safety, a White parent stood up and yelled from the crowd, "we need to keep these animals under control...zero tolerance." When the parent referred to misbehaving students as "animals," the racialized message of this language incited the Black parents who were there as parent mentors, catalyzing them towards action. When we, as researchers, gathered the parents together to reflect what had just happened, one parent noted, "Last week, Saturday, you brought up about being conscious on the words that they use. And that struck me…One blatantly said 'animals.'" Another parent argued, "Now we know that we have to take on a different way of fighting this discipline of black children…Now we need to take some sort of action… It's not enough to come into the schools and be aware, we now have to do something bigger…to really advocate for our children."

After the school board meeting, the parents who had attended met to debrief, and the consensus was that it was necessary to develop a larger strategy of returning to the school board meetings to protest the ways their children were being treated and talked about. The parents formed a grassroots parent advocacy group called CARES, Community Advocates Restoring Educational Standards. With the establishment of CARES, parents began regularly attending and speaking at these board meetings, and they began to discuss their role not just as parent volunteers in the school but as activists coming together to raise their collective voice. One parent shared: "The purpose of this program really is for us to come together and realize, we in a small community, we're not really noticed as much, but we do have a voice and we can change a lot of things."

CARES performed a parent-led protest at the next school board meeting. The group had decided to arrive to the meeting one hour before it started so we could all sit together, strategically located near the front of the room. As the teachers and their allies entered the room and saw the multiracial (largely Black) group of parents and their allies sitting together, the hostility was palpable. The audience, aside from CARES and their allies consisted of a large contingent of teachers who were still waging a protest against the superintendent to address labor contract concerns. A number of White parents also came in support of the teachers. This predominantly White group looked visibly shaken by the presence of the CARES members—a multiracial group. Throughout the evening, a number of teachers questioned the presence and legitimacy of "Blacks" in attendance, casting the entire multiracial CARES group and their allies with one broad brush of blackness. In doing so, they positioned this group attending a public forum as unwelcome, using the entitlement of whiteness to construct the presence of a multiracial group as hostile and threatening (Yancy, 2008). As the collection of multiracial

activists sat together with one unified message, the hostility directed at the group by others in the room was decidedly anti-black. The White teachers despised the gathering of Black people to act in unity to confront a school district dominated by White bodies invoking their silent white privilege with systematically excludes, derails, policies and silences the non-white (Yancy, 2008; Dumas & ross, 2016) or, in this case, the black. While the group of activists were multiracial, the negative sentiments expressed were directed at Black participants. There were murmurs from the crowd even before anyone from the CARES group spoke, whispers of "why are you here?" and "you're being racist against White people" directed specifically at the Black members of CARES which let us know that Black members of the group were being targeted.

The protest at the school board meeting took the form of each participant from the CARES group reading a statement during the open comment period, admonishing the school district for the continued disproportionate disciplinary practices primarily targeting students of color, but particularly pointing to the disparate treatment of Black students. In a particularly dramatic moment, the open comment period began with a Black female high school student taking the microphone, and announcing, "the title of my poem is, 'I'm sorry that I'm Black.' Although the room contained hundreds of people, the room became eerily silent, and the tension was palpable. As she started reciting her poem, several teachers shouted, "no!" but the student continued until she finished. She passed the microphone on to the next speaker, and left the meeting. The culture of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) created a space of hostility, tension, and anger at the mention of "race" within an educational context characterized by liberal colorblindness.

Following the poem, each member of the CARES group read five demands that had been collectively decided upon by the parents, community activists and activist researchers. The demands were:

1. To fully fund and implement restorative practices and parent mentor programs district-wide.

2. To fully fund and implement P.B.I.S. (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) together with accountability, monitoring, and data keeping systems.

3. To immediately stop suspensions and referrals for minor offenses (this does not include suspensions due to violence or threat of violence).

4. To improve parent notification system regarding disciplinary actions against their child.

5. To increase development trainings for all district staff regarding cultural competency.

In total, there were about 25 members of the coalition who read statements to the school board. These statements were read during the open comment period of the board meeting, in which each person was to be allocated 3 minutes to speak directly to the school board. However, we observed that this time limit was selectively enforced, whereby members of CARES were cut off at 3 minutes, while the teachers were not.

Taking on the role of scholar-activists, we participated in organizing meetings to prepare for our actions at the school board meetings as well as aligning with parents at the school board meeting. At one of the school board meetings a White teacher approached the Black researcher

and accused her of inciting racism in the school board meeting and teaching her students that White teachers in the school district were racist. This teacher approached the researcher in such a hostile manner that some there in support of CARES lept to her defense and ask the teacher to leave. It was at that point that we as researchers began to see that we were indeed walking an uneasy line line between our roles as untenured university faculty and as community activists, all the time worrying about whether our presence would help or hinder the collective struggle, and whether our jobs would be in jeopardy.

And the Song Continues: Anti-Blackness, Consequences, and Repercussions

When we originally set up the project, placing parents in school sites and collecting data in focus groups, our ethnographic methodology, while critical, was designed outside of actual participation with the parents in the classrooms or in activist spaces. As the parents shifted their focus to include actively challenging the school district around how their children and other children of color were being treated, we began to take on the role of activist scholars, participating in direct actions alongside the parent activist group. Initially reasoning that we would be able to use our credentials as academics to help parents gain access, we spoke alongside the parents of CARES at school board meetings. However, the resistance to the parent group that emerged out of a context of anti-Blackness made us question whether our help was more harmful and our affiliation with the university a distraction to the activist project.

Not long after the parents and teachers began speaking at the school board meetings, as part of the pushback against the activism, the superintendent was fired by the school board in response to the labor issues that the teachers' union had raised. This move, which removed crucial support for restorative justice practices, was considered a victory by the teachers. As soon as the superintendent was out of power, one teacher in the high school with whom one of the parent mentors had been working abruptly stopped participating in the program. Backed by a union representative, the teacher called a meeting in which she spoke disparagingly of the program, accused the parent mentor of aggressively interfering with her authority in the classroom, and announced that she would be discontinuing her participation in the program. We began hearing from many different sources (including teachers, university students who had spoken with teachers or had internships in the school system, our own university administration, and Rivertown school administrators) that the teachers perceived us as calling them racist, and that they wanted nothing to do with the university as a whole, even going so far as to threaten discontinuing student teacher placements and social work students' internships.

For the researchers—one Black woman and one White woman—the pushback from our participation with the parents was inequitably distributed, as racialized discourse constructed the Black researcher (Yull) as a race baiter and the White researcher (Wilson) as invisible. Prompted by the interim superintendent, one upper administrator at our University called Yull into their office and probed, "I hear there's a Black Lives Matter protest being organized for the school board meeting. Are you behind this?" When Yull maintained that she was not, the administrator relaxed, saying "thank God." As Andrea Dyrness (2008) warns, reporting from her study of Latina mothers organizing for education reform in Oakland, "granting new agency to uncredentialed and unelected community members, and bypassing official channels for making change in communities, participatory research runs the risk of conflicting with many powerful institutional players […] who have traditionally maintained the right to lobby for change" (p.

24). As anti-Blackness played out in the University and school contexts, only Yull was accused of being racist against White people and of trying to "start a race war," while Wilson had the privilege to speak freely about the racialized dimensions of the district's disciplinary practices and remain invisible and immune to these critiques. At one school board meeting, for example, Wilson introduced herself as a University professor, and directly named the "school-to-prison pipeline" as "one of the most important problems facing our schools today." She continued, calling out the district in race-conscious language:

> "What makes this school to prison pipeline particularly worrisome is that it is racialized. In other words, students of color are the ones who are disproportionately suspended and expelled, even when their behavior is identical to that of White students. This trend of disproportionate discipline is unfortunately what our district has been cited for" (Rivertown School Board Meeting, February 23, 2016).

Within the Rivertown context, even the mention of "race" is automatically assumed to be racist, and yet Wilson escaped scrutiny for using such language publicly. Clearly, anti-Blackness creates a situation where the race of the speaker determines the consequences they face. At this same school board meeting, Wilson was even photographed by the local newspaper while holding the microphone (see Figure 1), but again escaped consequences for her actions.

The photograph starkly captures the invisibility from which the White researcher benefits; while she is the one, front and center, holding the microphone and addressing her comments to the school board, her face is blurred, while the faces of Black parents and community members come sharply into focus behind her.

Figure 1. People line up to speak during the public comments section of Tuesday's Rivertown school board meeting. Thayer, A. (2016). Reprinted by permission.

Conclusion: Allies, Accomplices, or Troublemakers?

As a result of this pushback, we began thinking of ourselves less as "allies" to the project of racial justice in Rivertown, and more as "accomplices," in the words of indigenous rights activist Klee Benally (2014). Benally argues that "the term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless" (p. 2) by what he calls the "ally-industrial complex" in which the careers and success of paid activists, intellectuals, and organizations depend in part on the continuation of oppressive structures. Accomplices, Benally argues, seek to dismantle the ally-industrial complex and, in an academic setting, "would seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or betray their institution to further liberation struggles" (p. 5). Drawing on this concept, Angelina Castagno (2015) argues that the structures of whiteness are so entrenched in academic institutions, that it may take an "accomplice"—that is, someone who aids in the commitment of a crime—to truly undo it. The reaction to our activism began to feel like we had, in fact, committed a crime—a crime against whiteness. We had been very careful *not* to call the teachers "racist," dancing around the dynamics of white fragility, and also keen on maintaining our own positions as pre-tenure academics. In response, however, our words of support and constructive critique had been perceived as accusatory and hostile. Our actions have placed us in the spotlight as "troublemakers" whose tenure and even employment in the shorter term may be in jeopardy, and it also demonstrates the ways that whiteness reinscribes itself when the fundamental set of power relationships that whiteness produces is exposed.

Anthropologists Doug Foley and Angela Valenzuela (2005) suggest that scholar activists be evaluated on a continuum, which rates their involvement in direct community action. At one end of the continuum are those who write cultural critiques without involving themselves in direct political action. Those least directly involved participate in what Hale (2008) calls a cultural critique; these researchers produce scholarship which fits within the academy's acceptable a safe space of critical scholarly production with the researchers setting the agenda, collecting the data, and writing articles, with little input from their subjects. At the other end of the continuum are scholars who involve themselves directly in political action, prioritizing activism over scholarship. We situate ourselves precariously on this end of the continuum. Is it enough, we ask, to sit on the sidelines and voice cultural critiques, or should we be on the forefront of activism, intervening in an urgent situation in which Black lives are at stake? At what point do we, as Benally (2014) suggests, "betray [our] institution," sacrificing scholarship for activism, the position of ally for the position of accomplice? Do we sacrifice the writing of this article and more like it, which is necessary for the maintenance of our jobs, but takes precious time away from directly working alongside Black parents and youth to dismantle the structures that continue to dehumanize, criminalize, incarcerate, and murder them?

Scholar activists fight a battle on two fronts. One front is produced simply by being involved in a project that works to undo oppressive systems by working with community actors in ways that are not palatable to institutional power. The second struggle of activist researchers is the fight to gain respectability within academic circles for making a contribution to knowledge production. We are both assistant professors who are well aware of the constant need for publications and to find a way to integrate both our academic and political activities so as to not set ourselves up as political pariahs at our university. As critical researchers, we recognize the necessity of participating in these struggles, regardless of the consequences for us as academics in a university setting that does not want faculty to be activists, but instead wants faculty to engage in limited, palatable forms of "community-based research" that do not challenge the existing power structure. We must ultimately be willing to risk losing the research project (or at least the research site) if we are to be effective accomplices in the struggle for collective liberation. The work of researchers whose livelihood and tenure are at stake must continually engage in a critical self-reflective questioning of our goals, so as not to objectify, co-opt, or commodify a movement. And we remain critical of the possibility for us, in our position as academics, to fully inhabit the position of accomplices, as long as our "careers depend on the 'issues' [we] work to address" (Benally, 2014, p. 1).

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Authors

Denise G. Yull is an Assistant Professor in the College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University. Her research interests focus on Black students, schooling and educational contexts; role of Black identity on educational outcomes for Black students; and multicultural education.

Marguerite Wilson is an Assistant Professor in the College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University. She is an anthropologist of education whose research agenda focuses on ethnographically understanding and transforming the cultural conditions in schools that produce inequitable outcomes.

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