

Engaging While Black: A Racially Realistic Framework for Black Parental Agency in Schools

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Abstract

The racial realities of Black parental engagement are often rendered invisible, or the engagement itself is framed as deficit or is devalued altogether. This article challenges these orientations by introducing engaging while Black (EWB), a framework rooted in parenting while Black (PWB), to illustrate how endemic racism necessitates not just engagement, but a distinct form of parental agency and resistance. We find that Black parents develop strategic, sophisticated, and selective approaches to mitigate racial harm for their children and themselves. Thus, EWB represents a higher-order form of agency, as it is shaped by civilizational-level experiences with white supremacy and leverages dominant school engagement scripts to navigate and contest systemic racism. Black parents not only engage for their children's benefit but also negotiate survival within an education system designed to support white supremacy. In doing so, they constantly determine which battles to fight to avoid racial battle fatigue while ensuring their children's well-being in white supremacist educational structures. Ultimately, this paper calls for a critical shift in conceptualizing Black parental engagement—one that acknowledges white supremacy as an omnipresent force and recognizes EWB as a vital framework for understanding Black parental agency and resistance in schools.

Introduction

Lezley McSpadden was frantic when she arrived at the fringes of a police barricade. All she had heard was that her son had been shot by a police officer (McSpadden & LeFlore, 2016). Her eyes darted about as she worked to make sense of the scene. Peering through the barricade, beyond crime tape, police cars, and a sea of “white men dressed in blue uniforms” (McSpadden & LeFlore, 2016, p. 12), she noticed a white sheet covering what appeared to be a lifeless body. A few feet away, she noticed a St. Louis Cardinal baseball cap, much like the cap her oldest son rarely left

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home without. In those moments, Mrs. McSpadden realized that her first-born child, whom she affectionately called “Mike Mike,” was lying lifeless in the street. As she remarked that the police would pay for murdering her son, in response, an officer “threw up his middle finger” (McSpadden & LeFlore, 2016, p. 12). Surrounded by cameras, reporters, officers, bystanders, and grieving loved ones—all peppering her with comments and questions, Mrs. McSpadden cried in devastation:

You took my son away from me! You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate?! You know how many Black men graduate...not many! Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like [*expletive*], I ain't got nothing to live for anyway...they goin' try to take me out anyway. (Menke, 2014)

Even though a decade has passed since the killing of Michael Brown and the activism that followed in Ferguson, Missouri, the realities that shaped Brown's life—and the struggles his mother, Lezley McSpadden, faced as a Black parent—remain deeply relevant. In the aftermath of his death, McSpadden's public grief revealed a painful truth: Black parental engagement is not only about ensuring their children's academic success but also about navigating a world where racial violence is a constant threat. When she cried out, “You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate?!” (Menke, 2014), she was articulating a broader reality—the labor of Black parents to protect, advocate for, and ensure opportunities for their children in a system that routinely devalues them.

McSpadden's experience, alongside a host of national media narratives, illustrates what scholars and activists refer to as *parenting while Black* (PWB)—the experience of raising Black children in a society structured by endemic white supremacy. The PWB framework highlights the pervasiveness of systemic racism, demonstrating how Black parents must navigate hostile environments across multiple institutions, from law enforcement to education. This article applies PWB to parents' involvement with the school system and introduces the conceptual framework *engaging while Black* (EWB) to capture the racialized dimensions of Black parental engagement in schools.

Through EWB, two core premises emerge. First, white supremacy is an inescapable force that structures Black parents' interactions across institutions—from policing to schools—shaping both their children's experiences and their own. Second, because of this reality, Black parental engagement in schools is inherently a form of racialized agency and resistance—a strategic, protective, and survival-oriented negotiation within an education system deeply entangled in white supremacy. Feagin (2006)'s hologram metaphor illustrates this overarching claim:

If you break a well-crafted, three-dimensional hologram into smaller parts and shine a laser through one small part, you can project the whole three-dimensional holographic image again just from that part. Like such a hologram, each apparently separate institution of this society—including the economy, politics, education, the family, religion, and the law—on closer examination still reflects in many ways the overarching reality of racial oppression. Thus, each institutional dimension of systemic racism is linked, directly or indirectly, to other major institutional dimensions. While one can separate these institutional aspects of systemic racism for analytical purposes, in the world of the everyday lived reality, they are not normally separated but often occur in concert with one another. (loc. 1216–1217)

This study builds upon Feagin (2006)'s metaphor to show how racial oppression in education is never isolated but rather is intricately linked to broader societal forces. Counter-stories illustrate how Black parents strategically leverage engagement scripts—such as parent-teacher conferences

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and school volunteering—not merely as acts of engagement but as a strategy rooted in resistance. In this context, Black parents use school engagement to shield their children from racial harm while simultaneously mitigating their own exposure to racism. Ultimately, this study calls for a paradigm shift in how Black parental engagement is conceptualized in both research and practice: white supremacy should be acknowledged as an omnipresent force in schooling, and Black parents engage as a vital means of survival and resistance within a white supremacist structure.

The Problematic Orientations in the Parental Engagement Literature

Although undeniable evidence of structural racism has existed since the birth of the United States (Bradley, 2019), the parental engagement literature¹ is gravely divorced from considering this racial reality in studies focused on Black families. Overall, the literature rarely seriously considers race and racism. Only a handful of critical studies have emerged that account for how race and racism impact parental engagement among Black families (e.g., Crozier, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2015; Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Marchand, et al., 2024). Rather than acknowledge racism as a contributing factor that shapes parental engagement in schools, the literature arcs toward three problematic orientation patterns. First, the literature neglects the implications of racism, rendering them *invisible*. Second, the literature is *deficit-based* in that it blames Black parental engagement on constructed ideas of failure and school-defined performances (e.g., standardized testing). Last, the literature tends to *devalue* Black parental engagement by minimizing or disregarding the forms of agency they may be enacting. Coalescing these orientations may mean that studies have not authentically captured how Black families may engage in schools within a racist world and that applied practices have not soundly addressed the critical needs of Black students and families as key members of schools.

The Invisible Orientation

The invisible orientation in the literature effectively treats race, structural racism, and white supremacy as an invisible feature in the lives of Black families. According to Mutegi (2013), invisibility literature defines research that often uses demographic labels to characterize Black parents as “urban,” “inner-city,” or “low-SES,” but without its racial conventions. In other words, researchers in the field of parental engagement are often “in the midst of African American places (schools, neighborhoods, and communities), shoulder to shoulder with African American participants (in the form of students, parents, and teachers), face to face with African American problems, yet blind to the racial implications of those places, participants, and problems” (pp. 86–87, Mutegi, 2013). Even bodies of literature that use “Black” or “African American” as demographic labels often ignore how racial categories have been ascribed meaning “grounded in historical and social conventions [like race] that play an active role in shaping our present-day interactions” (Mutegi, 2013, pp. 86). For example, Joyce Epstein’s six types of involvement framework (see 1995 and 2011), a widely regarded foundational model for understanding parental engagement, fails to account for the racialized barriers Black parents may face when engaging with schools. While the activities of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community appear universal, these types of involvement mask the historical and contemporary role white supremacy may play in shaping any of those practices. First Author (2016) recognizes this invisible pattern in the work of Lareau and Horvat (1999); the latter authors attribute parental responses to racial discrimination to social class capital rather than acknowledging the direct impact racism may have on Black parents’ involvement strategies. Altogether, this pattern in the literature renders race as an invisible construct despite the indisputable racial reality of Black parents and children.

The Deficit Orientation

Since invisibility literature often presents an unrealistic purview of Black parents and parental engagement, First Author (2016) as well as Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) warn that deficit conclusions about Black parents and their engagement might form. For example, Jaynes' (2003) literature review suggests that lower levels of school achievement were hypothesized to reside with the educational values of Black families. However, on further examination, the review does not consider that dysfunctional schools, educator racial bias, eurocentric curriculum, and other modes of education racism contribute to school (under)performances. Other researchers have found that Black parents are also often scapegoated for school-related problems (see Anderson, 2004; King, 2006). King (2006) surmises that "most of the general public (and scholars) define Black people, their life situations, their experiences, and their communities as "The Problem"" (xv).

In contemporary education, "Black as problem" has become an unspeakable subject, and in turn researchers and practitioners have developed a system of codes and innuendo that represent "Black," "Blackness," and problem (xv, King, 2006). These categories within the invisibility literature, including "low income," "welfare queens," "achievement gap," "drop-out," and "Title I," are often discussed as reasons to blame Black parents and their children for schools' most pressing problems (King, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Scheurich & Young, 1997). DePouw (2012) reports a similar pattern across the literature that extends to parents of color, where purported choices, behaviors, and values are centered in achievement gap explanations. As a consequence, deficit research orientations detract from the grave racial reality prevalent in education that likely pervade the lives of Black parents and their school-age children, such as stark racial inequities inherent in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006); the racist origins and construction of school performance (Davis & Martin, 2008); the suffering inflicted by educators, researchers, and education policy makers within Black communities (Dumas & Ross, 2016); and the comprehensive destruction of Black education (Watkins, 2001). While researchers or schools are hyper-focused on determining if Black parental engagement improves achievement, the problem of white supremacist-supported schools is rarely critiqued as a factor that contributes to the underperformance or, in general, abysmal outcomes of schooling for Black children.

The Devalued Orientation

Researchers have also found that not all kinds of parental engagement have been valued (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Noguera & Wing, 2008), which plays a role in how Black families are portrayed in research and involved in school decision-making. The kinds of parental engagement that are often valued are those that are considered to play by the "rules of the game" (Crozier, 2001, p. 334) or closely align with the definition of "scripts" (Lopez, 2001). These standards are drawn from white middle-class mores, which constitute the traditionally structured institutional interactions that define parental involvement or engagement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The games or scripts parents must partake in typically include volunteering, participating in school functions, or becoming approved members of school committees. Since white norms in schools often frame these involvement types as parental engagement, parent interactions in opposition to institutions that emanate racial injustice might be missed, thought to be confrontational, criminalized, or holistically devalued. For example, dating back to chattel slavery, Black parents and extended kin created secret learning communities to educate their children, risking severe punishment to ensure literacy and knowledge transmission despite laws forbidding the education of displaced, kidnapped, and enslaved African people (Moultrie, 2016). However, researchers often do not regard these acts as examples of educational engagement when discussing the origins of parental engagement in education among Black families. During the Jim Crow era, Black parents fundraised and provided resources for segregated schools that were

intentionally underfunded by white-controlled school boards. Black families secured resources such as school buildings, books, and transportation to compensate for structural inequities meant to perpetuate a white supremacist hierarchy (Moultrie, 2016). However, the literature is sparse in determining these actions as engagement or even mentioning the acts to signify traditional forms of engagement among Black school-community members. In the post-Civil Rights era, facing continued racism in schools, many Black parents have turned to homeschooling and other alternative education strategies to protect their children from racial discrimination and ensure a culturally affirming education (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2012). Nonetheless, researchers and educators often do not acknowledge these actions as forms of parental engagement.

Historically, devaluing Black people's contributions and framing them as the problem has been a sequence of misinformation transmitted to the public for decades. The consequence is that these orientations often project a negative message about Black people, similar to what Dr. Carter Woodson observed when he noted that "most Europeans and practically all Americans have regarded the Negro merely as an undesirable—an undeveloped person constituting a problem in not being able to keep pace with others" (p.v, 1933/2023). Although many often claim that this understanding has changed, evidence within the extant literature, coupled with the ways Black children and their parents are described and treated, indicates that parental engagement among Black families continues to be falsely constructed under racism and white supremacy as antithetical to whiteness. Drawing from Leonardo (2009), we assert that when education scholars choose to propagate invisible, deficit-oriented, and devaluing scholarship despite the great weight of evidence of white supremacy, they are simply making a discursive choice to do so. As scholars, we find that this choice contributes to the hyper-representation of Black families and parents as the problem. Thus, to understand a more comprehensive view of parental engagement in schools among Black families, a more realistic understanding of racism is necessary.

Toward Racial Realist Frameworks for Parental Engagement

An emerging critical line of scholarship has captured the significance of race and racism in African American families' engagement with schools. For example, Howard and Reynolds (2008) demonstrate that both race and class may shape parental engagement, but even middle-classness does not prevent school racism among middle-class Black parents. However, interactions of race drove how parents were involved. Supportively, Reynolds, Howard, and Jones (2015) find that Black fathers' racial double-consciousness is intimately tied to their school involvement. Similarly, when regarding race consciousness, Cooper (2007) notes that race intersects with the work of Black mothers regarding their children's schooling. She specifically marks the work as "motherworking" and calls attention to how African American mothers strategically and exhaustively use school-choice policies to provide their children with a quality education. Posey-Maddox et al. (2021) also find that race and engagement intersect. They note that Black parents actively seek schools where their children can thrive, but such parents understand the racial implications of schools as they are not designed with Black children in mind. Fields-Smith and Williams (2009) as well as Mazama and Lundy (2012) found that Black families even make race-conscious decisions to homeschool their children to protect their children from racist schooling. Additionally, Fields-Smith and Williams (2009), Mazama and Lundy (2012), and First Author (2016) align with DePouw and Matias's (2016) claims that parenting children of color within a white supremacist society draws from racialized experiential knowledge that extends to nurturing and protecting their children. These last 15 years of work in parental engagement in education are linked to Marchand et al. (2024), who assert that racial critical consciousness among Black parents often informs their school engagement. Overall, studies confirm that Black parents possess a great

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sense of race-consciousness regarding their children and their schooling and leverage their racialized experiential knowledge to navigate an education system not designed with their Black children in mind.

Proposing a New Framework for Parental Engagement for Black Parents

Existing frameworks of parental engagement often center race-neutral perspectives that fail to account for the ways racism shapes Black parents' interactions with schools. Traditional models assume that engagement entails a choice, value, time, and resources, rather than a racialized negotiation shaped by white supremacy. Moreover, mainstream frames often solicit deficit-based parental engagement models that fail to consider how race and anti-Blackness shape parental advocacy and engagement. Thus, the first author developed PWB as a framework to foreground the racial realities of Black parents and children within a system of endemic racism. PWB extends the “while Black” discourse, which contextualizes the lived experiences of Black people as racialized subjects under white supremacy.

The Theoretical Origins of PWB: The Reality of Living *While Black* in Popular Discourse

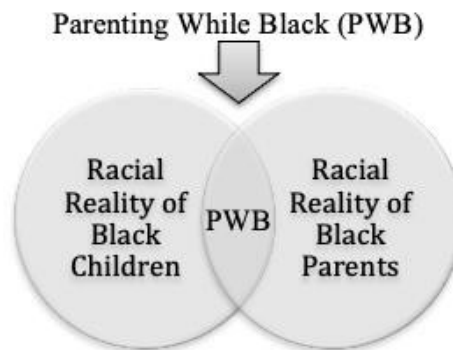
PWB theoretical origins are drawn from the popular expressive neologism, “driving while Black [DWB]” (Harris, 1996, p. 546), which illustrates how a Black driver is subject to any pretext traffic stop, questioned, detained, searched, arrested, and perhaps murdered, because of their race and racial features (Warren et al., 2006). DiAquoi (2017) describes this interaction as a “historical and deeply ingrained anti-Black bias that pervades all aspects of life” (p. 512). Over the years, DWB discourse has expanded to represent other violent racial maltreatment Black people encounter while doing everyday activities and natural human activities. For example, the terms “teaching while Black” (Patton & Catching, 2009), “playing while Black” (Pinckney IV et al., 2018), and even “dying while Black” (Randall, 2006) illustrate how Black existence under white supremacy is marked by social, political, economic, mental, emotional, and physical maltreatment and violence (Finley, 2018). Teaching while Black often raises the issue of racial profiling of Black faculty as an out-of-place phenomenon, where they confront ill-informed assumptions that do not represent them. Pinckney et al. (2018) find that Black children encounter challenges, akin to the racial profiling of adults, when playing like normal children, and this context is linked to the phrase “playing while Black.” One tragic example is that of Tamir Rice, a child gunned down by a police officer while he was playing in a park. Finally, dying while Black signifies that 100,000 Blacks unnecessarily die yearly from the health deficit derived from enslavement.

Over the years, “while Black” discussions have developed into an intellectual tradition that captures the reality-based conditions Black people experience in their daily lives. Across societal domains, Black people are subject to surveillance, exclusion, and institutionalized discrimination, which reinforced the perception that they are out of place in certain spaces. These experiences are not isolated but are interconnected across multiple institutions and shape the racial realities of Black people in general. The discourse also highlights the precarity of Black life, and racial disparities in healthcare, policing, and education contribute to unnecessary suffering and death. At its core, the “while Black” discourse underscores the persistent anti-Blackness embedded in society while also illuminating the resistance of Black individuals and communities in the face of white supremacy.

The Primary Racial Realities of PWB

Figure 1

Parenting While Black (PWB)



PWB is informed and shaped by two operative lived racial realities within a system of endemic racism—the reality of Black children and Black parents.

In line with the widespread “while Black” discourse, PWB experiential knowledge has historically signified a specific racial parenting phenomenon that centers the racial realities of Black parents and children, with particular attention to how the child and parent are perceived and subsequently treated under the rule of white supremacy. Regarding PWB, Black parents have discussed experiencing dual racial realities that influence their parenting and anti-Blackness towards themselves as parents. PWB often seeks to mitigate racist maltreatment. Linked to Feagin (2006)’s argument that racism is not separately experienced within separate institutions but rather is intricately woven between major institutions that reflects an overarching lived reality of racial oppression, PWB highlights the racial realities that shape Black parenting in line with the critical scholarship focused on race, Black parents, and parental engagement. As seen in the literature, Black parents use their experiential knowledge in dual racial realities to predict a particular treatment that perpetuates white supremacy. PWB also includes the experiential knowledge that is leveraged as a means to circumvent the overarching experiences of white supremacy. However, PWB experiences remain unseen and undocumented. To substantiate PWB as a necessary framework, we draw on empirical cases of Black parents and children that reveal how race and racism are experienced across separate institutions, and these experiences reflect an all-encompassing lived reality of white supremacy that shapes Black parenting. Three exemplar cases are underscored to illustrate the interconnected racial realities of Black parents and children that inform PWB.

In the first example presented in this article, PWB unfolded on live television, through the case of Michael Brown and his mother, Lezley McSpadden. On August 9, 2014, while walking to his grandmother’s home with a friend, Michael was confronted by a local officer with the Ferguson Police Department (FPD). What happened next between the recent high school graduate and the 26-year-old officer is linked to conflicting accounts. Some say Michael had his hands up (Corley, 2015), but the officer claims the 18-year-old charged at him, “looked like a demon,” and was the size of Hulk Hogan (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2014a). Regardless of what the college-bound teenager did or did not do to the officer or the fact that he was unarmed and the two were similar in size, Michael was perceived as a threat and was fatally shot six times. This tragic event made Michael one of the 476 Black American victims who died due to the excessive use of police force in 2014 (Our Visualizations–Fatal Encounters, 2021). This case contributed to the highest fatality rate (36%) across all age groups among any other racial category of state-sanctioned racial political

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violence that year (Edwards et al., 2019). As in many other cases involving Black children and the use of deadly force, this tragedy revived the PWB discourse across media outlets. Despite claims of racial progress, Michael's death demonstrated that PWB was commonplace in a time in which extrajudicial murders, continuous civil rights violations, and vast inequities across institutions remained overarching threats to Black people, including both parents and children. For example, Michael's extrajudicial murder and the socio-political activism in response (e.g., Mothers of the Movement, Black Lives Matter) prompted the United States Justice Department to launch an investigation of Ferguson, Missouri's criminal justice system (Chaney, 2015). Attorney General Eric Holder reported that Ferguson was a space disproportionately harmful to Black Americans—largely attributed to racial bias, which created an “Intensely charged atmosphere...under assault and under siege by those charged to serve and protect them” (Holder, para 10). Under this assault and siege, Black residents were 90% of the victims in cases of excessive use of force (Chaney, 2015), were the victims of every K-9 police dog bite (Chaney, 2015), accounted for 92% of the cases in which arrest warrants were issued, and were 68% less likely to have their cases dismissed than defendants from other racial and ethnic groups (Chaney, 2015).

Aside from Ferguson's criminal justice system, the resource-depleted suburb, a result of de facto and de jure segregation, had a domino effect on its main school system, the Normandy School District (NSD). NSD was characterized as “entrenched dysfunction” (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2014b, para. 4), and it suffered years of academic underperformance, high disciplinary rates, overemployed but unqualified teachers, and a lack of college preparation courses (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2014b). When Mrs. McSpadden enrolled Michael in Normandy High School, a predominantly Black school, NSD was engulfed in controversy surrounding the misappropriation of school funds, which ended in its bankruptcy (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2014b). Eventually, these troubles led to a state takeover of the district.

Although extrajudicial murders, civil rights violations, and dysfunctional and inequitable schooling seem to be separate issues occurring in separate institutions, they culminated in an adverse impact on Michael, as a student, and subsequently Mrs. McSpadden, in her engagement practices as a parent. According to Mrs. McSpadden, Michael struggled to stay in high school, which is attributed to the host of problems that were festering at NSD, and reasoned he had “nothing to live for, *they* [because law and criminal enforcement were] are going to take [him] out anyway” (Menke, 2014). In response, his mother persistently worked to help him successfully graduate from high school while raising three other children and working multiple long-hour jobs. In her memoir, she discusses how her parental engagement practices positively impacted Michael's achievement and ability to succeed in school. Specifically, she frequently contacted and visited his teachers and advocated for him (McSpadden & LeFlore, 2016). McSpadden's school-level engagement could be considered a successful endeavor. Michael graduated on August 1, 2014 with intentions to begin college later that month before his fatal encounter with police eight days later. Mrs. McSpadden's case demonstrates that societal and institutional racism, parenting in the state of white supremacy, and school engagement are intricately linked, although many would treat these occurrences as separate institutions, as cautioned by Feagin (2006).

Facing the Racial Reality of Black Children. Brown and McSpadden's story helps to frame the realities that many Black children live in, which Black parents often contend with, that make up the first dimension of PWB. In Michael's case, the police officer's perception of him falls in line with typical racial tropes applied to many Black children. Black children are often viewed as older, less child-like, and less innocent (Stone & Socia, 2019). For example, Goff et al. (2014) report that adults often adjust the nature of childhood to exclude Black children from expected protections normalized for other children. Excuses provided for the use of violent force against

Black children confirm their harsh reality. For instance, Black children have been arrested for tantrums (see Chiu, 2019); maced while having a mental health crisis (see Thureau & Wald, 2021); and murdered for looking “like a demon” (Hawley & Flint, 2016, p. 208), “a real suspicious guy” (Beety, 2012, p. 335), a larger than normal child (Sweis, 2021), and other excuses. The literature and the reasons provided by law enforcement for using violent force present a profound view that Black children are not perceived as children at all.

PWB is often shaped in response to such potential inhumane views and racial violence against Black children. For example, “the talk,” which some consider a rite of racial passage between Black parent/caregivers and their children (DiAquoi, 2017; Whitacker et al., 2012), includes a series of formal and informal discussions grounded in warnings of social and physical threats and death that can occur because of racism. Justice Sotomayor even provides “the talk” as evidence for dissenting on Utah vs. Streiff, which allows police to lawfully stop anyone based on “a hunch”: ...for generations, [B]lack and [B]rown parents have given their children “the talk”—instructing them never to run down the street; always keep your hands where they can be seen; do not even think of talking back to a stranger—all out of fear of how an officer with a gun will react to them. (pg. 12).

Mrs. Valerie Castile’s narrative account of the series of talks with her son, Philando Castile, is a prime example of how racism may shape PWB. She initiated these talks in an attempt to pre-empt racial violence. Mrs. Castile stated she instructed her son that, “Whatever you do when you get stopped by the police: comply, comply, comply...comply—that’s the key thing in order to try to survive being stopped by the police” (DiAquoi, 2017, p. 513).

Philando had been pulled over for minor traffic offenses 49 times across a span of 13 years since the age of 19 (LaFraniere & Smith, 2016). Sixteen days after Utah v. Strieff concluded, on July 6, 2016 Philando and his family were pulled over by Minneapolis police who claimed he fit the description of a robbery suspect. An officer noted Philando’s “wide set nose” as his reason. Within 40 seconds of the traffic stop, the officer shot Philando five times in front of his 4-year-old daughter while he was reaching for his license and legal gun permit (LaFraniere & Smith, 2016). He was not the robbery suspect; he was simply driving home with his family.

Facing the Racial Reality of Black Parents. The racial reality of Black parents is tangential to understanding the second dimension of PWB. We offered the first use of the phrase, PWB in 2003, to provide context that parenting is influenced by the racial reality in which parents live. For example, Conchita Jones, a Black mother, endured hostile maltreatment by the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) of New York (Schorr, 2001). In 1997, ACS claimed she had abandoned her children, but the accusation of abandonment was said to have derived from Jones’ landlord in retaliation for numerous complaints she had filed about how he managed the rental property (Boyd, 2003). In reality, Ms. Jones claimed she left an hour early for work, leaving her then 13-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter at home before they departed for school. According to Jones, only an accusation was made and the ACS failed to investigate the landlord’s claim (Boyd, 2003). Jones’ treatment was like other Black families of New York City, particularly those of low income. By 2003, six years after her two children had been removed from her care, Jones, several other families, and the People United for Children (PUC), a community organization established to advocate on behalf of low-income children and families, filed a lawsuit against the ACS. The plaintiffs claimed the agency failed to investigate allegations against parents and was in violation of their parental rights protected by the Fourth Amendment. Additionally, most of the parental victims and children of ACS were Black and Latinx. Notably, Sharon Salaam, the founder and executive director of PUC, described the overall maltreatment of Black parents by the state and subsequent struggle within and against its system as “parenting while Black” (Boyd, 2003).

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Salaam has first-hand knowledge of what PWB entailed as she is the mother of Yusuf Salaam, one of five teenagers who were wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for the rape of a white woman in NYC until they were exonerated years later. They are infamously known as the Central Park Five (Beardsley & Teresa, 2017).

Since Salaam coined PWB, the term has been similarly applied in the case of Ms. Kelley Williams-Bolar, mother of two, who was charged with a felony along with her father, for supposedly defrauding an Ohio school district. In reality, Ms. Williams-Bolar was attempting to navigate the racial inequities in her district by enrolling her daughters in her father's neighboring school district. Ms. Williams-Bolar claimed her father's district was safer and had better quality schools with college-bound opportunities. Regardless, she was criminalized for her efforts, ordered to serve prison time, and required to pay \$30,000 in tuition fees back to the school district (Canning & Tanglao, 2011). Furthermore, her father lost his home and then subsequently died in prison (Trexler, 2012). Adams, who reported the incident, characterized the mother and grandfather's struggle within and against the school and judicial system as "parenting while Black" (as cited in Quinn, 2012).

PWB serves as the foundational theoretical framework for this study and positions Black parental engagement within the systemic constraints of white supremacy. Rooted in the broader "while Black" discourse, PWB recognizes that Black parents do not engage with schools in a neutral context but rather in a historically racialized landscape where their agency is shaped by the ever-present threat of anti-Blackness. This study situates EWB as an extension of PWB to demonstrate how Black parents leverage engagement strategies both as tools of survival and as acts of resistance against white supremacy. By using PWB as the theoretical framework, this study challenges dominant parental engagement models that fail to account for the structural white supremacy embedded in schooling.

Methodology

Consistent with the critical research that centers race and lived experiences, we explored the research question "How do Black parents engage in schools given their lived reality of race and racism that impacts both parents and children?" The presented findings are drawn from a larger four-year (2014–2018) critical qualitative ethnographic study that explored the lived experiences of 16 sets of Black families engaging in their children's education. The present study focuses on the body of racialized experiences that informed engagement in various schools and illuminates three exemplar cases selected from the original pool of participating parents. To protect the identity of the participants, the cases presented in this study were given pseudonyms. The exemplar cases underscore how racism shapes school engagement, and each case represents a collective and broader historical struggle of African American families.

Participants and Setting

We recruited participants from the first author's parent networks to enhance the rapport and trust process, as these pre-existing relationships provide a foundation of familiarity and mutual respect. The 16 participants considered themselves to be Black, and the sample is comprised of nine children and six parents, or a total of three mother and father parent sets. All of the children were K-12 students attending schools in the Midwest region within 20 miles of Boomerville, a pseudonym, which is the state's most populous city. According to the 2010 census, the population of Boomerville was composed of nearly 60% white, 30% Black, and 10% Hispanic, Asian, and

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American Indian residents. Each featured set of parents was married and lived in what is considered a traditional nuclear family.

Table 1

Participants

Parent Sets	Socio-economic Status (SES)	Gender of Children in Household	School Description
The Richardson's	high SES	1 boy, 1 girl	Private school
The Johnson's	middle-class.	3 girls	Neighborhood public school
The Vicks'	working class	2 boys, 2 girls	Magnet public school

Data Analysis

Our methodology weaved together aspects of traditional ethnography and case-study methodology, forming a critical ethnographic methodology that uses counter-storytelling to document how Black parents engage in schools within the constraints of white supremacy. The coding process was explicitly informed by the PWB framework, which allowed us to track parental engagement practices that expound on the lived experience of racism and how it shaped school-level engagement within each of the three case-sets. When parents reported racial experiences that shaped their engagement, we then began to note engagement patterns related to the counter-stories shared that exposed how white supremacy impacted parent engagement.

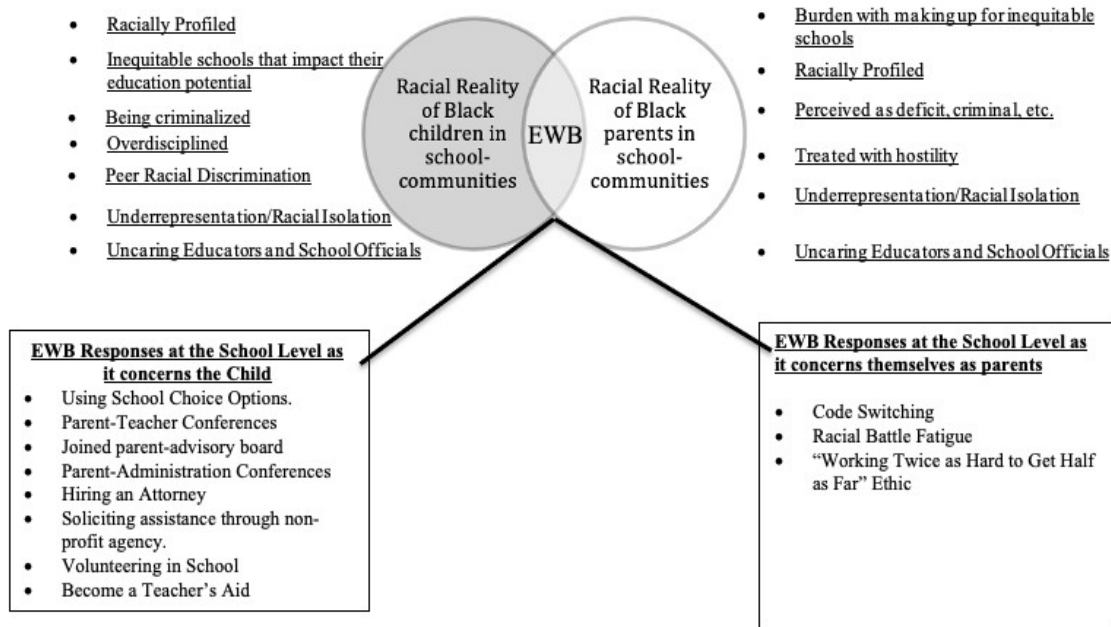
We followed up with the parents to confirm the link between the racial experiences, historical and contemporary moments, and the forms of engagement that occurred in response. Across the three sets, the data were derived from six semi-structured interviews and at least six informal conversations, two for each set, as well as a member check with the children to expand on their reflective experiences. Furthermore, we reviewed an analysis of documents related to racialized experiences within the cases (i.e., school discipline policies). Each case was also accompanied by observations at school engagement events. Events were selected by the parents for the first author to observe. Observations included parent-teacher conferences, carpooling, sporting events, graduations, and home gatherings, including homework assistance and interacting with school friends' families. After this data was compiled through stories that demonstrated how race impacted their engagement, codes were generated, tracked, and secured within the software program, MAXQDA. In addition to obtaining informed consent, the first author used several measures to confirm the codes and aid in the sensemaking of counter-stories across the case-sets. For example, MAXQDA was used to code instances where parents preemptively acted to protect their children from racial harm in schools, and such instances were coded as "racial battle fatigue" and "strategic survival." After the themes were coded, two rounds of member checks were conducted throughout the years of study, then peer-debriefers reviewed the final themes before reconstructing the presented stories.

Findings

The findings that follow provide how Black parents engaged with schools under conditions shaped by the racial realities of white supremacy. Using the Engaging While Black (EWB) framework, we examined how parents navigated multiple forms of racial violence, from school-level criminalization to broader systemic impact, like racial battle fatigue. These findings are drawn from exemplar case sets and are organized thematically to show how Black parental engagement operates as a distinct and strategic form of agency and resistance to racial harm. Before presenting these cases, we introduce a conceptual figure that synthesizes the core themes of EWB and offers a visual entry point into how Black parents enact agency and resistance within educational settings. The figure is not meant to be definitive but rather a racial realism-informed framework that guides the reader through the layered and intersectional nature of the findings that follow.

Figure 2

The Reality of Engagement While Black in Schools



The overlapping circles make up the dual racial realities that impact, influence, and shape EWB in schools. The bulleted points above the EWB boxes highlight the racial threats between student and parent. The bulleted points in each EWB boxes highlights the responses to the various racial threats across student and parent. The overlapping paradigm comprises both racial realities that occur in concert with one another.

The Racial Reality of EWB: Children as Targets Terrorized by White Supremacy in Schools

When parents reported racial experiences that shaped their engagement, we noted that engagement patterns emerged that were related to their stories. Some stories included witnessing media frenzied incidents as a television viewer, such as the tragic deaths of teenagers Michael Brown and Tamir Rice. Some stories drew from historical knowledge of racism; for example, one story shared was the lynching of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old African American boy whose brutal

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murder in Mississippi in 1955 became a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. Till was wrongfully accused and then murdered for whistling at a white woman. The 14-year-old's body was so brutalized that he was unrecognizable. His mother's decision to hold an open-casket funeral and the subsequent media coverage exposed the severity of racial violence. His lynching sparked widespread outrage and mobilized public opinion against racism in America.

This sense of foreboding was not merely hypothetical. Many parents shared deeply personal accounts of racism that their children had encountered in school spaces. In these reflections, several noted that their first encounters with white supremacist violence happened within the walls of K-12 institutions—suggesting that school itself can be an early site of racial trauma. This intergenerational knowledge shaped how parents approached their own children's school engagement, as they knew that these institutions were not designed to protect or affirm Black life.

The families in this study, the Vicks, Richardsons, and Johnsons, bore witness to the myriad ways white supremacy criminalizes Black children. They cited egregious acts of police and vigilante violence aimed at Black children (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown) and parents (e.g., Philando Castile, Eric Garner) to describe the depth and breadth of racial threats and terror they faced outside and within schools. Whether through police-involved violence or state-sanctioned neglect (e.g., systemic underfunding of Black schools), the participants' narratives highlighted that racialized terror is a defining feature of Black childhood. Mr. Vicks, a father and participant in this study, articulated this reality in an account that captured the helplessness, rage, and profound injustice of Black parenting under white supremacy:

Like, the cop didn't talk to Michael Brown. You know, he didn't try to see what was wrong with him...could have been having a problem that day...he might have been upset...he might have answered something wrong; the cop didn't see any of that. He said the kid was big like a monster. He was afraid. And he shot and killed him. You know, Trayvon Martin? The guy was following him, thinking that he was a threat. Trayvon Martin's looking at this grown man following him like he's a threat, because he *is* a threat. You're following a kid! The kid decides that, you know, he can't—he tries to run from the guy and can't get away from him. So now he has to turn and fight because he's a kid and he doesn't have the...wherewithal to think through these things...like an adult can.

This statement is a chilling indictment of the racial logic that governs Black childhood in the reality of EWB among Black parents. The parental reality exposes a critical tension we found amongst the parents: Black children are expected to navigate white violence with the foresight and rationality of an adult, yet they are denied the rights, protections, and presumption of innocence granted to their white peers. This racial double standard—of Black children being hyper-criminalized—underscores why Black parents must engage schools not as neutral institutions of learning but as hostile terrains where their children's very survival is at stake.

Parental Engagement as a Response to White Supremacy

Although ways exist to prepare children, such as using “the talk” and racial socialization, all three parent sets did not believe their children had the wherewithal necessary to mitigate the effects of endemic racism. Moreover, all of the parents believed schools were inherently racist institutions that included individuals who harbored and executed racism. Thus, the parents were compelled to take on the responsibility to mitigate, curb, pre-empt, and anticipate school racism. Each case highlights how Black parents engaged in schools as a direct response to white supremacy's structuring force.

EWB Case One: Tactical Maneuvering to Preempt the Criminalization of Black Childhood

For Black parents navigating schools under white supremacy, engagement is neither voluntary nor a simple act of participation. Rather, engagement is an act of racial protectionism, a necessary and preemptive maneuver against the structural and interpersonal violence that Black children encounter in schools. Mrs. Richardson's case illustrates the deeply racialized nature of parental engagement: she found herself forced to anticipate and disrupt the inevitable racial profiling and criminalization her son would face, both inside and outside of school.

The precipitating incident did not occur within the school itself but in the broader social environment where the policing of Black life is routine and unrelenting. Shortly after leaving a shopping center, three police officers surrounded Mrs. Richardson's car, shining flashlights into the vehicle and asking, "How many cars were you and your son trying to break into?" The accusation in its presumption of guilt exposed the disposability of Black innocence under white supremacy. Despite Mrs. Richardson being a successful business owner and respected member of the community, her identity as a Black woman rendered her credentials irrelevant. Her attempt to assert her legitimacy by offering her business card was met with open disdain as an officer spat back, "I don't care what you own!"

This moment of racial terror was more than an isolated instance of police harassment; it was a violent interruption of Black childhood itself. Eight-year-old Xavier, witnessing the interrogation from the backseat, absorbed the unspoken lesson of white supremacy: his presence and existence was inherently suspect. Confused and indignant, he turned to his mother and asked, "That wasn't right, why would they think we would do that [steal]?" Mrs. Richardson, like generations of Black parents before her, was forced to deliver "the talk"—a racial socialization process that prepares Black children for the brutality of living in a world that denies their innocence. She explained, "Racism exists, and sometimes people are unfairly targeted because they're African American... There's no way to know what reason they targeted us, but that's part of the burden of being African American—that you kind of have that threat at any time." This early encounter with racial profiling marked a critical juncture in Mrs. Richardson's approach to school engagement. She understood that the same racial logic that had led police officers to frame her son as a criminal in a parking lot could soon shape how teachers and administrators perceived Xavier in the classroom.

Preemptive Engagement as a Strategy of Resistance. Mrs. Richardson knew that, despite Xavier's academic strengths and their family's socioeconomic status, her son would not be afforded the presumption of childhood in his predominantly white school. As the only Black child in his class and one of only a handful of Black students in the entire school, he was already positioned as an outsider. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that Black boys are disproportionately labeled as disruptive, aggressive, or defiant by white educators, even when exhibiting the same behaviors as their white peers.

Recognizing these racialized disciplinary patterns, Mrs. Richardson devised a proactive strategy to preempt the school's misperception of her son. She requested a parent-teacher conference to control the narrative about her son early on, for if she didn't take such measures, the school would construct one for him. At the conference, she framed her engagement in the language of white institutional expectations—a tactic Black parents have long used to subvert and manipulate white supremacy's gaze. Instead of directly addressing her concerns about racial bias, she couched her intervention in the seemingly neutral language of special education needs. Specifically, she informed the teacher about Xavier's mild stutter, explaining that he sometimes

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struggled with fluency when excited. Though Xavier had never expressed frustration over his occasional stutter, Mrs. Richardson strategically positioned this information as a protective buffer—a way to ensure that if her son ever became frustrated in class, his behavior would be framed as a speech-related issue rather than a disciplinary infraction.

This maneuver is an exemplar of EWB. Mrs. Richardson understood that her son's actions would not be read through the lens of childhood innocence but through the racialized gaze of white suspicion. Her engagement was not about involvement—it was about racial harm reduction, about planting a seed in the teacher's mind that might prevent a future criminalizing interpretation of Xavier's normal childhood behavior.

EWB Case Two: Critical Consciousness as a Defense Against the School-to-Prison Pipeline

For Black parents, engagement in schools is not simply a matter of ensuring academic success; it is often a battle to protect their children from the criminalization embedded within the education system. The case of the Vicks family underscores how EWB is shaped by the racial realities of broader policies, such as school discipline, that disproportionately target Black children. The Vicks' son, Andrew, a 15-year-old honors student with aspirations of becoming a chemist, found himself ensnared in the web of the school-to-prison pipeline over an incident that his parents saw as trivial, a matter they thought would have been dismissed as youthful mischief had he been white. Andrew had etched his initials into wet cement in a parking spot on school grounds—an act of transgression that was also made by many of his peers that day. However, Andrew was one of only two students who were expelled for the act, and he was the only one who faced the possibility of a felony charge.

His parents were blindsided when Ms. Barnes, the assistant principal, called to inform them of the school's decision to pursue expulsion and criminal prosecution. The severity of the school's reaction was not lost on the Vicks. They immediately recognized the familiar pattern of how Black boys are disproportionately subjected to extreme disciplinary measures that transform ordinary childhood mistakes into criminal offenses. Mr. Vicks, desperate to intervene, pleaded with school officials, urging them to reconsider the punishment. He demanded to know why they were so intent on derailing his son's future over something so inconsequential, and he pleaded, "He's a kid! Why are you treating him like an adult? Why are you trying to end this kid's life?" His plea was met with indifference. What troubled the family even more was the role of Mr. Ranklyn, a Black administrator, in reinforcing this disciplinary decision. For the Vicks, Mr. Ranklyn's complicity reflected how Black school officials, operating within white-dominated institutions, can sometimes act as agents and enforcers of white supremacy rather than disruptors of it.

Strategic Resistance and the Role of Critical Race Consciousness in Black Parental Engagement. Faced with the reality that their son's educational trajectory—and potentially his entire future—was on the line, the Vicks knew they had to act swiftly. Their engagement with the school was not framed by the usual concerns of grades or extracurricular involvement; rather, it was a high-stakes intervention against institutionalized racism. They immediately mobilized, securing legal representation and reaching out to a local nonprofit that specialized in racial justice advocacy. They understood that navigating this system required not only confrontation with school leaders but also the leverage of external pressure. Over three weeks, the Vicks organized meetings that brought together attorneys, community activists, school officials, and district administrators. They refused to let Andrew's case be swept into the pipeline that disproportionately pushes Black children out of educational spaces and into the criminal justice system.

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Their relentless advocacy paid off. The expulsion was overturned, and the school abandoned its attempt to press felony charges. However, the victory did not come without consequences. The entire ordeal reaffirmed for the Vicks that their son was never afforded the presumption of childhood innocence, a reality that shaped how they would approach his schooling moving forward. Reflecting on their experience, Mr. Vicks articulated the burden of critical race consciousness that Black parents must carry—an awareness that is essential for survival but that is not universally shared:

You know what the “school-to-prison pipeline” is?... What if the kid’s parents, you know, don’t understand the dynamics between, you know, white supremacy?...What if they don’t know what it looks like?...[S]o many parents just let their kids go into the system without fighting for them and, well, [they think] “they did the crime, this is what happens.” So many people...let the system just screw them over without a second thought.

The Vicks’ case highlights a crucial distinction between those who can resist white supremacy and those who become ensnared in its machinery. Black parents who lack a critical consciousness about the racialized nature of policy, like school discipline in schools, are at a disadvantage, as they may not recognize the urgency of resisting these processes until it is too late to do so.

Andrew’s case is emblematic of the broader phenomenon of Black children being disproportionately subjected to punitive school discipline. Research has consistently demonstrated that Black students, particularly Black boys, are more likely than their white peers to be suspended, expelled, and even referred to law enforcement for minor infractions (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Schools do not merely educate Black children; they surveil, police, and, in many cases, prepare them for premature encounters with the criminal justice system. In this context, EWB, is not simply about involvement—it is about defense and resistance. The Vicks’ case reveals that Black parents must recognize that their Black children exist in a system designed to pathologize and criminalize them, and understanding this context is their first line of protection.

EWB Case Three: Volunteering as Surveillance and Protection

For Black parents, engagement in schools is rarely about mere participation; it is often a calculated effort to shield their children from the racial harm embedded in educational institutions. The Johnsons’ experience highlights how Black parental engagement operates as both a survival strategy and an act of resistance against the pervasive anti-Blackness within schools. Their decision to increase their visibility within the school was not motivated by a desire to integrate into the school community but rather to ensure that their daughter, Renee, was protected from the micro and macro racial aggressions that she would inevitably face.

Renee’s racial reality came into sharp focus at age six when she was singled out in a seemingly innocuous classroom ritual—the distribution of birthday invitations. As her white classmate, Kari, handed out invitations to every other girl in the class, she pointedly excluded Renee, explaining that she was “too dark” to attend the party. When Renee arrived home in tears, her mother immediately recognized this moment as a painful racial initiation—one of the countless ways Black children are made to feel inferior in predominantly white spaces.

Mrs. Johnson attempted to comfort Renee while simultaneously preparing her for a world in which such injustices were neither rare nor accidental. She explained, “Yes, you are different because of this [the color of your skin]—but that doesn’t make her [Kari], or anyone else, any better than you are.” Even as Renee accepted her mother’s reassurance, the incident was a reminder that racial exclusion is one of the first lessons Black children learn in predominantly white institutions.

The Need for Parental Racial Vigilance. Unlike traditional parental engagement models that emphasize collaboration with teachers and administrators, the Johnsons made a strategic decision not to address the issue through official school channels. They saw little value in confronting Kari's parents, who likely reinforced their child's racist attitudes, or in appealing to school authorities, whom they presumed would downplay the incident or dismiss its significance altogether. Their lack of faith in the institution's ability—or willingness to address racial harm—was not paranoia; it was an informed assessment based on lived experience. Instead of relying on the school to protect their daughter, the Johnsons took matters into their own hands. Recognizing that racism within peer groups could escalate over time, they adopted a strategy of constant vigilance. They understood that racial harm in schools is not confined to isolated incidents but is part of a broader pattern of exclusion and devaluation that accumulates over time.

Their solution was to embed themselves within the school's daily operations. They became hyper-visible, ensuring that their presence served as both a protective shield for their daughter and a subtle form of accountability for the school. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson began volunteering at classroom events, participating in school activities, and positioning themselves as engaged parents, not out of a desire for community involvement but as a form of surveillance. Their presence functioned as a silent but powerful deterrent, which aided in preventing teachers and administrators from overlooking or dismissing potential racial injustices. Mrs. Johnson's engagement also extended beyond standard volunteerism. She took on roles that gave her direct access to Renee's educational environment, and she eventually became a volunteer coach and later a coaching assistant on her daughter's sports team. Over time, her involvement deepened further, culminating in a position as a permanent teacher's aide. Through these roles, she was able to monitor the school climate, observe interactions between students and staff, and intervene in ways that might not have been possible for parents with less access to time and resources.

The Racial Reality of Black Parents: Code-Switching, Working Twice as Hard, and Racial Battle Fatigue

The lived realities of Black parents navigating predominantly white school spaces demand a level of strategic engagement far beyond conventional notions of parental involvement. Unlike white families, who engage with schools under the assumption of neutrality or collaboration, Black parents must anticipate and counteract the racialized scrutiny directed at both themselves and their children. This racial vigilance manifests in complex engagement strategies, including code-switching, overperformance, and the calculated preservation of energy through strategic disengagement—often at the cost of their mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Code-Switching as a Survival Mechanism. One of the most pervasive strategies Black parents employ in educational spaces is code-switching, a linguistic and behavioral adaptation that serves as both a protective measure and a form of resistance. Research has long documented how Black individuals shift their speech, demeanor, and self-presentation to navigate predominantly white institutions (McCluney et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021). In educational settings, Black parents engage in code-switching to avoid being labeled as aggressive, incompetent, or unfit parents—labels that can carry serious consequences, including the policing of their engagement or the criminalization of their parenting practices. Mrs. Richardson's case exemplifies this phenomenon. She recounted how, despite being a successful business owner, she consciously adjusted her attire during school drop-offs, opting for professional clothing to mitigate the racialized assumptions that could otherwise be made about her. This decision was not merely about personal presentation but about countering dominant narratives that construct Black mothers as uneducated,

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unprepared, or disengaged (Cooper, 2007). Her awareness of how she might be perceived—and the differential treatment she could receive based on her presentation—mirrors broader trends in how Black parents are forced to navigate predominantly white school spaces. Code-switching also extends beyond appearance. Parents in this study described shifting their linguistic patterns and tone when interacting with teachers and administrators, ensuring that their concerns were framed in ways that would not be perceived as combative. This hyper-awareness of tone policing underscores the racialized burden placed on Black parents, who must self-monitor in ways that white parents are rarely required to consider.

The Burden of Working Twice as Hard to EWB. The expectation that Black individuals must work twice as hard to receive half the recognition is deeply embedded in American racial discourse (Hughes & Chen, 1999). This notion is particularly salient for Black parents engaging with schools as they find themselves having to overcompensate for institutional biases that position Black families as less invested in education (Posey-Maddox et al, 2021). In this study, the parents expressed frustration with the ways their extensive engagement was often overlooked or dismissed. The Vicks, for example, recounted how their persistent advocacy for their son, Andrew, required mobilizing external legal and community resources to challenge his school’s attempt to criminalize his behavior. Despite their efforts, they remained hyper-aware that their engagement was not viewed in the same light as that of white parents, whose advocacy was often framed as an appropriate concern rather than defiance. This racialized disparity in parental engagement is well-documented. Research shows that Black parents often engage in high levels of involvement, but their efforts are routinely devalued or misrecognized within school systems that prioritize white middle-class forms of engagement. The expectation that Black parents must go above and beyond simply to secure baseline protections for their children reflects the deeply ingrained racial hierarchies within education.

Racial Battle Fatigue and the Preservation Strategy of “Picking Battles.” The emotional, psychological, and physical toll of constantly navigating white supremacy in schools contributes to what scholars have termed “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Originally conceptualized within higher education to describe the cumulative stress experienced by Black faculty and students, racial battle fatigue extends to Black parents, who endure chronic exposure to microaggressions, institutional neglect, and overt acts of racism as they attempt to advocate for their children and protect themselves. In response, many parents in this study described adopting a strategy of “picking battles.” This approach reflects an acute awareness that confrontation with schools may not be productive and can, in some cases, exacerbate harm. For example, the Johnsons made a deliberate decision not to escalate their daughter’s experience of racial exclusion by involving school administrators, because they reasoned that the institution was ill-equipped to address the situation in meaningful ways. Instead, they engaged in subversive engagement, embedding themselves within the school in ways that allowed them to monitor their daughter’s experiences while avoiding direct institutional conflict.

The decision to pick battles is not an indication of passivity but rather a strategic means of self-preservation. Research shows that Black parents are acutely aware of the ways their engagement can be policed and criminalized, and this understanding leads them to carefully assess when and how to intervene (Gillborn, 2008). This assessment is not simply about avoiding conflict but about ensuring that their engagement is as effective as possible within an institution that is structurally designed to resist their advocacy.

Conclusion

EWB and PWB provide critical lenses to understand how Black parents interact with schools under the constraints of white supremacy. While interconnected, these frameworks serve distinct purposes. On the one hand, PWB captures the broader reality of Black parents navigating multiple institutions shaped by white supremacy, from policing to healthcare. PWB underscores the daily vigilance required to shield Black children from systemic harm. On the other hand, EWB is rooted in a historical continuum of resistance, from the establishment of independent Black schools during Reconstruction to the relentless advocacy of Black parents challenging segregationist policies. EWB shows that Black parents have never simply engaged with schools—they have organized, fought, and disrupted white supremacist education systems to carve out spaces of possibility for their children. EWB as a framework helps examine how Black parents interact with schools, demonstrating that their engagement is often strategic and in response to resisting white supremacy rather than voluntary.

In conclusion, if education researchers and practitioners are serious about racial equity, they must abandon sanitized, race-neutral frameworks that obscure the realities of Black parental engagement. Recognizing this reality demands that engagement is redefined as resistance to white supremacist educational structures, rather than mere participation in the system. Future research should focus on centering Black parents as epistemic authorities on their own engagement strategies. Additionally, educators must dismantle the barriers that force Black parents into exhausting, labor-intensive strategies simply to secure their children's basic educational rights. Overall, education research and practice must finally reflect the racial reality of EWB.

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¹ In this article, the term "parental engagement" comprehensively draws from the engagement, involvement, and parent participation literature, predominantly from the field of education.