

# Advocacy for Equity: Extending Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Predominantly White Suburban Schools

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**Background/Context:** *This article describes Black educators in predominantly White suburban schools who have used advocacy through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy and serve as Educational Cultural Negotiators to help the students of color in these spaces academically and socially. This article highlights the advocacy needed to address the plight of students of color in suburban schools who disproportionately lag behind their White and Asian counterparts.*

**Purpose/Focus of Study:** *This research focuses on the experiences and reflections of five Black educators who have directed after-school programs in predominantly White suburban schools. Through their experiences and reflections, this study provides a snapshot—part of a larger study—of the ways Black educators use culturally relevant pedagogy to advocate for students of color.*

**Setting:** *Four suburban high schools in a Midwest metropolitan region of the United States.*

**Research Design:** *Qualitative research (i.e., portraiture) was used to capture the reflections and experiences of five Black educators (18–30 years of experience) in predominantly White suburban high schools. I interviewed participants three times during the course of a year, with the last interview conducted as a focus group. I developed interview questions thematically to provide information on each director's background, the role they played in influencing Black and Latino/a student achievement, their experiences as they helped program participants, their insight on sustaining program directors, and suggestions for educational leaders and educators of Black and Latino/a students.*

**Findings/Results:** *Participants shared a sense of racial uplift to address issues of concern with Black and Latino/a students. Racial uplift manifested in the form of racial and academic advocacy. Racial advocacy came through protecting students from various types of mistreatment, neglect, and macro and micro forms of racism. Educators worked with the staff and students to help navigate and negotiate the racial space. Academic advocacy came through encouraging and supporting students to reach their highest potential through mentorship, tutoring, student life workshops, college visits, and cultural field trips.*

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, Black educators have always been invested and connected to Black students (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1997; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle Walker, 2000, 2005, 2009), and they still may be able to better connect to them, due to common cultural and linguistic experiences (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Unfortunately, the percentage of educators who are of color is in stark contrast to the percentage of Black students and other students of color, with even graver numbers in suburban schools. In 2000, students of color in suburban schools made up 27% of the population, and in the 2006–2007 school year they made up 41% of the population (Fry, 2009). While the population of students of color rises in these districts, the percentage of educators of color remains at 18% (Boser, 2014). Additionally, while Black students in these suburban districts often outperform Black students in urban districts, they also often lag behind their White and Asian counterparts in academics, test scores, and the college-going rate (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Therefore, although some see suburban districts as an educational promise that Black students will do well, inequitable outcomes persist for these students. In this light, research addressing the needs of students of color in these schools is necessary.

While research addressing people of color in the suburban context generally focuses on the experiences of students of color (Carter, 2007, 2008; Chapman, 2007, 2013; Diamond, 2006; Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; Huidor & Cooper, 2010; O'Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011), some studies (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Madsen & Mabokela, 2000) discussed issues Black teachers face: a heightened awareness of differences between majority and minority groups, particularly with pedagogical differences, and their use of culturally relevant practices, beliefs in Black student achievement, and how they work to change the perceptions of Black students (Milner, 2005). Though it is important to look at the Black teacher experience in the classroom, it is also important to look at the experiences and reflections of other Black educators outside the classroom and the ways in which they work to address the needs of Black students and other students of color holistically—academically, socially, and culturally.

This paper shifts the attention to those who extend the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) by using measures outside of the classroom to advocate for students of color. Stepping beyond the role of their paid positions as teachers, counselors, or principals, these are educators who have created after-school programs designed to enhance the experiences and achievement of Black and Latino/a students. Like Black educators of the past, who consistently fought for educational equity, these educators perform racial and academic advocacy for students of color.

## THE RELATED LITERATURE

### CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a theoretical framework posits culture as an invaluable asset to students in their educational process. Educational researchers (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000, 2010; Irvine, 1990, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2002, 2006; Lynn, 2006) have suggested that using students' culture helps to improve the academic achievement of all students, but especially students of color, whose cultures have traditionally been left outside of the academic arena. Instead of stripping students of their cultural being/heritage/traditions, CRP uses culture as a vehicle to bridge the divide between home and education.

The roots of CRP stem from scholarship on effective Black educators who were committed to Black students and their communities. Foster (1995) described Black educators who use this ideology as expressing

cultural solidarity, affiliation, and connectedness with the African American community. Often reinforced by long-term residence and employment patterns, this solidarity is manifest in the way teachers characterize their relationship to students; the responsibility they take for educating the whole child by teaching values, skills, and knowledge that enable school success and participation in the larger society; and their demonstrated competence in the norms of the African American community. Excellent African American teachers draw on community patterns and norms in structuring their classrooms. They link classroom activities to students' out-of-school experiences and incorporate familiar cultural and communicative patterns in their classroom practices, routines, and activities. (p. 578)

The characteristics described by Foster capture the pedagogy of effective Black educators of Black children. Historically, a key ingredient of this pedagogy has been authentic and genuine relationships with students and their communities. Relationships were nurtured with a combination of discipline and love by treating students as extended family members—teaching them to have pride in themselves and their community and requiring that they meet high academic and behavioral standards (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1995, 1997; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000). Through these relationships, Black educators taught the “whole child,” including, but not limited to, socially, emotionally, culturally, and academically. Additionally, educators helped students to participate in society at large by becoming catalysts for change who examined and challenged inequity

(Foster, 1995; King, 1991a). Foster's description directly links to current educators using the theory of CRP.

CRP, as articulated by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2002, 2006), remains hinged on relationships and is based on three tenets: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. It is a "theoretical model that addresses student achievement and helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). While seeking to capture the pedagogical practices of successful teachers of Black students at urban schools, Ladson-Billings found that these teachers taught with the added dimension of cultural-identity affirmation.

The first tenet of CRP is academic achievement, which expresses the belief that all students can learn and that teachers must demand, reinforce, and produce academic excellence from their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002). Having high expectations with support is key to helping students attain academic excellence. For example, Ladson-Billings (2002) described a White teacher who saw that some Black boys in the class had "social power." The teacher challenged the boys to talk about and problem-solve things that they were interested in. Through this engagement, the boys received positive leadership training without even realizing it, and as a result of their status, other students imitated the behavior. First, the educator believed that the students could learn and partake in the educational process, and second, the teacher engaged them in a way that allowed them to choose and find academic success and still meet the educational objectives. This tenet, resting on the belief that all students can learn, allows educators to meet students where they are and connect with them in ways that they can understand to help them extrapolate the information in new ways.

The second tenet of CRP is cultural competence. Through cultural competence, educators connect students' cultures with educational content and activities. To be able to use culture as a bridge requires studying the students, understanding the ways culture influences educational spaces, and valuing different cultures (Dixson, 2008; Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2006). This tenet requires that educators move beyond superficial stereotypes and learn about other cultures. It is not enough to know about mainstream notions of what appear to be cultural connections; instead, it is more effective to know the ways in which culture influences the lived experiences of students (Fasching-Varner & Dodo Seriki, 2012). Using culture as a bridge helps students retain information better, make education personal, and connect the content to the larger community.

The third tenet is sociopolitical consciousness, which helps students develop critical thinking skills that challenge inequities while cultivating self-dignity in an unjust society. This tenet requires that educators must first act as catalysts for change themselves (Fasching-Varner & Dodo Seriki, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). One way to do so is through care. Caring for students of color entails educating students about the larger society (Roberts, 2010; Thompson, 2013). This includes (a) helping students develop their sociopolitical consciousness and providing them with an understanding of strategies to survive a racist society, (b) “rejecting negative stereotypes and developing new ways of knowing” (Mullins, 1997, p. 121), and (c) creating equitable spaces for the present and future generations. In these ways, care addresses the whole student, which includes helping them think beyond the text and about how class information can be applied to life outside of the classroom. Educators of this pedagogy are “systematic reformers, members of caring communities, reflective practitioners and researchers, pedagogical content specialists, and anti-racists” (Irvine, 2010, p. 61).

#### CHALLENGES OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

While this pedagogy has potential for transformative learning, the pedagogy is often seen as great in theory but one that only exceptional teachers can enact. Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) found that because it seems to go against the grain and “clash[es] with the traditional ways in which education is carried out in our society . . . [it] seem[s] herculean to many teachers” (p. 444). Practitioners generally praise the pedagogy, but many also find it hard to consistently work in the context of standardized testing. Young (2010) revealed that while all of the White educators in her study embraced CRP in theory, they did not fully embrace it in practice. Young argued that their “unspoken preference for the traditional curriculum prevented their conceptualization of how to effectively use the pedagogy in their lesson planning” (Young, 2010, p. 257). Young’s study also revealed the complexities—beyond lesson planning—of implementing CRP. Findings illustrate the need to

- (a) raise the race consciousness of educators and encourage them to confront their own cultural biases, (b) address systemic roots of racism in school policies and practices, and (c) adequately equip preservice and inservice teachers with the knowledge of how to implement theories into practice. (p. 257)

In alignment with Young’s findings, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper’s (2011) overview of conceptual and theoretical literature on CRP highlighted the

need to incorporate the significance of race and racism into the discussion of culture as a way to address systemic racism in policy and practice. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper argued that for some educators claiming to use CRP, “culture does not always take into account the permeating thread of racism in the fabric of American life” (p. 79). They suggested using Critical Race Theory, which centers race and racism, in conjunction with CRP to infuse the significance of race and racism into the discussion of culture. These complexities are, as Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, “rooted in how we think—about the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, and about instruction” (p. 30). Ladson-Billings suggested that the practices of CRP are a way of life, taking place in schools and communities on a continuum of struggle—past, present, and future. This outlook serves as a reminder of the larger purpose: preparing students to be critically conscious in a world of inequity.

Another complexity is that practitioners of color using CRP may face an additional obstacle of working in an era of accountability. These teachers may find themselves in a double bind of remaining true to their cultural/professional commitments of culturally responsive teaching while working under state and national accountability pressures, and the pressures associated with that double-bind (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Through the use of CRP as a theoretical framework, and highlighting racial and academic advocacy as a new layer of sociopolitical consciousness, this study demonstrates how Black educators in predominantly White suburban high schools have pursued equity for students of color while working in an era of accountability and incorporating the significance of race into their practices.

#### SCHOLARSHIP ON BLACK EDUCATORS AFTER THE *BROWN* DECISION

After the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) decision, Black institutional schools were practically dismantled, and “significant numbers of Black teachers and principals were dismissed, demoted, or reassigned” (Irvine & Irvine, 1983, p. 417). With the systematic removal of over 38,000 Black educators after *Brown*, Black students were integrated without most of their Black educational leaders and advocates, and to this date, the percentage of Black educators still remains abysmally low.

While moving Black bodies—teachers and students—became the method of desegregating, schools continued to operate under the old mentality of segregation in the form of overt and covert hostility (Ramsey, 2008), tracking (Oakes, 2005), and other forms of marginalization. As described by Ramsey’s (2008) research examining Black women teachers in Nashville post-*Brown*, Black educators in integrated schools prepared Black students to live in a discriminatory world; helped them deal with

racism within the schools; protected them from possible mistreatment; defended them when they were wrongly accused; emphasized the need for students to work hard, because “they must be ten times better than Whites to be treated equally” (p. 125); and served as mediators between the races. In some cases, integration damaged student-teacher relations when Black students thought Black educators were trying to force the students into being more like Whites, or when older Black educators were not aware of newer fashion trends and rejected the students’ fashions.

Black teachers in suburban schools are often seen as “resident African American expert” (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003a, p. 102), and pigeonholed as the leadership of “Black” issues. According to Mabokela and Madsen (2003a), in these environments Black teachers and students alike experience a type of “culture shock” (p. 101) from the negative and stereotypical comments about Black people. Consequently, Black teachers have fought against lowered expectations, unfair grading practices, and the placement of students of color in low-achieving classes. Teachers have “walked the tightrope” in deciding how to respond to racial issues and dispel myths, so that they would not jeopardize their ability to improve the environment for students of color. Like Mabokela and Madsen’s (2003a) study and others (Buendia, Gitlin, & Doumbia, 2003; Milner & Hoy, 2003; Siddle Walker, 2000), Milner’s (2005) studies highlighted how “teachers must be prepared to negotiate, balance, and combat pervasive discourses and practices that already exist in a context” (p. 415).

Literature on Black educators in predominantly White suburban schools coupled with CRP as a theoretical framework suggests that Black educators consistently seek to create more supportive environments for students of color.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, I used Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoote’s (1986; Lawrence-Lightfoote & Davis, 1997) qualitative approach—portraiture—which allowed me to share the stories of a marginalized group, acknowledge my own subjectivity, and participate in the liberation struggle (Henry, 1998). I used portraiture through a CRP lens, emphasizing sociopolitical consciousness, to interrogate the experiences and reflections of five Black educators in predominantly White suburban schools who created after-school programs for Black and Latino/a students. With the aesthetic of storytelling blended with the rigor of science, portraiture allowed me to “document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place” (Lawrence-Lightfoote, 2005, p. 13) and capture the voices, relationships, and meaning-making of the participants.

## METHODS

For each director, I conducted three taped, in-depth, semi-structured interviews and one follow-up interview for clarifications and follow-up questions. Interviews lasted approximately two hours, the follow-up interview lasted approximately one hour, and the focus group lasted two hours. The interviews and focus group took place over the course of one year. I developed the interview questions thematically to provide information on each director's background, the role they played in influencing Black and Latino/a student achievement, their experiences as they helped program participants, their insight on sustaining program directors, and suggestions for educational leaders and educators of Black and Latino/a students.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In the final phase, I used portraiture's *emergent themes* (Lawrence-Lightfoote & Davis, 1997) to bring order to the analysis and interpretation of the data. I transcribed all of the interviews and maintained ongoing coding to identify emerging themes and metaphors. This process drove the data collection as a form of early and continual analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I coded and sorted in an outline-like format that anticipated the format of the narrative, searching for patterns. I also used Miles and Huberman's (1994) three types of codes: descriptive, interpretive, and pattern.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants were chosen because they were the only known educators in this Midwestern metropolitan region who directed programs for students of color that addressed the academic, social, and cultural aspects of school in efforts to raise Black and Latino/a academic achievement. In my search, there were only five programs that targeted all aspects. The five directors all worked in predominantly White suburban public high schools, and were all past or current directors of these programs. There were two current directors—Angela Davis and Jack Hammer—and three former directors—Ida Jane, Coretta Davis, and Malcolm King (MK). All were Black and ranged from 40–60 years of age. (See Table 1 and Table 2.) Each program had a tutoring component, a social aspect consisting of life workshops, and college and cultural visits. Coretta and MK ran a program for Black and Latino/a students, and the other programs served Black students. Coretta and MK's school district had a growing population of Latino/a students as opposed to very small populations in the other districts. The five participants picked their own pseudonyms.



**Table 1. Study Participants**

Name	Title	Years of experience
Coretta Davis	English teacher	22
Malcolm King (MK)	Assistant principal	18
Jack Hammer	Assistant principal	21
Ida Jane, Ph.D.	Retired counselor	32
Angela Davis (Mama Davis)	Assistant principal	20

**Table 2. Profiles of Participants**

Coretta was the artist trapped in an English teacher’s job. She was a high school English teacher for 22 years in the same district. She grew up in a middle-class and predominantly White neighborhood. She attended all-girls private K–12 schools and a coed private Catholic university. She used her strict upbringing, Catholic-school training, and experiences as a member of a racial minority to help students find success.

Malcolm King (MK) was the hip-hop professor. Like a conscious rapper, in his classroom and as a principal, he mixed music and pop culture to help students understand forms of marginalization. He taught English for eight years in middle school and six years at the high-school level. He was an assistant principal for four years. He attended a small, private, predominantly Black K–8 school, and a predominantly Black public high school. He also attended a public state university.

Jack was the “Starfish thrower.” As in the poem about the little boy who tried to throw all of the starfish back into the ocean, if Jack could help one student, his mission was complete. As an ordained minister, he considered education an extension of his ministry. He attended K–12 school in a predominantly White district, followed by a public state university. He had been a social-studies teacher for three years, an assistant principal for 11 years, and head principal for six years; at the time of data collection, he was an assistant principal.

Ida Jane, Ph.D., was the griot. Like an elder griot of an African village, she told stories and provided examples that were always grounded in an assortment of Biblical truths, her own Black experience, or critical race theory. Growing up during segregation, she attended all-Black schools and went to a historically Black college. She started off as a fourth-grade teacher at a Black inner-city public school. She was a junior high counselor for nine years and then spent 22 years as a high school counselor.

Angela Davis was known as Mama Davis. Her students gave her the nickname because she was like everybody’s mama. Mama Davis was not afraid to break up fights, pull students aside, and have what she called a “come-to-Jesus meeting,” where she confronted students about negative behavior and firmly offered guidance. She grew up in a predominantly Black middle-class neighborhood and attended predominantly White schools during her K–12 school years followed by a historically Black university. She was a science teacher for 13 years and an assistant principal for six years.

## FINDINGS

Across the five educators studied, the common characteristic was their commitment to racial uplift (Ramsey, 2008) for Black and Latino/a students. It should be noted that notions of racial uplift in this study have been situated in relation to literature and practices on Black racial uplift. While Black racial uplift does not include all of the concerns of Latino/a students, educators in this study were using this frame in working with both groups. This racial uplift, forming racial and class mediators and protectors of students of color, manifests in communal responsibility. The two types of communal responsibility that will be addressed in this article are racial and academic advocacy, which often overlap. Through the lens of CRP as theory, these educators used their commitment to racial uplift as a form of advocacy that mirrored that of Black educators during and after segregation. The nature of these themes gives way for a new way of understanding CRP.

### RACIAL UPLIFT

The commitment of these educators can best be summarized by Mama Davis:

I have a strong passion for kids, but I think I have a stronger passion for our students, being African American students. Because I know that despite where they are academically, socioeconomically, wherever, I know they still are always having to prove who they are. It doesn't matter who they are. And a lot of our kids aren't equipped to do that. They're not equipped to advocate for themselves a lot of times. A lot of their situations they just don't know how to navigate. So I really see that that's my responsibility to help make sure that they're successful, because, I mean, that's my future. And if I'm not in the trenches helping make sure that the children who represent me are successful, then I don't know why I would be here, to make sure somebody else's kids make it. So I feel very strongly about, you know, pulling my kids along. I mean, I have African American kids of my own. And I want to make sure that they're successful and somebody's watching out for them. So that is what keeps me doing this (personal communication, March 28, 2011).

In this excerpt, Mama Davis expresses a commitment to and passion for the Black student population, because she understands the experiences they will face as people of color, such as “having to prove who they are.”

According to her, along with the other educators in this study, students of color may not know how to articulate their racialized experiences, their needs as a result of those experiences, or how to navigate the racialized academic space. Mama Davis also expresses a sense of group connectedness and communal responsibility to the Black students because she has kids of her own. This idea connects to what some scholars call other-mothering or other-fathering (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2009; Milner, 2006)—caring for kids who are not biologically their own as a means of racial uplift and communal care. According to Mama Davis, in addition to acting as a principal, it is her job to help Black students. As in Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (2002) idea of working with a collective commitment, these educators operate with the idea that success is interconnected to the entire group. Mama Davis is passionate about Black students because she sees them as inextricably linked to her future. All of the educators share a sentiment of racial uplift and communal care, as they are known to address issues of concern with Black and Latino/a students regardless of whether or not they personally know them. As educators it is their professional responsibility, and as Black educators it is their communal responsibility to Black and other students of color.

As a form of communal responsibility, participants in this study have protected students of color from various forms of mistreatment, neglect, and macro and micro forms of racism by way of advocacy. In this excerpt, MK gives an overarching description of the advocacy services these educators provide. MK explains that students had parents at home and a “parent” at school, giving the biological parents “peace of mind that there was somebody in the building that would watch out for their kids just as much as they [parents] would” (personal communication, February 23, 2011). He went on to illustrate the protection aspect:

Those [White] teachers realized that they [Black and Latino/a students] had somebody here that was watching out for those kids. It was kind of like, [I’m] not going to say we showed those kids favor, but it’s like they [teachers] were very careful with how they interacted with those students because [the teachers] realized that [Black and Latino/a students] had people here in the building.

These educators also advocate for academic, social, emotional, and cultural opportunities by navigating the racial academic space for and on behalf of students of color, as well as teaching students how to manage those same spaces.

## RACIAL ADVOCACY

### *Navigating and negotiating the racial space with faculty and staff*

These educators navigate and negotiate the racial space to challenge cultural-deficit beliefs and traditional White middle-class ideologies that inform teaching practices and policies. Navigating and negotiating the racial space takes on two forms: One is through working with faculty and staff, and the other is through working with students. As Mama Davis described herself and her role, “a lot of times [I am] a go-between when there were race issues here at the high school. So parents would call me, and I would be that mediator between things that happened here, with my role working with the program” (personal communication, March 28, 2011). As in Ramsey’s (2008) description of Black educators who desegregated formerly all-White public schools, Mama Davis’s description of serving as a mediator illustrates the role of working with and supporting students and families, while also making sure that the school handles issues in a fair and equitable manner.

During an interview on March 28, 2011, Mama Davis described an example of advocacy by navigating and negotiating the racial space with faculty to increase the number of Black students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Mama Davis selected and placed seven Black girls in an AP course. Although the girls resisted taking the course, they took it and did fine. She described the process of sitting down with teachers who were apprehensive about placing Black students in honors courses. She stated:

[It was, me,] actually sitting down . . . with the teachers who would be likely to take charge and . . . talking about how we were going to support these kids once we put them in this class, and what needs to be there for them. Me making sure that she [the teacher] was supportive as she did this, and as that continued to grow, to make sure she was supported in what she was doing. You know, the initial thought [by many of her colleagues] was that the AP scores were going to come down. And the contrary took place. Because we made sure the supports were in place. [W]e had many more kids taking [the AP test], and it didn’t affect the scores at all.

Mama Davis has advocated for Black students by working with teachers step by step through the process of enrolling students in the courses. She talked about how to support the needs of the students and teachers. Mama Davis instituted preventative measures for dealing with issues of isolation by enrolling two or more Black students in the courses so that no one would have to be the only Black student in a course. Additionally,

she started a bridge between junior and senior teachers, so that students would be prepared for the senior course. Mama Davis also advocated for the opportunity for future students of color to take AP courses, by giving the directive (Reynolds, 2010) and starting a trend; currently, more than 50 Black students have taken AP courses at her school. During the same interview, she reflected that it was considered “no big deal now” for Black students to state that they were taking an AP course, which was unheard of before her push. With AP courses serving as a potential gatekeeper for colleges and universities, she wanted students to be eligible and prepared for entry into various higher education institutions.

Despite the original opposition to the idea of putting Black students in the AP course, Mama Davis maintained her stance. She explained that people would say she was, “setting them up for failure” and “They’re not ready.” She said, her response was:

We don’t know if some White kids are ready, but we’re going to try and we’ll see what we get. And if they don’t do great, that’s okay. That’s important just being there. It will be an advantage to them when they get to college. So they’re in there. They all succeeded; they were fine.

Mama Davis used her sociopolitical consciousness to watch out for Black students against resistant White educators who did not look past traditions of exclusion or challenge deficit attitudes about students of color.

Through this process, she experienced what MK later called the “battle” during the focus group (personal communication, September 24, 2011). He described, “We [the participants] oftentimes have to go well beyond [navigating and negotiating for students of color]. We have to fight for them. It’s not even just a negotiation; it’s a battle sometimes. We become warriors of it [equity].” Similarly, Mama Davis’ battled to get more Black student in AP courses, and as a warrior, she understands that while there has been an increase in numbers, there is still work to do.

Another example of advocacy through navigating the racial academic space is through leading cultural workshops for faculty and staff. MK and Coretta conducted staff development workshops on cultural differences and cultural relevancy. In their workshops, they challenged staff members to look at their teaching methods, consider how their practices might be culturally biased, and consider teaching practices that were more culturally relevant for all students. MK said, “There are staff members that still discuss how powerful a workshop was and how it really helped him to realize what students of color experience and have to experience” (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

Additionally, these educators have challenged staff members to make the curriculum more inclusive, with literature from diverse authors. Coretta describes how the English department was going to make teaching *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which chronicles the life of a former slave, optional for teachers during the unit covering persuasive techniques. She described her response:

I was like, “Yeah, everyone does need to teach *Frederick Douglass*. It has nothing but persuasive techniques.” One [White teacher] said, “I can’t find any persuasion.” I was floored. She said, “I was just letting them find the emotional ones.” I was thinking, “If you’re just letting them find the emotional ones, then they don’t get the meaning behind the piece,” because they think it’s purely for sympathy and it’s sooo not that. . . . We all have a different take on it, I guess, and our [the teachers of color] take comes from a different place, and maybe they feel that they can’t. I don’t know. And another [White female] teacher even said, “I just don’t know if I can teach Douglass” (personal communication, February 4, 2011).

In this example, Coretta advocated teaching *Frederick Douglass* and suggested that many White teachers do not want to teach it because it deals with slavery, race, and racism. She continued by discussing the necessary burden of having to teach twice, to students and to staff, about culture, race, and racial implications. In this particular situation, she continued illustrating the tragic and nerve-wracking irony in how everyone was OK with teaching Patrick Henry’s famous speech, “Give me liberty or give me death,” but was not OK with Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, although both works were essentially about freedom. She later discussed how she would lend her colleague her book, which she marked with personal notes and commentary in the margins, so the teacher could see her highlighted examples of persuasive techniques—ethical and logical appeals. Using advocacy techniques of negotiation, Coretta, like the other educators, has worked on behalf of students and parents of color behind the scenes to link effective teaching practices and content related to critical racial content (Lynn, 2006). Challenging traditional White middle-class teaching practices, policies, and beliefs helped to ameliorate some educational inequities.

#### *Navigating and negotiating the racial space with students*

While combating racism and prejudice on an administrative and staff level, these educators have also taught students how to navigate those same “hostile spaces” in and out of schools. They have used culturally relevant

pedagogy, as in Lynn's (2006) suggestion of CRP, "which uses a broad interpretation of emancipatory pedagogical strategies and techniques that have proved to be successful with racially subordinated students" (p. 615). These educators also sought to affirm students' identity and culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006) to build students' confidence in who they were both individually and culturally. Through their after-school programs, the educators have (a) provided cultural opportunities and programs; (b) provided awards celebrations for program participants; and (c) discussed accomplishments and the beauty of their cultural heritage, as well as validating student experiences as persons of color. Additionally, participants invited guest speakers to share their stories of success. In these ways, the educators aimed to build or fortify students' foundation for navigating the sometimes racially hostile landscape of school.

Coretta gave one example of helping students navigate and negotiate the racial space when she validated a student's racial experience and helped her address the issue. Coretta described an incident where a Latina student enrolled in a Spanish course, and on the first day of class the White male teacher assumed that she spoke Spanish. The Spanish teacher simply told her at the beginning of class, "Don't worry about it. If you get bored, you can go to the library." The student was furious and hurt. Coretta calmed her down, validated her experience and feelings, and asked her what she wanted to do, as opposed to telling her what to do. Together they devised an appropriate response, where the student would talk to the teacher and let him know that she did not know Spanish and that the assumption made her feel uncomfortable. Together, they rehearsed the conversation before meeting with the teacher; to further connect with the student, Coretta shared personal experiences of racism as a student and as an adult. In this example, the White educator assumed that the student spoke Spanish because of her brown skin. Although to some this may seem like a fair assumption, he probably would not assume that a third-generation German American spoke German, and if he did, he would probably ask, as opposed to assuming. His comment was based on her skin color and name; by making it, he was relying on stereotypes and complacently going on his assumptions without even getting to know the student. As in this example, participants have taught their students strategies to survive in a racist society (Gay, 2000; Mullins, 1997; Roberts, 2010) while also helping them deal with the emotional aspect of receiving racial microaggressions: direct and more subtle forms of White racism and racial assumptions that lead to tension and mistrust (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano, 2009). Coretta provided mental and emotional aid to support the development and holistic well-being of her students of color.

## ACADEMIC ADVOCACY

As I studied the practices of these educators, the overarching theme of racial uplift for Black and Latino/a students also manifested through influencing the academic achievement of students of color. Like past Black educators both before and after desegregation (Foster, 1997; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000), these educators encouraged their students to reach their highest potential. They pushed for academic excellence by serving as mentors and stressing the importance of getting good grades, taking AP courses, and getting involved in leadership activities. In addition to individual and group mentoring sessions, the educators provided structural components to assist students in their academic endeavors, such as (a) tutoring sessions with peer tutoring, faculty tutors, or college student tutors; (b) student life workshops; (c) college visits; and (d) cultural field trips.

Student life workshops were held on average once or twice a month, depending on the time of year. These workshops included, but were not limited to, (a) how to write a resume, (b) how to talk with teachers, and (c) how to prepare a four-year plan to attend college; others included (a) race-related conversations discussing issues that may have come up at the school or in the local or national news, and (b) guest speakers who “tell their stories,” explaining how they arrived at their current status and giving tips for success.

College visits have been a regular aspect of the programs. Under all of the programs combined, these educators have taken over 1,000 students on college visits, local and away, to both historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly White institutions. One of the highlights for Jack and Mama Davis was during their annual college tour, when one of the students who had applied to the university they were visiting found out during the trip that she had been accepted there. The girl and the entire group of students celebrated her for her accomplishments and were excited to have witnessed the moment. Similarly, one of Ida’s fondest memories occurred when taking students to a local college fair, where one of the students received a full scholarship on the spot. Another of Jack’s fondest memories was when the president of a large, historically Black university joined their campus tour and announced that he would waive the out-of-state tuition fee for any student attending in the fall. Another memorable highlight occurred during the first trip they took with students. Jack said that there was a “young lady who had a special school district services, and [she said] ‘I didn’t know college was for everyone. I thought it was just for a small group of people’” (personal communication, March 11, 2011).

The college visits were one of the biggest components of their programs. These trips helped to make clear what was possible and attainable for the



students. MK and Coretta also expressed similar sentiments to Jack. One of their proudest memories was when they were able to help undocumented students apply to and attend a local university. Another occurred when one of their program alums, a college student at the time, ended up hosting a tour for the high school program participants. The alum was able to connect with students and tell them how the directors had helped her get into college and that they should take the advice of MK and Coretta seriously. This example brought the college trip full circle—an alum of the program was able to speak back to the benefits of the program and efforts of the directors. These visits were more than just field trips: They were a way to make concrete the concept of higher education and served as a catalyst for students to see college as possible.

Another aspect of academic influence was cultural field trips. One of the biggest examples was when MK and Coretta took 20 of their students to the 2009 presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. This opportunity connected academics with the real world by making it meaningful and tangible (Irvine, 2010). Both MK and Coretta discussed how attending the event brought their group even closer together, re-emphasizing the familial relationship, and showed them a world outside of their school district, city, and state. Additionally, students gained life skills by helping to raise the money to attend the inauguration and making professional presentations to a major corporation that chose to partner with the program's efforts to raise the funds. The students were then able to create and plan a community service project as a way to give back to the community, in collaboration with the business. Overall, these activities connected learning with real life (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006), and the experience inspired students to dream big and reach for the stars.

## DISCUSSION

### CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY PLUS ADVOCACY IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

Aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1995) CRP, educators in this study shared a particular ideology and had common behaviors that assisted in the “development of a relevant Black [and Latino/a] personality that allowed African American [and Latino/a] students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African American [and Latino/a] culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17) in a predominantly white suburban context. Participants expressed a passion for “racial uplift” (Ramsey, 2008) and, as CRP suggests, allowed a holistic educational approach. Through communal responsibility, they connected emotionally and culturally by affirming

students' identities and culture, validating their knowledge, and advocating with and on behalf of students of color. Through their influence on academic achievement they connected academically and provided real-life contexts and situations. For these educators, raising the academic achievement of students of color was not a job based on limited state test scores and pre-scripted technical skills and strategies that can simply be picked up or put down. Instead, these educators considered it their "responsibility and moral obligation" (personal communication, September 24, 2011) to help students find success; they viewed their advocacy work as a way of being and not something that they had to do. Whereas many educators may consider this type of racial and academic advocacy work as extra items on the to-do list that can be checked off—do talk about the value of different cultures, do address forms of marginalization, do talk about the importance of academic achievement and life-long learning, do talk about college—for these educators, it has been integrated into their daily lives. It has not been something they have to remember to do; instead, it has happened as a will to live, because these students are extensions of the educators, their family members, and their future, and this has been a communal responsibility. As family, these educators believed that they could make a difference, as they were aware that they were a positive force in their students' lives; they saw the genius in students of color, and they have done whatever has been necessary and in the best interest of the students.

This way of seeing, being, and believing connects to Ladson-Billings's (2006) description of CRP as "rooted in how we think—about social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, and about instruction" (p. 30). In suburban schools, these educators thought about the education of students of color in a holistic fashion, where each aspect was equally important—educator/student relationship, cultural affirmation, academics, equity, life skills, college visits, and cultural field trips. Through a focus on racial uplift in their pursuit of equity, they went above and beyond the call of duty as educators to advocate for students of color by working at the individual and institutional level and by creating the after-school programs.

While previous studies (Lipman, 1997; J. Morris, 2001) have addressed Black voices left out of discussions on the educational matriculation of students of color in integrated schools, this study found these participants to be overlooked leaders who advocated for students of color. One finding of this study is that the additional advocacy approaches used by these Black educators in their predominantly White suburban schools are nuanced in ways that differ from other users of CRP. The advocacy dimension provided by these educators has gone beyond CRP's social-justice component of sociopolitical consciousness, which suggests educators act as activists (Cochran-Smith, 2004) and challenge the status quo (Miller, 2013).

Participants recognized the ways schools were disconnected from the needs of students of color and took it upon themselves to advocate for those students by standing in the gap and acting as middlepersons to navigate and negotiate between students of color and schools. Through the programs that the participants directed, they were able to provide (a) a sense of community where care and trust were essential; (b) academic support through role models, guides, and mentors pushing for academic excellence; and (c) racial and cultural affirmation, celebration, and equity (Milner, 2010; Noguera, 2008). They helped students academically, socially, culturally, and emotionally, as well as helping them develop critical perspectives.

Additionally, their advocacy on an institutional level by working with faculty and staff continues to expand the notion of CRP. This advocacy included protecting students of color on all fronts and from various forms of mistreatment, neglect, and macro and micro forms of racism in policies, curriculum, traditions, and teacher-student and student-student relations. As described by MK during an interview on February 23, 2011, it was having somebody at the school “watching out” for students of color, as a way to safeguard them from various forms of oppression, including colorblind ideologies, dysconsciousness (King, 1991b), and failing to recognize the ways in which some students are privileged and others are disadvantaged at schools. Participants enacted CRP and advocated for students as a way to provide educational opportunities and as a form of protection.

Navigating and negotiating the racial academic spaces for and on behalf of students, as well as teaching them how to manage those same spaces, also extends CRP’s sociopolitical consciousness. While CRP calls for educators to help students develop critical perspectives that recognize, examine, and challenge inequities in the classroom, the notion of helping students and faculty navigate and negotiate day-to-day racial experiences takes challenging inequities one step further. Participants worked with staff by breaking down barriers for enrollment and matriculation in AP courses, leading staff development or training sessions, insisting on inclusive curriculums, and helping with one-on-one interactions. In working with faculty and staff, they advocated by deconstructing, constructing, and reconstructing (Shujaa, 1994) ideologies about educating students of color. Participants broke down knowledge about educating students of color, added new knowledge, took away misinformation, and created a more accurate and holistic picture.

Advocating for students of color in all of these ways is an integral part of how these educators added a new layer of advocacy to CRP and heightened sociopolitical consciousness in predominantly White suburban

high schools. It was not enough to perform CRP in limited spaces, such as the classroom. Instead, they went above and beyond the classroom to advocate for students of color. Their pedagogical approach of CRP combined with advocacy practices represents a role that I have come to identify as an Educational Cultural Negotiator (ECN) (Warren-Grice, 2014). The ECN is generally located within the school borders, is not limited to the classroom, and uses a educational advocacy approaches for students in addition to CRP. As seen in this study, ECNs facilitate academic success by interpreting, translating, navigating, and negotiating the socio-political educational structure and culture of the students for all parties. Furthermore, the ECNs center racial awareness and cultural resources while encouraging students' academic achievement. More importantly, ECNs also challenge school policies and practices that have a deleterious impact on African American and Latina/o students (Delpit, 2011). While there are other advocates in schools that could work in these ways, none, or very few, are operating in these ways.

ECNs uphold high expectations for all students, particularly students of color, while additionally recognizing the need for differentiated support to help varying marginalized groups. The difference between the ECNs and other advocates and/or teachers who use CRP is that while ECNs use CRP in ways that promote student learning, they also use advocacy, negotiation, and other means to work with educators and school officials to change policies and practices. They also help students negotiate around teachers and administrators when need be; it is this aspect of advocacy and the process of negotiation that makes them different from other advocates and educators who use CRP. In addition, the role of an ECN is not limited to teachers or the classroom, but may be taken on by doctoral students, community members, or other persons located inside schools.

## IMPLICATIONS

Racial uplift and communal responsibility for Black educators are long-standing traditions in the Black community (Foster, 1997). The sense of communal responsibility allows for forming caring and connected relationships, affirming students' cultural backgrounds, and advocating for equitable schooling with them and on their behalf. These educators have also influenced the academics of students through encouragement, tutoring, student life workshops, college visits, and cultural field trips. Through the use of CRP and advocacy, these ECNs have illustrated the positive influence of a holistic approach to educating students of color and have demonstrated that CRP is not a prescription, but a lifestyle.

This research demonstrates the types of relationships needed to help foster a positive environment for students of color and help with their educational outcomes. Students of color need (a) a sense of community where care and trust are essential; (b) academic support through role models, guides, and mentors pushing for academic excellence; and (c) racial and cultural affirmation, celebration, and equity (Milner, 2010; Noguera, 2008). Additionally, there is also the urgent need for educators of color in suburban schools to adequately support all students, especially students of color.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines overlooked educational leaders who have been advocating for students of color. These educators have been successful by continuing the work of Black educators and extending the notion of CRP. Although, post-*Brown*, the voices of Black educators have not been valued, now is a perfect opportunity to listen to the voices of those who continue to be successful in supporting students of color. They have a great deal to teach school leaders and policymakers about what works for all students, especially students of color, and their advocacy perspective is just what K–12 schools need.

While this work focuses on Black educators who have directed after-school programs, this research might be strengthened with several additions. One nuance future studies might take on would be to add school observations of the advocacy of these educators. Another variation could be to interview participants about how advocacy looks different for Black, Latino/a, and other marginalized groups of students. Last, future studies might investigate the ways in which Black educators who have not directed after-school programs perform advocacy beyond the classroom.

In this study, the top issue that ECNs addressed was a commitment to racial uplift through racial and academic advocacy. Thus, the following recommendations are essential for school districts. Districts must include ongoing equity professional development, where confronting issues of racism and other forms of marginalization is deliberate. The equity work must be anti-racist, examining both the oppressor and the oppressed, as opposed to only studying non-Whites (Kailin, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Through this frame, educators can examine themselves, their biases and prejudices, and their racial history. This frame also allows for a contextual examination of race from a historical perspective. By examining both the individual and historical context, educators are better able to understand how their individual actions are a part of a larger system that may reinforce racist structures at their schools and in

the world around them. The more educational leaders who are willing to invest in a commitment to help educators deepen their sociopolitical consciousness and how they think about issues of equity, the greater the possibility of having more educators advocate for students of color, speak out against acts of racism and racist practices and policies, and speak up for academic equity.

In order to create more inclusive and equitable schools, educational leaders must make educational equity a top agenda item and include these overlooked leaders in the planning and implementation process to spread the equity work. Otherwise, we will always get what we have always gotten: reluctant progress and inequitable outcomes.

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