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Educational Cultural Negotiators for students of color: a descriptive study of racial advocacy leaders

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ABSTRACT

The research presented in this study focuses on Educational Cultural Negotiators (ECNs). The participants were teachers, administrators, and graduate students in an after-school program in the Midwest and a community-based school/university partnership in the Western U.S. We posit that the roles of the ECNs function as advocacy leaders to invoke racial affirmation, and academic intervention on behalf of African-American and Latina/o students at these school sites. Relying on critical race theory as the methodological analysis of the findings, this study seeks to identify the role of the ECNs as advocates for students in these settings to promote their academic and personal growth and success. This work illustrates how these particular educational leaders provide academic direction and challenge racial neglect and color-blindness within the public school system.

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Introduction

For the most part, school personnel and practices have been ineffective at engaging urban public school students of color in areas of racial and cultural validation connected to academic preparation (Vaught 2011; Brooks 2012). Furthermore, some public schools are disconnected from the ways students of color value a sense of community where care and trust are essential, as well as support through mentors pushing for academic excellence and racial affirmation (Noguera 2008; Milner 2010). Although a lack of connection is key to understanding how students and parents of color have access without entrée to public school success, the primary focus of our research is to identify the ways some educators take leadership roles to help students of color negotiate school spaces and challenge racism. Our study highlights the purpose and function of an unnoticed group of leaders we are terming Educational Cultural Negotiators (ECNs). By profiling the ECNs as interventionists, the goal of this descriptive study is to illuminate the ways these advocacy leaders help to remedy overlooked needs of students of color, and how ECNs act as *intervenors* to help these students connect to public schools.

Historically, students of color are more likely to feel disenfranchised and experience challenges that have an impact on student academic success, which is magnified due to

predominantly white educators' lack of racial and cultural understanding (Lynn 2006; Milner 2006a, 2006b). Nationally, in the U.S. for example, while 83.5% of K-12 teachers are white (National Center for Education Statistics 2009), and the populations of students of color increases in major cities, suburban, and rural districts, the more likelihood of cultural disconnection and racial tension in the public school context (Landsman and Lewis 2006). The absence of equitable racial and ethnic balance among educational professionals in K-12 school districts often presents prime opportunities for racial conflict to occur when school officials: deny that racism exists; suggest isolated incidents cannot be tied to low academic achievement; and dismiss students and parents of color's negative perceptions of their school experience based on racism (Pollock 2008; Hardie and Tyson 2013). Consequently, when educators, particularly white administrators and teachers, continue to conduct educational activities with a color-blind mentality, or feel threatened by racial/cultural differences, students of color are often isolated from the normal public school context and 'otherized' (Larson and Ovando 2001; Borrero et al. 2010).

In view of color-blind practices and policies and a lack of personnel designated to address and engage in racial equity in schools, our study looks at a group of educators who have taken on this role. Previous literature recognizes the need for advocates such as parents, teachers who are from the community and culturally responsive, community members, mentors, cultural brokers, and culturally responsive counselors for students of color regarding their academic and social advancement (see for example, McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman 1994; Mitra 2009). Our study seeks to add to this work by establishing the ECNs as utilizing the qualities and tenets of the aforementioned educational partners, combined with racially/culturally relevant leadership to advocate for students (Anderson 2009). The ECNs do this by helping students of color navigate their way through issues of racial isolation and disparate racial treatment. Key advocacy leadership practices that ECNs provide are critical interventions and negotiations with students of color among the following groups: parents and teachers/administrators; students and parents; and students and teachers/administrators (Santamaría 2014). More importantly, ECNs challenge education policies and practices that have a deleterious impact on students of color in public urban, suburban and rural schools (National Center for Cultural Competence 2004; Delpit 2011).

In looking at the ECNs in our study, we asked a central research question which was, *given the cultural disconnect between school and students of color, who were the ECNs and what role did they play as advocates to nurture and protect the educational well-being and rights of students of color?* To answer this question, we present an overview of the research on students of color advocacy and racial brokering. We review these works followed by the introduction to the concept of ECNs using racially/culturally relevant leadership which builds on advocacy literature, and provides the grounding of the research questions. The second part includes a brief description of the in-school and after-school programs at each site and participants. This is followed by a discussion of how qualitative research in combination with critical race methodology helped guide our work and served as an interpretive lens to view the ECN actions as teachable and interventionist initiatives for students of color. Part three presents the findings and portrays the ECNs personifying advocacy with respect to race and culture as cultural capital to be valued. This in turn cultivated trust, provided academic steering, and helped navigate or challenge racialized spaces within the schools for the African-American and Latina/o students in the specific sites where we conducted our study. We do note that the our research project just covers two sites and is qualitative

and therefore not generalizable to all public schools with programs or individuals similar to those described in this study. Nonetheless, in part four, we discuss the broader implications of the role of ECNs in schools and in the lives of students of color. The study concludes with future analysis of the roles of ECNs in the era of public school accountability, teacher and administrator preparation, and racism in schools.

Literature review of advocates for students

This study grows out of literature discussing the roles, functions, and limitations of traditional student advocates such as parents/community members, mentors, cultural brokers, and culturally responsive counselors and teachers, while providing an overview of what ECNs are and how this concept connects to students of color advocacy.

Parents and community members

Both parents and community members as advocates help to provide holistic student development. However, both have been traditionally and subliminally discouraged from participating at the on-site school level (López 2001; Ramirez 2003). For example, while parents have been encouraged to pay attention to the educational outcomes, academically and behaviorally, as well as converse with adults who know their child at school, parental involvement is sometimes discouraged through practices and policies (Jordan, Orozco, and Averett 2002; Klem et al. 2003). Oftentimes, parents of students of color must combat racist practices at predominantly white schools (López 2001). Cooper, Denner, and Lopez (1999) argued that ‘community programs can play key roles in helping them [students] feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods, learn alternatives to violence, gain educational experiences, and acquire the bicultural skills needed for success in school’ (54). Through these programs, students of color are able to discuss what is important to them, and their current and future situations. The adults in these programs vary in ethnic background, but they all ‘value children’s home communities and many share a common language and sometimes a family history with the children’ (54). Through these connections, students of color see a common and shared experience that can be used as a springboard to forming significant relationships with caring adults. As counselor, friend, and role model, the adults can serve as a guide for students of color by helping them academically and assisting students to become bicultural – retaining their home/cultural traditions while learning the working racialized identity expectations of success in predominantly white schools.

Mentors

Similar to parents and community members, mentors of students of color operate in a holistic fashion emphasizing personal development, academic and work related goals, while also providing a place of empathy for students’ experiences. Hall (2006) summarizes the holistic approach of mentoring as a way to embrace youth and foster mentoring to achieve dreams and goals. Through this holistic approach, mentors may be able to more effectively help students of color with the added dimension of assisting them in understanding themselves and the development of students’ self-confidence and cultural knowledge. Ideal mentors for students of color value forms of cultural capital (e.g., social, linguistic, familial) embedded

in communities of color (Yosso 2006). Acknowledging cultural wealth within communities of color strengthens the mentor/mentee relationship bolstering student development. This form of mentoring increases the chance for students to gain significant knowledge and skills from those mentors who act as conduits of information (Packard et al. 2009). This vested interest in holistic development increases the chance for cultivating significant relationships with students of color.

Cultural brokers

Another group of advocates, also generally located outside of the schools but invested in students of color are cultural brokers. As described by the National Center for Cultural Competence (2004), cultural brokers, who may be from various demographic backgrounds, serve as liaisons, cultural guides, mediators, and catalysts for change. In the role of liaison, cultural brokers play a critical role in the personal and communal level of the both parties (i.e., students of color and teachers and administrators). Cultural brokers are knowledgeable in the practices and beliefs of both groups, as they have learned to effectively navigate their way in both communities. As cultural guides, they understand the strengths and needs of the community. With knowledge in both settings, brokers help to develop and implement educational material and diversity initiatives for both communities. Cultural brokers also serve as mediators easing the tension between the two groups. Through brokerage, attempts are made to heal rifts between communities of color and public schools. Finally, brokers act as a catalyst for change by creating an inclusive and collaborative environment for both communities by modeling, mentoring, and navigating effectively in both spaces (National Center for Cultural Competence 2004).

Culturally responsive counselor and teacher

Much has been written about the role that culturally responsive teachers have taken to improve the educational and emotional lives of children of color. Some teachers are indeed effective and successful in teaching and this is partially rooted in a connection to the communities in which the students live and using that understanding as cultural capital knowledge. For example, in her landmark work, Ladson-Billings (1994) profiled the success of eight teachers who worked with African-American students and how they were connected to and knew the communities of the students, and could rely on this as a way to affirm their identities and foster creative ways of learning. Rodríguez (2008) also documented how some teachers who know and understand specific communities of color can have a dramatic impact on student achievement in terms of showing them that they care in relational authenticity which allows for progress between teachers and students of color. However, with changes in the myriad of ways that new teachers are recruited and then come into the occupation, this has resulted in a major shift so that fewer teachers are rooted and connected to low-income communities of color. Subsequently, many new teachers come to schools as visionaries, reformers, saviors or opportunists (Castro 2014) which in turn lead to high rates of attrition and a lack of connection to advocacy leadership.

Traditionally, counselors define their roles and functions by the services they provide (e.g., counseling, consultation, and coordination, see Erford, House, and Martin 2003). However, critics have often charged counselors as underserving marginalized groups such as

low income English language learners, and students with special needs (Lee 2001; American School Counselor Association 2003). One effort to effectively counsel all students is through culturally responsive counseling (CRC). Access, equity, and educational justice undergird this form of counseling, which emphasizes the importance of promoting cultural diversity in school counseling (Smith-Adcock et al. 2006). CRC is based on two important premises: first, 'All young people can learn and want to learn'; and second, 'cultural differences are real and cannot be ignored' (Lee 2001, 259). Through CRC, counselors act as facilitators of student development by promoting, (a) positive self-identities; (b) interpersonal relations among students from diverse cultural backgrounds; (c) academic achievement; (d) attitude and skills for school success; and (e) career exploration and choice process. Culturally responsive counselors also act as students of color advocates by recognizing the systematic barriers to quality education, and intervening at an administrative or staff level. CRC seeks to provide ways of bridging the home and family life of students of color and the school by looking for ways to promote and incorporate family and community resources into the educational process (Carter and El Hildi 1999; Smith-Adcock et al. 2006;). CRC requires counselors to move beyond the knowledge component and into the advocacy approach for change to occur in schools. However, there are limits to what they can do to directly confront racial micro aggressions or deal with policies that have a harmful impact on students of color (Kohli and Solórzano 2012).

In sum, the literature on student advocates illustrates that there are different groups of people, official or unofficial, assigned or unassigned, who may advocate for students of color in K-12 settings. However, descriptions of these roles suggest that the aforementioned models may be somewhat limited in their services to students. As a result of some of the limitations of each of the aforementioned advocacy areas, it would seem as though students would gain greater success if they had one advocate from each group, or a few advocates with multiple advocacy skills. Overall, research on youth advocacy suggests that there is value and benefit to having a network of mentors and advocates (see for instance Hansford, Ehrlich, and Tennet 2004). However, some students do not have the benefit of having one or more individuals who perform in the role(s) previously indicated in the literature. While not generalizable to all schools, we posit that ECNs are a group of overlooked advocates who serve in a leadership capacity as interveners between public school teachers and administrators and students of color.

Educational Cultural Negotiators

The ECN uses a myriad of educational advocacy approaches for students of color while implementing culturally relevant leadership engagement. Whereas the other advocates are somewhat limited, by location or under direct control of the school district, the ECN employs all of the advocacy qualities and practices. The ECN has the intimate care of a mentor, the insider knowledge and savvy of a cultural broker, and the concern of a culturally responsive counselor. Five specific areas are unique to the role of ECNs: (a) directly fighting racism; (b) negotiate between spaces of race/marginalization; (c) navigate between spaces of racial marginalization; (d) translate between parties; and (e) provide information to students and parents in areas such as college readiness. ECNs directly deal with racism by challenging fellow staff members to look at their own biases. ECNs also negotiate spaces of racial marginalization, similar to cultural brokers and culturally responsive

counselors, by addressing racial inequity in areas such as curriculum, pedagogy and discipline. Additionally, ECNs intervene to help students of color navigate through issues of racial marginalization, isolation and racial micro aggressions. Through direct and indirect means, ECNs play a meaningful advocacy role in the lives of students of color. We chose to focus on the ECNs profiled in this particular study because from our observations of their roles as advocates and leaders they ‘toggled between the reality of being members of historically underrepresented and often disenfranchised social groups, while at the same time providing effective leadership in mainstream schools’ (Santamaría and Santamaría 2012, p. xii). These particular leaders used their racial and gender identities as persons of color to affect their practice, influence their applied critical leadership actions, and engage with the students and families to push for social justice change in schools. Furthermore, they acted as insiders/outside of the mainstream educational system in the locations we observed; both as school personnel and as community advocates working in the school. Focusing on the practices of ECNs, we provide examples of how these particular school leaders engaged in racial/cultural advocacy, and acted as *interveners* between school accountability expectations of mainstream administrators and teachers and students of color who have traditionally failed in conventional public school settings.

Settings and methods

Location of the programs

The Midwestern school program was located in a predominantly white, public high school in a suburban metro area stratified by race and social class. The program evolved as an effort to close the academic opportunity gap between African-American, Latina/o and white students. African-American and Latina/o students were identified by teachers and/or administrators as students in the ‘academic middle’ and/or have potential for post-high school achievement. The program lasted from 2004 to 2009, and operated year-round serving as a supplemental activity helping African-American and Latina/o students strengthen their academics as well as their social, cultural, and emotional sense of well-being. Students met approximately twice a month for regular meetings and were expected to attend tutoring sessions at least two hours per week.

Essential program activities included academic workshops for tutoring sessions. Students were required to attend two sessions per week for study hours and assistance and with homework, projects, and college related material. Student life workshops were held twice a month during the school day and consisted of speakers conveying their stories of struggle and success and using this as encouragement for the students to go beyond the accomplishments of the motivational speakers. The workshops also included student-centered discussions on relevant issues, such dealing with racial micro aggressions. Cultural fieldtrips and exposure to college events were held once a semester and included trips to local events celebrating Latina/o and African-American heritage and local and out-of-state visits to colleges and universities.

The second location for this study took place in an elementary school that is majority (80%) Latina/o in a large urban center in the western U.S. The school has been home for a university-school based partnership with the local public school district which was started in 2009. The intent of the partnership was twofold: (1) to value the cultural experiences

and lives of students by placing them in a dual immersion language program so they could uphold both languages and cultures; and (2) provide the students, parents, and the larger Latina/o community with early and continuous exposure to post-secondary education options, so students could see college as a real option to further their future education. The exposure came in various forms, such as university undergraduates of color who came on a weekly basis to tutor the students and serve as role models of success, or active engagement with parents geared toward increasing community partnerships with the school.

Midwestern and Western participants

The Midwestern participants consisted of two unpaid co-directors, one African-American female English teacher and one African-American male principal. They did not receive a stipend because they wanted to focus exclusively on elements thought to be critical for the support of the African-American and Latina/o youth in the school and subsequently did not want to feel obligated to special interests supported by the central office administration. The female was in her twenty-first year as a high school English teacher in the district, and the male taught middle school and high school English for seven years each, and was principal for two years at the high school. All of his experience was also in the same district. As co-directors, both coordinated life-workshops, tutoring sessions, and setup field trips and college visits. Additionally, both spoke with parents and facilitated conversations around college preparation. Overall, the ECNs expressed their role as helping students get to the next level academically, socially, culturally, and personally.

The Western program participants consisted of two doctoral students. These students were paid through the university-school partnership as advocates for the elementary school students and their families. One of them was a Latina doctoral student at a local university in the area. She worked with the program for four years, beginning as a summer camp teacher and was a program coordinator at the time of study. She operated as coordinator for two years, helping with all the programmatic aspects of the partnership, focusing on the undergraduate tutors, and serving as the academic planner. She also worked on-site to communicate with families about school-university events for Latina/o students, financial aid opportunities for future college plans, parental involvement in student learning, and resources to help undocumented families with the citizenship process.

The second participant was also a Latina doctoral student at the same university and worked in the program for two years as a staff member, starting off as a program intern. She was on-site to communicate with parents, and coordinate campus visits to the university. Like the other program coordinator, she also worked in the summer as a teacher/tutor/mentor with the students and took them to campus to attend afternoon classes in math, science, reading, and Latina/o history and culture. Both of these staff members said that their overall purpose was to show the students and families a way to be successful in school, while simultaneously taking ownership and pride of their culture and heritage. They saw the purpose of being staff members as helping students recognize early, how and why it was important to negotiate borders for eventual success in both the larger white academic world and their own communities as Latinas/os.

Conceptual framework, research methods, and data collection

For this study, we used an interpretive methodological framework that combined qualitative research interviews with critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Critical race methodology provided an important interpretive lens into the subjective everyday experiences of ECNs in schools. This methodology examined moments, incidents, practices and situations that contributed to an overarching pattern of denial of racial equity and the ECNs intervention work. Centering and documenting race and racial contexts, our research examined those overarching patterns of inequity in education through the counter-narratives of the ECNs who operated from race-centered and culturally based norms, to help students of color reach success (DeCuir and Dixson 2004). Critical race methodology was significant to our study because we wanted to examine the educational leadership actions of the directors and staff members, ECNs, who centered race/culture and racism in student advocacy.

We collected data principally from a series of interviews with the Midwestern ECNs during fall 2008 through fall 2009, and from the Western ECNs during fall 2010 and spring 2011.¹ Using Merriam (2001) as a guide to effective interviews we also supplemented the data with periodic observations and met with individual ECNs for at least two semi-structured interviews with subsequent follow up questions and responses.² The site visits and/or follow-up interviews included:

- (a) Attending key functions and events sponsored by the programs where the ECNs provided cultural after-school opportunities for students;
- (b) Attending focus group meetings where the ECNs engaged with students about how to negotiate school;
- (c) Observed or shadowed the ECNs to see how they acted as cultural negotiators with teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

Lastly, we used open-ending coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) in combination with a critical race theory application to these procedures and techniques (Malagon, Perez- Huber, and Velez 2012; Milner and Howard 2013), to thematically organize the data narratives into categories that captured the essence and depicted the roles of the ECNs. We focused on three major themes: (1) ECNs holding a sense of community – conveying care, trust in students and parents, cultural/racial affirmation, and an ideal of group connectedness (similar to a *village*); (2) ECN influence on academic achievement; and (3) ECNs helping students of color to navigate/ negotiate or challenge racism within the school setting.

Findings: community – connectedness, care, and trust

ECN discussed the importance of racial community for and with the students through the concept of it takes *a village to raise a child*. The *village* concept echoed the importance of building and maintaining group connectedness, care, and trust among themselves. In alignment with other culturally relevant pedagogues, ECNs often described their roles as members of an extended family where older adults take on a more parental role (Ladson-Billings 1995). Acting as a family member, educator, advocate of trust, role model, and mentor, ECNs held students accountable for their work, while providing a safe place where students felt comfortable to share information about their lived experiences. The ECNs relied

on their own sense of racial cultural capital to develop a sense of emotional support and caring so the students felt they could go to a safe and validating space for their physical or emotional well-being. The role of the ECNs was to establish racialized bonding that fostered communication patterns among themselves, students and parents, so that the students could use them as a resource to listen, encourage, support and serve as counselors and mentors. For example, the male ECN director from the Midwestern program described:

... with us, we [the other ECNs of the program] were all really close, then we got close to the kids, and the outlook was that they had people that they could trust to the highest degree here. [We were] people they could come tell stories to, talk about their problems, [and] help just like a family would. I was like a dad. [I would ask questions like] 'What are you doing here?' 'What about your life?' [Those] conversations help them with forward thinking, [and] encouraging them [to] move on. I was always talking to at least one of them ... about something. (personal communication, October 2007)

In the Western program the first ECN discussed,

As far as the Latino community goes, we are able to communicate with Latino youth and parents more efficiently because we speak Spanish and understand the culture. We do not use words or terms that are not familiar to youth and families. We use words that we would use with our own parents. (personal communication, November 2010)

In both sites, ECNs offered racially and culturally familial roles to support students academically and socially, acting as an extended family. As described by the male ECN from the Midwestern program, the ECNs from each program *got close first*, suggesting a meeting of the *village elders*, or family members. This was done to connect and figure out how best to link the students home, culture, and school expectations. For example, the use of home languages allowed at the Western site allowed non-English parents and students to feel more comfortable and this was a key component to help build relationships. Speaking in a more relaxed and familial way helped to bridge the home-academic divide and facilitated both students and parents to connect more fully with the educational system. In the Western site, the theme of family was of special importance since it was an elementary school and the ECNs here adhered to the goals of the partnership program regarding extensive parental involvement. Parental contact with the ECNs and teachers in some cases resulted in negotiations between families and teachers to reach common goals around particular student achievement concerns. ECNs in both sites practiced a type of racial and cultural translation and negotiation to help students and parents understand, utilize, and apply the information teachers and schools provided. Forming significant relationships connected and engaged students and parents with the school and fostered a feeling of academic success.

We also saw a pattern of the ECNs making meaningful connections to the students. The ECNs talked to the students with respect and attention, as opposed to speaking to them in a racially deficit manner. ECNs were keenly interested in the students and how they were developing holistically; consequently, students felt comfortable at virtually any time to seek academic help, advice, a sounding board, someone to listen, a referee, or someone to speak their home language. Interest in students overall well-being opened the door to discuss betterment in all facets of life in the present and future. The intermediary spaces created within the programs, allowed for a trusting/caring family-type structure where students felt safe to discuss everyday experiences that they were dealing with in and out of school. Additionally, the trusting and caring concept of connection was not limited to the students, but to their parents as well. Parents were a central part of the family, and as

described by the female Midwest ECN, 'not to sound cliché, but it does take the whole village' (personal communication September 2008). She continues, 'Parents are happy to see somebody pushing for their kid, so now they [the parents] would go out and they would look up some stuff [and make suggestions on activities for the program]' (personal communication, September 2008). As parents saw the personal and vested interest ECNs took with their kids, it encouraged some parents to become active and confident partners in their child's educational experiences. The second Western ECN illustrated this point,

Parents come ask about resources in the community or sometimes they tell us about community resources and events and ask us to help spread the word. Parents ask us to translate for them or help them pay bills. We give them resource information about schooling and educational opportunities [or information on citizenship] especially if they are undocumented. (personal communication, December 2010)

The ECNs made a personal commitment to their students and families by providing a climate of safety, support, and resources, where students and parents felt comfortable to seek and receive help. The ECN role as *family* at school further developed the student-ECN relationship, nurtured the foundation of trust, and supported the bridge to move students to the next level of success. This trust was particularly important at the Western site given that the school was situated in a majority low income Latino neighborhood with a history of political tension between them and the dominant white majority city. Some of the issues were: anti-immigration public sentiment, lack of affordable housing, lack of sustained investment in community development, tensions with police, poor health care, lack of employment opportunities, and biased attitudes of some school personnel toward Latina/o children and parents. These tensions in the city, community, and school created the need for space with advocacy leaders such as the ECNs whom parents and students could trust.

The racially/culturally based significant relationship also allowed for students and parents to have a participatory voice within the school. In general, the ECNs knew and recognized what their students needed because they listened to them; their racial cultural capital was integral to fostering intimate familiarity with students and their own formal knowledge of the operating system of the schools. The ECNs comprehended the impact racism had in schools, and sought equitable education for all students. Students felt comfortable to share their racial experiences, thus ECNs were able to speak to administrators as racial advocates for the students and parents. The first Western ECN described it as, 'we do not always get the support we need from central office school administrators, so we had to learn how to convince them that what we do is important and that there are other ways of doing things that will benefit the students and not continue to deprive them of good schooling experiences' (personal communication, January 2011). Sharing the experiences of students and parents with administrators helped demonstrate the need for these programs. In addition the ECNs helped students deal with everyday issues that the school teachers and administrators were not adequately addressing. ECNs afforded students an on-site and visible advocacy leader. To this point, the male Midwestern ECN said:

Those teachers [other teachers in the building] realized that they [students in the program] had somebody here that was watching out for those kids. They were careful with how they interacted with those students because they realized they had people here in the building. (personal communication, October, 2008)

The ECNs acted holistically by protecting the educational rights of their students from, but not limited to, a social, cultural, and emotional standpoint. These ECNs were the voices of advocacy pushing for change on behalf of the African-American and Latina/o students and parents.

ECN influence of academic achievement

When discussing their influence on academic achievement, in general they operated as a guide, role model, or mentor pushing students for success, while providing them with support. This point is important in that the ECNs saw first-hand and/or lived through periods of low teacher expectations based on racism, and they were determined to use their own personal experiences to make sure this would not happen with their students at each particular school site. The first Western ECN summarized, ‘We are able to prep them and guide them through the K-16 system by sharing our experiences, and giving advice/suggestions/support to parents so that they are able to advocate for their child’ (personal communication, January 2011). ECNs *pushed for excellence* by challenging students to strive to reach higher levels of academic goals while also providing the structures to challenge and support those endeavors. For ECNs, there was no standard benchmark of achievement; but with each student it was an individual process of constant improvement and striving for personal goals related to educational success.

An example of pushing for excellence was when ECNs encouraged and helped students navigate spaces where they were not challenged academically. Once again, this push for excellence stemmed from their experiences with overt and institutional racism. This made them more aware of what teachers were or were not doing to push students of color to succeed in the classroom. At the Midwestern site, two African-American senior students felt as if their math teacher was failing to adequately prepare them for college math. The students complained to the ECNs, and the ECNs discussed the importance of following the administrative policies of decision-making responsibility. The female ECN told the students, ‘The thing is not to act out in class, but to go to him and say, ‘this is what we want,’ and if you don’t get what you want, then you go the next person above him (personal communication, October 2008).’ The students followed the administrative protocol by talking to the teacher and principal. When students saw no results regarding the teacher, the students enlisted their parents to get involved, and with persistence, talking to the right people, and providing documentation, the teacher was eventually not re-hired by the school. ECNs pushed the students to look out for their own best interest and use their voice, to demand preparation for the next stage in their academic trajectory. Additionally, the ECNs taught the students how to fight against injustice and create change. Critical race theory was relevant to interpreting this aspect of our study’s findings in that the ECNs helped the students articulate a counter-narrative (Vaught 2011; ; Kohli and Solórzano 2012). In this particular instance, the counter-narrative illustrated students of color using their own racial cultural capital to take action which resulted in a direct beneficial pedagogical change for a more rigorous educational experience. The ECNs helped the students recognize their rights as students of color to be educated to their full capacity. When students were not being adequately educated, the ECNs helped the students navigate the administrative channels to have the teacher removed in order for future students to receive a challenging math curriculum for college preparation. As ECNs pushed for excellence, this finding connects to other CRT

works by Lynn (2006, 1999) who documented the connection between African-American students and teachers to improve the practices of African-American social justice educators and improve academic knowledge, or Carter's (2008) research on critical race achievement ideology and African-American students drive to success.

ECNs also pushed for racial excellence by stressing the importance of getting involved in extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. As a result of, but not limited to, constantly hearing the need to get involved and take on leadership roles, students in the Midwestern program began entering both extracurricular and academic areas where students of color were traditionally underrepresented or completely absent, such as leadership programs, student council, and honors courses. ECNs pushed extremely hard for program participants to take higher-level courses to prepare them for college and increase their critical thinking skills.

Another example of the influence ECNs had on academic achievement was on a college trip for the Midwestern program. The campus tour guide for the overnight trip was an alumna of the program. One of the female ECNs commented,

She talked to the kids and was like, 'you need to go to college, do this, because Mr. [ECN] is for us, and you all gone get here and some of the same things that they said would happen, happened.' So it was kinda like she was talking about how it affected her by preparing her for what was to come. (personal communication September 2008)

Though not a direct hand in academics, the alumna discussed the care of the ECNs and their diligence to show students an avenue of preparing for the future. The African-American and Latina/o high school students saw college students who looked *just like them*, who came from places *just like them*, and acted and talked *just like them*, and it showed the students the potential of what they could be and do for success.

College trips were also a part of the experience built into the Western program hoping to empower the Latina/o community around educational opportunities. The ECNs took the elementary school children on field trips to the university. The hope was to give the young students a concrete concept of college and post-secondary opportunities, and serve as a catalyst for them and their parents to imagine and see themselves in college. Through the program, the ECNs led students around the campus to meet with professors and administrators; see campus facilities in the humanities/social sciences, hard sciences and medical fields; and obtain information about colleges. The ECNs also taught summer academic classes for the children at the local university that gave the students early exposure to the environment of college classes. In this way, the ECNs at the Western site used the college visits as an intentional way to engage in active college-linking strategy, which shows an organized commitment to start preparing students and families to see college as an option at a young age and start the college opportunity process early for Latino students and families (Hill 2008). The college visits were intended to instill an early sense of ownership and belonging on a college campus, so these students could start to feel, even at an early age, that they had a place on a predominantly white campus environment.

Navigate and negotiate racial tensions

At both sites, ECNs used an approach similar to Lynn's (1999, 2006) suggestion of critical race pedagogy, 'which uses a broad interpretation of emancipatory pedagogical strategies and techniques that have proved to be successful with racially subordinated students' (Lynn

2006, 615). With students, ECNs first tried to affirm students' identity and culture. Building students confidence in who they were individually and culturally, helped provide students with a foundation for navigating the sometimes racially hostile landscape of school. In the Midwestern program, ECNs would find activities that spoke to the Latina/o and/or African-American culture, through, but not limited to, local events, speakers, movies, and conversations. Also, students in the Midwestern program had the opportunity to learn about two cultures, African-American and Latinos/as, which allowed them to learn about themselves and see similarities with another group that has been historically discriminated against.

In the Western program, ECNs had students conduct oral histories, and encouraged them to focus on their cultural and familial background to get a better sense of who they were as Latinos/as in terms of history and cultural heritage. Not only did this foster interest in their own history but by doing this type of activity, students were taught that there were different ways of learning history that is not always taught in schools. Through helping students gain more knowledge about their histories individuals, communities, and culture, students were able to build confidence in them through their race and culture. At both sites, ECNs emphasized racial cultural capital as a strength and source of knowledge (Yosso 2006). The ECNs believed that in addition to the accountability of standardized assessment of the school curriculum, it was imperative that the African-American and Latina/o students also learned about their respective histories, struggles and achievements, and value their racial cultural capital. From a CRT perspective, the ECNs knew that it was their responsibility to create moments that would be just as important as the standardized assessment tests, especially since there were either limited opportunities to learn about their own racial group histories, as students felt a pervasive sentiment of racial intolerance in the larger communities in both the Midwestern and Western sites (Camarota and Aguilera 2012).

Another way ECNs negotiated racial tensions was to challenge traditional white middle class ideologies that informed teaching practices and policies. This finding was a key element differentiating ECNs from past advocacy models. For example, the Midwestern ECNs conducted staff development workshops on cultural differences and cultural relevancy. ECNs challenged staff members to look at their teaching methods, consider how their practices may be culturally biased, and to consider teaching practices more culturally relevant for all students. One ECN at the Midwestern program stated, '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, September 2008). Additionally, Midwestern ECNs challenged teachers to make the curriculum more culturally relevant. The female ECN described how the English department was going to make teaching *the narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* optional for teachers during the unit covering persuasive techniques. She describes,

I was like, 'yea, 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 your 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 its sooo not that. [She goes on to say] We all have a different take on it I guess, and our [ECNs] 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't teach Douglass. (personal communication, September 2008)

In this instance, the ECN advocated teaching *the narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* and suggested that many white teachers did not want to teach it, because it dealt 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 irony in how everyone accepted teaching Patrick Henry's *Give me liberty or give me death* famous quote in the context of U.S. history; yet these teachers were not comfortable with Frederick Douglass' autobiography, both essentially talking about freedom. She later discussed how she would lend her book, which she marked with personal notes and commentary in the margins, to the particular white female teacher in question, so the teacher could see her highlighted examples of persuasive techniques of ethical and logical appeals. Using advocacy techniques of negotiation with other school personnel, ECNs worked to link effective teaching practices and content related to critical racial content. Challenging traditional white middle-class teaching practices, policies, and beliefs helped ECNs to ameliorate feelings of educational inequities.

While combating racism and prejudice on a staff and administrative level, ECNs also taught students how to navigate those same hostile spaces in school. In the Midwestern program, the female ECN 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 told her, 'Don't worry about it. If you get bored, you can go to the library' (personal communication, October 2008). The student was furious and hurt. The ECN 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 letting him know that she did not know Spanish, and the assumption made her feel uncomfortable. They rehearsed the conversation before meeting with the teacher, and to further connect with the student, the ECN shared personal experiences of racism as a student and as an adult. CRT can be used to interpret these findings, in that the ECNs helped the students directly confront the color-blind assumptions within the pedagogy of the teachers, and addressed the racial battle fatigue that students may face from direct and more subtle forms of racism and racial assumptions that lead to tension and mistrust. ECNs helped students navigate those same hostile spaces while also helping students deal with the emotional aspect of constantly dealing with racial micro aggressions (Yosso et al. 2009). The mental and emotional support provided by the ECNs worked in tandem with instructional assistance for the holistic well-being and development for students of color.

At the Western site, the ECNs helped navigate the racial space at school, by providing legitimacy to the use of Spanish and English at the school. They also saw the importance of providing an additional informal level of advocacy for students with teachers where problems related to low expectations were prominent and effected student learning and behavior. Additionally, having undergraduate Latina/o students from the local university serve as tutors also helped solidify a stake to claim racial spaces at the school, by providing an auditory and visible presence of support and advocacy. The language, advocacy, and work with the undergraduate tutors affirmed the Latina/o culture and heritage and served as a conduit for student learning and a connection between school and community. Through these methods of advocacy leadership at the Western program, ECNs helped to navigate and negotiate the racial spaces for both students and parents.

Discussion and implications

The ECNs held a unique racial/cultural position of leadership within the school sites in this study. The advocacy leadership characteristics to influence academic achievement, and negotiate racial spaces, offered the ECNs an opportunity to intervene and advocate for students and parents when they faced teachers or administrators using racial stereotypes or deficit ideologies. ECNs were able to push for academic excellence because they used their own racial and cultural capital, related to the students, and used their own knowledge of the school system to help access, and nurture the strengths of the individual students. As advocates and practitioners of racially relevant pedagogy, ECNs were able to more effectively lead students of color due to the holistic educational approach rooted in the concept of African-American servant leadership and tempered radicals as advocacy (Alston 2005; Murtadha and Maliak Watts 2005; Tillman 2005).

This study considered how the ECNs' advocacy approaches, racial navigation and negotiations, and culturally relevant pedagogy work together to help students of color on a staff and administrative level, individual student level, and family and community level. The reasons why these ECN leaders and their programs were worthy of study was because they engaged in a particular type of school leadership than the other roles described in the literature review. Because of their background as racialized persons, they were willing to initiate and engage in critical conversations with teachers and school leaders about racism directed at the students they were trying to support. The ECNs were also conscious of the negative stereotypes associated with students of color and worked to counter and challenge these assumptions. They also felt the need to gain the trust of the students and parents they worked with and lead to meet an educational need or challenge; in sum, they represented applied critical leadership by their actions.

However, while the ECNs served a special leadership role as a resource for students, parents, and educators, ECNs described their work as, a full-time job because there were so many demands made on their time and energy limitations. The sheer number of particular issues sometimes made it impossible to reach all students of color; therefore, the work of ECNs was limited to those they could reach. Our research implies and recognizes that ECNs cannot alone solve all racial and cultural conflicts in schools. ECNs are just one group of leaders currently working to connect students of color to schools. For schools to be most effective, it takes a collection or *village* of educators to make a positive difference. Furthermore, we argue that ECNs should not be seen as just another group of outsiders who manage racial issues for students. Teachers and administrators need to acknowledge the leadership roles of the ECNs and take partial ownership in this form of advocacy leadership.

Conclusion

In this study, we take the position that the ECNs are an amalgamation of the parent, mentor, cultural broker, and culturally responsive counselor in schools. Essentially, this is a both-and position we are positing in this research; we feel both ECNs and teachers and administrators are needed to engage in a collective effort of racial advocacy leadership for students and families of color. The implication for teacher and administrator preparation is that a fundamental change needs to be made in terms of how we prepare these groups to educate other people's children. This is particularly important after the recent U.S. election

results when a rise in feelings of racism that have festered for years is now coming into the open in schools triggered after the victory of Donald Trump.

A fundamental issue in U.S. public schooling is that for the most part, as an institution, it has not consistently and effectively worked with the students and families of color. Schools must be held to a higher standard, and this study challenges educators to investigate what individual schools can learn from the ECNs leadership experience and how they can they apply the information to their own school. Future research must delve into schools replicating the work of, or similar to, ECNs on a structural level. The ECNs in our study facilitated a sense of racial and cultural trust regarding relationships between students and school personnel and pushed for structural change in schools. However, this cannot rest on the shoulders of a few. This is an issue that all educators must take on to effectively service students of color. These interveners and advocates are often overlooked; however, they serve as a missing leadership link for informing and advising educational professionals regarding academic, social, cultural, emotional, and personal development of students of color.

Notes

1. While we acknowledge the potential datedness of some of the data collected for this study, we feel that the study is still relevant and especially timely now given the recent rise in overt racism in U.S. schools prompted by the election of Donald Trump as the U.S. president (Bacon 2016). The current racial tensions in some schools call for more interventions by ECNs and other advocates for students of color as white racism has now become more out in the open in some sections of the country.
2. The personal communications are in reference to the formal interviews conducted with the individuals in the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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