TAKING ACTION: AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHER ACTIVISTS WORKING FOR
CHANGE IN CITY SCHOOLS

by

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ABSTRACT

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African American parents have engaged in education activism throughout United States history, in attempts to gain better access to education for their children. Activism is taking direct actions to achieve a social or political goal. For some parents, the goal is positive change in schooling, at the local, community or state or national level, making their actions educational activism. In New York City, the nation’s largest public school system, parent activism has been documented describing actions of African American parents in cases such as the Harlem school boycott of 1958 and the struggle for control over the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools in 1967. The purpose of this dissertation is to add to a growing body of literature on education activism, moving beyond describing the actions by focusing on the experiences of the activists.

Using Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework, this study employs a storytelling methodology to understand the lived experiences of seven African American mothers who engage in educational activism in New York City today. Black feminist
thought provides a framework to understand the situated experiences of the mothers as they navigate oppression while seeking structural change in education. It also provides a means for understanding how the activities of these mothers are in fact activism, as their roles as “othermothers” are explored. The methodology, which employed conversational interviews and a focus group, was designed to center the mothers’ stories in the research, using their own words to make sense of what it means to be a Black woman, mother, education activist.

The findings of this research present a picture of what activism is for these mothers and where it happens – at the local, state and national levels: highlighting how it happens both within and outside of existing structures for parent involvement. Another finding highlights the importance of having allies for activism. This research has implications for how teachers and others work with parents, suggesting strong collaborations with parent activists as a way to create positive change in schools.
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Dedicated to:

*My Mother, Pamela Edstrom*

who taught me what a mother is and how valuable a mother’s love can be.

And

*The Memory of Doris Hodge Edwards*

1944 - 2016

*Doris was a devoted mother to her own children and many others in Brooklyn, NY. One of my early role models as an education activist, Doris served as inspiration for this work. Her contributions to the community will benefit generations of school children in Community School District 17 and beyond.*
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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on African American mothers who engage in education activism – activism around issues related to the education of children. Activism has been defined in a number of ways, but central to most definitions is “taking direct action to achieve a political or social goal” (Zeitz, 2008, p. 6). The terms activism and advocacy are often used interchangeably and while they can happen simultaneously, there is also a distinct difference.

Advocacy has been defined as actively supporting, speaking or acting on behalf of another person, group or thing (Franciscus, 2015; Grace, 2015). Often people think of activism as engaging in protests, strikes, or demonstrations for or against an issue, while advocacy may be thought of as involving less vigorous actions and may happen in smaller or less public settings. However, activism can take on various forms (Grace, 2015). Collins (2013) writes of “intellectual activism” which she defines as “the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice” (p. ix). For Collins personally, activism happens through scholarship. Through intellectual activism she recognizes the work of many Black feminist writers and artists. This study builds on Collins’ strong connection between women’s activism and the act of mothering, which

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1 In this study, I interchangeably use the terms “Black” and “African American” to describe people who identify as Afro-descendent. While more often I will use the term “African American,” when referring to or citing specific studies, I use the term used in the study cited.
looks quite different than participating in a protest, though may be just as vigorous of an act.

Collins (1990) sees Black women’s activism as existing in two domains. The first avoids direct confrontation of oppressive structures, instead taking on a form of resistance to ensure group survival, while the second domain includes the direct challenge to oppression through struggles to transform institutions. The direct challenges are often more visible, as the person engaging in the activism is actively telling you that they are doing so in their challenge to oppression. Resistance, on the other hand may be more difficult to recognize. As mothers, our activism is to achieve the goal of raising healthy, successful children and may exist in either domain or cut across both.

Advocacy is an important part of this activism, as mothers, and more inclusively parents and other adults, act on behalf of children, who as minors do not have the same rights or abilities to advocate for themselves. There are a number of arenas in which children need advocates, but schooling is a major one. This study focuses on when mothers’ activism and advocacy focuses on educational issues. With regards to the education arena, Davies writes:

Advocacy, whether for children’s rights, or for more funding for public schools, or for exposing school inadequacies, historically tends to increase in a time of debate and controversy about education, such as the current school reform movement. Advocacy cuts across the full political spectrum and is, almost by definition, controversial, as it involves conflicting social interests and values. (1987, pp. 153-154)

I see activism and the advocacy that accompanies it as forms of parent involvement with schooling, in which parents seek to make changes that address social issues. However, this kind of work by parents is not always recognized as such, especially when conflict arises between the parent and the school.
Coming to This Research

My own experience with activism and advocacy as a mother began when I wore the dual hats of researcher and mom, working on my master’s thesis, studying my son’s school’s PTA and participating in PTA and school sponsored activities. I spoke with a number of African American parents who were feeling disenfranchised in a school that was experiencing rapid demographic changes. The result of my research was that I became an advocate for African American parents in the school who did not feel they could speak up for themselves. The conflicting social interests in this case appeared to be drawn along race and class lines. Though the policies I found myself challenging, such as how meetings were scheduled, were not inherently racist or classist, they favored the middle class White mothers, especially those who could afford not to work or to take time off from work, over working-class African American mothers whose work schedules were less flexible. Over time as I became more involved in school, PTA and district activities, I felt my stance change from that of an advocate to an activist, as I began to more actively and directly challenge what seemed like oppressive structures that excluded some and advantaged others both at the school level and at the district level. My journey to activism is only one example. But, looking back at correspondence between my son’s principal and myself, when I first started to really become aware of parent participation in my own local school district, I wrote:

I am curious about the parents who do get involved. It has been my experience that there are a disproportionate number of White parents involved in parent leadership positions within our district, but that there are definitely some Black parents who are very involved. I am curious about the experiences of these [Black] parents and it is my hope that in learning from them, we can increase Black parent
involvement in ways that may strengthen a diverse school district. (personal communication, October 22, 2013)

This email reflected my concern about the disproportionately low numbers of African American families getting involved in what is a predominantly African American district. Yet, while the numbers may not have seemed in proportion, African American parents were then and continue to be involved, at the school level and beyond. Some of these parents consider themselves activists. Therefore, I embark on this narrative study, hoping to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American mothers who are involved on a level that they or others who interact with them would consider activism.

**Rationale**

While African American and Latino children make up the majority of public school students in large urban areas within the United States (Council of the Great City Schools, 2016), media coverage of parent activism often shows middle-class White and Asian parents, rather than Black and Latino parents, leading the movement. However, there are parents who identify as African American or Latino who have taken action. This research attempts to make visible some of the African American mothers who have become activists for education through an examination of their personal narratives (Riessman, 1993) in which mothers share, through retellings, their understandings of specific events in their lives related to their becoming educational activists. It is my hope that in doing this research, the stories shared not only celebrate the activism that African American mothers are doing, but also interrogate individual understandings of what, in certain contexts and situations, might constitute “activism” in education by parents, as
well as perhaps encourage more participation in advocacy for children by African American parents, and more broadly, parents of color.

Kakli (2011), whose research focused on one African American mother activist, wrote:

As educational researchers and practitioners, we have much to gain by examining the life trajectories, motivations, and experiences of activist parents. Until we know how and why parents become education activists, we will have very little idea of what fuels their work, ideas, and agenda for education. If we value the inclusion of parents in educational decision making, we need to express a sincere interest in their full lives and what has led them to become active supporters of education. (p. 176)

I hope that through the analysis of these narratives on involvement and activism in my study, we gain an understanding of how other parents and community members might increase their involvement in the bettering of public education.

In exploring the personal narratives of the mothers I engaged with in this study, I too gained a better understanding of how notions of parent involvement and parent activism are closely related--by examining, for example, how moments in mothers’ lives moved them toward activism. While previous work on parental involvement, explored in the next chapter, provides some useful ways to think about the roles parents play in relation to schools, I conceptualize parental involvement differently, broadening the ways in which we understand the relationships parents have with formal institutions that are charged with educating their children.
Research Questions

I explore the personal narratives (Riessman, 1993) of African American mothers who engage in educational activism to better understand their lived experiences as mother-activists. My research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do the African American mothers in this study understand themselves as educational activists?
   - How do they define activism or their activities as activism?
   - Where/how do these mothers enact their activism?
   - What do they identify as motivation for their activities or actions?

2. How do the mothers in the study understand the sociopolitical context and the educational landscape in which their activism is situated? How do the mothers in the study understand their gender, race, class and/or other identity markers, as identified by themselves or others, as factors in the experiences or concerns they share with me?
   - How do the mothers in the study understand their gender, race, class and/or other identity markers, as identified by themselves or others, as factors in the experiences or concerns they have with me?
   - How are issues of power, knowledge, race, gender and class expressed and analyzed in the stories shared by these African American mothers?
Organization of the Dissertation

In Chapter II, I begin by exploring Black feminist thought and how motherhood and activism are conceptualized, developing a theoretical framework for this study. I go on to review the literature on parent involvement and activism. I first consider what the literature states broadly about parent involvement and how activism is and is not represented as part of models for parent involvement. Then, looking at African American parents specifically, I take an historical view of African Americans as activists around educational issues, ending with a look at the current research on African American parent activism. Chapter III explores methodology and research methods for this study.

Findings are presented in Chapters IV through VI. Chapter IV presents narratives that shed light on moments in the mothers’ personal histories that have shaped them as activists, while simultaneously reflexively looking at the research process. I use this chapter to introduce the mothers to the reader by presenting examples of their human struggles. Chapters V and VI are written as articles that are intended to be able to stand alone. Chapter V builds upon the chapter before it, filling out the picture of these mothers’ activism. It explores the ways in which the mothers in the study define and enact their activism, looking at the different arenas in which it takes place. Chapter VI looks at a particular relationship some mothers have formed with a local teachers’ union and the implications for working with a union as they engage in activism.

Chapter VII is the conclusion. In this chapter, I look across all of the findings to bring this research together as a whole.
Chapter II
THEORETICAL FRAMINGS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I begin by presenting the key elements of Collins’ (2000) Black Feminist Thought that serve as the theoretical grounding for this research. From there, I continue by presenting key literature on parent involvement and activism, particularly as it pertains to African American parents to help situate the activism of the mothers in this study in a larger discussion of parent involvement and activism. I then consider how African American parents, and mothers in particular, fit into the discussion on parent involvement. To understand African American mothers’ experiences as situated within the broader context of African American experiences in the United States, I look to literature on African American families, specifically as it relates to activism and education, the areas in which I expect the experiences of the mothers participating in this study to speak to existing research. This literature includes historical perspectives as well as theoretical understandings of key ideas. It is important to explore the current state of education, the context in which the mothers in this study operate, with a particular focus on New York, where I conducted my research. Therefore, I start within a broader context with the theorizing of parent involvement and then situate how African American parents fit within that literature. Finally, I move to a historical situating of African

1 While this study focuses on mothers, in some cases the related literature is more encompassing to include parents (mothers and fathers) or families (including other caretakers such as grandparents and aunts or uncles). When referring to a specific study, I use the terms used by the author of the study.
Americans to understand what obstacles may impact their involvement in education as well as motivation for their activism.

**Theoretical Overview**

This specific research study employs Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990), primarily as constituted and situated within the United States. My choice to use this framework stems from the notion that it privileges the experiences of Black women and values storytelling as a methodology. Essential to this framework are lived experiences, the use of dialogue, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability, all of which lead to the credibility of the knowledge produced (Collins, 1989). In this chapter, I explore how intersectionality, the idea that being Black and female together situates one differently than being Black and male or White and female, and that being situated as such matters and comes into play in Black feminist thought. I then explore the way Black feminist thought takes up the concept of motherhood. I go on to explore the role of storytelling as a methodology. Finally, I explore some limitations and challenges to Black feminist thought.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Using Black feminist thought as a theoretical lens allows for the privileging of the experiences of Black women. It seeks to achieve a standpoint, a self-defined shared perspective, “embracing both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility” (Collins, 1990, p. 28) from which Black women’s experiences can be both analyzed and understood not through the values of oppressors, but rather those of Black women.
themselves. Harding (2012) writes, “An oppressed group must become a group “for itself,” not just “in itself” – as others observe it – in order for it to see the importance in engaging in political and scientific struggles to see the world from the perspective of its own lives” (p. 51). In this study, I work toward and for an African American mother’s standpoint, specifically as I explore the nature of activism as it is tied to participants’ motherhood.

Intersectionality

Drawing from Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of intersectionality and crucial to Black feminist thought is an understanding that being Black and being female are not additive, but that a Black woman is both Black and female at the same time, and that her experiences of being a Black woman cannot be separated out as being just gendered or racialized. There is no hierarchy to the forms of oppression, meaning being female is not more significant than being Black and vice-versa. Collins (1990) uses the term “intersectionality” as a way of explaining how systems of power such as race and gender come together in oppressive ways thus resulting in the development of knowledge from a situated standpoint, such as that of Black women. Intersectionality is a key component in Collins’ (1990) “matrix of domination” which posits that there are interlocking systems of oppression which people experience and resist … on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions.

Crenshaw (1989) posits that “intersectionality is heuristic in nature: it is akin to a “prism” to be used to “amplify” and highlight specific problems, particularly by drawing
attention to dynamics that are “constitutive” but are generally overlooked or silenced” (as cited in May, 2015, p. 19). May explains that:

A heuristic orientation accentuates its problem-solving capacity, one that is contextual, concerned with eradicating inequity, oriented toward unrecognized knowers and overlooked forms of meaning, attentive to experience as a fund of knowledge, and interrogative (focused on asking questions, incrementally and continuously). (p. 19)

With this orientation, intersectionality becomes a form of activism. May (2015) connects it to a tradition of Black feminisms (and other feminisms of women of color) that approach theorizing as “active and engaged in by (variously) situated (and subjugated) knowers” (p. 20), drawing from the works of Black feminist intellectuals, including Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Barbara Christian. Collins (2013) describes it as intellectual activism, stressing its importance as part of Black feminist thought.

**Motherhood and Activism**

Collins’ (2000) conception of motherhood is broader than the traditional notion of the biological mother who bore and raised her children. Collins describes various kinds of “mothers” in African American communities, all of whom share in the responsibility of child rearing. In addition to “bloodmothers” or biological mothers, there are the “othermothers,” a term first defined by Stanlie James (1993) and “community othermothers” (Collins, 2000). Othermothers are “fictive kin” who take on the role of childcare. My own upbringing included several “aunties” who were not blood relatives, but rather my mother’s close women friends. They acted as othermothers, providing guidance and discipline both in my mother’s presence and in her absence throughout my childhood, and even into adulthood. Collins makes a point to include grandmothers,
aunts, sisters and cousins, who often take on the role of othermothers, and who, in some cases, will adopt a child when the situation requires it. According to Collins (2000), bloodmothers and othermothers form “woman-centered networks of community-based child care” (p. 193) and are “vital to African-derived cultural production” (p. 225). Community othermothers take the notion of being an othermother a step further, going beyond the work of direct childcare and becoming active in the community advocating on behalf of the community’s children and wellbeing.

Motherhood itself is not a natural state of being, but rather a social and historical construction (Johnston & Swanson, 2003), and is affected by concomitant social constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Glenn, 1994). Collins presents a conception of motherhood that is specific to African American communities, yet it should be noted that how the notion of motherhood is understood is not necessarily universal even within African American communities that embrace the notion of bloodmothers and othermothers. Collins writes:

Because factors such as social class differences among African-Americans, region or the country, and the degree of racial discrimination in housing, education, jobs, and public services all influence Black community organization, othermother traditions characterizing Black women’s community work have taken various forms. (2000, p. 205)

Furthermore, Collins (2000) herself questions the shift over time in American society that eroded the cultural foundation that women-centered networks was based on; she thus too questions the relevance of this conceptualization may have currently. Collins is not abandoning the idea of othermothers or their importance, but suggesting rather that the relationship between bloodmothers and othermothers is potentially more important now and worthy of examination, as it leads to a conception of children not as the property
of individual families, but as the responsibility of the whole community. The implications for this are significant, in that it suggests a rejection of an oppressive capitalist system, including versions of “ownership” ways of thinking.

Collins (2000) sees Black women’s activism as existing in two domains. The first avoids direct confrontation of oppressive structures, instead taking on a form of resistance to ensure group survival, while the second domain includes the direct challenge to oppression through struggles to transform institutions. Motherhood, in its various forms, provides a space for Black women’s activism that may operate in either domain. Black mothers may resist or avoid confrontation, which in terms of their children’s schooling may appear to be lack of involvement. On the other hand, mothers may directly confront school officials in advocacy for their and other children. Either way, Collins sees protecting Black children as a primary concern for African American mothers.

For Collins (2000), the maintenance of African-derived cultural practices is a form of resistance and activism that women engage in. The passing down of traditions becomes the work of women through mothering and becomes part of the struggle for group survival. Traditionally, both as bloodmothers and othermothers, “African American women worked to create Black female spheres of influence, authority and power that produced a worldview that [was] markedly different from that advanced by the dominant group” (p. 225).

Historically, Black women employed a variety of strategies to work around the challenges they faced, including staging individual protests against unfair practices. Collins’ (2000) offers Ruth Powell’s one-woman sit-ins at drugstores, where she sat at
lunch counters for hours waiting for service or staring down the staff who refused to serve her, to draw attention to Jim Crow practices in Washington D.C. Another example was shared with me in my pilot study, when Mrs. Brown (pseudonym) told of her experience picketing as a lone mother outside a courthouse to draw attention to school segregation practices in New York City (NYC) and gain entrance to an elite mostly White school for her daughter.

Teaching can also play an important role in Black women’s activism as a route to empowerment for teachers and students. Becoming a teacher is an extension of the notion of othermother (Foster, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005) and a way to resist ignorance while promoting knowledge for oneself as well as the community; thus, becoming a teacher could be considered a form of activism (Collins, 2000). Nieto (2003) presents a Black female teacher whose teaching is clearly activism in the way she creates spaces for students to challenge racism. In a discussion about teachers’ and students’ destinies being comingled, this teacher asserted the connectedness she has to her students as part of her community and how the shared identity becomes part of her motivation. For African American women who take on the role of othermothering, teaching can be a natural extension and an act of activism.

**Storytelling as Methodology in Black Feminist Thought**

While methods and methodology are taken up in greater depth in Chapter III, it is worth noting that in developing Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) drew on her understanding of African American women’s understandings of what counts as knowledge. She refers to Black feminist thought as both theory and epistemology.
Central to Black feminist thought is that knowing comes from experience. Therefore, understanding can be gained through experience. Methodologically essential are examinations of lived experiences, the use of dialogue, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability, all of which lead to the credibility of the knowledge produced (Collins, 1989); thus, storytelling becomes the basis for research methodology.

*Figure 2.1 Tenets of Storytelling Methodology*

Dialogue becomes the way in which knowledge is constructed and shared. The use of dialogue comes from the African-derived tradition of call and response, in which the audience responds to the storyteller rather than listening passively. The audience thus actively engages in the knowledge construction and sharing processes, in which the ethic of caring is enacted.
Being both the recipient of care through a women-centered network of one’s bloodmother and othermothers and being called upon to provide care for relatives and others in the community, Collins (2000) finds the development of what she calls an “ethic of caring.” The ethic of caring stems from the experience of both being nurtured by an extended community of caregivers (othermothers), and the responsibility of women for providing care for both kin and fictive kin, but it also comes into play in dialogue. In her framework, Collins (1990) claims three components of an ethic of caring: value placed on the uniqueness of expressiveness, the appropriate use of emotions in dialogue that convey a belief in the validity of an argument, and the capacity to develop empathy, which created a connection between storyteller and audience. The call and response format then becomes an expression of the interconnectedness of the three components of the ethic of caring.

This ethic of caring, which embraces social responsibility, is at the heart of women’s experiences as othermothers, and provides a foundation for how Collins conceptualizes African American women’s activism. It should be noted that the “ethic of caring” as conceptualized by Collins is not the same “ethic of caring” conceptualized by philosopher of moral education Nel Noddings, which she describes as “concerned with how, in general, we should meet and treat one another – with how to establish, maintain and enhance caring relationships (Noddings, 2013). While both Noddings and Collins see relationships at the heart of the ethic of caring, for Collins, the ethic of caring is concerned with active empowerment, and moves beyond the relationships between individuals (Collins, 2000).
Limitations of Black Feminist Thought

It is important to consider the limitations of Black feminist thought. While Collins (1990) includes a disclaimer that there is no one way of being a Black woman and she emphasizes individual uniqueness, there is also necessarily an assumption that there are commonly shared experiences among Black women. Specifically, there are shared experiences of oppression among Black women that lead to a specific standpoint from which to theorize. For example, Parsons and Mensah (2010) demonstrate concretely how as Black women they share “common challenges in milieus where Whiteness and maleness maximize participation” (p. 23), yet their experiences are by no means the same. This need to essentialize the experience of Black women can become problematic, especially as we consider all the other aspects of identity that come into play beyond gender and race. Collins includes class as just one other identity marker that factors in, not added, yet what assumptions get made about class when talking about Black people’s shared experiences of oppression? We are not all lower or working class, yet we often find low socioeconomic status lumped in with Blackness. In fact, I would argue that by the time researchers are conducting their research, regardless of what their economic status was when they were younger, they are likely to be benefitting from some privileges of the middle class, which could create a dynamic between the researcher and her participants that may be noteworthy. That said, one should not assume that the participants are of a lower socioeconomic status either.

A critique of Black feminist thought as a standpoint theory comes from the poststructural camp (Weedon, 1987). Collins rejects the postmodern for rejecting the essentialism of identity, which she finds a necessary platform from which to build her
standpoint theory. Collins acknowledges the multiplicity of experiences of Black women, but lays claim to a shared understanding of oppression necessary for agency and activism. Yet, feminist poststructural theories also “tend to account for multiple systems of privilege and oppression and their intersections, along with people’s capacity for agency or resistance” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 61). Rejecting an assumption that poststructuralism leaves no room for agency, Weedon (1987) offers instead the notion that agency is itself, “discursively produced in the social interactions between culturally produced, contradictory subjects” (p. 176). As if responding directly to Collins’ specific concern, she goes on to say:

While there may be strategic needs for identity politics, defined by shared forms of oppression and political objectives, postmodern feminists argue that it is important to recognize the nature and limitations of the essentialist foundations of many forms of identity politics. They propose a theory of identity which sees it as discursively produced, necessary but always contingent and strategic. (p. 176)

With a shift in an understanding of power from something possessed to relational, as is found in poststructural theories (Weedon, 1987), the question becomes: How can subjects be agents seeking power if power is not something that can be possessed? Britzman (2000) explains, “assuming people to be effects of language, knowledge, power and history, rather than their essential authors, a more provisional, historical and ethical understanding of agency is possible” (p. 36). In other words, since subjects are viewed as discursively constructed, agency does not originate with them, but is rather a product of situated relationships.

Collins’s scholarship has been affected by the postmodern turn and in following her writing from Black Feminist Thought (1990) to On Intellectual Activism (2013), it is clear that she also grapples with notions of identity and power in a context of competing
epistemologies. In *Black Feminist Thought* she stressed that a Black women’s standpoint is necessary, explaining the importance of conceptualizing oppression as interlocking systems rather than additive ones. In *Fighting Words*, Collins (1998) pushes back against postmodern ideas of decentering and difference, holding that without similar experiences, we lose the notion of a collectivity. She questions how scholarship can be in service to social practice if we abandon notions of identity that bring us together. In more recent writings, Collins (2013) herself seems to embrace the notions of the discursive and what she calls, “shifts in language and politics” (p. 71) as she develops her “domains of power” framework that can be used to “analyze social phenomena as historically specific as Black women’s experiences” (p. 72). This framework operates with an assumption that power is “everywhere and nowhere,” (p. 72) and considers power as is it is organized into four interrelated domains: structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal. It is the shift in thinking that has happened over time, as Collins continues to reframe Black feminist thought and respond to changing approaches to scholarship that make this theory a useful one for this research. The idea that Black women can still come together collectively with a shared notion of identity, whilst also being unique individuals with different experiences makes this research possible. Collins’ domains of power framework becomes a useful tool for understanding how power is organized in the stories of the activist mothers, and so I take it up in the fourth chapter in much greater detail.

Cooper (2015) acknowledges there is work to be done with Black feminist theory. Specifically, she calls for more active theorizing, recognizing that significant strides have been made in some areas, such as critical sexuality studies. However, she questions “how contemporary Black feminist academics negotiate theoretical debates that are
foundational to our institutional legitimacy” (pp. 10-11), citing the way race is navigated, or not, as a social construct that is real in the lives of Black women while other theories have rejected it for not having a biological basis. She also critiques scholars for not building upon Collins’ theories, but rather stagnating in the use of Black feminist thought for representations of Black women in contemporary culture, which she sees as limited. She warns Black feminist theorists in the US need to recognize Black feminist knowledge production in multiple sites around the globe. However, most significant is Cooper’s rejection of limiting Black feminist theory, stating, “we must name the acts of intellectual colonialization and then stop ceding the terms of the debate to the colonizers” (p. 18). Returning to the political agenda of Black feminist thought, Cooper pushes back against poststructuralist deconstruction, claiming, “…what we build is far more important than what we destroy” (p. 19).

Review of the Literature

Parent Involvement and Activism

The role of parents in education has shifted over time. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, parents were the recipients of parent education that provided guidance for parenting and was external to the functioning of the school (Cutler, 2000). By the mid-twentieth century, the role of parents shifted to that of providing support for the teacher’s role as instructor (Cutler, 2000). In the last forty years, parents have taken on more active roles in schools that move beyond raising money through bake sales and accompanying classes on field trips (Winters, 1993). Cutler (2000) explores the nuanced fluctuation of relationship of parents to schools in the last 150 years, recognizing that
normative trends describe a White, middle-class experience for parents’ involvement.

Parent involvement today is recognized as involving direct active engagement both with students as they complete schoolwork and with schools as they operate to provide instruction.

Yet, how parent involvement is conceived varies. Researchers and school administrators offer frameworks of parent involvement that sort and categorize activities parents engage in (Cervone & O’Leary, 1982; Davies, 1987; Epstein, 2001; Johnson, 2013). As I am more interested in activism, I mention a few studies as they are relevant to understanding the dominant discourses on parent involvement and connect to conceptions of parent involvement becoming activism.

One of the most frequently cited frameworks is Epstein’s (1995, 2011), which became the foundation of the National PTA’s National Standards for Family-School Partnership (PTA, 2008), and can be used to outline the activities in the guidelines for parent involvement in the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110). She identifies six types of involvement:

- **Type 1: Parenting** – helping all families understand child and adolescent development and establishing home environments that support children as students
- **Type 2: Communicating** – designing and conducting effective forms of two-way communications about school programs and children’s progress
- **Type 3: Volunteering** – recruiting and organizing help and support at school, home or in other locations to support the school and students’ activities
- **Type 4: Learning at Home** – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and curriculum-related activities and decisions
- **Type 5: Decision Making** – having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and obtaining input from all parents on school decisions
- **Type 6: Collaborating with the Community** – identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools,
students, and their families, and organizing activities to benefit the community and increase students’ learning opportunities. (Epstein, 2001, pp. 46-47)

It should be noted that this framework is written for school administrators and teachers, rather than for parents themselves. This seems to be the case with much of the research on parent involvement, as it is written by and for scholars and educators rather than for parents, often to encourage school-based activities that might engage parents with the goal of improving students’ academic success.

As it is conceptualized by Epstein (2001), parent involvement is school-centered, presenting involvement as activities that support the school. However, this characterization is critiqued for making three broad assumptions: (1) that all parents are welcome in schools; (2) that parents believe that they should be creating a home environment that supports the goals of the school; (3) that there is a “universality surrounding the “basic obligations” of parents and teachers, while downplaying the fact that such obligations may be culturally defined or grounded” (Lopez & Stoelting, 2010, p. 25). Given these assumptions, this framework does not include parent activities that may challenge practices at the school or district level, thus ignoring some of the activities of parent activists, rendering it problematic as a way to understand the array of ways in which parents may interact with schools. Winters’ (1993) definition of parent involvement as “structural mechanisms put in place by the school that govern and orchestrate parent interaction in school organizations, processes and activities” (p. 3) is what we see in play here.

On the other hand, Davies (1987) offers an alternative framework with four categories that begins to move beyond school structured involvement: (1) coproduction
or partnership; (2) decision making; (3) citizen advocacy; (4) parent choice.

**Coproduction** or partnership focuses on those activities that “contribute to schools’ efforts to instruct pupils more effectively and raise pupil achievement” (p. 48). This category by itself encompasses much of what Epstein’s (2001) typology describes. These activities tend to be teacher or school initiated; though they extend the responsibility for student academic success or failure to the family and community. **Decision making** can involve parents on two levels, that of making decisions about their own child’s education and participation on school and district level decision making bodies such as School and District Leadership Teams in New York. In all examples of decision making offered by Davies, there are institutional structures or laws in place to both support and possibly hinder the involvement of parents.

**Citizen advocacy**, on the other hand, moves beyond decision making in that it includes activities in which parents and other citizens organize outside of the structures in place within the school system to further a specific cause. It is notable that Davies’ (1987) conception of advocacy involves group organizing. Individuals as advocates are not discussed in his description of advocacy. **Parent choice** for Davies raises the question of how much choice parents should have in the selection of their children’s schools. For Davies, there is a distinct difference between parent choice and the first three forms of parent involvement, which he sees as providing “for political voice or direct influence on the content of education” (p. 154). Choice differs in that parents gain power through their selection of schools – influencing the school market – so to speak.

Johnson (2013) cites research conducted in the Kansas City area that looks at parental involvement in only two ways. The first is what she calls the “traditional
parental roles -- the moms and dads who check on homework and report cards and support the schools from time to time by helping out with clubs, sports, and bake sales” (p.1). The second alternative put forth by Johnson is what she refers to as “parents as change agents,” which includes parents who work towards school reform through practices such as voting and communicating with local officials to assure school funding and high standards. Though this way of conceptualizing parent involvement can be useful at times, it is also problematic in that it presents parental involvement as a binary that does not explain very well how parents themselves can engage in both kinds of activities. Johnson points out that in the Kansas City study parents did not fall neatly into these two categories; thus, it is important to consider the assumed agenda in each of these forms of involvement. Parents who take on traditional roles may be assumed to be accepting of the notion that the parents’ role is to support the school in improving student achievement, while a parent acting as change agent is working to alter some aspect of the school system, thus working against the status quo. These positions are not necessarily at odds, though they may appear to be. An individual parent could likely be both working for change while supporting the child’s academic progress in school.

In considering the literature on parent involvement, it is important to consider the different stakeholders’ viewpoints, as was noted above with regards to Epstein’s (2001) framework. For instance, Miretzky (2004) found, “research on parent-teacher relationships tends to relegate parents to visitor roles in schools and reinforce student achievement as the primary goal of parent-teacher relationships” (p. 814). While some researchers, such as Davies (1987) consider the role of parents in education beyond that of supporting the agenda of schools, the intended audience falls within academia and
proposed outcomes, tend to focus on what schools or school districts can do to increase parental involvement. The perspective of the parents is often lacking in the research on parent involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey’s work considers parents’ perspective, but also their comprehension of their role in their children’s education and how that translates to involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In all of Hoover-Dempsey’s work, parent involvement is categorized into one of three types of activities: school-based activities, home-school communication, and home-based activities. Both school-based and home-school communication focus on a school controlled agenda. However, since the home-based activities include activities such as helping with homework, leaving one to wonder if this model of parent involvement is really all that different, since the home-based activities still seem to support a school agenda. One notable contribution of their work is the consideration of the parent perspective. In doing this, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues explore parents’ decision making, recognizing that there are factors that influence a parent’s agency, or decision to engage in a particular activity or not. Parents’ understanding of their role is informed by “past and present experiences in schools, demands placed upon the parent, cultural norms and understandings, opportunities for involvement, and personal preferences” (Lopez & Stoelting, 2010, p. 27). Furthermore, groups that parents belong to and associate with will influence a parent’s expectations around involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Self-efficacy, or a parent’s belief in her ability to produce an outcome, is also a factor in a parent’s motivation to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).
Lopez and Stoelting (2010) interpret Hoover-Dempsey’s model of parent role construction for involvement to fall into one of three categories: *parent-focused*, in which parents feel the education of their children is primarily their responsibility; *school-focused*, in which parents assume the responsibility falls to the school; and *partnership-focused*, in which a shared responsibility exists. The *parent-focused* model may lead to negative perceptions when parents prioritize different learning experiences than the school. The *school-focused* model can also lead to negative perceptions of parents by educators because parents’ apparent lack of involvement is interpreted as not caring, while it is in fact a result of an understanding of their role. It is the *partnership-focused* model that is promoted by many parent involvement advocates, such as Epstein (2001), and often it is assumed that there is a power imbalance with the school having more authority over the agenda for the partnership.

Cooper and Christie’s (2005) qualitative case study is notable in that it considered the parental perspective while examined a university-sponsored parent education program that was designed to empower parents in a small urban school district in Southern California. The program was created to provide parents with knowledge of the curriculum to support student learning, so it was based on a notion of parent involvement for the purpose of improving student performance through a partnership between the parents and the school. The study included interviews with parents and principals to gain their perspective of the program. The parent participants of this study were mostly Latina mothers and a few African American parents. One significant finding of the study was that the desires of the school principals and the parents differed. Principals wanted parents to be involved in “traditional” ways that supported the activities of the school,
while parents wanted “more decision-making ability and power to influence the district’s reform agenda” (p. 2262).

Within the last decade, the term “parent engagement” has become more popular than “parent involvement.” The NYC Department of Education consistently talks about parent engagement. While proponents of parent engagement talk about it as giving more voice to parents in decision making (Ferlazzo, 2009, 2012), in practice it is questionable whether that there is any shift in agendas from being school focused to parent focused, or even truly collaborative. Furthermore, a memo from the New York State Education Department (Schwartz, 2012) suggests that in the eyes of the State parent “engagement” involves getting parents to do more educating of children with the guidance of the schools but does not take into account a parent agenda or perspective. This memo discusses how to use funding for both “involvement” and “engagement.”

Specifically, parent “involvement” includes activities such as sharing information regarding a myriad of topics from student performance, to parent meetings, to complaint processes, as well as having parents participate in the “development and review of program plans,” and the “development and review of the district and building parent involvement policies” (p. 2). Engagement is defined as being “greater and more meaningful parent participation in the education of their children” (p. 2). The activities funded as parent engagement are part of a family literacy initiative, in which parents are trained to teach their children literacy skills at home. Thus in New York State, the difference between parent involvement and engagement seems to be more a matter of activity levels, not necessarily distinguished by level of participation in shared decision-making processes or having voice as agendas are set.
African American Parent Involvement

Reynolds and Howard (2013) make the point that much of the discussion on parent involvement fails to critically analyze race and class dynamics, assuming the determination and hard work on the part of parents without acknowledgement of inequities of resources is what is needed to improve parental involvement. This way of thinking leads to a discourse of the poor African American mother who does not care enough to put her child first (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).

Cooper and Christie’s (2005) study offers the perspective of one African American mother on the intentions of school officials with regards to parent empowerment. The mother “maintained that they have an interest in keeping parents disempowered. She further remarked that there is ‘no way to partnership with oppressors until you’re on equal ground’ and said she is dedicated to educating parents and trying to level the playing field” (p. 2269). The distrust of school officials is echoed in other parent involvement and empowerment research in urban school districts (Fine, 1993; Jackson & Cooper, 1989; Noguera, 2001). For example, Fine suggests that the distrust is warranted when she writes, “parents enter the contested public sphere of public education typically with neither resources nor power. They are usually not welcomed, by schools, to the critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices” (pp. 682-683).

Historically there is evidence that African American parents demonstrate an involvement level that matches that of White parents. Anderson (1988) provides us with many examples of how parents were intensely involved, both working with schools and
working to create schools for their children, with the belief that educational opportunities were for the betterment of their offspring and the race. Cutler (2000) discusses the segregated precursors to the National PTA, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (NCPT), and the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) as having much in common with regards to the kinds of activities its parent members took on in their local PTAs.

Other studies show that African American parents continue to be involved in their children’s education. For example, Eccles and Harold (1996) found that African American parents may be more involved in school related activities at home, while Caucasian parents are more likely to be involved in the school. A multidimensional study of parent involvement by Kohl, Legua, and McMahon (2000) found that ethnicity was not an indicator of significant difference between African American parents and Caucasian parents’ involvement, while other factors such as parents’ education level were. Additionally, a study by Drummond and Stipek (2004), which looked at the beliefs about involvement of low-income parents of students in the early childhood grades, found that the parents had a strong belief that they should be involved in their children’s education and found no significant differences across ethnicity. Furthermore, they suggest that when parents’ actions fall short of school expectations, it is not for lack of wanting to be involved, but rather as a result of other barriers to involvement or a lack of communication about what expectations are.

Knight, Norton, Bentley and Dixon’s (2004) study also illustrates ways in which parents are involved in their children’s education, focusing instead on “college-going processes” and counternarratives as entry points. Rosier’s (2000) study of nine inner-city
African American mothers found that the mothers had “unanimously strong valuation of education” (p. 13) and as a result were actively involved in their children’s schooling, despite lacking resources. However, she also found that the mother’s activities outside of school went unrecognized by teachers, who narrowly defined involvement as participating in open houses and parent-teacher conferences, resulting in teachers being critical of those mothers who failed to participate in those specific events. All these studies provide a counternarrative to a discourse of African American apathy towards parent involvement as noted above (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).

The disparity between the understandings of African American parents’ involvement in schooling both historically and currently raises two questions. To what extent is involvement not visible? And, what is happening that is potentially leading to the disenfranchisement of African American parents that may lead to a decrease in involvement or lessen the visibility of their involvement? To understand this, we must consider the location of African American families within the American educational landscape.

**Contextualizing African American Families in the American Educational Landscape**

It should be noted that there is no singular African American experience. Experiences are situated in both time and space, and that to examine African American families through all of American history, understanding that the influence of location matters significantly, would not be possible here. However, there are particular practices in the United States from slavery to institutional racism today that marginalize African
Americans in the broader American society and impact their relationships to schools. Though the term “post-racial” has been bantered about since the election of our first African American president, the extreme violence towards African Americans, including children, by White people, often in law enforcement, in this country in past and recent time makes it evident that we have in no way achieved a post-racial society.

From colonial times, people of African descent were deemed unequal at the most basic level – their humanity. In 1787, the Three-Fifths Compromise was enacted, legalizing the notion that African slaves and their descendants were valued as three-fifths that of White people. With law determining a person’s worth in terms of political representation, it institutionalized the notion that Black and White Americans were not equal. It would not be challenged until the Dred Scott case of 1856 (African American Registry, 2012). The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, would grant citizenship to former slaves and establish that Black and White Americans were considered equal in the eyes of the law. However, in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case decision of 1892, writing for the majority, Justice Henry Brown wrote:

> The object of the Fourteenth Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. (PBS.org, 2016)

Thus, the Supreme Court upheld the notion that Blacks and Whites were not truly equal. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision established the notion that “separate but equal” was not only acceptable, but constitutional. This would be challenged in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case in 1954, and the Supreme Court would then rule that segregated schools were not equal. Though this ruling was specific to schools, this would
open people’s minds to the idea that separate is not equal. Yet, the legacy of centuries of inequality is that the discourse that Blacks are inferior lingers in the minds of many Americans, both Black and White.

A decade after Brown v. Board of Education, maintaining the notion that there is a difference between Blacks and Whites, the Moynihan Report (1965) posited that slavery disrupted the functioning of the Black family by reversing the roles of men and women, positioning the Black family within a norm of Whiteness as not just different, but deficient and in need of remediation. This was followed by Coleman’s Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey (1966), commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which was conducted in response to provisions in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Considered a landmark study, it “scientifically” concluded that students’ academic performance was directly impacted by parents’ socioeconomic status, while in comparison, the effect of school resources was less significant (Cohen & Barnes, 1999). The impact of Coleman’s report was also significant in that research following it focused on how the socialization patterns and home environment of minority families resulted in disparities of educational attainment of minority students (Meece & Kurtz-Costes, 2001). Research of this era was used to develop educational policy and influenced public opinion that took a deficit view of minority parents, especially African American parents, allowing blame for gaps in achievement between Black and White students to be placed on the family rather than schools (Cohen & Barnes, 1999).

In the early 1980’s A Nation at Risk (Gardner, et al., 1983) began the standards-based reform movement (LaVenia, Cohen-Vogel & Lang, 2015). The report was the result of hearings and information gathering by the National Commission on Excellence
in Education, a task force appointed by President Reagan’s secretary of education, Terrel Bell, in 1981 (Hayes, 2008). Written in clear language, understandable by lay people and highlighting U.S. failure to rank in the top globally to educate its citizenry, it got the public’s attention (Ravitch, 2010). Taken as a call to arms, the report outlined a need for better education for all children (Hayes, 2008). One major critique of *A Nation at Risk* was that it focused too much on the quality of education, not paying enough attention to social and economic factors, such as poverty, that affect educational outcomes (Ravitch, 2010). The Reagan administration left education reform to the states, and by the time Clinton took office in 1993, most states had developed curriculum standards and testing to measure achievement (Hayes, 2008). The Clinton administration took education reform a step further with the attempt to develop national curriculum standards, though it was not a success, and the passing of The Improving American Schools Act, which furthered the notion of making schools better for all students.

Though his education policies would in theory benefit African American students, the attack on welfare during Clinton’s presidency would be a blow to many African Americans. In the 1990’s President Clinton campaigned with a promise to end welfare, thus further hurting poor women and their children. Sidel (1998) found the language used to describe the recipients of welfare in the House of Representatives in 1995 dehumanizing, leading to a bill that would eventually cut social welfare program spending significantly. Representative John L. Mica of Florida had a sign that said, “Don't feed the alligators,” while Representative Barbara Cubin likened welfare recipients to wolves (p. 7). Abromovitz and Piven (1993, 2003) provide one example of critique of Clinton’s welfare reform as making scapegoats of poor mothers. Garin,
Molyneux, and DiVall (1993, 2003) found that the majority of voters in 1993 were in support of welfare reform, believing that recipients would not find jobs quickly on public assistance, but recognized the need for support for recipients to make a successful transition to work. With Black mothers overrepresented as welfare recipients (Sidel, 1998), these attitudes reflect what Collins (1990) refers to as one of the controlling images of the Black woman’s fertility, the welfare mother who becomes objectified and scapegoated as a bad mother who threatens political and economic stability.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), introduced and made law by the George W. Bush administration, had a goal to have all students proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. Seen as building upon the Improving American Schools Act (Hayes, 2008), it too focused on the achievement of all students, but this time more emphasis was placed on closing the “achievement gap” between White students and students of color, namely Black and Latino students (Garrison, 2009). With it came the adoption of the Common Core Learning Standards by forty-six states (Academic Benchmarks, 2015), which were to serve the purpose of standardizing the curriculum across the nation thus providing all students with more equitable access to rigorous curriculum. With NCLB also came the proliferation of standardized testing, with states required to disaggregate the data by demographics, including race, to show how schools were doing in their efforts to address the achievement gap. The “standards-based” reform movement shifted to a “test-based accountability movement” (Ravitch, 2010).

Along with NCLB came the expansion of the charter school movement. Viewed as providing students (families) with choice, charter schools that were seen as innovative solutions that combined private and public funds to educate students, were touted by
some as educational reform that would improve public education by creating competition (Hoxby, 2002). However, subsequent research has called into question the effectiveness of the charter school movement in terms of its impact on racial segregation in schools (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Garcia, 2008; Renzulli, 2006). In her review of the literature on charter schools and Black education, Almond (2012) found that African American families were choosing charter schools at a higher rate than public schools. Furthermore, she found that Black parents’ perception was that charter schools provide an improved quality of education and are alternatives to failing public schools. Though charter schools have been critiqued for not being any more effective than public schools (Ravitch, 2010), the appeal to Black families of choice is significant.

In recent years, NCLB has been replaced by Race to the Top. This program is an extension of NCLB introduced by the Obama administration that attempts to address low achieving schools by having states compete for funding by presenting ambitious ways in which to reform their schools. On the U.S. Department of Education website, it says:

Awards in Race to the Top go to States that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform. Race to the Top winners help trail-blaze effective reforms and provide examples for states and local education agencies throughout the country to follow as they too are hard at work on reforms that can transform our schools for decades to come. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

The result has been policies that increase standardization of learning, testing and privatization of public education (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2013). This reform movement in the U.S. is part of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which has made education reform a business, in which public funds can be captured for profit by individuals and corporations. Testing becomes the tool for “accountability” (Au, 2013) and with Race to the Top specifically, not only does testing become big business, but data
management systems, as emphasis is placed on measurement of student growth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

History shows us that the education of African American children has been fraught with challenges from the beginning of our nation. First, seen as less than equal to White children, then seen as culturally deficient, and now seen not as individual people but as numbers in business schemes, African American students have continuously been at a disadvantage. Throughout this same period, African American parents are also being marginalized. They too are seen as less than equal to White parents, they are blamed for being culturally deficient and are scapegoated as bad parents, when their children under perform compared to White children. It should not be surprising that African American parents seem disenfranchised. Yet, researchers have demonstrated that African American parents are actively involved both at home (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Rosier, 2000) and as agents of change to school systems and structures that may not favor their children (Anderson, 1998; Cutler, 2000; Watkins, 2005).

**African American Activism in the Educational Arena**

Historians and education researchers have recorded examples of African Americans engaging in activism to support the education of their children from the colonial period to the present (Anderson, 1998; Cutler, 2000; Watkins, 2005). Many of the earlier examples in U.S. history take the form of legal challenges to policies that exclude Black children from schools (National Park Service, n.d.). While there were a number of victories as well as losses, the real turning point for African Americans came with the Brown v. Board of Education case because it opened the door for desegregation
of schools, thus in theory giving Black students access to the same education that White students were getting. That *Brown v. Board of Education* happened during the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century is not without importance. Situated within a larger movement for social justice, the Supreme Court was uniquely positioned to make the decision it did. The movement mobilized mass support for the work of desegregation that followed. This was not easy, and it required many acts of activism, and we see a rise in African American parent activism following the historic court ruling to insure that the decision would not only be carried out in Topeka, KA, but that it would impact the ways in which Black children accessed education throughout the U.S.

In New York City, boycotting parents in Harlem in 1958 took strength from the Civil Rights Movement (de Forest, 2008). This civil action was led by a group of mothers who found the conditions of middle schools serving African American students in Harlem to be unacceptable. In 1957, twelve mothers formed The Parents Committee for Better Education, which grew to nearly four hundred members. The group gathered information and documented the substandard conditions of the schools, bringing their concerns to the New York City Board of Education and the mayor. After exhausting sanctioned avenues for complaint and getting no results, the parents planned a boycott in 1958. Nine families, who became known as the Harlem 9 (Weiner, 2010) kept their children out of school for 35 days, long enough for the City to take them to court for violation of New York State’s compulsory education law. While the judge who heard the majority of the cases sided with the Board of Attendance and ordered the students back to school, Judge Poiler, who heard the Skipwith and Rector cases sided with the parents, confirming the parents’ right to take action. The boycott and the now famous Skipwith
case had a few lasting results, including influence on the decision to move away from neighborhood middle schools, giving families choice within larger zones as well as forming localized school boards, which paved the way for an even larger parent action by African American parents in New York (de Forest, 2008).

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis may be one of the more widely known instances of African American parent activism since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Chronicled by Podair (2002) and Pritchett (2002), the clash between African American parents and community members and White, mostly Jewish, teachers and school administrators impacted all of New York City when the conflict resulted in a teachers strike in 1968.

In 1967, the New York City Department of Education experimented with a community controlled local school district in the neighborhoods of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a majority African American area of Brooklyn that was suffering from school overcrowding and underperformance. The newly appointed, majority Black school board ultimately clashed with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the local teachers’ union, over the removal of teachers and administrators from Junior High School 271, which resulted in the thirty-six day strike. However, power was not simply handed over to the parents and local community. Prior to the dismissal of the staff, the newly appointed school board sought more control over finances and staffing than originally granted. A boycott of the junior high schools, sponsored by the PTAs, kept nearly 5,700 students home (Buder, 1968). These large scale community efforts to gain control to improve public education for Black students in New York were fueled by the Civil Rights Movement.
Similarly, other actions around the country included parent actions in Boston (Kaufman, 1991). In the last 10 years, parents have taken actions to address a variety of issues, including high stakes testing, charter school takeover, and school safety; however, nothing on the scale of the Harlem School Boycott or the Ocean Hill-Brownsville have been seen in New York. Smaller actions are not getting the attention that large scale actions such as boycotts receive. There is a lack of research on the forms of parent activism happening in African American communities that this study addresses with a focus on the activism of African American mothers.

Eleanor Davis is an African American mother who is an education activist. She is the subject of Kakli’s (2011) study that looks at the narratives of one mother. In this study, Kakli found that “activism can stem from a variety of personal, cultural and structural influences” (p. 192). Kakli also noted that “race pervades Davis’ narratives” (p. 192). Though this study takes a very different approach to looking at African American mothers’ activism, by taking an intimate approach of looking at the personal narratives of one mother, it contributes to our picture of African American mothers as education activists by showing the importance of their situatedness as Black women with specific histories and influences as this study hopes to do. A significant finding for Kakli was that even though Davis’ personal events and circumstances are what led her to become an activist, her interactions with educators and community leaders influenced her activism. The implications of this finding suggest that there is something to be learned by educators about encouraging the activism of African American mothers.
Chapter III

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I take up methodology and methods of this narrative study. First, I explore the methodological thinking that drives the study towards addressing the research questions. Then I explain the specific methods used to conduct this research. I consider both the location and the participants of the study, the gathering and the analysis of data. I also explore my role as a researcher. Finally, I discuss notions of validity and trustworthiness and ethical concerns.

A Storytelling Methodology

This study attempts to understand the lived experiences of African American mothers who become activists around educational issues using Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990) as a framework. Embracing a standpoint theory that assumes both a situatedness to these mothers’ experiences as well as the retelling of their stories (Harding, 1993), I employ a culturally sensitive approach through the design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the findings of the study (Tillman, 2002). This means recognizing and centering the experiences of the participants in the research by valuing their experiences. Drawing from African American traditions of interaction, storytelling about these experiences becomes a central mode of data collection (Collins, 2000).
In her study of graduate students engaging in multicultural feminist activist research, Knight (2000) explores the importance of understanding the situated positioning of the participants, the researcher, and the community within the structures of society as well as in relation to one another. She also makes the point that engaging in the act of research, both researcher and participants are evolving as they develop new understanding. Richardson (2000) identifies the act of writing research as a method of inquiry, suggesting that understanding is developed not only through the gathering and analysis of data, but that the researcher learns and develops while engaging in the process of writing research. In this study, I engage these notions of the researcher and participant evolving throughout the research process, as I use the tenets of Black feminist thought as laid out by Collins (1989, 1990, 2000) as a guide for developing the research design.

This study relies on my constructions and interpretations of “personal narratives” in which mothers share their understandings of specific events in their lives related to education and educational activism through retelling. The research study provides examples and inspiration for others who might take up similar activist causes, but as I offer my constructions and interpretations of personal narratives of this study’s participants, it is important that I consider both how these “narratives” have come to be and where they may go, acknowledging the messiness of this research as it has been complicated by competing stories and narratives about Black women and education, but now told by Black women and not about them.
Methods

Location & Research Participants

**Location.** This research was conducted in New York City (NYC). With over one million students enrolled in public schools, the New York City Department of Education is the largest school district in the U.S. (American School and University, 2016). As a leader in the current education reform movement, New York State was an early adopter of the Common Core Learning Standards and related standardized testing. Numerous charter schools exist alongside public schools, often co-located within public school buildings. New York is also one of the country’s most segregated school systems (Cohen, 2015; Resmovits, 2014).

**Activist mothers.** Seven activist mothers agreed to participate in this study. The mothers were identified through a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) or what Ladson-Billings (1994) calls “community nomination” (p. 147). Through my own activist activities as a parent, I recruited two parents that I knew. Additionally, I solicited recommendations of participants from other parents, teachers, principals, and district level staff, such as family leadership coordinators who have contact with activist mothers in their daily work. In total twelve mothers were recommended/solicited. All expressed interest in the project, but only seven of the twelve were able to commit their time to participate at the time of the study. All of the mothers identify as being “African American” or “Black” and meet the criteria of being parents/guardians of children who currently or had attended New York City public schools, and currently participate in some form of education activism. By
education activism, I mean the mothers have taken some form of action with the intention of making their child’s school or district a better learning environment for children. Their activist activities varied and included actions taken individually as well as through participation in a group. Key demographic information is provided in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 shows information specific to participants’ roles as mother.

Table 3.1
Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial Identification</th>
<th>US Citizenship Status</th>
<th>Location of Own Schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akeelah</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Black, Interracial</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>UK and NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Black, African American,</td>
<td>US Citizen</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>Black, Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Legal Alien</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2

Participants’ Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Children*</th>
<th>Motherhood Relationship to Children</th>
<th>Children Currently in Public School</th>
<th>Grandchildren Currently in Public School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akeelah</td>
<td>4+</td>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>4+</td>
<td>Biological, Non-biological</td>
<td>4+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Non-biological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers above four are not specified to protect anonymity.

Data Collection

Data collection took two main forms, conversational interviewing, including one-on-one conversations (interviews) and community-sharing interviews (focus group interviews), and reflexive journaling. Each form of data collection is described below.

One-on-one conversations (interviews). In keeping with Black feminist thought, I employed an approach to culturally sensitive interviewing that allowed me to engage in free, open dialogue with the activist mothers, encouraging in the sharing of, and cogeneration of, stories. I interviewed seven research participants, or activist mothers, in one-on-one conversations, using an in-depth interview design that ranged from semi-structured to unstructured (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 1998). I interviewed each one individually three times for 45-120 minutes each time. I went into the interviews with a loosely structured set of interview questions (Appendix A). These
questions were inspired by Collins’ (2013) domains of power framework. The questions were designed for use across the three sessions, understanding that each interaction I had was unique; in fact, I addressed with one mother in the first session was not addressed until the second or third session with another. Since these were conversations, rather than structured interviews, there was much room for discourse that deviated from the prepared questions, as my intent was to respect the theorizing women were doing of their own experiences. While it was my original intention to meet with each mother in person for each conversation over the course of four months, their extremely busy schedules meant that I had to extend my data collection period, and ultimately talk to some of the women over the phone for later conversations.

**Conversation 1.** The first conversation was used to gather some general information about each mother, the school, and other contextual information that may be important. I had intended this conversation to be a semi-structured, exploratory interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) using the interview guide to be sure to gather important background information. However, I started with sharing of information about the study and my own background and some discussion of their activism and why the participant chose to participate in the study. This approach allowed me to develop rapport, as well as to give the participant the freedom to share elements of her life in her own way. Since these were conversations, rather than question and answer style interviews, the discussion meandered, and the questions from the interview guide were addressed out of order, when they were addressed.

**Conversation 2.** The second conversation built upon the first, provided an opportunity to check in about stories shared in the first conversation and test theories as
we co-created knowledge. Since all participants had ongoing projects as activists, conversations usually began with an update on that work. This conversation was loosely structured to allow the participant freedom to share what they felt was important, while allowing me to address questions on the interview guide that have not yet been answered.

**Conversation 3.** The third one-on-one conversation was intended to take place after a group conversation (focus group) with 2-3 other participants as well as myself as the researcher. For the three participants who did participate in a group conversation, this third one-on-one conversation was opportunity to debrief from the group conversation. For all participants, it also served as a last chance to address any remaining questions on the interview guide that seemed important. However, this conversation mostly served as an opportunity to check in on current projects, about stories previously shared and test theories as we co-created knowledge.

**Community-Sharing Interviews (Focus Group Interviews).** Each participant was invited to participate in a focus group interview, which I will called community-sharing interview. I intend to conduct two such interviews to accommodate the schedules of the seven participants and allow for small enough groups that there would be enough time for each mother to share stories. Building on the notion of co-constructed knowledge through conversation, the community-sharing interview was to provide a space for the mothers to talk about their experiences to a larger audience than myself. The community-sharing interviews were intended to offer an opportunity for conversation to happen in a shared social setting that for some may feel more comfortable than the one-on-one conversations. Madriz (2000) writes, “The collective experience of the focus group empowers participants to take control of the discussion process, moving the conversation
toward areas of the topic relevant to them” (p. 847). Only three of the seven participants were able to participate in a community-sharing interview. The rest of the mothers had such different schedules, that I was unable to find common times for group conversations.

Similar to the one-on-one interviews, the community sharing interview had an interview guide (Appendix B). The community-sharing interviews provided a new audience for the participants to tell their stories to. Rooted in African-based oral tradition and African American culture, the stories and storytelling dialogue is essential for developing and validating knowledge claims within the Black feminist thought framework (Collins, 1989). Knowledge was co-produced by the group, rather than by just me and a single participant, thus the community-sharing approach had the potential to reduce researcher influence more than the one-to-one interviews. However, because two of the participants already knew each other, as the conversation facilitator, an important role ended up being to make sure that all three mothers participated in the conversation.

**Journaling.** Throughout the research project, I engaged in self-reflexive journaling about the research process itself. Pillow (2003) writes of reflexivity that it “not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced” (p. 178). Through this process I sought to explore how my assumptions, biases, expectations, fears and hopes, which are possibly changing, influence my interactions with the participants, and my developing interpretations of the data. In doing so, the journal became a space to attend to power relations throughout the research process as I grappled with the difficult task of representation.
In addition to this, journaling was a way for me to record my interpretations of my memories of my own life-stories around education activism. I wrote in response to the questions I ask the other mothers. In this way, I explored my own responses to my first set of research questions. I also wrote about the stories I shared with the mothers in response to the stories they shared with me to help better understand my own participation in the conversations. Maylor (2009) drawing from both Black feminism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) writes about doing research as a Black woman. She writes, “A part of ‘naming one’s own reality’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14) involves paying attention to incidents or events that have affected me as a researcher” (p.54). Journaling provided the opportunity to better understand my own influences on the research process, especially as I engaged in ongoing analysis.

**Data Analysis**

As I tried to make meaning of the stories participants tell, narrative analysis allowed me to preserve the stories that were co-constructed in the conversational interviews. Though Riessman (2008) uses the terms narrative and story interchangeably, for clarity I will call the retelling of events by participants through dialogue “stories,” while I refer to my retelling of these stories in written form as “narratives.” Consistent with traditions of narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), these narratives retain the storied elements of the verbal recollection of the events shared to the best of my ability.

Riessman (1993) discusses the analysis process as beginning at the telling level, since even at this stage of the research process, decisions were made about how I
interpreted, as well as ultimately composed, “the narratives.” This is consistent with a Black feminist approach that assumes that knowledge is being co-constructed even as the stories are being told. However, knowledge construction continued throughout the research process. Transcribing also involves decision making about what counts and how the narrative may be interpreted. Therefore, following Riessman’s recommendation, interviews were transcribed verbatim, capturing all speech and to the extent it was possible “other striking features of the conversation on paper (e.g. crying, laughing, very long pauses)” (Riesmann, 1993, p. 56).

I coded the transcripts borrowing from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), looking for gerunds that repeated, as well as key terms from Black feminist thought, such as race, racism, mother, and words describing activist activities. (Collins, 2000). Open-ended coding was an important place to start so that I did not fall into the trappings of only finding what I expected to find, and in fact, it was through this particular method that the theme of working with the teachers’ union was identified. Once initial themes were identified, selections of transcripts were identified for further analysis. Detailed analysis came after selections had been identified, and involved looking for themes unique to and across individual participants, as well as overlaying key concepts from the theoretical framings, including concepts such as othermothering and activism as resistance and direct confrontation from Black feminist thought and Collins’ domains of power. See Appendix C for a coding schema that illustrates the process with sample codes. Simultaneously, I engaged in dialogue with participants around selected pieces of data to learn more about how they were making sense of our conversations and to test the credibility of my own interpretations of the data.
It was my intention to organize my analysis of these data thematically. One example of this approach is a narrative study by Rosier (2000) in which she presents the narratives of Black mothers whose children are transitioning from Head Start to school in an inner-city setting thematically. She recognizes the diversity within individual narratives, yet identifies and names what she interprets as patterns that cut across the narratives, providing the basis for her conclusions. Similarly, Luttrell’s (1997) study of working-class women who have returned to school employs a thematic approach to analysis as she compares the women’s identity development in two distinct settings, and considers the role of class, gender and racial oppression.

With the potential to shed light on the ways in which the participants understand their activities as activism as well as how their activism may be situated in the educational landscape, core themes of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), including work, family, sexual politics, motherhood and activism provided a starting point for the thematic analysis which took place after the first round of initial coding. Assumed within these themes is an analysis that attends to the intersections of gender, race and class (Collins, 2000), making these themes good potential starting points for analyzing how the mothers experience race, class and gender as activists.

Riessman (1993) warns that “to avoid the tendency to read a narrative simply for content, and the equally dangerous tendency to read it as evidence for a prior theory” (p. 61). It is important that the researcher begin analysis with the structure of the narrative. While recognizing the unavoidability of interpretation, she argues that the speaker’s voice can be privileged by starting from how the researcher perceives and interprets how meaning is constructed and variably, by whom within the conversation, recognizing the
situatedness of the talk within “social, cultural and institutional discourses, which must be brought to bear to interpret them” (p. 61). Part of this process is acknowledging the power relations at play in the construction of the through the conversation. This level of analysis sheds light on how meaning is made in the interview process.

**Role of the Researcher**

Henry (2006) writes that, “we tend to write about the topics we want to read about ourselves,” suggesting that these scholarly works “represent a correction of the past; perhaps a continuation of historical and cultural memory” (p. 333). As an African American parent in the NYC public school system who experienced and continue to experience oppression as I advocate for my children, I find myself drawn to the stories of others, both historical and contemporary that parallel my own. Like the participants in this study, I too am an activist for justice within our education system. This research is therefore deeply personal.

As a researcher, my influence cannot be eliminated, and therefore must be acknowledged. I understand that my positionality (Mensah, 2008) comes into play in the decisions I make about what knowledge to count as I record and write the stories of others. While I take this up in the next section, on validity, trustworthiness and ethical concerns, I must acknowledge here that rather than to attempt to create a myth of objectivity, I operate fully within a framework that embraces subjectivity, recognizing the situatedness not only of our experiences, but of the research itself. In order to understand this, I have included reflexive journaling as part of my methodology. But I also want to be sure to be inclusive of my participants in the research process, so my research design
of one-on-one and group conversations allows them to co-create the knowledge produced by this study.

**Trustworthiness and Ethical Concerns**

In narrative research, the question of validity is two-fold. Being questioned is both the story told by the participant and the analysis provided by the researcher (Riessman, 2008). To this end, Riessman offers several approaches to address trustworthiness for narrative studies, suggesting that they are not one-size-fits-all approaches and should be appropriately employed depending upon the nature of the study. For this study, one suggested method that I used was what Riessman (1993) calls “correspondence” but is also referred to as “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Riessman further suggests that doing so allows for the gaining of additional theoretical insight. However, she warns this method in no way guarantees validity given the changing nature of stories, and as the researcher I am ultimately responsible for my interpretations. Yet, in keeping true to a Black feminist approach, I needed to do more than simple member checks for quoted accuracy. Participants were part of the knowledge-making process, and therefore analysis process throughout the research. After the first one-one-one interview, I cycled back to make sure that I was allowing for this co-production of knowledge, and the final conversation/interview was specifically designed for this purpose. In addition to following up on comments made by the individual mothers in their final interviews, we talked about themes I saw in the data across participants. I sought their input and tested theories I was developing. This honored the epistemological assumption of Black
feminist thought that connectedness is essential when using dialogue to assess knowledge claims (Collins, 2000).

I approached this research as a form of intellectual activism (Collins, 2013). As a parent activist who has spent more time writing as of late than engaging in other activities that might be considered in service to the cause of creating more socially just schools for our children, I feel ethically bound to make sure this research serves African American parent communities. One way I see this happening is through the research process itself, engaging other activists in the intellectual work that helps us better understand our actions, that may support us in future actions. At the same time, shedding light on the importance of African American parents’ activism for the broader educational community, showing the positive work the of participants in this study, as well as exposing the challenges, has the potential to work in service to their causes.

Limitations

As I am proposing a narrative study, it is important to recognize its limitations. The nature of narrative studies can be challenging, for they require a small sample size often drawn from unrepresentative pools, making generalization nearly impossible (Riessman, 1993). However, being consistent with Collins’ third characteristic of the “ethic of caring,” the focus on individual uniqueness, this study seeks a deeper understanding of the hows and whys of my particular interpretations of the “experiences” of the seven mothers who participate in the study, with the belief that while there may be thematic overlap between narratives it is important to respect and retain the individuality that makes up these narratives.
Language becomes a challenge when conducting work such as this. Black feminist thought is an epistemology that is not typically used in academic settings, so at times, having to map onto institutional expectations requires skillful use of language as I attempt to defend a way of knowing that may be different than that used by my readers. For example, when it comes to notions of trustworthiness, “the truth” comes from dialogue based on individual and collective experiences. I am not concerned with the details of the “what happened” of those experiences so much as the “how it was understood.” What meaning was made by those experiences? But meanings may shift situationally, so it is important to understand the situatedness of both myself as researcher and of the participants as claims are being made. Also important is whose understanding is being privileged. In this study, ultimately as the one who makes the decisions about what is written, no matter how much I claim to co-construct knowledge with the participants, I am privileging the meaning I, as researcher/mother/activist, make of what I perceive to be the meanings as researcher/mother/activist and what I perceive to be the meanings made by Black mother activists, understanding that other people, and even the mothers, might make different meaning of similar experiences.

Basic methodological terms such as interview and focus group too are problematic within this methodology. I chose to use “conversation” in place of “interview” to be more descriptive of the process that took place, since knowledge is constructed through dialogue within this framework, yet I default to including the term “interview” to explain how this process relates to other research. Needing to situate this research and methodological approach in accordance with the hegemonic norm illustrates the need for situated knowledge and privileging of Black mothers’ viewpoints. Black
feminist thought provides a methodology, but not a clear cut set of methodological tools that can simultaneously resist hegemonic structures while gaining (much needed) acceptance for a new researcher in an academic world that marginalizes Black feminisms.

So, in reverting back to the normative language I fall into the trappings Audre Lorde (1979) warns of when she says, “for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house [italics original to text]” (p. 16).

Finally, a limitation to this study that was not predicted was time. Activist mothers are extremely busy. Their activism is in addition to all the things they do in their daily lives as mothers, homemakers, community members, and employees. All but one of the mothers were actively raising children in their homes at the time of data collection, and most had multiple children in the home. All engage in typical homemaking activities, such as cleaning, grocery shopping, and cooking on a daily basis. In addition, five out of the seven women were employed outside of the home in some capacity or another. During the time of data collection, they were all engaged in at least one organized campaign, and several were involved with multiple actions. The result is that these women were extremely busy and difficult to pin down, requiring that compromises be made in allowing for phone conversations in place of face-to-face conversations, and allowing the data collection period to extend months longer than planned. While sufficient data was collected through individual conversations, the results were limited in that I was unable to conduct all of the group conversations planned. Additionally, there were other mothers who expressed interest in participating in the study, but they were unable to commit to the time required to meet with me. Thus the nature of activism as being something one does in addition to their usual responsibilities – not unlike the
burden of labor on women of color faculty in universities who pick up additional responsibilities, especially to students of color, yet are not relieved of any other responsibilities or requirements for advancement (Baez, 2000; Few-Demo, Piercy & Stremmel, 2016; Hall, 2016; Matthew, 2016). Thus, time was an understandable limit considering the availability of the women who were actively engaged in other activities, including this research.
Chapter IV

FINDINGS

RESEARCHING IN THE RAW: OPENING THE FLOODGATES

*In the comfort of daily conversations, though serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness and right to exist.* (Collins, 2000, p. 113)

**Introduction**

As I embarked on my research projected around African American mothers’ activism for educational justice in New York City, I anticipated hearing stories of working in schools, with local school districts and at the city-wide and state-wide levels. I anticipated stories of rallies and marches. I anticipated hearing about frustrations with a school system that is too large, too bureaucratic, and plagued with institutional racism. I expected stories of advocacy for children. To an extent, I got what I expected, but I got so much more. What I had not anticipated was how the mothers who consented to participate in my study would open their hearts as well as their mouths. My initial interview protocol called for conversations of sixty to ninety minutes, yet more than one interview went on for well over two hours. They had so much to say, and I could not stop them because we had reached an arbitrary time limit that I had set before I knew what they were going to tell me. As long as they were wanting to talk, we kept talking.
In these conversations, the mothers shared pieces of themselves. While they spoke passionately about their activism, there were also moments when their voices got lower and they shared, as one mother put it, “their truths” – their unique experiences that led them to the work they do and in some cases, the raw pain that stems from these experiences that they carry with them as they walk through this life. As I listened to the mothers, I held back tears and felt honored to be trusted with their stories. Sometimes we cried together and sometimes we laughed. To do the activist mothers and their stories justice, this chapter is going to be a departure from the format my other findings chapters took. Unlike the two findings chapters that follow, this chapter does not take the form of a standalone article.

This chapter serves several functions. It introduces the mothers who participated in the research with a certain level of intimacy that cannot be gained through a table or brief description. These stories also speak to the research questions, sometimes very directly and sometimes indirectly. I have selected short stories that for each woman was related to me as part of an explanation for what drives their activism, thus questions addressing Research Question 1: How do African American mothers in this study understand themselves as education activists? And the sub-question: What do the mothers identify as motivation for their activities or actions? For some the particular situations recalled were turning points in their lives, experiences so significant that they were motivated to work for change, but in some cases, what they shared was more ongoing and more shaped who they are as a person and therefore as an activist.

Research Question 2: How do the African American mothers in this study understand the context of the educational landscape in which their activism is situated?
and its sub-question: How are issues of power, knowledge, race, gender and class expressed and analyzed in the stories shared by these mothers? are also taken up in these stories. That said, sometimes the stories were told to me in parts, so as the researcher, I take license to piece together the whole from different parts of a conversation or conversations. It should be noted, that the stories offered in this chapter are only a small bit of what was shared during hours of interviewing. These stories give a glimpse of what these mothers were thinking about, but they do not truly do justice to the complexities of their lives – they are still just snapshots from a day or a period of their lives.

I conclude this chapter with my own experience of the process of doing this research with these inspiring women. Here I will examine my role as a researcher and the way in which knowledge is being produced.

**Barbara: Sharing a Personal Tragedy**

Barbara was raised in Queens, New York. She was the younger of two children in a middle-class family. Education was stressed in her home and her parents were involved. She continues to live in the borough she grew up in, raising her own three children there. Her older two started their education in Christian schools, but eventually they were moved to public school. Her younger one only attended public school. At the time of the interview, only her youngest was still in school.

Who am I? Mother of three. Married mother of three. I guess I, I do a lot of community service work. Um here at work, outside of work. President of my son’s PTA at his school, [committees omitted to protect anonymity], . . . So, uh, I hold positions in each one of those organizations. And I am on an advisory board for an afterschool program. . . . Yeah, so mother of three.
So my oldest passed away in his senior year in college. He was on his way home, got into an accident on the highway, and while he was waiting for somebody to come to pick up his car, somebody struck and killed him on the highway. He would have been 27 this year. He was in his senior year, so he was due to graduate. (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

Barbara shared this story about her son very early in our first conversation – my first interview for the project – and I did not see it coming. Sitting there, I wondered what I had gotten myself into as tears welled up in my eyes. I tried not to show how much it was affecting me, but I didn’t want to seem indifferent either. Not being sure what to do, I let Barbara lead the conversation where she wanted, and we left the subject of her son’s death for a while. However, as she began to talk about herself as a parent leader and how she relates to other parents, she shared more about her experiences of losing a child and what it meant for her youngest son.

A lot of times [parents] feel embarrassed because of whatever reason. Or they get the total opposite and get very offensive when you try to reach out, and so my hope is that being a part of the PTA, I talk to them. You know, ‘listen I have things going on of my own. My child is not perfect, because I am standing up here talking to you. My child has issues, he has challenges. But, that does not take away from us, us as parents here trying to help our children.’ (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

Barbara’s activism is centered around getting other parents involved in their children’s education. Through her activities, she experiences resistance, which in itself may be a form of activism, from other parents who view her not as another parent, but as part of the school.

You know at the last meeting we had, one parent had brought up that uh, I think after the elections, children just reflect what’s going on in the homes. And the kids were making fun of her son because of his weight. And this was after the elections, because I was kinda, like, surprised. Because I’m like is this a result of everything else that they’ve been seeing for the past how many months between the two candidates and how nasty things have gotten to take it that it’s okay for
you to talk to people like that? No it’s not, you know what I mean? (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

Barbara sees the teasing of the other mother’s child as situated in a sociopolitical context where national leaders are not nice to one another and teasing and bullying appear to be condoned.

So she brought it up, and that was the night that we had a meet and greet the guidance counselors. It wasn’t for them to have one-on-ones, but just to know who your guidance counselor is . . . So, it was to let parents know, because sometimes they just think that the guidance counselors are all about the grades. No, the guidance counselors are about the child, it’s not just the grades. And so when she brought that up, um, you know I tried to reassure her, because with my youngest we recently found out that um, he doesn’t remember the day that my son passed away. He remembers, he knows he’s gone. He remembers the funeral, but the actual day that he was in that accident, when we went to the hospital, saw him before he passed, he remembers nothing. And so, all this time I’m thinking he’s healed, ‘cause everybody was still like healing, and he seemed to be the quickest that bounced back, he was 10 at the time when it happened. (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

Wanting to illustrate the ways in which the guidance team is helpful, Barbara opened up and shared a bit of her own story by telling this other mother how the guidance team supported her son.

So, my concern was there, but not as much as my older son, because I knew that my older son, they were best friends. And so, it was devastating for him and I put him in counseling . . . But not for [my younger son], because I talked to him and he seemed to be fine. They asked him in English to write something that you know, about something good or bad, whatever, but something significant impact in your life, and I just knew that that was what he was going to write about. And he goes, “I don’t remember, mom.” And I just looked at him, and I was like, “what do you mean?” thinking he was joking. And he was like, “I don’t remember that.” And that’s when it clicked for me. (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

Barbara didn’t realize that her younger son was struggling with the death of his brother because she was more focused on the more obvious ways in which her second son was reacting.
So when his guidance counselor reached out to me, and she was like, “I’ve seen him from 9th grade, something’s wrong. I don’t understand it, this is not the same child that I’ve known for the past two years.” She brought it to my attention and then that’s when I told her what happened in class. (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

The guidance counselor was the one who brought the younger son’s struggles to light for Barbara.

I told that to the parent because I wanted her to understand, because the way we have it set up in our school is that they follow them from day one. So you don’t change guidance counselors every year. You have the same guidance counselor and that guidance counselor follows your child through to the end. So she was able to see the changes. So I said, “so don’t think that they don’t care, but they do,” And I explained the whole situation to her, and a lot of the parents came back to me and it was like they didn’t know. You know, I don’t always talk about my older son. I do, but people don’t know that he’s passed. So, and a lot of parents came to me and said, “I didn’t know,” and, “I’m really sorry.” And they were like telling me their own experiences. And you know, it took it to a different level for them. Because now they understood that I’m not just standing here just to say that I’m PTA president but you know, but I’m standing here because I care, I care about the children that are here. I care about what goes on in the school. I care about the teachers that are here, because they are teaching our children. Not just to bash teachers when you think they should have done something for my child. No, it’s not always like that. I said you get both stories because your children will tell you one thing and you sit there and you have them in the room because I said don’t do the conversation with the guidance counselor or the teacher without your child. ‘Cause I told my son, I want you to hear what’s being said. But I also want you to understand what I’m saying to them. And I need for you, for all of us to be on the same page. It’s not, I’m not coming in here to bash you because I feel that my son is right. I’m coming in here to make sure that we are all on the same page to get him moving forward. It’s about getting him on the right foot and moving forward.

She tries to connect with the other mother by stating that she is like other mothers, that she cares and she wants them to understand how they can work with the school.

So I tell the parents that on a personal level so that they can understand, ‘you know, I’m looking out for your child, as much as I’m looking out for my own.’ So, I think in that aspect, it kinda like changed for them. So they understood that I’m trying to bring workshops to you that are meaningful to you. What’s meaningful to one school might not be meaningful in another. So trying to figure out how do I get them in. Like how do I get them to participate, because at the end of the day this is your child. (Barbara, November 29, 2016)
Sharing the story of what happened with her younger son, she illustrates for parents how schools can play a positive role in supporting students experiencing difficulties. Of course in doing so, she opens herself up to attention she may not be seeking, and to an extent shows them her own vulnerabilities.

We don’t get this time back. Okay, every day that passes. Tomorrow’s a new day, we can do something different tomorrow. But let’s keep it on a positive note and, and keep you moving forward and upward. I tell them if your child hits a bump, it’s okay to fall, but you’ve got to get back up. In order to keep moving, you’ve got to get back up. We can’t just sit there and say, ‘oooh, I fell.’ You know, and now I’m sitting on the ground. No, you’re able to get up on your own. You know, ‘cause when they get to college . . . (Barbara, November 29, 2016)

It seems as though when she says “you’ve got to get back up. In order to keep moving, you’ve got to get back up,” she is talking about herself and her own family as much as she is giving advice to others. Her work with parents is one of her ways of getting back up after the tragedy that has befallen her family.

Barbara mentioned the loss of her son one more time over the course of our conversations. In a conversation on workshops she was doing with parents around getting ready for the college going process, she shared, “so even if you pass away they don’t forgive a student loan” (Barbara, personal communication, March 7, 2017). Having the bank treat her deceased son’s college loan as a matter of accounting only strips both Barbara and her son of their humanity. Barbara reclaims the humanity of herself and her child by taking ownership of the story and using it to help other parents. One night changed her life and the lives of her family, and while she may be carrying the pain of loss with her, she uses it to draw strength to help others. Losing her son seemed to make her value life even more.
Alicia: “Born from Death” – A Story of Alienation and Conflict

Alicia identifies as a Black woman. She is interracial, with a Black father and a Jewish mother. She grew up in New York, feeling rooted in two boroughs – where she lived and where her father came from. Her parents were not consistently together and they struggled financially. She did not know her mother’s family, but was raised on the border of a Jewish neighborhood, and interacted with Orthodox Jews regularly. Alicia has two grown children and one granddaughter who now attends the same elementary school her children did. In addition to raising her own children, she taken on the role of othermother with her nephew, taking him in her home, and mentored several other young people.

My grandmother was born here [in the US] but she grew up on the Lower East Side. My grandfather came to the United States when he was about seventeen or twenty. And he came from the Ukraine or some part of Russia where they escaped the pogroms, the religious prosecution because they were Jews. And when my mother showed interest in Black people and Black men, she was a runaway at sixteen. And her family lived in New York and then they moved to Long Island, but her family disowned her. Because they were Jews they sat Shiva for her. So that was deep. I’ve written about being born from death. I come from death. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

As an interracial child growing up in the 1950’s and 1960’s, Alicia faced racial bias even within her own family. Her primary care taker was a White, Jewish woman, but she and her brother were brown and not accepted by her mother’s family or community, so from birth she was confronted with racism and a search for identity and belonging.

While her own Blackness may have resulted in alienation by some people, her White mother was able to gain her certain privileges, such as attending a private school in Manhattan.
In eleventh and twelfth grades, I got a scholarship to [private prep school], and I graduated in a class of twenty-one. I was the only person of color in the grade. Well, I think in the middle of the twelfth grade, another Black girl came in. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

These privileges worked to heighten her sense of alienation.

Again that dichotomy between attending an elite private school, and feeling as though intellectually I belonged but culturally I did not belong. Culturally I found a niche. My friends were Black and Puerto Rican, and none of them particularly intellectual, but that was my hang out crew. You know, getting high, drinking, hanging out, all against my family’s wishes. But sneaking out, really just trying to find myself. And so sex was part of that, and I really felt at sixteen, once I realized that I was going to have this baby, I actually hid it from my family as long as possible. I was a chubby girl, so I was able to do that. . . . I didn’t really know anything about sex. It was, it was a shock to me when I missed my period. Although I had been fooling around with a boy, a little older than I was, a Puerto Rican boy who lived in the projects. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

Not having the sense of belonging in her prep school, Alicia found it in other youth of color to hang out with outside of school. Still struggling to navigate her multiple identities, she engages in risky behavior and finds herself pregnant.

I confronted it and spoke to my family, and I was not given any choice. And in the back of my mind, knowing that my mother’s family had turned against her, and kick her out, I so desperately did not want to lose my family. And so I did what they wanted me to, but I was forever changed. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

Afraid that her family would do to her what her mother’s family had done her, Alicia felt powerless to resist her family’s wishes to have the baby given up for adoption.

I … gave birth to my first child, a son, during the summer between the eleventh and twelfth grades. And my family, my father, my father’s sister and my mother all decided that this was going to ruin my life. And they put a lot of pressure on me and insisted that I give my child up. And that was 1970. There was no Planned Parenthood. If there was, as a teenager I didn’t know about it. I didn’t have any resources. I didn’t have any adult to turn to, to talk to about this. And Roe v. Wade was just in the news and there were a few abortions being given at city hospitals. I tried Metropolitan. I tried Coney Island Hospital. And I didn’t want to have the baby. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)
Alicia didn’t want the pregnancy, but the time period was not one in which a young woman could easily obtain an abortion, especially without family support, which Alicia did not have. As a woman, her body was controlled by rules and regulations. Ultimately, Alicia had the baby.

And it is because of that, and that situation, knowing that I have a son who I have never seen, or been of part of, and though I pray for him every day, and I, I missed that opportunity to know a human being that I created and put in the world. To guide him, to love him. That pain, it never goes away. It’s been a part of me since I was sixteen. So, it hurts. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

Having given birth to the child, Alicia is haunted by the pain of separation, so much so that she is waiting and willing to welcome the son she doesn’t know back into her life. She informed her other children that “there could be a knock on the door and they are to welcome their brother” (Alicia, December 8, 2016).

The loss of this child motivates her to focus her activism on issues relating to children and mothers, shaping her attitudes about parenting, even before she had an opportunity to do it. Feeling violated, she works with youth to educate them, to prevent situations like hers own from happening. She seeks to empower them to be in control of their own bodies in ways that she was not in control of her own.

But also to the young people I’ve ever mentored or counseled, I’ve always talked about safe sex and also respecting your body, and respecting the other person’s body, and all the ramifications from not being prepared. Not being emotionally prepared to deal with the challenges of allowing your hormones to get the best of you. And it is the reason why I became a human rights activist, especially focused on parents. Because I know, that even at a young age, my parental rights were violated. My child was taken from me when I said, “No, I don’t want to do this.” And having him, even the awkwardness, it was a private adoption. The awkwardness of being in a wheelchair to be released from the hospital, and having to hold him because that was the rule in the hospital, even though I was a birth mother giving my child up for adoption, that to have to go through that and have him taken from my arms when I’m saying no, it was just awful. It’s despicable to have that happen. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)
Ultimately, Alicia decides she wants to keep her baby, but we see that the baby is forcibly removed. Once again, Alicia is not in control. Alicia sees this experience in which she feels her parental rights were violated as a call to action to help others protect their parent rights.

And so the joy of coming of age – getting married, having a child, having two children – the joy of motherhood, it is what defines me. Even though I don’t live through my children, but I am who I am because I had that opportunity. My two children and my granddaughter, [pause, then spoke through tears] don’t fill the hole in my heart from not being able to fulfill mothering my first child. But because I have such deep faith, I have to believe that God, He or She, Mother of the Universe, has protected and looked after my child and given him a loving home. That somehow he will come to understand or maybe find me or allow me to find him before I’m not here anymore. Or he’ll find his siblings and they’ll tell him that he was loved from afar. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

Alicia seems to be trying to come to terms with what happened, putting her faith in God that her son is okay, and yet she still holds out hope for a reunion because she allows motherhood to define her and as long as she is separated, she experiences the loss.

Knowing what I went through gives me a really deep insight to the pain that people suffer, other people suffer, because of the violation of their human rights. And it is the reason that I am an activist. It’s deep. (Alicia, December 8, 2016)

There is more to Alicia, but the combined stories of searching for her identity in a world she felt alienated in, along with having to give up a child she didn’t want to give away sit at her core. The stories, while seemingly distinct, are intertwined. As she was trying to understand who she was as a Black girl being raised by a White mom and going to an all-White prep school, she got pregnant and was persuaded to give up her child for adoption. With an awareness of the fate her mother faced as an Orthodox Jewish woman choosing to have a family with a Black man, Alicia felt powerless to challenge her own family when she wanted to make a life decision around family that they did not approve
of. She gave up, albeit unwillingly, a child she bore and has resented and regretted it ever since.

Together, these stories encompass injustices women suffer due to race, gender, religion and class. It is of a time, and yet it is timeless, both for her and for others who may be experiencing similar fates. We see the intersectionality of Alicia’s identity as a young woman of color, as a daughter of a Jew and a Black Baptist, as someone who grew up poor and yet had access to privileged spaces. She had to navigate all of those identities in one body, while as a teenager was learning about her own body. She draws purpose from these experiences. They drive her activism, giving her compassion for the suffering of others, and the motivation to co-found an activist group for mothers, especially women of color, and women who seek to improve education in New York and promote human rights.

**Shirley: Zero Tolerance**

Shirley grew up in the Caribbean. She grew up with parents who promoted education in the home. She reminisced about her father, riding her and her siblings to school on his bike – one in the handle bars, and one on the back – because he did not have a car, but she said it was her mother who was more educated, and interacted with the school. Shirley came to New York as a young adult, bringing one child with her. She later had a second daughter in New York. Her second child is a US citizen, but she and her eldest daughter are not. She raised her daughters as a single mother, sending them to public schools. Her youngest is still in high school, while her eldest is an adult. Shirley now has a granddaughter in public school that she often looks after.
Let me tell you the story. In high school, it was a scan in high school, and she had a nail clipper in her pocket, or her book bag, or whatever, but she had the nail clipper and that set off the scanning machine when she was going into school. So of course security stopped her and took her separate from the others. Now think also that this is a teenager and the development going on. Okay, so they [were] interviewing her. And don't get me wrong, I'm not saying she was right in everything she did, but some things could have been done differently because a teenager is going to be rebellious. A teenager is going to be defiant, whatever, okay? Now she's coming to school to learn and this scanner goes off because she has innocently a nail clipper on her person. The police force was called in. This was what the teacher had called me for, that he did not like to see her in handcuffs on a stretcher in one of the rooms there. What I was told, she was being defiant. She was not cooperating with what they were saying to her. The school called in the police force and they think handcuffing her and trying to calm her that way would help but that only made her even more agitated or whatever. As I said, thankfully that teacher, he called me. In seeing all of this, he did not like what was going on and he knew her and knew how she would be like, and was uncomfortable with that calling in.

So as I said, that's one of the first things that stick out because I don't see why I am totally in disagreement of people being treated that way as an individual. And subsequent to that, how things have gone, I believe if it was approached a different way, she wouldn't have ended up in St. Luke's Hospital at that time. That's one instance. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)

Shirley carries this story with her as a reminder of how schools are sites of racist policies that control Black bodies, stripping them of their humanity. For Shirley, this is a strong motivator for her activism. Shirley shared that in her daughter’s case, the outcome was mandated out-patient mental health visits, for what she believes was developmentally appropriate behavior handled poorly by the school and School Safety. Aware of how her daughter could have been caught in the School-to-Prison Pipeline, Shirley reported later in the same conversation:

But that same child graduated on the honor roll, thank God. She turned around. I’m not saying she was perfect. Yes, she had challenges, but some of it was not necessary, could have been dealt with other ways. She graduated on honor roll. Yeah, she didn’t leave from high school – well, yeah, the school-to-prison pipeline. She didn’t leave from school and end up in Ryker’s Island or whatever. She had been a turnaround. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)
Shirley’s daughter, now an adult, has a school-age daughter of her own, a job, and a mother who is thankful for her success. However, as a result of her experience with her older daughter, Shirley is determined not to let history repeat itself with her younger one, her granddaughter, or anyone else’s child if she can help it.

However, she sees her own story as compounded by her status and her daughter’s status as an immigrant. She goes on to explain:

I am the oldest, and my younger sister, the sister that follows me, and we’re just one year apart. The sister that followed me and the brother that followed me, both of them, they came here a little after high school when they came to this country and was going to college . . . . Afterwards, myself and my younger brother, the youngest of us, we came up after that because it was my sister's graduation so that’s how we initially came to this country, for her graduation. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)

Education was valued in the home, so college was something Shirley and her siblings did. Celebrating the success of her sister’s graduation provided an opportunity to come to the United States, and she stayed.

There was not a strong force of people here with children going through the system and all of that since I was the oldest one, and the two, my niece and nephew, they are younger than my daughter, so we didn't have that experience of people growing up here. My cousins, I'm one of the oldest ones too, so you can't even say a distant relative, they had children in the system, whatever. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)

However, Shirley did not have a network of family in New York who had arrived before her. There was no one to help her navigate the public school system, which was very different from the one on her island.

My oldest daughter experience here, what I saw her going through, what she experienced, coming home and tell mommy this and that happening. . . . So of course that time, other things, I say, "Why should the child have such difficulty?" And I said, "We're new to this system. A lot of things she could have gotten, she did not get because she was born [elsewhere]. She wasn't born here in comparison
to my younger daughter." A number of things that's afforded to other people who are Americans, were born and raised here, she did not have that opportunity. She did not qualify, okay, so that also caused her to miss a lot of opportunities that was open to her. I'm a single parent and coming here, there's the challenges there that, okay, if there is something available, why not explore and see what can happen. Everything you tried to do, it was a no-go. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)

Shirley felt that the challenges her eldest daughter faced were connected to her status as an immigrant. She felt that due to her immigration status, she was a second-class citizen, denied access to programs that could have supported her growth as a student.

So I didn't want the same thing. I didn't want the repeat of her circumstance for my younger one, so yes, I was active with my older daughter in school but my activism grew even more with the second one, because as I said, I didn't want her to walk that road, experience the same thing. (Shirley, December 16, 2017)

Shirley became more proactively involved in her younger daughter’s schooling. She names it as “activism,” implying the stance she took with her second child was more than just parent involvement.

As a single Afro-Caribbean woman raising two daughters in New York, Shirley struggled to learn a different school system. As the oldest in her family and no other relatives to have gone through parenting in the NYC school system before her, she found herself on her own. Having to forge her own way, and sought out supports, but as an immigrant mother to an immigrant child, she found doors closed to her. All the while, she is witnessing injustices done to her child that are out of her control.

That a child would be handcuffed and taken to a hospital over a nail clipper seems absurd, yet it happened, and not just to any child, but to her child. For Shirley, there was/is no denying this injustice. Having had this and other experiences as a mother of a Black, immigrant student in a system not designed to support her children’s success
motivates her to “stand in” for parents who cannot be there, to gather information and turn-key it to parents, who like herself when her older child was in the system, may not know what her rights are or what opportunities should be available.

**Andrea: Disabilities and Bullies**

Andrea grew up in New York City. She moved from one borough to another to raise her family near her husband’s. Her two children went through the public school system. At the time I interviewed her, her eldest was finishing his senior year. She is extremely active in school-based activities, and serves on numerous committees at the city-wide level as well. She lives with multiple disabilities that prevent her from working at this time. Understanding the gift of time this has given her, she devotes her time to improving education for all students.

When I was born, I had a [serious health issue]. And then when I turned around at 6 years old, I woke up in a seizure. We had bunk beds and I kind of fell down and crawled my way to my parents’ room. My mother works during the day and my father works at night because that’s when he drives the bus, at night. My vision was so blurred, I’m glad I made it to my parents’ room. And to my father I said, “I can’t see, I don’t know what’s going on.” And the last thing I know is that I felt like I was going to fall down the stairs. And then the next thing I see is myself in the ambulance, emergency room and them trying to hold me down. And that’s when I was diagnosed with [another serious health issue]. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Life was hard from the start for Andrea. She has had health issues from birth.

And from then I went to grade school and then in third grade my parents decided to put me in special [education]. So I was in special ed from third to 12th grade. But at the same time, as I’m getting older, they diagnosed me. . . So during the time I was in special ed, from third to about 9th grade, um back then when I was growing up it was a contained class of 10 kids and it was called “health conservation 31,” and it was a mixture of different kids who were categorized in special ed as learning disabled, because of my comprehension. But
at the same time I was at the top of my class because I was one of the smartest kids in class. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea’s physical health issues had direct effects on her education. Interestingly, even though Andrea has physical challenges, motor and mobility issues, she was placed in special education for learning disabilities.

I’m in special ed, smartest kid in the class, teacher’s pet, the one to be picked on. And there was one guy in class who, you know, boys when you’re little like you and he started to you know, treat me nice and then, you know, gave me bubble gum things from the bubble gum machine and then after a while, as we grew, I started to develop. That was a problem. But he picked on me because I was dark skinned. He was Jamaican, I was American. I’m a girl, he’s a boy. But I’m different. And I wasn’t the only one he picked on but it was like a rotation. So after a while, you know I got tired of it and my parents got tired of hearing it then it was like the honeymoon phase. He’ll leave me alone and he’ll pick on you and it was a rotation. But he would maybe from 4th or 5th grade up until 9th grade. He would pick on me. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

This environment was problematic for Andrea. She was bullied for many years.

Then we move on to junior high school so it even got worse there because he would rob me every day and luckily I was in walking distance from home, so he would rob me every day, he would spit on my clothes, my jackets and stuff so I would take my jackets off before I came in and take it to the Dean’s office and hang it up there because we had hooks at that point. So he would just hock up spit and yeah. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea is unable to stop the bullying, but finds ways to cope by avoiding particular patterns. Putting her jacket in the dean’s office is an example of how she actively works to problem solve.

By the 8th grade my father said, “Maybe you should change schools.” And I’m like, “He’s been harassing me since grade school and I’m not gonna leave because of him,” you know? I’m graduating. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea clearly endures the bullying, which becomes more aggressive over time. Her father’s response is to pull out, run away from the situation, but as a fighter, Andrea
resists the urge to run. She fights back in small ways, teasing here and there, but she doesn’t give in or give up.

And it’s sad because these teachers see this happen again and again and again and you know who this child is. And what’s funny is my parents were one of the only parents who came up and I never saw anyone’s parents. Maybe once but after that, I never saw those parents. But now I know that, I looked him up. He went to jail like two times for small little things because it’s karma. For everything we do to people, it comes back to you. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea blames her bully’s behavior on a lack of parental involvement. Despite a problematic relationship with her own father, she recognizes that his involvement contributed to her positive upbringing. As a mother in the schools, she stands in for absentee parents, recognizing that students need parents or other adults to advocate for them.

That’s one of the reasons I got into you know, because my parents even though they did what they did, my parents were there financially. Like my father said, “I did what I was supposed to do: provide a roof over your head, clothes and food.” And all the other stuff, that extra stuff, he ain’t gonna do. That’s not something he has to do. He dropped the ball on a lot of things. Even when I almost got raped, he says it was my fault. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea praises, yet criticizes her father. Compared to the absentee parents of her bully and other children, he appears to be a provider. Yet, she recognizes her father only provided a minimum of and blamed her for her problems with aggressions from boys rather than defending her against them. In her own role as a parent, Andrea defends children.

And my father used to press his hair. So he would say, “Go to the store, get some grease and come back.” He has to leave by 6, so he’s in the shower getting ready and I’m trying to get home and the boys come around me, swarming around me, with their bikes. They grabbed me and handcuffed me to a gate trying to tear up my shoes and my pants. And boom. They all know my parents. They all know my parents. But I didn’t scream because it’s broad daylight. It’s 5:00 in the afternoon cars whizzing by, no one sees nothing. No one. No one sees and I live
on the corner so no one passed by or nothing. And like right there, and my father, you know he was in the bathroom, I guess. His room is in the back. I didn’t scream or nothing. I was like “For what?” . . . Then one of them said, “we can’t do this. Her mother’s a cop.” . . . And I’m glad that they remembered that my mother is a cop. And I’m like, “First of all, you know how my father look.” Most people are more intimidated by him. For some reason they remembered somehow that she worked [for the police] and they let me go because of that. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

In addition to all the other hardships she has had to face, Andrea is sexually assaulted.

Andrea is spared some level of violence because her mother works for the police. It is not her father, or his position that rescues her, but rather the perceived power of her mother.

And then when I went inside to tell my father. Now first of all, I’m telling you what happened. I almost was raped I’m telling you who they are. Go around the corner and find them. No. He told me straight up no. He told me, “You should have said hello.” Yeah, he blamed it on me. He said, “Well, you’re punished.” It was Mother’s Day weekend that Friday before Mother’s Day. Because I was supposed to go to my aunt’s family, and he was like, “You’re not going nowhere and you’re going to be in your room for the rest of the weekend. You can’t do nothing.” And I was like, “Okay.” I was really upset so I waited for my mother to come home. And I said, “Well, he said I can’t go to my aunt’s house.” She said, “Don’t worry about it, just go.” (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea is generous in the way she excuses her father’s behavior, understanding that he too has had a difficult life. It is unclear as to whether she has forgiven him.

See that’s how my father was. My father wasn’t raised by his parents. His mother died when he was 16 during childbirth. And she also had cancer at the same time but she wanted to have the baby before she took care of the cancer so she died during childbirth. But that’s how my father is and people say I should get over it but, I have gotten over it. But it’s a lot of things I feel as a parent and as a father, especially of a girl, you’re there to protect. How are you going to protect me if you’re not there? I’ve gone through all this stuff. . . . (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea sees protecting the young as a role of a parent. She buys into gender stereotypes that men are supposed to protect women, and women protect children. Her own father failed to protect her as a girl child. She is determined to be different and seeks to protect
her own children in as many ways as she can, drawing from knowledges gained from her own experience in the special education system. This drive to protect children and youth is at the heart of her advocacy and her activism.

And my youngest right now, he’s in special ed. And I’m a former special ed student but I’m a parent of a special ed student. So I know ins and outs of how things should go. I’m making sure that he will never ever go through what I went through because I’m paying attention. I’m looking out for you. You know? It’s funny, because my father right now, he’s proud of me. And it’s sad because I’ve been doing this for a while but you never paid attention to me. Because as a special ed student, he never thought I would be capable of graduating high school. He didn’t think I was capable of even going to college. He didn’t think I was capable, so to prove to him that yea, this is what I was capable of doing. “Oh, you can’t do this, you can’t do that. You shouldn’t . . .” I’m like, “Why are you always telling me I shouldn’t do something?” And I always tell my kids, “Don’t you dare say you cannot do something. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Andrea is a survivor. An event at birth left her with a medical conditions and learning disabilities. She endured bullying, assault, and emotional abuse from men and boys in her life. Andrea grew up being told that she couldn’t do, and yet she sets out to prove her father and other doubters wrong every day. She graduated from high school, attended college, and she even defied the odds having children. She draws strength for her advocacy from knowing that she can do and does the things no one believed she was capable of.

I’m kinda blessed with them too because they actually shouldn’t even be here. Because like I told you, I have [a serious medical condition] so I have high risk pregnancies and my oldest was born one pound, no my oldest was born 3 lbs. 7 oz. and I had him three weeks early because I had high blood pressure when I got pregnant. . . . And [the youngest] was born 1 lb. 8 oz. But if you look at them today, you would never know it. (Andrea, January 6, 2017)

Having children was important to Andrea, and she strives to be a better parent than her own. She parents differently than her father, and drawing upon knowledge gained through the experience of her own childhood, looking to provide emotional support to her
sons, rather than belittle them. She educates herself about their needs and looks for solutions, rather than accepting what is offered. As a former special education student, she understands some of the she navigates the education system, especially the special education system, with ease working to ensure that her sons’ educational needs are met.

**Akeelah: Growing Up Quickly in the Face of Domestic Violence**

Akeelah has spent her entire life living in the same general neighborhood, where home and family are of great importance. Surviving domestic violence as a child, she sought a different lifestyle as an adult. The theme of caregiver runs throughout the story she shares about her own childhood and the activist she has become. She is the matriarch of a large family, and as an activist, she cares for her community.

I grew up – it was my mother, father and the children. I grew up in an abusive home, with my father being abusive toward my mother. Which I think is what, which I know it is what kinda drives me and motivates me today, but also has me still today facing challenges of kinda low self-esteem and dealing with self-confidence issues, still healing from all that I saw in my home, me being a young kid, as a child. I am the oldest. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

Akeelah makes direct connections between her motivation for activism and the abuse she endured as a child. She says, the “thinks” and then corrects herself to say that she “knows” that it motivates her activism. Nonetheless, she also confesses that there is lasting damage, and it has impacted her confidence and self-esteem.

I was really good in school, my mother tells this story when I was two that she, because I was so advanced that she was able to get me into a Head start program that really didn’t start until [age] 3. And so that what I – she said she thought I could read this book, but what happened she would read it to me so much that I would fake it and read and turn the pages. But it was, but yeah she said that from very young like having that throughout elementary school, middle school, I was in kinda gifted programs even when I got into high school. When I when to school in Brooklyn I was in a specialized high school program as well. And then I, once I
graduated, a year after I graduated is when I got pregnant. So I finished, I think, like a year and a half of college. So yeah, school was, I enjoyed school, I enjoyed reading. Math was never my strong point. But I played an instrument from the age I was, from sixth grade all the way to twelfth grade. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

Though she talks about having low self-esteem, Akeelah is aware of her own talents. Facing abuse, she strove to excel and was successful. She continues to cope with the trauma of domestic violence by acknowledging her accomplishments and strengths.

My mother went to parent teacher conferences. I don’t remember PTAs so much. But parent teacher conference she always went- she I don’t know why you are here she’s doing great. But she always went. My father, yeah, I don’t think wanted him in my school. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

Despite being a victim in the home, Akeelah’s mother was a role model for parent engagement with school. Akeelah takes her mother’s engagement to the next level by becoming an advocate for children.

So because of the abuse, I think [my mom and I] were really, not think, we were really close and she really needed the bond. And so I grew up feeling like being the caregiver, like even though I was a child, like always wanting to protect her and my siblings. So I think I became like a part of her – like a friend also to her as she was dealing with whatever she was dealing with trying to figure out how she was going to make her life better to get out of this situation. Yeah so, growing up it was --I mean I could do no wrong, but at the same time I was a friend too. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

When her mother, the direct recipient of the abuse becomes unable to fulfill the caregiver role, Akeelah steps in. The roles of mother and child are blurred. For Akeelah, the role of mother is one she took on early in life, and now with a large family, continues to play that role.

When I was in high school I met my husband. … We had mutual friends. . . . And so we got married . . . and I had my oldest daughter, first daughter a year after high school and then we got married, and so along that journey we have [many] children now and . . . grandchildren. . . . So yeah, we broke the cycle. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)
Akeelah mentions multiple times throughout the interviews the domestic violence she witnessed as a child. She talks about the abuse affecting her self-esteem. According to Collins, women who are the victims of such violence “are often silenced by the image of the “superstrong” Black woman” (2009, p. 172). Yet anyone who meets Akeelah would automatically see that superstrong Black woman. Akeelah has broken the cycle in more ways than one. Akeelah shared how she works the story of surviving domestic violence into her activism. She shares her story with others, breaking the silence around domestic violence and simultaneously humanizing and demystifying the superstrong Black woman by exposing her vulnerabilities.

Being the oldest child and wanting to protect her mother, who was a victim of domestic violence, Akeelah became a caregiver at a young age. Motherhood formalized and legitimized a role she had already taken on as a young Black girl. Akeelah’s activism stretches beyond education to issues of social and racial justice, but as a mother of multiple children, the school system provided a natural starting point.

Karen: Singled Out in School

A native of New York City, Karen remains in her childhood home raising her niece’s son, Malik, as his legal guardian. Karen does not have biological children. She raised her niece from a very young age, when her brother and sister-in-law were incapable. Her niece, following in her own mother’s footsteps, became pregnant as a teenager. She continued to parent her niece, taking on the role of “grandmother” to the baby. Over time, her niece has moved away and started a family in a new city. Karen
continues to care for the first child of her niece, now as the primary caregiver. With
regards to her niece’s daughter, who lives down South with her mother, Karen sees
herself as a “grandmother.” But now that she is alone in New York raising her niece’s
son, she as assumed the role of mother with him. Karen is an othermother, assuming
responsibility for childrearing when others cannot.

I grew up in New York, went to public school throughout elementary school,
junior high, back in the day it was junior high, now middle and the high school.
And then went to college upstate, I guess you would call it a private women’s
college. Graduated and went to [local college of education] and got a degree in
education. Years later went to [local college] and got a degree in social work.
(Karen, December 15, 2016)

Karen has two degrees in caring fields, education and social work. These are fields
typically more populated with women who are looked at as nurturers and caregivers.

I have one brother, younger, two parents, two parent household. Cohesive, you
know cohesive family, not at all dysfunctional, although somebody would
probably say my brother was, but not at all dysfunctional in the scheme of things.
And uh, you know later on in life, my niece joined the family and since then her
kids have, but we’re pretty much a small family, extended family is quite large
and very close, close extended family. (Karen, December 15, 2016)

Karen makes a point of stating that there is no dysfunction in her family when compared
with others, yet, she is raising her niece’s son, after raising her niece. Her brother was
absentee as a parent, and now that her niece has moved away as an adult and started a
family with a partner, Karen is raising the child from her niece’s teenage relationship.

My niece, let me talk about her first. It was a good relationship until she became
a teenager and then a whole bunch of just normal teenage stuff happened and you
know she began to act out. Became pregnant, has a son who I now have, and she’s
now 29 and doing well. She now has a 2-year old who’s autistic, so we’ve got
some issues, just recently diagnosed and trying to secure services for her. She’s in
[the South], small town, which is why there’s a problem in getting services. So
we’re dealing with that. (Karen, December 15, 2016)
Although Karen is not raising her niece’s daughter, Karen is engaged with her upbringing. She is helping her niece “deal” with having an autistic child, which means helping her advocate for services in a town where access is limited.

And then her son who I have is currently in a NYC non-traditional public school. And struggling a bit with math, but doing well, cause the school pretty much allows the kids to work at their own pace. Their focus is to allow kids to be critical thinkers and, basically that’s it. When he [Malik] came home with her, she was at my house as well. So he’s always been with me. And then legally, I took custody, I think he was 3 [years old] when I took custody. (Karen, December 15, 2016)

With Malik, Karen has been present and raising him from day one. When her niece was still under her roof, Karen did not take legal custody right away. However, when her niece moved, Karen kept Malik and sought to make the arrangement legal so that she had full control over child rearing decisions.

I had a wonderful school experience. The schools that I went to throughout, I did well academically. I loved my teachers. I loved my peers, you know, I just, school was just, if I could have been a professional student, fiscally, I would have, ‘cause school was just something I liked. [My parents] were involved. You know, I mean, back then probably not the way that I am, but, you know, they were involved with the PTA. If there were incidents at the school. (Karen, December 15, 2016)

Just as she describes her family experience in a positive light, Karen looks back on school positively. She attributes some of this to her parents’ involvement. Karen’s parents provided role models for school engagement, laying the groundwork for how she would later engage with schools on behalf of the children she raised.

I remember there was an incident a long time ago, a negative incident. The school used to take us to a dentist . . . back in the day and they took groups of kids to the dentist every Tuesday, I think it was. And on one of these Tuesdays, I was in the second grade and I will never forget the story. But, the way, the way the group went to the dentist, the last child who comes down is given an envelope. I didn’t know that, but I was the last child who came downstairs. So the teacher who accompanied us that particular day said, “Who has the letter? Who has the
letter?” So nobody said anything. And I had an envelope, but my history whenever a teacher gave me a letter, I took it home. It was, you know, a letter for my parents. So she kept asking and I didn’t say anything and nobody else said anything. And finally she lined us all up and she said, she went to each person and when she got to me she said, “You have it!”. And so I said, “but this, nobody told me to give this to you,” cause the letter indicated that they could leave, that was how she knew she had all of the kids. She, so she said, “you stupid idiot.” And I was like, “what?” (Karen, December 15, 2016)

As a good student who loved school, having a teacher insult her intelligence came as a shock.

So of course I went home and told my parents that this teacher had called me stupid idiot and they both were at the school the next morning. And when she arrived, cause she was called into the meeting and she arrived with candy. So my mom and that look said, “if you dare take a piece of candy...” You know, she knew she was really trying to buy me. She said, “if you dare,” she didn’t use her words, she said, “if you dare take a piece of candy, I’ll kill you,” so I knew to just step back and to just sit and listen. And she apologized. That was in the second grade. The same woman became my fifth and sixth grade teacher and I loved her dearly until her death. (Karen, December 15, 2016)

As involved parents, Karen’s parents modeled ways to address a problem in the school and advocate for a child with a positive outcome.

Yeah, I had a good time at school, but you know, my parents were there for me, not only for me, but for my brother as well. And my aunt worked in my school and there were things that I kind of knew from her as well. . . . I guess she was like a para, she wasn’t a teacher. But she accompanied students to different places and stuff. She was around where we didn’t want her. My cousin and I went to school together and she’d pop up when we didn’t need to see her. If we would have tried to do anything wrong, it couldn’t have happened because she was always there. (Karen, December 15, 2016)

What sets Karen apart from the other participants in the study is her relationship to the children she is raising. The first child she raised was her brother’s daughter.

Though actually in her parents’ custody and due to their ages at the time, Karen performed the majority of parenting duties for her niece. And then her niece had a baby, which she has been caring for since birth. Now her niece has another child, and although
they do not live in the same state, Karen is involved in supporting her niece as she raises her son. Biologically, Karen is not a mother, but the role she takes on with these family members is the “othermother.” Family is important to her, and in the absence of these children’s biological parents, she has become the mother, perpetuating African American traditions of mothering and othermothering. Having grown up with strong family bonds, including an aunt in her school and parents who served as role models in her youth, she draws strength from a supportive family. In turn, she strengthens her family by taking on the roles of caregiver and advocate.

Her parents were role models for parent engagement with the school, making the idea of being involved as a parent automatic. Karen shared a memory of a negative incident in school, but the way in which her parents responded resulted in a positive outcome that did not result in a significant change in her attitude about school. And it is through her love of school and her experiences as a parent that Karen has found purpose for her activism.

**Camille: Medical Maltreatment**

Camille is a mother of a large blended family. She has several children who have had or currently receive special education services. As a special education parent, she has experienced services within her local school district, as well as District 75, which is a citywide district for special education. District 75 oversees standalone classrooms and schools often spread through multiple sites, housed within local schools.

I thought I was going to go into education because I like to teach. I like, I like learning in general. So I liked school for that aspect. I might not have liked some other stuff at school, but I’ve always liked the idea that you can go there and you
can learn new things and expand. It was like “oh that’s why this does this” or something like that. That always fascinated me. You know and I like to inspire that in people, it’s like, worth something and sometimes you don’t even think of exploring the world around you and when you do, it’s like such a happy, you know, it just makes you glad that you’re here, you know. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille shared that she had considered teaching as a career, but with her current circumstances, she is a homemaker for her large family, overseeing the majority of the childrearing responsibilities, including dealing with securing and monitoring support services for her children who need them. Yet teaching is still something she has an interest in, and it is one form her activism takes. She is involved in training (teaching) other parents to become activists. Her interest in teaching also probably has some impact on why her activism is focused on education.

I think how I got into advocacy was more around my children. You know, I had my first child, and you know, my ex-husband was not really thrilled with that fact that he was diagnosed with autism when he was about, let’s say 2 and a half, going into 3 [years old]. And you know, me, I was just happy to have a diagnosis. Because the pediatrician made me feel like I was going crazy. Because she kept saying to me, oh, children grow in their own way, all children are different. Which I knew. But she also said, oh you’re a nervous Nellie, so she, she would push it off to nerves and stuff like that. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille’s initial concerns about her son were dismissed by the pediatrician as individual differences in child development. Unfortunately, is happens all too often, as Goin-Kochel, MacIntosh, and Myer (2006) found that some clinicians are slow to address parents’ concerns about atypical behaviors.

And I don’t think it was nerves, because even though I didn’t have children yet, I had, you know, I used to babysit, when I was younger, stuff like, it was one of the first jobs I had, I was always around kids. And I knew they all grew in different ways, but I also knew that if you were talking, you were progressing, you were meeting the milestones and then all of the sudden, you stop talking, something happened. Either, you went deaf and you couldn’t hear me anymore, or you know, you stopped giving me eye contact, you stopped, there’s a lot of stuff
he stopped doing. It wasn’t like he didn’t start. He stopped. And he was making
sentences. So he stopped, which was peculiar to me. So I said okay. And then one
of the things he would, my oldest son is he was stacking. So if he saw blocks or
cars or whatever it was the toy was, instead of using the cars to like run up and
down, he’d like stack them and line them up, and they had to be perfectly aligned
and you can’t put one out of his so you couldn’t pull one out of position and think
he was bugging out, kind of thing, so, um, like all the different things I was telling
her, but she wasn’t really interested in listening. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille recognized that something was different about her son’s behavior than the
behavior of other children, even though he was her first child. She tried to explain her
concerns to the pediatrician, but left feeling unheard.

So my mom worked at [local college with a medical school] for many [years],
well before that she worked as a nurse, she was a nurse, she did her nursing in
England and whatnot before she came here. We said, okay, let’s take him and see.
You know, so we took him to audiologist first thinking his hearing was gone, took
him to, everybody; I took him to, I didn’t know they had child behaviorists, but
apparently that’s a field. I took him to a child behaviorist, I took him to, and she
needed behavior thing herself, I guess, but anyway, long story made short, by the
time I got to a neurologist is when I got the diagnosis. But all of this takes time.
And in the meantime, the same pediatrician had said to me, oh, give it 6 months
and if it’s still happening in 6 months, I’ll give you a referral. And then 6 months
turned into 6 months turned into 6 months turned into 6 months and by the time
she was ready to give me a referral, I already had the diagnosis and I already had
him in um, in therapeutic nursery. So therapeutic nursery is what they call the
CPSE programs, the Community on Preschool Special Education. So, what she
did was not helpful. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Unwilling to wait for the doctor to come around to her point of view, Camille took her
son to multiple doctors until she had a diagnosis.

I don’t expect every doctor to know everything, because everybody’s human but
I find that if you have a child who is special needs, if you don’t have someone
who’s a developmentalist or a developmental pediactrician, it’s very hard to get a
diagnosis. Even though now the pediactricians I have are not necessarily
developmentalists, one teaches at um, one teaches at . . . Hospital and the other
teaches at . . . Hospital, and they are the type who, if your child’s supposed to be
walking by a certain time, they’ll actually call you in if it’s not happening. And
give you a referral, so it’s not based on, you know they’d rather be safe than
sorry, so they’d rather give you the referral, and they rule it out rather than wait
and I appreciate that because that’s what. . . . But I didn’t switch pediatricians until he was 7, with all this other stuff going on. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille acknowledges that her activism has been shaped by this early parenting experience. As she shared this story, frustration and anger came across in her voice. Having a child with autism is difficult enough, but having a doctor ignoring her pleas for help was consuming. Her child had stopped meeting his developmental markers and was showing signs that something was amiss, but when she asked for help, her concerns were dismissed as premature or over-reaction. Osborne and Reed (2008) noted that one source of stress for parents of children with autism was the communication with professionals regarding their children, and that often parents of preschool children found themselves having to rely on their resourcefulness, suggesting that Camille’s experience was not unique, something that she confirms in a later interview as she talks about other parents she has met through her activism who have experienced similar challenges.

Camille is a resourceful person who has also gone through the process of diagnosis with another child as well navigating special education in the Department of Education. She has educated herself and uses her knowledge to educate others. Special education advocacy has become a focus of her activism. Forming a working group on special education that includes parents, the DOE, the United Federation of Teachers, and Local DC-37, which includes parent coordinators, she organizes parents to educate educators, school staff and parents alike to improve educational opportunities for all children.
Reflection on the Research Process

I think it is necessary to acknowledge how my position as a researcher influenced the research process. As a Black woman who is also an activist for education justice, I was able to quickly build a relationship in solidarity with these mothers. After the first round of interviews, the more formal researcher/research participant role seemingly gave way to a more informal friendship, and often when transcribing the audio of the interviews, it was difficult to tell when friendly conversation gave way to “interviewing,” if it ever did. In this, I think I was successful at establishing a conversational approach to interviewing. Despite busy lives and hectic schedules, when we were able to connect, in person or by phone, the mothers were always eager to talk. I wonder if they too were getting something out of the conversations.

Before sitting down to write this chapter, I had the opportunity to talk to one of the participants about how I was making sense of “the data.” While as researchers, we often talk about the co-generation of knowledge referring to our influences on the participants’ stories, but less often do we invite our participants to help us co-generate knowledge about our own stories. In that conversation, I talked about how no one had the same experience, and there were multiple stories of hardships, obstacles and pain. The mother asked me if all of the participants were women of color. When I answered that all identify as being African American or Black, she gave me an all knowing, “Mm-hmm,” acknowledging the common experience of oppression of Black women in the United States. While this is in keeping with Black feminist thought (2000), talking through the
notion of a common experience of oppression with another Black woman and engaging in intellectual thought with her helped me understand better what I was seeing. I present them as fully human subjects.

As a researcher, I went through a coding process, examining the stories for commonalities, or themes, I think it important to note that one significant commonality was found not in the data itself, but rather in the process of collecting it. This commonality was a desire to be heard. The mothers welcomed the opportunity to tell about their lives. What they chose to share varied. For some, it was about exposing the injustices they have experienced, while others focused more on how they are working towards solutions. Sometimes the stories were sad or frustrating, while other times, what they told me was full of hope. No mother shared only one kind of story, and there was not one kind of story they all shared. However, they all displayed an excitement about the idea that someone is going to tell their stories and shed light on the work they are doing to better education for our children. Akeelah explained the phenomenon as such:

I mean there’s something about being a part of, and to your point, being connected to it, and then sharing your story. You’re not trying to hide anything, you know. Often we want people to hear, but then we don’t have people willing to ask us and really want deep conversation, so when we do, it’s a floodgate, you know. It’s a floodgate cause it’s like, oh yes, to get our story out, I want to share this. I want people to hear about it. (Akeelah, August 22, 2017)

According to Collins, as a group, Black women are always visible and open to “objectification” but, “this group treatment potentially renders each individual African American woman invisible as fully human” (2000, p. 110). Individuals’ humanity becomes visible when Black women have opportunity to get together and demonstrate an ethic of caring towards one another. Collins writes, “The issue of Black women being the
ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives” (p. 114). I cannot know to what extent my sharing a Black female mother activist identity aided in this research, but I sure that it did. As a Black woman mother activist, I feel an obligation to honor these women through my scholarship, which for now is the site of my own activism, sharing their individual stories and making their humanity visible.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

These mothers have shared these stories to expose oppression of Black women. They have shared these stories to claim their humanity. They have shared these stories are ways of demonstrating the complexities of their experiences that inform their activism. Looking across these stories, it is clear that each woman’s experiences are unique. At the same time, there were commonalities across their stories. They represent stories of oppression survived by these women who rather than give up chose paths of resistance and struggles for change. “Oppression describes any unjust situation where systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Collins, 2009, p. 6).

Since the criteria for participation was being an African American or Black identifying mother, the role race plays in the mothers’ lives was often assumed and not made explicit in stories the mothers shared. Likewise, gender, and class were often assumed experiences within the mothers’ stories. However, most of the narratives shared in this chapter relate an experience with oppression in which the intersectionality of race, gender, and class have some part in shaping their particular experiences. As Black
women, most of whom came from or experienced poverty at some point in their lives, what they experienced and shared illustrated the intersectionality of Black women’s identities (Collins, 2000).

For example, Alicia’s story of having her first born taken from her highlights the intersection of race, class and gender throughout her experience. The interplay of race, class and gender in oppression are complicated as Alicia lives as a Black daughter of a White Jewish mother, attends a posh private school, while hanging out with poor kids of color like herself, and not having control over her own body as a woman both in the conception and birth of her first born. For Shirley, immigrant status was also part of her identity. She spoke of the way she and her daughter were treated when her older daughter was in school. As she told the story of her daughter being taken by the police for a nail clipper, she emphasizes the intersection of her identities as a Black, immigrant woman from Jamaica.

Oppression was there in multiple facets of their lives – the interactions we have with family members, teachers, and institutions. Collins’ *domains of power framework* (2013) provides us with a way of looking at the oppression these women have experienced in their lives. Using Foucault’s notion that power is everywhere, the framework organizes power into these interconnected domains: (1) a structural domain; (2) a disciplinary domain; (3) cultural domain; and (4) interpersonal domain.

The *structural domain* includes the social institutions such as schools, government agencies, hospitals, and businesses where discrimination is experienced by individuals in minority groups. Camille’s story of struggling to get a diagnosis for her son with autism places power in the structural domain. Research also suggests that White
children are more likely to receive and earlier diagnosis of autism than Black children (Begeer, Bouk, Boussaid, Terwogt & Koot, 2008; Mandell, Listerud, Levy & Pinto-Martin, 2002). In Camille’s case, the healthcare system is the site of the power. While Karen’s story highlighted in this chapter is a positive one, Karen notes that her niece whom she raised now has a child other than the one Karen has custody of that she is now helping with. This second child is also a Black child with autism, and in other interview sessions, Karen shared a similar experience to Camille’s in the apathy of healthcare providers to help Black mothers diagnose their children with autism so that they can begin to receive the services their children need.

The disciplinary domain refers to how “modern bureaucracies regulate race relations though their rules and practices, primarily surveillance” (Collins, 2013, p. 72). This domain seems particularly relevant to current events as there has been much pushback against the way policing is conducted in Black communities in the United States. For Shirley, whose daughter was handcuffed over a nail clipper, this form of power is particularly salient. Research shows how the practice of using scanners in inner-city schools to surveil students of color regulates race relations by criminalizing Black youth. Since the 1980’s New York City has had metal detectors and X-ray machines in some schools. Students of color, in particular Black and Latino students, are much more likely to have to go through the daily ritual of scanning than White students (Aaron & Ye, 2015; Reyes, 2016). In New York City, metal detectors are managed through School Safety, a division of the New York City Police Department, which is larger than the entire Boston police department (Hirschfield, 2008). The presence of policing in public
schools is viewed as one dimension of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The New York Civil Liberties Union claims:

Directly schools send their students into the Pipeline through zero tolerance policies, and involving the police in minor discipline incidents. All too often, school rules are enforced through metal detectors, pat-downs and frisks, arrests, and referrals to the juvenile justice system. (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2017)

The cultural domain addresses how ideologies are constructed and shared, while the interpersonal domain is where social relationships between individuals are formed in daily living. Andrea’s story provides an example of both the cultural and interpersonal domains. Here we see cultural understandings of difference coming into play with race, gender and disability coming to the forefront in what became a daily, lived experience of physical and emotional bullying by individuals, including students at school as well as her father. For Akeelah, the domestic violence also exists between the cultural and interpersonal domains, as the culture of violence against women was perpetuated in the home and the oppression took place between individual players within the family.

All of these women are activists. They are mothers who became education activists by fighting for educational equity and justice in public schools. The stories they shared all suggest something about their motivations in activism, yet only a couple of these stories relate directly to school experiences. These are stories of oppressions they have managed and hardships they have overcome. In many cases, the women endured the trauma of having been stripped of their humanity, collectively across all domains of power, yet they persist. They can draw on the knowledge and strength to persist in the face of oppression as they pursue educational justice for their children and future generations of children.
Chapter V

FINDINGS

BLACK MOTHERS AS EDUCATION ACTIVISTS

Abstract

This is a study with seven African American mothers’ education activism in New York City. Narrative research methods with a Black feminist framework are employed to look at the various locations and ways mothers engage in activism. Drawing from the mothers’ stories of lived experiences, this research seeks to understand their definitions of activism, as well as how and where they enact it. This study finds that participants understandings of their activism are consistent with notions of “othermothering.” Their activism takes multiple forms, including quiet resistance and not so quiet resistance, working within and around existing structures created by the Department of Education as well as working with activist groups to directly challenge systemic oppression of African Americans in schools.

Key Words: Parent Engagement, Activism, African American Mothers, Othermothers, Black Feminist Thought

Introduction

Over the last decade, in the largest educational system in the United States, there has been a push to move from parent involvement to parent engagement. There is an
office dedicated to engaging parents in their children’s education known as the Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE). This office and those who work with parents in the schools stress the ways in which schools actively engage parents in the task of preparing students to be college and career ready. They do this with school and district level Parent Involvement Plans. Most recently, the Comprehensive Education Plan required for each school and district was revised to include goals associated with the Framework for Great Schools, including an element for how parents will engage around the enactment of each of the framework’s pillars.

On some level, these efforts can be viewed as a success, though success varies school by school. For example, one district in Brooklyn reported an increase in parent involvement in some schools now that they are submitting Parent Involvement Plans to the superintendent’s office (P. Walker, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Yet, this way of engaging parents is very much controlled by the Department of Education. There are extensive regulations known as the Chancellor’s Regulations that specify with exacting detail the ways in which parents can engage in leadership roles in their children’s schools. At the classroom level, the rules are determined by the teacher and the school culture. The Chancellors’ Regulations A-660 (New York City Department of Education, 2012) outline governance for Parent Associations and Presidents’ Councils, and the Chancellor’s Regulations A-655 (New York City Department of Education, 2012) do this for School and District Leadership Teams. These documents define the roles of parents, as well as set limits on the number of parents who can serve in leadership positions. The School Leadership Teams, led by the principal, and the District
Leadership Teams, led by the district superintendent, are responsible for creating the Comprehensive Education Plans and the Parent Involvement Plans.

This study looks at Black mothers who are parent activists, their understandings of their activism, and the spaces in which they advocate for their own agendas for public education. Examining the work of seven Black women who are “mothers” of children who were or are currently in the public school system, I explore the ways in which they move beyond the boundaries of parent engagement set by the DOE. These women are all current education activists, engaging with schools in sanctioned ways, yet also finding ways to make their voices heard and opinions known through a variety of creative ways.

**Theoretical Framework**

Often people think of activism as engaging in protests, strikes, or demonstrations for or against an issue, while advocacy may be thought of as involving less vigorous actions and may happen in smaller or less public settings. However, activism can take on various forms (Grace, 2015). This study builds on Collins’ (2000) strong connection between women’s activism and the act of mothering, which can look quite different than participating in a protest, though may be just as vigorous an act. This study focuses on mothers’ activism around educational issues.

Black feminist theory places Black women’s activism in two domains, resistance to and direct challenge to oppression (Collins, 2000). When people resist or avoid confrontation, they operate within the first domain. However, in terms of their children’s schooling this may appear to be lack of involvement. On the other hand, direct challenge can take more familiar forms of activism such picketing, letter writing, lobbying, and
more. In this study, mothers identified the goal of raising healthy, successful children we found that their activism may exist in either domain or cut across both.

Using a Black feminist framework, this study looks at activism from the perspective of seven mothers who identify as activists seeking to make changes that address social issues. It is my hope that in analyzing individual understandings of what, in particular contexts and situations, might constitute “activism” in education by mothers might be used encourage more participation in advocacy for children by African American parents, and more broadly, parents of color. Kakli’s (2011) research focused on one African American mother activist and suggests that if we are to increase parent involvement in education we need to better understand the motivations and actions of those who are already engaged. This work is an attempt to do just that, by shedding light on the way mothers see their own activism as it takes place in and out of school settings to gain a new or better understanding of the complex, yet necessary, relationships they form as they attempt to educate their children.

**Literature Review**

**Motherhood and Activism**

Although mothers play a particular role in American society, often having the responsibility for the education of their children attributed to them, motherhood itself is not a natural state of being. Rather it is a social and historical construction (Johnston & Swanson, 2003), and as such is affected by concomitant social constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Glenn, 1994). Conceptualizing motherhood as broader than the traditional notion of the biological mother who bore and raised her children, Collins
(2000) presents three kinds of “mothers” in African American communities, all of whom share in the responsibility of child rearing. In addition to “bloodmothers” or biological mothers, there are the “othermothers,” a term first defined by Stanlie James (1993) first defined the term “othermothers” to describe women with a non-biological relationship to the individuals for whom they have assumed parenting responsibilities, and Collins takes this a step farther, coming up with “community othermothers” whose work goes beyond direct childcare into the arena of advocating on behalf of the community’s children and their wellbeing. At the core of women’s experiences as othermothers, is the “ethic of caring,” which embraces social responsibility, a foundational element of Collins conceptualization of African American women’s activism.

**Parent Involvement and Activism**

How parent involvement is understood varies. Often parent involvement is described in terms of categories of activities parents engage in (Cervone & O’Leary, 1982; Davies, 1987; Epstein, 2001; Johnson, 2013). Most conceptualizations of parent involvement however, including Epstein’s (1995, 2011) frequently cited framework, are written for school administrators and teachers rather than for parents themselves, centering the role of the school and positioning parents as a support network for schools. Miretzky (2004) found, “research on parent-teacher relationships tends to relegate parents to visitor roles in schools and reinforce student achievement as the primary goal of parent-teacher relationships” (p. 814). Notable as focusing more on parental perspective are Hoover-Dempsey’s work (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) which considers parents’ perspective, and their comprehension of their
role in their children’s education and how that translates to involvement, and Cooper and Christie’s (2005) qualitative case study, which also considered the parental perspective. These few studies demonstrate a need for more work in this area.

Reynolds and Howard (2013) make the point that much of the discussion on parent involvement fails to critically analyze race and class dynamics, assuming the determination and hard work on the part of parents without acknowledgement of inequities of resources is what is needed to improve parental involvement. This leads to a discourse of the poor African American mother who does not care enough to put her child first (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). However, there is evidence that both historically and currently, African American parents demonstrate involvement levels that match that of White parents (Anderson, 1988; Cutler, 2000; Drummond and Stipek, 2004; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Kohl, Legua, & McMahon, 2000). Furthermore, they suggest that when parents’ actions fall short of school expectations, it is not for lack of wanting to be involved, but rather as a result of other barriers to involvement or a lack of communication about what expectations are. Another reason for a narrative critical of a perceived lack of parent involvement by African American mothers is that their activities outside of school go unrecognized by teachers who define involvement narrowly as participating in parent-teacher conferences and open houses (Rosier, 2000).

A counternarrative to a discourse of African American apathy towards parent involvement is provided in literature on parent involvement and empowerment research in urban school districts (Fine, 1993; Jackson & Cooper. 1989; Noguera, 2001). At the heart of this issue is distrust of school officials by African American parents. The result is likely the form of activism Collins (2000) refers to as resistance. The disparity between
the understandings of African American parents’ involvement in schooling both
historically and currently raises two questions. To what extent is involvement not visible?
And, what is happening that is potentially leading to the disenfranchisement of African
American parents that may lead to a decrease in involvement or lessen the visibility of
their involvement? To understand this, we must consider the location of African
American families within the American educational landscape.

Understanding the American Educational Landscape for African Americans

Although individuals all experience being African American in unique ways,
there are particular practices in the United States from slavery to institutional racism
today that marginalize African Americans in the broader American society and impact
their relationships to schools. Though the term “post-racial” has been bantered about
since the election of our first African American president, the extreme violence towards
African Americans, including children, by White people, often in law enforcement, in
this country in past and recent time makes it evident that we have in no way achieved a
post-racial society. Furthermore, the current president’s open disregard for racial justice
and the increase in hate crime since 2016 (Schaffner, MacWilliams & Nteta, 2017) would
suggest that, if anything, the nation is becoming even more racially polarized.

A decade after Brown v. Board of Education, maintaining the notion that there is a
difference between Blacks and Whites, the Moynihan Report (1965) and then Coleman’s
Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey (1966), commissioned by the U.S.
Department of Health, Education and Welfare in response to provisions in the Civil
Rights Act of 1964, laid the groundwork for research that would blame African American
parents for disparities in achievement between Black and White students (Meece & Kurtz-Costes, 2001).

In the early 1980’s *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, et al., 1983) began the standards-based reform movement (LaVenia, Cohen-Vogel & Lang, 2015). One major critique of *A Nation at Risk* was that it focused too much on the quality of education, not paying enough attention to social and economic factors, such as poverty, that affect educational outcomes (Ravitch, 2010). The Reagan administration left education reform to the states, and by the time Clinton took office in 1993, most states had developed curriculum standards and testing to measure achievement (Hayes, 2008).

While the standards movement was seen by some as a potential benefit to African American students, Clinton’s attack of the welfare program would negatively impact poor women and children and continue to perpetuate negative images about Black mothers. Comments made by congressmen likening mothers to animals shaped public opinion (Sidel, 1998) and scapegoats were made of poor mothers (Abromovitz & Piven, 1993, 2003). With Black mothers overrepresented as welfare recipients (Sidel, 1998), these attitudes reflect what Collins (1990) refers to as one of the controlling images of the Black woman’s fertility, the welfare mother who becomes objectified and scapegoated as a bad mother who threatens political and economic stability.

Following Clinton, the Bush and Obama administrations have pushed education policies that have increase standardization of learning, testing and privatization of public education (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2013). This reform movement in the U.S. is part of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which has made education reform a business, in which public funds can be captured for profit by individuals and
corporations. Testing becomes the tool for “accountability” (Au, 2013), and is used to close schools, justify privatization efforts. All of these efforts impact African American students who attend public schools at a rate of around 95% (Black Demographics, n.d.).

History shows us that the education of African American children has been fraught with challenges from the beginning of our nation. First, seen as less than equal to White children, then seen as culturally deficient, and now seen not as individual people but as numbers in business schemes, African American students have continuously been at a disadvantage. Throughout this same period, African American parents are also being marginalized. They are seen as less than equal to White parents, they are blamed for being culturally deficient and are scapegoated as bad parents, when their children under perform compared to White children. It should not be surprising then if African American parents seem disenfranchised.

**Activism: Responding to Injustice**

Researchers have demonstrated that African American parents are actively involved both at home (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Rosier, 2000) and as agents of change to school systems and structures that may not favor their children (Anderson, 1998; Cutler, 2000; Watkins, 2005). Furthermore, research shows that African American parents have been activists, standing up to the injustices their children face with regards to education.

In New York, where this research is located, there are two significant examples of African American parents’ activism. The first was the Harlem Boycott of 1958. After exhausting sanctioned avenues for complaint and getting no results to improve substandard schooling conditions, the parents planned a boycott in 1958. Nine families
kept their children out of school for 35 days, long enough for the City to take them to court for violation of New York State’s compulsory education law so that they could fight the City in the court system (de Forest, 2008; Weiner, 2010). The other notable example is the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis of 1968 which led to the parents in an African American community going head to head with the local teachers’ union over community control of the schools. This action included a PTA sponsored boycott of schools by nearly 5,700 students, which resulted in the firing of school staff and ultimately, a teachers’ strike (Buder, 1968). In recent years, parents have engaged in multiple smaller actions to improve educational conditions for their children. However, smaller actions are not getting the attention that large-scale actions such as boycotts receive.

One notable study on activism that does address the void of research is Kakli’s 2011 study looking at the narratives of one mother. Kakli found that “activism can stem from a variety of personal, cultural and structural influences” (p. 192), and noted that “race pervades Davis’ narratives” (p. 192), and the importance of their situatedness as Black women with specific histories and influences as this study hopes to do. A significant finding for Kakli was that even though personal events and circumstances led to activism, interactions with educators and community leaders influenced her activism, suggesting that educators should be encouraging the activism of African American mothers.
Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal narratives (Riessman, 1993) of African American mothers who engage in educational activism to better understand their lived experiences as mother-activists. In doing so, I engage Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which seven mothers in New York City define and enact activism. This research is guided by the following question: How do the African American mothers in this study understand themselves as activists (i.e., educational activists)?

1. How do these mothers define activism or their activities as activism?
2. Where/how do these mothers enact their activism?

Methodology

In developing Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) drew on her understanding of African American women’s understandings of what counts as knowledge. She refers to Black feminist thought as both theory and epistemology. Central to Black feminist thought is that knowing comes from experience. Therefore, understanding can be gained through experience. Methodologically essential are examinations of lived experiences, the use of dialogue, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability, all of which lead to the credibility of the knowledge produced (Collins, 1989); thus, storytelling became the basis for the research methodology.

This study looked at the lived experiences of seven African American mothers who became activists around educational issues using Black feminist thought (Collins,
1990) as a framework that employs a storytelling methodology. By embracing a standpoint theory that assumes both a situatedness to these mothers’ experiences as well as the retelling of their stories (Harding, 1993), I employ a culturally sensitive approach through the design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the findings of the study (Tillman, 2002). This meant recognizing and centering the experiences of the participants in the research by valuing their experiences. Drawing from African American traditions of interaction, storytelling about these experiences became a central mode of data collection (Collins, 2000).

Location and Participants

Location of the research. This research focuses on activism in New York City. The school system serves over 1.1 million students, the majority of whom are non-White (NYC Department of Education, 2017). As one of the most segregated school systems in the United States (Cohen, 2015; Resmovits, 2014), there is great disparity between schools, sometimes only blocks away from each other. In the last decade, there has been a push to increase the number of charter schools in the city. Many charter schools are co-located in the same buildings as traditional public schools. New York was an early adopter of the Common Core and testing of those standards. Since 2016, the lead up to Trump’s presidency, there has been an increase in hate crimes. In New York City, hate crimes are reportedly up 24% from the year before (Mathias, 2017).

Participants. This study examines the lived experiences of seven African-American mothers in New York City who engage in education activism. The mothers were identified through a combination of purposive sampling and what Ladson-Billings
calls “community nomination” (1994, p. 147) or snowballing methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Two participants (Alicia and Karen, pseudonyms) were known to me prior to starting the research. Additionally, through recommendations from teachers, principals and district level staff, such as family leadership coordinators who have contact with activist mothers in their daily work, three additional participants were recruited (Akeelah, Barbara, and Camille). The final two participants (Andrea and Shirley) were recommended by other participants. All of the mothers had adult children who have attended New York City public schools and six of the mothers currently have a child in the public schools, while the seventh has a grandchild in public school. The forms of activism the mothers engaged in varied widely. All but one participant (Karen) knew, or knew of, one or more of the other participants through their activism and/or through volunteering within the school system, a fact I only became aware of as the research was underway.

**Data Collection**

In keeping with Black feminist thought and culturally sensitive interviewing, I engaged in open dialogue with the activist mothers, encouraging in the sharing of and cogeneration of stories about their lives, from own experiences of childhood and schooling through their experiences of mothering in the public schools and their work as activists. This dialogue took place in conversational, in-depth interviews. I asked about their parents’ involvement with schools, their own involvement with schools as parents, their activism (including what they believe to be their activism and how they developed as activists) and their motivation to do the activist work that they do, but they also shared
things that I did not ask about or know to ask about, exercising their agency to take charge of the conversations and shape the stories we were co-creating. The initial interviews were held in person, while some subsequent interviews were conducted by phone to accommodate participants’ busy schedules. Following a very loose interview guide rather than a strict protocol of questions, interviews were allowed to meander through participants recollections of their lives, resulting in interviews that lasted between one and three hours. Subsequent interviews started usually began with an update on their activism work and sometimes included questions about specific points raised in earlier interviews as I was trying to analyze the data as I went.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was an ongoing and iterative process in which early analysis informed later data collection, as themes emerged and thoughts were followed through on. Interviews were transcribed and initial coding was done using constructivist grounded theory methods (Chamaz, 2014), starting with “line-by-line” coding, in which I pulled out action words. Initial codes were analyzed within interviews and across interviews for frequency and relatedness to research questions to determine focused codes that center around the mothers’ understandings of and enacting of activism. In the second round of coding, selected data was also coded for participants’ talk of race, class, gender and current sociopolitical issues following the Trump election so as to get a better understanding of how parents were making sense of or using sociopolitical knowledge in their activism. Focus codes were then analyzed using Collins’ (2000) theory of Black women’s activism as a lens. Throughout the interview process, but especially in the final
interviews, I conducted member checks, engaging the mothers in discussion of how I was interpreting data and how they too were making sense of data.

Findings

Defining Activism

The mothers defined and enacted activism in multiple ways. Some of the mothers focused on the relational aspect of why they were activists as they defined what they were doing. For them, the focus was on helping others. Initially, Karen described her work as “advocacy” rather than “activism,” but in talking about the things she is doing, she announced, “I guess I am an activist” (Karen, December 15, 2016), which she later defined as “a person who has a certain belief about what should be fair, or you know just for people, kids in particular, and just to stand up and fight for it” (Karen, personal communication, September 18, 2017). For Shirley, activism meant, “I’m not only there for my children. I’m also for her classmates, my neighbor, everybody needs a fair education” (Shirley, December 16, 2016). Andrea saw “taking care of people” as central to her role as an activist (Andrea, January 6, 2017).

Some of the mothers focused on achieving institutional change. Alicia defined activism as “disruption,” while Camille defined it as “making change.” For Akeelah, activism is “organizing.” Akeelah’s activism has evolved over time, and she has moved from local issues to more national issues, tackling concerns beyond education. Camille, Alicia and Akeelah all define activism as changing oppressive institutions.
While Barbara too seeks change, it is in the behavior of her own community which she sees as also being oppressive. Believing in the collective power of parents, her activism focuses almost entirely on building parent engagement:

You see the difference in the parent participation in those [White and middle class] communities as opposed to ours. And you can see what they’re doing for their schools in those districts as opposed to ours. The resources that they are able to pull together as parents to get for their children. Whether it be through the congressmen, or local businesses, or you know. You see that difference. And that contrast to me was disheartening. It was an eye-opener. It was like you know what? What is the difference between the two? If you took color out of it? What is the difference between the two? Parent participation. That’s the bottom line. The parents being there, showing their kids. Being in there, voicing their opinions, “yes,” “no,” you know, and whatever. And that was the key. And part of it is that it’s hard to get our [Black] community to see that. I mean they understand it, but how do you get them out? (Barbara, December 1, 2016)

The “how” of activism included numerous strategies. Several mothers mentioned letter writing campaigns and petitions. All mentioned educating others about their platforms or causes. This was done by various kinds of interpersonal interactions such as, setting up tables in the lobby of the school at times when parents were likely to be around, and by holding informational meetings, workshops, and even conferences. Additionally, they shared their ideas by creating flyers, information sheets, and websites they shared with families and in the community. Sometimes, they held rallies and press conferences. They also marched and walked, sometimes locally across bridges, and sometimes long distances such as from New York City to Albany.

Spaces Where Activism Happens

Working within the box: Being activists within Department of Education structured activities and committees. All the mothers in this study describe multiple ways in which they have engaged with their children’s schools directly. For most of
them, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was their starting point. All have at one point been an executive board member of the PTA, and most served at least one year as president. For most of them, this was an early step toward education activism. Akeelah recalls taking up a challenge after first being elected to the PTA:

I got voted vice president and the first day afterwards I was so excited about what we were going to do. This woman who had been the PTA president for a number of years prior to that, said I don’t why you are excited - not going to get these parents to come out, they just don’t care. I was just like-oh that was like wow that interesting and yeah it took me aback. Um then from then on I was just like I’m going to prove her wrong, you know. And it was just about figuring out what would make me want to come in here. (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

Her focus was getting parents engaged with the school in a school community that traditionally did not have high levels of engagement. Like Akeelah, Barbara is a parent leader, her activism stems from her PTA work and focuses on increasing parent engagement in the schools. She defines parent engagement in a holistic way, making the school a place where parents come to learn and forge relationships so that they find the engagement with the school meaningful. In doing so, she strives to find out what parents need and fulfill those needs. She has organized activities for parents such as meet-and-greets to help parents get to know the guidance counselors in the high school and understand their roles. She has learned to tie events to PTA meetings, such as training sessions for the grading software that the school uses. Her goal is to empower parents to better navigate the school system to optimize their ability to help their children succeed.

Andrea is another parent for whom PTA work is integral to her activism. She was involved with the PTA at her son’s high school for many years. Since both sons attended the same school and she served on the PTA for both, she has outlasted two principals, and seen numerous changes at the school. She carries institutional knowledge that supports
the parent association as well as the school itself. Because she does not work at the moment and lives in close proximity to the school campus, she is able to spend more time at the school than other parents. Andrea talks about this as an asset, but recognizes that her level of involvement in day to day activities in the school is not attainable for most parents. Therefore, she willingly assumes an “othermother” role, looking out for all of the students in the school.

In addition to the PTA, these mothers have engaged in other school-sanctioned committees at the school level, such as Title I Committees, and School Leadership Teams; at the districtwide level, the Presidents’ Councils and District Leadership Teams, and at the citywide level, the Chancellor’s Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), and City-Wide Council on High Schools (CCHS). The district and citywide level activity allows parent leaders to extend their reach and influence. Most of the mothers interviewed have claimed membership in two or more DOE committees. As the mother of multiple children in the school system, Camille’s participation spanned well over a decade. In that time, she has participated on all the committees mentioned.

Barbara is currently working at the district and city-wide level to increase parental involvement, with her organizing focus to get parents engaged in their children’s education remaining steadfast. However shortly after the start of the Trump presidency, serving in a city-wide capacity, much of Barbara’s efforts went into finding immigration lawyers who could speak to immigrant parents in her borough, fearing deportation and the breaking up of families with new anti-immigrant policies. This was in response to a need within her community.
Direct involvement at the school level allowed the activists mothers access to their school in ways that uninvolved parents do not have. Being a PTA executive board member, especially a president, means working with and getting to know the principal of the school. The position affords one the opportunity to learn what happens in schools on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, it provides them with a vehicle to access other parents. It is a structure already in place for organizing parents around a particular issue that may be central to their school community.

However, there are limits to what parents can do through the PTA and other DOE committees, since they are regulated by the School Chancellor. The roles of parents on these committees as well as what these committees can do are outlined in these regulations which set limits on parents. The work of these groups is designed to support the schools in a very school-centric way, limiting the opportunities for parents to bring their own agendas in, especially when those agendas are not in alignment with the educational plans of the schools’ administrations.

**Reshaping the box: Collaborations with the Department of Education.**

Camille and Shirley participate in a Special Education Working Group that includes representation from the Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), parents, and most recently DC-37 (the union that represents school aides, parent coordinators, and other support staff). The parents who participate in this particular committee describe it as a unique experience, a collaborative one that gives equal value to the voices of different constituents at the table. Camille describes it as:

> . . . not a place where we're yelling at the DOE or throwing innuendos at each other and stuff. Everybody is coming together to find out information and to help each other, and it's a safe space where you can ask questions and not feel like it's a
dumb question or something. (Camille, personal communication, February 21, 2017)

This committee is different from other committees described above because it exists due to the efforts of Camille and is not regulated by the Chancellor’s Regulations. The committee came to be as a result of Camille’s persistence with members of UFT Parent Outreach, who in turn helped facilitate the founding of this group to bring together different stakeholders, including DOE officials, to discuss issues pertaining to students receiving special education services.

For Karen, the school is really the main place where her activism takes place. As an educator as well as a parent, she takes a strong stance against high-stakes testing. Her child is at a school in which the principal supports her platform. However, the state requires schools to give the tests, and administrators must walk a fine line when they are not in support of a mandated practice. On the other hand, parents have the freedom to speak their minds about their beliefs without worry because they are not employed by the Department of Education. Therefore, Karen has worked with her school’s administration to help mobilize an “opt out” movement in her school. She has become the mouthpiece for the local movement, explaining to parents the problems with the tests. For the last few years, the result of Karen’s work has been a high opt-out rate in the school, making a community-wide statement about testing and education.

Recently, a local quasi-governmental agency began making moves to take over the building that her son’s school now occupies, which would displace it and the three other schools in the building. Again, Karen is working with the administration, sitting in on meetings, and working to inform other parents of the potential threat to their space.
Karen describes this as their next “movement,” anticipating the need to organize parents across the four schools to stand in unity to save their building, possibly needing petitions and to engage local politicians for support as well.

Karen, Camille, and Shirley are working outside the structures created by the DOE to engage parents, finding ways to work with DOE officials on particular issues. Karen’s work still takes place at the school level, but she uses an alliance formed with the school administration from her participation in the PTA to engage in activism on behalf of the students and the school that is outside the prescribed roles of parent leaders. For Camille, getting the DOE to agree to join a committee made up of various stakeholders was a big gain. The work of this committee ultimately has the potential to affect institutional practices and thus create change that will benefit all children receiving special education services.

**Stepping outside the box: Working to improve education by working outside the Department of Education structured or sanctioned committees/organizations/activities.** Five of the seven participants in the study belong to activist organizations that work to improve education. They participate with a variety of activist organizations that address a range of educational issues at the local and state level. Two of the mothers each helped to found a group. One mother is also engaged with groups at the national level. Their activism takes many forms. Participants listed a variety of organizing activities including holding trainings and informational sessions for other parents, petitions, lobbying elected officials, rallies, and marches.

When I first met several of the mothers, it was at a demonstration outside the main administrative offices of the Department of Education. In the wake of the
presidential election, parents were demanding Culturally Responsive Teaching in schools
to combat what they claimed were an uptick in bias incidents in the public schools. There
were posters with photographs taken in schools. One that stood out was of two water
fountains, side by side, that had signs scrawled in child’s handwriting, one marked
“Whites” and the other marked “Blacks.” Concerned that the school system was not
responding appropriately to the hate speech that was happening in schools, these mothers,
along with about 100 other parents and concerned city residents were standing on the
steps in the middle of winter not only demanding action, but presenting a solution.

Alicia is the only participant who no longer has a child in the public schools.
While she was very active in school and district based activities when she was a public
school parent, she also co-founded an organization specifically for activist mothers of
color after working with White parents both within and outside of district structures, and
getting pushback for what she calls her “outspokenness” (January, 31, 2017). For Alicia,
this organization provides a space for her to engage in activism in her way for issues that
matter to her, without having to worry about White parent activists with competing
agendas or judgement of her as a Black woman.

Shirley and Andrea (Shirley & Andrea, January 13, 2017) talked about making a
trip with buses of parents to the state capital to meet with elected officials on “Lobby
Day,” a day when state senators open their offices to speak with the public. Motivated by
the lack of compliance by the state to pay the funding it owes to local school districts as a
result of a lawsuit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity ten years earlier, Andrea
walked one hundred fifty miles from New York City to Albany (Andrea, January 6,
2017).
Understanding the Consequences of Their Activism

The mothers all discussed their activism as something they felt compelled to do. While they worked toward the large goals of educational justice, they generally spoke positively about their work, though Akeelah admits that it is not always easy. In talking about working with a local labor union, she comments, “I have a mixed bag of experiences that range from when it worked, it worked really well, and when it doesn't work, oh well” (Akeelah, August 11, 2017).

Most of the mothers talked about the success of particular actions or events. For example, Karen was proud to have 59% of students in her child’s school opt out of the testing this year. Barbara was excited about the events she had scheduled to accompany PTA business meetings that she felt would entice parents to come out, while providing assistance for them to become more involved with the school. Akeelah talks about her early success with engaging parents as well:

It was just about figuring out, ‘what would make me want to come in here?’ . . . over the years just kinda built up the need and the parent body as a whole. So we would have PTA meetings prior to, like early on we would have just a few parents, but we were having like a hundred plus parents at meetings. (Akeelah, December 23, 2017)

Andrea is aware of the benefits of working within the system as well as outside of it for her presence in school for children. For instance, being in the school as a PTA vice president or president allows her to monitor what is going on in the school. Both she and Akeelah commented that having a presence in the building has the potential to reduce the mistreatment of Black children by their teachers. For Andrea, relationship building within the school was important. It allowed her to form an “othermother” relationship with
students, stepping in to protect them when their biological parents could not. She shared this story, a clear example of her taking on the othermothering role:

   Just like, I knew one of the kids, one of the girls, you know, we have a lot of kids living in shelters. She lives in a shelter. But, at the same time, that’s not it. She was just upset because she got, she didn’t like the way her hair looks, she wanted to keep her scarf on. The Principal’s like “Take your scarf off.” She said, “No, I’m not gonna take the scarf off.” And I was standing right there. She was like, “Take the scarf off or I will suspend you.” And she said, “I don’t want to take the scarf off. And she had a cap and another scarf on and I said, “Just take it off.” I said “I’d rather you take it off. I don’t want you to get suspended. I know your father.” And luckily, I talked to her long enough to where she took it off and she went to class. Because if I wasn’t standing there, she would’ve gotten suspended and that would hurt her father. You know, her father’s not in the best health and he can’t be running back and forth and this and that. So I’m like, you know, she got issues but at the same time, I know she didn’t want to do it but I’m like, “What’s wrong with your hair? Your hair looks beautiful!” I’m like, I didn’t see nothing wrong with her hair. But she just didn’t seem to like the way it looked. I said, “Please, just take it off. I just don’t want you to get suspended. Just take it off in front of her, you know, and go to class.” She could have put it on when she got back in the class. As long as she took it off long enough for her to go into the room, and not get suspended, that’s all I care about. And luckily I was there to make sure she didn’t get suspended. (Andrea, personal communication, January 6, 2017)

Andrea sees all of her work as coming together for good, meaning what she does in one arena can have positive impacts on her work in another. As a longtime parent in her son’s high school, she saw multiple leadership changes. When faced with an ineffective principal, she believes she was able to have the person removed by engaging the right person:

   I meet so many different people. And I found someone who was powerful enough to find something. . . . it was just a conversation. I didn’t write nobody. I only told one person, a few group of people, but that one person did everything. I didn’t even write nothing down. She just heard what I had to say and that was it. (Andrea, personal communication, January 6, 2017)

Seeing success outside of the DOE structures was also very important for the mothers. Shirley spoke of a trip to Albany for Lobby Day, and feeling that her work was
validated when she was able to speak with a state senator about her concerns for public education. This meeting was a success that motivated her to continue her work (Shirley, personal communication, January 13, 2017). For Akeelah one of the earlier wins came when working with a group that advocated and lobbied for science equipment in middle schools. “Winning the money, that couple hundred thousand dollars for science equipment was huge. That win bolstered all of us to go like, “Oh, maybe we got something here.” Like parent power is real, community power is real!” Even though this was an early success, she holds onto it as an example of what can be accomplished as she takes on new campaigns.

Discussion

The activism of the mothers in this study cuts across the two domains Collins (2000) conceptualizes as the purpose of Black women’s activism. The first dimension typically involves Black women’s struggle for survival while working within existing structures taking the form of resistance. The second dimension is one where Black women struggle to abolish oppressive institutional structures and practices. While she notes that these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive, the relationship between the two seems rather significant. They are interconnected in that institutional change is necessary for long term survival if Black people are to be healthy and culturally sound. The mothers in this study operated both within the structures provided by the Department of Education (DOE) as well as structures that lay outside of the DOE while working for institutional change. When the mothers served on school-based committees such as PTAs, School Leadership Teams, and district and citywide committees such as
Presidents’ Councils and CCHS, they worked within existing structures. Their resistance was against a narrative of Black mothers caring and providing for their children’s educational needs, rather than to the structures the DOE had established. While six of the seven parents engaged in activism outside of the DOE structures for parent engagement, they all saw benefits to continue working within these structures as well.

A common thread to their work within the DOE’s structures was to increase parent involvement in schools. The strategies used to bring parents into the schools who had not previously been engaged included providing information and supports that parents would find useful. One of the challenges here is that while the mothers in this study believe that active engagement with schools is important to improving educational conditions for students, not all parents share this assumption. Barbara, who made it a mission to get parents engaged complained of parent apathy, but this may be a mistaken interpretation of parents’ absenteeism at meetings and workshops. Their absenteeism may actually be a form of resistance on the part of other parents, bringing the two domains of activism as identified by Collins (1990) into conflict. Additionally, as Barbara critiques Black parents for not being as resourceful as White parents, it is unclear as to whether she is understanding the matrix of domination (Collins, 1990), or the intersectional, interlocking systems of oppression that prevent Black parents from having equal access to resources. On the other hand, Andrea, Akeelah and Alicia all expressed awareness of the complex lives the Black parents in their schools and districts faced. They spoke of parents having to balance work schedules, childcare and institutional racism as barriers to parental participation by other Black parents, and seemed to have more of an appreciation for being able to step in where they could.
For the mothers working within the DOE structures, there were some benefits. One benefit the mothers gained from working within existing structures was the building of social capital through their interaction with school officials. Noguera (2001) found that the relationships between the people who work in schools and parents have the potential to either negatively or positively impact social capital. For the mothers in the study, working within the DOE structures allowed provided opportunities for them to build strong positive relationships that had a positive impact on social capital, which could then be used both for work within the sanctioned structures and when parents stepped outside of them. Andrea learned to use her contacts within the Department of Education and the State Education Department to help her make direct institutional change at the school level when faced with a principal she found to be highly problematic. In this instance, she used social capital gained through her sanctioned parent engagement to circumvent what might have been a lengthy process. Likewise, Karen used her relationship with her principal to promote an opt out movement in her school. Karen was allowed to set up tables and hold meetings to provide parents with education about the detrimental effects of standardized testing for students. Many principals would not allow this to happen on school grounds, and certainly, not just any parent would be given access to the facilities to do so. However, Karen understands that her position as PTA president gains her certain favor with the principal who therefore supports her promotion of having students opt out of testing.

A second benefit parents working within the DOE structures receive was the opportunity to build relationships within their own community. Even though the opt out campaign was outside of the DOE structures, and in fact was in open opposition to them,
Karen’s campaign for opting out was more successful because of the work she had done within the school. She was a known entity to the parents as well as school officials. She had gained their trust as their PTA president, so while she was no longer the PTA president during the last round of testing, parents were still willing to hear her platform against high stakes testing and the opt out results would suggest that she was successful.

A final benefit the mothers talked about was that it placed them in the schools, allowing them to take on the role of othermother or community othermother (Collins, 1990), as Andrea did with the incident where a student was being threatened with suspension for not removing a scarf. Andrea was able to teach the student how to resist within the school structure so that the student would not be suspended, jeopardizing the student’s education or survival, by advising her to take off the scarf just while the principal was standing there, and then to put it back on in class.

Five of the seven mothers in the study actively engaged in forms of activism that took place entirely outside of the school. This activism was often done through collectives such as the Coalition for Education Justice, a group four of the participants belonged to. This organization and others they belonged to challenge the Department of Education directly through rallies, letter writing campaigns, walks to the state capital, meeting with politicians at both the state and local level, and building support for platforms among peers through education. Developing allies for institutional change is a strategy identified as an aspect of Black women’s activism by Collins (2000). Understanding the value of working in collaboration with others with similar agendas, these mothers in this study built relationships outside of the DOE’s internal structures to further their efforts to make institutional level change for educational justice.
While othermothering is often associated as working within the structure, community othermothering goes the next step. Collins (2000) makes a connection between Black women’s teaching and othermothering. In the case of these mothers, their roles as community othermothers places them in the role of teacher. While they are not teaching African American youth, they are teaching the parents of African American youth to empower them towards the goal of survival for the race through the protection of the young. Some of the mothers spoke of going to workshops and meetings where they learned about the inequities Black children face in education and how institutional policies and practices promote injustice, but they also spoke of becoming the ones who then passed this knowledge on to others. They became teachers within the community, promoting survival through knowledge and encouragement to others to take action.

The parents who engaged in activism beyond outside of the DOE’s prescribed channels were more articulate about the need for institutional transformation to address systems of oppression both within schools and in other institutions, illustrating Collins’ (2000) second domain of activism. While all seven mothers saw education as essential to survival, the mothers who belonged to outside activist organizations were more articulate about ways in which Black power was being suppressed in current societal structures and how changes to educational institutions were necessary to ensure the health and safety of oppressed populations, including African American youth in schools. Calling for culturally responsive education, ends to oppressive high stakes testing, and a human rights agenda in schools, these mothers seek.
Implications and Conclusion

The mothers in this study engage in activism in three arenas. They worked within the structures created by the Department of Education, adhering to the rules in place resisting oppression and promoting community uplift by taking on the role of caregiving in those spaces. Using their positions in these spaces, as othermothers, the mothers were able to care for the youth whose own parents were absentee, as well as take on the role of teacher, teaching other parents about the injustices they and their children face within these structures. Simultaneously, some mothers were able to use connections built from their work within the sanctioned DOE structures to promote agendas that may vary from that of the Department of Educations. In tapping these connections, they continued to work inside of the structures, but bent them to their will, with open and vocal resistance to policies they found problematic for their children.

Finally, the mothers stepped outside the structure altogether working with activist groups, engaging in activities that directly challenged institutional racism and oppression within education policies at the local, state and national levels. At times, these mothers also benefitted from relationships they had built through their DOE sanctioned work, but more often the relationships that were important were those that connected them to other likeminded activist organizations such as the teachers’ union to form a collective and increase their power. As activists most mothers moved between the quiet resistance of work within the DOE to organizing with activist groups with some level of grace and ease. For all mothers, the work started within the DOE structure, suggesting that attention be paid to new parents coming in through these structures who may also have the
potential for additional activism. Parents’ levels of activism developed over time as they became more aware of social inequities. This research has only begun to scratch the surface of the knowledge Black activist mothers working for educational justice. Further in-depth research could reveal motivations for activism and strategies for engaging more parents in this work.
Chapter VI

FINDINGS

FINDING ALLIES: HISTORICAL CONFLICT MAKES WAY FOR COLLABORATION

Abstract

In 1968, in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, parent activists and the local teachers’ union clashed over who should have control over the local school district. Nearly fifty years later, parent activists in New York City have found new ways to work with the local teachers’ union. In a narrative study and using Black feminist thought as a framework for understanding African American mothers’ activism, I explore the experiences of four women who engage in work with the United Federation of Teachers, including the benefits and challenges that these mothers experienced. Ultimately, the mothers in the study found that having the union as an ally and building coalitions supports their activism, thus increasing the potential for parent power.

Key Words: Activism, African American Mothers, Teacher Unions, Organizing
**Introduction**

In an ideal world, parents and teachers are partners sharing the responsibility for the education of our nation’s youth. In reality, the relationship is not always amicable. On an individual level, a parent and a teacher may work well together or there may be conflict. But what happens when you put parent activists and a teachers’ union together? In 1968 in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York the result was explosive. In an overcrowded and underperforming school district, a fight for control over schools led the community to go head-to-head with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), resulting in a 36-day teachers strike and lasting distrust between stakeholders (Podair, 2002; Pritchett, 2002).

However, more recently in the era of neoliberal school reform in which we see the corporatizing and privatizing of public education, there are examples of the UFT and parent activists collaborating effectively for school change. A collaboration between the UFT and Community Collaborative for District 9 (CC9), a parent and community activist group, resulted in the establishment of a lead teacher program in Community School District 9, in the Bronx, which gave experienced teachers more pay and release time to mentor novice teachers (Warren, 2010). The Coalition for Education Justice (CEJ), which has had a number of successful campaigns, including bringing thirty million dollars in funding to low-performing middle schools, brought together a number of organizations including both CC9 and the UFT.

As part of a larger study on the educational justice activism of seven African American mothers of New York City public school children, this study examines
relationships between parent activists and the UFT. Four mothers described their development as activists as being supported by work being done with and for parents by UFT Parent Outreach, while another mother expressed concerns about the connections she saw between parent activist groups and the teachers’ union. The remaining two mothers were not engaged with, nor were they concerned with the UFT, engaging instead in activism centered within schools. In this chapter, I focus on the four mothers who worked directly with the UFT, examining the ways in which their activism is shaped by their work with the union, as well as explore possible concerns to collaborations between parent activists and the UFT.

**Background Literature and Theoretical Framework**

Warren (2010) presents organizing as a cyclical process which is useful for thinking about how the UFT has helped the four mothers develop as activists. The process starts with relationship building. Relationships are built when one-to-one meetings are had, stories are shared, common concerns are identified and leaders are found. The next stage in the cycle is leadership development. This happens when a power analysis is conducted, people learn about issues, find solutions and leaders are trained. The final stage in the cycle is taking action. Action involves mobilizing networks, demonstrating community support for solutions, and holding officials accountable. The cycle is then repeated, identifying new concerns, bringing in new people and developing new leaders. This model is a useful when considering the work of the UFT and the parents who have engaged with it.
Historically, as activists, Black women employed a variety of strategies to work around the challenges they faced, including staging individual protests against unfair practices. While individual efforts such as Ruth Powell’s one-woman sit-ins at drugstores, where she sat at lunch counters for hours waiting for service or staring down the staff who refused to serve her, to draw attention to Jim Crow practices in Washington D.C. However, Collins writes, “Black women have also seen the need for principled coalitions with groups affected by similar issues” (2000, p. 233).

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) provides a lens for understanding the mothers’ experiences when working with the UFT. Collins sees Black women’s activism as existing in two domains. The first avoids direct confrontation of oppressive structures, instead taking on a form of resistance to ensure group survival, while the second domain includes the direct challenge to oppression through struggles to transform institutions.

Motherhood, in its various forms, provides a space for Black women’s activism that may operate in either domain. In terms of education, resistance may appear to be lack of involvement in schooling, whereas direct challenge to oppression may appear as advocacy, lobbying, or protesting.

Useful are Collins’ conception of “community othermothers” and the understanding that coalition building with allies is important to Black women’s activism, to promote institutional change to combat oppression. Conceptualizing motherhood as broader than the traditional notion of the biological mother who bore and raised her children, Collins describes various kinds of “mothers” in African American communities, all of whom share in the responsibility of child rearing. In addition to “bloodmothers” or biological mothers, there are the “othermothers,” a term first defined by Stanlie James
(1993) and “community othermothers” (Collins, 2000). Othermothers are “fictive kin” who take on the role of child care. Community othermothers take the notion of being an othermother a step further by going beyond the work of direct childcare and becoming active in the community advocating on behalf of the community’s children and wellbeing. Additionally, as an extension of the notion of othermother (Foster, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005) teaching is a way to resist ignorance while promoting knowledge for oneself as well as the community; thus, becoming a teacher is a form of Black women’s activism as a route to empowerment (Collins, 2000).

**Research Questions**

The relationship between the activism of four mothers and the local teachers’ union came out of my exploration of the following two research questions that drove the broader study.

1. How do the African American mothers in this study understand themselves as education activists?
   
   a. For mothers who engage with the UFT, what role did the teachers’ union play in the development of their identities as activists?

2. How do the mothers in the study understand the context of the educational landscape in which their activism is situated?

**Methodology**

As I conducted research with African American mothers around their education activism, I used Tillman’s (2002) notion of culturally sensitive research design because
this approach aligned with the Black feminist framework I was using. This included my approach to data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the findings of the study. To do this I had to center the experiences of the participants in the research honoring their traditions and valuing their experiences. Drawing from African American traditions of interaction, storytelling about these experiences became a central mode of data collection, and data analysis involved engaging the participants in the meaning-making process (Collins, 2000).

**Participants and Setting**

As part of a larger study of mothers who are education activists, this chapter draws on a subset of five participants who discussed working with the local teachers’ union. The mothers in the larger study were identified through a combination of purposive sampling, snowballing methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), “community nomination” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 147), and my personal contacts. The five participants in this smaller study were identified through data analysis as having experience with or thoughts on working with the teachers’ union. Akeelah, Andrea, Camille and Shirley were all directly involved with the union, while Alicia chose not to work with the union, but expressed strong opinions of that work.

This research focuses on education activists in New York City’s school system which serves over one million students, the vast majority of whom are students of color (New York City Department of Education, 2017). As one of the most segregated school systems in the United States (Cohen, 2015; Resmovits, 2014), there is great disparity between schools, sometime only blocks away from each other. The employees of the
school system belong to several different labor unions, the largest of which is the teachers’ union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), a local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). As was mentioned above, there is a history dating back nearly half a century of tension between Black parents and the predominantly White UFT.

**Data Collection**

In developing Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) drew on her understanding of African American women’s understandings of what counts as knowledge. She refers to Black feminist thought as both theory and epistemology. Central to Black feminist thought is that knowing comes from experience. Therefore, understanding can be gained through experience. Methodologically essential are examinations of lived experiences, the use of dialogue, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability, all of which lead to the credibility of the knowledge produced (Collins, 1989); thus, storytelling was the basis for the research methodology.

Dialogue becomes the way in which knowledge is constructed and shared. The use of dialogue comes from the African-derived tradition of call and response, in which the audience responds to the storyteller rather than listening passively. The audience thus engages in the knowledge construction and sharing processes. The ethic of caring stems from the experience of both being nurtured by an extended community of caregivers (othermothers), and the responsibility of women for providing care for both kin and fictive kin. It also comes into play in dialogue in that value placed on the uniqueness of expressiveness, the appropriate use of emotions in dialogue that convey a belief in the
validity of an argument, and the capacity to develop empathy, which creates a connection between storyteller and audience. The call and response format then becomes an expression of the interconnectedness of the three components of the ethic of caring: emphasis on individual uniqueness, appropriate use of emotions in dialogue and developing the capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000).

In keeping with a culturally sensitive interviewing approach, I engaged in free, open dialogue with the activist mothers, encouraging in the sharing of and cogeneration of stories. This dialogue took place in conversational, in-depth interviews, in which I used an interview guide – a loosely structured set of questions – that were addressed over the course of three sessions. The initial interviews were held in person, while some subsequent interviews were conducted by phone to accommodate participants’ busy schedules. All interviews lasted between one and three hours. While I had intended for interviews to last no more than 90 minutes, some interviews took longer because the participants felt they had much to tell me and wanted to continue. Additionally, there was one focus group in which two of the four focus mothers participated, along with one other mother.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing from the beginning of the interview process through the writing process. Interviews were transcribed and initial coding was done using constructivist grounded theory methods (Chamaz, 2014) in which the data was coded for gerunds, and it is through this process that a pattern of working with the UFT became apparent across the transcripts of interviews of four of the seven participants. After initial
coding revealed a pattern with regards to working with the union, a second round of analysis included coding for themes related to Black feminism that would reveal power dynamics. Data collection and analysis lasted just over ten months, in which time analysis was iterative process, meaning early analysis informed later data collection. As I was analyzing data, I relied not only on transcripts to reveal codes or themes that could then be theorized, but rather on the mothers themselves to offer perspectives on the data that was emerging from their own interviews as well as others, though a member checking process that happened throughout the interviewing process, but especially at the end.

Findings

The Teachers’ Union Opens a Door to Activism

The mothers who talked about the United Federation of Teachers credited it as being important to their development as activists. Four mothers talked about the union, the borough parent-community liaisons, and the meetings and workshops they attended. On the day I met Camille, she suggested we go to the UFT headquarters for a quiet space to talk. When arrived, she insisted on introducing me to the woman who had been so influential in her becoming the activist she is today. She was the parent-community liaison for Manhattan. I did not know it at the time, but this woman’s name would come up in many conversations over the course of this study as someone who was influential in the mothers’ development as activists. Over time, I learned that this woman had first been the liaison for Brooklyn, and then transferred to Manhattan, and in making this move broadened her audience. When she left Brooklyn, she trained her successor, who carries
on her work today. She also continued to work with parents from Brooklyn and other
boroughs. As an individual, this particular community liaison was instrumental in
drawing in parents and others through relationship building and education. Akeelah
explains:

I used to go to her [the parent-community liaison’s] meetings. And that’s when
I’d hear stories from other parents from around Brooklyn, the whole of Brooklyn,
. . . guidance counselors would come to it, school psychologists, parent
coordinators, you’d get a whole, and people would come from all over the city. It
wasn’t just Brooklyn, because her meetings were that good. (December 23, 2016)

Once connected, the mothers attended UFT Parent Outreach meetings, workshops
and conferences, usually led or organized by this parent-community liaison. It is in these
spaces that the mothers’ activism really began to develop. Akeelah describes these
experiences as “learning how deeply entrenched politics was in education, which I had
never known,” (December 23, 2016) and learning what organizing was. She learned of
specific issues to organize around, and how to take action in more effective ways through
her relationship with the parent-community liaison.

Similarly, for Andrea, the UFT was “a vehicle to help us figure out what’s going
on in the Board of Ed and how to be an advocate for our kids and how to help our
kids…” (Andrea, June 6, 2017). She gives multiple examples including learning about
the rights of special education students, Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) funds, the
issues of charter schools and school co-location in general, and mayoral control. When
asked why she thinks the UFT provides these trainings, Andrea responds, “They want to
make strong leaders of parents.” (Andrea, June 20, 2017). Considering the role she plays
as an activist whose knowledge and skills have been developed by the UFT, Andrea
explains further:
Why have this knowledge and not teach it to somebody? And we, me as a leader doing all the stuff I do, that’s helpful to me because I can take it somewhere. You know, it’s not just, you know, left, it’s transferable. Basically taking it back to our communities. ‘Cause parents like us, there’s only a certain amount of us who advocate like us, but there are parents who don’t know and won’t come out to these things. (June 20, 2017)

The Coalition for Educational Justice and the UFT

The Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) was born out of a realization that groups working together would have more power and therefore be more effective than groups working alone. Akeelah explains how CEJ came about:

[The parent-community liaison] was helping to foster with NYU, they have a community program with NYU. And they were trying to create this collaborative of a conversation with parents in Brooklyn, which winded up being called the Brooklyn Education Collaborative. They already had one in the Bronx called CC9, the Community Collaborative for District 9 Schools. And so they were trying to start a Brooklyn collaborative. And so I started going to planning meetings. . . . What we tried to do was, we brought together that Bronx collaborative and the Brooklyn collaborative because we realized we were having these. Well actually, let me take that back a minute. After [winning money for] the science equipment, we were trying to push for science labs, because a lot of kids didn’t have access to a lab. In these particular districts, it was like 17, 18, 19 and 23, which were historically underfunded, didn’t any of them have science labs. And so we went and we thought we had it going. We had all the city council members in Brooklyn. There was a delegation, we went to the meeting. We had our i’s dotted, our t’s crossed. And that’s when the political thing just kinda crushed everything. People who said they were going to support science labs in Brooklyn caved and they never said anything. And so that was our message. That was our awakening to tell us we can’t have parent power just in a collaborative, we need a citywide collaborative. Hence came the Coalition for Educational Justice, which I was a founding parent member of. (August 11, 2017)

As a coalition, CEJ currently lists four organizations as members on its website: Make the Road New York, New Settlement Apartments (New Settlement Parent Action Committee or PAC), New York Communities for Change (NYCC), and the United Federation of Teachers Parent Outreach Committee (CEJ, 2017).
NYCC is an organization that was founded by the head organizer of New York ACORN, after ACORN, a national coalition of activist nonprofit organizations folded amidst a corruption scandal. NY ACORN had been instrumental in several successful campaigns for education reform. One mother, Shirley described the relationship between CEJ and the UFT as this: “UFT is one of those eight arms of CEJ” (June 15, 2017).

The mothers all talked about participating in the workshops and conferences offered by the UFT, but identify as members of CEJ. Shirley talks about how she became a CEJ member through an already established connection with the UFT:

In my experience personally, she [UFT parent-community liaison], there was an email that went out saying that, it was the retreat. CEJ was doing the retreat. There’s a retreat coming up if you’d be available. And then, following on that, every third Saturday, there’ll be a PLB – parent leadership board – and if you’re available for that. And that’s how I, I responded to the email, “Yes, I’m available. I can do that.” (June 15, 2017)

Several mothers mentioned CEJ’s Parent Power School, which is parent education for organizing provided by the parent leaders within the organization. But more consistently than anything, they talked about CEJ’s latest campaign, Culturally Responsive Education. It was at a CEJ sponsored rally on the steps of Tweed (the main administrative building of the Department of Education) promoting culturally responsive education that I met Camille, Andrea, and Shirley for the first time. All of the mothers who belong to CEJ shared why the campaign is necessary. Coming shortly after the election of President Trump, in the midst of a national climate where hateful speech is seemingly more pervasive, Shirley talks about the rally on the steps of Tweed:

[We] were having that thing on the steps and the banner that I was given to hold, that I was asked to hold, what I was told was that picture was taken from some school it started coming up now, yet two drinking fountains, and on one,
White only, and on another, Black only. Since the election, that is what is coming up in schools. That is one of the things. (December 16, 2016)

Camille is now a representative for the UFT Parent Outreach to CEJ, but she was quick to say that she does not represent the union itself, clarifying that, “the UFT doesn’t have a role in CEJ” (Camille, personal communication, 9//2017). She is also the representative for NYCC to CEJ. When I asked about how the UFT was responding to the new platform for culturally responsive education, she commented:

The UFT has a whole thing about CEJ now – they have ants in their pants about CEJ. . . The involvement with CEJ is only through [the former Manhattan parent-community liaison and the Brooklyn parent-community liaison]. (Camille, 9//2017)

That said, when it comes to this campaign, the parents have a strategy to getting the UFT on board. Rather than seeking the support of the union as a whole, they will go to individual schools to build support from the ground up for this platform. She says:

I’m not sure how they see it but it's not something that they are totally open to so that’s why it’s something for us that is important to start with individual teachers so that we can say well we’ve already met with and already have people and schools who are potentially interested and doing it already and so it can also allow us to go around the union and directly reach out to schools who are interested in doing it. Now we have somebody who is open and we begin to go really deep inside the school. (Akeelah, August 11, 2018)

The former Manhattan parent-community liaison has a long history of organizing, which she brought to the parents in her work with UFT Parent Outreach. She was the person who trained the Brooklyn liaison, so the traditions of organizing continue to be passed on to the parents in Brooklyn, as well as through the parents she trained who are now working through CEJ. Both Camille and Shirley express concerns that some of the support that CEJ and parents in general received from the former Manhattan liaison will no longer be available now that she has stepped down. The question looming was what
will happen with the change in the Manhattan liaison. Will the Brooklyn liaison can carry on the relationship with CEJ alone, will she be joined by the other borough liaisons, or will CEJ and the UFT eventually go their own ways?

**An Ally for Special Education**

Camille and Shirley talked about the importance of a special education working group that includes parents, UFT representatives and DOE officials. At times, it also includes other organizations such as Include NYC, Advocates for Children, and People to Improve School Transportation, and most recently DC 37, another union, which includes parent coordinators. However, these mothers talked about the UFT as an important ally in working toward meeting the needs of students with special needs, including those in District 75, a district within the department devoted entirely to special education, and students in general education districts who require individualized education programs (IEPs).

Camille, whose children have special needs and attend District 75 schools, was one of the parents instrumental in getting the group going. By the time they approached the liaisons at the UFT, she had spent years navigating special education. She knew first-hand the challenges parents faced, having had to, as she put it, “fight” for her children to get the services they need. As she tells it:

I’m not an aggressive person, but I am persistent. Someone described me once as having the quietest voice in education, but a voice that is like water. Water goes over rock and it wears away, next thing you know, you’ve got a river and an ocean. You know it’s like water, it starts with that drop of water and it’s everything. And it’s rough, it erodes . . . . I harassed [the UFT Manhattan and Brooklyn parent-community liaisons] for a year and a half straight because they had all sorts of parent groups with the UFT. They had nothing that addressed special needs. They had nothing. So I think finally . . . it was either the end of
2013 or the beginning of 2014 they decided to finally go ahead and listen to me. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille’s persistence paid off, and she went on to describe the group as an example of how collaboration can work:

It’s like a couple of representatives from each group, so that when we talk something out, if it sounded like nonsense, at least one person would be able to say, well we really can’t do that because X, Y, Z is in the way. . . . It was also something where we’re not trying to crucify the DOE or the UFT or anybody. It’s not a group where you’re judging people. It’s a group where, okay, we have this specific problem. What are the challenges on your side? What are the challenges on my side? And how do we meet in the middle? And what do we do? It was all this. There has to be a way. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Camille explained the role of the UFT as essential to the creation of the working group. Even though the idea was hers, she admits that she would not have been able to form such a group on her own. The parents needed the UFT’s power to get the attention of the DOE. However, she also makes it clear that she views the group as a “parent working group that is hosted by the UFT, and now sometimes also hosted by DC-37” (Camille, September 19, 2017).

Shirley also described an atmosphere of cooperation and problem solving where parent voices were included, describing the meetings as a place where “we [parents] bring information, the experience of the District 75 special education people to DOE, and it's ongoing and we have had progress” (December 16, 2016).

The Challenges of Working with Unions

One challenge is that the UFT’s parent outreach seems to be inconsistent. I was told repeatedly that the parent-community liaisons did not all engage parents in the same way. It seems the Brooklyn and Manhattan liaisons work to develop parents as leaders in
their communities, encouraging activism through education in the form of workshops and conferences. However, the mothers talked about how in the other three boroughs the outreach was not focused on engaging parents in activism. They said that parents came from other boroughs to work with the one liaison, but in those other boroughs themselves they do not see the same kinds of activity that they see in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Nine months after the beloved Manhattan liaison left the UFT, it was reported that her replacement was not continuing in the same vein. Camille shared:

We have a new guy. He’s the opposite of organizing the parents. He might want to organize somebody, but its more PCs [presidents’ councils] and people of power. . . . He’s Manhattan, and he’s interested in organizing Districts One, Two and Three. He’s not really interested in organizing the other three districts . . . He’s interested in One, Two and Three because they already have power in and of themselves. (September 19, 2017)

As Camille goes on to describe the districts that are not being engaged, what is implied is that they are uptown districts whose populations are predominantly Black and Brown and on average lower income than the districts downtown that are getting his attention. Prior to her leaving the UFT, parents from all boroughs were welcome to work with the Manhattan liaison, but now, it is the perception that the scope of engagement is limited to those who already have power. These are the districts that have more money and more White and Asian students.

Another challenge was understanding the politics of unions. Over the course of the ten months that I was in communication with Camille, she consistently brought up the work she was doing with the special education working group and DC-37 to provide parent coordinators with information about special education. In my first meeting with her she was organizing a professional development session for them.
conversations, she spoke about the successes of that training and the plans for future trainings. She felt that this work with parent coordinators was extremely important as they are often the first school personnel a parent deals with in a school. However, in my final conversation with her, after they had completed a third professional development session with the parent coordinators, Camille shared one of the challenges they faced:

When we put it together we really weren’t thinking that the unions don’t work together well. That was not really my concern at the time. But it became my concern, because they came in there, you know, seeking blood when they came to the first one. What happened was, oh they sent their big guns honey. But when they realized what it was and we weren’t bashing them, that’s when it changed. Because they actually had to sit through it to see what they were objecting to. . . . I guess they thought because we had the UFT working with us, that the UFT was trying to say something about them. They were mad at the UFT, because they were like, ‘why the UFT was trying to train their people?’ And it wasn’t UFT, it was a bunch of parents from a parent group, and outreach parent group who are not employed in any way by UFT, I know ’cause I don’t get a check from them.

(Camille, December 8, 2016)

As she describes, the parents trying to organize the professional development were unaware of the tension between unions. Since the working group has been hosted by the UFT from its conception, there is a perception that they are controlled by or heavily influenced by the UFT, leading to suspicion from the other union the working group was attempting to engage. Once this was understood to be the problem, the parents could work toward a solution:

Rather than bashing them [DC-37], I let them help us to organize it. And we had a discussion and we had a back and forth, and since that first time when DC-37 was out for blood, we made sure they were at the table too. . . . But there was so much involved in getting that together, and the personalities, that was a lot of back and forth . . . sort of like herding cats, not easy. (Camille, December 8, 2016)

Coming to an understanding of the issue, the solution they found was to move the meetings to DC-37’s space and involve DC-37 leaders in the planning.
DC-37 members were not the only ones questioning the relationships between the UFT and parent activists who engaged with the organization. Alicia, one of the mothers I spoke with, expressed skepticism of CEJ’s relationship with the UFT, suggesting that she was unsure whose agenda was really being promoted. She questioned not only the relationship between CEJ and the UFT Parent Outreach Committee, but also the relationship CEJ has with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, which while not a member of the coalition is listed on their website as a supporter. It is understandable that there would be some confusion about the connection between the CEJ and the UFT, given how the mothers involved speak about it. The UFT is a union for teachers. The Parent Outreach Committee and its borough parent-community liaisons are part of a very small program that the UFT has for community engagement. The liaisons are employees of the union, but are not engaged in the main work of the union which is organizing its constituency, namely the teachers. When the parents speak about working with the liaisons and the Parent Outreach Committee, the often simply said, “the UFT,” which to someone unknowing sounds like they are talking about the main organizing body of the union.

Akeelah, one mother activist whose work has been with the union for years, blames the media for an anti-union narrative that she believes is at the root of parents’ mistrust of CEJ’s union connection:

The frame of the union being bad that’s what the media covers that’s why it’s easy to understand that someone is supposed to believe or is suspicious of the union because that's the narrative being put out there. And I’m not saying they should or shouldn't, but we know for a number year that's the thought being driven home and has hit some community members. (August 11, 2017)
Fine and Fabricant (2014), scholars of education and social work, respectively, explain that this is a result of neoliberal reform efforts. They wrote that “corporate reformers enjoy deep pockets and remarkably cooperative media and political allies, who are eager to help them foment schisms between parents, teachers and unions” (p. 19).

While all the mothers in CEJ were generally positive about the connection with the union, they all admitted that the relationship was not always perfect:

I think when it doesn’t work it’s when we do work on the statewide level and they have a political agenda in support of the governor where we are the ones that he hates and . . . are fighting against inequities in our schools and they decide to stand because of a political population or to stand with a candidate instead of being vocal with us. (Akeelah, August 11, 2017)

All four mothers expressed uncertainty about whether there would be UFT support for CEJ’s platform on Culturally Responsive Education. The mothers thought it timely with the current uptick in hateful speech and violence in the nation after the election of Donald Trump, but they expressed doubts about the level of organizational support they would receive from the union itself. However, despite these concerns, they had a strategy. They did not write off teachers as allies altogether, but talked instead of working with individual teachers and schools building support from the ground up, so that eventually the union would look bad if they did not support a platform their own constituents supported.

The question of what happens when the agendas of parents and the unions are not the same led Akeelah to also share what she believes the UFT gains by working with parents. She suggests that the ultimate goals are the same, making it worth the challenges. Going forward, she suggests the potential for organizing with the UFT and beyond. For example, she stated: “I think also it's really powerful like in regards to the possibilities
and it ends up growing what it looks like and what can be done is through honest interactions. The union which has nationally millions of members and then in NY with tens of thousands of members organizing parents, like where the union is always representing every school and while we may not have parents who are organizing from every school there's a possibility there that has yet to happen” (Akeelah, August 11, 2017)

In addition, Akeelah talked about the power of what it could look like with “true collaboration and organizing with parents and the union” and the potential benefits for students:

You know teachers are in the union for the full dignity and humanity and you know all that entails like equitable funding and imagine tens of thousands of teachers in schools would and millions of parents, you know, imagine what that could look like in that moment of resistance and organizing, really we were throwing down and organizing and strategizing with young people and students for the benefit for teaching for all and for betterment for all and also embracing the whole educational system like even having principals imagine what the possibilities could be. The possibilities are just endless. (Akeelah, August 11, 2017)

Discussion and Implications

This study examined the experiences of the four mothers whose activism was connected to the work of the UFT to gain an understanding of how it impacted the development of their identities as activists, how it influenced their understandings of the context of the educational landscape in which their activism is situated and their motivations for their work as activists. A final question that emerged from the interviews with these four women, as well as one other, asked in what ways working with the union was or could be problematic.
These mothers identify the union as significant in their development as activists. Getting involved with UFT Parent Outreach and connecting with UFT parent community liaisons took their activism to another level. Although they had all already been involved with education at the school level by participating in PTAs, they talked about the union as enhancing the work they had already begun to do at the school level by broadening their understanding of the larger sociopolitical context in which their schools were situated and providing them with tools to take their activism to the broader city and state arenas.

These mothers viewed their activism as encompassing more than just their work with the union, and were clear not to give too much credit for their activism to the union, yet they recognized how influential it had been in grooming them to be the activists they are now. They became educated and organized, with some helping to create and others joining new spaces for their activism to take place in, namely CEJ and the Special Education Working Group.

We see the cyclical nature of organizing coming into play (Warren, 2010). Significant to their involvement with the UFT, the four mothers all talk about making a personal connection with the UFT borough parent-community liaison. This is the beginning of relationship building, the first stage in the cyclical process. They begin to attend meetings, workshops, and conferences in which they connect with others who share their concerns.

From there, they move to the second stage, leadership development (Warrant, 2010). Their development as leaders involves their education around issues and leadership training. The mothers also spoke of the union workshops as being the places where they learned about the sociopolitical landscape in which their public school system
is located. Furthermore, Akeelah, Shirley, Camille and Andrea all talk about attending workshops in which they learned skills they use in their activism. These skills include how to use research and how to mobilize and organize other parents to work with them for their causes, giving them the confidence to be public speakers, to speak out when they saw injustices. This stage of organizing is exemplified in Andrea and Shirley’s discussion of how these workshops were where they learned about the Campaign for Fiscal Equity’s (CFE) school funding lawsuit, in which the New York State was sued for not providing children with the opportunity for an “adequate education” as required by law, and which resulted in the state owing school districts (mostly in ones that serve high percentages of children of color) billions of dollars in Foundation Aid (http://www.aqeny.org/campaigns/campaign-for-fiscal-equity/).

This propelled Andrea and Shirley to taking action, the third stage of organizing (Warren, 2010), CFE funding became a rallying point, and they both became involved with lobbying the state senators around this issue, and Andrea’s activism took an even more outwardly dramatic turn in the fall of 2016 when she participated in a nearly 150-mile walk from New York City to Albany, marking ten years since the original CFE march to Albany. As mothers of action, all four mothers who worked with the union have a lot to say on education. Participating in these workshops and conferences equipped them with knowledge and confidence needed to engage in open resistance to injustices – speaking out to and for other parents, participating in rallies, demonstrations, and marches, gathering community support for their causes, and lobbying elected officials and holding Department of Education officials accountable. Taking action included
campaigns beyond the CFE, taking up issues such as the need for science labs and culturally responsive teaching.

The full cycle of organizing is illustrated in Figure 6.1, showing how the mothers’ experiences working with the union map on to Warren’s conception of organizing. It becomes clear that the UFT parent community liaisons play a significant role in the mothers’ development as activists. It is in the liaison’s meetings that we see both the development of relationships as well as new concerns being identified, and it was this entry point that brought the four mothers in this study to see themselves as more than involved mothers, but as activists.

Figure 6.1 Cycle of Organizing for Mothers Working with the UFT
From building relationships, the mothers who worked with the union came to understand a need for alliances. Collins (2010) identifies forming alliances as an aspect of Black women’s activism. The mothers in this study realize that a predominantly white teachers’ union has more bargaining power than a handful of parents of color. The formation of CEJ as a coalition of groups with shared interests was the ultimate example of this. The union played an important role in connecting the different parent groups, but equally important was their partnership in the coalition, making the collective that much stronger. Additionally, Camille talks directly to the importance of alliances as she explains how she needed to leverage her relationship with the UFT to create the Special Education Working Group, knowing that the Department of Education would just ignore her as a parent.

The final question critically probes the relationship between parent activism and union activism. While the mothers who work with the union identified practical challenges in working with the union, such as not understanding the politics between the UFT and other unions, the question raised by one participant who is skeptical of the relationship at all, is one around whose agenda gets promoted. The parents who work with the union talk about how their education came from their interaction with the UFT. Significant were the relationships they built with individual UFT parent-community liaisons and the workshops, conferences, and other activities organized by the liaisons in which they learned about the sociopolitical landscape in which their children’s schools are situated. This suggests that these parents’ understandings of the issues that fuel their activism is in part influenced by the union. However, their understandings are also
shaped by their own lived experiences of parenting and their positionality as Black women.

Through the Parent Power School, they are continuing the cycle of organizing. They identified culturally relevant pedagogy as their current concern and are building relationships with new activists, developing leadership skills, and planning actions. Aware that they may not have the full support of the UFT at this point in time, they are still seeking allies within schools. Rather than going through the larger organization, they are going to the individual schools to build relationships with individual teachers and administrators, with the hopes of building a groundswell of support.

Acknowledging that Culturally Responsive Education (Coalition for Educational Justice, 2017) in all schools may not be an agenda shared by the UFT as a whole, these mothers, through CEJ, are persistent. They are the ones steering the conversation within CEJ, and they are using the organizing tools they have learned from the UFT to promote their platform even without the full support of this particular ally at this point in time. They seem to accept that they may not always have the same immediate goals as their allies, but it doesn’t deter them from making these alliances, with allies whom they believe they share an ultimate goal of improving education for all. Rather they focus on the potential that drawing upon alliances has for increasing the power of the activism and bringing about change.

**Conclusion**

Akeelah, Andrea, Camille and Shirley found benefits to the collaboration between the union and parents. The mothers came to the UFT Parent Outreach at
different times, and have engaged in different campaigns. Ultimately, they all got connected with CEJ. To varying degrees, they have emerged as leaders in CEJ as well as in their local educational communities. Collins (1990) points out that African American women’s activism often includes coalition building. She states that struggles for institutional change rarely happen without allies, so the approach of forming coalitions is an essential part of Black women’s activism.

They note that their interactions are limited to working with UFT Parent Outreach (a small program of the union that is dedicated to engaging parents), and specifically with two individual parent-community liaisons. The parents are pleased with the training and resources they get receive. In particular, the mothers I interviewed stressed the importance of attending workshops and conferences as part of their development as activists because that is where they learned the skills of organizing. It makes sense that an organized labor union would be able to train parents in the skills of organizing.

Having moved through the different stages of organizing, the mothers themselves have taken on leadership roles in helping to develop new parent activists primarily through work with CEJ, which is now a well-established coalition of activist groups that includes the union. These mothers also continue to work with UFT Parent Outreach, now teaching and leading in their conferences and workshops. Additionally, it continues participate in collaborations such as the Special Education Working Group, creating other spaces where parents and union members come together as allies.

As stakeholders with different perspectives on issues, it is likely that there will be times when ideologies may be in conflict. CEJ’s current campaign for Culturally Responsive Education is one possible issue on which the parents and the union as a unit
may not be in total agreement. The mothers understand that there may times with political expediency requires the union to take a stand that seems in opposition to theirs. Nonetheless, the mothers felt that the overall experience of working with the union outweighed the potential for conflict, and instead focused on potential for expanding collaborations.

The mothers appreciate the power they have as parents and the value for the union to mobilize them. With the mobilization capabilities of such a large union, they see the potential for greater organization of parents, and thus for greater ability to affect institutional change within the Departments of Education at both the city and state levels for educational justice. Further research that includes the union perspective could be useful in better understanding the particular relationship parent activist groups can potentially have with the UFT. Additionally, further exploration of possibilities for collaboration should be explored with the parents who can imagine such a collaboration.
Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

_In organizing you have to be able to speak to those who are impacted because, you know, who else is going to be able to share the story in an honest way, or tell the story or be part of the solution._ (Akeelah, December 23, 2016)

Employing a Black feminist framework (Collins, 2000) with narrative research methods, this research brings forth stories of activism by seven African American mothers in New York City. In this final chapter I first review key findings from this study of seven African American mothers who became education activists. The findings are significant in that they provide an understanding of activism from the perspective of mothers who engage in it. Following the review of key findings from each chapter, I examine cross-cutting themes. Finally, I conclude with implications for future research.

Chapter IV provides longer narratives from each mother and offering a more intimate look at some of the personal experiences that help shape who they are as activists and how they came to become activists. Chapter V took up how the mothers define activism and the activities they consider to be activism. Chapter VI focused on a relationship between four of the mothers’ activism and UFT Parent Outreach. Throughout these three chapters, I explored how the mothers make sense of the educational landscape their activism is situated. And finally, I see how they view their identities, including race, class, and gender among other markers as factors in their experiences.

The research questions for this study are:
1. How do the African American mothers in this study understand themselves as educational activists?
   - How do they define activism or their activities as activism?
   - Where/how do these mothers enact their activism?
   - What do they identify as motivation for their activities or actions?

2. How do the mothers in the study understand the sociopolitical context and the educational landscape in which their activism is situated? How do the mothers in the study understand their gender, race, class, and/or other identity markers, as identified by themselves or others, as factors in the experiences or concerns they share with me?
   - How do the mothers in the study understand their gender, race, class, and/or other identity markers, as identified by themselves or others, as factors in the experiences or concerns they have with me?
   - How are issues of power, knowledge, race, gender, and class expressed and analyzed in the stories shared by these African American mothers?

**Summary of Key Findings**

Chapter IV presents a personal experience or series of experiences that give the reader a sense of who the participants are as people. The experiences shared in these narratives illustrate the intersectionality of identity and how it relates to oppression in the lives of these women (Collins, 1990). For these women, they experience what they do because they are Black, and women, and other things as well. For Shirley, being an
immigrant is part of her identity, so being Black and an immigrant shapes her experiences in the world.

In this chapter, we see that all seven mothers are African American women who have experienced oppression. For some, such as Shirley and Camille, the stories highlight institutionalized racism that Black women live with. Other stories deal with dynamics within families and in both Andrea and Karen’s narratives, we see both family and school dynamics at play. Using Collins’ *domains of power framework* (2013), which organizes power into four interconnected domains (the structural domain, the disciplinary domain, the cultural domain, and the interpersonal domain), we find that the oppression discussed by the mothers in their stories falls into one or more of the domains. All the mothers talked about these stories as being related to the reasons why they have become activists.

In Chapter V, we see that the seven mothers use different language to define activism, but salient features included: taking care of people, making and/or working toward change, and organizing. Similarly, the mothers discussed a variety of ways in which they enacted their activism. They named a number of activities they engaged in as part of organizing to spread their platforms, including letter writing campaigns, boycotting, holding rallies, lobbying, walking, educating others with meetings, workshops, and conferences.

The women’s activism exists both within the structures of hegemonic, oppressive institutions and outside them as direct challenges to oppression. Working within the structures of the Department of Education, the mothers defy assumptions about African American parents as uncaring or disengaged (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005) by engaging at every level and on every committee possible. They use their leadership roles
within these structures to form relationships with school and district personnel who may help them with other causes. Simultaneously, they work to engage other parents, taking on mentoring or teaching roles to help other parents become more actively engaged in their children’s education, thus improving outcomes for children and potentially building community support for their platforms against oppression.

The majority of the mothers also work with one or more activist groups outside of the DOE. They often take on leadership roles in these groups as well to actively combat oppression through institutional change. Four of the mothers work with the Coalition for Educational Justice, and have affiliations with a number of other groups while another is a co-founder and leader of a local activist group. While CEJ is a coalition of organizations working together to improve education throughout New York City, the other is a stand-alone organization to promote sisterhood among women of color to combat educational injustice and human rights violations. For all of the mothers, finding these spaces in which to speak out against multiple forms of oppression in schools is the common thread.

Chapter VI focused on the particular relationship some mothers had with the local teachers’ union. Four mothers engaging with the UFT Parent Outreach Program identified it as an important vehicle for their development as education activists. They identified key staff members of the program as the people they learned to organize from. They talked about UFT-sponsored workshops and conferences as being the places where they learned about problematic social and political influences on schools and families that lead to the injustices they are working to eradicate. These mothers also talked about the importance of having unions, and specifically the teachers’ union, as an ally in their
activist work. They saw potential power to be realized from working in collaboration with the union to organize mass groups of parents.

**Cross-Cutting Themes**

Several themes cut across many of the narratives in this study. The first cross-cutting theme is that of caring and specifically care for others, which for the mothers in this study takes the form of othermothering or community othermothering. Related to othermothering, we also see teaching in all of the findings chapters. A final cross-cutting theme is the value placed on having allies for activism.

**Care and Othermothering**

While six of the seven women were biological mothers, all the women in this study took on some aspect of othermothering in their activism. In Chapter IV, othermothering is clearly exemplified by Karen, who was not a biological mother, and who first raised her niece and now raises her niece’s son as his legal guardian. However, all seven of the mothers took on a nurturing role for others outside their families. As Collins (2000) suggests we re-examine the role of othermothers with an understanding that the concept leads to a belief that children are not the sole responsibility or property of the biological family, but rather the responsibility of the community as a whole. The notion of “community othermothering” is salient to the way in which the mothers in this study viewed their activism. They all talked about their work as being for the benefit of the children of the community collectively. They were shouldering the responsibility for other people’s children in one way or another. This comes through in Chapter V as we
explore the forms their activism takes, and for some, it comes through again in their longer narratives in Chapter IV.

**Teaching**

Collins (2000) identifies teaching as a natural extension of othermothering. All of the chapters reflect the idea of teaching as important to the nature of their activism. Only one of the mothers in the study had trained as a teacher, but several others talked about wanting to be a teacher or having had considered it as a possible career before life took them on their current trajectories. Regardless of their own educational background, most of the mothers talked about learning about organizing and then teaching others about organizing. The Parent Power School is an important part of what CEJ does. Parents learn organizing skills as well as how to articulate why they are organizing in the first place. The mothers mentioned in Chapter VI now participate not only as learners but also as teachers in this process, extending the community othermothering role to teaching, as Collins suggests happens.

**Allies for Activism**

One theme that came up in Chapters V and VI was the importance of having allies. For some, being part of a coalition of groups meant having allied groups to work together having a greater collective voice to get a message across. While for others, the allies were either other activists sharing the struggle, or even school personnel who supported their work. The mothers who worked either with CEJ and the UFT or with another organization, found that formalizing an alliance supported their work. Yet, informal alliances in their work within the schools, such as Karen finding way to work
with a principal to gain momentum for an “opt-out” [from high-stakes testing] movement also served the mothers’ activism.

**Implications for Future Research**

The enthusiasm of the mothers to participate in this research and share their stories suggests a need felt by them to have their stories and stories of women like them heard. Existing research on mothers’ educational activism is limited. While this research adds to that body, there is little available that explores activism from the parents’ perspective. Future research could explore other Black mother’s perspectives, delving even deeper into motivations and experiences with activism.

The uniqueness of each mother’s story makes evident that future research from parents’ perspectives needs to be conducted that takes individuals’ circumstances and experiences into consideration. Just as some of the mothers in this research want culturally relevant education for their children, they want to participate in research that is respectful of who they are as Black women, understanding the intersectionality of oppression that they experience, but also recognizing that they are making positive contributions to their communities by bringing awareness to problems and in some cases, bringing about significant educational change. One way to engage in such research is to engage the mothers not as participants co-creating knowledge, but as co-researchers, where they are part of the research process from design to analysis to writing and reporting, which we may call Parent Participatory Action Research.

The mothers’ desire to share their stories as activists to connect to the community also suggests that future research should consider the audience. While writing for
academia is important, this work should also be for the activists doing the work and for the mothers who might be activists. For my own work, this means that in addition to publishing in academic journals and presenting at academic conferences, I should be publishing in periodicals and newsletters that parents read, presenting at parent-led conferences, and/or leading workshops with CEJ’s Parent Power School. I would encourage others who embark on this topic and similar topics to do the same, and engage with the community directly. If heeding the wisdom of Akeelah, we should be speaking to and writing for those directly impacted by the oppression these activists seek to disrupt.

Othermothering is a significant theme in Black feminist thought and ran throughout this research. All of the women in this study identified as “mothers” in the way they saw their roles as primary caregivers for children, including Karen, who was not raising her own biological children. However, the mothers in this study related their experience of activism to notions of othermothering, or caring for children other than their own within their community. The relationship between activism and othermothering is one that would be worthy of further research. Researchers might explore the ways in activism of women who are not biological mothers is similar or different to that of women who are biological mothers, and whose activism may stem from experiences with their own children.

The discovery that for some mothers working with the teachers’ union provided an avenue into the world of activism was unexpected. The enthusiasm of the mothers who worked with UFT Parent Outreach suggests that there is a special relationship with the potential for much more. Additional research to understand the possibilities of
collaborations with unions could be of use to activists. Research might include the perspective of the union to better understand the dynamic between parents and teachers. This research has the potential to yield additional ways that teachers unions and parents may collaborate. The findings of the study also found that the work of two teachers’ union parent-community liaisons in particular were salient to these women’s development as activists. Understanding the importance of the relationship between the parent-community liaison as well as what these particular liaisons brought to that relationship could further inform future parent-union collaborations. While this study focused on activism, gaining a better understanding of what made these relationships and the collaborations between the mothers and the union people work has the potential to inform the ways in which teachers and parents collaborate in schools. In this way, we gain a better understanding of the myriad ways teachers might think about parent engagement. This could be useful for practicing teachers as well as teacher education.

At the same time, the mother activists working for Culturally Responsive Education and to end high stakes testing are bringing their own agendas to the forefront. Further research might explore ways in which schools can make space for parent involvement that gives parents greater voice in educational decision making. Research could explore the issues that parents find relevant and important. It might also explore the ways in which schools engage parents so as to avoid resistance or direct action taken in opposition to school policy. There will likely always be a need for parent activists who step up to take a stand for children and public education, but further research into parents’ advocacy and ways to work with them has the potential to inform teachers and those who
hope to be teachers how to work with activists to achieve shared visions, rather than see them as problematic.

In the academic field of education, there is reason to continue to learn more about parents who become activists. They represent a group of parents whose involvement with their children’s education pushes the boundaries of most parent involvement frameworks. They have the interests of their children and all children at heart, and have given thought to what schools should and could be if parents and teachers are working together. There is possibility for future research to inform teachers and administrators as well as those training to be teachers and administrators, both in terms of what community schools could be, and ultimately how to engage parents on a larger scale.
REFERENCES


Au, W. (2013). “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”: False pretenses and the humbug of high stakes testing. In J. Gorlewski & B. Porfilio (Eds.), *Left behind in the race to the top: Realities of school reform* (pp. 7-22). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.


Appendix A

One-On-One Conversations (Interview) Questions

These questions will be addressed over the course of 3 conversation/interviews.

Background Information (likely asked in the first conversation/interview):

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Describe your family structure? What was your birth order?
3. What kinds of schools did you attend? (public, private, other)
4. Did your parents work?
5. Where do you live now? (borough/school district)
6. What is your current family structure?
7. How many children do you have?
8. What are the ages of your children?
9. Where do your children go to school?
10. Is there something you would like to add?

Exploratory Questions:

1. You have (been) identified as a parent activist around educational issues. Why do you carry that label?
2. Are you a member of any parent organizations? If yes, which ones.
3. Are you a member of any activist organizations? If yes, which ones.
4. What activities do you engage in that you would consider activism?
5. What motivates you to do these things?

6. What is the school your child goes to like?
   a. General demographics?
   b. Overall state of the building?
   c. Your impression of how the school is run?
   d. What is the curriculum like?

7. How are you involved in your child(ren)’s education?

8. Do you ever feel there are barriers to your involvement? If so, what are they?

9. What was school like for you growing up?

10. How would you describe your parents’ involvement in your education?

11. How do you think your parents’ actions influenced you when you became a parent?

12. What role do you think parents should play in their children’s education?

13. What are your hopes for your own children?

14. Is there something you would like to add?
Appendix B

Community Sharing Conversation (Focus Group) Questions

This conversation will be loosely structured, with the following questions to get it started:

1. Introductions
   a. Please tell us your names,
   b. how many children you have, and
   c. their ages.

2. Please share something you want us to know about your child(ren).

3. As a Black woman, what is it like being a parent activist?

4. Do you define/see yourself as an activist/educational activist? Would others define you in this way? Why or why not?

5. Please tell us about a moment that makes this work worthwhile for you?

6. What challenges have you faced?

7. Other questions will be asked based up broad themes from data analysis from individual interviews.
Appendix C

Sample Coding Schema

The following charts show the progression from sample initial codes to focus codes, to themes they are organized by theoretical framings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Having parents who valued education</td>
<td>Having parents model involvement</td>
<td>Importance of role models and/or mentors in development as activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents stressing education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having a strong female role model (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having parents who modeled involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents advocating for child at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having parent involved with PTA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having a mother who was an activist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having parent advocate for her with a problem teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 1. Women Taking on Responsibility for Cultural Reproduction*
### Domains of Power: Structural/Disciplinary/Interpersonal/Cultural (Collins, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not being taken seriously by doctor when something wrong with child</td>
<td>Being neglected by medical institutions as a Black woman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being dismissed as a crazy mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling to get diagnosis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going through scanners to get into school</td>
<td>Having a Black body controlled through policing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter being handcuffed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter being hospitalized for resisting arrest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having child taken away at birth – forced adoption</td>
<td>Being denied experience of motherhood</td>
<td>Having human rights violated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being picked on</td>
<td>Being bullied by other children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being spit at</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being robbed repeatedly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being yelled at by teacher</td>
<td>Being bullied by an adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing domestic violence</td>
<td>Being a victim of physical violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sexually assaulted</td>
<td>Being sexually assaulted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being almost raped</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to pull her pants off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 2. Domains of Power*
### Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of their Activism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding the disparity between having wealth and not by seeing wealthier districts as “organized and they tend to fight for the rights of their students”</td>
<td>Being/Becoming aware of racial injustice</td>
<td>Understanding the sociopolitical context and educational landscape in which their activism is situated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expecting White people to judge everyone by holding them to White norms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seeing Black people displaced by White people in her neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seeing difference between Black and White parent participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seeing difference in resources between Black and White schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Finding (DOE) regulations hinder parent involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Codes</td>
<td>Focus Codes</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting the fight</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>Enacting activism – taking action for change through direct confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting for what you believe in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to fight for it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting NYC public school system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting for every placement (special education)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to fight for it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesting</td>
<td>Making position known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking to Albany</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to Albany for “Lobby Day”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting the flow of work</td>
<td>Putting a stop to the</td>
<td>Enacting activism – taking action for change through direct confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eroding the problem</td>
<td>identified problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting mothers’ stories</td>
<td>Documenting mothers of</td>
<td>Enacting activism – taking action for change through resistance of dominant narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>color’s experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being persistent</td>
<td>Not allowing others to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>break her down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being on PTA</td>
<td>Serving on DOE sanctioned</td>
<td>Resistance of dominant narrative of uninvolved Black parent: Taking action within DOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being PTA president</td>
<td>Committees</td>
<td>structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being on CEC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being on DLT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being on SLT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being elected CCHS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 4. Domains of Black Women’s Activism*
### Othermothering and Teaching (Collins, 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Doing for others  
• Believing in trying to help your community  
• Holding a meet and greet  
• Caring for niece  
• Becoming guardian of nephew  
• Taking in nephew  
• Feeding kids’ friends  
• Stepping in for absent father when girl wouldn’t remove headscarf. | Caring for others (other people’s children) | Othermothering/Community  
Othermothering: Mothers taking responsibility for care of those outside of immediate family. |
| • Liking to teach  
• Wanting to help other parents to feel empowered  
• Providing training to the parents  
• Grooming other women to be activists | Teaching | Teaching as an extension of othermothering |

*Chart 5. Othermothering and Teaching*

### Burdon of Labor – “Invisible” Labor (Baez, 2000; Few-Demo, Piercy & Stremmel, 2016; Hall, 2016; Matthew, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Being sandwiched between caring for elderly and children  
• Feeling exhausted from everything that needs to be done  
• Not protesting because busy doing other stuff  
• Feeling fortunate to have enough time for activism | Experiencing a shortage of time | Personal challenges to time |

*Chart 6. Burdon of Labor*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• UFT helping to form special education working group</td>
<td>Working with the UFT</td>
<td>Finding Allies in local unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning about issues at UFT sponsored workshops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participating in UFT sponsored parent conference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing a relationship with the parent-community liaison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being connected with parents in the Bronx who are also</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Forming CEJ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adding DC-37 to the special education working group</td>
<td>Working with DC-37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having professional development for parent coordinators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doing another professional development to reach more parent coordinators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Helping parent coordinators understand how to guide parents of children with special needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respecting other activists</td>
<td>Connecting with others who are like minded on issues</td>
<td>Finding Allies in other parents and organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trusting other activists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Needing to belong to a group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Founding an activist organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Starting an activist coalition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Connecting with an activist organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 7. Allies for Activism*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focus Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Creating safe spaces for parents to learn  
• Attending parent-community liaison meetings  
• Coming together with others  
• Making a personal connection with the parent-community liaison | Being introduced to others and activist ideas | Building relationships: Where activism begins |
| • Being prepped to attend meeting  
• Being recognized as a parent leader  
• Learning the rules/Chancellor’s Regulations  
• Learning from White women activists | Learning to be an activist | Cycle of Organizing  
Developing leadership: Learning and teaching |
| • Passing the baton  
• Grooming other women to be activists  
• Providing training to the parents | Teaching others to be activists | |
| • Protesting  
• Marching  
• Walking to Albany  
• Writing letters  
• Talking to parents  
• Meeting with politicians  
• Going to Albany for “Lobby Day” | Being active for a cause | Taking action: Ways activism is enacted |
| • Picking what your heart is passionate about  
• Addressing a specific problem  
• Doing what you have a passion for  
• Wanting to make a change  
• Being an activist for the right cause | Identifying issues | Identifying (new) concerns: Motivation for Activism |

*Chart 8. Cycle of Organizing*