12 Schools, Black Mothers, Black Children, and the Tenets of Disillusionment

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> And you can always hear this long sob story: "You know it takes time." For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change.

Fannie Lou Hamer spoke these words at a rally in 1964 challenging the Mississippi Democratic Primary election (Brooks & Houck, 2011, p. 62). She and other organizers were declaring the election outcomes fraudulent as the overwhelming majority of the state's Black population were prevented from openly and freely participating in the election. The myriad of tactics used to prevent Black people from exercising their constitutional right to vote has become the stuff of political racism folklore. They are now pointed to as the hallmark symbols of disenfranchisement: grandfather clauses, poll taxes, literacy tests, and the outright murder of Black people that even attempted to vote themselves or empower others in their community to vote (Brown-Marshall, 2016; Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.; Lewis & Allen, 1972).

The organizers of the 1964 rally hoped to convince officials to run another election devoid of the coercion and terrorism of elections past. Alas, the conclusion of the 1964 protest effort did not result in the desired outcome. Yet, it did contribute to the mounting evidence used to push for the eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (MFDP Congressional Challenge, Nov '64-Sept '65). Unfortunately, 56 years later, in 2021, at the time of this writing, we are witnessing some of the most aggressive challenges to the rights fought for during that time, as legislatures across the nation attempt to pass bills diminishing access to the vote for millions (Berry et al., 2021; Fandos, 2021; Gardner, 2021). The lion's share of ill impacts of these measures is predicted to fall disproportionately on the backs of Black people in this country.

The history of the United States is littered with stories of the ebb and flow of racial advancements towards equality and equity. As the pattern goes, a barrier is erected to disallow rights and access to resources for Black people. Then an arduous fight to break down those blockades results

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in a victory for progress, only to be followed by a resurgence in White rage (Anderson, 2016) that claws away hard-fought wins—illustrating that racial progress is never permanent. This dance epitomizes one of Derrick Bell's (1992) tenets in his theorization of Critical Race Theory—the permanence of racism, which he declared "is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" (p. ix).

Much like in the halls of Congress, the dynamics of this ongoing struggle have played out in our educational institutions since before the first common schools opened in the mid-nineteenth century (Mondale & Patton, 2001). During the 1700s and 1800s, slave codes and anti-literacy laws spread throughout the south in an effort to keep the enslaved populations from becoming "unfit to be a slave" (Douglas, 1960, p. 52). The intentional exclusion of Black people from learning was an ingrained feature of the colonial project before the United States even became an independent country (Cornelius, 1991; Rasmussen, 2010). These de jure practices came to be known as compulsory ignorance laws (Weinberg, 1995; Williams, 2005) and were accompanied by punishments as minimal as fines or as extreme as death for those caught defying the mandates.

Countering Denial

Yet, even under the threat of the lash or death, the enslaved population did disobey such laws. The commitment to "steal learning" was a communal effort. Enslaved Black men had some legitimate access to gleaning lessons when they were selected for apprenticeships or through their military enlistment, passing on what they had retained to others. Meanwhile, Black women utilized the opportunities their gendered work afforded them in the slave owner's house to overhear and memorize the instruction given to the master's children by tutors. The enslaved population even created underground schools in the dark brush of night to reach as many of their kindred as possible (Williams, 2005).

After the Civil War, when Black people were released from the institution of perpetual enslavement under the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 (Tsesis, 2008; Vorenberg, 2001), for a flicker in time, there appeared the potential for intentional investing in the education of the newly freed people. However, lack of governmental commitment, fiduciary mismanagement and the retaliatory tactics of the defeated Confederate States quickly evaporated any prospects Reconstruction once held for Black people (DuBois & Mack, 2017; Foner, 1983, 2013). Newly built schoolhouses were burnt down by White angry mobs; the birth of the Ku Klux Klan committed to intimidating Black people away from voting polls, regardless of the Fifteenth Amendment. Tax structures ensured the unfair allocation of dollars out of the pockets of Black families and funneled those funds into White-only schoolhouses (Butchart, 2010; King & Tuck, 2007; Tyack & Lowe, 1986).

The Jim Crow laws that cemented the separation of Blacks and Whites in everyday life were most visibly salient in educational institutions. However, the pushback of such laws and practices seemed to reach its zenith with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 (Kluger, 2011). Challenging the constitutionality of the Separate but Equal Doctrine as established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the counsel for *Brown* successfully convinced the justices to move in their favor. Chief Justice Earl Warren penned the landmark unanimous ruling, stating:

> We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.
>
> (www.ourdocuments.gov, n.d.)

Once again, this triumph was short-lived as states and school districts implemented inventive ways to elude the spirit of the law. There were increases in school suspensions and expulsions by race (Fund, 1975; Southern Regional Council, 1973) and entire school districts shut down rather than allow Black children to occupy the same educational spaces as White children (Brookover, 1993). Some states blatantly defied the ruling (Bell, 1980; Walker, 2009), forcing a second *Brown v. Board* judgment in 1955 ordering states to institute plans to desegregate their districts with "all deliberate speed" (Bond, 2015; Ogletree, 2004). Still, in Louisiana, where a federal court order was necessary to force the state to desegregate in 1960, a test was required for Black children to be allowed entry into schools with White classmates. Six-year-old Ruby Bridges, now with the last name Bridges-Hall, was one of only five children that passed the test in her school district. She ultimately was the only one of the five who decided to attend the local elementary school.

Bridges-Hall recalls the reluctance her father, Abon, felt to send his daughter into such a hostile environment. She speaks of her mother's insistence that the family see this opportunity through since it could benefit Ruby and other Black children in the long run.

> My mother was all for it. My father wasn't. "We're just asking for trouble," he said. He thought things weren't going to change, and blacks and whites would never be treated as equals. Mama thought I would have an opportunity to get a better education if I went to the new school—and a chance for a good job later in life. My parents argued about it and prayed about it. Eventually my mother convinced my father that despite the risks, they had to take this step forward, not just for their own children, but for all black children.
>
> (Bridges-Hall, 2000)

Bridges-Hall did, in fact, affect the ripple, but not the tide. Her father lost his job, and her grandparents were evicted from their farm, though the school she attended was officially desegregated, inspired by her actions (Michals, 2015). Still, in the present day, schools have been resegregated (Frankenberg et al., 2019; Garcia, 2020; Orfield, 2001; Owens, 2020), with some states exhibiting more concentrated divisions today than in 1960.

Black Mothers' Resistance

From the enslaved Black mothers who confiscated knowledge to tuck away in their kerchiefs and deliver to their children and community members, to the determination of Lucille Bridges as she walked through shouting throngs of hate to enable her daughter to attend school, Black mothers have been committed to the possibilities afforded their children through education. Even when the system charged with delivering that education denies them and their children unhampered access, Black mothers resist such denial efforts through multiple means. One way they fight back is through organizing for the transformation of the system.

Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers

I (Dawn) spent over a year conducting an ethnographic study with a cadre of Black mothers in the metropolitan area of Sun City in the United States Southwest. These women created a grassroots organization called the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM). The organization's goal was to interrupt the policies and practices that contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline in an effort to create equitable educational environments for the children in their communities. This group was composed of both natural mothers and what Stanlie James (1993) called "othermothers."

> …[O]thermothers are those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of childcare for short- to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be but are not confined to such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, or supportive fictive kin.
>
> (p. 45)

The mothers of ACBM, many of whom were grandmothers whose natural children were adults, committed to the communal work of transforming local school systems. Patricia Hill Collins (1987) calls this expanded sense of responsibility community othermothering.

> Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by trying, in the words of late-nineteenth-century Black feminists, to 'uplift the race,' so that vulnerable members of the community would be

> able to attain the self-reliance and independence so desperately needed for Black community development under oppressive conditions.
>
> (p. 6)

As part of my ethnographic study, I (Dawn) conducted multiple in-depth interviews with 10 of the mothers, addressing their own educational experiences during childhood as mothers of school children and as organizers. The mothers also produced various forms of artistic expression, capturing how they viewed the relationship between the school system, their natural and communal children, and themselves as mothers and organizers. What was most striking about the stories was the consistency and predictability of the educational trauma and suffering experienced by the mothers and their families, even across generations. Yet, all of the women translated that pain into motivation to change the ways the schools dealt with Black children. We have chosen to share an in-depth look at one mother's story as it was representative of the whole corpus of narratives and contained many of the dynamics revealed in all of the mothers' tales.

One Mother's Story—Multigenerational Educational Trauma

Michelle is a single mother of four. I (Dawn) met her early on in my engagement with ACBM during one of their monthly meetings. Michelle was born and raised in the Midwest by her paternal grandparents as both of her natural parents had issues with drugs. Still, Michelle shared with me that, regardless of her father's issues, she remembered that he was always nearby when she needed him. Furthermore, Michelle was surrounded by a lot of family and fictive kin, as she grew up and lived in the same neighborhood her father came up in. Though she felt protected being surrounded by so much family, one interaction in elementary school left her particularly traumatized and eventually affected her far into the future.

> I was acting up in school and she [her teacher] … told me she was going to call my mom. I didn't even know my mom at the time. So, I was like, "You can't call my mom," you know, of course, being smart. And she's like, "You're right." And then she's like, "Why not? Does your mom not want you?" And so that was like that whole thing right there. It was like—it really was a bad time. Because what happened is the kids started to repeat it. So it was like, "Aha, your mom don't want you." And so at that point in time, I just didn't know my mom or didn't know where she was. But when she asked me that question, then it was like, "Oh, she don't want me. That's why she not here." And so from third grade, that's why I started to struggle like really bad with behavior and my self-esteem. Cause I felt like my mom don't want me. And it was from that interaction with that third-grade teacher.

Michelle was triggered by this teacher's comments as she herself had yet to meet her mother. Thus, the reasoning the teacher offered filled the void of the unknown in her mind. This single comment shook Michelle's sense of belonging that had been established by her family and community. Additionally, the teacher embarrassed Michelle in front of the entire class and gave the children fodder with which to tease Michelle.

> I went to the same elementary school that my father and my aunts went to. So a lot of their peers of course grew up to be teachers. So to my advantage, some of my teachers, they knew my dad struggled with drugs. They knew my mother struggled with drugs. You know, they knew about me before I knew about me. And I didn't know that then, but I know that now. And so they kind of was very lenient with me. Like I said, they refocused me a lot. Um, and they really pushed me outside of what I wanted to do, I would say. So I have really excellent teachers outside of that one.

With this statement, we see that the historical familiarity of some of the other educators in the school with Michelle's family served to benefit her. Her teachers utilized their knowledge of her circumstances to redirect the pain that was caused by the teacher inferring she was unwanted by her mother. While these teachers were able to soften the blows of these events, the scars of her encounter with the teacher at the age of eight years were ever-present.

> I mean, it was from that interaction with that third-grade teacher as far as anything positive about school. I don't know, like I've done a lot of positive things, but that experience overshadowed anything. So, like I won spelling bees. I was like the State Champ. I did poetry contests, you know. I've had my paper that I wrote on Martin Luther King published in the paper. But my [most memorable] school memory is that third grade [incident].

Michelle went on to work in the public schools of Sun City, creating after-school programming around bullying prevention and boosting self-esteem. She said she wanted to offer to the students "the programs I needed when I was a kid." Eventually, Michelle got involved with the work of the ACBM during an exclusionary incident involving her own son.

> He was attending Sanchez Middle School, in Newman School District. And there was an incident where the teacher wouldn't let him in class. He was like, I guess like 30 seconds late. She was still in the door, though, but late, because he went to the bathroom first. He was upset she wouldn't let him in, and he started crying, folded his arms. And the teacher said she was intimidated by him—his posture the way his arm was folded. So he was suspended for 10 days for intimidating a teacher. When he returned from suspension, people were saying,

"Hey, I heard you got suspended. I heard you got suspended." And my son said, "Well, the teacher shouldn't be telling the business, because these are my rights. You're not supposed to be able to tell." My son knows that cause I work for the schools, and he knows there are certain things you can't talk about, and so he approached the teacher: "Why are you telling my business?" Again, she felt intimidated by him, right. He then went into the cafeteria; he was trying to tell the administrators. They weren't listening. They were like, "We'll check into that. We'll have a conversation with her." And he was at the lunch table, and he was like, I'm tired of this. I'm tired of them treating my people like this. I would rather them shoot me dead than treat me like this!" And one of the students told the administration. So, because he mentioned shooting a gun, they correlated that to, he brought up guns and violence.

So, he received another 10 days suspension with a recommendation for expulsion. And so myself, along with ACBM, as well as some other community leaders, we went to his hearing and everything. … So they had this folder prepared with all of these, like their evidence, should I say? They have made a [printout] internet search stating that my son had searched up guns previously on the computers. And then it was pointed out [by ACBM members] that during the dates that they have under his ID logged into his computer, those days he was on suspension. So he never could have searched through that school computer [on those days]. But that was part of their evidence. And so once that was brought to light, [the school board] said "Well, we'll just tear this up. We can't use this." Then they just took it out the folder. They wanted us to just tear it out and give it back to them. I'm like, no, of course I kept my folder. But they ended up saying, "Okay, well, we're not going to expel him, but he has to go to a special school." But at this school, he'll be isolated. They have isolated studies. They pick up trash and do community service, and I basically just went off. Like, I'm not going to let you put my son in prison. That sounds like public prison, and so I declined. I removed him from the Newman district.

We see Michelle's 12-year-old son being perceived as a threat in both interactions with his teacher. Then, when the district was making its case to expel him, they were called out for inserting falsified evidence to support their claims for expulsion. But, instead of addressing it and possibly apologizing, they ask the mother and her supporters to ignore it. Furthermore, rather than rectifying and addressing the suffering caused to her son, the district suggested he be put into an alternative school that was "like a public prison." The school that was suggested for her son as a remedy had, in fact, been created by the district as a "last chance" school for students that had multiple legal violations and were in danger of entering the youth juvenile system. In other words, the district felt it was an appropriate response to place her son in the alternative school rather than deal with the

problems of how her son was treated by the administrators and teachers. Michelle ended up taking her son out of the Newman District and eventually sent him to Florida to his father to go to school, believing the schools in Sun City were too problematic for Black children.

During our discussions, Michelle often bragged about how intelligent her son was, though it was not acknowledged by the teachers and administrators in the Newman District. She told me (Dawn) that he had tested as gifted, but the district refused to place him in gifted classes. "I am going to send you the paperwork if I can find it," she told me. I believed that her son had tested as gifted, but Michelle insisted on showing me the evidence. A few weeks after this discussion, she tagged me on a social media post (Figures 12.1 and 12.2).

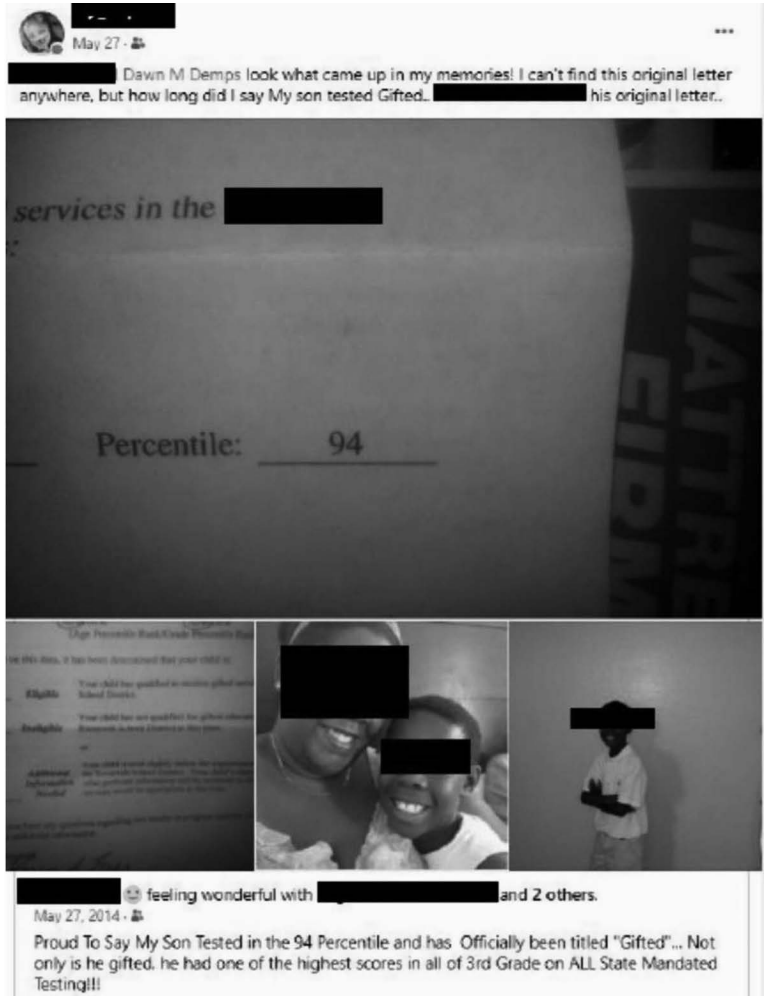
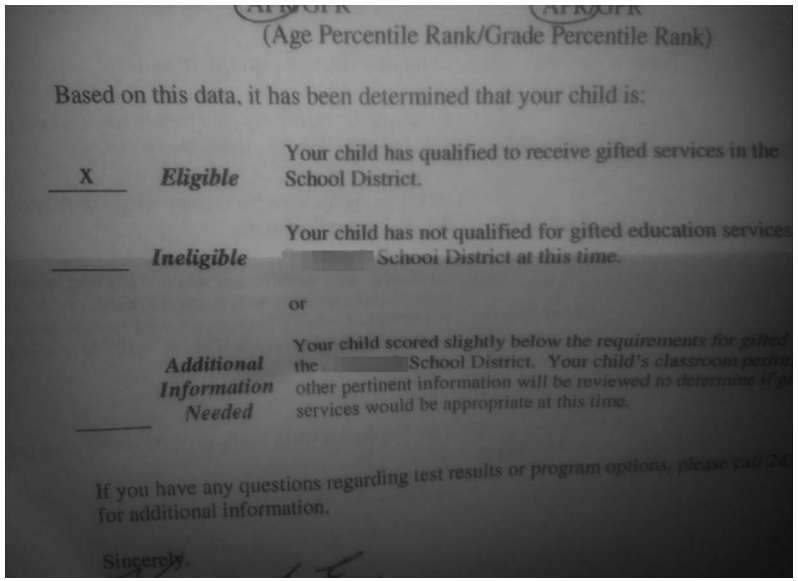


Figure 12.1 Shared Facebook post.


(Age Percentile Rank/Grade Percentile Rank)

Based on this data, it has been determined that your child is:

X **Eligible** Your child has qualified to receive gifted services in the School District.

_____ **Ineligible** Your child has not qualified for gifted education services [redacted] School District at this time.

or

_____ **Additional Information Needed** Your child scored slightly below the requirements for gifted the [redacted] School District. Your child's classroom perfor other pertinent information will be reviewed to determine if g services would be appropriate at this time.

If you have any questions regarding test results or program options, please call 24 for additional information.

Sincerely,

Figure 12.2 Picture of district notification of Gifted Eligibility.

The post reads:

> *… look what came up in my memories. I can't find this original letter anywhere, but how long did I say My son tested Gifted … his original letter.*
>
> *(May 27, 2014) Proud To Say My Son Tested in the 94 Percentile and has Officially been titled "Gifted"… Not only is he gifted, he had one of the highest scores in all of 3rd Grade on ALL State Mandated Testing!!!*

Michelle's insistence on providing me (Dawn) with the evidence of her son's intellectual capabilities speaks to a history of not being believed by those who should have more appropriately responded to her son's educational needs and capacities. Over time, this disbelief in the words and testimony of Black mothers contribute to a sense of gaslighting, where mothers are desperate to have others see what to them is evident regarding the capabilities and beauty of their children.

What is of most interest in Michelle's post is the pride and happiness of the mother and son as captured in their bright smiles. Michelle's son was in the third grade when he was tested as gifted yet denied entrance into the gifted program. Michelle was also in the third grade when her teacher suggested her mother did not want her, leaving an indelible negative impact on her for the rest of her schooling experience.

As the final component of the study with the mothers, they were each asked to create artistic expression pieces to capture how they would define the relationship between themselves as Black mothers and advocates, their

Black children, and the school system. Michelle chose to use poetry for her expression piece. She placed her typed poem on paper with images of blood-splattered hands and a chalk outline. She entitled her poem, "Murder is the Charge."

> Murder is the charge.
> Why so large? I know you're thinking
> But let me tell you about the life that's missing
> Full of passion, But she didn't like the reaction
> She said she was scared and my son caused her fear
> So they tried to suspend him for the whole year
> He's never been the same, his glow is gone.
> But I know who to blame, and it wasn't the broken home
> She was the teacher, also Caucasian
> My son a Black boy with passion
> But they say race is not in the equation
> Yes, I said his color
> Nothing he could change
> So as his mother, I mean the Black Mothers
> We took a stand, to tell Newman they can't have another
> Black child, Black student, Black brother.
> All because they feared him and he did not fear her.
> He now hates what he sees in the mirror
> She killed his love for self and his love for school
> This was never about him breaking a rule
> When it comes to our Black boys, killing their passion is not small, but large.
> So I rest my case with murder is the charge!

Weaving the Threads

Michelle's artistic expression piece alludes to the stereotypes widely held of the deficiencies of Black family inadequacies and the fear of Black boys that fuel the overly punitive responses to them in schools. It further animates the ability of educational institutions' treatment of Black children to kill their love of school and to damage their love of self. Yet, regardless of the schools' denial of Black humanity and education, she highlights the Black mothers' refusal to let the system sacrifice another Black child. In the end, she suggests the trauma of the schooling experience is so great that the system's actions equate to the murder of Black children.

As noted earlier, we chose Michelle's story as representative of the ACBM mothers' experiences, not for its uniqueness, but for its assured replication across the ten mothers' narratives. While all of the components found in Michelle's struggle may not have appeared wholesale in every story, portions were consistently present in each tale. As I (Dawn) listened

and observed, I could not help but wonder how the ACBM mothers steadfastly held to the promise of the educational system, given all the suffering they had experienced and observed. What were the limits of their dedication to improving the system that had repeatedly let them down?

Of Suffering and Disillusionment

The theories that arise in this study weave together a tightly connected braid, with its ups and downs that animate the realities Black mothers and their children must contend with daily in their school interactions. Black mothers' understandings of how to survive the educational system are informed not only by their children's traumas, but also by their own childhood experiences and most often those of their parents as well. The repetition of this pattern is sadistically dependable and effectively exhausting. Black mothers have sharpened an understanding that every victory will be short-lived, likely not extending beyond the current generation. They have witnessed too many times the concerns of equity, progress, and educational justice for their progeny be upended by the demands of white majoritarian concerns and power retention. The converging interests, as Derrick Bell (1980) premised, undermine any illusion of permanent progression, and cement the permanence of racist structures.

A refrain that I (Dawn) heard often during my time with ACBM was, "I am feeling really disillusioned." Michelle also spoke of such disillusionment, but went on to state, "but if not us, then who? Right?" This mother, who had experienced her own negative encounter in the schools during her childhood, then had to defend her own son as he was painted as a threat to the school. In the end, she felt it was necessary to send him away to an out-of-state school rather than continue in the district near her. For Michelle and the rest of the mothers of ACBM, schools were most consistently sites of suffering (Dumas, 2014). Still, they hoped their motherwork (Hill-Collins, 2016) would pave the way for a breakthrough in service of their community.

Thus, the work is never done. To this end, Black mothers have committed to the labor of othermothering as necessary for the uplift and survival of their entire community, regardless of the insurmountable mountain they face. The literature is replete of examples of Black othermothering in the educational system as exhibited by school teachers (Brown et al., 2018; Foster, 1993), principals and superintendents (Beard, 2012; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 2019; Lomotey & Lowery, 2013), college professors and administrators (Griffin, 2013; Guiffrida, 2005; Hurt et al., 2008; Mawhinney, 2011), and community mothers (Case, 1997). The mothers of ACBM join this chorus, seeking to improve schooling through transformation, driven by hope in the possibility. The ethic of communal care that is central to the notion of community othermothering is what motivates mothers, who may have seen their own biological children to safety, to stay in the fight

for systematic change, even as there will be no immediate material benefit to themselves personally.

Yet, in the end, there are limits to faith. A point where the blatant disjuncture between what is espoused and what is practiced must be remedied or abandoned. The notion of disillusionment is not a new reference relating to the position of Black people in America and their relationship to its institutions. Block (2010) states that "disillusionment implies a gap between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'" (p. 31). This essay began with a sprinkling of the long history of promises unfulfilled for Black Americans. Even when forward movement is achieved, the gains are temporarily enjoyed as a newly outfitted rendering of an old oppression rewinds progression. This redundant disappointment facilitated by the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992) is a driving force in some nationalist political leanings in Black communities. If we understand nationalism as an ideology centering Black interests in service of Black liberation (Bracey et al., 1970; Shelby, 2003), we can expand this concept of disillusionment beyond just political interests, but into the educational arena. We then begin to see how disillusionment could be the flicker that lights a fire of departure from the school system by Black mothers. It could contribute to a movement where being "sick and tired of being sick and tired" of Black student suffering in the school system inspires Black mothers to walk away instead of fighting to change a system that has historically never reflected their needs or concerns. Considering that all the mothers of ACBM had personal traumatizing experiences in their childhoods, motherhoods or as advocates in their dealings with the school system, how long would the remnants of their tacit and sometimes explicit hope survive? We surmise it is not merely a matter of hope as it is of necessity and desperation (Stovall, 2013), as it is understood that there will always be children that cannot leave the system. Thus, simultaneously advocating from within while imagining a new creation outside the system will always be part of their arduous mission. Only when we change the narrative do we begin to change practice and policy and assist these mothers in their undertaking. Telling the whole story of what Black families have endured in the educational system begins to unsettle the wholesale assumptions we let inform our approaches inside the educational system.

Reflection Questions

1 In what ways can schools begin to restore the harm that has been inflicted generationally on Black families through their institutions?
2 How do schools work towards building trust amongst themselves and all the populations they serve?
3 If historically marginalized communities begin to believe they are better served outside of the public school system, what is the future of public schools? Are we seeing evidence of this possible future now?

4 How can schools construct a system where the expertise and knowledge of Black mothers helps to inform system-level decision making? What creative ways could they reach out to these mothers?

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