Breaking Down Racialized Power Hierarchies to Build Solidarity: A Case Study of How Family and Educator Relationships Influence School Decision-Making

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Abstract

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Students benefit when their family is engaged with their school, but traditional forms of engagement privilege the participation of White caregivers and reproduce inequities for those minoritized by race, class, gender, sexuality, language, disability, and other social factors. Despite the prevalence of individualistic, school-centric family engagement, educators and caregivers *can* build solidarity and work together to disrupt whiteness. Grounded in theories of whiteness, organizational change, and solidarity, this study examines how educators at one elementary school attend to racialized power dynamics while building relationships with families and how these efforts to cultivate relationality shift power in school decision-making. Findings illuminate the importance of intentional relationship-building and educator practices that increase agency for families of color, as well as the limitations of individual efforts when family engagement structures are not altered to meaningfully shift power.

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Table of Contents

1 | INTRODUCTION..1

1.1 | Inequities of Traditional Family Engagement...3

1.2 | Importance of Equitable Family Engagement..5

1.3 | My Goals and Perspective...6

1.4 | Overview of the Study... 8

2 | FRAMING LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK................................ 9

2.1 | Critical Family Engagement Advances Justice..9

2.2 | Nondominant Families Are Educational Leaders... 10

2.3 | White Parents Perpetuate Racism.. 13

2.4 | Limitations of Shared Decision-Making in Schools... 15

2.5 | Equitable School-Family Collaborations.. 17

2.6 | Legacy of Black Educators' Fugitive Teaching Practices..19

2.7 | Theorizing Whiteness and Solidarity in Family Engagement...................................... 20

2.8 | Whiteness... 21

2.9 | Settled Expectations..25

2.10 | Racialized Organizations... 28

2.11 | Mistrust Between Schools and Families... 32

2.12 | Family-Community-Educator Solidarity.. 35

2.13 | Defining Solidarity...38

2.14 | Solidarity Can Disrupt the Status Quo in Decision-Making...42

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY... 46

3.1 | Qualitative and Participatory Approach...47

3.2 | Study Design and Research Methods..54

3.3 | Setting and Participants..57

3.4 | Data Collection.. 63

3.5 | Data Analysis... 68

3.6 | Researcher Positionality..74

3.7 | Limitations... 76

3.8 | Conclusion.. 77

4 | STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ARE FORMED THROUGH CARE AND TRUST..........79

4.1 | What's Happening at Baker Elementary.. 79

4.2 | Centrality of Relationships..85

4.3 | Relationships are Strengthened Through Authentic Care and Community Connections 88

4.4 | Educators Value the Expertise of Nondominant Families.. 96

4.5 | Intentional, Vulnerable Communication and Follow Through Builds Trust................ 103

4.6 | Educators Can Be Liaisons to Families..110

4.7 | Important Role of Black Educators at Baker Elementary... 112

4.8 | Conclusion....116
5 | DISRUPTING AND REINFORCING AGENCY AND RESOURCE INEQUITIES....120
5.1 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: Equity Moves of Educators....120
5.2 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: “Real Talk” about Racism....124
5.3 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: Structures that Reinforce Racialized Power....128
5.4 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Integration and Ongoing Inequities of the Gifted Program....137
5.5 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Shifting Practices, Intentional Hiring, and Racialized Staff Hierarchies....143
5.6 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Family-Led Organizations....146
5.7 | Conclusion....150
6 | INTERRUPTING AND REINFORCING THE CREDENTIAL OF WHITENESS AND THE DECOUPLING OF FORMAL RULES AND PRACTICES....153
6.1 | Refusing the Credential of Whiteness: Listening to All Types of Feedback and Limiting the Influence of White Parents....153
6.2 | Continuing the Credential of Whiteness: Different Practices Among the Staff....157
6.3 | Aligning Formal Rules about Equity with Organizational Practices: How Formal Leaders Support Educators to Enact Equitable Practices....159
6.4 | Decoupling Formal Rules about Equity from Organizational Practices: Limitations of Shared Decision-Making....161
6.5 | Limited Agency of Nested Organizations....164
6.6 | Conclusion....165
7 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS....167
7.1 | Discussion of Findings....167
7.2 | Implications....172
7.3 | Guiding Principles for Equitable Family Engagement....178
7.4 | Future Research....184
7.5 | Conclusion....187
References....189
Appendices....212

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework……………………………………………..………………43

List of Tables

Table 1: Equitable Collaboration Framework (Ishimaru, 2014)………………………..…..….18

Table 2: Study Participants…………………………………………………………………62

Table 3: Data Collection Summary…………………………………………………………67

Table 4: Data Analysis……………………………..…………………………..…………74

Table 5: Guiding Principles for Equitable Family Engagement………………………………..183

1 | INTRODUCTION

On a cold, dark evening in January, I arrive at Baker Elementary[1] and enter through double doors at the front of the building. I make my way to the gymnasium, where families are starting to trickle in carrying dishes of food for the potluck. The gym and cafeteria are in one large space with a high ceiling, cafeteria tables, and student artwork hanging around the room. Flags from countries across the world hang from the rafters, along with a Black Lives Matter and Pride flag. On a buffet table, there are banh-mi sandwiches, sushi, Ethiopian injera, and other food and drinks that families have brought to celebrate multicultural night at the school. I ask Rita, a Black staff member and former parent who is running the evening's event, how I can help. She asks me to put together a salad and lay out plates, cutlery, and napkins. Over the next two hours, about one hundred people arrive, a mixture of families, students, educators, and other school staff. At one point, Rita looks at me and says, "Pretty good turnout, huh?" I agree with Rita, "Yes, it really is, especially since this is the first multicultural night the school has hosted in over four years." Rita explains that they have been eager to get this event going again after it was canceled for several years due to the pandemic.

Throughout the night, there is a steady stream of families and students getting food from the buffet table and enjoying it at nearby tables. At one point, Idil, a Black mother at the school, gets on the microphone and announces that they are starting the fashion show. Students line up on the side of the cafeteria wearing traditional clothing from Ethiopia, Vietnam, Mexico, and other countries. One by one, Idil reads students' names along with a description of what they are wearing. The students stand proudly in front of the school community before running to their families in the crowd. At a few different points, a fifth-grade teacher, Sally, and I look at each other and remark how sweet this "fashion show" is. We are leaning against the side wall with

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

several other educators and a few caregivers. When all students have displayed their clothing, Idil asks everyone to celebrate the students with a round of applause.

The rest of the evening is unstructured with time for families to connect over food. Rita shares that this is an intentional choice because most of the school's family events are very structured and teacher led. Multicultural night was designed and run by the school's Black Family Advocacy Group, with financial support from the school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). The Black Family Advocacy Group is run by Rita, a former parent and current staff member at the school, along with several other Black parents. Like many schools, Baker Elementary celebrates their diversity at a multicultural night, and although celebrating diversity is not synonymous with educational justice, which involves community-determined goals and activities (Ishimaru, 2020), this is a joyous occasion for the school and the coalition of Black mothers that organized the event.

Baker Elementary, a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest, is made up of a racially, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse group of students and families. The school is known for their strong community ties, stable leadership, and three programs: a special education program, a gifted program, and a general education program. In recent years, they have been recognized for their academic progress and their school district has implemented new equity-focused programming and policies. At the same time, the district has a long history of racial segregation and disparities in discipline and academics. These dynamics play out at Baker Elementary through their programs, policies, activities, and family engagement, leading to a school that is simultaneously unique and similar to many other schools across the country that are shaped by racism. In this study, I explore how educators build relationships with families in this context in an attempt to disrupt whiteness and how efforts to cultivate relationality influence

the agency of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and White families in school decision-making.

1.1 | Inequities of Traditional Family Engagement

Based on decades of research demonstrating that students benefit when their family is engaged with their school, educators are increasingly expected to partner with families[2] (Epstein, 1995; Mapp et al., 2022; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). However, traditional forms of engagement privilege the participation of White caregivers and reproduce inequities for those minoritized by race, class, gender, sexuality, language, disability, and other social factors (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2020). Many activities, such as bake sales, parent-teacher conferences, and open houses, are based on white, normative expectations in which schools determine what success looks like (Ishimaru, 2020; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). When nondominant[3] caregivers do not meet the expectations of educators, it can lead to deficit views and harmful stereotypes of families of color based on their perceived lack of involvement (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

Schools are especially susceptible to deficit views of families of color as most teachers are White, even as over half of public-school students in the United States are students of color (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). Teachers employ racialized scripts that describe families of color

[2] Based on the varied use in the literature and to avoid marginalizing any system of support, I use the terms “family,” “caregiver,” and “parent” interchangeably in this study. I primarily use “family” and “caregiver” as they are more inclusive of the many people that may support a young person, including parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, foster parents, and others both related and unrelated (Ishimaru, 2020).

[3] There are several terms used to describe those marginalized by race, class, language, immigration status, gender, disability, and other social factors. Many in the field use the terms “nondominant,” “marginalized,” or “minoritized,” all of which I use in this study. These terms are meant to foreground the impact of systemic oppression and power. However, these terms are flawed and imprecise given the different experiences of families based on these social factors. I use these terms not to essentialize or conflate, but to consider the interconnected and intersectional systems of oppression that uniquely impact individuals and families in schools that privilege dominant identities (e.g., White, middle-class, English-speaking, able-bodied, cis-gendered, etc.). When specifically discussing the impact of race, I use the terms “people of color” and “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). I also name specific racialized groups such as “White caregivers,” “Black families,” or “Latiné students” when appropriate.

as "hard to reach" or "problem parents" whereas White caregivers are positioned as "good parents" (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). In this context, schools miss out on the expertise of families of color (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2020) and White caregivers reify racial power dynamics through opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 1999) and by exerting their influence to maintain the status quo (Diamond & Lewis, 2022; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Opportunity hoarding occurs when White parents access a resource—like a coveted spot in a gifted program—and exclude others from accessing it, thereby maintaining their privilege and advantage (Tilly, 1999).

Instead of working together, teachers and families are often pitted against one another (Hong, 2019). As a result, trust and solidarity are frequently missing in relationships between teachers and families (Auerbach, 2007; Lareau & Horvat 1999). The historic and current racism of the United States' education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and the harm done to children of color and Black children in particular (Dumas, 2014) only exacerbates this lack of trust among families and educators. However, in some schools, families and teachers *do* build relationships and solidarities, which can fuel justice-centered work and advance racial equity (Hong, 2019; Hong et al., 2022).

The recent pushback by White[4] parents against ethnic studies and supposed Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Chang, 2022; Ishisaka, 2021), demonstrates the complexities of family engagement in the context of right-wing assertions of "parents' rights" (Bouie, 2023). Advocating for increased family voice in education, without taking a critical, race-conscious approach and considering power differentials, could reinforce inequities. Therefore, this study is

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[4] I follow the lead of Dr. Eve Ewing, Dr. Cheryl Matias, Dr. Nell Irvin Painter, and others who capitalize "White" to recognize that it is a specific social category that affords material advantages to White people and to avoid perpetuating the myth of its neutrality. Dr. Painter (2020) summarizes the issue: "White Americans have had the choice of being something vague, something unraced and separate from race. A capitalized 'White' challenges that freedom, by unmasking 'Whiteness' as an American racial identity." However, I recognize that many scholars do not capitalize the word and many critique capitalization for reinforcing its power. Like Dr. Matias, I only capitalize "White" as a racial category, but do not capitalize "white" in its adjectival form or "whiteness."

grounded in the understanding that educators in multi-racial contexts seeking to advance justice must navigate power differentials of White, resourced caregivers and Black, Indigenous, and other caregivers of color whose leadership is often overlooked.

1.2 | Importance of Equitable Family Engagement

Critical family engagement scholarship recognizes the shortcomings of traditional family engagement approaches and calls on educators to expand "what counts" as family engagement (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Traditional power dynamics in which teachers are the experts and families of color are expected to support the goals of the school will only perpetuate the inequitable status quo. Schools often approach families of color as "impacted stakeholders" who may provide input through surveys or listening sessions, but are not empowered decision-makers (Ishimaru, 2018, p. 548). In contrast, family engagement efforts that engage nondominant caregivers as theorists and co-designers in educational change offer opportunities for educational justice. Similar to Ishimaru (2020), I use the term "educational justice" in an expansive way to describe when education is liberatory and based on community-determined goals (Ishimaru, 2020). Ishimaru (2020) writes, "Engaging parents and community members in organizational decision-making can build a sense of legitimacy around identified problems and solutions, strengthen problem-solving capacity, enhance broader civic engagement, and improve student outcomes" (p. 104). Therefore, schools must meaningfully shift how they approach family engagement and share power in order to build equitable collaborations.

Much of the critical scholarship on family engagement highlights how schools do not consider the contributions and leadership of families of color (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2020; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Other critical family engagement studies note the harmful impact of

White caregivers that hoard opportunities and gentrify schools (Diamond & Lewis, 2022; Freidus, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Syeed, 2018). In addition, critical family engagement scholarship highlights the importance of trust and the barriers to building trust in schools (Banks, 2017; Bryk, 2010; Geller et al., 2015). However, more research is needed that illuminates how nondominant and dominant educators and families foster and sustain solidarity as well as the ensuing impacts on decision-making in schools.

This study explores how educators approach relationship-building with families in the context of racial tracking and segregation. Furthermore, it considers the extent to which these efforts have increased or diminished power for nondominant families. This research adds to the critical family engagement literature and deepens our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of relationship-building and collaborative decision-making to disrupt whiteness in schools.

1.3 | My Goals and Perspective

I come to this work as a former teacher, and as a White, female researcher. While teaching, I saw first-hand the importance of trusting relationships between teachers and families, as well as the individual, organizational, and structural barriers that inhibit relationship and solidarity-building. Many White teachers, who make up the majority of the profession, hold deficit views of families of color and overlook their contributions and leadership (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). In some schools where I worked, well-intentioned educators interacted with families by supporting them to meet the goals that the school had determined instead of genuinely partnering with families. In a racially diverse school where I taught, some educators resisted robust family engagement efforts for fear of being steamrolled by

privileged, White parents. In other schools, I saw glimpses of what teacher-family solidarity (Hong et al, 2022) can look like and how it can advance justice. When students, family leaders, community organizers, and educators build trust and advocate for more humanizing policies like restorative justice and equitable school funding, there are opportunities for deeper solidarity. In these situations, the power of starting with the needs and desires of nondominant families was clear.

Reflecting on my first few years of teaching, I've realized that my own efforts to build relationships with the families of my students were still in service of what the school and the district defined as "success." I was aware of my whiteness, but I did not fully understand the racialized power dynamics at play when I attempted to build relationships with caregivers of color. As a special education teacher, I asked families about their hopes and dreams for their child, but ultimately, I made many decisions about what was taught. I participated in our school's official decision-making body, but even as a teacher I felt like I was there to check a box. For the parents of color on this committee, I imagine they may have felt this even more acutely.

I have learned and grown from these experiences, and I approach research in this area with humility. As I describe later in this study, I focus on whiteness not to center it, but to name it and ultimately disrupt it. I acknowledge my limitations as a White researcher studying racism, and I maintain a strong commitment to conducting research that advances equitable policies and practices in schools and beyond. Ultimately, my goal for my dissertation is to collaborate with a community and create something that advances racial justice and community well-being at the school. I hope to be a co-conspirator with the nondominant families that shaped and supported this study. I am answerable to them and all of the nondominant families at Baker Elementary that deserve an education and school that is liberatory, equitable, and just. I share these reflections

here and throughout the paper to be transparent about who I am, my intentions for this study, and how my identity shapes my work.

1.4 | Overview of the Study

In this study, I argue for the importance of critical family engagement rooted in strong relationships, trust, and shared power. Grounded in theories of whiteness, organizational change, and solidarity, and using participatory and qualitative methods, this study considers:

1) How do educators at a racially diverse school with a history of segregation and tracking attend to racialized power dynamics while building relationships and solidarity with families in an attempt to disrupt whiteness?
2) How and to what extent do efforts to cultivate relationality and solidarity influence the agency of BIPOC and White families in decision-making at this school?

Given the history of Baker Elementary and the continued use of racial tracking, this is a case of a school with heightened racialized power inequities that is attempting to build new types of relationships beyond the status quo. Families describe how Baker Elementary educators build strong, trusting relationships through authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999), community connections, valuing the expertise of families of color, and intentional communication. I also found that when educators consider racialized power dynamics in their approach to family engagement, the school can increase the agency of families of color. At the same time, some of the main organizational structures reinforce the unequal distribution of resources. This work builds on previous family engagement research and can support families, educators, scholars, policymakers, and others who seek to foster racial justice and community well-being in schools.

2 | FRAMING LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Traditional forms of family engagement perpetuate the inequitable status quo in which educators view White families as “good parents” (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) and families of color through a deficit-lens (Auerbach, 2010; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). In this chapter, I argue that schools should partner with families of color by sharing power and codesigning solutions that honor the expertise and leadership of families of color while resisting whiteness. The theoretical concepts of the settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993) and racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) illuminate how schools perpetuate inequities through seemingly “neutral” policies that provide White students and families with a disproportionate amount of power, resources, and dominance. However, when educators build solidarity with families and the community (Chin et al., 2023; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2022; Zeichner et al., 2016), there are greater opportunities for justice and increased agency for students, families, and communities of color.

2.1 | Critical Family Engagement Advances Justice

Family engagement practices, even those that are considered “best practices,” such as listening sessions and parent workshops, typically position nondominant families as passive participants who need to assimilate into the school’s White, middle-class norms (Ishimaru, 2020). Many approaches, including Epstein’s (1995) influential model of family engagement, center individualistic and school-centric approaches (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). These efforts are typically measured by the number of caregivers that attend an event instead of the quality of connections between the school and community (Rodela & Bertrand, 2023). These approaches are harmful when white normativity leads educators to unfairly and incorrectly

assume that caregivers of color are not involved in or supportive of their child's education. Diamond et al. (2004) highlight how teachers feel less responsible for student learning when they believe that a student's parents are not supportive. Furthermore, emphasizing the Western values of individualism and meritocracy, which assume an equal playing field, maintains whiteness and the status quo (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Therefore, traditional methods of parental involvement are not sufficient, and schools must foster equitable collaborations with nondominant families by including them in the process of determining the goals for their child's schooling (Ishimaru, 2014).

There is a growing body of critical family engagement scholarship that critiques traditional forms of family engagement that privilege White, middle-class norms (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). This scholarship calls on schools and scholars to expand "what counts" as family engagement by including and valuing the contributions of nondominant families (Watson & Bogotch, 2015; Yosso, 2005). I define critical family engagement as approaches that address power differentials along lines of race, class, language, or other social factors and interrogate the taken for granted, White, middle-class norms that dominate the family engagement field. Critical family engagement practices do not attempt to "fix" families of color; rather, they acknowledge that nondominant caregivers have expertise and resources that are essential for fostering just schools (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru, 2020).

2.2 | Nondominant Families Are Educational Leaders

Critical family engagement scholarship values the participation and expertise of nondominant caregivers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Moll et al., 1992). From this perspective, families of color are educational leaders rather than passive stakeholders (Bertrand

& Rodela, 2018; Ishimaru, 2018). For example, critical scholars argue that Mexican American parents' *consejos* (advice) to their children about the importance of hard work (López, 2001) and the "othermothering" or collective care of African American mothers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Collins, 2009) should be acknowledged and valued by schools. Instead of viewing nondominant families as "hard to reach," this scholarship critiques schools as being "hard to access" (Mapp & Hong, 2010) and highlights the importance of relationships, shared power, and equitable collaborations between schools and communities (Ishimaru, 2020). Nondominant families have a unique understanding of how inequities play out in schools and their expertise is needed in school change efforts (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2020).

The educational leadership of Black caregivers is an especially powerful yet under acknowledged example of family engagement that at times defies traditional, school-centric approaches. Black mothers must navigate race and gender inequities while simultaneously supporting and protecting their children, which scholars describe as "motherwork" (Wilson, 2007). Black caregivers' motherwork supports Black children to survive and flourish in the face of structural racism (Wilson et al., 2021). For example, Black mothers involved in and leading community organizing efforts in Detroit draw on Black feminist conceptions of activism and channel spiritual beliefs, hope, and liberatory aims to facilitate community-based leadership (Wilson, Nickson, & Ransom, 2021). These mothers cross borders and build alliances in pursuit of liberation, which Wilson et al. (2021) call "spiriting educational justice." In another case, a PTA led primarily by Black mothers refuses the role of "passive supporters and 'cookie-bakers'" (Ishimaru, 2018, p. 556). Instead, they prioritize relationships, engage in political advocacy, and support their community with housing insecurity and other crises. These Black caregivers do not perpetuate the status quo and instead, organize against and resist racial inequities in schools.

Fuentes (2013) considers mothering to be a political strategy and highlights how mothers of color are heavily involved in their child's education, even if not in a school-centric, school-approved manner. Through this lens, resistance is a form of leadership (Freelon, 2018). When nondominant caregivers are positioned as leaders, there are greater possibilities for educational justice because solutions move beyond traditional, school-centric approaches towards sustainable, community-centric solutions (Ishimaru, 2018; Rodela & Bertrand, 2023).

Community organizing, which involves building the leadership of community members to drive change (Warren et al., 2011), can be an effective model for creating educational change that differs from traditional, school-centric approaches. Community organizing honors the expertise of students, families, and communities, especially those minoritized by race, class, language, and other social factors (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Based on relationships, organizing builds capacity for families and communities to advocate for themselves and redistributes decision-making power (Ishimaru, 2018; Welton & Freelon, 2018; Wilson et al., 2021). Scholars have noted the possibilities of community organizing to foster educational justice in schooling and beyond (Warren et al., 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018; Wilson et al., 2021). However, traditional partnerships between schools and communities in which schools set the agenda are still the norm in family engagement. For decades, scholars have called on schools to move "beyond the bake sale" (Warren et al., 2009) and equitably collaborate with families to foster more just, humanizing educational experiences for students (Ishimaru, 2020). However, the changes needed to realize this vision are difficult to achieve, due in large part to the influence of White parents in schools.

2.3 | White Parents Perpetuate Racism

Families and educators must partner to support students, but these relationships are not race-neutral. The "good parent" narrative aligns with the typical participation of White, middle-class, English-speaking, heterosexual, two parent households (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). The "good parent" supports the agenda of the school in ways that align with the expectations of educators such as helping with homework, joining the PTA, and attending school-based events (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). These behaviors are normed to whiteness, which is a "hidden cultural resource" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) that supports White parents and their children. Educators expect and encourage this type of school-centric participation and although some educators complain about the influence of White parents, their involvement is tolerated because dominant caregivers typically know how to navigate the educational system and have the resources to do so (Olivos, 2019).

Many White parents utilize their privilege to advantage their child, whether through getting their child into a gifted and talented program, contesting a disciplinary action, or securing resources (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2012). Even well-intentioned White caregivers who express a belief in equity often take steps that further an inequitable status quo (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). In their study of a racially diverse, politically liberal, suburban high school, Lewis and Diamond (2015) found that White parents felt entitled to and confident in their ability to advocate for their children to be in honors classes, even when they knew this meant furthering racial segregation. Despite this contradiction in their expressed political beliefs and actions, most White parents were "ready to sacrifice an integrated experience for an advantaged one" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 134). These liberal White parents relied on cultural racism and

race-evasive language to justify their actions and excuse the racial disparities at the school (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

The dynamics of White caregivers leveraging their power to advantage their children can take place in majority White schools as well as in schools with majority BIPOC students (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). White families who send their children to schools that have historically served students of color are often seen as a solution to the challenges these schools face because of the resources White families are thought to bring (Freidus, 2019). However, White caregivers' involvement can reify class and race-based inequities through their support of policies that hoard resources for their children (Posey-Maddox, 2012). Furthermore, when White parents change the norms and goals of parent groups, racial tensions can worsen (Freidus, 2019; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Syeed, 2018). This counters the mainstream message about the positive impacts of White, middle-class caregivers who choose racially diverse public schools for their children.

Whiteness, which I will unpack as a theoretical lens later in this chapter, encompasses both ideas of white superiority and structures that provide advantages to people who are deemed as white (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). Whiteness is not simply about demographics—it is present when White students and families hold a disproportionate amount of power, regardless of the number of White people present. Therefore, efforts at diversity and inclusion without an interruption of power differentials will not lead to equity. While scholars have documented how White caregivers can be a barrier to equity (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), less is known about how White parents build trusting relationships with educators and families of color to disrupt whiteness in schools.

2.4 | Limitations of Shared Decision-Making in Schools

Increasingly, schools are expected to not only engage families, but to include them in governance. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of such asks, but the idea of shared decision-making is not new. Several initiatives in the past sixty years have sought to include families in decision-making, perhaps most notably in Chicago (Anderson, 1998; Bryk et al., 1998; Moore, 2002; Kuttner et al., 2022; López et al., 2017). These initiatives, sometimes called community councils, site-based decision-making, or shared governance, aim to increase accountability and responsiveness to the community, facilitate greater input from parents, and improve quality and equity in schools. When educators and families realize their shared interests, there are possibilities to resist the system and foster a more humanizing space for decision-making (Lopez et al., 2017). However, research about the effectiveness of such councils is mixed and scholars have long noted both the importance of and limitations to democratic participation through shared decision-making (Anderson, 1998; Bryk et al., 1998; Kuttner et al., 2022). While well-functioning councils, such as those in Chicago (Bryk et al., 1998; Moore, 2002), can achieve their intended impact of increased parent voice, improved academics and facilities, and greater equity, many councils fall short.

In theory, shared decision-making bodies include families as equal partners, but in reality, power often remains in the hands of school staff and a few resourced parents (López et al., 2017). Prior research documents the mandatory engagement efforts related to California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which requires families to be involved in decision-making (Kuttner et al., 2022; López et al., 2017; Marsh & Hall, 2018). Marsh and Hall (2018) found that this process is hindered because of power imbalances, institutional habits, and limited capacity,

even when district leaders endeavor to include families. There is a spectrum of involvement among caregivers in LCFF efforts: school districts can *inform*, *consult*, *involve*, or *empower* families (Marsh & Hall, 2018). Most districts in Marsh and Hall's (2018) study *consulted* families, but school staff ultimately made the decisions. Anderson (1998) summarizes the problems of family, teacher, and student participation in schools by explaining that instead of leading to meaningful participation of teachers and families, shared governance structures often result in "contrived collegiality" of participants, reinforce privilege, and create "a tighter iron cage of control for participants" (p. 572). In fact, participation in shared decision-making can legitimize the institution without making real substantive changes and the "structures that are set up for greater participation often become sites for collusion among dominant groups" (Anderson, 1998, p. 573).

Shared governance policies are often color-evasive (Annamma et al., 2017) and do not account for the ways in which many White, middle-class caregivers already have an outsized influence on their child's school through the PTA and other forms of engagement (Posey-Maddox, 2012). As a result, these decision-making bodies can become yet another space where White parents have disproportionate power and influence. Furthermore, shared decision-making can be a site for tokenization of nondominant families. Parent volunteers on school decision-making groups are often "taken for granted by schools to 'rubber stamp' school policies and other school-driven initiatives" (Lopez et al., 2017, p. 12). In many cases, policies that call for the inclusion of families in decision-making actually reify racialized power dynamics (Daramola et al., 2022). These policies, while "laudatory in theory" often lead to the perpetuation of racism (Daramola et al., 2022, p. 16). For example, McCarthy Foubert (2020) found that the contributions of Black parents were dismissed and ignored unless they aligned

with the interests of White parents or the school district. This is an example of Derrick Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence in which racial progress occurs only when it aligns with the interests of White people. Bell (1980) cautions against viewing supposed advancements in racial equity as true progress.

In most cases, policies regarding mandatory inclusion of families in school decision-making bodies are written such that White caregivers and educators can perpetuate whiteness, even while technically complying with the policy and appearing to be equitable (Daramola et al., 2022; McCarthy Foubert, 2020; Shange, 2016). Even when those involved in school governance reflect the racial demographics of their community, school decision-making bodies are still "shaped by White supremacy and prioritize the needs and desires of White families first (McCarthy Foubert, 2020, p. 14). Simply including a few parents of color in a decision-making group will not necessarily lead to transformative change (Ishimaru, 2020). Likewise, educators and families cannot come together in a room and assume that equitable collaborations will occur as racialized power dynamics are easily reproduced, even in a multiracial setting (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). Scholarship in this area highlights the limitations of many shared governance policies and the need for equitable collaborations that meaningfully address racialized power dynamics. Equitable school-family collaborations *are* possible, but shared decision-making often falls short of its promise when it does not address power imbalances (Ishimaru, 2014).

2.5 | Equitable School-Family Collaborations

Equitable school-community collaborations differ from traditional school-family relations regarding the goals, strategies, role of parents, and the process. Ishimaru (2014) theorized this

model based on an empirical study and offers examples of how it departs from the types of partnerships that many schools enact (Table 1). While traditional partnerships have specific goals and rely on technical change, equitable collaborations strive for systemic change and prioritize capacity and relationship-building. In traditional partnerships, educators set the agenda and nondominant caregivers are seen as beneficiaries. In equitable collaborations, nondominant caregivers are leaders who collaborate with educators to set the agenda and address broader issues important to nondominant families. Instead of an apolitical approach, as seen in traditional partnerships, equitable collaborations are inherently political and community-centric. These distinctions are critical because justice in schools can only be co-constructed by both educators and those with the greatest expertise on their children, families (Ishimaru, 2014).

Table 1

Equitable Collaboration Framework (Ishimaru, 2014)

	Traditional Partnerships	**Equitable Collaborations**
Goals	Material resources and discrete aims within a culture of denial or implicit blame.	Systemic change within a culture of shared responsibility.
Strategies	Reliance on technical change such as scaling existing practices or leveraging existing relationships.	Adaptive change to build capacity and relationships of a broader range of stakeholders.
Parent Role	Nondominant parents are seen as clients and beneficiaries, professionals set the agenda.	Nondominant parents are seen as educational leaders who contribute and help shape the agenda.
Process	Apolitical approach focused on schools in isolation from broader issues in the community.	Reform as a political process that addresses broader issues in the community.

While mandated shared governance policies do not often lead to equitable collaborations given the limitations discussed earlier, when parents, community members, and educators work towards systemic change, share power, and address societal issues as part of a political process, more effective solutions are identified (Ishimaru, 2020). Collaborative decision-making, when rooted in these principles, has the potential to increase accountability and responsiveness from schools and create better and more equitable schools (Kuttner et al., 2022). Schools can build on the strengths and assets of families and teachers and families can build relationships and work as allies (Hong, 2019). Structural racism in the education system and educator biases against families of color, especially among White educators, inhibit these types of relationships and partnerships. The majority of teachers in the United States are White, and so conceptions of school partnerships with families of color are often thought to be cross-racial. However, Black educators have a long history of forging equitable collaborations.

2.6 | Legacy of Black Educators' Fugitive Teaching Practices

When considering collaborations among educators, families, and communities, it is important to acknowledge the legacy of Black educators resisting racism and supporting liberatory education (Givens, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021; Walker, 2018). There is a long history of Black educators being deeply rooted in their communities engaging in what Givens (2021) calls "fugitive teaching practices." Givens (2021) notes that "black education was a fugitive project from its inception" (p. 3) and "when it came to the pursuit of freedom through education, black people consistently deployed fugitive tactics" (p. 4). Throughout history, Black educators have dealt with the duality of being both "within yet against the American School" (Givens, 2021, p. 240). Strong connections to the community and a liberatory framework were

and continue to be important elements of the pedagogies of many Black educators. Solidarity between educators and families is nothing new for many Black educators. However, the school system in the United States is steeped in whiteness and the dominant paradigm is a hierarchical relationship in which teachers are seen as experts and often, teachers hold deficit views of nondominant families. As we imagine more just relationships in schools, and as I consider the dynamics at Baker Elementary, it is important to highlight the legacy of Black educators' fugitive teaching practices and to value and learn from the contributions of Black educators. The Black educators at Baker Elementary are part of a larger history and tradition.

2.7 | Theorizing Whiteness and Solidarity in Family Engagement

In addition to the literature on critical family engagement, theories of whiteness, organizational change, and solidarity ground my work. In this section, I discuss these foundational theories and what they illuminate about the possibilities and limitations of teacher-family solidarity, shared decision-making, and racial justice in schools. First, I describe how racism has shaped the education system, the prevalence of whiteness, and how schools perpetuate the "settled expectations" of White privilege and dominance (Harris, 1993). Then, I discuss how organizations, including schools, are racialized and often diminish the agency of people of color while increasing the agency of White people (Ray, 2019a). Next, I discuss teacher-family solidarity and how it can interrupt the status quo when relationships between educators and families are built on a shared vision of racial justice. Finally, I bring these theories into conversation with one another and the critical family engagement literature to frame my research about teacher-family solidarity and how this shapes the agency of racial groups in school decision-making.

2.8 | Whiteness

Although race is socially constructed, it greatly impacts all aspects of society, including the law, economy, politics, housing, religion, cultural life, and education (Omi & Winant, 2014). Both historically and currently, the United States is shaped by white supremacy, which Leonardo (2007) defines as "a racialized social system that upholds, reifies and reinforces the superiority of whites" (p. 261). While elements of race and how people are racialized are fluid, race is a central organizing feature of the United States (Leonardo, 2007; Omi & Winant, 2014). Despite advancement and what seems to many like racial progress, society is arranged so that White people maintain power and control (Allen & Liou, 2019; Bell, 1992). Recent pushback by right-wing politicians and White parents against teaching about racism in schools demonstrates how racism continues to shape the education system. Race certainly matters and whether through structural racism and discrimination, anti-Blackness, the model minority myth (Shah, 2019), or other prejudices, the impacts of racism are real. Therefore, any research that attempts to explore inequities in education must meaningfully consider the impacts of racism and whiteness.

Whiteness is a social mechanism that affords privileges and resources to White people and normalizes these advantages. It encompasses the everyday actions, norms, policies, and practices that uphold white supremacy and maintain material advantages for White people (Leonardo, 2007). Whiteness is ultimately about power more than demographics (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). Whiteness is often unnamed as it is both "nowhere since it is unmarked and everywhere since it is the standard whereby other groups are judged" (Leonardo, 2007, p. 263). Or, as Toni Morrison asserted in 1992, "In this country, American means white. Everybody else

has to hyphenate." The normalization of whiteness further privileges White people and makes it difficult to interrupt.

In the context of education, schools are white-controlled institutions that have been forces for colonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012), have reproduced racial inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and have been sites of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014). Whether through English-only boarding schools for Native students (Tuck & Yang, 2012) or harsh discipline policies that are disproportionately used for Black students (Nguyen et al., 2019), schools often perpetuate or even worsen inequities, despite being touted as the "great equalizers." Organizational routines, policies, and ideologies such as a reliance on testing, deficit views of BIPOC students, and Eurocentric curriculum reproduce whiteness in schools. As some scholars describe it, white supremacy is a "hidden curriculum entrenched in schools" (Allen & Liou, 2019, p. 678). Shah and Grimaldos (2022) summarize:

> Whiteness is a logic that upholds control and power among White people in institutions such as schooling, by privileging and normalizing the interests and needs of White students, families, and staff. This logic often exists in White bodies but can also exist in Indigenous, Black, and racialized bodies that have been socialized into whiteness and have been expected to conform to these logics for professional and personal protection and advancement. (p. 23-24)

Indeed, whiteness is not synonymous with White people. While whiteness and white supremacy are often associated with overt forms of racism, such as the KKK and other hate groups (Newkirk, 2017), even people with liberal politics who express a belief in racial equity can perpetuate whiteness (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Yoon, 2012). Therefore, whiteness must be named and understood in order to deconstruct it in schools.

While much of the research on racism focuses on its harmful effects on people of color, Whiteness Studies and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) analyze whiteness in order to interrupt its power. Scholars note that when studying racism, it is problematic to focus solely on people of color as it perpetuates the idea that whiteness is invisible and allows White people to avoid accountability and scrutiny (Leonardo, 2013; Matias, 2022). Decentering whiteness is critical, but an explicit focus on the insidious ways that whiteness is maintained can marginalize its power. Leonardo (2013) describes the inherent tension of focusing on whiteness without perpetuating it as "a risk" of the field (p. 91). As a White scholar, I am especially attuned to this dynamic. However, by grounding this study in theories of whiteness, I aim to bring whiteness "into the center of analysis in order to locate it, demystify it, and if possible, discontinue its hold on education" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 91). Whiteness is too often unnamed, both in research and in schools. It is through this lens that I approach studying whiteness in education.

Decades before the field of Whiteness Studies was formally established, Du Bois (1904/1989) wrote extensively about whiteness, white privilege, and white racial identity. Du Bois (1904/1984) theorized that whiteness and white identity are grounded in the belief in the total domination of the world by White people (Du Bois, 1920). Baldwin (1984) also wrote about whiteness, perhaps most notably describing it as "the lie of whiteness." European settlers in the United States "became White" to justify the subjugation of Black people and by debasing and defaming Black people, "they debased and defamed themselves" (Baldwin, 1984, p. 92). Although conceptions of whiteness and who is considered to be White have changed over time (Ignatiev, 2008), its importance in upholding white supremacy has remained. The field of whiteness studies was furthered by McIntosh (1988) who described White privilege as the contents of an "invisible knapsack" that White people possess. McIntosh (1988) likened White

privilege and the invisibility of these privileges to the privileges men hold in a patriarchal society. Although McIntosh and other White scholars are often incorrectly credited with the founding of whiteness studies, Black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and others have long theorized about whiteness (Matias, 2022).

Currently, critical scholars of whiteness focus on how it is present in work cultures (Yoon, 2012), the emotionality of whiteness (Matias, 2016), its influence in policy and teacher education (Annamma, 2015; Aggarwal, 2016) and how it can be interrupted by school leaders and teacher unions (Allen & Liou, 2019; Liou, 2019). "Whiteness-at-work" describes how whiteness is enacted in everyday interactions (Yoon, 2012). When confronted with their racism or even a discussion of race, many White people feel guilt, shame, anger, defensiveness, denial, sadness, dissonance, and discomfort (Matias, 2016). Instead of suppressing these emotions, Matias (2016) argues that they need to be acknowledged and contended with in order to deconstruct white supremacy. However, these emotions cannot be separated from race and White people can weaponize them to shut down conversations about race (DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016).

When whiteness is left unchecked, there are material harms for people of color through racial microaggressions, policing surveillance, stereotype threat, dehumanization, job discrimination, inequitable education, internal racism, and the forever foreigner stereotype, among many others (Matias, 2016). Whiteness can also lead to privilege, emotionalities, coloniality, color-evasiveness, wealth, White gaze and surveillance, entitlement, authority, and Eurocentrism for White people (Matias, 2016). Given these harms, my goal of interrogating whiteness in this study is to improve the conditions of students and families of color at Baker Elementary, and not simply for the self-improvement of White people.

Scholars caution against CWS that is taken up by White scholars without deep collaboration with scholars of color (Matias, 2022). As Matias (2022) asks, "How can those who are privileged by a White racial power structure expect to lead racial justice without the engagement of BIPOC scholars?" I strongly agree, and collaborating with families and educators of color in this study was essential. Similar to Matias (2022), I situate my work as a "critical study of whiteness," instead of a part of CWS to clarify that my scholarship attempts to explicitly interrupt the harm done to people of color when whiteness is left unchecked. Given the possibility of whiteness studies "moving at the snail's pace of the White imaginary" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 101), I approach the study of whiteness with determination to enact change (e.g., not just to "listen and learn") and deep accountability to communities of color. In practice, this means working closely with parents, caregivers, and educators of color to collaboratively identify how research could support their efforts to advance racial justice. I approached this study not as an outside expert, but as a collaborator committed to learning more about the practices that align with the school's vision of racial justice and those that do not. Throughout the research process, I shared emerging findings with the nondominant families that collaborated on the project as well as with educators of color to ensure what was learned was not limited to academic papers and was accessible and actionable.

2.9 | Settled Expectations

The concept of "settled expectations" (Harris, 1993) clarifies how the material advantages of whiteness are maintained in schools. Harris (1993) theorized this idea in her influential piece, "Whiteness as Property." Historically in the United States, whiteness and property ownership gave legitimacy to settler colonialism (Bang et al., 2013), a unique type of

colonialism in which settlers come with the intention of staying and demand sovereignty over everything in their sphere (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Although societal norms have shifted, whiteness continues to afford advantages to White people (Allen & Liou, 2019; McIntosh, 1988), and is something of value, or "property" (Harris, 1993). As a result, White people rely on and expect these privileges and benefits to continue, which Harris (1993) calls "settled expectations." Harris (1993) explains that settled expectations permeate all facets of society, including education.

In the context of schooling, the idea of "settled expectations" exposes how school policies and practices perpetuate whiteness. While many view schools as "race-neutral" or "meritocratic," critical scholars argue that schools are part of a larger project of White domination (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tuck & Yang, 2012). For White caregivers, whiteness supports their engagement with schools and gives them a sense of entitlement in educational spaces (Dumas & ross, 2016). For example, Aggarwal (2016) documented how in New York City, White parents were assured by educational leaders that the district's desegregation plans would not take any advantages away from White students. In this way, district leaders confirmed the settled expectations of White parents who expected privileges in schooling to continue.

While many view the status quo in which White students are advantaged and students of color are treated inequitably as a "neutral baseline" (Aggarwal, 2016, p. 131), this myth of neutrality masks how racial domination and exclusion are central to our education system. These expectations are "settled" or invisible to most White caregivers and educators who do not recognize that White, middle-class norms shape schools. When schools send home forms in English or communicate via email, it may appear neutral, but it privileges English-speaking, middle-class families who can access this type of communication. Settled expectations are also

present when White parents justify inequities with narratives like "Everyone just wants what's best for their kid" instead of advocating for more equitable policies. Settled expectations are not just ideological, but also structural. For example, when schools are racially segregated based on formerly redlined residential areas and predominantly White schools receive more school funding (Reardon et al., 2019), this is an example of the settled expectations of whiteness. These inequities do not occur by accident, rather they are a result of overt and covert structural racism. Shah and Grimaldos (2022) expose how the harm done to children and families of color, especially Black families, is not a result of "cultural mismatch" or "unintentional bias" among educators. Instead, Whiteness as property operates in schools by intentionally maintaining advantages for White people and excluding and harming BIPOC students and families. The invisibility and "settledness" of whiteness make it difficult to interrupt in schools.

Scholars have applied the concept of settled expectations to analyze a variety of topics in education including teachers unions (Liou, 2019), science education (Bang et al., 2013), family engagement (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022; Shah & Grimaldos, 2022), and school boards (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022). These studies, which offer recommendations for how to "desettle" expectations, demonstrate the potential insights that arise when analyzing aspects of schooling through the lens of settled expectations. For example, Bang et al. (2013) argue that educators must reject deficit-based views of students and families, respect the different ways that students make sense of the world, and rethink nature-culture relations. These actions, when taken together, work to "desettle" expectations of whiteness in science education. In the context of family engagement, Ishimaru and Bang (2022) offer solidarity-driven codesign as a method of disrupting "forms of normativity that function to assimilate and erase our cultural ways of knowing and being" (p. 136). Many have taken up codesign as a method of building solidarities and "realizing the future

in the present" (Chin et al., 2023). This study adds to this area of scholarship by identifying how equity-minded educators and families effectively desettle expectations in family engagement. The concept of settled expectations provided a helpful architecture for interrogating power dynamics and understanding the taken for granted roles and routines of schools. For example, educators and families often expect the PTA to be led by White families, leading some to normalize this dynamic and think, "That's just the way it is." Acknowledging how this and other expectations of whiteness have become settled is a first step in "desettling" expectations of whiteness and creating more equitable futures.

2.10 | Racialized Organizations

To examine how whiteness and settled expectations are perpetuated, it is helpful to look beyond the actions of individuals (micro-level) and institutions (macro-level) and instead, focus on organizations (meso-level). To that end, I draw on Ray's (2019a) theory of racialized organizations. Ray delineates macro-level institutions (e.g., the racial state, legislation, etc.) from meso-level organizations (e.g., corporations, schools, etc.) to highlight the important role meso-level organizations play in perpetuating racism. Workplaces, membership organizations, churches, and schools are all organizations, or meso-level social structures. As such, schools reproduce racism, not just through the actions of individuals, but through the organizational policies and practices that perpetuate the settled expectations of whiteness.

Ray (2019a) argues that the whiteness of organizations is often unnamed. Organizations that are run by or primarily serve Black people are often called "Black businesses" or "Black banks," but similar organizations that are run by or primarily serve White people are simply called "businesses" or "banks" (Ray, 2019b). However, when organizations are left racially

unmarked, it obscures how they reproduce racism. In contrast, when the racialized nature of organizations is exposed, it is easier to see why decades of policies aimed at increasing diversity, opposing discrimination, and ensuring equality have largely failed to change how power and resources are distributed in society (Ray, 2019b). Most organizations including Fortune 500 companies, colleges and universities, and financial institutions continue to be White-controlled organizations. These organizations are not meritocratic, rather, they are "long-standing social structures built and managed to prioritize whiteness" (Ray, 2019b). To better understand how organizations maintain whiteness, Ray (2019a) theorizes how organizational policies and practices reproduce racism. This framework challenges organizational theorists who have long seen organizations as race-neutral and race theorists who have often focused on the state (Ray, 2019a). By combining these areas of scholarship, Ray (2019a) posits that racialized organizations "limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group" (p. 36). Ray (2019a) identifies four tenets of racialized organizations: (1) they enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, (2) they legitimize an unequal distribution of resources, (3) whiteness is a credential, and (4) race is decoupled from existing practices.

Firstly, Ray (2019a) argues that agency, or independent action, is greatly impacted by one's position in an organization. One's location in a racialized organization influences "the amount of control they exercise over their time, their ability to plan non-work time, and their ability to plot the future" (Ray, 2019a, p. 36). Due to racism and white supremacy, White people are more likely to hold power within organizations and people of color are more likely to be at the bottom of the hierarchy (Ray, 2019a). Therefore, White people's agency is increased through their involvement with an organization while the agency of people of color is diminished (Ray,

2019a). In the context of a school, White parents' participation often increases their power and influence (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). For example, White parents may become PTA presidents and make decisions about funding. In this study, I attended to how the racial identities of families and educators influence both their positions in the organization and their agency in decision-making.

Secondly, racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources. Organizations are often segregated, and organizations led by people of color are often under-resourced compared to predominantly White organizations (Ray, 2019a). This is not simply a result of individual acts of discrimination; rather, these inequities are normalized and legitimized through racialized organizations until they are taken for granted as normal (Ray, 2019a). Schools are heavily racially segregated organizations, even decades after Brown v. Board of Education, and schools with more White students are better funded (Lombardo, 2019). In this study, this tenet illuminated how the school distributes resources within the organization to students and families based on the three tracked programs.

Thirdly, in racialized organizations, whiteness acts as a credential. Similar to the idea of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), whiteness facilitates access to resources and increases agency for White people in organizations (Ray, 2019a). Organizational norms, policies, and practices may ignore race altogether, but whiteness remains an unnamed credential that empowers White caregivers to hoard opportunities (Tilly, 1999) for their children. In this study, I considered how whiteness afforded White caregivers increased access to resources.

Lastly, racialized organizations often decouple—or separate and isolate—commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion from policies that reinforce racial hierarchies (Ray, 2019a). Many equity-focused policies are ignored or broken while other organizational policies are strictly

enforced. This separation enables organizations to appear progressive even while they do little to shift racial inequity within their organization (Ray, 2019a). Schools may assemble a racial equity team while simultaneously disproportionately suspending Black male students. This is especially relevant in politically liberal contexts in which organizations employ social justice and anti-racist rhetoric, but still reinforce racial inequities through their actions (Shange, 2016). Drawing on this tenet, in this study I examined both the school's external rhetoric about equity and their organizational policies and routines.

While most often applied to workplaces, prisons, and higher education, the theory of racialized organizations can also uncover how K-12 schools reproduce racism. Stewart et al. (2021) analyzed how the policies and practices of a high school align with the tenets of racialized organizations. In this example, White caregivers influenced the disciplinary actions of school personnel in ways that enhanced the agency of White students and diminished the agency of Black students. Whiteness was a "credential" for White students who school personnel assumed were innocent and therefore did not target for disciplinary actions (Stewart et al., 2021). Most K-12 schools, even those with goals and a strategic plan that center racial equity, are racialized and reproduce whiteness through their policies and actions.

Once racialized practices are enacted and routinized, inequitable outcomes are legitimized and difficult to shift (Ray, 2019a). Racial inequity and whiteness can flourish even when there is no "discriminatory intent" among individuals within an organization, which helps explain why it is difficult to make organizations more equitable (Ray, 2019a, p. 34). However, Ray (2019a) argues that both external and internal actions can address racial inequities in organizations. Externally, social movements, changes in macro-level public policies, and a change in the reliance on the state can shift the racialization of an organization. Internally,

diversity programs and explicit attempts by individuals to shift the distribution of resources can alter the racialization of an organization.

To interrupt the maintenance of white supremacy, Ray (2019a) calls on researchers to examine whiteness in organizations and to interrogate how organizational policies and practices perpetuate whiteness, even when organizations employ social justice rhetoric. In my research, I consider whiteness because although educators and families at the school in this study discuss the importance of anti-racism and equity, the theory of racialized organizations suggests that the school is still reproducing racism. When I analyzed data collected in interviews, focus groups, and observations, I considered the tenets of racialized organizations by examining who set the agenda at meetings, who made decisions, who held power, and whose ideas were taken up to uncover how and when the school reproduces and interrupts racism. I also analyzed how teachers and families build solidarities rooted in anti-racism to identify elements of the school that disrupt whiteness. My work builds on the literature that analyzes K-12 schools as racialized organizations (Owens, 2022; Stewart et al., 2021) by applying this theory to a school committed to strong relationships between educators and families.

2.11 | Mistrust Between Schools and Families

Given the racialization of schools and the pervasiveness of whiteness in education, teacher-family relationships are often marred by a lack of trust. Teachers and families play different roles and have different perspectives, leading 1930s sociologist Willard Waller to call them “natural enemies” (Hong, 2019). In recent years, teachers and families have been pitted against each other regarding school openings during the COVID-19 pandemic (Williams, 2022), and teaching of racism and other topics (Chang, 2022; Ishisaka, 2021). The concept of “parents’

rights" has been weaponized by groups like Moms for Liberty to advocate for education that ignores the racist history of the United States and limits freedoms for LGBTQIA+ and other minoritized students (Williams, 2022). Outside of these racist, extremist groups, many other families and educators also find themselves at odds. Bryk and Schneider (2002) summarize the challenge facing educators and families:

> Teachers often see parents' goals and values as impediments to students' academic accomplishments. Parents in turn believe that teachers are antagonistic toward them and fail to appreciate the actual conditions that shape their children's lives. This lack of trust between teachers and parents—often exacerbated by race and class differences—makes it difficult for these groups to maintain a genuine dialogue about shared concerns. The resultant miscommunications tend to reinforce existing prejudices and undermine constructive efforts by teachers and parents to build relational ties around the interests of children. (p. 6)

As Bryk and Schneider (2002) point out, the mistrust can be even more pronounced between the predominantly White teaching workforce and families of color and other nondominant families. The mistrust is due in part to the role schools have played and continue to play in reproducing racism and white supremacy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2007; McCarthy Foubert, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Despite these structural and positional impediments to trust, many have noted the importance of trust in school-family-community relations (Banks, 2017; Bryk & Schneider; 2002; Geller et al., 2015) and others have highlighted how to build trusting relationships (Chin et al., 2023; Hong, 2019; Hong et al., 2022; Marsh & Daramola, 2022).

Trust has long been theorized, but historically, not all analyses have considered the role of race, class, gender, and other social factors in establishing trust (Banks, 2017). Recent studies

have demonstrated the difficulties of building trust among nondominant and dominant groups. Geller et al. (2015) examined trust and respect among families, teachers, and cultural brokers. Although teachers' trust and respect for parent leaders increased following more social interactions and intentional relationship-building activities, these exchanges were not enough to counteract the prevalent deficit view of families of color and other minoritized families as "lazy and uncaring" (p. 36). Geller et al. (2015) argue that "in the presence of vast power differentials, daily social exchange alone is an insufficient driver of trust and respect" (p. 36). Therefore, educators must consider the socio-political conditions, including power differentials due to the racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic background of participants (Banks, 2017). Marsh and Daramola (2022) argue that trust is built through "small wins" (Weick, 1984), or "concrete accomplishments of moderate importance, such as collaboratively hosting an event or completing a project" (Marsh & Daramola, 2022). Marsh and Daramola (2022) argue that it may take many cycles of small wins to build trust with families, especially with nondominant families who have had negative experiences with schools. Therefore, it is critical that educators are patient because when trust is not present, parents and community members may disengage with the school (Marsh & Daramola, 2022).

A related, but more specific concept is "politicized trust" (Vakil et al., 2016; Vakil & de Royston, 2019). Vakil and de Royston (2019) identify politicized trust as having three components: "(a) understanding each other; (b) respect for one another; and (c) solidarity with one another" (p. 550). Within those components, they elaborate on what it looks like, including elements such as "historical and place-based understanding of each other's communities and challenges facing those communities" and understanding of the "racialized history of US schooling and historical tensions that exist between particular racial and cultural groups" (Vakil

& de Royston, 2019, p. 550). Within politicized trust, respect is shown through "knowing when to 'step up' and when to 'step back'" and "acknowledging ways of being and knowing derived from nondominant communities" (Vakil & de Royston, 2019, p. 550). Solidarity is enacted based on "shared commitments to social justice and equity" and a recognition that good intentions are necessary but not sufficient (Vakil & de Royston, 2019, p. 550). Vakil and de Royston explain how equity goals can be compromised when trust is not present.

Establishing politicized trust, especially between racially nondominant and dominant students, is an ongoing process that must continually be renegotiated. Politicized trust is rooted in relationships and "a political or racial solidarity" (Vakil & de Royston, 2019, p. 551). As a part of this, history must not only be acknowledged, but disparate power differentials must be attended to. Simply bringing together groups with different histories and levels of power in society will not lead to politicized trust. In fact, without explicit norms, agreements, and processes for attending to these differences, power differentials may be reproduced or reinforced. However, relationships based on trust, political or racial solidarity, equitable power-sharing, and a shared vision can be disruptive forces that foster justice and community well-being.

2.12 | Family-Community-Educator Solidarity

In the context of white, normative assumptions in schools, solidarity between educators and families can advance justice. Relationships between teachers and families have long been noted as an important component of effective schools (Epstein, 1995; Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp et al., 2022; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). However, relationships alone are not sufficient to interrupt the settled expectations of whiteness and the dynamics of racialized organizations in schools. Hong et al. (2022) introduce the concept of "teacher-family solidarity," which they define as "the

creation of authentic, long-lasting, trusting partnerships between teachers and families, rooted in the common goals of both parties" (p. 2). Teacher-family solidarity differs from parent involvement, which consists of one-way communication from schools to families and traditional, school-based events like back-to-school night. Instead, teacher-family solidarity focuses on the "dual roles, responsibilities, and shared purpose of families and teachers as well as the dynamic relationship between them" (Hong et al, 2022, p. 21). Hong et al. (2022) draw parallels to culturally sustaining pedagogies (Alim & Paris, 2017) and argue that for educators to enact culturally sustaining practices, building solidarity and trusting relationships with families is essential (Hong et al., 2022).

The concept of teacher-family solidarity emerges from Hong's (2019) work on educators and families working as allies. Hong (2019) argues that teachers and parents are not enemies but are actually "natural allies" and can form trusting relationships under the right circumstances. Hong (2019) highlights individual teachers that have built trusting relationships with the families of their students. Interestingly, three of the five teachers in Hong's study work at the same school. This begs the question, what is happening at schools with multiple teachers who have built solidarity with families? Furthermore, to what extent does teacher-family solidarity shape power and decision-making in schools? In their theorizing of teacher-family solidarity, Hong et al. (2022) describe some of the structures needed to foster teacher-family solidarity, including explicit, schoolwide goals to engage families authentically and a culture of support and professional development. However, the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) demonstrates how commitments to equity are often decoupled from organizational routines and how racism is reproduced even in spite of individual beliefs. Hong et al. (2022) call for more

research in this area to deepen our understanding of solidarity-building in schools with nondominant and dominant caregivers as well as its impact on school decision-making.

Teacher-family-community solidarity (Zeichner et al., 2016) is a related concept that centers on teacher education and preparation programs. Zeichner et al. (2016) categorize three ways of engaging with families: teacher-family-community involvement, teacher-family-community engagement, and teacher-family-community solidarity. Although these distinctions are not fixed and schools move between them, many schools fall primarily into the involvement category. This includes activities such as Parent Teacher Association (PTA) events, conferences, homework assignments that connect with families, and other teacher-led activities. Through involvement, schools are "trying to develop teachers who have the disposition and skills to talk with families and providers, although most of the talk is often done by the teachers and is limited to curriculum or student academic progress" (Zeichner et al., 2016, p. 279). In this approach, the solutions are often technical instead of relational.

Increasingly, schools are taking a relational approach, which Zeichner et al. (2016) describe as engagement. This approach emphasizes the knowledge that families and community members can share with educators and includes listening sessions, home visits, and other activities that support educators to understand the assets and expertise of families (Zeichner et al., 2016). While engagement is more equitable than involvement, power is still held primarily by educators and activities are often individualistic. The solidarity approach, on the other hand, is grounded in an understanding that educational inequities are part of larger "racialized structural inequalities in housing, health, employment, and intergenerational transfers of wealth" (Zeichner et al., 2016, p. 279). Solidarity is often built through community organizing and activism that address issues of importance to communities and are family-led.

To foster solidarity, Zeichner et al. paired students in teacher education programs with community members to foster greater awareness, solidarity, and community teaching. The mentoring of teacher candidates by community members had an impact, and Zeichner et al. (2016) call for more of an emphasis on authentic community engagement in teacher education programs. While Zeichner et al. (2016) considered solidarity within the context of teacher preparation programs and Hong et. al (2022) explored teacher-family solidarity between individual educators and nondominant families, I analyzed both individual and organizational efforts to build solidarity at a school with heightened racialized power dynamics due to tracking. I also build on and expand these notions of solidarity by bringing in other theorizing on this concept.

2.13 | Defining Solidarity

When considering solidarity, it is important to define and unpack the term to avoid over-simplifying it. While I find great value in the concept of "teacher-family solidarity" (Hong et al., 2022), I also consider other research and theorizing on this term in my conception of solidarity. As Chin et al. (2023) argue, "Discussions of solidarity and organizing can easily slip into romanticized notions of collectivity and common cause that belie the complexities of hierarchical power and normative judgments of worth within and between non-dominant parents and communities" (Chin et al., 2023, p. 75). Others have critiqued the vague definition of and overuse of the term. Roxane Gay (2013), in response to Mikki Kendall's creation of the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, writes, "I'm not sure there's a clear sense of what we mean when we call for solidarity. I don't know how solidarity is possible when some people refuse to listen and others act like everything is just fine and others are so busy performing their understanding

they neglect to offer anything of substance to the conversation" (Gay, 2013). Gay's analysis points to how some "perform" understanding or solidarity, but true solidarity is rooted in interdependence, reciprocity, and must include a concrete contribution or sacrifice (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022).

Despite these criticisms, many argue for the importance of solidarity. Gaztambide-Fernandez et al. (2022) explain, "Solidarity has been and continues to be fundamental to the struggles of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples of the Global South, in Turtle Island, as well as in the peripheries of Empire" (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022, p. 254). Gaztambide-Fernandez et al. (2022) add complexity to the term. They argue that solidarity does not develop randomly, instead, it develops from a political tradition (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022). Solidarity can be a "source of strength" for communities working together (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022, p. 264). Importantly, solidarity requires that people who benefit from oppressive structures sacrifice their privilege "to join the oppressed in their struggle for freedom" (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022, p. 251). Therefore, solidarity is not simply a strong relationship between an educator and a caregiver. Solidarity is not niceness. In the context of schools, White educators in particular must be willing to sacrifice some of their power and privilege to build solidarity with nondominant families. Solidarity must challenge power dynamics and be committed to a specific political project (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022). In the context of this study, I consider educational justice in which communities determine what success looks like as a political project.

To build solidarity, differences and tensions cannot be glossed over, rather, they should be embraced. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2012) describes solidarity as a pedagogy that is built through embracing differences. While some may assume that families and educators need to focus on

what they have in common in order to build solidarity, Gaztambide-Fernandez's (2012) definition suggests that educators and families should name and embrace differences. Chin et al. (2023) suggest a similar idea, arguing that we cannot have "solidarity mask over tensions, and you can't have solidarity still cover up anti-Blackness underneath" (Chin et al., 2023, p. 75). Indeed, solidarity must be intersectional and acknowledge differences and tensions while centering interdependence.

In my understanding of solidarity, I also draw inspiration from how the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) theorizes the term. Solidarity can be built through codesign, "an iterative inquiry process with nondominant youth, families, and communities to envision and enact just relations and educational futures" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022, p. 133). FLDC identifies four design principles for the concept of solidarity-driven codesign (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022):

1) Beginning with family and community ecologies
2) Refusing and disrupting normative power dynamics
3) Enacting solidarities in collective changemaking
4) Cultivating ongoing transformative possibilities

It is important to start with families and communities as Ishimaru and Bang (2022) argue that "the foundations of justice and wellbeing must be rooted in the knowledge, priorities, practices, ethics, and relations of nondominant families and communities (p. 136). When building solidarity, it is critical that ancestral knowledge, lived experiences, and cultural practices are seen as assets and resources. Furthermore, normative power dynamics must be disrupted. Building solidarities through codesign necessitates naming and desettling intersectional forms of oppression including racism and colonialism, among others. In the context of schools, this means

refusing to view families as "passive recipients or needy beneficiaries" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022, p. 136). Solidarity-driven codesign involves "realizing the future in the present" through envisioning and designing justice (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022, p. 137). Finally, cultivating ongoing transformative possibilities describes how this work is not meant to end in a "one-size-fits-all" solution, but rather will play out across various spaces (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022). Solidarity-driven codesign is one model of building and sustaining solidarity. While definitions of solidarity vary and it can be built in a number of ways, the design principles of solidarity-driven codesign (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022) can be applied to many different settings.

This study expands the concept of teacher-family solidarity (Hong et al., 2022) to family-community-educator solidarity to reflect the important roles of all educators and the broader community in movements for educational change. Furthermore, my conception of solidarity adds to Hong et al. (2022) by bringing in other theorizing on solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022; Ishimaru & Bang, 2022; Vakil & de Royston, 2019) and including the importance of taking into account historical and current power asymmetries of teachers and nondominant families. In this study, I define family-community-educator solidarity as trusting relationships (Hong et al., 2022) that acknowledge differences and historical power differentials (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022; Vakil & de Royston, 2019) and are rooted in shared goals of educational justice and community well-being. Educators can be collaborators, but in order to build solidarity that can transform systems, educators should center the goals of nondominant families.

Family-community-educator solidarity foregrounds role-based solidarity, but racial or cross-racial solidarity is also needed. Families, communities, and educators build solidarity based on their roles and their shared goals of supporting student growth and well-being. In some cases,

families and educators share a racial background and their relationship is strengthened by a racial solidarity. When educators and families do not share a racial background, then cross-racial solidarity is needed. Similarly, solidarity based on other identities can strengthen role-based solidarity. While Geller et al. (2015) focus on the role of cultural brokers, Vakil and de Royston (2019) analyze student interactions, Banks (2017) considers trust in place-based initiatives, and Hong et al. (2022) focus on the actions of educators who build solidarity with families of color, I add to this area of scholarship by considering how educators and families consider race, power, and whiteness when building trusting relationships and the extent to which this shifts the status quo in school decision-making.

2.14 | Solidarity Can Disrupt the Status Quo in Decision-Making

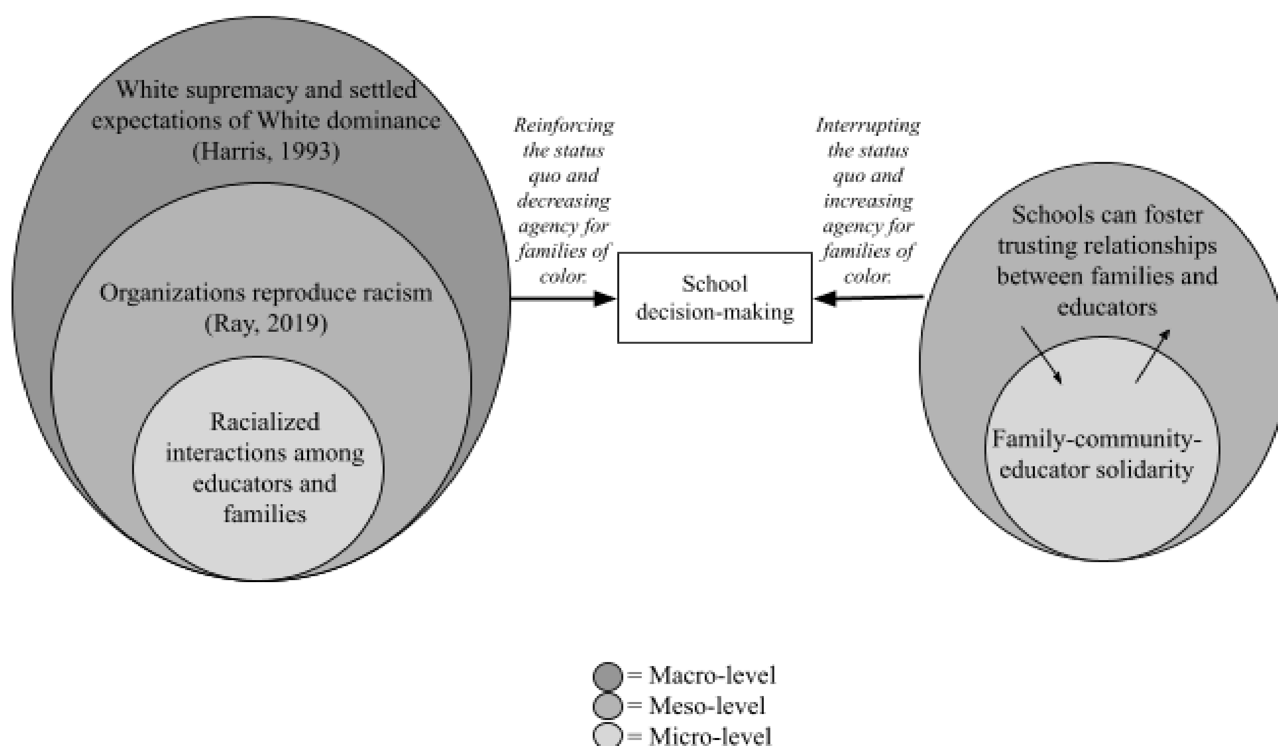
Theories of whiteness and racialized organizations are helpful lenses for understanding the racialized power and politics that take place in schools, especially related to decision-making. These theories illuminate the status quo in schools in which whiteness is perpetuated at the individual, organizational, and societal levels (Figure 1). Traditional methods of family engagement increase agency for White families and legitimate the unequal distribution of resources (Ray, 2019a) through event-based family engagement activities, the PTA, gifted programs, and other school-centric activities. These inequities are normalized, or “settled,” (Harris, 1993) and often reinforced through school decision-making. Decision-making in schools encompasses both formal decision-making bodies as well as the everyday decisions that shape students’ experiences and outcomes. However, these are not the only dynamics at play. At many schools, families, educators, and communities organize and advocate for racial justice and equitable collaborations. These efforts are often rooted in trusting relationships and solidarities.

The concept of family-community-educator solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2022; Ishimaru & Bang, 2022; Vakil & de Royston, 2019) sheds light on how these relationships are built and how they can disrupt the status quo by shaping who has agency in school decision-making.

When educators and families build solidarity, it can interrupt the status quo and lead to more equitable decision-making in schools. Trust-building in schools must affirm families' cultural ways of knowing, acknowledge racial bias, and include "a commitment to shared decision-making and addressing power asymmetries" (Banks, 2017, p. 27). Solidarity is more than a strong relationship as it must include shared power. It can be a disruptive force that shifts power and interrupts the settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993) and the racialization of organizations (Ray, 2019a).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Despite the structural and relational challenges that inhibit equitable collaborations between educators and families, they *can* build solidarity. Educators and families must approach solidarity-building in a strategic way that centers equity and attends to racialized power differentials. For example, educators may decide to spend more time building trusting relationships with families of color or immigrant families because they recognize that their White, non-immigrant families are already involved in school decision-making. When there is family-community-educator solidarity, this can disrupt the status quo in school decision-making and lead to more just schools.

To support more teachers and families who seek to build solidarity, I partnered with an elementary school in the Pacific Northwest to examine how educators and families seek to build solidarities with one another, how their racial identities impact their approaches, and how they attempt to disrupt whiteness through these relationships. In addition, I analyzed how trusting relationships between educators and families at the school shape the agency of racial groups in decision-making. While relationships and trust are important, ultimately power dynamics must be shifted.

In my work, I am more interested in exploring "possibility" than "pathology and challenge" (Kuttner et al., 2022, p. 147). As such, I partnered with a school that prioritizes relationship-building with families and is attempting to shift power dynamics and include parents, especially parents of color, in decision-making. I highlight promising interactions, strategies, and relationships to deepen our understanding of the opportunities for humanizing and equitable family engagement. However, I also discuss the inevitable complexities and nuances of the school, including where they may be falling short of their goals of racial equity and how and when normative dynamics of whiteness emerge and take over. I build on the existing scholarship

in this area (Daramola et al., 2022; Geller et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2022; McCarthy Foubert, 2020; Kuttner et al., 2022; López et al., 2017; Marsh & Hall, 2018) by analyzing a school where educators are seeking to equitably collaborate with nondominant and dominant families. I provide insights into the complexities and contradictions that occur when educators and families attempt to break down power hierarchies and build family-community-educator solidarity.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Drawing on the concepts of the settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993), racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a), and teacher-family solidarity (Hong et al., 2022), I employed critical, qualitative, case study methodology to answer:

1) How do educators at a racially diverse school with a history of segregation and tracking attend to racialized power dynamics while building relationships and solidarity with families in an attempt to disrupt whiteness?
2) How and to what extent do efforts to cultivate relationality and solidarity influence the agency of BIPOC and White families in decision-making at this school?

In this chapter, I outline how participants and I co-created research methods, which included eight months and over forty-five hours of observations, two focus groups, fourteen interviews, and document analysis (Appendix C).

During data collection, I was attuned to how educators and families approached relationship-building and how they considered race when doing so. To better understand how this impacted the agency of families in decision-making, I explored who made decisions and whose perspectives were included when determining things like the budget, curriculum, and after-school programs (protocols in Appendix D). In interviews and focus groups, I asked families whether they feel that they have an impact on decisions at the school and I asked educators the extent to which families are included in decision-making. In observations, I considered who held power, who led meetings, whose ideas were taken up, and how structures at the school facilitated or hindered the agency of nondominant families.

3.1 | Qualitative and Participatory Approach

A qualitative, participatory approach was well aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework that grounded this study. I sought to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular topic—teacher-family solidarity and the impacts on agency in decision-making—which led me to use qualitative methods (Merriam, 2016). People construct meaning based on their understanding of the world and people's realities are "relative, situated, and context-driven" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, it was best to employ qualitative methods that allowed for a deeper exploration of the complex factors that influence solidarity-building and decision-making. Although qualitative methods have been criticized for not being generalizable enough, much can be learned from a rigorous, thorough exploration that is only possible through in-depth, qualitative research.

Participatory methods, in which researchers and participants collaborate to address a topic of importance to the community, were also well aligned with the transformative change I hope my work supports (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). In this project, I was inspired by the principles of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR is not a checklist; it is a framework that honors community input, prioritizes relationships, advances equity, and empowers communities to enact change. In educational research, many studies prioritize equity as a *goal* of the research, but neglect relationships and equity in the *process*. This type of outcomes-only thinking can be harmful and perpetuate mistrust between researchers and communities. In contrast, I aimed to honor the principles of CBPR and center the needs of the community I partnered with for this research (Wallerstein et al., 2018). For example, I originally planned to hold focus groups with educators in racial affinity groups. However, two of the educators who collaborated on this project shared that the school was intentionally moving away

from racial affinity groups this year in favor of talking about racism in racially diverse groups. This change was part of a larger initiative among the staff members to talk more openly about race and racism. I was flexible and adapted focus group protocols to reflect this change and align with the goals of the community. Ultimately, I prioritized my relationships with community members at the school to ensure they remained strong and that the community's needs were prioritized ahead of any research goals.

One of the key principles of CBPR is collaborative, equitable partnership in all research phases and power-sharing that attends to social inequities (Israel et al., 2018). To honor this, I named and attempted to address inequities and power differentials between myself and participants with the goal of deconstructing such dynamics. This was necessary from our initial meeting, in which one educator asked for my "expert feedback" following an event at the school. I reiterated to the educator that I could share my reflections, but she and others at the school were experts in their own right.

Communities with the most at stake are not often included in the decisions to address inequities they face (Bertrand and Rodela, 2017). When solutions are designed *for* communities instead of *with* communities, the expertise of the community is overlooked and the solutions are not as effective (Oetzel et al., 2018). To ensure this pattern was not reproduced through my research, I collaborated with participants and there were structures and protocols to continually prioritize equity, relationships, and humanizing research (Paris, 2011). This was even more important when collaborating with nondominant families, many of whom had experienced being left out of school decision-making. When meeting with participant collaborators who were nondominant parents, I shared how much I valued their expertise and insights and openly named racialized power and positional dynamics that were present as a White, university researcher

working with families of color. While I was inspired by the principles of CBPR and endeavored to be responsive and engaged with the community, I acknowledge that this study was not entirely community-led. I balanced working with a community while being upfront about my role.

The topic of this research, solidarity and decision-making, was co-developed with four educators and three parents from the site of this study. I was first advised to connect with this school by a trusted community and educational leader who has worked with the school's racial equity team. Based on this advice, I reached out to the principal via email, and we met online. The principal is a White woman who has been at the school for ten years. She shared that the school is committed to inclusive family engagement, but would like to learn more about how they can develop equitable collaborations with families. The principal then introduced me to two staff members, one of whom is a Black woman and a former parent at the school, and another who is a White woman and was previously a classroom teacher at the school. Both now work in roles directly related to family engagement. When we met, I shared my background, why I work in education, and a bit about my research interests. We discussed the school's approach to family engagement and all three educators expressed an openness to collaboration and an interest in strengthening their school's approach to family engagement. In April of the 2022-2023 school year, I started to attend a few school-based events and meetings at the school. When interacting with educators and families, I listened, shared my perspective on different topics when asked, and got to know people on a human level.

After building relationships with the school community for a few months, I met with a group of educators at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year. At our first meeting, we discussed the school's goals for family engagement and each staff member shared their perspective on what the school was doing well and how their approach to family engagement

could be more equitable. Emily[5], the school's principal, said that she wonders about families who do not attend events at the school. She asked, "Do you think they feel welcomed at the school?" which indicated to me that she wants families to feel a sense of belonging and attendance at events is an unspoken measure of success. Wilson, a Black educator who works as a family engagement specialist, responded that he doesn't hear that families don't feel welcomed, but many families live far away, do not have transportation, and work long hours. With these barriers, he understands why some families cannot attend evening events. Rita, a Black educator who also works as a family engagement specialist, then brought up how we need to be thinking of family engagement outside of the "white lens." From Rita's perspective, limiting engagement to attendance at school-based events is white-normed, and we need to consider all the other ways families support their children's education. This exchange reinforced my belief in starting with the desires and priorities of nondominant families. Rita, who is a former parent at Baker Elementary, has a critical lens on family engagement and questions the taken-for-granted assumptions about what success looks like.

Several questions were brought up that the educators thought would be worthwhile areas of exploration for this study. The educators then recommended several caregivers for me to reach out to as collaborators, some of whom were heavily involved in the school and some who the educators felt did not have a strong connection with the school. Following this meeting, I reached out to the families they recommended and asked if these caregivers were interested in participating as collaborators on a research project. A few responded, and the remaining meetings were held with these caregivers. While I had originally planned for us to meet as a group of educators and families, I ended up meeting with educators and families separately due to scheduling conflicts. I was initially hesitant to meet with these groups separately because I

[5] All names are pseudonyms.

wanted to foster solidarity and collaboration, but it ended up being beneficial to have a space just for families. Families could speak freely in these meetings, and they did not defer to the perspectives and input of professional educators, which may have occurred if we'd met as one group. Even while meeting separately, it was important to collaboratively establish norms and a shared purpose for our time together, which was my goal for the first meeting with families.

At the first meeting with caregivers, I introduced myself, shared my background in education, and discussed my motivations for conducting research with this community. The parents then introduced themselves and we shared who were outside of our formal roles. We spent the majority of our first meeting getting to know each other and talking about what we would like to accomplish together. I felt it was important not only that I developed a relationship with these families, but also that they developed relationships with one another. Although it was understood that there would only be four meetings for this project, we dedicated time to get to know each other. Two caregivers joined this first meeting and I met with another parent individually as a conflict came up and she was not able to make the originally scheduled meeting time. In discussing my motivations for the research with families, I shared this quotation from Ishimaru (2020):

> Equitable collaborations between families and schools call us to move beyond our current paradigm, in which schools are the central actors (and holders of expertise) who reach out to 'engage' families around educators' and policymakers' visions of what is best for children. Rather, a justice-based educational change agenda can only be co-constructed by both professional educators and those with the greatest expertise on their own children, their learning priorities and needs, their languages and cultural practices, their histories

> and nondominant ways of knowing—that is, the families and communities of children themselves. (p. 13)

I explained that this quotation reflects my stance on the importance of solidarity and co-creation of an educational change agenda by families, communities, and educators. We discussed what this quotation meant to them and how we hoped to approach this research.

After discussing equitable elements of the schools' approach to family engagement and those that the parents would like to see changed, we identified relationship-building and shared decision-making as areas of inquiry. Before this meeting, I had a general idea of where I hoped this research would go. At times during the meeting, it felt as though families were looking to me to decide the topic for the project. I reiterated that I was open to ideas, but shared some initial wonderings I had based on my interactions with the school community and my understanding of the family engagement literature. Prior to our first meeting, I was most interested in exploring power in decision-making at the school. While families agreed that this was an area of growth for the school, both parents expressed an interest in centering relationships and developing a deeper understanding of how teachers and parents build strong relationships that support students. Therefore, identified educator-family relationships and decision-making as two areas of focus.

Families were integral in shaping all phases of the research. In the following sections, I describe the role that these participant-collaborators had on the development of the research methods and data analysis. While sometimes referred to as a Research Advisory Group, these caregivers did more than advise as they made decisions about the topic of the research, the questions that were asked in interviews and focus groups, and they reviewed and analyzed the data collected. However, I recognize that they were not co-researchers and in our meetings, they

often looked to me to make decisions. I attempted to include them in the project without defaulting to me as the decision-maker. While this was my goal, there were times when I did not foster a space of true collaboration. In those instances, I reminded the group that ultimately, they know their school community best, and while I had ideas to share, I wanted to collaborate and hear their ideas as well. I was always upfront that I was working on my dissertation so it was clear that this was one of the goals of the project, but I reiterated that I ultimately wanted to develop something that would be useful to the school community.

At our final meeting, we reflected on the process of partnering on a research project. One parent shared that she enjoyed collaborating and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share her perspective. To acknowledge the time spent on this project, each parent collaborator received a $120 gift card. While compensating families for their time was important to me, one parent said that she appreciated connecting with other families and knowing she was not alone in some of the challenges she has faced as a parent. Through these Research Advisory Group meetings, I attempted to build the type of relationships with families that I believe are needed to advance justice and community well-being in education.

We are currently in the process of sharing findings with the community through in-person and virtual engagements with families and educators. While this study was engaged and responsive to nondominant families, it was not fully co-constructed and I am primarily responsible for presenting the findings. The school has not yet implemented changes from this work, and I understand that my aspiration to catalyze change has not yet been fully realized. However, I am hopeful that this study will inform how Baker Elementary approaches family engagement going forward. I plan to stay in touch with the school to support the enactment of the changes that families called for in this study.

3.2 | Study Design and Research Methods

In this critical case study of an elementary school, I examined how families and educators approach relationship and solidarity-building and the impacts on the agency of BIPOC and White families in school decision-making. A case study involves an in-depth exploration and analysis of a defined system (Yin, 2003). For this study, the school is the defined "case." While much could have been gleaned from analyzing several schools, by bounding this study to one school, I gained deeper insights into how the educators, nondominant caregivers, and dominant caregivers build solidarity and the extent to which these relationships influence who has power (Bhattacharya, 2017). Therefore, a case study was well-matched with the research questions as they required a thorough exploration of complex phenomena: teacher-family solidarity and decision-making (Yin, 2003). I differentiate this as a *critical* case study as it was meant to lead to change and it examined how a system of oppression, white supremacy, was experienced and interrupted (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Baker Elementary is a unique case of racialized power dynamics given the school's makeup of three programs: a gifted program, a general education program, and a special education program. These distinctions, which are discussed in more detail below, heighten the racial and power inequities at the school. Simultaneously, the school is known for strong relationships with families and the community. Therefore, the school offers insights into how families and educators attend to racialized power dynamics when building relationships. This site has been reckoning with their history of racial segregation and tracking through relationships and integration, but have been stymied by district policy and other structural barriers. Given this history, as well as their ongoing efforts to center racial justice and deepen their family

engagement efforts, Baker Elementary is an interesting case of how families and educators approach relationship-building in a strategic way that disrupts whiteness.

In this project, I was guided by the question, “What is good here?” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). As Hong et al. (2022) show us, “Schools can strive to be a site for sustaining—rather than eradicating—BIPOC ways of being” (p. 24). As such, I partnered with a school that multiple trusted educational leaders described as committed to equitable school-family partnerships. While these educational leaders have insights, they might be different from what families of current students would share. Nonetheless, I sought to partner with a school with promising interactions, practices, and organizational conditions that support humanizing and equitable family engagement. However, even schools with good intentions and social justice rhetoric can fall short in centering equity in every decision. As such, I did not *only* look for what is going well at the school. Instead, I paid attention to the tensions and complexities of solidarity-building and decision-making, noting when normative dynamics of whiteness and racialized organizations were dominant. I build on the existing scholarship in this area (Anderson, 1998; Daramola et al., 2022; Geller et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2022; Kuttner et al., 2022; López et al., 2017; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Marsh & Hall, 2018; McCarthy Foubert, 2020) by analyzing a school where dominant and nondominant families and educators are attempting to collaborate. I found insights into the challenges teachers and families face when building solidarity as well as what can go right when working to advance justice in schools.

To interrogate teacher-family solidarity and the previously discussed racialized power dynamics in school decision-making, I conducted two focus groups, fourteen interviews, over forty-five hours of observations, and reviewed over twenty documents (Table 3). I had originally planned to hold in person focus groups with all participants, but the Research Advisory Group

recommended that I work around parents' schedules and offer both interview and focus group options as well as in-person and remote options. The group's advice around deferring to what worked best for families worked out well and aligned with my value of centering the needs and desires of nondominant families. As a result, I conducted a combination of interviews and focus groups with twenty participants to answer the research questions (Appendix C).

I drafted interview and focus group questions to align with the research questions. I then shared these protocols with the Research Advisory Group for feedback. We reviewed each protocol together and changed the wording and order of some questions. For example, I originally included a question that asked about families' role in decision-making at the school. One parent thought that it would be more straightforward to ask, "Do you feel like you can impact decisions that are made at the school?" Another parent recommended I add in a question about how parents *feel* when they're at the school to better understand the experiences of families of color in the white space of the school. For research question 1, I focused on how caregivers and educators at the school perceive that they build trust, relationships, and teacher-family solidarity. Through focus groups, observations, and interviews, I learned about the practices most meaningful to families. For research question 2, I analyzed how solidarity among educators and families disrupted the status quo at the school and the extent to which normative power dynamics have been shifted. I considered how the school increases and diminishes the power of different racial groups in decision-making processes. For both research questions, interviews and focus groups were the primary research methods, with observations and document analysis as important, secondary research methods.

Observations were needed given the importance of looking beyond the rhetoric of racial equity among educators. At times, White educators may read about social issues and discuss

anti-racism without critically analyzing their own participation in racism (Yoon, 2012). As a result, when analyzing White educators who participated in a racial equity group, Yoon (2012) found, "contradictions in the intentions and actual functions of [White] teachers' words and behaviors" (p. 608). Given the progressive city and school district where this study took place, I was attuned to this possibility and regularly observed how educators and families interacted during day-to-day interactions, family events, and decision-making meetings (full list of observations in Appendix F). I also spoke with nondominant families to explore how they experienced relationships with the educators at the school.

Although I began this project with a general idea of the research design, this work was participatory and I collaborated with caregivers to refine the research questions and co-develop the research activities. Throughout this process, I shared emerging findings from this research with families, educators, and the broader community to both gather feedback and work towards reciprocity. I am accountable and answerable to the nondominant families who shaped this study and shared so much to inform these findings.

3.3 | Setting and Participants

This research took place at Baker Elementary[6] in the Pacific Northwest. The site for this study is an "information-rich" (Patton, 2013) case given the unique programs, history, and demographics of the school. The school is located in a historically Black part of the city, but in recent years the racial demographics of the neighborhood have changed dramatically due to gentrification. While in the 1970s over 75% of the neighborhood was Black, today Black residents make up less than 20% of the neighborhood and over half of neighborhood residents

[6] All names are pseudonyms.

are White. There are also growing percentages of Asian and Latiné[7] residents. The district where this school is located is racially segregated and has long been criticized for racism in their discipline, family engagement, and gifted program. In response to the district being identified as having one of the largest racial test score gaps in the country, the district developed a strategic plan around centering the needs of students "furthest from educational justice." In practice, this means funding and programs for Black male students in particular. Baker Elementary is one of the district's thirteen focal schools given the large percentage of African American male students who attend the school.

Baker Elementary serves a diverse community of students. For many years, the school primarily served the neighborhood and was predominately Black. Due to gentrification and the arrival of a gifted cohort program in 2009, the racial demographics have changed. Currently, just over one fourth of students at the school are White (28%), one fourth are Black (24%), one fifth are two or more races (21%), 17% are Asian, and 12% are Latiné (student demographics in Appendix A). In recent years, the percentage of Asian and Latiné students at the school, as well as the percentage of multilingual learners, has increased. Educators report that there are several "newcomer" students who recently arrived in the United States.

Within the school, there are three distinct programs: the district's gifted cohort program, a special education program, and the general education program. Although some educators shared that the programs have become less racially tracked in recent years, the majority of general education students at Baker Elementary have historically been Black, the majority of students in the gifted program have been White, and the special education program has been a combination of Black students, White students, and other racial and ethnic groups. At a district level, the

[7] Many terms to describe racial and ethnic groups can be problematic, including Latiné, Latinx, Latina, Latino, and Hispanic (Villanueva Alarcón et al., 2022). In this study, I preliminary use the term Latiné to reflect the gender-neutral term. However, when participants use another term, I defer to the term they use.

gifted program continues to be racially segregated by race. In 2020, only 1.8% of students in the gifted program were Black and 5% were Latiné, while 15% and 13% of students districtwide were Black and Latiné, respectively. Indigenous students, who made up 0.4% of the district, were not represented in the gifted program (0%). White students, who made up 46% of the district, accounted for 63% of students in the gifted program in 2020. Asian students made up 13% of the district overall and 13% of the gifted cohort program. These disparities are significant because students in the gifted program go through the public school system in a separate cohort for elementary school and often do not interact much with students in other programs.

Baker Elementary does not disaggregate their demographic data based on program, so they were not able to identify the racial makeup of their three programs. This color-evasive practice surprised me given their focus on racial equity. However, the principal and two educators shared that the three programs are less racially segregated than in previous years. As the principal shared, “You used to be able to walk by a classroom and tell” if it was a gifted classroom or a general education classroom, but this is no longer the case. Wilson, however, disagreed that it has changed much and said that he can still tell if the class is a general education, special education, or gifted program by the racial demographics of who is sitting in the room. Given the inequities in the gifted cohort program, its existence only exacerbates existing racial segregation in the district.

In response to the racial segregation and problematic nature of the gifted program, several years ago the Baker Elementary community attempted to integrate social studies, which meant advocating to change district policy. Families, educators, and school administrators lobbied the school board to allow them to integrate this class. As I describe in more detail in later chapters, Baker Elementary was successful and now, students in all three programs learn social studies

together. Emily shared that while there was some disagreement from parents of students in the gifted program at Baker Elementary, most of the pushback came from White parents at other schools in the district who feared that integration of social studies at Baker Elementary may lead to broader integration of general education and gifted classes across the district. Dismantling the gifted cohort program has been discussed for many years and the district has announced that it is phasing out the separate cohort model for students identified as gifted. Many educators at Baker Elementary are happy about this upcoming change, but for at least the next several years, the school will continue to be shaped by the existence of this program, and some doubt the program will actually be disbanded. For decades the program has been disproportionately White due to racism in standardized testing (Au, 2021), teacher biases in referrals (Fish, 2017), and other resource inequities. Despite efforts to increase racial diversity in the gifted program, educators and families narrated that the program's inequities are felt at Baker Elementary.

Given these three programs and the racial diversity of the school, it was important to talk with caregivers who represent different programs, racial identities, and experiences (Table 2). After meeting with educators and caregivers who were collaborators on this project, I began reaching out to other educators and families at the school. I identified most participants using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2003). Race was central to this study, so I wanted to speak with caregivers who represent the racial demographics of the school. The perspectives of both families of color and White families, as well as BIPOC and White educators, were crucial to conceptualizing approaches to building relationships and solidarity. In addition, I was intentional about hearing from families who attend every event at the school and those who support their children's education in other ways. As such, I spoke with parents in leadership roles with the PTO who volunteer regularly at the school and those that have not attended any school-based

events. All of these caregivers described caring deeply about their child's education, but some face greater barriers to participation in school-centered events. Through in-depth focus groups and interviews with families and caregivers, the perspectives of participants illuminated how educators and families strategically build solidarity to disrupt whiteness and the ways in which this increases and diminishes the agency of BIPOC families in school decision-making.

While it was important to talk with families and educators from different programs and racial backgrounds, I acknowledge that every caregiver's experience is unique and no one speaks for an entire group. While at times I refer to participants as either caregivers or educators, five educators I spoke with are current or former parents at the school and one parent that I interviewed works part-time as a tutor (Table 2). For full-time staff, I primarily refer to them as educators, but these roles are not distinct. A limitation of this study is that I was only able to interview one Latiné parent and she also works part-time at the school. Therefore, there are important perspectives from caregivers of all backgrounds that I missed.

For educators, I attempted to interview a mixture of teachers from all three programs, instructional assistants, administrators, and family engagement staff. Given the limited racial diversity of the staff (Appendix B), I only spoke with one Asian educator and no Latiné or Indigenous educators. The educators who participated are largely representative of the staff as a whole, in which almost all certificated teachers and administrators are White and other staff members are people of color, many of whom are Black. I was intentional about centering the perspectives of nondominant families and educators, but future research could explore the complexities of specific racial groups and the diverse experiences of educators and families as they build relationships and partnerships.

Table 2

Study Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Role
Caregivers		
Aaliyah	Black	Parent of a student in the general education program
Casey	Asian	Parent of a student in the gifted program
Gabriela	Latina	Parent of a student in the general education program and part-time tutor at Baker Elementary
Awra	Black	Parent of two students in the general education program
Idil	Black	Parent of a student in the gifted program
Mia	Black	Parent of a student in the special education program
Nancy	White, Native American	Parent of a student in the gifted program and a student in the general education program
Rachel	Multiracial	Parent of a student in the special education program
Jess	White	Parent of a student in the general education program
Vivica	Black	Parent of a student in the general education program
Educators		
Ashley	Multiracial, Asian	Educator and parent of a current Baker Elementary student
Cassie	White	Educator
Deborah	White	Teacher in the special education program
Emily	White	Principal
Mel	White	Teacher in the general education program
Molly	White	Teacher in the gifted program and parent of a current Baker Elementary student
Nicole	White	Instructional assistant and parent of a current Baker Elementary student

Rita	Black	Family engagement specialist and parent of a former Baker Elementary student
Rose	Black	Instructional assistant and parent of a former Baker Elementary student
Wilson	Black	Family engagement specialist

Note. I report the race of participants based on how they self-identify.

3.4 | Data Collection

In order to get to know the school community, I observed over forty-five hours of meetings, events, and other activities at the school including family events, back-to-school night, teacher professional development related to family engagement, parent meetings, Building Leadership Team (BLT) meetings, and other informal interactions among families and educators including school drop-off and pick-up (Appendix F). I approached these experiences as a participant observer, often helping with various tasks needed at the school. While observing, I took notes when possible using an observation protocol that highlighted the aspects of the events most salient to my research questions (Appendix D). For example, to answer the first research question, I observed how educators and families interacted and how they talked about family engagement. This helped me understand the context of the school, the existing dynamics, and the different strategies and approaches of caregivers and educators. Following each observation, I took more detailed notes on what I experienced as well as my own reflections.

To answer the second research question, I focused on who was present when decisions were made in the school, who spoke during meetings, who made decisions, and the racial identities of participants. In Baker Elementary's district, every school is required to have a Building Leadership Team (BLT). The local school board adopted a policy that encourages collaborative governance and the primary function of BLTs is to promote and facilitate

collaborative decision-making. These bodies often make decisions regarding the school budget and plans for continuous improvement. Most BLTs in this district include the principal, four staff members, and two parents or guardians elected from the school community. At Baker Elementary, they have a large BLT with the goal of representation from various groups at the school. The 2023-2024 BLT included representatives from the following groups:

- Primary (Grades K-2) Representative
- Intermediate (Grades 3-5) Representative
- General Education Representative
- Specialist (e.g., art, library, music) Representative
- Special Education Representative
- Union Representative
- Education Office Professional Representative
- Classified Staff Representative
- General Education Parent Representative
- Gifted Program Parent Representative
- Special Education Parent Representative
- Black Family Advocacy Group
- Public Funding/Grant Representative
- Multilingual Learner Representative
- Family Engagement Representative
- Family Engagement Representative
- Principal

In this study, I spoke with two of the three family representatives and four educators who are members of the BLT. I also attended several BLT meetings starting in the spring of 2023 and through the fall and winter of 2023 and early 2024. Throughout the year, the Baker Elementary BLT met monthly and discussed topics including the school improvement plan, academic outcomes, student and staff climate survey results, budget priorities, professional development, enrollment projections, and initiatives for the following school year. These are all consequential topics that influence educators, students, and families. Each BLT member is expected to be a representative and consult with those that they represent through surveys, conversations, and other methods throughout the year.

Decisions are made through both formal and informal channels. Observing BLT meetings as well as other activities that influence decision-making was an important way of triangulating what educators and families shared in interviews and what Baker Elementary's formal policies and other documents indicated. Baker Elementary is in a politically liberal context in which educators and caregivers are aware of racism and how schools typically privilege White parents. In a progressive school that actively recruits Black parents to participate in shared decision-making, it can appear that there is an expansive vision of justice. However, as McCarthy Foubert (2020) shows, "Measuring only whether Black parents were present and participating misses the key outcome for authentic shared governance. School communities must also examine whose ideas and desires are actually taken up" (p. 13). Therefore, I observed decision-making processes to explore not only who was involved, but whose ideas were taken up and implemented. Throughout the data collection stage, I kept a personal log of my own reflections, further description, and rationale for my observations.

In addition to observations, I conducted interviews and focus groups. Focus groups and interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and each lasted approximately one hour. Participant collaborators provided feedback on questions I drafted based on foundational ideas from my conceptual framework about relationships between families and educators and the school's approach to shared decision-making (Appendix D). Structural questions, which address the social and cultural structures of an organization (Bhattacharya, 2017), elicited participants' views on agency of families of color in school decision-making.

I conducted one focus group and seven interviews with caregivers, as well as one focus group and seven interviews with educators (Table 3). All educators and caregivers participated in just one interview or focus group and received a $30 gift card to acknowledge their time. I offered participants various options including focus groups or interviews, online or in-person, and a variety of date and time options. Most participants preferred to meet individually or their schedule made an interview more feasible for them. During data analysis, I followed up with all participants to clarify my understanding of their responses. I shared any direct quotes used as well as the paragraph of my analysis or summary of the finding. As I mentioned earlier, focus groups and interviews took place both in person and online via Zoom depending on the preference of participants. I audio recorded and transcribed all focus groups and interviews. After each interview or focus group, I made note of what questions elicited more information, what themes came up more often than others, and what we did not address in the interview. I analyzed these notes when writing analytic memos throughout the data collection process.

In addition, I analyzed documents from the school including BLT meeting agendas, staff climate survey results, professional development agendas, schoolwide emails and family newsletters, and other materials distributed to the school community. I collected these documents

as I conducted observations, interviews, and focus groups. For example, I attended a full-day professional development session at the beginning of the school year. I reviewed the agenda, several school and district policies, and the district's racial equity toolkit that were shared at this meeting. I was added to the school's all-staff email listserv and so I received emails related to family engagement, parent-teacher conferences, schoolwide goals, and other activities. Many of these emails contained documents that summarized the school's approach to relationship-building and partnership with families. The principal also shares a newsletter with the school community every two weeks and I reviewed this communication throughout the year. Documents were helpful in understanding the official policies of the school as well as the intended practices.

Table 3

Data Collection Summary

Type of Data	Number	Notes
Research design meeting notes	4	During design meetings with collaborators, I took notes on what was discussed and the interactions among families and educators.
Interviews with educators	7	I conducted interviews with seven educators. They were held in person and online via Zoom. They were recorded, transcribed, and later coded.
Focus group with educators	1	I conducted one focus group with three educators. It was held online via Zoom. It was recorded, transcribed, and later coded.
Interviews with families	7	I conducted interviews with seven caregivers. They were held online via Zoom. They were recorded, transcribed, and later coded.
Focus group with families	1	I conducted one focus group with three caregivers. It was held online via Zoom. It was recorded, transcribed, and later coded.

Observation notes and analytic memos	21	During and immediately after observations, I took field notes about what I observed using an observation protocol (see Appendix F for a full list of observations). Throughout the data collection process, I also wrote analytic memos reflecting on the process, what I observed, and emerging themes.
Documents	15	While observing and attending events and meetings at the school, I gathered documents relevant to the topic of this study. In addition, I was added to the all-staff email list, so I analyzed emails, newsletters, and other schoolwide publications related to family engagement, decision-making, and racial equity.

3.5 | Data Analysis

After completing all data collection activities, I began the process of coding the qualitative data to establish patterns and themes. I first coded the interview and focus group transcripts by reading through them and developing a codebook using analytic induction (Erickson, 1986). I utilized Atlas.ti software for the coding process. For the first round of coding, I used inductive or open coding. In the initial codebook, identified 42 codes such as “communication,” “trust,” and “power.” Participants discussed these topics across interviews and focus groups and I grouped them based on my review of the transcripts.

After initially coding interview and focus group transcripts, I then analyzed field notes. I triangulated data by focusing on any potential discrepancies between what participants shared in interviews and what I observed. Field notes included not only what was said, but also tensions and other dynamics that were not verbalized. Therefore, I addressed any actions or practices that substantiated what was shared in focus groups or interviews or provided more clarity about how educators and parents approached relationship-building. For example, here is an excerpt from field notes from a staff meeting I attended:

> First BLT meeting of the year. We are meeting in the library on the second floor of the school. The principal passes out M&Ms and we go around the room and introduce ourselves, our connection to the school, and answer questions based on the color of M&M's we have. There are 4 Black staff members, 7 White staff members, and 2 parents. The principal facilitates the meeting. She has developed the agenda. She asks if everyone is okay with her developing the agenda and facilitating meetings each month this year. She shares that she did this last year and it was what the group preferred. A few head nods, but the principal says that someone needs to officially endorse the idea and someone else has to second it. The principal passes out a decision-making matrix. Principal has the most decision-making power (20 total areas where the principal is decision-maker), followed by the district (13), all staff (13), and BLT (10). Only parent representation is PTO (8).

While coding this excerpt, I noted that the principal developed the agenda for this meeting and coded under "power." I also coded the introduction activity we did as "relationship-building" as the group was getting to know each other. I coded notes about the decision-making matrix under "decision-making." I intentionally coded field notes after coding most of the interviews and focus groups so I was able to look for observation data that reinforced, challenged, or added nuance to what participants shared.

During the second round of coding, I read the data from a deductive approach to explicitly track where theoretical concepts intersected with my emerging themes (full codebook in Appendix G). I identified six deductive codes based on Ray's (2019a) theory of racialized organizations including "agency," "legitimating resources," "whiteness as a credential,"

"decoupling commitments to equity with everyday practices," "reinforcing racialized organization," and "interrupting racialized organization." These codes align with the four tenets of racialized organizations. When considering agency, I relied on Ray's (2019a) description of agency as "independent action" (p. 36) or power. I considered agency more as a process than an outcome as some participants shared that they feel that they have influence and power if needed, but they have not exercised it.

To answer the first research question, I coded and analyzed how educators and caregivers discussed relationships with one another. I looked for differences in how individuals approached relationship-building based on racial/ethnic background, role at the school, or program (e.g., special education, general education, gifted program). I was especially attuned to the elements of solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2022; Ishimaru & Bang, 2022; Vakil & de Royston, 2019) to determine how families and educators perceived that they built trusting relationships. When coding field notes, I noted interactions among nondominant and dominant caregivers and educators at both formal and informal events.

For the second research question, I coded and analyzed how participants discussed the impacts of trusting relationships on shared power and decision-making. Relationships do not necessarily shift power in schools, so I observed and analyzed how decisions were made at the school and who influenced them. The theory of racialized organizations tells us that organizations limit the agency of people of color and increase the agency of White people. Given this, I was attuned to the racialized power dynamics within decision-making. I noted how various actions and processes of the school either enhanced or diminished the agency of racial groups, how parents and educators perceived and discussed the unequal distribution of resources, how whiteness was a credential in family engagement, and how formal rules about racial equity were

decoupled from organizational practice (Ray, 2019a). I analyzed how the school approached decision-making, which included both formal decision-making processes and informal, day-to-day decision-making, and who held power.

After conducting two rounds of coding and developing a codebook based on interviews, focus groups, and field notes, I reviewed documents. I analyzed documents with a particular eye to how the materials addressed power, decision-making, and equity within family engagement at the school. Through document analysis, I learned about the school's stated norms, vision, and activities. This information was helpful when interrogating both the ostensive and performative aspects of the school (Diamond & Lewis, 2022).

After two rounds of coding and some refinement, I identified 33 codes. Then, I reviewed the codebook, my research questions, and analytic memos that I wrote throughout the data collection process. In analytic memos, I often wrote questions or thought through how codes might turn into emerging themes. For example, in November 2023, following a focus group with educators, I wrote the following in an analytic memo:

> I'm noticing from interviews, focus groups, and observations that the staff is focused on building relationships with one another and having open, honest conversations about race and racism (e.g., the full-day PD before the school, what the principal shared about cross-racial dialogue, and what these educators just shared today). The idea is that if staff members cannot have these conversations with one another, then how will they be able to have them with families? If staff members don't build cross-racial solidarity, how can they build it with the families of their students? There's an intentional focus on having conversations

> about race. I'm wondering, do families of color recognize this? How is this shaping family experiences at the school?

In this example, I took the codes "race talk among staff," "relationships," "vulnerability," and "whiteness" and began to consider a finding related to the importance of open dialogue about race and racism among the staff. I continued this process through analytic memos and developed seven emerging themes about how educators and families build trust, the importance of community connections, equity moves that educators make to increase agency and power for families of color, and inequities in the PTO and BLT. I considered the frequency of codes as well as the positionality of who discussed certain topics. For example, "two-way communication" was one of the most frequently used codes, so I developed an emerging theme around the importance of communication. In addition, when considering how families and educators build trust, I prioritized the perspectives of families of color to align with my conceptual framework.

Next, I reviewed the codebook and these initial themes with parents from the Research Advisory Group. I shared a one-pager with a list of the codes, definitions, examples, and emerging themes. We discussed them using the framing questions: What resonates with your experience? What surprises you? What questions do you have? Does anything seem off or missing? One parent shared that the themes resonated with her experience at the school, but added clarity to some of the dynamics at play for families of students with IEPs. Another parent elaborated on what builds trust for them and what they've heard from other families at the school. They described how important it is for families to see educators engaged in the community. Unfortunately, one parent was unable to attend this meeting and I was not able to connect with her to get feedback on the emerging findings. Based on the group's reflections, I coded the data again to further refine the themes. Then, I presented these updated findings to

Rita, Wilson, and Emily. These rounds of feedback refined the themes and added nuance to the initial findings. For example, I shared an example I had heard from an educator about how the class sizes are smaller in the gifted program. In response, Emily shared greater context about district policy and logistical challenges of figuring out class sizes for the three programs at the school. This led to a deeper analysis of the ways in which the school is limited at times by district policy. The iterative process also helps to mitigate bias and adds to the trustworthiness of the findings. When coding and developing findings, I considered both what was shared during interviews and focus groups, but also what is known from previous research and theorizing in this area.

I took several steps to ensure this was a rigorous and reliable study. First, my research questions aligned with my conceptual framework, the existing literature, and the research methods. I documented the iterative nature of qualitative research (Bhattacharya, 2017) and analyzed data using both inductive and deductive approaches informed by my theoretical framework (Merriam, 2016). I substantiated findings by analyzing multiple sources and types of data. After developing preliminary findings, I checked in with participant collaborators to get their feedback and perspective on emerging themes. In addition, I conducted member checks with all participants to review quotations from interviews and focus groups and ensure that I captured the meaning behind their words. I transparently share an audit trail of the research methods, my rationale for the methods, and an account of the data analysis process that led to the findings. While I took these steps towards trustworthiness, I understand that there is not one "truth," but rather various perspectives of participants that will be shared in this study (Glesne, 2016).

Table 4

Data Analysis

Research Question	Theoretical Framing	Data Collection	Analysis
How do educators at a racially diverse school with a history of segregation and tracking attend to racialized power dynamics while building relationships and trust with families in an attempt to disrupt whiteness?	-Teacher-family solidarity (Hong et al., 2022) -Settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993)	-Interviews and focus groups with families -Interviews and focus groups with educators -Observations -Document analysis	Qualitative coding (see full codebook in Appendix G).
How and to what extent do efforts to cultivate relationality and solidarity influence the agency of BIPOC and White families in decision-making at this school?	-Racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) -Settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993)	-Interviews and focus groups with families -Interviews and focus groups with educators -Observations -Document analysis	Qualitative coding (see full codebook in Appendix G).

3.6 | Researcher Positionality

I aim to conduct research that leads to racial and educational justice and I recognize that my identity has informed my approach. Therefore, I analyze how my lived experience impacts my perspective, possible biases, and how this influences my work. I do not list these identities here to bracket them in pursuit of objectivity. Rather, I name them to be upfront and transparent about who I am, knowing that my identity is inextricably linked with my research. Interrogating my privilege and understanding how to dismantle systems of oppression and imagine new futures is lifelong, ongoing work. I have not limited this exploration to one section of this paper, rather, my positionality and perspective is acknowledged throughout. I invite other perspectives on what I may be missing in this analysis.

My positionality impacted several aspects of this study. Given the salience of race in this study, as well as the harmful history of research and education as tools for colonization and white supremacy (Tuck & Yang, 2012), it is important to note that I am White. As a White researcher, I must continually reflect on my whiteness, who I am accountable to, and how I show up in this work. By naming my whiteness and collaborating with participants, I aimed to deconstruct traditional power relations in research. When facilitating interviews and focus groups with Black participants and other participants of color, I transparently explained my goals of this study. However, I know that some participants of color likely did not feel comfortable sharing their full perspectives with me and there may be nuances I did not pick up on during interviews and focus groups. In my interactions with White participants, I explicitly named whiteness to both expose and marginalize its power (Leonardo, 2013). When conducting interviews and focus groups with educators, I shared a gender and class background with several staff members. While these identities are not foregrounded in this study, my position as a woman with class privilege is salient. This shared background may have decreased researcher-participant power differentials, but I was still mindful of the potential for participants to view me as an authority.

To counter power differentials or the expectation that I was an "expert" I continually emphasized that I was there to learn *with* and *from* educators and families at Baker Elementary. During observations, I helped with set up, clean up, or anything else that was needed. Emily and other educators often encouraged me to instead mingle with families, but I was always upfront about why I was there. I attempted to center reciprocity by helping with things that came up at the school like survey development and connecting with families who had questions about special education. When connecting with all participants, I shared my motivations for this

research and how I am implicated in the inequities in family engagement and education. I listened to their perspectives and shared openly about myself throughout the process.

Another salient aspect of my identity for this study is that I am originally from the city where Baker Elementary is located and I previously worked for the school district. My familiarity with the district was at times an advantage as we were able to connect over shared experiences. My background as a special education teacher seemed to build trust with some educators. However, my familiarity with the city and district may have limited my ability to see all the dynamics at play at the school. Lastly, I am a researcher studying family engagement, but I am not yet a parent. Therefore, there are likely some limitations (e.g., a lack of understanding) as well as advantages (e.g., a fresh perspective) given my position as both an insider and outsider in various contexts.

Ultimately, I aim to be a co-conspirator (Love, 2019) in the fight for racial justice. I feel accountable and answerable (Patel, 2014) to participants, especially nondominant caregivers, who for too long have been marginalized by schools and research. Accountability requires reflexivity and partnership at every stage. I sought guidance from mentors and collaborators to ensure I stayed true to this vision and was adaptable to the needs of participants and collaborators (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010). Throughout all stages of this study, I prioritized relationships and the process ahead of a specific outcome and was committed to supporting the goals of the nondominant families who participated in this study.

3.7 | Limitations

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, although I collaborated with caregivers and educators to design the study, I conducted, transcribed, and coded the interviews

and focus groups independently. I also conducted observations, took notes, and reviewed documents independently. Therefore, there are likely dynamics or patterns that I inadvertently overlooked. I aimed to mitigate this by collaborating on the questions asked in interviews and reviewing codes and initial findings with participants, colleagues, advisors, and mentors. I journaled throughout the process to make note of dynamics that arose, emerging findings, and how my positionality may have impacted my analysis.

Another limitation is that I only connected with families who speak English. While I spoke with several multilingual families, they all speak English, which is not the case for many families at the school. Therefore, these important perspectives are not included in this analysis. I recommend that future research consider solidarity-building among families and educators across language differences. Finally, the findings from this study are not necessarily applicable to other settings as I am not employing methods with generalizable findings, and even these have limitations. However, as a qualitative study, the goal was depth instead of breadth. Given the racialized tracking, neighborhood gentrification, and three distinct programs, Baker Elementary is simultaneously unique and similar to many other schools. Therefore, there is much to be learned from their history, current approach to family engagement, and how families and educators build solidarity and attempt to foster equitable collaborations.

3.8 | Conclusion

I hope this description of the research methods is helpful when considering the findings from this study. While I worked closely with several families and educators on this research, any shortcomings are my responsibility as I was leading this study. The next three chapters are organized around the main findings, including how educators build relationships and trust with

families, the ways in which the school increases and diminishes agency and resources for White and BIPOC families, how whiteness is interrupted, and how the school's formal rules for equity are decoupled from their everyday practices (Ray, 2019a).

4 | STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ARE FORMED THROUGH CARE AND TRUST

Relationships between educators and families are at the heart of family engagement (Hong, 2019). However, not all relationships, even those that are positive, lead to equitable school-family collaboration. In schools with white normative assumptions and expectations, relationships between educators and nondominant families can be fraught with deficit views, stereotypes, and miscommunications (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Vakil and de Royston (2019) posit that while respectful relationships are an important goal in education, "the assumption that this can be achieved 'irrespective of their race, class or gender' is disconnected from how power is embedded in everyday interactions" (p. 548). In this study, I foreground the role of race and power when considering how strong relationships are built between educators and families. Many educators at Baker Elementary understand racialized power dynamics and make intentional efforts to build strong, trusting relationships with families, especially with nondominant families, that disrupt power hierarchies rooted in whiteness.

4.1 | What's Happening at Baker Elementary

Families and educators described Baker Elementary as having notable strengths. The school has received awards and attention for their academic success, and they are known across the district for their stable leadership and well-run operations. Most families I met over the several months that I attended school-based events report being happy with the school. Families discuss how responsive the principal is and how communicative the teachers are. Two parents I met describe how the school has a strong "community feel." I also noticed this, especially given that many educators are current or former parents at the school. Of the ten educators that I interviewed for this study, five are current or former parents of Baker Elementary students. One

parent who participated, Gabriela, a Latina[8] mother of a student in the general education program, shared that since she started volunteering at the school, other Spanish-speaking families have asked her to look out for their child and let them know how their child is doing at the school. Other parents and caregivers are working at the school as teachers, instructional assistants, part-time tutors, and volunteers. This blurring of the lines between educator and parent is a strength of the school according to both families and educators.

Like many schools, Baker Elementary has a history of segregation and tracking. However, due to its location and the nature of its programs, racialized power dynamics play out in unique ways. The school was founded in the early 1900s. Not long after, a program for special education students was added in 1925. In the 1960s, the school served a majority Black population given the demographics of the surrounding area. Some Black students in the neighborhood were bused to the northern part of the city as a part of the district's voluntary desegregation efforts, but the school continued to serve a large percentage of Black students. In the late 1970s, the school was temporarily closed due to the construction of a highway through the neighborhood. It was later re-opened several blocks away in a new building where the school is still located today.

In 2009, the district moved one of their cohorts of gifted students to Baker Elementary. This move had major impacts for the school. In the district, there are two elementary schools that only serve students identified as gifted. Baker Elementary, on the other hand, continued to serve students in the special education and general education programs, leading to a combination of three tracked programs that are still present today. After the arrival of the gifted cohort, the overall school demographics shifted as more White students and families joined the community

[8] The terms to describe racial and ethnic groups are imprecise and at times problematic, including Latiné, Latinx, Latina, Latino, and Hispanic (Villanueva Alarcón et al., 2022). In this study, I preliminary use the term Latiné to reflect the gender-neutral term. However, when participants use another term, I defer to the term they use.

as part of the gifted cohort. At one point, the school even lost Title I funding given the influx of families from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Today, Baker Elementary qualifies for Title I funding, and any attempts from the district to desegregate schools have come to a halt due in part to the 2007 Supreme Court Case, Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS), which outlawed school districts from using race as a factor when assigning students to a school.

Educators who have been at Baker Elementary for many years detailed the transition period in the years following the addition of the gifted cohort. They described it as marked by racial tension and confusion as the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) changed from being Black-led to led by White parents of students in the gifted program. The PTA began raising more money to fund the school librarian and a counselor. In addition, the PTA started an after-school enrichment program in which families pay a fee to have their child attend an after-school class. One educator hypothesized that the district may have moved the gifted program to Baker Elementary because the school was not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a measure of academic test scores by which schools, districts, and states were held accountable under No Child Left Behind, a 2001 U.S. federal law which sought to improve public schools through increased accountability. With the arrival of the gifted program, the school's test scores improved dramatically.

The existence of three distinct programs is a unique element of Baker Elementary. Although many educators point out that the three programs are less racially segregated today than they were in the past, the general education program is primarily made up of students of color from the neighborhood. Baker Elementary is located in a historically Black neighborhood and although the demographics of the neighborhood have changed in the past several decades due to gentrification and rising housing prices, the majority of students from the neighborhood at

the school are BIPOC. Students from both the special education program and the gifted cohort program are often bused from across the city as these programs attract families from many different neighborhoods, based either on family choice or the availability of different special education programs. While district desegregation efforts are no longer, families across the city can exercise “choice” and opt into specific schools that are deemed as “option schools” or schools with specific programs. I heard about efforts Baker Elementary has made to integrate their three programs, but parents and educators shared that students are aware of the different programs and some students describe the gifted cohort as “the smart kids.”

Families and educators note the inequities in these programs, but hold different views about its benefits and drawbacks. Some families of students in the gifted program feel strongly that their children will not receive the support they need in a general education classroom. Families and educators of students in the general education program expressed frustration that their class sizes are sometimes larger and wonder why students need to learn separately. As Molly, a parent and teacher at Baker Elementary shared, “This is our public school…it is important that students learn alongside everybody.” The special education program has its own challenges and inequities. Some feel that students with individualized education plans (IEPs) are not integrated enough into the school community and would like to see more inclusion and co-teaching. Others express frustration that all-school family events do not have support for students with IEPs and feel left out at times. The existence of these three programs exacerbates inequities based on race, disability, socio-economic status, language, and privilege.

Simultaneously, there is a racialized hierarchy among staff at the school in which 90% of the certificated teachers are White and almost all of the instructional assistants, custodians, cafeteria staff, and other support staff are people of color. There is only one certificated

classroom teacher who is Black. Many of the educators of color are from the community or neighborhood. Therefore, within the staff there are racialized power dynamics in which the predominately White teachers have more power and earn higher salaries than the classified staff members, who typically have less autonomy in their day-to-day work and earn lower salaries. Although the school attempts to minimize this dynamic, there are both societal and organizational structures in place that reinforce it.

As a White researcher and former teacher, I came into the community knowing that some educators and families of color may see me as yet another White woman with positional power. As I discussed, in interactions with the community, I named my whiteness in an attempt to marginalize its power. More importantly, I listened to and followed the lead of families and educators of color that guided this study. I did this not to distance myself from the majority White, female staff, but to stay true to the goals of my research of transformative change.

This context of what is happening at Baker Elementary is important to consider when reviewing the findings. The relationships and dynamics I observed occurred in a specific setting. I found Baker Elementary to be a diverse, welcoming, and thoughtful community. I observed the dedication and willingness to grow from educators as they grapple with contradictions and tensions that emerge when attempting to be equitable in a system shaped by racism. As I will detail later in this study, the school has spearheaded integration in a district that has widespread and documented segregation and tracking. Although it is not the school's choice, the gifted program still exacerbates racial and socioeconomic inequities. As a result, I argue that there are power imbalances and implicit messages sent to general education and special education students about intelligence and belonging.

The three distinct programs impact family engagement and relationship-building in a number of ways. Unlike at schools where all students are identified as gifted, Baker Elementary families interact across programs. The principal shared that in the past, some parents asked, “Who is your child’s teacher?” This typically came from parents of students in the gifted program and from the principal’s perspective, it was a covert way of gauging what program a student was in. As the principal shared, “There’d be a family event, and people would say, which teacher does your child have? It was kind of this coded language of like, are you [gifted], like me? Or are you not? It just did not lend to a good school culture.” In the decade that the principal has been at Baker Elementary, which is noteworthy in a district with high principal turnover, the school has done a lot to break down these silos and assumptions. The programs have been renamed, they are integrated for one subject, and family events are open to all families. The principal shared that she doesn’t hear parents asking this question anymore because she is explicit with families about the values of the school before they ever enroll their children. Within the staff, educators described both incredible strengths and enduring challenges of the school.

All of these elements of the school are examples of societal factors—redlining, segregation, gentrification, tracking, racism, and ableism, among others—playing out at Baker Elementary. Relationships, power dynamics, and attempts at building solidarity are all influenced by both the history of the school and the ongoing societal factors. Meanwhile, students are playing on the playground, learning to read, and many educators are working tirelessly to build a school that meets the holistic needs of every student and family. I share this background on the school to set the stage for the findings from this study. However, I also acknowledge that there are certainly elements of the school’s long history and current practices that I do not capture in

this study. Nonetheless, these contextual factors are important to note because they shape what is happening and how relationships are built at Baker Elementary.

4.2 | Centrality of Relationships

Educators described how relationships with families are prioritized at Baker Elementary, and I argue that some disrupt the normative expectations of whiteness. Like in most schools, educators at Baker Elementary discuss the importance of strong, trusting relationships and express a desire to form deep connections with families, especially with nondominant families. Likewise, families describe building relationships with educators based on frequent communication and a shared goal of supporting students. While educators and caregivers at all schools would likely share these sentiments about the importance of relationships, some relationships between families and educators at Baker Elementary seem to be a step beyond simply a "nice" relationship. In some cases, educators are building relationships with nondominant families in ways that disrupt whiteness by centering authentic care and community connections, valuing the expertise of nondominant families, and building trust.

When these relationships are built, there are more possibilities for educational justice and community well-being (Ishimaru, 2020). Indeed, the nondominant families I spoke with shared that knowing that teachers care about their children is more important than anything else a teacher may do. In the context of high-stakes testing and the district's ambitious academic goals, Baker Elementary's prioritization of relationships is noteworthy and offers lessons for other schools seeking to build solidarity.

Baker Elementary centers relationships by establishing expectations that educators will reach out and build relationships with families early in the school year. One way educators do

this is through school-based events and during drop-off and pick-up. Before the school year started, I attended a back-to-school ice cream social for students and families. The line was out the front door as caregivers and students waited to enter. Once families signed in, they made their way to the cafeteria to get ice cream. Teachers, instructional assistants, administrators, the school counselor, and other staff members, all of whom I call "educators," reconnected with students and caregivers and met new families. It was a warm August day, and many students and families enjoyed their ice cream outside. Educators and caregivers mingled while students played on the playground in this unstructured opportunity for families and educators to build connections. Also, it was an opportunity for incoming Kindergarten students and other students new to the school to see their classroom prior to the first day of school. It was also the first time I met several families, most of whom assumed I was a teacher. When I explained that I was partnering with the school to learn how educators and families build relationships, one parent responded, "So, you're evaluating the school?" I assured her that I was not evaluating the school, but just hoping to learn from the community. This event, which was student-centered and meant to be fun for families, was an intentional effort by the school to start the year off on a positive note.

All educators emphasized the importance of starting each relationship with families positively. According to Emily, a White woman who has been principal of Baker Elementary for the past decade, teachers are expected to call the family of every student within the first three weeks of the school year to share something positive. Some educators continue this practice, regularly calling home or sending home postcards sharing what students are doing well. Educators agreed that when relationships start out by discussing what students are doing well, it is easier to partner when challenges arise.

Conferences are another way the school prioritizes relationships. The principal shared how the school approaches conferences in a more relational way. From Emily's perspective, the most important takeaway from parent-teacher conferences is a connection between the parent and teacher. She explained how critical it is for families to know that their child's teacher likes and cares about their student. At many schools, conferences are mostly "data dumps" in which teachers share how a student is doing academically by referencing their reading level and relevant math skills. Although sharing updates on the academic progress of students is a goal of the conferences at Baker Elementary as well, Emily described how strengthening the relationship between the educator and family is even more vital.

Several educators mentioned an awareness that intentional relationship-building is especially important with nondominant families. As Emily shared, "We really try to use established relationships at this school to smooth parents' paths a little bit, especially thinking about families who maybe have had their own negative school experiences, or who are new to the country and trying to figure out how to navigate things." Emily recognizes that relationships are essential in building strong collaborations with families and notes the importance of centering relationships with nondominant families in particular. The school also prioritizes relationships with families by ensuring that siblings have the same teacher as their older sibling if the relationship between the teacher and caregiver is positive. The principal describes it as a "shortcut to building relationship" because "teachers learned so much about parents and their preferences over the course of a year…sometimes we've worked really hard with a parent to establish that relationship and establish that trust, and it's almost like you're gifting it to the next sibling coming in." These sentiments indicate that relationships are a key component of the school and schoolwide systems are in place to support relationship-building.

4.3 | Relationships are Strengthened Through Authentic Care and Community Connections

When relationships between educators and families move beyond surface-level niceness, there are opportunities to desettle the expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993). In many schools, teachers show what Valenzuela (1999) calls aesthetic care, which is characterized by a focus on academics, test scores, attendance, and other measurable achievements. In contrast, authentic care "emphasizes relations and reciprocity between students and teachers" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). Educators and families from Baker Elementary describe how when educators authentically care (Valenzuela, 1999) about students and are from the community, relationships with families are strengthened. Authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) helps to build solidarity, which can be a disruptive force against whiteness and can "dismantle the veneer of false assumptions and unchecked power that lies at the heart of hierarchical relationships within education" (Hong et al, 2022, p. 4). Therefore, care is critical to relationships and solidarity.

Caregivers explain that when they know that educators care about their children beyond their formal role, they feel more trusting of educators. For example, Aaliyah, a Black mother of a student in the general education program, described how when she knows that an educator is looking out for her son and is concerned about him as a person beyond academics, this means a lot to her. Nancy, a multiracial mother of a student in the gifted program and a student in the general education program, described how her son struggled last year and was often in the office. This year, her son is doing better and is no longer in the office calling home due to challenges in the classroom. However, the staff members in the office still ask about her son and how he is doing. As Nancy describes it, "That just shows to me that it's not just her doing her job, helping him out, she genuinely cares about what he's going through." Nancy shared that this makes her

feel like “they’re genuinely caring about families and genuinely trying to make connections and genuinely trying to help people out. That helps to build that trust.” From Nancy’s perspective, authentic care builds trust. Nancy and Aaliyah both appreciate being able to send their sons to a school with caring adults. Notably, families discuss the importance of caring adults, which could be classroom teachers, instructional aides, office staff, counselors, and administrators. I found that care, trust, and solidarity is needed not only with teachers, but with other adults at the school.

Authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) from an educator can make a huge difference in how a caregiver views and interacts with the school. For example, some Black mothers at Baker Elementary discuss how a caring educator means even more to them given the harmful racism of other teachers towards their Black children. Vivica, a Black mother of a student in the general education program, said that she immediately connected with her son’s teacher because she sensed that the teacher cares about her son. She describes the “motherly” feeling she felt from the teacher and how she felt assured that the teacher was going to treat her son like a child instead of viewing him as an adult or devious. As Vivica described it, “It’s more of an energy thing for me. The vibe [at Baker Elementary] is just totally different…I’m not worried about how the teachers are treating my kids.” Vivica contrasts Baker Elementary from the school her son attended last year. As she noted, “Seeing the difference in him this year is everything a mother ever wants for a child.” Last year, her son struggled with outbursts and often called Vivica and asked to be picked up from school. Vivica felt that her son was singled out as an African American male student last year by a White teacher at his previous school. Vivica changed schools as a result of the challenges last year and came to Baker Elementary in search of a school where her son would be treated fairly.

Based on the actions of Baker Elementary educators, Vivica shared that she trusts the school. She told me a story about the second day of this school year. Vivica shared:

> One of his teachers called me and was like, 'I love this kid. I don't even know this kid yet, but I love this kid. He's awesome. He's helpful. He's outspoken. I love the way he smiles. I love the way he carries himself. He don't go for no BS, or none of that.' And I'm just like, that's the kid I know. That's the kid I birthed. That's the kid I'm raising. The kid they were talking about last year, I don't even know who you guys were talking about.

This year, when a teacher called her and described her son in a similar way to how she sees him, it was affirming and instantly built trust with Vivica. This year, her son's teacher is White, but Vivica feels that the teacher understands and appreciates her child. In addition, Vivica mentioned that other educators at the school such as Wilson, a Black educator who supports family engagement, understand her family and help her to have trust in the school. She shared that Baker Elementary has "done wonders" for her family because of how the teachers treat her son.

Vivica's experience highlights how the authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) of a teacher disrupted a dynamic that plays out at far too many schools across the country of White educators' racism and biases negatively impacting Black students and families. This also led Vivica to feel a positive connection with her son's teacher, unlike last year when Vivica did not trust the teacher and felt that she was not welcomed at the school. From Vivica's perspective, her advocacy last year was viewed negatively by educators at their previous school. This year, she feels that she can advocate for her son in partnership with her son's teacher. In this example, Baker Elementary is interrupting the racist stereotype of Black parents and other parents of color as "problem parents" (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) and reframing advocacy as a valued form of

engagement. Through authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999), there are opportunities for educators to build positive relationships with nondominant families who may have had negative school experiences in the past, thereby interrupting whiteness and building something new.

In my conversation with Vivica, she vulnerably shared her experiences and previous challenges. At first, she mentioned issues at her son's previous school, but did not mention how race played a role in her interactions with her son's teacher or the teacher's treatment of her child. When she described the challenges, I followed up by sharing how Black students are often treated unfairly by White teachers and Black parents' involvement in schools is not always welcomed. When I mentioned an understanding of this dynamic and shared how I have seen this play out in other schools, Vivica immediately shared much more about her experience and how she felt that her son was targeted because of his race. She also discussed how her and her husband's advocacy was devalued at the previous school, and her wondering about if this would have been the case if she was a different race.

Although different from Valenzuela's (1999) conception of authentic care, a related idea of authenticity or organicness came up as an important component of strong relationships with families. Several educators used the term "authentic" in interviews and focus groups when talking about the types of relationships they aim to build with families. Ashley, a multiracial, Asian educator who works with students in all programs explained that she tries to "be intentional" and build partnerships that are "authentic" with families. She does this in both big and small ways. For example, she stressed the importance of "acknowledging [caregivers] in the hall" or "remembering certain little bits about their family that I can ask about." These small interactions help to build a connection and eventually trust. Ashley, who lives in the neighborhood and is also a parent at the school, reflected on negative experiences she has had as

a parent of color in other schools when educators did not greet her in the hallway. Based on these experiences, she aims to connect with all families so they feel welcomed at the school. By asking about their family, she demonstrates how she cares about students as people, beyond their academics or experiences in the classroom. In this case, authentic means genuine or real instead of fake or performative. While these small interactions may seem insignificant, Ishimaru (2020) explains that "moment-to-moment interactions between educators and families can foster collective learning…and replace historically rooted power asymmetries with new relationships and ways of interacting" (p. 12). Therefore, these interactions matter and have the potential to lead to deeper solidarity and new types of educator-family relationships.

Each morning, Baker Elementary educators greet students and families. On the first day of Kindergarten, which was several days into the school year for the rest of the grade levels, I joined the principal and Wilson at the front gate. This was an especially busy morning as many nervous parents dropped off their child for their first day of Kindergarten. Wilson greeted many students with a handshake, something that he does every day. He described the importance of this practice and how it is critical for families to see him "being present every morning at the gate, talking to [students]." This builds relationships with families as Wilson shared that parents sometimes approach him and thank him for teaching their child how to shake hands.

Other educators emphasized the importance of building partnerships with families. Nicole, a White mother of a student in the general education program and an instructional assistant in the special education program, shared how she appreciates the genuine connections between educators and families at the school. She explained, "For me as a parent that has crazy hair, interracial relationship, I definitely was nervous." Despite the nervousness, she felt welcomed as a parent because "the parent engagement, it doesn't feel so formal and

cookie-cutter…that inclusivity really helps to make the engagement authentic." Nicole continues, "It really feels like genuine connections that are made from educators to the families, beyond handouts, and the weekly newsletters and things like that." Nicole describes the connections she feels with educators and families at the school that are relational and not simply based on communication or handouts. She values how family engagement is not always formal or "cookie-cutter" at Baker Elementary and instead, often feels organic. Molly, a White educator in the gifted program and a parent of a student in the general education program, echoed this sentiment. She shared, "Sometimes if [family engagement] is too shaped, it can be contrived, and then that's not authentic engagement." When family engagement is more relational and not narrowed to a checklist, it can be more genuine.

Families also described how they appreciate when engagement with the school feels more organic and less structured. At the school's multicultural night, which I described in the first chapter, most of the evening was spent sharing food and connecting with other families and educators. A Black mother that I connected with informally at this event shared with me how much she appreciated the open-endedness of the evening. She explained that she sees a place for more structured family events focused on academics, but she values the less structured time to build relationships and be in community.

Care is reinforced through the community connections of educators, which serve as a powerful antidote to the disconnection that occurs in many schools in which the teachers are not from the community. Most educators that I spoke with for this study either currently live in the neighborhood or grew up in the community, and many are parents of current or former Baker Elementary students. These educators described building relationships with families when they see them outside of school in the community. For example, Rose, a Black educator who is an

instructional assistant and a parent of a former Baker Elementary student, shared, “It’s really fun and exciting to give them [students] a hug out in the world and then see the parents and they get to know who I am and what I do with their child.” Rose, who has lived in the neighborhood for over thirty years and whose child went to Baker Elementary twenty years ago, described it as a “close community.” In this phrase, she was describing both the neighborhood and the school as a community where people look after each other.

Connecting with families outside of school is powerful and supports relationship-building. When asked how he builds trust with families, Wilson shared the importance of showing up to community events, especially when invited by a family. As he explained, “Being in the community, showing up to community events. [When a parent says] my son has a football game, okay, I’ll be there…I’m in the community. I see my students all the time at grocery stores, I see them walking down the street.” When families see Wilson at community events, he feels that this strengthens their relationship. Likewise, when educators are in the community and see families outside of the school setting, educators develop a deeper understanding of the school community and the families of students they teach. Zeichner et al. (2016) summarize the problem when community connections are missing in schools:

> Continuing to parachute well-intentioned teachers from university and nonuniversity teacher education programs into public schools who know little about their students, their families, and communities, and who are not committed to engaging families and communities in schooling will continue to widen the opportunity and learning gaps that have persisted. (p. 288)

Wilson echoed this sentiment and explained how important it is for educators to be immersed in the community. Families also feel that way. For example, Aaliyah shared that knowing that

Wilson, a Black man from the community, is at Baker Elementary makes her feel more comfortable sending her son to school every day because she knows there is someone who is not only looking out for her son, but who understands his lived experience. These community connections are important as educators from the community have valuable knowledge and skills that are difficult for others to develop. Therefore, educators' community connections play an important role in disrupting the dominant paradigm of White teachers working in communities of color without a deep understanding of the history and values of the community.

At the same time, I heard from families and educators that not all educators at Baker Elementary build connections with the broader community and most classroom teachers are not from the community. Ashley, who is both a parent and educator at Baker Elementary, recognizes that Baker Elementary is still a "majority White female staff" and the school needs more educators of color (teacher demographics included in Appendix B). From Ashley's perspective, "It just inherently builds trust and community. People just feel more comfortable and more welcome seeing faces that are similar to their families." Wilson, who grew up in the neighborhood, explained that while it helps for educators to be from the community or to share a racial or ethnic background with families, educators of all backgrounds can make these community connections with families. He described a few White teachers who are engaged with the community and "go to the basketball games and football games or the birthday parties. They show up and they're in those spaces. They get it…it's just in you." From Wilson's perspective, showing up and meeting families in the community is meaningful.

Authentic care and community connections can transform relationships between educators and families. However, research shows that too often the biases of educators impede relationships with nondominant families (Auerbach, 2010; Watson & Bogotch, 2015; Owens,

2022; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993) reinforce a hierarchy in which teachers are the experts and schools know what is best for children, especially children of color. At Baker Elementary, educators describe an intentional effort to honor the expertise of nondominant families whose contributions to their children's education have for too long been overlooked by schools (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). In doing so, there are greater opportunities for relationship-building, which I will describe next.

4.4 | Educators Value the Expertise of Nondominant Families

By valuing the expertise of nondominant families, educators can shift power dynamics and increase the agency of nondominant families. In many schools, White parents have a disproportionate amount of power and are able to advocate for policies and practices that benefit their children (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Families of color, on the other hand, are often viewed as "problem parents" (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) and their leadership is ignored (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). At Baker Elementary, some educators intentionally interrupt this and work with nondominant families as partners. These educators emphasized that nondominant families have expertise that must be valued at the school. Educators described families as experts and the "first teachers" of their students. While this common phrase, "first teacher," is repeated by teachers in schools across the country, the trope often leads to paternalistic assertions that families of color need training to better prepare their children for the white-normed expectations of schools (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). However, based on what I observed, the phrase is enacted differently at Baker Elementary. When educators value nondominant families' ways of knowing, it can disrupt whiteness.

Educators described the importance of developing systems to learn from and share power with nondominant families, thereby interrupting traditional, racialized hierarchies. Mel, a White educator who teaches in the general education program, shared that she emphasizes to families how critical they are to students' well-being and academic success and has several strategies to solicit this knowledge from nondominant families. Mel makes a special effort to get feedback from families who do not typically attend school-based events through phone calls, postcards, and informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up. Mel explains, "They'll give me tips, tricks, advice on how to support their student with what they've noticed works at home." Mel shared that these tips often not only support that student, but other students as well.

Other educators talk explicitly about valuing family expertise and breaking down hierarchies with families. Ashley describes her approach: "I try to see every single student as someone's baby, and from that approach, really having the utmost respect for every parent, and just really making sure that they know that we know that they are the expert, and they know their child best." Ashley continues that when respect is present, partnerships with families can be authentic, "the most success, at least in my relationships with parents, is when it's just this level playing ground where we're just working together trying to figure out holistic care for their kid." This is in contrast to what Ashley describes as a "weird hierarchy of teachers and families" in which only educators are seen as experts. This is especially true for families of color whose expertise is often devalued by schools and who often face both positional and racialized power dynamics with teachers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2020). To counter this, Ashley seeks out advice from nondominant families and approaches these relationships as a partnership. She calls home and asks about their approach to parenting and then co-creates support plans for students based on teacher and family feedback.

Other educators express similar beliefs about the importance of valuing family expertise. Nicole, a White parent who began working as an instructional assistant (IA) in a Pre-K classroom last year, shared that as a parent, she appreciates when educators are welcoming and ask her to share her perspective on her child. Therefore, when she began working at the school, she took this same approach. Nicole discussed how it is an expectation at the school that educators value the expertise of nondominant families and reject any hierarchies. As Nicole described it, "We are a community, and we all are here to help these kids. It isn't a hierarchy system…like teacher versus parent. It is recognizing that the parent knows their child best and that that is their baby, and we're here to make them feel welcome." Nicole described wanting to work as an ally with parents (Hong, 2019) instead of an adversarial "us vs. them" approach. Likewise, Molly, a White educator, shared that she builds relationships with families by listening to and valuing them as caregivers: "I'm definitely not an authority on your child. So we have to have solidarity together." In acknowledging that she is not an authority, she attempts to honor the expertise of families and share power. From Molly's perspective, this is more about mindset than a specific practice. She shared more about her approach, "My goal is for kids to know that it is a true partnership between the teacher and the caregivers in the family." She connects with families via text messages, emails, phone calls, and in person interactions during events and drop-offs and pick-ups. In all of these instances, educators describe not only valuing family knowledge, but ways in which they enact this value.

To better understand how these educators' approaches are landing with families, I asked nondominant caregivers about their experiences. Some families of color shared that from their perspective, these efforts are working and their opinions and perspectives are valued at the school. Casey, an Asian parent of a student in the gifted program, shared a story of when they

partnered with their child's teacher to read a story about a social issue with their child's class. This plan was co-developed by Casey, Casey's child, and the teacher. According to Casey, it went well and led to productive classroom discussions about differences and inclusion. Rachel, a multiracial parent of a student in the special education program, had a similar experience in which she came into her son's class and read a book about disabilities. She was grateful for this experience and felt that her expertise was valued by her son's teacher and the school. Aaliyah also shared that her son's teachers have reached out to her to get her advice on how to support her son. Last year, she was invited into the classroom to volunteer, which was an experience she really valued. While families did not discuss breaking down power hierarchies in the same way that educators did, caregivers whose perspectives were valued by educators were positive about these experiences. Others, like Arwa, a Black parent of a student in the general education program, discussed wanting more opportunities to partner with teachers and make decisions together. Therefore, although there is some variety at the school, many families of color appreciate being asked to partner with educators and co-develop solutions to challenges their students might be facing.

Educators of color had particular insights into the importance of valuing the expertise of nondominant families and how this can support students and families of color to navigate the white space of school. Given the trust Wilson has built in the community, Black families often ask him what he thinks about different teachers. He appreciates when he's able to share with families that the teacher will call home in the first week to ask about their parenting style and what works at home. From Wilson's perspective, this makes parents feel comfortable, "Now, as a mom or dad, I'm comfortable with this teacher because they're asking me what I do and some of the techniques I use. It makes me feel like a little piece of me is going to be in the class for my

students." Wilson shares that this is especially important for families of color who are sending their children to Baker Elementary, which is part of what Wilson describes as a "white system." As Wilson explained, "Just imagine how hard it is for a Black student to come into a white system that's designed for, you know, the history of white America and they have to sit back and learn about people [and] you never talk about anything about my culture." Given the racism of the educational system in the United States, Wilson notes the importance of Black educators and other educators of color who represent the community.

This sentiment was echoed by Aaliyah, a Black parent of a student in the general education program, who described how much it means to her when her son's teacher not only asks her for advice, but invites her to help in the classroom. Aaliyah shared that she was able to better understand what was happening in the classroom and not only support her son, but all the students in the classroom. From Aaliyah's perspective, her opinions are valued at the school. She contrasted this to most other schools, including the schools she attended while growing up, that only want parents, especially Black mothers, to be involved in specific ways. However, Wilson's description of appreciating *when* he can share that educators will call home indicates that not all educators do this. Mia, a Black mother of a student in the special education program, shared that she has never been asked for input or advice from her son's teacher. Therefore, there is variability in the practices of Baker Elementary educators.

A schoolwide practice that supports educators to value the expertise of nondominant families and builds relationships outside of the "teacher as expert" dynamic is what the principal describes as "culturally responsive conferences." Conferences at Baker Elementary begin with two questions for all families, "What are your hopes and dreams for your child?" and "What do you care about most for your child's school experience?" Instead of a teacher-led conference in

which teachers share one-direction communication about students' academic achievement and any behavioral issues, educators are encouraged to ask families how they want to use their time together. This practice reflects the importance of valuing the ways of knowing of nondominant families and centering the needs and desires of students and families.

Caregivers appreciate the opportunity to share what is important to them, especially those like Vivica who have had experiences at other schools in which their perspectives were not valued. At a previous school, Vivica shared that teachers would get defensive when she offered advice or ideas about how to support her son. In contrast, at Baker Elementary, she feels they invite this type of feedback from families. Gabriela, a Latina mother of a student in the general education program, also shared how she feels that educators value her perspective and experience. She explained that during her son's Kindergarten year, she volunteered in the classroom so often that Emily, the principal, asked her if she wanted to work as a part-time literacy tutor. Gabriela explained, "They wanted me to be part of the community since they saw that I connected very well with the kids and I helped them and encouraged them. And little by little I became part of the family." Gabriela feels her Spanish language skills and ability to connect with students as "more of a mom" are valued by the school. As a result, she has taken on other leadership responsibilities and supports many Spanish-speaking families to connect with the school. She explained, "There's certain parents that come up to me and tell me hey, can you keep an eye on my child? They're struggling with this or that. And it's not as a teacher, but it's more as a friend [or] mom." By valuing Gabriela's expertise and community connections, Gabriela feels that the school has built a stronger connection with many of the Spanish-speaking students and families at the school.

The idea of kinship came up a few different times with families and educators. Vivica described how she values the "motherly" feeling she gets from her son's teacher. Gabriela recounted becoming "part of the family" at the school and shared that she is valued for her motherly nature. This discussion of family aligns with theorizing on kinship in family engagement, including "motherwork" (Wilson, 2007) and "othermothering" (Collins, 2009) of Black women. When families and communities dream of possibilities beyond the status quo, they center "healing, well-being, cultural revitalization, kinship, and humanizing relations" over "status quo systems or settler colonial white supremacist institutions" (Ishimaru et al., 2023, p. 96). Ishimaru et al. (2023) posit that these theories of change, which involve developing "kinship relations" that extend beyond roles and systems, come from "Indigenous, Black, Latinx and Asian American family and community histories and ecologies" (p. 96). Vivica and Gabriela's use of family-based terms furthers the idea that deep, or even familial, relationships are powerful and kinship relations can extend beyond roles. Wilson also discusses his relationships with students and families in a way that is deeper than how many conceptualize professional educators. Wilson shared with me, "I am the families I work with." This description illuminates how he sees himself in the Black families at Baker Elementary.

These discussions of family among educators and families at Baker Elementary demonstrate how these relations extend beyond the school. When educators and families connect in this way, there are opportunities for solidarity. Author Valarie Kaur (2020) writes:

> Shallow solidarity was based on the logic of exchange—you show up for me, and I will show up for you. But deep solidarity was rooted in recognition—I show up for you, because I see you as part of me. Your liberation is bound up in my own. (p. 82)

Growing kinship relations builds deep solidarity as educators and families understand that our liberation and futures are bound up together.

Kinship is a powerful term and certainly not all educators build family-like relationships with students and families at Baker Elementary. However, educators across all three programs, special education, general education, and the gifted program, express that valuing the ways of knowing of nondominant families is a priority of the school. I observed Emily reinforce this through messaging at staff meetings and by modeling this value. Truly appreciating and honoring the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of nondominant families is an important part of educator-family relationships based in trust, solidarity, and a shared vision of racial equity in schools.

4.5 | Intentional, Vulnerable Communication and Follow Through Builds Trust

While most families appreciate communication from teachers, when communication is vulnerable and intentional, it can desettle the expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993) that normalize one-way communication to nondominant families. In most schools, teachers communicate to the families in the form of a newsletter, email, or letter home, but do not establish strong systems for two-way communication. However, at Baker Elementary, some educators honor the expertise of nondominant families by developing two-way communication systems and making changes based on what they hear from nondominant families. Gabriela connected communication with a strong relationship by sharing, "the more communication, the better relationship you'll have [with teachers]." Gabriela elaborated that although it varies by teacher, most at Baker Elementary are very communicative and inviting. Teachers send text

messages to families, share newsletters, and build systems for two-way communication so that families can share what is important for them and how their child is best supported.

There are different levels of communication—some that are helpful and appreciated, but do not meaningfully build solidarity—and some that do. When communication is part of an intentional strategy to build solidarity with nondominant families around a shared vision determined by nondominant families, and when it is transparent, vulnerable, and reciprocal, communication can build trust. For example, parents discussed how much they value transparency. While at some schools educators offer vague responses or gloss over issues, families at Baker Elementary value the open, honest communication from educators and the principal. Vivica described how she values the level of information provided by the principal. “I've only talked to her twice in person and the conversations were great, but as far as the emails that she sends, I like how she’s detailed and not beating around the bush.” Vivica compared this to a previous school her son attended that she said did not communicate with families. She did not like hearing about things that happened at the school, including safety incidents, from her son instead of directly from the principal or another administrator. Last year, a teacher at her son’s previous school had a heart attack at school, but the school did not notify the community. When Vivica heard about this incident from her son, instead of from the school, her trust in the school was diminished as she wondered what else the school was not communicating.

At Baker Elementary, in contrast, their level of communication leads Vivica to feel trusting of the school. She explained, “As a mother or father, taking your child into a building that you really don’t know nothing about the people, but you know that they went to school to be a teacher, so you have to trust that. And I trust [Baker Elementary].” Vivica did not automatically trust the school, especially given the negative school experiences of her son and her family in

previous years. The transparent communication from the school, even when it is to report that something negative has occurred, has gone a long way in building trust with Vivica.

Likewise, vulnerable communication can also build trust with families. For example, Wilson explained that when he builds relationships with families, he vulnerably shares his own life experiences that may connect with what families are going through, including growing up in the neighborhood in a single-parent household. Ashley also draws on her lived experience as a parent of color to connect with other parents of color. Educators must experience vulnerability themselves to build the deeper connections with families needed to advance justice through solidarity.

Transparent communication about race and racism also supports trust and relationship-building among educators and nondominant families. Wilson explained that when he interviewed for his current position, Emily was vulnerable and shared that the school was having trouble building trust with Black families. Her willingness to be open was enough to convince him to join the staff. Wilson explained that when he shares with parents why the principal hired him, “it gives them respect” for the principal because instead of pretending like everything's okay, she is acknowledging that she and the school need to do more to build strong relationships with Black families. Wilson says that given the principal’s vulnerability, he has “a different respect level” for her because she’s “owning it.” Aaliyah and Vivica both echoed this sentiment and shared that they value when Emily and other educators are “real” with them and do not sugarcoat issues.

Transparent and vulnerable communication must also be accompanied by follow through. Settled expectations of whiteness lead educators and families to accept that schools may not take action based on feedback from nondominant families. In many schools and districts, families,

especially nondominant families, are surveyed without any meaningful changes based on what they share. This can be even more harmful as families may share challenges in hopes of change, only to be asked to share their trauma again the next year. However, when educators communicate with families and follow through on what they say they will do, this goes a long way in building trusting relationships with families.

Families explained that educators at Baker Elementary build trust by being responsive to feedback and following through on what they say they're going to do. For example, Nancy shared, "The school is really open to feedback from parents. They're always wanting to know what we think…they're always open to hearing suggestions and often those suggestions turn into things that you see happening in the school." Nancy notices when her input results in changes in the school. Sometimes the little things build trust with families. Awra explained that she trusts the principal because, "I like how she first hears you to understand you instead of hearing you to respond." Awra appreciates that she feels genuinely listened to by the principal and when the principal says she's going to do something, she does it. Awra shared the story of a time when her daughter kept forgetting her lunch code. Awra happened to mention it to the principal, and the next day the principal set up a system where the lunch code was saved in the cafeteria for Awra's daughter. Awra explained, "This builds trust [when] she does what she says she will do. So this makes me feel comfortable." The principal's follow through led Awra to feel more trusting.

I observed the principal's commitment to timely follow up one morning in the school's office. A Black mother and her son entered the office just minutes after the school day started and the mother asked to speak with the principal. Emily came out of her office and greeted the parent and child. The mother then told the principal about an issue her son was having on the bus with another student. Emily took notes and told this parent that she would call the bus company

right away and would follow up with her later that afternoon. The parent, visibly upset, shared that she had already called the bus company and they had not resolved the issue. Emily validated the mother's frustrations and reassured her that she would address this that day. The parent thanked the principal and told her son to go to his classroom. The mother then spoke to the principal a bit more and they developed a short-term plan in which the two students would be separated until the issue was fully resolved. In many schools, educators use vague language like "I'll look into it" or "I'll get back to you soon" when approached by families with an issue. Oftentimes, this is a result of educators being overwhelmed and overworked. However, these vague platitudes and a lack of action do not build trust. I heard from many families who appreciate Emily and other educators at Baker Elementary who communicate clearly and do what they say they will do.

Strong communication and follow through are especially important in relationships with nondominant families. Emily shared that she wants to develop two-way communication with all families, but recognizes it is especially important for nondominant families, or what the district describes as students and families "furthest from educational justice." This term, which is used by educators at Baker Elementary and across the district, is ambiguous, but generally means students of color, especially Black boys and teens, and other students who have not been served well by the district including low-income students, immigrant students, students with IEPs, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness. This term is part of the district's strategic plan to center the brilliance and excellence of Black boys and teens and is based on the idea that if the district can support Black male students, other minoritized groups will also benefit (powell et al., 2019). Emily shared that she makes extra efforts to connect with nondominant families and when she receives feedback, she follows up with parents to update

them on changes that are made at the school. As she shared, “We have to be genuine and authentic, and if we say we care about what parents think, we have to listen to that. And then we have to act on it.” The follow up is an essential part of building trust with families.

At a school level, the staff also work to develop strong communication with nondominant families. Last spring, they held a focus group for families of color following an Academic Parent Teacher Team (APTT) night. APTT is a family engagement model that encourages teachers and families to work together to support student learning (West Ed, n.d.). APTT typically involves three academic-based evening events with families throughout the year in which teachers share data on students’ academic progress and teach families academic-focused games that they can play at home with their children to reinforce skills in math and reading. Following a spring 2023 APTT night, Baker Elementary held a focus group for families of color in which they heard that many of the nondominant caregivers wanted to remain with their children during the event instead of having childcare for students in the library. Families also shared that they prefer making connections instead of focusing so much on learning games that reinforce academics. As a result, the school shifted for the 2023-2024 school year and the first APTT event was centered on building connections among families, educators, and the community. At this APTT night, students and caregivers went to classrooms together, a change made based on feedback from the focus group. Instead of a full agenda of activities, there was more time to build relationships.

In one fifth-grade general education classroom, close to thirty caregivers and students squished into the student chairs and desks around the classroom. Throughout the hour, other families trickled in and stood in the back of the classroom while the teacher led different activities. After introductions, the teacher projected a slide with instructions for students and caregivers to complete a scavenger hunt in the classroom. Families counted the desks, students

showed caregivers where their self-portraits were hanging in the classroom, and they looked for other items around the room. Following a few ice-breaker activities in which families connected with other families sitting nearby, the teacher went through each subject and shared what students were learning. Then, the teacher asked families what they thought about this evening and if they had any takeaways or feedback. One parent, a Black father, shared that he appreciated the opportunity to get to know other parents, including a parent who had been at the school for the past six years that he had not met before this event. During the teacher's introduction, she shared with families that the school was partnering with a researcher from the University of Washington and encouraged parents to talk with me. When the APTT presentation ended, a mother approached me to ask me about my research. When I told her more about this study, she shared that the school is very responsive and whenever parents have an issue, they respond quickly to figure out a solution.

The responsiveness of Baker Elementary was a common theme from families and educators. Reflecting on this, Cassie, a White educator at the school, shared, "There really is a genuine desire to include families, constant surveys, like after every APTT night, here's a QR code, fill out the survey. And really utilizing the survey results to adapt what the next APTT night looks like." Cassie describes how the school seeks out two-way communication and feedback from families, as well as how they prioritize implementing feedback and sharing back updates with the school community.

Many families of color acknowledge and appreciate the school's efforts to communicate and follow through. Aaliyah shared that she values the formal communication she receives from the principal who sends an online newsletter every two weeks, as well as the informal, text message conversations she has with her son's teacher. Importantly, Aaliyah values not just

receiving information from the school, but being able to respond and share her input on decisions, especially those directly related to her son. Aaliyah also mentioned the ease of communication she has built with Wilson, a Black educator at the school who supports their family engagement efforts and plays a central role in all family and community engagement. According to Aaliyah, communication with Wilson is important because she has someone she trusts who she can go to when problems arise. Wilson also described himself as a liaison for Black families at the school. In this way, Wilson facilitates communication between Black families and the school and is a bridge to strengthening relationships between families and other educators.

4.6 | Educators Can Be Liaisons to Families

Some educators play especially important roles in disrupting whiteness and building solidarity with nondominant families. While Emily and other administrators at Baker Elementary expect all educators to build relationships with families and be in regular communication with caregivers, educators often rely on one another as bridges to families when needed. As Ashley shared, "There are certain staff members that have really good relationships with families, so if maybe if I don't have as tight of a relationship with them, I'm going to Ms. Rose or Mr. Wilson or Ms. Nicole…knowing that they have a deeper connection and using that to facilitate engagement." Ashley is acknowledging that she may not have the strongest relationship with all families, and instead of avoiding those interactions, she seeks out support from colleagues who have built trust with families. Wilson also discussed how he serves as a bridge for families of color at the school:

> They [families of color] know they can call me freely. They can text me freely. They can be them. They can laugh, joke, whatever. And it just helps. Because now I can be that bridge and go to Ms. Emily and say, 'Hey, this is what this parent wants, even though they don't know how to ask for it that way.'

Wilson works closely with Emily and other educators at the school to support Black families and other families of color to navigate the system. Wilson described his approach to building relationships with families of color: "Letting them know that there is a trusted person of color there for their students…it just helps to build the community, me being the liaison for those Black and Brown students, making them feel comfortable and standing up for them." When families and educators have strained relationships, Wilson steps in to be the point of contact for the caregiver, mediate the situation, or support the caregiver. Wilson does more than serve as an intermediary, he supports families to advocate for themselves. However, he explained that while some teachers prioritize relationship-building with families and understand the culture of the community, others rely on staff at the school who have built trust with families of color. When done thoughtfully, as Ashley described, I believe this can strengthen relationships at the school. However, there are important limitations to "cultural brokers" (Ishimaru et al., 2016), some of which educators discussed.

While Wilson and other educators of color are invaluable parts of the Baker Elementary community, I heard that some White educators depend on Wilson instead of forging relationships with Black families. Mel, a White teacher, shared that White educators still need to make authentic connections with families of color. Mel explained, "It feels like it even perpetuates racist systems and ideas that we can't just connect. Why is it that you feel that we can't connect? No, all of us can connect and maybe other staff need to do a better job of trying to connect with

families of color." Outsourcing this labor to staff members of color is not only inequitable in Mel's view, but it can reinforce negative stereotypes. Mel wants White staff to know "it's on us to make those relationships and build those relationships and understand that there's an inherent power dynamic that needs to be broken down." Mel acknowledges the power dynamic in which teachers are seen as experts and nondominant families' leadership is overlooked. However, she attempts to confront this head on instead of solely relying on her colleagues of color to connect with nondominant families. Mel clarified that educators of color and community connectors play an important role at the school, and ultimately she follows the lead of families in terms of who they prefer to communicate with, but she endeavors to build solidarity with all families. Mel and Wilson's descriptions of educators who build strong relationships and those who do not demonstrate how at Baker Elementary, like all schools, there are different types of relationships between educators and families and not all disrupt whiteness. However, in many interviews and other conversations, Black caregivers shared that the connections they've made with Black educators at Baker Elementary are especially meaningful, demonstrating the important role and legacy of Black educators, which I discuss next.

4.7 | Important Role of Black Educators at Baker Elementary

The extraordinary efforts of Black educators at Baker Elementary to build solidarity with Black families cannot be separated from the history of Black teachers and the indelible role they have played in the Black freedom struggle (Givens, 2021). Givens (2021) describes how throughout history, "black educators recognized themselves as within yet against the American School" (Givens, 2021, p. 240). Similarly, several Black educators at Baker Elementary discussed being part of a white space—the school—while simultaneously working to disrupt the

status quo and empower Black students and families. Two Black educators in particular, Wilson and Rita, were cited by several Black families as an essential connection and source of support from the school.

Black educators partner with Black families and empower them to navigate the white space of the school. For example, some Black caregivers including Aaliyah discussed how they call Wilson when there is an issue and he walks them through the steps they should take to advocate for their child. As Wilson described it, “I just coach them up on how to talk to the principal, how to get what you want out of the situation.” According to Wilson, working with parents to navigate the white space of the school “empowers Black families to speak up more or to understand how it works.” Wilson describes himself as someone who can navigate white and Black spaces, so he supports Black families to do the same. Wilson also advocates for Black students himself, which further deepens trust with families.

Rita, a Black educator and former parent at the school, also supports Black families to engage with the school. Several years ago, when Rita was a parent at the school, she co-founded the Black Family Advocacy Group, a family-led organization that was created to center the needs of Black students and families at Baker Elementary. Based on her strong relationships with families and leadership in the community, she was hired three years ago as a family engagement specialist focused on literacy. Her role is part of the district’s strategic plan to support “students of color furthest from educational justice.” In 2019, the district identified that only 30% of Black male third graders scored proficient or better in reading on the district’s standardized test. At select elementary schools across the district that serve the majority of Black male students, including Baker Elementary, the district hired family engagement specialists to build connections between schools and Black families around literacy with the ultimate goal of at least 70% of

Black male third grade students scoring proficient or better by 2026. This is how Rita ended up working at Baker Elementary, and while she has been recognized by the district for the impact she is having on reading scores for Black male students, she plays an even bigger role at the school and in the community. Some families of color, such as Vivica, describe the advocacy of Black educators as a form of care. Black educators can play an important role in supporting Black students, who may face racism and other biases at school.

Many Black educators at Baker Elementary bring their lived experience and community connections to the school, which can strengthen their practice and support solidarity-building with families. Wilson describes his motivation for becoming an educator as a responsibility to his community and attributes his ability to connect with families to a similar lived experience. He explains, "It's hard to work with people who are in situations you've never been in…I've been in those situations…single parent household, watching domestic violence." Wilson is vulnerable with families and shares his experiences to build trust and connection. This aligns with insights from Givens (2021), who explains, "Black educators possessed the potential to become a new kind of teacher, a teacher with pedagogical insight cultivated from the margins" (p. 232). I observed how Wilson, Rita, and other Black educators cultivate insights from the margins that desettle expectations of whiteness by building solidarity with Black families.

Black educators at Baker Elementary advocate for families and communities of color in overt and covert ways. Rita is a community leader and well-respected colleague who does not shy away from difficult conversations. At a professional development day prior to the beginning of the school year, Wilson and Cassie facilitated a conversation about racial equity at the school. When discussing how the school could do a better job addressing racial equity, Rita shared that in conversations with the Black Family Advocacy Group, Black families were surprised to learn

that there is only one Black classroom teacher at the school. While there are many Black staff members, most are instructional assistants or in other support roles at the school. Rita explained that Black families want to see more Black teachers at the school, and she thinks a reason why they don't have more Black teachers is that the school recruits people through a limited network, leading to a disproportionately White staff. This moment came up in our interview, when Rita reiterated, "We tend to continue hiring White females…I think we have to cast our net wider." At the all-staff meeting, Rita was not concerned with being comfortable or being deferential to the principal. Instead, she enacted solidarity by advocating for Black families and Black students who want to see more Black teachers at the school.

Wilson is also a truth-teller and is not afraid to show up as his full, authentic self. He explains:

> I don't code switch. I could care less like, I can be professional my own way, but I'm gonna be me…And I try to tell the rest of the Black staff members to be who you are. You don't got to code switch. Be who you are. You can be professional in your own culture.

By being his authentic self and not code switching to align with white, normative expectations of what it means to be a professional, Wilson shows families that they can be themselves too. Wilson shared that families notice that he is his authentic self and they appreciate it. Wilson wants families and his colleagues to know that they do not have to minimize any part of themselves in order to be accepted by a school. In this way, Wilson is actively disrupting whiteness.

Rita, Wilson, and other Black educators at the school carry on a long tradition of Black educators enacting what Givens (2021) calls "fugitive pedagogies" or "black Americans' pursuit

to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning" (p. 11). Close to seventy years after Brown v. Board of Education, the schooling system in the United States is still shaped by and in service of white supremacy. Nonetheless, Black educators at Baker Elementary continue to advocate for education that is humanizing and empowering for Black students and families. Their advocacy often increases agency for Black students and families. While Black educators play a critical role at Baker Elementary, Rita and Wilson's positions are more vulnerable during budget cuts than classroom teachers, almost all of whom are White at the school. Given the stability and importance of classroom teachers, the school's Black Family Advocacy Group has been calling for the school to hire more Black teachers, while maintaining these critical family engagement roles.

4.8 | Conclusion

Relationships can disrupt whiteness, but the process of building relationships rooted in trust and solidarity cannot be distilled to a checklist. Importantly, building trust takes time and there is no shortcut. Emily explained, "I've built relationships with families, and so there's some trust with me, but I think that happens over time." Likewise, Wilson described how even when he shares similar lived experiences with families, "it takes a good two months, maybe half a year, maybe a whole school year. And then the next year, they [families] know I got help, I got support." Therefore, this work is relational and will take time.

All educators acknowledged that building strong relationships and ensuring that the perspectives of families of color are centered is a "work in progress" at Baker Elementary. As Rita described it, "There's definitely work to be done around that, but there's been effort made to hear from the many voices at the school." While these efforts are important, "solidarity cannot be

gained (nor should it be) by the mere assertion of good intentions" (Vakil & de Royston, 2019, p. 552). Family-educator relationships should not ignore racism and schools should not simply encourage teachers to be more welcoming (McCarthy Foubert, 2020). Relationships alone will not lead to justice and creating more welcoming schools will not necessarily rectify power imbalances. Therefore, solidarity is built through trusting relationships rooted in a shared political project that advances justice, and these relationships must attend to racialized power dynamics.

At Baker Elementary, some educators described how they work towards educational justice, but the extent to which their understanding of educational justice is rooted in the goals of the community and shared with families is not clear to me. Baker Elementary's school district has outlined a vision for educational justice, but this is largely school-centric and educator-led. Based on what families of color shared, some relationships with educators are rooted in solidarity and some are strong relationships, but not necessarily in service of a political project. Many Baker Elementary educators also shared this perspective and described steps they are taking to build deeper connections with families.

These findings on how educators and families build relationships add to Hong et al. (2022)'s concept of teacher-family solidarity in a few ways. Families in this study described critical relationships with office staff, family engagement specialists, instructional assistants, and school administrators. Students need strong relationships with caring adults, and caregivers benefit from trust with both teachers and other staff members at their child's school. Therefore, I broaden the concept and use the term "educator" instead of "teacher" to include the variety of staff members that need to build relationships with families. This distinction is especially

important at Baker Elementary and other schools where the certificated teachers are mostly White women and other staff members are people of color from the community.

Secondly, these findings further broaden the concept of teacher-family solidarity by highlighting the importance of community connectedness. While Hong et al. (2022) recognize the importance of caring, the concept can be somewhat school-centered. However, it is critical that schools and communities are not separate entities. When educators, families, and communities are working together, there are greater opportunities for justice. Zeichner et al. (2016) use the term teacher-family-community solidarity to reflect the importance of including the broader community in school-family relationships. I argue that the term "family-community-educator" solidarity denotes the value of community connections and relationships with all educators.

Thirdly, these findings highlight the central role that Black educators play at Baker Elementary. Black educators at the school often draw on their community ties to support students and families. While family-community-educator solidarity can be applied to educators and families of all racial backgrounds, Black educators shape schools and family engagement in particular ways. Relatedly, family-community-educator solidarity is primarily a role-based solidarity as families, communities, and educators build trusting relationships to support student and community well-being. However, racial solidarity and solidarity based on other shared identities (e.g., LGBTQIA+, disability, etc.) intersect with family-community-educator solidarity. Some Black parents at Baker Elementary narrated how a shared lived experience strengthened their trust with Black educators at the school. For educators who have built solidarity with families with whom they do not share a racial identity, such as Mel and Vivica, cross-racial

solidarity must be present. Individual relationships can shift power dynamics at the school, and structures influence agency, which I describe in the next chapter.

5 | DISRUPTING AND REINFORCING AGENCY AND RESOURCE INEQUITIES

Schools are racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) that reproduce racism through inequitable power differentials and the normalization of whiteness. However, as described in chapter 4, many Baker Elementary educators strive to build solidarity with families of color. These efforts and relationships matter, and literature suggests that organizational conditions and processes also shape inequities (Ray, 2019a). The theory of racialized organizations demonstrates how organizations reproduce racism, even in spite of individual efforts (Diamond & Lewis, 2019; Ray, 2019a). Ray (2019a) identifies four tenets of racialized organizations, which can be applied to schools. In this chapter, I focus on the first two: (1) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; (2) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources (p. 27). To shift power and interrupt racism in an organization, addressing intentional discrimination among individual actors is not enough. Therefore, I sought to understand not only the actions of educators and families, but also the structures of the school and the distribution of power and influence. I argue that individual efforts and organizational structures are at times at odds with each other and simultaneously interrupt and reproduce whiteness.

5.1 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: Equity Moves of Educators

Many educators at Baker Elementary employ intentional strategies to increase agency for families of color, or what I call “equity moves.” These are efforts to avoid reifying racialized power dynamics given that families do not all hold the same amount of power in schools. As Hong et al. (2022) argue, “The examination of power is critical to understanding how race, class, and immigration have shaped the uneven experiences between white and BIPOC families’

interactions with schools" (p. 6). Typically, dominant caregivers have a disproportionate amount of power and nondominant families have less influence on decisions in schools. At a racially diverse school like Baker Elementary, educators cannot approach family engagement in the same way for every family given the different experiences, social capital, and access to power of families. Instead, educators must simultaneously work to increase agency for nondominant families and limit the agency of some dominant families. In doing so, educators can disrupt the patterns of racialized influence in schools (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

There are several examples of race-conscious family engagement practices that increase agency for BIPOC families at Baker Elementary. Emily, who as the formal leader has a lot of influence on the school, discussed how every decision teachers and administrators make has an impact on racial equity. She shared that several years ago, the school district developed a strategic plan to meet the needs of students furthest from educational justice and in particular, Black boys and teens. This approach, based on the idea of targeted universalism (powell et al., 2019) gives what Emily describes as permission to "unapologetically" center the needs of students of color in the decisions they make. As Emily explains it:

> Everything in schools is a decision—resources, budget, schedule, the order you answer your email in, the order you return phone calls, who you meet with, all of those things are decisions. I think that the idea that we're unapologetically centering students of color furthest from educational justice, that sort of makes it a little bit more clear…when we do our budget, we use the racial equity analysis tool to think about, what are the impacts? Where does the money go? Who are we thinking about first? And same with the schedule. You know, we think about the

> kids in our intensive special ed programs first, what works best for them in their day. They're the most vulnerable. So you know, you start there.

From Emily's perspective, the clarity from the district allows her to advocate for racial equity unapologetically.

At the first all-staff professional development day for the 2023-2024 school year, staff members spent a full day discussing their goals for racial equity, how to use a racial equity toolkit and decision-making framework, and how racial equity and family engagement intersect. While some of the agenda was scripted by the district, much of the open discussion was focused on practices at Baker Elementary. Wilson and Cassie, who facilitated the conversation, asked all educators to identify individual goals for family engagement and a plan for accountability. I was seated at a cafeteria table with a few other educators. First, we shared our goals with our table, and then a few shared with the larger group. One educator said they wanted to build stronger relationships with the families of color in their class. Another educator said their goal was to communicate something positive with all caregivers at least once a month. They said they will keep track of their communication and discuss their progress during early-release day meetings with their grade-level colleagues.

This conversation was powerful, but ultimately conversations of racial equity must be enacted through both the small, everyday decisions as well as the large, structural decisions. Many schools talk about centering racial equity but continue with the status quo. The district training argued that when a racial equity framework is consistently used and when families are included in decision-making, it can disrupt the status quo in which schools make all decisions.

At Baker Elementary, I observed or heard about several instances when the principal and other educators did not simply make a decision based on the loudest voices in the room. Instead,

educators described times when they have used an equity lens and reflected on their actions to center the needs of students and families of color. For example, when developing the schoolwide schedule, Emily starts with the intensive special education program at the school, consults with special education teachers, and bases the rest of the schedule on what works best for students with IEPs. While a step further would be consulting with nondominant students and families from the special education program about optimal schedules, this action indicates that Emily is considering equity in decision-making.

In another example, Ashley, a multiracial Asian educator who works with students in all three programs, describes how she self-monitors to ensure she is equitable in who she is serving:

> It's a lot of self-monitoring, because I receive a lot of emails from White parents asking for support for their White students, or Ms. Emily receives lots of emails about certain things going on, so then I get emails from her. Then there's a caseload of White males [in the gifted program]. So I have to just constantly monitor who is needing support and push back on that saying, 'I've been getting a lot of emails from [gifted] families that have private insurance and can see a therapist outside of school.' So just being really thoughtful and intentional and noticing patterns and making sure that my time is spent equitably.

When I asked Ashley how the administrators at the school react to her approach, Ashley shared that Emily is "always very open to receiving that feedback." Ashley clarified how she responds to some of the well-resourced, White parents that reach out for one-on-one support, "My pushback is usually just a diplomatic response of here's some things that you could try or here's some outside organizations that could help…it's not like saying, 'I have too many White kids on my caseload." Ashley notes that she cannot necessarily share with White families that she is not

going to see their child because she has too many White students on her caseload, but with the support of school leadership, she manages to maintain an equitable caseload centered on the needs of students of color. In many schools, White parents have greater access to the principal and can influence decisions about programs, discipline, and what is taught (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). However, educators like Ashley and Emily narrated how they work to counteract this dynamic.

5.2 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: "Real Talk" about Racism

Explicit conversations about race and racism can also enhance the agency of educators and families of color. In many schools, educators, especially White educators, shy away from conversations about race in an attempt to avoid discomfort (DiAngelo, 2018). In contrast, Baker Elementary is focused on having open conversations about racism in order to have more equitable family engagement that does not reify racialized power dynamics. Through professional development and structured conversations, the school has prioritized explicit conversations about race. Instead of sweeping issues under the rug, the school is embracing the inevitable tensions that are necessary to build solidarity with one another (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). Educators shared that these conversations among staff members prepare them to have conversations with BIPOC and White families and build cross-racial solidarity with families. As Nicole shared:

> The discussions about race and equity can kind of get messy, but those conversations have to be had in order for us to bridge the gap with engagement with families. Whether it's families of color, queer families…I recognize that there's a need for these sorts of messy conversations and to be vulnerable

> ourselves and to talk about things that we've experienced with each other and things that we see…so I think those conversations are going well. And I think that there's always room for improvement, but I know, personally, what I take from those meetings, and then I try to apply it within my role as an educator, and as somebody within the community.

From Nicole's perspective, having these "messy" conversations among staff members prepares them to engage with families, especially with nondominant families. In these conversations, Nicole brings up the importance of vulnerability, and also shares how as a White woman, she aims to not overspeak while also not staying silent.

As described earlier, at an all-staff meeting before the first day of school, educators discussed racial equity and family engagement. I was seated at a cafeteria table with four other educators. Cynthia, a Black instructional assistant who has been at the school for many years, discussed how important it is for Black children to see Black educators. During the whole group discussion, she shared with the staff that sometimes, White teachers at the school take offense to her tone of voice when she is talking with students. She assured her White colleagues that they "should not be scared" because she is talking to Black children in a way that is normal and expected in the Black community. At this moment, the room was silent as the rest of the staff took in what she shared. The facilitators, Wilson and Cassie, thanked Cynthia for her words. Then, other educators, both White and BIPOC, shared their thoughts on how the school could better align with its mission of educational equity, sharing examples of how to interrupt bias in discipline and how to build better relationships with families of color. I do not know what action was taken based on what Cynthia shared. I reached out to Cynthia to participate in this study, but did not hear back from her.

From my perspective, this conversation demonstrated both the willingness of the staff to have these conversations as well as the need for more culturally responsive and equitable practices. If Cynthia feels that her White colleagues are "scared" of her based on her tone of voice, to me that indicates a need for White educators to do more work to decenter whiteness. Some White teachers may be more comfortable with a certain tone, but tone-policing is often racialized and can have harmful impacts (Prescod-Weinstein, 2015).

While all educators I spoke with agree that there is more work to be done, educators report progress in the past few years. In particular, Rose, a Black instructional assistant and parent of a former student at the school, described how racial tension among the staff came to a head a few years ago. At this time, some Black educators were frustrated with White educators not listening to them. Rose explained, "When I first started at the school, there were a lot of Black people who were having lots of problems and troubles with the adults in the building." After Emily and the school's racial equity team stepped in, things improved from Rose's perspective: "Everything was better because of all of us coming together and discussing it, and giving real reasons, not trying to hold back, or try to think that if I say this, I'm going to hurt their feelings. It was a 'real talk' kind of thing." Real talk—open conversations that confront racism at the school—were vital to disrupting this dynamic. Through more open dialogue and a shared norm around conflict resolution, Rose and Emily reported that racial tension among the staff has improved.

When accompanied by anti-racist action, open conversations about racism can not only disrupt inequities among the staff, but also prepare educators to enhance the agency of nondominant families and when necessary, diminish the agency of White families. When this occurs, educators flip the script on traditional racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a). These

changes are both individual and organizational as the school has made conversations about racism a part of their formal structure for professional development. By leaning into tensions and acknowledging differences, these open conversations about racism can build solidarity among staff members (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012) and interrupt whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018; Ray, 2019a). While the school's formal racial equity team is not meeting regularly this year, the principal shared that two educators have continued this important work.

The school's efforts to discuss racism seem to be having an impact. In the fall of 2023, educators took a staff climate survey. When asked the extent to which staff members agree that the school "is productively taking actions to address issues of racial equity at the school" 90% answered favorably. For the statement, "Staff in this school can have honest conversations with each other about race" 70% responded favorably. Both of these responses were increases from the previous year, indicating that the school's focus on open conversations about racism are making an impact. Ashley echoed these sentiments, "Having that time and space to have those restorative conversations about race and other things. I think that is being prioritized in our building, which feels good." Over 80% of staff members agreed that the school uses the racial equity toolkit, 80% agreed that the school deals with racial conflict in an effective and fair manner, and 90% agreed that leadership actively confronts issues of racial concern. When these results were shared at a BLT meeting that I attended, educators and administrators expressed happiness to see that relatively high percentages of the staff agreed with these statements and across the board, percentages had increased from the previous year. However, educators also noted that close to a third (30%) of staff members do not believe that the staff can have honest conversations about race. Therefore, work remains to build a culture where racism is openly

addressed to increase agency for families of color. This work is ongoing, and the school plans to continue this focus on open discussions about racism.

While most educators I spoke with were positive about the school's emphasis on open conversations about racism, there were some educators that I reached out to who did not participate in an interview or focus group. While I do not know why they did not respond, educators who are more critical of the school's approach may have opted not to participate for that reason. Furthermore, as a White researcher who is not part of this school community, I recognize that some educators may not have shared their full perspectives when discussing racial equity and confronting racism. Given this possibility, I analyzed who holds power in the various family engagement structures at the school, which I describe in detail next.

5.3 | Enhancing and Diminishing Agency: Structures that Reinforce Racialized Power

When asked about family engagement, most educators and families discussed the school's PTO and a schoolwide initiative, Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT). I argue that these schoolwide strategies, while well-liked by many families and educators, are school-centric and often reinforce racialized power dynamics in which educators and dominant families have a disproportionate amount of power. An analysis of power is important as "educators must be willing to relinquish power" in order to enact solidarity (Hong et al., 2022, p. 25). Therefore, I consider how these organizational structures influence who has power and influence at the school.

PTAs, which are the preferred method of family engagement in many schools (Murray et al., 2019), often enhance the power of dominant families and reinforce whiteness (Freidus, 2019; Murray et al., 2019; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Syeed, 2018). PTAs can

perpetuate whiteness and exclude parents of color by requiring dues, professionalizing meetings, focusing on fundraising, and holding engagements at hours when many parents work. Some well-resourced PTAs donate to PTAs with less funding, but these relationships can be fraught with white saviorism and ideas of charity (Morton, 2021). A few years ago, Baker Elementary's PTA decided to no longer be classified as an official PTA and instead they changed to become a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). This change was primarily made to remove the requirement that each family pay a membership fee. In addition, an educator shared that previous parent leaders acknowledged that PTAs do not always feel inclusive. By changing the name and association, the group was attempting to be more inclusive to the Baker Elementary community.

In spite of these efforts, both educators and families shared that the PTO is run primarily by dominant caregivers. The PTO has a lot of power given their longstanding involvement with the school and robust fundraising. With assets of over $160,000 in 2022 and even more in previous years, they currently fund half of the librarian's salary, along with school supplies, emergency funding for families, and family events throughout the year. Deborah, a White educator who teaches in the special education program, explained that the PTO changed significantly when the gifted program was moved to Baker Elementary in 2009. They began fundraising significantly more each year and supplementing district funding to fully staff some positions.

Like many PTAs and PTOs, leadership is not entirely representative of the community. As discussed earlier, Baker Elementary's PTA changed with the arrival of the gifted program and today, it is mostly run by parents of students in the gifted program. Casey, an Asian American parent of a student in the gifted program noticed these inequities when attending a PTO meeting:

> I was sitting at the [PTO] meeting and then we went out afterwards. I was looking around the room like, these are all people with pretty high incomes. That's the way I noticed things. And so is it inclusive? I feel welcomed, and I think that they welcome any kind of help, but the people that can come tend to skew towards the higher socioeconomic status.

From Casey's perspective, the PTO is welcoming, but those who can attend meetings and volunteer have higher incomes. Casey explained that they believe it is a product of "the current economy" in which "most families have two working parents and they can't send people to volunteer." As a result, Casey describes volunteering as "kind of a privileged thing."

Others also note the lack of representation from Black and Latiné families in the PTO. Molly reiterated the idea that the PTO is "predominantly run by the White and Asian affluent families" of students in the gifted program. Molly explained that this is likely "because they hold meetings and they require you to be in a committee position, and maybe that's not something that is accessible" and not all families want to participate in this manner. This aligns with research that shows how the formality of some PTAs can be exclusionary to families, especially nondominant families (Freidus, 2019; Murray et al., 2019; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Syeed, 2018). Casey shared that although the PTO sends out surveys to families asking where they want donations to go, the PTO could do a better job ensuring that parents feel "ownership and agency" for the PTO's activities.

Other PTO leaders agreed with this sentiment, explaining that they aim to include everyone and would like to do a better job engaging the community. When I spoke with parents who are not involved with the PTO, I heard several different reasons. Aaliyah shared that she is not very involved with the PTO because there has not been enough information shared with

families about how to get involved. On one occasion, she sought out a volunteer opportunity for an evening event hosted by the PTO. When I spoke with her that evening, she shared that she doesn't always feel like she fits in with the parents who lead the group. As a result, she has stayed on the periphery instead of getting more involved.

At this PTO-led event, families gathered in the cafeteria to play Bingo. PTO parent leaders wore Bingo visors and welcomed families as they entered the school. Students were invited to a multipurpose room where a movie was playing and some PTO leaders supervised. In the cafeteria, adults gathered at tables across the room while a PTO leader called Bingo numbers. The majority of parents—about thirty—were White. There were ten Asian parents and four Black parents in attendance as well. As parents picked up their Bingo cards, there was a QR code with a suggested donation of five dollars. At a table in the corner, there were a few desserts that families had brought from home. The PTO had prizes for winners including a gift card to a restaurant, a free class at a gymnastics center, and various other gift cards donated by local businesses. Families seemed to enjoy themselves, smiling and chatting with other families. Although no one mentioned it, I noticed the limited participation from Black and Latiné families.

In other conversations with families not involved with the PTO, parents explained that they cannot attend or volunteer at PTO-led events because they are busy working, have other children that need childcare, live far away, do not have regular access to transportation, or have other responsibilities in the evenings. Barriers like these make school-based events, both those led by the PTO and those led by the school, difficult to attend for some families. This does not mean that there is no place for school-based events, but some caregivers and educators of color, including Vivica, Mia, Wilson, and Rita, asked about the possibility of weekend events or other community-based events.

I heard about similar challenges with the school's main family engagement strategy, APTT. APTT, the schoolwide family engagement program focused on academics, has been in place at Baker Elementary the past four years. Three APTT nights, held annually in the fall, winter, and spring, are the key elements of the program. Family attendance at APTT events has been a priority of the school in recent years. For the 2023-2024 school year, they had a goal of 80% of families attending at least one APTT event throughout the year. Leading up to these events, staff members call every family that has not RSVP'd to encourage them to attend. At one APTT event, I asked a parent about the program. She said she enjoys learning about what is being taught, but also acknowledged, "I mostly see the same people." At another APTT event, I asked two teachers what they thought about APTT. One replied, "I have yet to see APTT move the needle on a family that wasn't very engaged in their child's education." The other teacher agreed and said, "It's the same families who attend most events at the school." The APTT nights I joined were well-attended, but educators acknowledge that they are not reaching all families, especially multilingual and Black families.

At one APTT night in the spring of 2023, I joined a first-grade classroom. A cheerful teacher, a White woman named Carly, welcomed me into her colorful and neatly organized classroom. I sat at a small u-shaped table in the back of the classroom as caregivers entered the space. Carly invited families to sit at their child's desk, which led some parents who had entered the room together and appeared to know each other to separate. Carly welcomed families and reminded the two students who were with their parents that childcare and pizza were available in the cafeteria for all students. Parents crammed into the small chairs designed for first-graders and were divided into three groups. There was one Latiné mother, one Asian mother and grandmother, a Black mother and father, and six White parents. Carly asked caregivers to play an

icebreaker game in which they played Jenga. Each tile had a question that families answered before moving on to the next person. Eleven caregivers were present this evening, taking up about half of the twenty-two seats in Carly's classroom. After the icebreaker game, Carly presented on the different subjects and what students have been learning. Then, Carly introduced families to a math game using a small blow-up ball. Families practiced the game with one another so that they knew how to play with their child at home. Before closing, Carly apologized to families that she did not have more updated reading scores to share, but said she would be contacting all families once reading assessments were completed. Families thanked Carly and a few stayed back in the room to mingle after the formal portion of the evening ended. While families had an opportunity to ask questions of the teacher, and it appeared that families were making connections, Carly set the agenda and led the conversation.

Baker Elementary is committed to APTT as a strategy, but educators acknowledge the shortcomings and challenges they've faced when implementing the model, especially related to interpretation. At another APTT night, I joined a fifth-grade classroom. Mid-way through the teacher's introduction, a Spanish interpreter entered the classroom with a Latina, Spanish-speaking mother and her fifth-grade son. The interpreter then said she had to go to another classroom and the student replied that he could interpret for his mom. For the rest of the evening, the mother and student sat quietly throughout the presentation and activities. When the teacher asked families to talk with other families, the mother and son spoke to one another, but did not interact with any other families. This led me to wonder, how can families make connections—the theme of the event—when interpretation is not widely available?

Baker Elementary educators are aware of this challenge and are trying to make events accessible without funding for widespread interpretation. For example, at other APTT events,

some educators used microphones and AI-interpretation in which caregivers read what the teacher is saying in their home language. There were mixed reviews about the effectiveness of this type of interpretation, but without funding for interpreters for every classroom, educators struggle with whether to have all Spanish-speaking families in a separate classroom or to keep all students and families together without interpretation. For families who speak Vietnamese or Somali, the other two most commonly spoken languages among Baker Elementary families, they also face barriers to participation. As Emily shared, “We never want to unintentionally marginalize a community” by separating them for the sake of interpretation. Nonetheless, this continues to be a challenge as educators and families attempt to build relationships at events like APTT nights without the resources for widespread interpretation.

While I value the idea of family-educator collaboration, and based on a recent evaluation, the program is generally popular with families who attend APTT events across the district, school-centered family engagement often reinforces power dynamics in which teachers are the experts. In this dynamic, families, especially families of color, are positioned as passive recipients of information (Ishimaru, 2020). When educators share what students are learning and model an academic-focused game without offering an opportunity for caregivers to teach educators about their own cultural and home practices, it can reinforce the idea that teachers are the only holders of knowledge. This does not mean that there is no place for teachers to share ideas of how families can reinforce academic skills at home. However, when families are not offered the opportunity to do the same, the school misses out. A recent evaluation of APTT in New York City had similar findings. Sanzone et al. (2018) argue that there is a “gap in the model’s cultural responsiveness as currently implemented in New York City middle schools” because “parents are positioned as learners rather than assets, and they have limited voice,

agency, or decision-making power in the context of APTT" (p. 27). Sanzone et al. (2018) found that school staff determined the content of APTT presentations, and it was not based on the needs or concerns of students and families. While Baker Elementary has at times deviated from the APTT model to be more responsive to the desires of families of color, the majority of the content appears to come from school staff and the events I observed were all teacher-led.

With the exception of conferences, I did not observe many opportunities through APTT for families to set the agenda at Baker Elementary. Awra, a Black mother of a student in the general education program, shared that she attends APTT nights and enjoys learning about what her child is being taught, but she wishes that educators would ask caregivers for feedback about the curriculum. She explained, "I never miss an APTT night. I like to hear every parent's comment on how they feel…I sometimes wish that [teachers] can ask us a question about homework for example." Awra noted that she could initiate communication with her child's teacher, but she wants to be respectful of the teacher and would only offer input if explicitly asked by a teacher. Awra's experience demonstrates the limitations of family engagement solely led by the school and offers ideas for how Baker Elementary educators could reshape how they implement APTT to ensure a more equitable distribution of power.

At the same time, educators and families described how Baker Elementary makes great efforts to gather input from families when making decisions, mostly through surveys. The principal and several educators referenced the surveys that Baker Elementary sends out to families to gather feedback on things like homework, budget priorities, and what types of events families want to have at the school, which is how family engagement seems to be primarily conceptualized. Surveys are part of the school's efforts to include families in decision-making. However, I heard about some limitations to this approach. Rita explained that the school's

method for seeking input often leads them to hear more from White parents. Rita described surveys as a "mainstream communication tool" and since "some parents are more responsive than others" the school gets more feedback from White parents than they do from families of color. From Rita's perspective, when the school solicits feedback through surveys, they limit who they hear from. Educators are aware of this and typically ask parents to identify the program their student is in (e.g., gifted program, general education, or special education) and their race/ethnicity to ensure that they do not make decisions based on the majority of responses since the majority is often dominant caregivers. Furthermore, the school often includes a disclaimer reminding families to prioritize "equity" and "the needs of students of color furthest from educational justice" in their responses. Surveys can be a helpful tool for gathering feedback from a large group of people, but if professional educators are ultimately making the final decision, then power has not shifted to families in meaningful ways (Ishimaru et al., 2023). A survey is more than what many schools do, and educators could collaborate more deeply with families and codesign solutions.

While present at all schools, racialized power imbalances are heightened at Baker Elementary given the history of tracking and gentrification. As the neighborhood gentrified and with the arrival of a gifted program, the demographics of the school have changed. As a result, power shifted in the school to dominant caregivers. Although there is an awareness of this dynamic among individual staff members and the school works to ensure that nondominant families have a say in decisions made at the school, I observed family engagement structures that, even unintentionally, advantage White, resourced families. Or, as Wilson described it, the gifted students and White parents at the school "still run the show." This dynamic occurs in spite of the efforts of many educators who actively work to disrupt it.

5.4 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Integration and Ongoing Inequities of the Gifted Program

Organizations often perpetuate racism by legitimating the unequal distribution of resources (Ray, 2019a). In racialized organizations, including schools, "White dominance" remains "implicit, legitimate, and unnamed" (Ray, 2019a, p. 40). In practice, this looks like White people occupying positions of power within an organization and people of color having less power and resources. This can be reinforced through tracking and in-school racial segregation. Within the context of family engagement, this looks like White families having more resources than families of color. At many schools, White parents advocate for resources for their children such as counseling, tutors, field trips. Or, as Dr. Bettina Love (2023) explains, many White parents hoard opportunities (Tilly, 1999) and resources to maintain their privilege through education. Oftentimes, educators and families accept this reality and allow it to continue. At Baker Elementary, in contrast, they are wrestling with these resource inequities and try to avoid reifying them.

Baker Elementary, along with several other schools in the district, has attempted to disrupt the gifted program in recent years. The district's gifted program has been inequitable and racially segregated since its inception, and it was created this way by design. The district's first accelerated learning program was developed in the 1960s, but was reinvented in the 1970s as a way of enticing White parents to stay in the public school system as the district desegregated schools through busing (Angelos, 1984). Nationwide, White families reacted to desegregation efforts by leaving cities and the public-school system, often called "white flight." This district's attempt to cater to these families resulted in the current, inequitable gifted program of today

(Dornfeld, 2019). The racism of this system has continued through standardized testing, bias in referrals, and other inequities. Until recently, when independent testing was disallowed, resourced parents often sought out private testing for their Kindergarteners to demonstrate that their child was gifted, resulting in a disproportionate number of White students being identified as gifted. While it has become more racially integrated in the past several years, the inequities of the gifted program across the district remain stark.

District policy requires that students in the gifted program learn in a separate classroom. However, there is no accelerated curriculum for social studies. As a result, several years ago educators and families involved in the school's racial equity team decided to advocate for the school board to change their policy and allow integration for social studies. Emily, who said she "doesn't use the term integration lightly," explained how this movement at the school started:

> There's a lot of institutional racism that the [gifted] program was built around. It was really, I think, built to keep White families in the system when there was a lot of White flight. I think the district at the time knowingly or unknowingly set that up to privilege those families and keep them here.

As a result, a coalition of Baker Elementary families and educators decided to integrate the three programs at the school for social studies. Several other schools in the district, including elementary, middle, and high schools made similar efforts around the same time. The nearby high school implemented an "Honors for All" program and another elementary school made efforts to integrate. Simultaneously, some Baker Elementary families of students in the gifted cohort, along with others, advocated for district-level changes that would make the gifted cohort more racially diverse. For example, families advocated for the district to send out information about assessments in multiple languages and train staff on how to identify signs of giftedness.

These tweaks to the system, as well as broader efforts to dismantle the gifted cohort program entirely, have faced pushback from families of students in the gifted program. Emily describes the process of getting the school board's approval, "We had a lot of adults, parents, and kids testify at board meetings about why this was important…We spent about a year as a community jumping through every hoop the board could give us about why that should or shouldn't happen." Emily notes that most of the pushback was actually from White parents at other schools in the district: "The pushback was mostly from parents that don't go here whose kids were in the 100% [gifted] schools on the North End. Because if we're going to integrate, what does that mean for them?" However, some White parents of children in the gifted program at Baker Elementary also resisted efforts to integrate by arguing that it would "lessen the rigor" of social studies. Other parents accused Emily of "making people feel like they're racist" if they were not on board with integrating for social studies. Despite these "discouraging comments," Emily shared that they had "a critical mass" of parents and educators who were passionate about making the change, many of whom were parents of students in the gifted program.

With community support behind the decision, Emily was able to deal with the pushback she received from some dominant caregivers. She reflected, "We probably lost a few families, maybe five, over that whole thing. But the families that came in, I kind of felt like from the time they come to do a school tour, it's my job to educate them that you're not choosing a program, you're choosing a school community, and this is who we are, and this is what we've decided as a community together." Now, Emily is able to clearly message to prospective families about the values of the school. A group of families and educators advocated for this change and together, they were able to limit the power of dominant families who were against the change. In this way, the school delegitimized the unequal distribution of resources.

Despite these efforts and the barriers that the school overcame to integrate for social studies, students at Baker Elementary spend the majority of their time in tracked cohorts. Emily acknowledges that the school "still is segregated, but it's a little less segregated because we blend for social studies" and because there are more students of color in the gifted program due to changing practices in the district. In recent years, the district has announced that they are phasing out segregated cohorts and students who are classified as gifted will learn alongside their general education peers. Students of all levels and abilities will receive differentiated instruction to meet their needs. Districtwide, the gifted cohort has historically started in first-grade, but this year's first-grade cohort is supposed to be the last cohort of gifted students. The district has announced plans to change the gifted cohort in the past, leading some educators to wonder if the district will follow through this time.

At Baker Elementary, several educators and families I spoke with are happy about this change, although some parents of students currently in the gifted program are worried about what this will mean for their future. Molly, who teaches in the gifted program, shared:

> We don't need to participate in a system that segregates. It used to be clearly racially segregated and they [the district] are changing that now, but even intellectually segregated. I just don't think that that is important.

While Molly acknowledges that the racial inequities of the gifted program have improved, she does not agree with the premise that students of different intellectual abilities should learn separately. A current parent of a student in the gifted program shared a different perspective with me. She appreciates that her son is able to be around students who are similar to him where he "fits in." She wonders, "What's going to happen for him in middle school when he doesn't have that anymore and he's just in amongst everybody?" Given that her son is two grade levels ahead

in math and one grade level ahead in reading, she wonders how his academic needs will be met in a general education classroom as the district does not have separate classes for gifted students in middle school.

Despite the school district's rhetoric about centering "students of color furthest from educational justice," the district's gifted program legitimates the unequal distribution of resources. Although many note improvements in this area, the gifted program continues to be racially segregated with Black, Indigenous, and Latiné students being significantly underrepresented. White students, on the other hand, are overrepresented in the gifted program. The school district is already racially segregated, and the gifted program only exacerbates existing inequities in the district.

The negative impacts of racial segregation and tracking are significant and well-documented (Oakes, 1986; Reardon, 2016). Oakes (1986) argues that research does not support tracking as a practice as it cannot be implemented "fairly" and it does not support student achievement or effective teaching. Even more importantly, tracking has long been noted for its inequities as White students are more likely to be placed in more advanced tracks while Black and Latiné students are more likely to be placed in less advanced tracks. This plays out at Baker Elementary and leads to students learning in more racially segregated classrooms. Racial segregation is associated with racial inequities in academic achievement and "may lead to segregated social networks that persist long beyond high school and create unequal opportunities" (Reardon, 2016, p. 51). Therefore, as many educators shared with me, the gifted cohort program does not seem aligned with the district's mission of racial equity. Ultimately, this is a district-level decision and not something that Baker Elementary educators can eliminate entirely.

Acknowledging the district-level dynamics, some decisions regarding the gifted cohort *are* up to educators at Baker Elementary. Mel, a teacher in the general education program, described some of the contradictions she sees between the school's external messages about racial equity and decisions that are made. She shared, "We're being told to use a race and equity lens for building decisions, but my classroom has twenty-nine students who are students of color and students furthest from educational justice and the [gifted] classrooms have twenty. So I feel like there's a lot of lip-service sometimes." Mel identifies how smaller class sizes for the gifted program, which serves disproportionately more White students, is inequitable. When I asked the principal about this, she shared that the school tries to create smaller class sizes for general education classes, but sometimes based on staffing and district policy, which requires that students in the gifted cohort learn separately, the gifted classes end up being smaller. Each year, the school has to balance enrollment numbers to create classes for students in all three programs. The principal's explanation highlights how inequities can continue in spite of individual efforts. Or, as Ray (2019a) describes it, "Once racialized practices are instantiated, the elimination of all intentionally discriminatory action will not eliminate unequal outcomes" (p. 40). Nonetheless, when gifted classes are smaller than general education classes, I argue that the school is not yet disrupting the unequal distribution of resources. Inequities in the gifted program are very visible, but educators have shifted practices to disrupt the unequal distribution of resources in other ways, which I describe next.

5.5 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Shifting Practices, Intentional Hiring, and Racialized Staff Hierarchies

Educators shared examples of small but meaningful shifts in their practices to disrupt the unequal distribution of resources. For example, the principal explained that for many years, the third-grade class went on a field trip that cost each family fifty dollars. Although scholarships were offered, it didn't feel right to put families in the position to ask. In response, the third-grade changed this field trip to a similar experience without a cost for families. Emily explained that this change was part of the shift at the school:

> We try to think about things from the perspective of the families that are furthest from educational justice and plan that way versus going about business as usual, what might work for an upper middle-class family, and then trying to scale it back. It just doesn't work that way. It doesn't feel equitable.

Instead of starting from what works for a middle-class family, in some cases like this, the school starts with what works for families from low-income backgrounds. In this way, the school is refusing to simply accept that some families can afford field trips and others cannot.

Another way the school works to delegitimize the unequal distribution of resources is through intentional hiring of family engagement-focused staff members from the community. While some family engagement positions are funded and decided upon by the district, Baker Elementary determines who is hired. For example, Wilson supports students of color, especially youth in the foster care system and students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. He shared that when he went through the interview process, Emily was clear that the school needed support building trust with Black families. Wilson appreciated her transparency and clarity on what the school needed: "It was very intentional…what she needed me and what she wanted me

to do." Wilson understands that his focus is on families of color, especially Black families, and he has support from the principal to maintain that focus. Another staff member, Rita, works with Black students and families to support literacy and school-home connections. The school hired Rita based on her experience as a parent and her community connections. Within the school's discretionary budget, they also hire educators of color from the community, specifically as bilingual instructional assistants. These educators not only support multilingual students and families, but they serve as connectors with different communities at Baker Elementary. Although educators acknowledge that resource distribution is still not fully equitable at the school, I observed how some of their equity moves and the strategic hiring of Wilson, Rita, and others has interrupted the racialized nature of the school.

While the school creates specific roles that bring more support and resources to families of color, I also noticed how the staffing structure contributes to the unequal distribution of resources. In schools, credentialed teachers are typically given more autonomy and power in decision-making, while classified staff (e.g., instructional assistants, custodians, etc.) have less power and are more vulnerable during budget cuts. At Baker Elementary, over 90% of certificated teachers are White while the vast majority of classified staff are people of color, most of whom are Black (Appendix B). This aligns with Ray (2019a), who posits, "integrated organizations internally recreate institutional-level segregation, as racial hierarchies are mapped onto ostensibly nonracial positions" (p. 39). Certificated teachers not only have higher salaries, but they have more autonomy and power at the school. Classified staff do not always attend professional development meetings and are not always present when decisions are made, resulting in an imbalance of power that is racialized.

This racialized staff hierarchy has played out at Baker Elementary in important ways. Rose, a Black instructional assistant who is a parent of a former student at the school, explained that several years ago, some White teachers were not listening to some Black instructional assistants. Emily also brought up this issue and shared that in her view, conflict between instructional assistants and teachers can be "a race issue" because of the racialized power asymmetries between these two roles. To address this, the school has prioritized critical conversations about racism, as previously described. These efforts have greatly improved staff dynamics and lessened the overt racial tension, but structural inequities remain between these roles.

I heard about and observed how Baker Elementary leaders attempt to equalize power dynamics between classified and certificated staff. For example, the school's decision-making body has representation from both classified and certificated educators. At BLT meetings, Emily often asks the classified staff representative for his opinion and what he thinks other classified staff members prefer regarding budget priorities and professional development topics. In addition, several classified staff members who are interested in pursuing a teaching credential are supported to do this while continuing to work at Baker Elementary. The principal shared that the school hopes some of these educators will be able to stay at the school as classroom teachers once they earn their credential. This dynamic is not unique to Baker Elementary, and administrators and educators are wrestling with how to be equitable and inclusive in a hierarchical system.

5.6 | Disrupting and Legitimating the Unequal Distribution of Resources: Family-Led Organizations

Nondominant family-led organizations have the potential to disrupt the unequal distribution of resources at Baker Elementary and build power for the community. In 2015, Rita co-founded the Black Family Advocacy Group with two other Black parents. Rita described how the group began:

> A lot of times we'd be the only Black family at the school event or school meetings. So we were like, wouldn't it be great to create an opportunity for Black families to get together to share their shared experiences at the school, to be a safe place to have conversations, to talk about issues that they see at the school to make it a more welcoming place, and to host events for Black families…we felt there was a need to have that Black space at the school.

While the Black Family Advocacy Group is for Black families at Baker Elementary, they are also a part of the broader Black community. Rita explained that the group was designed to advocate for Black families and "to make sure we advertise different things not only happening in the school, but in the community and having people be more aware of what's happening around us." Since its inception, the Black Family Advocacy Group has been connected to the community, even hosting events at local community centers and libraries. Rita shared that the group received feedback from some families that they would like to meet in the community instead of at the school. Rita hypothesized, "Maybe they weren't comfortable coming back to the school or being in the school building. Or maybe they wanted it closer to their home…some families don't always have a positive experience with schools, so we're trying to take that school environment away, and give it more of a community feel by being in a community location,

hoping to draw more families." The group's community focus offers opportunities for more holistic and community-led activities.

Other educators note the importance of the Black Family Advocacy Group. Cassie, a White educator, described the benefits of the group, "It's great to have a space where Black families are encouraged…maybe it's a space where they want to show up more, and start to build those communities up." Cassie describes the school as a "white space" and argues for the need to create a Black space for families. By cultivating a Black space and organizing around the priorities of Black parents, the Black Family Advocacy Group builds power for Black families.

Recently, another nondominant family-led group was developed at Baker Elementary. At a meeting early in the school year, Gabriela brought up the idea of starting a Latino student and family group to the principal and a few other educators. Gabriela mentioned that she was part of a similar group in middle and high school and she thought that the school's growing population of Latiné families would benefit from this group. She shared, "I would like to have that support group here. For kids to see that, okay, it's not just me, there's other people that look like me, and we belong in that community." Emily immediately said that she thought this was a great idea and offered to connect Gabriela with resources and a list of the Latiné families at the school. Molly, a White educator in the gifted program, also offered to support Gabriela if she needed help getting the group started or needed a space at the school to hold meetings. She encouraged Gabriela to not feel like she has to do it all alone. The immediate endorsement and offer of resources led Gabriela to feel the full support of the school. Gabriela hopes to organize a group that not only supports Latiné students, but also builds cross-racial solidarity:

> I feel like we have a lot in common—Latino, Brown and Black [communities]. We have struggles that are different from other groups. And I feel like working

> together would help us navigate through certain situations or feel that even though we might look different from the outside, we still have the same struggles in a way. But we can overcome them together.

Gabriela is discussing how to build power and agency for nondominant families at the school through organizing. Although this group is in its early stages, she is already thinking about how to build connections with the Black Family Advocacy Group to advocate for students and families together.

In many schools, PTAs are white-normed organizations (Freidus, 2019; Murray et al., 2019; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Syeed, 2018). At Baker Elementary, however, the Black Family Advocacy Group plays an important role in redistributing power. For example, the group planned a schoolwide multicultural night in early 2024 centered around food, culture, music, and celebrations. In recent years, the group has also coordinated guest speakers on topics that are of interest to Black families at Baker Elementary. These events are entirely designed, planned, and led by Black families. Nondominant family-led groups have the potential to enact change at the school, especially if they are part of larger community movements and community organizing (Chin et al., 2023; Olivos, 2019; Warren et al., 2011). However, if schools ask families of color to lead activities that are not central to the school or instruction, this can lead to further marginalization.

When families of color lead activities on the periphery, it may be helpful to the school and meaningful to families, but it may not change systems or practices. For example, one of the main family-led endeavors at Baker Elementary is the PTO-run after-school enrichment program. Deborah, a White educator in the special education program, shared that when the gifted program was moved to the school, many parents of students in the gifted program wanted

after-school childcare. To meet this need, they developed an after-school, fee-based enrichment program. Today, these after-school classes are completely run by the PTO. Jess, a White parent who is part of PTO leadership, shared that they decide on the classes offered, coordinate with staff members at the school to determine where the classes will take place, communicate with the community about the after-school offerings, and process payment.

In some ways, I heard that this has been helpful for the school community because the nearby community center does not offer enough spaces in their after-school program to accommodate all of the Baker Elementary students who need after-school care. However, Jess shared that although there are scholarships for students to attend enrichment classes, they are not sure if all parents are aware of these opportunities. Jess is not sure why some parents don't attend PTO events or join their meetings, but recognizes that the PTO needs to do a better job reaching out to the community. When I asked families how the school cultivates relationship-building among families, most discussed school-based events focused on student academics or general family engagement, but I did not hear about or observe any activities that explicitly brought together families across racial differences like there are for the staff. Deborah also noted some inequities in the enrichment program, explaining that many students are not able to attend after-school enrichment classes because the PTO-run program does not provide transportation. As Deborah explained, the PTO can "donate money into the scholarship fund to try and make it more equitable, but still, a lot of our families or kids can't necessarily participate because of transportation." Unlike district-sponsored after-school programs, which are required to offer transportation, the PTO-run enrichment program does not offer this, leaving some students unable to participate.

Given the PTO's power as the coordinator of after-school enrichment classes, and the lack of representation from the entire community, the PTO at times legitimates the unequal distribution of resources even as they seek to be more inclusive. Several PTO leaders mentioned how they have changed in the past few years to be more inclusive and equitable—changing their name, removing the requirement for families to pay dues, and having a "pay what you can" approach for school supplies. The PTO also partners with the Black Family Advocacy Group by providing funding for some events like multicultural night. However, neither the Black Family Advocacy Group nor the Latino Student and Family Group have the resources or influence on decision-making at the school that the PTO does, indicating continued resource inequities.

5.7 | Conclusion

Educators and families described how there are many educators at Baker Elementary that go above and beyond to interrupt the racialized nature of the school. Through the equity moves of individual educators, a schoolwide emphasis on open conversations about racism, and nondominant family-led organizations, I argue that Baker Elementary increases the agency of families of color and delegitimizes the unequal distribution of resources. Mel, a White teacher, expressed her desire to share power with nondominant families, "There's an inherent power dynamic, as an educator, and then with my families…I try to diminish those power dynamics." Mel and many others aim to build relationships with caregivers and disrupt teacher-parent power dynamics that are exacerbated by whiteness. At the same time, Mel and others are quick to point out that there is much more work to be done.

I noticed that Baker Elementary still primarily defines family engagement in a school-centric, individualistic, and event-based way. Or, as Rita described it, family engagement

is viewed “through a white lens.” For example, Baker Elementary has a goal of increasing the percentage of families that attend APTT nights. Some families may not attend events at the school regularly or at all, but this does not mean they are not engaged or happy with the school. Therefore, defining and measuring engagement through attendance at school-based events does not reflect the depth or variety of engagement of families.

Outside of attending events, caregivers may share cultural histories, stories, and practices at home, as well as engage in more school-centered activities like checking in with teachers via text message, dropping their child off at school, and encouraging their child to ask questions in school. For example, Vivica shared that although she is not able to attend many in-person events at the school, she is highly engaged in her son’s education. She explained that with her husband working and four kids, “I don’t have the time to do [events] in person. I wish I did…I do make sure I attend every Zoom that they do have available to learn more about the school or the school district.” Vivica feels that despite not being able to attend in-person events, she is able to provide input on what happens at the school through the relationships she has built with her son’s teacher and Wilson, the family engagement specialist. Vivica’s experience demonstrates how many families face barriers to attending evening events, but are still highly engaged and feel very connected with the school. Rita encourages the school to expand its definition of family engagement. As she shared, “Engagement doesn’t look the same for everyone. That’s key to looking at engagement through an equitable lens because what looks like engagement for a Black family may be completely different for a White family or an Asian family.”

Schools are not entirely equitable or inequitable. Baker Elementary, like many other schools, is grappling with challenges that arise when attempting to foster an inclusive and just school. I heard about extraordinary efforts of educators over the course of this study, and I

observed ways in which the school is still racialized. I argue that some school and district-level structures, such as the PTO and the gifted program, reinforce the unequal distribution of power. Organizational structures must be analyzed to understand how attempts at solidarity impact power and decision-making. The contradictions also point to the settled nature of whiteness in schools and the difficulty in disrupting systemic inequities. At times in discussions of racism there is a tendency to focus exclusively on the individual-level or to posit that individual actions do not matter as racism is structural. However, individual, organizational, and structural levels matter (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022). Therefore, educators' equity moves improve the conditions for nondominant families at Baker Elementary, and organizational inequities persist.

6 | INTERRUPTING AND REINFORCING THE CREDENTIAL OF WHITENESS AND THE DECOUPLING OF FORMAL RULES AND PRACTICES

At Baker Elementary, I sought to understand how efforts at relationality have shifted racialized power dynamics. In this chapter, I focus on the second two tenets of racialized organizations: (3) whiteness is a credential; and (4) the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often racialized (Ray, 2019a). Through this lens, I observed how educators disrupt the access to power that whiteness affords, and how the settled expectations of whiteness (Harris, 1993) persist in the school's formal decision-making process. The school's unique structure as a nested organization within a school district is also salient as some of Baker Elementary's structures and practices are outside of their control.

6.1 | Refusing the Credential of Whiteness: Listening to All Types of Feedback and Limiting the Influence of White Parents

In racialized organizations, whiteness is a credential providing "access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies, and expanding White agency" (Ray, 2019a, p. 41). In many schools, whiteness can work as a credential for White parents who email the principal and navigate the educational system in a way that educators prefer (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Meanwhile, nondominant families' advocacy and activism are often constructed by educators "as defiant and instigative instead of parental acts of care and concern" (Shah and Grimaldos, 2022, p. 27). Educators interrupt this when they resist the undue influence of White parents. At Baker Elementary, some educators work to see all caregiver advocacy as a representation of care. The principal explained that she knows emails or scheduled meetings are not the only way to receive feedback or requests from families. Instead, she listens to caregivers

when they express frustration: “We need to listen to the parent upset in the office just like we do the parent who emails a request.” In this way, she is rejecting the institutional script (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) that identifies nondominant families as “problem parents.”

Educator practices, like norms for meeting and replying to emails, can also disrupt or reinforce the credential of whiteness. Emily shared that she attempts to be more equitable in her approach to family engagement by being mindful of who she meets with. She explains that many parents of students in the gifted program request a one-on-one meeting with her. In the past, she met with those parents, but she quickly realized that this was taking up a lot of her time. Without intending to do so, she was meeting with more White parents than parents of color given the racial disproportionately of the gifted program. To interrupt this, she now has an informal rule that she does not meet one-on-one with parents of children in the gifted program unless their child has a specific need. Instead, she encourages these parents to attend one of the monthly “coffee with the principal” events, a school tour, or other engagement opportunities. However, the principal shared that she meets with parents of color, parents of students in the special education program, and other nondominant families that request to connect with her. This is not something she publicizes, rather, it is an unwritten rule she has to work towards more equitable family engagement.

I attended two “coffee with the principal” events during the year. These events are open to all families and are an avenue for families to connect with the principal. At the first coffee of the school year, there were six parents in attendance, four of whom were parents of Kindergarten students. This was an informal gathering in which caregivers had the opportunity to ask questions. One of the PTO leaders was also present and shared information about when the group meets and some of their activities, including information about how to donate to support their

efforts to buy school supplies for all students at the school. Several months later, at another coffee with the principal, Emily shared information about a new instructional approach, Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I was seated at a table with three other parents, and there were two other tables of four parents. Emily passed out an infographic about UDL and guided the group through a few activities that demonstrated the theory behind UDL. Afterwards, Emily invited questions and caregivers asked several, mostly about UDL. Emily acknowledges that these events are not accessible to all families and views them as just one method of engagement in a menu of strategies. She stressed the importance of communicating with families when the school cannot do all the things families are asking for. For example, some families requested that coffees with the principal be offered more frequently (e.g., mornings, afternoons, and evenings). Emily shared that she would like to accommodate more people's schedules, but she has limited capacity to hold multiple events each month. Nonetheless, Emily makes herself available at many other times and works around parents' schedules when needed, especially for nondominant families.

As the demographics of the school have changed over the years, it has become even more important to disrupt whiteness as a credential. Rose described the need for staff members to ensure that "that they're not just basing what they're teaching on what the White parents want." From Rose's perspective, as a parent of a former student at the school and a long-time community member, educators are aware of this tendency and work to counteract it through relationship-building with families of color and by developing systems to gather feedback from families, whether that is through a survey, a text message, or a conversation in the hallway. Nicole, a White parent of a student in the general education program who lives in the

neighborhood and works as an instructional assistant, also notes the shift in school demographics:

> It was a majority Black school, and because of gentrification and things happening within the neighborhood, there are a lot more White students and White families now. [We're] making sure that the increase of White families isn't creating an erasure of the Black families and the people of color and making sure those parents have such a huge voice and an impact within our school.

As Rose and Nicole demonstrate, there is an awareness of the potential for privileged White families to dominate the school, and a real desire among educators and families to interrupt this.

I observed and heard about times when educators employed equity moves to limit the influence of White families to ensure there is not an "erasure of Black families" at the school. For example, Emily shared a story about a few years ago when a group of White parents of students in the gifted program went on what Emily described as a "crusade against homework." These parents cited research, sent her emails, and attempted to convince her to make a schoolwide policy of no homework. While Emily was open to hearing their thoughts, she shared that in conversations with several families of color with students in the general education program, she heard that they value homework and it helps them understand what their children are learning. Therefore, Emily did not just go along with what this powerful group of White parents wanted. As Emily described it, "Sometimes the loudest voices are the White families with privilege, they know how to navigate this system, and they are skilled at getting the things that they think work best for their child. But then, whose voice are we not hearing?" To counter this, the school created a short survey that asked caregivers to share what programs (e.g., special education, gifted cohort, or general education) their children were in and their thoughts on

homework. The school had paper versions of the survey during drop-off and pick-up and through a lot of effort, they heard from almost all families. Ultimately, more than two-thirds of families shared that they wanted some homework, with an even larger percentage of families from the general education program being in favor of a modest amount of homework.

With this information, Emily was able to share other families' viewpoints with parents who were advocating to get rid of homework. She recounted the experience, "It does mean that maybe the people that are the loudest are not the people that you're making the happiest, but I also feel like my job is helping build people's understanding about why the school makes some of the decisions that we make." Emily did not give in to the pressure from the "loudest parents" which often happens at schools (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Instead, the school gathered feedback from the broader community and made a decision that aligned with the school's vision of supporting nondominant students. In this example, the credential of whiteness would typically ensure that the school was most responsive to the desires of dominant families. At Baker Elementary, their insistence on hearing from and acting on the input of families of color disrupted this dynamic. Importantly, refusing or continuing the credential of whiteness is not a binary. Educators may interrupt it through some practices and reinforce it through others, often unknowingly. However, I heard from many educators who strive to interrupt it.

6.2 | Continuing the Credential of Whiteness: Different Practices Among the Staff

While some Baker Elementary practices intentionally interrupt whiteness, I also heard about systems and practices that may advantage White families. For example, Gabriela shared that some teachers make more of an effort than others to communicate in languages other than English, leading some Spanish-speaking families to feel excluded and disempowered when all

communication is in English. In another example, Mia, a Black parent of a student in the special education program, shared that she has not been asked about how to best support her son. Instead, she shared that questions from her son's White teacher felt more judgmental, like they were implying that she wasn't smart or wasn't raising her son well. She explained, "I get annoyed when people ask me the same thing over and over. It's very irritating. And then I feel like my intelligence is being undermined. If you try to ask me that same thing, but in a different way, I feel like you think I'm stupid, and that's even more annoying." While Mia is generally happy with the school, she has had a few negative experiences with White educators, and wonders if she is treated fairly. Mia described a frustrating experience in which she felt that her perspective was ignored. Mia explained, "I think that they hear me because they respond. So it's heard, but I don't really see some of the things go into effect right away." When I asked Mia if she has developed trust with any teachers at Baker Elementary, she said, "No, to me, trust is a big word." She then added that she trusts the school "just enough" to send her son to school there. For Mia, who is a strong advocate for her son, she feels that her approach is not always valued by her son's teacher. Mia's experience demonstrates some of the ongoing challenges of educator-family relationships and how educator practices can differ at the school.

Other parents who have been at the school for several years shared that each teacher is different and some value the expertise of nondominant families more than others. Awra explained that she would like to provide more input on what her daughter is learning and how teachers can support her development, but her daughter's current teacher does not ask for this type of information. This is different from last year, when her daughter's teacher was much more communicative. Given these examples, it is possible that some educators may view the advocacy of Black parents differently than they view the advocacy White parents.

Additionally, when educators do not consider race in their family engagement practices, it can reinforce whiteness. For example, some teachers send out virtual links to sign up for conferences and ask all families to sign up at once. This "first come, first served" process results in dominant families signing up first and taking the more desirable time slots and nondominant families, some of whom have less access to technology, may not sign up for a time. Mel, a White educator in the general education program, shared that small practices like this can reinforce inequities. At the all-staff professional development prior to the beginning of the school year, educators discussed equitable practices like this. In fact, there was an explicit conversation about how to make conferences more accessible. At this meeting, the staff voted to hold one day of conferences on a Saturday because there are many families for whom Saturday is a more accessible day to meet at the school. Educators told me that many families of color signed up to meet on Saturday, indicating increased accessibility as a result of this decision. While appreciated by families, this schoolwide decision and other educator practices are sometimes focused primarily on increasing access to school-based events instead of sharing power.

6.3 | Aligning Formal Rules about Equity with Organizational Practices: How Formal Leaders Support Educators to Enact Equitable Practices

While I have highlighted several individual practices, Baker Elementary has worked to institutionalize their equitable approach to family engagement and align their commitment to equity with their everyday practices. In racialized organizations, "formal commitments to equity, access, and inclusion" are decoupled from or even contradicted by "policies and practices that reinforce, or at least do not challenge, existing racial hierarchies" (Ray, 2019a, p. 42). Ray (2019a) explains how racialized organizations may have external commitments to equity, but in

practice continue with inequitable routines and actions. At Baker Elementary, I heard from educators who are attempting to align their rhetoric about racial equity with their everyday practices. While the principal plays a vital role in this work, she often steps aside to let others lead, noting her own areas of growth. For example, she partners with Wilson to facilitate conversations about racism and train teachers on equitable approaches for family engagement. Although this is an effective practice, and not necessarily what is happening at Baker Elementary, there are some additional considerations given the undue burden sometimes put on Black educators who may be asked to lead work outside of their formal role without compensation (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Griffin & Tackie, 2017).

Importantly, Emily backs up staff members when they approach family engagement in an equitable manner. In other schools, educators may worry about upsetting White, privileged parents because of their power and influence, leading them to go along with the demands of White parents (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Furthermore, there may be greater risks for educators of color to employ equity moves than there are for White educators. At Baker Elementary, Ashley, Wilson, and other educators of color described how with Emily's support, they resist this dynamic. To foster solidarity, educators need to have a willingness to learn and support to grow. Hong et al. (2022) argue that "a longstanding culture of support and professional development must be created in order to develop teacher-family solidarity" (p. 26). Furthermore, educators who build solidarity with families are more likely to work in schools with a principal who has a vision for family engagement (Hong et al., 2022). At Baker Elementary, Emily plays a pivotal role in the centering of family engagement and supporting educators to build strong relationships with families.

6.4 | Decoupling Formal Rules about Equity from Organizational Practices: Limitations of Shared Decision-Making

The Building Leadership Team (BLT) is the formal decision-making body at all schools in Baker Elementary's district. The BLT must include a mix of the principal, teachers, classified staff, and parents. At Baker Elementary, this body includes one parent from each program (e.g., special education, general education, and gifted cohort). This year, a Latina mother from the general education program, a White mother from the special education program, and a multiracial mother from the gifted program are BLT representatives. According to district policy, this group makes decisions and recommendations regarding the budget, professional development, and the school improvement plan.

The BLT is part of the district's broader approach to family engagement, including their Family Engagement Action Plan. This plan, which is utilized by educators at Baker Elementary, identifies four pillars of family engagement: 1) sharing power and responsibility; 2) facilitating positive interactions; 3) welcoming environments; 4) and two-way communication. At a professional development meeting at the beginning of the school year, Baker Elementary educators reviewed the district's Family Engagement Action Plan and reflected on how they implement these pillars of family engagement. While the Action Plan calls for an equal partnership and shared power between educators and families, through observation of BLT meetings and through interviews with parent and staff representatives, I found that Baker Elementary's formal commitments to equity are at times decoupled from their day-to-day organizational practices, especially through the BLT (Ray, 2019a). The school and district discuss sharing power and including families in decision-making, but in practice, the BLT does

not appear to be designed to equitably share power with families, especially with nondominant families.

Decades of research have demonstrated how school-based decision-making is often inequitable (Anderson, 1998; Bryk et al., 1998; Moore, 2002; Kuttner et al., 2022; López et al., 2017). Nondominant families are typically there to “check a box” and power is often limited to the principal. At Baker Elementary, I observed some similar challenges regarding shared decision-making. At the BLT retreat at the beginning of the year, the principal shared that in past years, she has developed the agenda and facilitated meetings. The group agreed that this practice would continue this year. There are three parents on the team, but when I spoke with one, she shared that she is not sure exactly what her role is supposed to be and from her perspective, they have not yet established a process for real representation. Families volunteer to be on the BLT and they share their contact information with other families via the school newsletter, but there is not a formal process by which BLT parent representatives get feedback from other families at the school. There is a guaranteed spot for someone from the Black Family Advocacy Group, but so far that position has been unfilled this year.

The BLT has the potential to be a more collaborative space where power is shared between educators and families, but district policy has not designed it this way. While some educators receive a stipend for being members of the BLT, it is a volunteer position for family members and there is no childcare offered. BLT meetings take place in the early afternoon, when union contracts allow educators to participate, but also when many parents are working. This automatically limits who can be involved. Even among the parent representatives who volunteer their time, most join remotely due to a lack of childcare, which limits their participation. In the five BLT meetings that I attended, parents spoke only occasionally, at times asking clarifying

questions when educators used acronyms and educational jargon. At other times, Emily asked parents explicitly for their input on topics, such as schoolwide goals and practices related to family engagement or budget priorities. However, it was not clear the extent to which families were shaping decisions.

In other ways, I observed how the BLT is attempting to be equitable in their decisions. The group uses a racial equity lens to analyze the impact of budget decisions to determine what students will be impacted by various decisions. At a BLT meeting in which educators discussed the upcoming budget process and the likelihood of budget cuts given the district's financial woes, Emily reminded educators and families that when considering what to fund and what might need to be cut, they should consider who will be impacted and avoid making decisions that would impact "students of color furthest from educational justice." For example, if a bilingual instructional assistant position was cut, this would disproportionately impact multilingual learners. This type of awareness is meant to interrupt unintended consequences of decisions that may worsen inequities in the school. A White educator who works with students in all three programs asked about the parameters of the BLT's power and wondered what positions or programs could be considered and which ones are mandatory. Like Emily, she encouraged her colleagues to consider the needs of students of color in their decisions.

As part of their budgeting process, the BLT sends out a survey to all families to ask about budget priorities for the year. These responses are analyzed based on the racial demographics of who responds as well as what program the parents represent (e.g., special education, general education, or gifted cohort) to ensure that the school is not making budget decisions based on disproportionate feedback from dominant caregivers from the school's gifted program. While these efforts can increase agency for families of color by ensuring that the school receives input

from all families, I found that the BLT was not fully representative of the school community. Gathering feedback is necessary, but when professional educators are ultimately making decisions, power is not equitably distributed.

The district cites shared power as a pillar of family engagement, and yet power is held primarily by educators through the BLT, an example of the racialized decoupling that Ray (2019a) describes. While Baker Elementary could reshape aspects of their BLT, all schools in Baker Elementary's district have a BLT and the policies and procedures of the group are largely decided by the district. This demonstrates the limited agency of schools, which are nested within school districts, which I describe in more detail next.

6.5 | Limited Agency of Nested Organizations

Baker Elementary, like most schools, is part of a school district. In this way, Baker Elementary is an organization nested within a larger organization of a school district. Therefore, when analyzing how the school disrupts the tenets of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a), district-wide dynamics are important to consider. Organizational theorists have long noted that organizations can be "nested" and operate within "institutional logics" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Through laws and other regulations, organizations are connected to the state. Ray (2019a) argues that race theory "would benefit by adopting organizational theory's understanding of organizations as nested within broader fields and institutional logics" (p. 34). Likewise, the theory of racialized organizations, when applied to schools, would benefit from an understanding of how schools are nested in school districts. This is not meant to take away accountability from educators and school-based administrators, but it is important because a school's limited agency can make it difficult to fully disrupt its racialization.

As discussed earlier, Baker Elementary's gifted program and BLT are district-level policies. Regarding the gifted program, there is little that Baker Elementary educators and families could do to change this other than supporting plans to phase out this program. In addition, the school district determines which students attend the school and there are restrictions on staffing. The school district also determines the budget for the school. The past two years, school budgets throughout the district have been reduced, forcing schools to cut programs or staffing. These are just a few examples of how the district shapes what happens at Baker Elementary, but there are other ways in which the school's agency is limited.

6.6 | Conclusion

Educators and administrators are aware that equitable decision-making is an area of growth for the school. As Nicole shared, "There's an awareness across the board, at the staff level, that that is something we need to continue to work on." Rita agreed, "There's certainly an awareness that the White voice is predominantly heard at the school, so I think there's been many attempts to try to engage families of color to give input." Many families at the school narrated to me how much they appreciate these efforts.

All caregivers I spoke with could name educators at Baker Elementary with whom they have built trusting relationships. Some parents contrasted Baker Elementary with other schools their children have attended, noting the strong communication and dedicated staff. Educators shared that they value the expertise of nondominant families and I observed educators asking families of color for feedback on how they support their child. In BLT meetings, I saw educators consider the needs and priorities of families when making decisions. However, at an

organizational level, I argue that power in decision-making has not shifted to nondominant families in a meaningful way.

Nice relationships and a welcoming environment are important, but if Baker Elementary seeks to build equitable collaborations with families, educators must be willing to give up power and commit to a shared vision of educational justice rooted in the goals of the community. Although the district has outlined a vision of educational justice, it is not clear if families and educators conceptualize this vision in the same way. Rita, Emily, and all educators I spoke with acknowledge that equitable family engagement is a work in progress at Baker Elementary. Rita urges others to continue to reach out to and build relationships with families, "even when it's tough, or you don't see tangible growth." From Rita's perspective, this relational work takes time, cultural competency, and care, but she is encouraged by her colleagues who she says have "the heart to do the work." This heart, combined with a commitment to building solidarity and reshaping organizational structures to ensure an equitable distribution of power and resources, can lead to a more just school.

7 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the process of this study, I noticed how open educators were to feedback and how there seemed to be a culture of reflection and growth at Baker Elementary. At many schools, educators are resistant to sharing about what's really going on for fear of judgment. Baker Elementary educators, on the other hand, were overwhelmingly generous with what they shared. From my first meeting with Emily, she gave me access to information and encouraged me to attend any event or meeting. I am deeply grateful for the school's willingness to share and I hope that findings from this study are both validating of their efforts and seen as opportunities and a loving critique (Paris & Alim, 2014). I observed how Baker Elementary educators attempt to foster educational equity while operating in a school system that is shaped by white supremacy. I argue that educators and families are making meaningful individual efforts, but some organizational structures have yet to be reshaped to share power with nondominant families. Based on these findings, I share practical, theoretical, and methodological implications, and discuss how the findings fit in the broader movement for educational and racial justice.

7.1 | Discussion of Findings

The relational focus of this study came from families who emphasized the importance of strong educator-family relationships and my own belief that trust and solidarity are essential elements of any movement for educational change. Several educators described how they intentionally build relationships with nondominant families and attend to racialized power dynamics in their family engagement efforts. Black educators such as Rita and Wilson are driven by a commitment to their community. Some White teachers discussed being aware of their societal and positional power and described ways they seek to interrupt this. According to many

families of color that participated in this study, these educators' efforts are impactful and families appreciate the relationships and trust they have built with educators.

In interviews and focus groups, nondominant families reiterated the importance of authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999). Families want to know that educators care about their children beyond their academic achievements. Furthermore, when educators are from the community or make connections with families in the community, this helps to build trust. Many schools privilege the contributions of White parents over those of families of color (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), but when Baker Elementary educators interrupt this pattern, it strengthens relationships with nondominant families. Lastly, while all educators and families discussed the importance of communication, when communication is vulnerable, part of an intentional strategy to break down power hierarchies with nondominant families, and combined with follow through, it is a critical component of solidarity. Given the strength of some relationships and the unique context of Baker Elementary, educators, policymakers, and researchers can learn a lot from their efforts.

Using the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) as a lens, I also considered how Baker Elementary interrupts the organizational perpetuation of racism. Many educators employ equity moves to increase agency for families of color and when needed, diminish the agency of White families when they exert an undue influence on the school. Some educators self-monitor who they are meeting with, whose emails they are replying to, and who is receiving their services to ensure that White students and families do not have greater access to resources. In addition, the school is committed to interrupting racism through open, vulnerable conversations about racism.

These individual actions are important, and I observed how some resource and power inequities have yet to be fully disrupted. One of the potential challenges of individual level practices is that if individuals leave, school practices could revert back to an inequitable status quo. For example, what would happen if Wilson or Emily left Baker Elementary? If a new principal comes in that is not comfortable pushing back against White parents like Emily was when a subset of dominant parents wanted to get rid of homework, will the school defer to the loudest voices in the room? I observed how both Wilson and Emily, in different ways, play essential roles in advancing equitable family engagement at the school. The principal shared that the school's racial equity team is not as active this year, but the work is continuing through other groups. However, as the school seeks to center racial equity and establish structures that align with this vision, I wonder if a formal racial equity team made up of educators and families may be beneficial to their efforts. To support their vision of equity, I believe there are further opportunities to reshape family engagement structures within the school.

The school's two main family engagement strategies—the PTO and APTT—are primarily led by dominant families and educators. Therefore, these groups, along with the BLT, often increase agency and resources for White families, even while attempting to be inclusive. Likewise, the school's gifted program legitimates the unequal distribution of resources. In response, educators, families, and the community successfully fought to integrate for social studies. While the gifted program is outside of the school's control and most educators I spoke with are happy to see it being phased out, the program will continue to influence who holds power at the school for at least the next several years.

When considering how Baker Elementary could further disrupt the racialized nature of the school at an organizational level, Ray (2019a) offers insights into several factors that can lead

to this. External factors like social movements and macro-level policy changes can reshape the racialization of an organization (Ray, 2019a). Therefore, in the coming years when the gifted program is phased out of Baker Elementary, there will be an opportunity for significant change at the school. This type of external "shock" offers a unique opportunity to shift the culture and racialized power dynamics at the school (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). In the meantime, internal factors such as individuals' attempts to modify how resources are distributed can also reshape organizations (Ray, 2019a, p. 45). As such, educators and families at Baker Elementary do not need to wait until the gifted program is gone to more holistically disrupt the racialized nature of the school.

First, school leaders can scale some of the individual equity moves and make them schoolwide practices. For example, all educators at Baker Elementary could prioritize families of color when scheduling conferences, and the school could set aside time each month for educators to reflect on who is receiving services and address any inequities. School leaders could work to ensure that general education class sizes are smaller than the gifted cohort classes, which would allow educators to spend more time with students and families of color who are disproportionately represented in the general education program. Educators and families could also work to reshape some of the family engagement structures. For example, APTT nights could be codesigned with families and family leaders could share cultural practices and knowledge with educators to foster robust two-way communication and shared power. The PTO could establish a more formal partnership with the Black Family Advocacy Group and the Latino Student and Family Group to divide resources without requiring the nondominant family-led organizations to ask the PTO for financial support. Baker Elementary could also restructure the BLT by having a parent co-chair, providing stipends for family representatives, and establishing

communication channels with the broader community so that family representatives truly represent the priorities and desires of the community. All of these activities require time and resources that the school may not have currently. As schools and districts across the nation contend with budget shortfalls, school resources may be even more limited in future years. Therefore, Baker Elementary could deepen partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) with shared goals of family empowerment. As greater awareness of the importance of equitable power sharing is fostered among educators and the community, the school can share power, build trusting relationships with families, and reshape structures in ways that disrupt whiteness.

While including nondominant families in school decision-making is important, some equity moves described in this study are still a part of what Ishimaru et al. (2023) identify as "within-systems" theories of change (p. 94). Through this lens, solutions include "strategies for working within the existing structures and paradigm of formal schooling, such as opening access, increasing representation, and aligning interests between families and educators" (p. 94). These types of small changes often have "underlying assimilative assumptions" in which families are expected to change to align with the school's norms (p. 94). For example, sharing a sign-up link for conferences with families of color first may support more families of color to attend conferences, but this is still a school-centered activity. Ishimaru et al. (2023) posit that interpretation, childcare, and hiring family liaisons are needed, but to foster justice and community well-being, schools must analyze power and rethink assumptions about "the racialized roles" of families (p. 86). Within-systems strategies can lead to more accessible schools, but "reclaiming educational systems" and "solidarity-dreaming" theories of change offer possibilities beyond the status quo. Many families and educators at Baker Elementary appear to

use a “reclaiming educational systems” theory of change. Through this lens, educators and families reconsider problems and solutions and move from distinct, simplistic roles (e.g, teacher, parent, principal, etc.) towards more fluid roles (Ishimaru et al., 2023). When Baker Elementary educators view families as holders of knowledge that benefits the school, this breaks down simplistic conceptions of educators and parents. Educators’ community connections and the Black Family Advocacy Group’s empowerment of families to advocate for change are other examples of reclaiming educational systems and rejecting the status quo. “Solidarity-dreaming” theories of change focus entirely on community and culturally-based forms of learning and “decenter the system entirely” (p. 95). When considering recommendations and ideas for equitable family engagement strategies, I argue that Baker Elementary should focus on reclaiming educational systems and solidarity-dreaming, as increasing access to the existing system of education will not lead to the type of transformative change needed to ensure justice.

7.2 | Implications

Findings from this study contribute to the critical family engagement field and offer practical, theoretical, and methodological implications. Education is rife with initiatives and programs aimed at increasing equity and addressing racial disparities. However, many fall short and fail to adequately address racialized power differentials in schools. Family engagement efforts often focus on increasing access or one-way communication with families, but solidarity, trusting relationships, and power sharing are essential. When schools and families equitably collaborate, students, families, and educators benefit from improved relationships, outcomes, and social connections (Mapp et al., 2022). Therefore, educators and families must build solidarities across differences to address historical and current racialized power asymmetries and collaborate

to enact change. Based on findings from this study, I argue that educators should authentically care (Valenzuela, 1999) for their students, value the expertise of nondominant families, communicate vulnerably, and follow through on what they say they are going to do. These actions can build trust, and when part of a shared political project such as educational justice, these actions can build solidarity with families.

There are several practical implications from this study for educators, families, and policymakers. Given the importance of family engagement, and specifically trusting relationships with families, findings from this study and other research in this area (Hong et al., 2022; Zeichner et al., 2016) suggest that family engagement should be a more central component of teacher education programs. Teachers should understand the importance of family engagement, learn effective practices, and get to know the community where they will teach. Schools should also support relationships and solidarity-building by providing ongoing support, resources, and time for educators. Importantly, educators must acknowledge and interrupt racism and racialized power dynamics in family engagement. If educators are supported to build relationships and solidarity based on politicized trust (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019), this enables justice-centered work. Depending on the school context, educators may need to limit the power and influence of dominant families while empowering nondominant families to be decision-makers in schools. Families and educators from Baker Elementary provide an example and a deeper understanding of how educators can build solidarity with nondominant families and employ equity moves to desettle the expectations of whiteness.

This study also offers insights for school leaders. For example, school leaders can support educators who implement equity moves and may face backlash from dominant groups. Baker Elementary educators describe how their principal supports them and is integral to why they are

so engaged with families. Ashley shared that she is comfortable pushing back on White parents who request services because she knows that the principal will back her up given their shared vision of equity. Backlash to anti-racism is inevitable, but support from a formal leader can protect educators as they employ both covert and overt equity moves. In addition, school leaders can develop schoolwide norms and routines around equitable practices. For example, school leaders can establish weekly time for educators to share practices, reflect on their impact, and build relationships with families. Principals can foster opportunities for educators to learn from families through frequent, two-way communication, and offer professional development and other support for culturally responsive practices. School leaders can model anti-racist decision-making (Diem & Welton, 2020) and shape the school's goals and vision for family engagement. Formal leaders play a critical role in building more equitable schools (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020) and while there are many leaders at schools, they often set the stage for what family engagement looks like in practice.

Findings from this study also reinforce the importance of asset-based mindsets and shared power within the APTT model. Similar to previous recommendations for APTT (Sanzone et al., 2018), I contend that APTT should be implemented alongside intentional trust-building activities and schools should provide opportunities for families to lead and share their expertise. Although educators at Baker Elementary ask families for feedback at APTT events, educators are ultimately setting the agenda and leading the interactions through APTT. To share power, APTT presentations and events could be co-developed with families. For example, a group of families and educators could collaboratively identify priority topics for APTT events and family leaders could co-present with educators. Some APTT activities could be offered in the community, on weekends, following other community events, or virtually to increase accessibility. If family

leaders and educators co-facilitated these interactions, it would not only recognize the expertise of these family leaders, but it may encourage other families to share their perspectives and ways of knowing. By moving away from a solely teacher-led model, APTT could foster more equitable collaborations between educators and families.

At a policy level, I argue that school districts should eliminate tracking given both the racial inequities and the drawbacks of separating students based on perceived intellectual abilities. Instead, districts should support educators to meet the needs of all students through inclusion, co-teaching, and other holistic support. Districts should also consider school boundaries and how zoning decisions are made to encourage equitable, integrated, and well-resourced schools. Findings from this study suggest that Baker Elementary's district should restructure their formal decision-making bodies to more equitably share power with families. For example, the BLT could be led by families with input from educators and school leaders. Baker Elementary's school district has a strategic plan that calls for robust family engagement and racial justice. However, the district's budget does not always align with this vision. Educators at Baker Elementary shared that there is no budget for translation or food at family events. Furthermore, positions like Wilson's and Rita's are somewhat rare in the district and funding for these positions is not guaranteed. Fully funding these activities and roles would indicate that family engagement truly is a priority.

This study also offers theoretical implications. Findings deepen our understanding of how whiteness shows up in family engagement and how to interrupt it. When whiteness is the norm, educators are seen as the experts and expected to "fix" nondominant families whose contributions and involvement are not valued, resulting in fractured relationships that lack trust. The "settled expectations of whiteness" (Harris, 1993) make it seem normal and expected when

White parents and teachers hold most of the power in schools. The case of Baker Elementary demonstrates how even when individual actors intentionally disrupt whiteness, organizational structures can perpetuate it, signaling the need for organizational and structural change. This study also adds to the literature on gentrifying schools (Freidus, 2019; Syeed, 2018) by highlighting how, when needed, educators can simultaneously limit the influence of White parents while empowering families of color.

Teacher-family solidarity (Hong et al., 2022) and racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) were particularly helpful lenses when exploring what is happening at Baker Elementary. They illuminated dynamics and patterns of whiteness that often go unnamed in schools. However, I observed other dynamics not captured through these theories. As such, I expand the concept of teacher-family solidarity to family-community-educator solidarity to include all educators and center the community. This study also builds on the theory of racialized organizations by highlighting how schools are nested organizations within school districts, which influences the agency that individual schools have. Therefore, when applied to schools, racialized organizations (Ray, 2019a) should consider school- and district-level structures and dynamics.

Finally, this study offers methodological implications for researchers and communities engaged in participatory research. Through participatory methods, communities and researchers partner to address issues of concern for communities. Ultimately, these collaborations can result in deeper understanding and knowledge of how to address inequities. San Pedro and Kinloch (2017) summarize the need for participatory research: “Instead of approaching people and communities with solutions, thought of in their absence, we should be in conversation with people and communities to co-construct and implement solutions based on local knowledges and realities” (p. 380). I sought to enact this value by co-constructing this study and making meaning

with families. However, the inequitable societal dynamics that participatory research is meant to address can still show up in participatory research partnerships.

I encountered a number of issues during this study worth noting. First, all participants came with varying levels of power based on their positionality and role. In meetings with collaborators, I intentionally named these power dynamics in an attempt to disrupt them. In an early meeting with educators, some deferred to me as a researcher, even using the term "expert." As I described earlier in this study, I explained that they are experts on their school and I was there to learn with them. This was also important when interacting with families. In these meetings, I also used a variety of facilitation strategies to gather insights from all participants including offering opportunities to share input verbally or in writing. However, families often looked to me to make decisions. I understood this impulse, and I was mindful that this study was ultimately my dissertation and I should not ask too much of families.

Despite these challenges, participatory methods were meaningful and aligned with my personal value of centering relationships. It was helpful to design and implement the study alongside families, and it also ensured more support from the community. The nondominant parents who made up the Research Advisory Group, along with the group of educators that I met with throughout the study, provided insights into the priorities of the community, the challenges the school faces, and how to best engage with families. Given the important role that families and educators played, I am hopeful that findings from this study will have an impact. We are currently in the process of sharing findings with the community at several virtual and in-person events and through school communication channels. Although I plan to remain in contact with Baker Elementary educators and families, ultimately members of the community will be the ones

taking action based on findings from this study. I hope that those reading this paper will learn from my experience and take these learnings to their own participatory research projects.

7.3 | Guiding Principles for Equitable Family Engagement

Based on findings from this study, I identify four guiding principles for equitable family engagement that families and educators could implement in their communities (Table 5). Together, these guiding principles are summarized in the acronym REAL:

- **R**elationships first
- **E**xamine self and consider impact
- **A**dvocate for equitable systems
- **L**ook beyond the school

The acronym REAL represents how families in this study shared that they appreciate when educators are real with them. Families described the importance of authenticity in communication and in educator-family relationships overall. In addition, educators narrated the value of "real talk" about racism and being authentic with families. These guiding principles can be applied to any school and offer ideas for individual, organizational, and societal-level changes needed to realize a more just future. The first principle, which focuses on individual-level actions, explicitly centers relationship-building because relationality is foundational to all of the principles. The second and third principles move towards organizational-level change. Change is needed at all levels, and so the fourth principle focuses on societal-level changes. For each principle, I draw on examples from Baker Elementary, and also offer additional ideas for what equitable family engagement could look like when it interrupts or looks beyond the status quo. In

particular, I took some of the individual-level practices that I observed at Baker Elementary and imagined how they could be operationalized schoolwide.

First, I argue that relationships are central to any attempt at equitable school-family collaboration. Families consistently shared how important it is to know that educators care about their children beyond their academics. When educators check in about students' well-being or get to know caregivers beyond discussing attendance or other school-based issues, this signals to families that educators care about students. To build strong relationships, educators can communicate openly, honestly, and vulnerably. Families often appreciate when educators are "real" with them and communicate what is going on at the school, even if it is not good news. Also, when educators are vulnerable themselves, it can build trust.

When both educators and families value each other's expertise, relationships are strengthened. Educators in particular must value the expertise of families of color, as it is too often overlooked in schools. For example, educators could ask families about how they approach issues at home and codesign solutions to challenges students may face. Furthermore, when families see that educators are engaged in the community, either by attending community events or living in the community, this helps to build trust. Educators from the community who reflect the student body are critical, but even educators who are not from the community can demonstrate respect by learning about community priorities and being engaged in the community outside of their formal role as an educator. Community connectors or family liaisons can play an important role in deepening school-community connections, but all educators need to build relationships with families. This relationships-first principle is primarily focused on individual relationships, but there are also organizational-level routines that can facilitate relationship-building. For example, school leaders can systematize practices like communicating

early and often with families to share positive news and asking families about their hopes and dreams for their children, their approach to parenting, and their priorities through surveys, focus groups, and other activities throughout the year. If these practices, which I observed from individual Baker Elementary educators, were built into existing staff meetings or were part of a school's norms, they could become schoolwide.

Second, family engagement efforts will be strengthened if educators routinely engage in self-reflection to consider their positionality, biases, and the impact of their decisions and practices. For example, schools could set aside time each week for educators to engage in intentional reflection to consider their identity. Furthermore, educators could participate in facilitated learning and cross-racial dialogue to increase racial literacy (Diem & Welton, 2020; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). By including families in this work, educators could gain new perspectives and co-develop practices and solutions that work for families (Rodela & Bertrand, 2023). In addition, educators could consider the impact of their actions by asking questions about their practices such as:

- Who benefits from this decision/practice/action (e.g., who will receive more resources, power, etc.)?
- Does this decision/practice/action align with or interrupt the status quo?
- How does this decision/practice/action empower students and families of color?
- Who is involved in making the decision?
- How could power be shared in this decision/practice/action?

Educators could support each other through collaborative reflection, shared learning, and by engaging students and families to better understand how practices are experienced by the school community.

Systematic reflection could shift not only individual practices (e.g., increased equity moves by individual educators), but also schoolwide practices. For example, schools could dedicate time to reflect in professional learning communities (PLCs). Baker Elementary has weekly time dedicated to conversations about race and racism. Schools could build upon this and directly tie self-reflection and consideration of race and power with their practices to analyze impact. As a result, equity moves that individual educators make, such as building the schoolwide schedule based on the needs of the special education program or monitoring who educators meet or spend time with, could be expanded to shift practices at the school-level. These equitable practices would increase access and power for students and families of color.

Third, families, educators, and the community can build coalitions and advocate for equitable systems and practices based on family priorities. This type of advocacy could shift organization-level routines, such as the formal decision-making body, and wider systems like the district's gifted program. For example, when families, educators, and the broader Baker Elementary community came together to advocate for the gifted program to be integrated for social studies, they personified this principle. Other policies and systems, such as the BLT, could be reshaped to be more inclusive and share power with families. Importantly, advocacy should start with student and family priorities. Efforts to address inequities and reshape systems should attend to power differentials and build coalitions based on trust and a shared vision of educational justice. For example, dominant caregivers at Baker Elementary that currently run the afterschool program could redesign the program based on the desires and priorities of nondominant families. Current leaders could first reach out to trusted leaders of the various communities at the school and design a process for gathering input and co-creating the classes that are offered. If the afterschool program is not only developed by dominant caregivers of

students in the gifted program, but is truly co-developed by dominant and nondominant caregivers, it could be more responsive, inclusive, and equitable.

When families and educators build coalitions, dominant caregivers can act in solidarity with nondominant caregivers, giving up power when appropriate or using their privilege to advance shared goals. When working in solidarity, dominant families shift from advocating for *my* child to advocating for *our* children. This may require a short-term sacrifice of advantage or privilege, but as a strategic political move, it could advance a collective effort. Likewise, educators will need to give up some power in decision-making, but when truly working in solidarity, dominant and nondominant families, educators, and community members will understand the role they each play in this collective effort to advance racial justice and community well-being.

Lastly, families, educators, and community members can look for liberatory possibilities outside of the school and engage in solidarity-dreaming (Ishimaru et al., 2023). This could look like community organizing on issues that impact racial and educational justice and partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs). In Baker Elementary's community, there are CBOs focused on increasing access to ethnic studies, restorative justice, and affordable housing. Baker Elementary families and educators could join these efforts to advocate for change. Looking beyond the school involves looking outside of the system entirely and centering the community (Khalifa, 2012; Khalifa, 2017; Warren et al., 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). For example, Baker Elementary's Black Family Advocacy Group meets in the community and centers the needs and desires of the Black community instead of focusing efforts on the school-determined goals for students. Working towards liberatory possibilities involves a shared

political project, deep solidarity, and an understanding that systems of oppression are interconnected.

Table 5

Guiding Principles for Equitable Family Engagement

Guiding Principle	Definition	Example
Relationships first	• Families value when educators authentically care about their child. • Relationships between caregivers and educators work best when they are open, honest, reciprocal, and when educators value the expertise of families of color. • When educators are active in the community, communicate often, and follow through on what they say they will do, this can build trust with families.	• Educators communicate clearly and openly (e.g., not sweeping issues under the rug) to work towards common goals. • Educators ask families how they approach issues at home and co-design strategies and solutions. • Educators engage in community events.
Examine self and consider impact	• Educators routinely reflect on positionality and examine how this impacts practices. • Educators collaborate with students and families to reflect on race and power dynamics and consider schoolwide and individual practices to determine who is impacted by decisions and practices.	• Weekly PLC time to reflect on practices, have open conversations about race and power, and consider individual and schoolwide practices that shift power (e.g., who is making decisions, are these choices perpetuating or interrupting the status quo, does this practice benefit students of color, etc.).

Advocate for equitable systems	• Build a coalition and based on family priorities, advocate for policies, practices, and initiatives that are equitable and empower families and students of color. • Stay curious about existing systems and consider how they could be restructured.	• Integration of the gifted program. • Restructure the school decision-making body to more equitably share power with families (e.g., families set the agenda or co-chair the meetings). • Codesign after school enrichment classes.
Look beyond the school	• Community organizing and other efforts to imagine more just futures. • Collaborate with community-based organizations.	• Black Family Advocacy Group. • Broader movements for racial and educational justice.

I recognize that these guiding principles are not exhaustive and there is always more nuance in practice. Educators are overburdened with increasing responsibilities and limited resources. Building relationships with families takes time, and schools already ask so much of educators. Likewise, many families work multiple jobs or live far away from their school due to gentrification. Families, especially families of color, may be hesitant to build trust with educators based on previous experiences with schools. All of these factors make this work incredibly difficult. At the same time, families and educators in many communities *are* building solidarity and collaborating to advance justice. I hope these principles and examples offer values and ideas for schools that seek to equitably collaborate with families and communities.

7.4 | Future Research

This study raises new questions, complexities, and areas for future research. Educators at Baker Elementary are wrestling with tensions that exist in many schools. Nondominant

family-led and CBO-led organizing is powerful (Baldridge et al, 2011; Warren et al., 2011). However, educators wondered if the creation of the Black Family Advocacy Group may have led to leadership of the school's PTO to be even less representative of the community. Given the limited time of families, how do schools provide opportunities for affinity group spaces that center nondominant communities and cultivate spaces for cross-racial solidarity and relationship-building? Could the Black-led family organization have the same resources, power, and influence as the predominantly White-led PTO? Likewise, educators described how they struggle with whether to keep families of all languages together at events or separate into groups based on language to ensure greater accessibility. If they separate families, will it further segregate or unintentionally marginalize communities that speak languages other than English? Like at many schools, families at Baker Elementary have different opinions about the amount of communication they would like to receive, the number of events, and the ways in which they would like to be engaged. How do schools balance these needs and share power without burdening families? What about the families that do not want to be as involved? All of these questions and seeming contradictions are areas for further research.

The critical family engagement field would also benefit from additional research on family-community-educator solidarity. While I sought to explore the role of White caregivers in building solidarity with families of color, the parents of color that I spoke with in this study did not bring this up in interviews and focus groups. Some educators discussed how White parents were involved in efforts to integrate the gifted cohort program for social studies, and several educators acknowledged that the PTO is working to be more inclusive, but I did not hear about cross-racial solidarity and community organizing between BIPOC and White families. This does not mean it is not happening at Baker Elementary, but it is noteworthy that it did not come up in

interviews, focus groups, or observations. I asked about how families build trust across racial differences. While nearly all families shared that they have built relationships with families across racial differences, the families of color that participated in this study did not share any examples of times when they have worked in solidarity with White families. This type of cross-racial solidarity is rare, but does exist (Shah & Grimaldos, 2023), and it is what I aspire to build when I am a parent at a school. The design of this study may not have facilitated learning in this area as this study was primarily focused on educator-family relationships. If I had prioritized family-family relationships and solidarity, I would have asked more questions about this topic and may have uncovered additional insights. Given the research on the inequitable role that White parents often play in schools (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2012; Syeed, 2018), future research that illuminates how families of color and White caregivers collaborate is needed.

Furthermore, several Baker Elementary educators are seeking solidarity with nondominant families, but at an organizational level, it is not clear if there is a shared vision for educational justice. Gaztambide-Fernandez et al. (2022) posit that solidarity must challenge power dynamics and be committed to a specific political project. Case studies of schools where educators, families, and the community have a clearly articulated vision for educational justice would offer important insights. A limitation of this study is that while several caregivers that participated in interviews speak more than one language, all were at least conversational in English. As such, I recommend a deeper exploration of how educators and families build solidarity across language differences. Finally, I foregrounded the perspectives of caregivers and educators in this study, but I did not talk with students. Youth voice is critical in any attempt to build family-community-educator solidarity and in any movement for educational justice. While

many studies demonstrate the importance of student and youth voice (Holquist et al., 2023; Mitra, 2018; Rodela & Bertrand, 2023; Warren et al., 2011), a greater emphasis on the critical role of young people will benefit future research on family-community-educator solidarity.

7.5 | Conclusion

Educators and families committed to justice in education must simultaneously disrupt the system and survive the system. Dr. Anthony Craig, in opening remarks at the Leading Towards Justice Symposium in 2024, asked, if we are burning down the settler-colonial education system, what happens to the students currently in schools? Who will tend to the fire in the meantime? Can we ensure that it is a maintained burn? Many families and educators at Baker Elementary recognize that the school system is deeply inequitable and expressed a desire to dismantle the system. And yet, they are committed to improving their school and fostering educational justice and community well-being in the meantime. This duality is critical in these times of immense suffering and needed changes to the system.

Findings from this study demonstrate how educators must simultaneously share power with and value the expertise of nondominant families, while curtailing the disproportionate influence dominant families often exert on schools. It is not enough to improve access for nondominant families. Instead, power should be distributed equitably. Likewise, individual-level actions are important, but school- and district-level structures, such as tracking, formal decision-making processes, and the PTA must be redesigned. Organizational and structural changes take time, but schools are harming nondominant students and families today through status quo practices and policies. Families deserve affirming, equitable, and just schools, and they should not have to wait for a theoretical future state in which power is shared equitably.

While coalition-building and long-term change are needed, in the meantime, nondominant families, educators, and dominant families can center relationships, reflect on their practices, share power, and work in solidarity to reshape and reimagine educational systems to foster racial justice and community well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Racial/Ethnic and Other Demographics of Baker Elementary Students

Demographics	**Baker Students**
Asian	17%
Hispanic/Latiné	12%
White	28%
Two or more races	21%
Black/African American	24%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.2%
American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous	0%
Male	53%
Gender X[9]	1%
Female	46%
Multilingual learners	14%
Low-income	45%
Experiencing homelessness	5%
Students with disabilities	20%
Classified as gifted	40%

[9] Baker Elementary's district uses the term "Gender X" to indicate gender expansiveness and include all those who identify outside of the gender binary (male/female). This term includes a broader and more flexible range of gender identities including non-binary and trans.

Appendix B

Racial/Ethnic and Other Demographics of Baker Elementary Certificated Teachers

Race/Ethnicity	**Baker Teachers**
Asian	5%
Hispanic/Latiné	0%
White	91%
Black/African American	2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%
American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous	2%
Male	14%
Female	86%

Appendix C

Research Question Data Collection Matrix

RQs	Methods	Participants	Data Sources
RQ1: How do educators at racially diverse school with a history of segregation and tracking attend to racialized power dynamics while building relationships and solidarity with families in an attempt to disrupt whiteness?	Focus groups and interviews	-Caregivers -Educators -Administrators -Family engagement specialists	Transcribed focus group and interview data
	Participant observation of back-to-school night, parent meetings, BLT meetings, professional development related to family engagement, meetings with educators and families, and informal interactions during drop off and pick up	-Caregivers -Educators -Administrators -Other community members	Observation notes
	Document analysis	-N/A	BLT meeting agendas, staff climate survey results, professional development agendas, schoolwide emails and family newsletters, and other materials distributed to the school community
RQ2: How and to what extent do efforts to cultivate relationality and solidarity influence the agency of BIPOC and White families in decision-making at this school?	Focus groups and interviews	-Caregivers -Educators -Administrators -Family engagement specialists	Transcribed focus group and interview data
	Participant observation of back-to-school night, BLT meetings, parent meetings, professional development related to family engagement, meetings with educators and families, and informal interactions during drop off and pick up	-Caregivers -Educators -Administrators -Other community members	Observation notes

	Document analysis	-N/A	BLT meeting agendas, staff climate survey results, professional development agendas, schoolwide emails and family newsletters, and other materials distributed to the school community

Appendix D

Interview, Focus Group, and Observations Protocols

Interview with principal protocol

Context

1) Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you ended up at this school?
2) Can you walk me through the key responsibilities you have as the principal?

Family Engagement at Thurgood Marshall

3) How does the school approach family engagement?
    a) What are your goals for family engagement?
    b) How is race considered in the school's family engagement goals?
4) How do your family engagement efforts attend to power differentials among parents from different racial backgrounds?
    a) How do White parents tend to participate or contribute to the school?
    b) How do parents of color tend to participate or contribute to the school?
    c) How, if at all, do you approach family engagement differently with different parents based on race, program, etc.?

Teacher-Family Solidarity

5) How do teachers and families build relationships at your school?
6) How do teachers build solidarities with families (trusting relationships rooted in a shared vision) across racial differences?
7) How does the school and other organizations (e.g., PTA, Black Parent Advocacy Group, etc.) support parents to build relationships with one another, if at all?
    a) How do you support parents to build cross-racial relationships, if at all?

Decision-Making

8) Can you tell me about the school's decision-making protocol?
    a) How did this come to be?
    b) How is this implemented?
9) How are families included in decision-making at this school?
    a) What parents are included? Who holds power?
    b) How do you include families of color in decision making and interrupt the dynamics of White, privileged parents having a disproportionate amount of power and influence at the school?
10) Where would you currently place your school on the Involvement to Engagement Continuum?
    a) What makes you make this choice?

   b) Have you experienced times on either end of the spectrum? What happened in those cases?

11) How has your school's approach to including families in decision-making changed over time?
   a) Where do you see it going in the future?

Conclusion

12) Anything else we didn't discuss related to teacher-family relationships and decision-making at Thurgood Marshall?

Interview with community engagement specialist protocol

Context

1) Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you ended up at this school?
2) Can you walk me through the key responsibilities you have as the community engagement specialist?

Family Engagement at Thurgood Marshall

3) How does the school approach family engagement?
   a) What are the schools' goals for family engagement?
   b) What are *your* goals for family engagement?
   c) How is race considered in the school's family engagement goals?
4) How do your family engagement efforts attend to power differentials among parents from different racial backgrounds?
   a) How do White parents tend to participate or contribute to the school?
   b) How do parents of color tend to participate or contribute to the school?
   c) How, if at all, do you approach family engagement differently with different parents based on race, program, etc.?

Teacher-Family Solidarity

5) How do teachers and families build relationships at your school?
6) How do teachers build solidarities with families (trusting relationships rooted in a shared vision) across racial differences?
7) How does the school and other organizations (e.g., PTA, Black Parent Advocacy Group, etc.) support parents to build relationships with one another, if at all?
   a) How do you support parents to build cross-racial relationships, if at all?

Decision-Making

8) How are decisions made at the school?
   a) How is the decision-making protocol implemented?

9) How are families included in decision-making at this school?
    a) What parents are included? Who holds power?
    b) How do you include families of color in decision making?
    c) How do you disrupt the dynamic of White, privileged parents having a disproportionate amount of power and influence at the school?
10) Where would you currently place your school on the Involvement to Engagement Continuum?
    a) What makes you make this choice?
    b) Have you experienced times on either end of the spectrum? What happened in those cases?
11) How has your school's approach to including families in decision-making changed over time?
    a) Where do you see it going in the future?

Conclusion

12) Anything else we didn't discuss related to teacher-family relationships and decision-making at Thurgood Marshall?

Interview/focus group with caregivers protocol

Context

1) Could you share your name, your connection to Thurgood Marshall, and how you came to be a part of the Thurgood Marshall school community?

Family Engagement at Thurgood Marshall

2) How do you engage with the school (e.g., communicate with teachers, attend events, volunteer, etc.)?
    a) What does the school do to communicate with or reach out to you?
    b) What is your experience when you engage with the school?
3) When you engage with the school, do you feel included or comfortable?
    a) Do you feel like you belong?
    b) Do you know how to best engage with the school?
    c) *Consider any patterns or trends in terms of who is involved with the school, whether that is racial background, language, program, etc.*

Teacher-Family Solidarity

4) Educator to Family: Can you describe the relationships you have with educators/staff at TM?
    a) How, if at all, have you built trust with teachers? What was that process like?
    b) How do other teachers and families build relationships at Thurgood Marshall?

   c) How do teachers and parents build solidarities (trusting relationships rooted in a shared vision) across racial differences?
5) Family to family: Do you feel that you can connect with families?
   a) If so, is that school supported? How have you made those connections?
   b) How does the school, or other school-related organizations (e.g., Friends of Thurgood Marshall) support parents to build relationships with one another, if at all?

Decision-Making

6) Do you feel like you have an impact on the decisions made at the school?
   a) What decisions have you been a part of?
   b) Do you feel like your voice was heard?
   c) Do you feel you have the mechanism to have an impact on decisions at the school?
7) More broadly, how are parents included in decision-making at Thurgood Marshall?
   a) Do you notice any differences in what parents are involved in decision-making?

Closing

8) What would you like to see in terms of inclusion of families in decision-making?

9) Anything else we didn't discuss related to teacher-family relationships and decision-making at Thurgood Marshall? Thank you!

Interview/focus group with educators protocol

Context

1) Can you tell me a bit about your role and how you ended up at Thurgood Marshall?
   a) What are the key responsibilities you have in your role?

Family Engagement at Thurgood Marshall

2) How does the school approach family engagement?
   a) What are the schools' goals for family engagement?
   b) What are *your* goals for family engagement as an educator?
3) How do your family engagement efforts attend to power differentials among parents from different racial backgrounds?
   a) Communication
   b) Valuing the expertise of nondominant families
   c) Follow through
   d) Authentic community connections

Teacher-Family Solidarity

4) How do educators and families build relationships at your school?
    a) How do you build trust with families?
    b) How do teachers build solidarities (trusting relationships rooted in a shared vision) across racial differences?
5) How do educators discuss race at the school?
6) How do the school and other organizations (e.g., PTA, Black Parent Advocacy Group, etc.) support parents to build relationships with one another, if at all?
    a) What role do parent-leg organizations play at the school?

Decision-Making

7) How are families included in decision-making at this school?
8) Where would you currently place your school on the Involvement to Engagement Continuum?
    a. What makes you make this choice?
    b. Have you experienced times on either end of the spectrum? What happened in those cases?

Closing

9) How has your school's approach to including families in decision-making changed over time and where do you see it going in the future?
10) Anything else we didn't discuss related to teacher-family relationships and decision-making at Thurgood Marshall?

Observation protocol

Guiding Question	**Notes**
How are families and educators interacting (note identities of individuals including position, race, role, etc.)? - Indicators of relationship building - Indicators of trust	
Who is talking (note identities of individuals including position, race, role, etc.)?	
Who are the decision-makers (note identities of individuals including position, race, role, etc.)?	
Who holds power (note identities of individuals including position, race, role, etc.)?	

Discussion of family engagement	
Discussion of racial equity	

Appendix E

Consent Procedures

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Building Teacher-Family Solidarity and the Impacts on School Decision-Making

Investigator: Mary Padden, 206-790-6963, mpadden@uw.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Ishimaru, 206-543-9840, aishi@uw.edu

Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be in a research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington. The purpose of this consent form is to give you all the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how educators and families can build teacher-family solidarity and how this shapes school decision-making.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you or have you participate in a focus group for approximately one hour. In addition, I would like to observe your interactions with educators and families at the school. In the interviews and focus groups, I will ask questions about your involvement with the school such as:

- How does the school approach family engagement?
- How do your family engagement efforts attend to racial dynamics among parents from different racial backgrounds?
- How do teachers and families build relationships at your school?
- How do teachers build solidarities (trusting relationships rooted in a shared vision) across racial differences?
- How are families included in decision-making at this school?

In observation, I will be attuned to how decisions are made at the school, who holds power, and how educators and families approach relationship and trust-building.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape your interview/focus group so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. I will transcribe this recording without identifiable information and destroy the recording after the study is over. Only I will have access to the recording, which will be kept in a secure location. If you would like a copy of the transcript of the interview, I will gladly provide you with one.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken or interviews are recorded.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study. One benefit of this study is a better understanding of how schools can foster teacher-family solidarity and how this can lead to more equitable decision-making processes in schools.

OTHER INFORMATION

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Information about you is confidential. I will assign you a pseudonym and code the study information. I will keep the link between your name and the pseudonym code in a separate, secured location until the study is complete, then I will destroy the information linking your information to the pseudonym. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name, or any other identifying information.

I may want to re-contact you for future related studies. Please indicate below whether you give me permission to re-contact you. Giving me permission to re-contact you does not obligate you in any way.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Mary Padden at the telephone number or email listed at the top of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact my doctoral advisor, who is overseeing this project: Dr. Ann Ishimaru, 206-543-9840, aishi@uw.edu.

____

Signature of investigator Printed Name Date

<u>Participant's statement</u>

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the investigator listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact one of the course instructors. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

____ I give permission for this researcher to audiotape my interview or focus group.
____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

____ I give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.
____ I do NOT give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

____

Signature of participant Printed Name Date

Copies to: Investigators' file; Participant

Appendix F

Observations

Date	Activity	Time
4/18/23	Time at the school, informal connection with principal and other staff members	2 hours
5/4/23	Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT) event	3 hours
5/9/23	Building Leadership Team (BLT) meeting	2 hours
6/1/23	APTT debrief	1 hour
6/20/23	Time at the school, informal connection with principal and other staff members	2 hours
8/31/23	Professional development day for educators	7 hours
9/5/23	Ice cream social with educators, students, and families	2 hours
9/11/23	First day of Kindergarten drop-off and coffee with the principal	2 hours
9/12/23	BLT beginning of the school year retreat	2.5 hours
9/21/23	APTT "making connections" event	2.5 hours
10/12/23	APTT debrief	1 hour
11/7/23	BLT meeting	2 hours
11/27/23	Time at school, informal connections	1 hour
12/5/23	BLT meeting	2 hours
12/5/23	Time at school during the school day, informal connections	2 hours
12/5/23	PTO Bingo Night	2 hours
12/14/23	Coffee with the principal, time at school during the school day	1.5 hours
1/9/24	BLT meeting	2 hours
1/18/24	Time at school, informal connections	2 hours
1/18/24	Multicultural night organized by the Black Family Advocacy Group	2 hours
2/12/24	National African American Parent Involvement in School Day	2.5 hours

	organized by the Black Family Advocacy Support Group	
		Total: 46 hours

Appendix G

Codebook

Code	Definition	Example
Access	Efforts to ensure the school is accessible for families	Language accessibility, having interpreters, etc.
Agency	Enhancing and diminishing the agency of racial groups	Not listening to the loudest voices in the room
Authentic care	Educators show authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) to students and families	Educators asking about students and not just because of their job
Black Family Advocacy Group	Discussion of the Black-led family organization, why it was needed, what role it plays today, and how it has impacted relationship-building and decision-making at the school	Families share why they value it as a "Black space"
Challenges	Challenges the school faces to equitable family engagement and teacher-family solidarity	No funding for translation, educators cannot work on weekends
Commitment to growth	Educators and families discuss how the school is committed to improving	Staff share how it's a part of their culture
Community connection	School-community connections	Teachers live in the neighborhood, meetings at community centers
Credential of whiteness	The credential of whiteness in racialized organizations	White families and educators have greater access to resources and are treated differently
Decoupling of commitments to equity with practice	The decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is racialized	BLT language about sharing power vs. reality
Definition of engagement	Discussion of how the school defines family engagement and how it is measured or assessed	School improvement goals for attendance at APTT events
Equity moves of staff	Actions that educators take to advance equity and disrupt whiteness	Limiting meetings and who receives services

Families in decision-making	Efforts to include families in decision-making at the school through both formal structures and informal	BLT, positive behavior support team
Family expertise	The expertise of families is valued, especially nondominant families	Asking families for advice on how they approach things at home and implementing this feedback
Formal leadership	Importance of principal and administration in supporting equitable family engagement	Principal "sets the tone" for the school
Gentrification	Description of neighborhood gentrification and the impacts on the school	Longtime residents have seen the demographic changes—fewer Black families
Interrupting racialized organization	How educators and the school interrupt the tenets of racialized organizations	Listening to all parents, not just those who advocate in a school-preferred manner
Race talk among staff	Open conversations about race and racism among the staff	"Real talk" between educators
Racial equity team	The school's racial equity team and the impact they have had on the school	Racial equity team-led PD and impact on the school
Racial tension	Discussion of past and present racial conflict and tension (both explicit and implicit)	Issues with teachers not listening to IAs
Racialized power dynamics	Racialized power dynamics among staff and families (e.g., who holds power, who makes decisions, etc. and how race intersects and influences this)	Parents who lead PTO are mostly White parents of students in the gifted program
Recommendations	Recommendations from participants that they believe the school should consider	Hire more educators of color
Reinforcing racialized organization	How the school and its structure reinforce the tenets of racialized organizations	Gifted program legitimates the unequal distribution of resources
Relationships	Relationships between educators and families	How relationships are built over time
Resource inequities are legitimated	Legitimating the unequal distribution of resources	Smaller class sizes for gifted program

Responsive to feedback	The school listens to families of color and is responsive	Change APTT nights to keep students with parents following focus group)
Segregation	Discussion of racial segregation, especially related to the three programs at the school: HCC, general education, and special education	Educators describe the racial and intellectual segregation of the gifted program
Shifting power	The school shifts power from educators and white, resourced parents to parents of color	Black Family Advocacy Support Group-led events, including in hiring processes
Traditional family engagement	Traditional, school-based family engagement	PTA, back-to-school nights, etc.
Trust	How trust is built among staff and families	Parent shares why she trusts principal
Two-way communication	Educators and families communicate with each other to support students	Conferences, phone calls home, texts, newsletters, informal communication, etc.
Vulnerability	Educators and families demonstrate vulnerability with one another	Educator sharing personal experiences that are similar to families
Welcoming	Efforts to ensure the school is welcoming to families, especially families of color and multilingual families	Greeting families in the hallway, inviting families into the classroom