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A Tale of Two Pandemics: Black Family Engagement at the Intersection of Distance Learning and Black Lives Matter

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A Tale of Two Pandemics:

Examining Black Family Engagement at the Intersection of Distance Learning

and Black Lives Matter

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Ryan Jacob Smith

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Tale of Two Pandemics:

Examining Black Family Engagement at the Intersection of Distance Learning

and Black Lives Matter

by

Ryan Jacob Smith

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Tyrone Howard, Chair

The recent global pandemic triggered by the spread of COVID-19 left the majority of school systems across the United States moving quickly toward remote learning and hybrid models of education. As school buildings closed, many K – 12 school systems adopted a form of whole-school distance learning, leaving students to learn from home and families to support these swift changes. A report released by "Urban District #1" in the Los Angeles area highlighted that Black students remained less active online than their White peers during the early stages of the pandemic. Black students and their families also navigated the country's "racial reckoning" due to the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black men and women at

the hands of the police. This qualitative study was guided by three goals: (1) to understand how Black students and their families experienced distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) to examine how schools attempted to engage with Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, if at all; and (3) to build on the scant literature on the experiences of Black families during the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of distance learning. I conducted nine focus groups with 10 students and 20 parents that explored Black middle and high school students and their families' distance learning experiences. The data led to several notable findings. Black students and their families navigated a host of technological, social-emotional, mental health, and academic challenges in the move to implement remote learning. Parents' roles shifted dramatically to support this new normal.

Additionally, students and parents felt that new flexibilities, school supports, and new tools were positives to implementing distance learning. Though students and parents identified some bright spots, communication between schools and families remained challenging. Further, I found that due to the coverage of deaths of unarmed Black women and men at the hands of the police and the media attention to subsequent protests, students and parents facilitated more conversations about race, racism, and the role of the police between each other and their peers. The study suggests that in the wake of the pandemic and potential new forms of hybrid education, education systems should invest in integrated supports for Black students and their families and more culturally-relevant, distance learning capacity-building opportunities for school staff. Recommendations based on the findings share directions for future research and implications for institutional change to better support Black students and their families.

The dissertation of Ryan Jacob Smith is approved.

Walter Allen

Robert Cooper

Shaun Harper

Pedro Noguera

Tyrone Howard, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION

To my dad, who started this journey with me but unfortunately passed before I completed it. Since childhood, your belief in the need to change and transform the world has colored my personal and professional pursuits. I finished this study fueled by my knowledge that you were proud of me and the content of this study. We will forever be Maasai warriors in life and beyond.

To my mom, who instilled in me the belief that we can never truly be successful if our community fails to be successful. I grew up inspired by your strength, intelligence, and fortitude. All I've accomplished is a reflection of your sacrifice and faith. This new chapter represents a win for both of us. We did it. Thank you for being my superhero.

To my sister Brandy Smith and aunt Carol Smith, I navigated the last three years through your encouragement, humor, patience, and prayers. You two reflect the love I hope to spread through my work. I could not have done this without you. Thank you.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The recent global pandemic triggered by the spread of COVID-19 left the majority of school systems across the United States moving quickly toward remote learning and hybrid models of education. Given the scale of the effort and the challenge in supporting the learning of thousands of K–12 students online, many education leaders expressed concerns about how this pandemic would exacerbate existing opportunity and achievement gaps, particularly for low-income students and students of color (Haeck & Lefebvre, 2020). Since October 2020, experts believe that school closures caused as much as 183 days of lost learning time in reading and 232 days of lost learning time in math (Trawick-Smith & Miles, 2020).

"Urban District #1", a large-urban school district located in Southern California, was no exception. In the spring of 2020, Urban District #1's 600,000 students moved to remote learning overnight. This version coined "distance learning" and "remote learning," unlike past e-learning and blended learning models, included limited in-person interaction between teachers and students and relied on digital forms of communication such as online platforms, messaging applications, video calls, and discussion boards to deliver instruction (Stauffer, 2020). An assessment of Urban District #1's distance learning efforts in spring 2020 found that student engagement for Black and Latinx pupils lagged behind their White peers. Compared to more advantaged students, fewer middle and high school students who are Black, Hispanic, living in low-income households, classified as English learners, have a disability, are in the District's

homeless program or are in foster care, participated across all measures of online activity (Besecker et al., 2020). They examined four types of activities: absent, created session, viewed content and participated. Through these factors, Black students were rated as having the lowest student engagement rates which reflected the socioeconomic challenges the pandemic plagued on marginalized communities and factors related to long-existing systemic barriers in education based on race and class. Many parents bore even more responsibility to support their students' academic and social emotional success because of the distance learning shift. These changes shed even more light on current state of family engagement practices, particularly for low-income families and families of color.

  As research has well documented, parents and caregivers have a substantial impact on their child's education. In the words of Karen Mapp, "Any adult caretaker that rises up to take care of our children, those people should be included and counted and valued and respected," (as cited in Stringer, 2018, pg. 1). During the onset of the spread of COVID-19, parents and their families became even more essential to their child's education (Lansford, 2020). A University of Southern California survey of 1,100 Black and Latinx families during spring 2020 found that 80% of families stated that it was very important to increase direct contact between schools and parents or guardians and one in three families have purchased new devices or services during distance learning (Galperin & Aguilar, 2020). Given the emerging research about the impact of distance learning and the literature that outlines the need for strong family partnerships to support student engagement, it is important to understand how Black students and families engage in distance learning and how the systems both support and hinder their engagement.

  The pandemic has also demonstrated that schools need to build authentic relationships with students, parents and families in order to support student's academic and social-emotional

well-being. Two pandemics- the COVID-19 crisis and a racial reckoning brought forward by deaths of George Floyd and other Black people at the hands of the police– confronted K – 12 education. Some schools and school districts responded to the pandemic by making commitments to support policies that addressed harmful policies to students of color and families, equipping parents with more supports at home and providing students more flexible schedules and learning pathways (Waite & Arnett, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black students and their families in South Los Angeles experienced distance learning during the pandemic, including learning about challenges and opportunities they faced in order to identify strategies that might help improve future learning experiences for Black students and their families based on these findings. I examined these factors by conducting nine focus groups with 30 Black students, families and caregivers that attend traditional public schools in South Los Angeles. I explored distance learning through the lens of student and family engagement. For the purposes of this study, I define Black families as the students, parents, guardians, caretakers as well as non-traditional families that support Black youth (Kenyatta, 1988). Now more than ever, it is essential that educators listen to those families most impacted by the pandemic and long-standing inequities so that we can support students, parents, caregivers, and schools to provide quality educational opportunities in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

California's Black Student Achievement in the Shadow of Systemic Racism

California has the fifth largest Black population in the country and is home to approximately 900,000 African Americans under the age of 25 (US Census Bureau, Population Division, 2018). About 324,500 of these young people are students in our public K-12 schools,

representing 5.3 percent of the public-school population (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019-2020 Enrollment).

Black students often lack access to critical instructional supports as compared to their White counterparts, including access to a culturally relevant, standards-based curriculum, qualified teachers, and technology (Noguera et al., 2019). These opportunity gaps exacerbate the well-documented achievement gaps for Black students and other marginalized communities. For example, Black students with high math performance in fifth grade are unlikely to be placed in algebra in eighth grade (NCES, 2010). Among California's many racial and ethnic groups, Black children, whether from upper or lower-income families, are the least likely to become proficient readers by third grade or be placed in Gifted and Talented Education programs; master the mid-level mathematics skills that position students for success in college preparatory math courses; and graduate from high school in four years (Education Trust – West, 2015). Black students are most likely to be suspended or expelled; identified for special education; and take remedial, non-credit bearing coursework as college students (Education Trust – West, 2015).

These data make clear that even now, 68 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and 59 years after the March on Washington, systemic and institutional racism are still a troubling hallmark of young, Black lives. Over the last 150 years, federal and state laws have played an enormous role in shaping the educational opportunities and school conditions faced by Black children. From the 1870s to the late 1940s, courts and laws helped exclude and segregate Black students. In 1852, as part of California's fugitive slave law, the state banned Black children from California public schools — even though California was a free state (Education Trust – West , 2015). During the Civil Rights era, the pendulum swung toward desegregation and affirmative action policies. However, in the 1990s, California dismantled affirmative action, impacting how

the state and districts target funding. Also, Black children often still grow up in highly segregated neighborhoods lacking critical social supports and services (Acevedo-Garcia, 2014).

Black Families and Distance Learning

As students and families have learned remotely for close to 2 years due to the spread of COVID-19, we continue to discover how whole-school distance learning efforts, where every student in a school participates in learning online, may further exacerbate opportunity and achievement gaps for Black students and their families. A disparate number of Black students in LA County attend schools that the state has identified as "low-performing," and they are also more likely to be enrolled in schools where critical resources are in short supply (Noguera et al., 2019). Many Black families have been identified as lacking access to quality technology and broadband access (Galperin, 2020). According to a recent study, on average, Black students at LAUSD have been less active in online classes than other students (Besecker et.al., 2020). During the spring of 2020, only 67% of Urban District #1's Black middle school students and 71% of Black high school students were reported as active online compared to 88% of White middle school students and 85% of White high school students (Besecker et.al., 2020).

Amid the spread of COVID-19 and entire schools participating in remote learning, students' families played an even more significant role in their education. According to a USC survey (2020), 40% of families surveyed stated that their children turn to parents and guardians for distance learning supports, and 42% responded that they turn to siblings for guidance with distance learning activities. In California and in cities like Los Angeles, a disproportionate number of low-income families identify as Black. For example, according to a poll commissioned by EdSource, low-income parents, in particular, worry that prolonged distance learning will mean they will not be able to get back to work (2020). As most school campuses

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closed in LA County in spring 2020, it fell on families to provide technical and instructional assistance for learning. With the current pandemic hitting low-income communities and communities of color the hardest, the challenges facing students and families have only increased (Cabildo et al.,2020).

More generally, the amount of time a child spends with adult supervision outside of school is a significant determinant in that child's academic outcomes (Israel et al, 2009). The greater the amount of time spent supervised predicts higher math and reading scores and greater likelihood of school persistence (Israel et al, 2009). There is also substantial evidence that students whose parents are involved in their schooling have "increased academic performance and overall cognitive development" (Clark & Howard, 2016). During the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially for working families with children, it is crucial to understand on a wide scale what barriers and opportunities exist to better support parent/guardian involvement in student learning.

<div align="center">

Statement of the Purpose

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The study's primary aim is to identify and examine the challenges and opportunities of remote learning for Black students and their parents to discover strategies that might help improve remote learning and more general engagement experiences for Black families based on these findings. The findings support the identification of strategies that can help improve Black students and families' remote learning experiences and the overall engagement for Black families moving forward. School communities will better meet Black students' and families' specific needs by leveraging family engagement through this moment and beyond. I conducted focus groups with Black students, parents, guardians, and caregivers of Black secondary students who

attend LA public schools in South Los Angeles and are part of the "Urban District #1", a traditional public school district with enrolls 600,000 students.

Research Questions

1. How did Black students and their families experience distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did schools attempt to engage with Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, if at all?

Research Design

I conducted nine focus groups with 30 Black secondary students and their parents and caregivers in school sites in South Los Angeles. I recruited parent and/or caregivers to participate and invited them to outreach to their students to participate in the study as well. I interviewed parents and students separately, and I grouped middle and high school students together and middle and high school parents together. Interviewing students and parents in separate groups helped students feel comfortable speaking about their challenges without feeling influenced by parents and guardians in the room. I also observed that parents felt more open to discuss their students' academic progress, mental health and social-emotional journeys without students in the room. I also administered separate focus groups for middle school students and high school students who may interact with their level groups differently than in a mixed level-group environment. Each group received general questions about the pandemic and their distance learning experience during the pandemic, including the benefits and challenges of engaging in distance learning and more specific questions targeted for their groups. For the parents and caregivers, I asked questions specifically about their thoughts and attitudes about distance learning, what they observed, and their perceptions of the quality of schooling and supports their

child or children received. I asked students about their observations of distance learning, their perceptions of the quality of education and supports they received, what they would change or keep about distance learning, and if they received support from their families during the process. I developed an interview guide and protocols for my study and have a range of more general and unstructured questions to more specific questions to build rapport in the focus group.

Gaps in Research

Currently there are some peer reviewed studies that demonstrate the impact the COVID-19 health crisis has had thus far on students and families. However, more research is emerging and underway. Prior to the recent pandemic, research demonstrated the impact of whole-school distance learning and remote learning programs; however, much of that literature focuses on postsecondary education. Much of the literature on online learning in K–12 education has focused on blended learning and e-learning models that do not reflect the fully remote nature and hybrid models that exist for most students post-pandemic (Sherry, 1994). Although I have found research related to online learning and its effects on students of color, I realize that the current scale of whole-school distance learning, where every student participates remotely, is still very new to the field and requires more investigation. This level of remote instruction requires more research to assess the full extent of its impact. Given the new nature of this unprecedented shift in education, this study references emerging research, articles, polls, and interviews in addition to peer-reviewed, juried studies and other published content.

Significance

This study will add to the emerging body of research about how the pandemic has impacted marginalized communities, in particular Black students and their families. The study will deepen knowledge about how to engage Black students and their families after the

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pandemic. By conducting focus groups with numerous Black families in the Greater Los Angeles area, the study helped to understand the challenges and opportunities to more fully support Black students, parents and families as well as how to deepen Black family engagement as a lever to close persistent opportunity and achievement gaps for Black students.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As a result of the spread of COVID-19, schools closed for most US students in March of 2020 for students and families across the country. Emerging research supports that school closures and the pivot to distance learning had a disparate impact on Black students and their families (Trawick-Smith & Miles, 2020). Urban District #1 like many large urban districts, moved quickly to provide access to technology, broadband, materials, and basic supports for thousands of students. However, some studies showed that the most marginalized students, including Black students may have engaged less in remote learning due the well-documented inequities that Black families and students faced pre-pandemic, only to be exacerbated due to the spread of COVID-19. This study explored the challenges, benefits, tools, and resources for Black students and families engaging in distance learning.

As forms of distance learning continue into the future and beyond, the findings from this moment may have profound effects on teaching and learning as well as how schools partner with parents – particular the families often marginalized by the education system. In order to analyze these phenomena, I provide an overview of the family engagement literature and synthesize the existing and emerging research on distance learning. First, I review traditional family, school and community partnerships within schools in order to explore the foundational literature regarding family engagement. I then juxtapose that section with family engagement policy efforts as well as power-building outside of school sites to explore inside and outside models of family engagement. Finally, I review distance learning efforts and the equity challenges exacerbated by the spread of COVID-19. Given the extremely current nature of this unprecedented shift in

education, this study references emerging research, articles, blogs and interviews in addition to peer-reviewed, juried studies and other published content.

Family Engagement as a Strategy to Improve Student Achievement

Over the past four decades, researchers have examined the effectiveness of families' involvement in their children's education as a strategy to boost student achievement. Much of the foundation for parent engagement research began in 1980 when Stan Stalett, Bill Rioux, and Carl Marburger discovered a study that linked schools with PTAs to higher student achievement rates and wondered if there might be a correlation. This led the publication of the *Evidence Grows* (1981), which became the launching point for the current canon of research investigating families' influence on their student's achievement in school and through life (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The majority of the research about parents' relationship with schools has commonly centered on Stalett, Riouz, and Marburger's original premise about parents involved with their own students or within their local schools.

Scholars have used several theories to explore the link between schools and family engagement partnerships. Epstein (1986; Epstein et al., 2002), one of the leading researchers of family engagement, developed a framework comprising six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein's parent involvement framework explains how family engagement influences children through procurement of learning, aptitudes, and an expanded feeling of certainty that they can succeed in school (Taylor, 2016). In addition, the framework helps teachers and educators understand how family engagement can help all students succeed. Researchers have expanded on Epstein's work to show how teacher characteristics and perceptions are connected to family engagement (Taylor, 2016; Walker et al., 2005). Hoover-

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Dempsey and Sandler (1997) created a theoretical model of the parental involvement process and the perceived life context of parents. This model has now become the most commonly referenced theory in family engagement research, and revisions by Walker et al. (2005) helped further influence and shape the literature surrounding family engagement.

This theoretical model is divided into 2 types of family involvement—home involvement and school involvement—which are broken into three subtopics: parents' motivational beliefs, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, and parents' perceived life context. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argued that a parent's level of family engagement is connected to their "beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities, [their] sense that [they] can help [their] children succeed in school, and the opportunities for involvement provided by the school or teacher" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, as cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 22).

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), each of these factors influences a family's decision about whether or not to become academically involved in the lives of their Black children (Reynolds et al., 2015). Based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parent involvement processes, these factors also have a major impact on a family's motivation to be involved (Murray et al., 2014). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) theory also emphasizes the concept of social ecology, or the social and physical environment that affects people's minds and behaviors (Oishi & Graham, 2010). Based on their theory, social ecology helps determine family engagement by analyzing socioeconomic characteristics, parent cultural characteristics, and teacher characteristics (Calzada et al., 2015).

Many family engagement studies fail to examine how race and social capital play an integral role in family engagement. Therefore, in addition to building on the work of Epstein (1986), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), and Walker et al. (2005), this study used social

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capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and critical race theory (Bell et al., 1995; 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2008) to understand the relationship between Black family engagement and supporting student success.

Family Engagement and Public Policy

Regarding family engagement, President Barrack Obama once said, "The question is whether all of us—as citizens and as parents—are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities." Scholars have debated the question of how to leverage parent and family engagement as a key strategy of school reform for over a century. Parent engagement policy dates back as early as 1642, when Massachusetts passed a law that required parents to provide their children with an education in reading, religion, and trade (Watson et al., 2012). The Civil Rights era brought a new wave of policies centered on citizen engagement to reduce poverty (Karen, 2012). The Head Start Program, launched in 1965, initially saw parents as learners, seeking ways to enrich their child's experience. Parents were encouraged to participate, but no one was sure how they should participate (Policy Council, 2000). As the program evolved so did clarity on how parents can play a role in the program. In 1967, Head Start published their *Manual of Policies and Instruction* outlining their parents' four parent participation areas. These areas include 1) parents as decision-makers; 2) parents as paid staff, volunteers and observers; 3) parents involved in activities which they have helped to develop; and 4) parents working at home with their children in cooperation with Head Start staff (Head Start 1967). These four areas gave a view of what parent engagement could look like in early childhood. These categories also became a framework that served as a foundation for how states and districts invested family engagement resources for decades.

The first iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) made no mention of parent engagement when it launched the Title I Program. In 1967, policymakers added that "This language was expanded in 1967 in a government program guide where the goal of parent involvement was defined as building "the capabilities of parents to work with the school in a way that supports their children's well-being, growth, and development." Through this opening, advocates across the country began to strengthen family engagement mandates through Title I (Education Trust, 2001). As White and upper-income parents supported organizations like the Parent Teachers Association, groups like the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the National Committee for Citizens in Education started capacity-building opportunities for parents to participate in decision-making opportunities. Subsequently, the numbers of Black, Latinx and low-income parent participation grew in parent advisory councils (Watson et al., 2012). In addition to the Head Start Project in 1964, ESEA in 1965, and the Handicap Act in 1974, other policy related to the involvement of parents in education included the Economic Opportunity Act; and the Bilingual Education Act, 1968, all of which required parent participation in the development and implementation of school programs in advisory or collaborative roles (McLaughlin & Shields, 1986).

Congress enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002. While the controversial law ushered in a new era of high-stakes testing, unrealistic goal-setting and accountability, the policy also presented a step in shining a light on equity challenges through disaggregated student data. NCLB also strengthened the mandates of parent engagement as a strategy to improve student achievement. This policy connected the development of parent involvement policy with federal dollars more succinctly than any other past federal policy (Webster, 2004).

For the first time, ESEA included a definition of parent involvement. It stated that participation of parents looks like "regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities." (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2016). California, the most populous state in the United States, has played a significant role in shaping family engagement strategy. For many years, a large percentage of family engagement strategies in California mirrored federal mandates. However, in 2013 California adopted the Local Control Funding Formula for deciding how much money each school district receives based on the concentration of English Learners, low-income students and foster youth (CDE, 2016). School districts decide how to use the funds, but they must get input from their local communities. School districts also have to tie their budgets to improvement goals by creating a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). According to the California Department of Education, LCAPs focused on 8 state priorities:

- Student achievement
- Student engagement
- Other student outcomes
- Course Access
- School climate
- Parental involvement
- Basic services
- Implementation of Common Core State Standards and course access

The move to LCFF promised greater participation of parents and families; however, there were tensions about the extent of authentic family engagement strategies being implemented in the process, particularly for low-income families and families of color (Ed Trust-West, 2016).

Family Engagement and Power-Building

Parent organizing as a strategy for educational change is a fairly recent development, but one that is garnering increasing interest as indicated by the burgeoning research. Education organizing is grounded in the tradition of community organizing, but it is also strongly influenced by the history of labor unions, turn of the century progressivism, the civil rights and farm worker movements of the 1960s, and nonviolent resistance movements (Scott & Fruchter, 2009, Simon & Gold, 2009). A report by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform states, "Organizing is about building power for people who are powerless and those whose lives are negatively impacted by the decisions of others" (Gold et al., 2002).

There have been several attempts to produce models of parent organizing and power building. The Cross City Campaign's (CCC) report, the 2002 Indicators Project on Education Organizing, attempted to document the impact of parent organizing on school reform. The report recognized that the impact of community organizing could not be measured through traditional means and in response to this challenge developed eight indicator areas: leadership development, community power, social capital, public accountability, school/community connection, equity, high quality instruction and curriculum, and positive school climate. The indicator areas were created from the results of a telephone survey conducted with nineteen different community organizing groups. The areas were also created through the researchers' review of existing literature on school improvement and community development. The indicators were further refined based on interviews with organizers and other community stakeholders (Gold et al., 2002). After completing an analysis of five case study sites, the authors examined the relationships between the indicator areas and improved schooling, the

results culminated in the development of a theory of change for education organizing. This theory is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Figure 1

Theory of Change: Relationship of Community Capacity
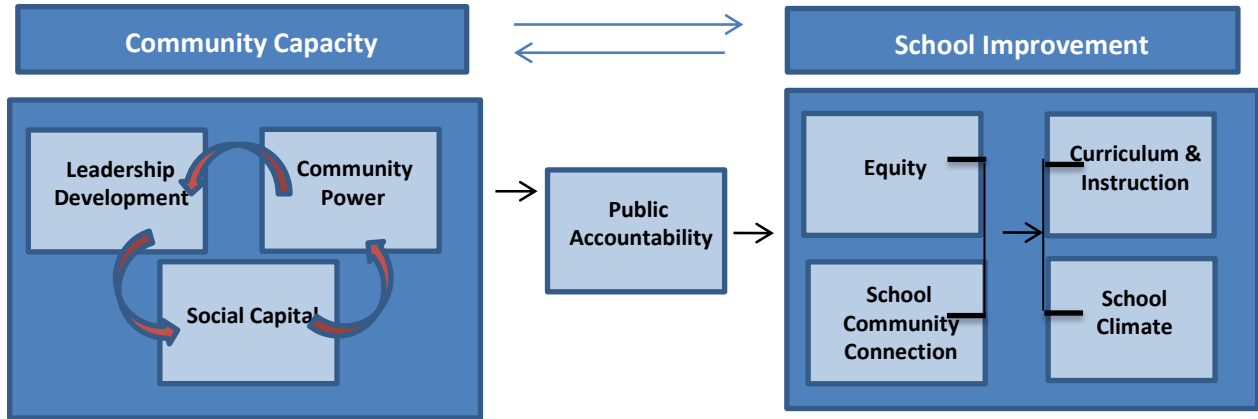
Community organizing is represented in the lower left of the community capacity box in the model. Regarding this theory of change, Evans (2009) notes:

> The indicator areas of leadership development, social capital, and community power all work interactively and support one another during the organizing process. As the community grows in knowledge and forges new relationships it can build public accountability with public officials to support school improvement. Public accountability is a crucial element of the process, but it should not be understood as a mandate for public officials. Community organizing attempts to build collaborative public accountability that requires a commitment from all of the stakeholders including: teachers, students, parents, administrators, and other community members.

Case studies on community organizing provide concrete examples of the various elements of the Cross City's Campaign model. In Shirley's (1997) exploration of Texas Industrial Areas

Foundation's work in education he found that social capital played an important role in the success of community-based organizations (Shirley, 1997). The most effective groups were those who were able to forge partnerships with schools or align themselves with education experts. Shirley cites a number of examples where CBO members encountered significant resistance for school employees, but efforts on the behalf of the members to understand the perspective of the educators went a long way towards building mutual trust.

This is what Putnam (2002) refers to as "bridging" social capital where an individual or group builds a relationship outside of their immediate spheres of influence (p. 22). These extended ties help provide access to information that might not otherwise be available and serve as the foundation for future collaborations.

Black Family Engagement & Student Achievement

The literature shows that Black family engagement can improve not only the life outcomes of young Black students, but also academic progress, such as maintaining passing grades (Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Defined as the "collaborative relationship between families and schools, and between schools and the community" (Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016, p. 7), family engagement can help to improve students' educational performance and retention (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Research has also shown that Black families and students who share the same educational expectations are more likely to have higher academic achievement (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Black parents and families are equipped to passionately create partnerships with schools to support their children's learning (Graham-Clay, 2005). However, despite the recognized importance of family engagement, there remains a family engagement gap—defined as a lack of connection, involvement, or relationship between families and the children's schools or teachers (Fisher et al., 2011)—and it is still difficult to get Black families engaged (Murphy, 2010).

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Due to systemic and institutional racism and classism, Black students continue to lag in academic outcomes, face harsher discipline punishments, and be identified for special education at higher rates than their counterparts (Delpit, 2012; Howard, 2015; Jeynes, 2005; Kunjufu, 2012). In fact, Black students experience harsher punishments, more suspensions, and expulsions at three times the rate of their peers who engage in similar behaviors (Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2012). While elements of the Black family and community, such as social networks and community, can protect youth from negative pathways, these disparities in punishment hinder relationships and exacerbate barriers between Black parents and schools (Latunde & Clarke-Loque, 2016) rather than support them. In a meta-analysis of 77 studies which examined expressions of parental involvement and academic achievement, Jeynes (2005) noted that Black parents held high aspirations for their children's success. Like most parents, Black parents exercise their social capital to advocate for their students and support educational opportunities outside of the home (Latunde & Clarke-Loque, 2016). However, Black parents have mentioned their challenges when it comes to communication between home and school (Latunde, 2009; Thompson, 2004). Latunde and Thompson (2015) examined Black family engagement strategies that built upon Black parents' high expectations, connections to spirituality, culturally relevant curriculum, community organizing and leadership. The literature shows that despite the systemic barriers to opportunities for Black students and their parents, Black families continue to persist in order to support their students dreams and aspirations.

Race plays an important part in the engagement strategies of parents (Diamond et al., 2006). Deficit views of Black families and their capacity to support their children's learning have led to misconceptions of roles and responsibilities of families and schools with respect to learning and development (Harry & Klingner, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002). These misconceptions are

tied to issues and beliefs about race and the confounding variables of race and learning in America (Delpit, 2012, Kunjufu, 2012; Leuchovius, 2006). Race plays an important part in the engagement strategies of parents (Diamond et al., 2006). There is limited awareness of the significant roles Black families play in the learning and development of Black students (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Williams, 2007). Despite the vast research on parental involvement, little is known about the specific contributions of Black families to student learning. One study surveyed 130 parents and guardians of Black K–12 students throughout the United States to identify the strategies and resources they use in engaging with their children's education (Latunde & Thompson, 2005) and the confounding variables of race and learning in America. In this study, Black parents demonstrated high rates of communicating with school sites, supporting their students learning at home, and providing educational experiences in the community through church and expanded learning opportunities. (Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2012; Leuchovius, 2006).

Also, Black families tend be treated as a monolithic group and not recognized for the diversity within the organization. Howard and Reynolds (2008) note that middle-class Black families are often left out of the discussion when it comes to engaging both Black families and middle-class families. Further, the experiences of many Afro-Carribean, Afro-Latino and families from countries across the diaspora is missing in much of the literature on Black family engagement in the US.

Student Engagement

I explore student engagement through the lens of family engagement. However, it is helpful to understand student engagement in relation to schooling. Researchers have noted that the *student engagement* construct continues to be complex to understand and measure, particularly as there exists a fundamental conflict between two uses of the term. We can view

student engagement as 1) an accountability measure that provides a general index of students' involvement with their learning environments; and 2) as a variable in educational research that is aimed at understanding, explaining, and predicting student behavior in learning environments (Axelson & Flick, 2010). Also, student engagement requires a reciprocal relationship between educators and students. Students need to put forth the effort necessary to develop their knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning (Theisen-Homer, 2018). For the purposes of this study, I will define student engagement as a measure that's aimed at understanding student behavior in this new distance learning environment.

Distance Learning

Definitions

In February of 2020, US schools started to prepare for the likelihood that the coronavirus epidemic would affect their communities. Many made plans to instruct children online should their districts be forced to discontinue face-to-face instruction due to the virus's spread (Morgan, 2020). As districts across the country moved to writ-large or a hybrid model of online learning, terms such as "online-learning," "remote-learning," and "distance learning" have been used interchangeably to describe K–12 students' learning from home in a complete or hybrid manner. Distance education is defined "as a style of learning where teachers and students are physically separated, and different technologies are used so that they can communicate effectively" (Britannica, 2020). Distance education, remote learning, e-learning and online training are just a few of the many terms used to describe different technology-enabled learning spaces. Although the interface, format, and structure of these products may differ, some common characteristics seem to be emerging. Although these terms are used interchangeably, several similar distance

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learning components have appeared in the field that include elements like fixed or open online learning, some form of video conferencing, and hybrid online learning (Fought, 2020). The term "open learning" describes learning experiences in which learners choose from a variety of options in relation to a host of factors including time, place, instructional methods and access (Hodgson et al., 1987). Hybrid learning refers to an educational model where students attend class in person and also attend class virtually at home. Educators teach remote and in-person students at the same time using tools like video conferencing hardware and software (Owl Labs, 2020).

Before 2020 and the pandemic, the focus on whole-institution distance learning and distance learners focused primarily on postsecondary students. One study describes distance learners as an adult juggling multiple responsibilities and seeking to continue their education (Valai et al., 2019). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2019), distance education is "education or training course delivered to remote (off-campus) location(s) via audio, video (live or prerecorded), or computer technologies, including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction." Although the recent scale of distance learning is unprecedented due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online virtual schools have grown to meet the need of stakeholders who have called for more school choice and high school reform (Cavanaugh et al., 2004).

Distance Learning Standards

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has created standards for teachers to provide instruction online and include 7 critical elements for students and 7 for teachers using technology in learning. The ISTE standards for students are included in the following list (ISTE, 2017)

- The Empowered Learner standard is designed to encourage students to take an active role and to demonstrate their competency to use and choose technologies

- The Digital Citizen standard focuses on increasing student awareness of the responsibilities and rights of participating in a digital world.

- Knowledge Constructor standard is designed to build knowledge. Students enhance their understanding of the world by applying effective research methods to find information that advances their intellectual pursuits.

- The Innovative Designer standard explores creativity. Students design new solutions for real-world problems using different types of technologies. They use their critical thinking skills as they work on open-ended questions.

- Computational Thinker standard focuses on exploring and finding solutions to problems by using a variety of technologies. Students collect data and analyze them to make decisions and problem solve. They enhance their understanding of complex systems and automation.

- Creative Communicator The sixth standard emphasizes students to create original works. One of the ways they can achieve this goal is by remixing digital resources into new ones.

- Global Collaborator: This standard focuses on broadening students' perspectives. Learners use digital tools to connect with students from different cultures and backgrounds. They use collaborative technologies to explore global and local issues and think about possible solutions from multiple viewpoints.

ISTE has also created standards for educators to help empower student's online learning. Like student standards, ISTE includes seven standards for educators that include ways to support students as learners, leaders, citizens, collaborators, designers, facilitators, and analysts.

Distance Learning Literature

The transition to distance learning was challenging for a large number of districts, particularly large urban districts with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color. A survey of thousands of students, parents, and teachers in the organization's network highlighted their experiences with the transition. From late April through June 2020, the education non-profit Cognia conducted three surveys designed to better understand the effects of this abrupt shift to online instruction. Respondents in this non-representative sample included more than 74,000 students, parents, and teachers from the United States and 22 other countries. The organization found that students' workload including the number of assignments they received and the time required to complete those assignments increased significantly once schools shifted from in-person to remote instruction (Cognia, 2020).

Despite challenges posed by online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the literature also reveals students can achieve academic success through virtual learning platforms. A 2004 meta-analysis of dozens of online virtual learning classes in K–12 classrooms demonstrated that students could experience similar academic success levels while learning using virtual technology and learning in classroom settings.

Distant Learning and Equity

The last time the US shut down schools on a grand level happened during the 1918 Spanish Flu. Although school closings have saved lives, experts posit that these closings have produced challenges, impacting low-income students more than others. One challenge involves

how to provide meals to children eligible for free or reduced lunch at school. Another relates to

unequal access to technology. Children from low-income families are less likely to have access

to computers and the internet at home. Although many municipalities and private sector

organizations agreed to help those in need have broadband access during the coronavirus crisis,

some schools cannot provide students' computers. High-poverty schools usually have fewer

resources than low-poverty schools (Morgan, 2018).

Research continues to emerge about the impact of distance learning, particularly for

marginalized groups of students and high need schools. However, new literature reveals that the

Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated ongoing inequities for schools, districts, and communities.

According to study published by the Center Reinventing for Public Education, six school

systems focused on a myriad of challenges when implementing remote learning. These priorities

included addressing the basic needs of students and families, identifying digital access and

technology gaps, connecting students to the internet, shifting grading and attendance

expectations, and reacting to mixed federal government signals (Hill, 2020).

According to a recent Rand survey of 379 school district leaders, disparities in student

learning opportunities were the most significant challenge among the eight topics asked about for

2020–2021 school year (Rand, 2021). Half of the district leaders rated stated differences in

learning opportunity as a "significant challenge." The participants also recognized that the need

to provide more significant professional development and instructional supports, although

district leaders from districts with higher concentrations of students of color and poverty listed

the need to foster more SEL supports and more mental health resources (Hill et al., 2020).

Los Angeles Unified School District, the second-largest school district in the country,

serves as an example of these efforts. As schools closed and food insecurity threats rose, LAUSD

moved quickly and set up sixty-three "Grab and Go Centers". By January 2021, LAUSD served 100 million meals to students, families, and community members (City News Service, 2021). LAUSD also moved quickly to provide the technology to students as well. Within weeks of school closings, LAUSD had spent more than $54 million on devices and WIFIhotspots from T-Mobile. By the end of March 2020, the District had spent almost $13 million on a deal for even more devices, according to the District's reports to the County Office of Education (Stokes, 2020). Even with these investments, families in Los Angeles tackled numerous challenges to bridging the digital and device gap. Other large-scale urban districts like Oakland, New York and Baltimore faced similar challenges with these equity challenges (Bellefante, 2020; Natanson et al., 2020; Tucker, 2021).

Parents also conveyed concerns with distance learning inequities. A California poll of parents administered by Education Trust-West revealed that 41% of parents reported that they did not have a computer, tablet, or enough devices at home for their students to engage in distance learning. Also, 11% mentioned that their child was too young to participate in remote/distance learning (Education Trust-West, 2020). Disaggregating parent racial groups' data, parents of color reported feeling these challenges at higher levels than their White counterparts. The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools administered a survey with 1,000 LA Unified families from March–April 2020. Almost all families identified as either Black or Latinx. The survey discovered one in three families purchased new devices or services to support their student's success; of these, 77% contracted fixed or mobile internet services. (Partnership for LA Schools, 2020). A survey from the Learning Disabilities Association found that nationally only 39% of parents of students with disabilities had been contacted by their school to

check on their students during remote learning (ExcelinEd, 2020). Thirty percent of families

stated they purchased new devices or services for distance learning.

Black Students and Distance Learning

Although scant research detailing Black K–12 students and families' attitudes toward

online learning and remote learning currently exists, there is evidence that Black students and

families have a wide variety and attitudes toward this medium. Data collected from 124 African

American students enrolled in a Memphis, Tennessee youth development program reveal that

almost 65% of students did not enjoy using the computer to complete school work. The study

also discovered that 52% of these students' attitudes toward online learning would not change,

even if they became more accustomed to the technology. Only 38% stated that online learning

and tutoring were valuable. A larger percentage of African Americans (33.02%) and Latinx

(30.67%), however, reported using their home computer for academic use, compared to Whites

(21.51%) (Okwumabua et al., 2011). Eamon (2004) found that White, Black and Latinx students

used computers at comparable rates; however, over a third of Black and Latinx students reported

using their home computer for academic purposes compared to their White counterparts

(21.51%).

According to a poll in November 2020, more than 70% of Black students learned entirely

remotely at that point in time, compared to about 40% of White students and about 60%

Hispanic or Latinx students (Marketplace, 2020). Given the history of systemic and institutional

racism that Black students and families face, some Black parents and families have questioned

the education system's ability to meet both the academic and social emotional needs of Black

families. Also, Joseph Trawick-Smith and Karen Hawley Miles identify (2020) that "in some

cases, Black families are more likely to opt into a remote learning, posing the risk that their

children will experience less overall learning time, more independent learning without a teacher, and fewer opportunities to build adult relationships" (p. 5).

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I relied upon Joyce Epstein's Family-School Connections Theory (1986; Epstein et al., 2002). Epstein, one of the leading researchers of family engagement, developed a framework comprising six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein's parent involvement framework explains how family engagement influences children through procurement of learning, aptitudes, and an expanded feeling of certainty that they can succeed in school. According to Epstein (1987, 1991), parental involvement focuses on how to assist *all* families to support their student's success. However, all has not always meant all, particularly as schools have historically viewed Black family engagement as lacking and Black family culture as problematic. Thus, I am also drawing upon Critical Race which Theory (CRT) which examines society and culture related to categorizations of race, law, and power. CRT posits that racism is ordinary and not aberrational. The dominant class will allow and support racial justice and progress to the extent that there is something positive in it for them (Crenshaw et al., 1991). Therefore, the combination of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, language plays out in various settings, and that we should acknowledge the intersections of these identities. Because frameworks studying parent involvement have disregarded race and racism, some studies have excluded the voices of culturally and linguistically diverse people (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Due to systemic and institutional racism, Black parents are often viewed and blamed as the problem even though the problem does not lie solely outside of the school but within the school as well (Johnson, 2015). There is a void in the literature that does not illuminate the

resistance parents may encounter from teachers and school officials because of their (parents) race and socioeconomic status (SES). Race and SES are two variables that have stifled and disenfranchised students and parents' relationships with schools (Anderson, 2007; Anyon, 2005). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 26). So, counter-stories can be used to expose and analyze narratives and characterizations of privilege. I plan to leverage counter-story telling methods to unearth the stories of Black students and their families during the spread of COVID-19.

Conclusion

This literature review provides a foundation for my proposed research to explore the challenges and opportunities of distance learning for Black students and their families. Emerging research on the impact of whole-school distance learning during the pandemic continues to demonstrate the complexities of engaging families of color during and outside of crises. Understanding the distance learning practices during the pandemic may help deepen relationships and collaborations between Black students and their families in the schools across California and possibly improve schools' ability to engage Black families. By centering my research on Black students and families' perspectives, I hope to contribute worthy research that captures the successes and challenges of distance learning for Black families.

Chapter 3: METHODS

Introduction

The recent unprecedented global pandemic triggered by the spread of COVID-19 left many school systems across LA County scrambling to support students and families. In the spring of 2020, Urban District #1 moved to remote learning overnight. However, an assessment of Urban District #1's distance learning efforts in spring 2020 found that Black students' engagement lagged behind their White peers. Given the gaps in research on whole-school remote learning and emerging research about the impact of distance learning, it is essential to understand how Black students and families engage in distance learning and how the system supports and hinders their engagement.

The study's primary aim is to identify and examine the challenges and opportunities of remote learning for Black students and their parents to discover strategies that might help improve remote learning experiences for Black families based on these findings. Using these data, this research ultimately identifies strategies that might help enhance Black students' and families' remote learning experiences and their overall learning experiences in school. This study also recognizes the impact of the second pandemic, the racial reckoning attributed to the deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of the police. School communities might better meet Black students' and families' specific needs by leveraging this moment's student and it's impact on family engagement to further this aim, I conducted 75 minute focus groups (on average) with Black secondary students and their parents, guardians, and caregivers. I conducted student focus groups and parents and caregiver focus groups separately. These students and families attend traditional LA public schools in South Los Angeles and have experienced remote learning during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Research Questions

1. How did Black students and their families experience distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did schools attempt to engage Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, if at all?

Research Design Rationale

I used a qualitative research design for this study. Because this study aimed to understand the relationship between student and family engagement and remote learning, a qualitative approach is necessary to attain a holistic sense of the whole Black family perspective. Also, Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that counter story-telling can magnify the stories, experiences, narratives, and truths of often marginalized communities (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001), which provides a framework to design focus groups. As collective knowledge continues to grow about the recent impact of whole-school distance learning in the wake of the current pandemic, qualitative research is exploratory, making this type of research preferable (Maxwell, 2013). A qualitative study helped identify and understand the challenges, benefits, tools, and resources Black students and their families utilized during distance learning. In addition, a qualitative research approach provided a detailed description of Black students and their parents' feelings, opinions, and experiences, and allowing interpretations of their actions (Denzin & Rochberg-Halton, 1989).

My research consists primarily of focus groups of Black students and their parents, guardians, and caregivers. Focus groups create open lines of communication across individuals and yield data that may be impossible to collect through one-to-one interviews alone (Lavrakas,

2008). My study focused on middle and high school students and their families who attend LA Unified traditional public schools in South Los Angeles, where significant populations of Black students exist. I used the videoconferencing platform Zoom to conduct focus groups because of the safety precautions in place due to COVID-19. If a parent or student did not have the Zoom feature, I provided them the Zoom conference call number so that they could participate with in a Zoom call using their phones. I deemed focus groups appropriate as they allowed for qualitative analysis to understand the challenges and benefits of distance learning for Black students and their families at this moment. In addition, given the relatively new phenomenon of whole-school distance learning in traditional K–12 schools, focus groups provided insight into discovering participants' feelings, values, attitudes, reactions, and experiences about distance learning (Gizir, 2007).

Focus groups provide rich and high-quality data allowing for a more nuanced understanding of Black family engagement. Using focus groups to examine whole-school distance learning efforts provided an effective method for capturing various opinions and views within Black families, an important factor given the new occurrence of whole-school distance learning in traditional public schools (Mack et al., 2005). The richness of focus group data emerges from the group dynamic and the diversity of the group. While I explored using surveys earlier in my research design, given the ongoing pandemic, conducting quality survey methods with students and families who may have challenges with technology could prove challenging to administer in the current climate, particularly with students and families. Also, while one-to-one interviews may provide a potential for more in-depth analysis and insights, given the relative new nature of distance learning, focus groups allowed participants to tell their own stories, express their opinions, and even draw conclusions without having to adhere to a strict sequence

of questions. Given the gaps and emerging distance learning research, focus groups allowed for the collection of in-depth data in a relatively short period. Focus groups also allowed for a dynamic that can generate "synergy, snowballing, stimulation, and spontaneity," which I believe will be helpful with both student focus groups and parent focus groups (Grizir, 2007).

Conducting focus groups online provided technological challenges. As I conducted multiple focus groups, both my co-facilitator and I witnessed students and particularly parents grapple with engaging with Zoom, logging in, calling in and others way to connect online. During almost half of the focus groups, I had to delay or interrupt the questioning in order to help participants with their technology or explain how to use the Zoom application during our discussions. I monitored technical challenges with focus group participants and supported any issues.

Methodology

Site Selection

I conducted focus group with Black families with children in 2 middle schools and 2 high schools, where at least one out of ten students identify as Black or African American, in the Urban District #1. South Los Angeles is an area in southern Los Angeles County, California, defined on LA city maps as a 16-square-mile rectangle with two prongs at the south end (Sosken, 2017). The "Urban Schools Collective" is a non-profit organization with a long-standing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Urban District #1 to support K-12 schools in South LA and Boyle Heights. The "Collective" supports 19 schools with a total population of 14,200 students, with 89% of the population identifying as Latino and 9% of that population identifies as Black. Currently, 96% of the student population qualify for free and reduced lunch. Out of the 19 schools, 12 schools reside in South Los Angeles with a moderate to large number of Black

students than other LAUSD school sites. Of the 12 school sites, I have chosen four schools, two high schools and two middle schools in South Los Angeles that reside in the Collective Network and meet the 10% Black student threshold.

The schools will be purposefully identified as a Collective-partnered school because the Collective has identified Black family engagement in a virtual setting as a problem of practice. The "Collective" is a non-profit, in-District partner to Urban School District #1 and not a charter network.

I have chosen Urban District #1, a school district located in Southern California, for this study because it is a prime example of a large, urban district grappling with the challenges and opportunities of distance learning. According to the California Department of Education, during the 2020-2021 school year, there were 43,715 African Black students enrolled in Urban District #1 schools, making up 8% of all students. About 6% of students are low-income and Black. The South Los Angeles region has the highest concentration of Black students (Innovate Public Schools, 2017). Urban District #1 has also recently passed policies targeted to support Black students and their families. In 2020, the District enacted a new school initiative called the Black Student Achievement Plan, identifying schools with higher populations for Black students to receive additional resources and instruction supports. In addition, in June 2020, the District's board voted to cut $25 million from the $70 million school police budget in response to calls from dozens of community groups to divest from law enforcement and how kids are pushed out of school and into the criminal legal system. Now, the school board has decided to redirect it into a Black Student Achievement Plan.

Recruitment

I employed a stratified randomized sampling through phone calls and text messages to families to create an unbiased representation of the population. *Stratified random sampling* involves the division of a population into smaller sub-groups known as strata. In *stratified random sampling*, or *stratification*, the strata are formed based on members' shared attributes or characteristics such as income or educational attainment. Recruiting participants is often a challenge for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some people; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the survey (Mack et al., 2005). Because of these factors, I reached out to the four Urban District #1 secondary principals whose schools have at least a 10% population of Black students in South Los Angeles, particularly schools that are a part of the "Urban Schools Collective" network, to understand the group further.

I recruited Black students and their families from Urban District #1's middle and high schools working with school sites to identify eligible Black parents of students. I worked with school community representatives and the school's administrators to reach out to Black parents through text messages, phone numbers and flyers. I also leveraged the "My Integrated Student Information System" (MISIS) to identify Black parents, and I coordinated with principals and school site staff to post recruitment material. All potential parent participants within the selective pool were reached out to at least three times. Parent participants outreached to their students to participate as to confirm their consent and their student's consent to participate in the study. I did not reach out to any student participants directly. All adult participants provided verbal or written consent during the time of their focus group. Student participants will have their parents

or guardians provide consent before their focus group and have them present at the beginning of the focus groups to reaffirm their consent. As part of compensation, I provide a $50 gift card for students and parents participating in the study.

Sample Selection

Focus groups are typically comprised of four to six participants led by a moderator (Lavrakas, 2008). I obtained participants through stratified random sampling utilizing phone calls (with at least two attempts made before replacing the prospective participant with another participant). I administered two 75-minute focus group of Black middle school students, one 75-minute focus group of Black high school students, and four 75-minute focus groups of Black middle school parents, and two 75-minute focus groups of high school parents and caregivers. I separated students and parents into level-alike groups. I also employed focus groups with no more than 6 to 8 Black student, parent, and caregiver participants. In total, I recruited 30 participants. For this study's purpose, I define Black families as parents, guardians, and caretakers, and non-traditional families that support Black youth (Kenyatta, 1988). According to a recent study, a lower percentage of Black students in their district been active in online classes than other students. Spring 2020, only 67% of Black middle school students and 71% of Black high school students were reported as active online compared to 88% White middle school students and 85% of White high school students. A disparate number of Black students in LA County attend schools that the state has identified as "low-performing." They are also more likely to be enrolled in schools where critical resources are in short supply (Noguera et al.,2019). In addition, many Black families have been identified as lacking access to quality technology and broadband access (Galperin, 2020).

I conducted nine semi-structured focus groups with 30 participants that identified as either Black students, parents, or caregivers from four traditional public schools located in South Los Angeles. Out of the 30 participants, I engaged ten complete Black families (at least one student and one parent or caregiver in one family unit) in the participant group (see Tables 1 & 2). Table 1 provides each student's names, grade levels, and gender, and Table 2 provides each provider's name, gender and school level of their child. I use pseudonyms for each participant to protect anonymity.

Table 1

Pseudonym and Demographic Information for Student Focus Group Participants

Name	M	F	Middle	High	Grade
Uriah		√		√	11
Edwin	√			√	11
Heather		√		√	12
Dante	√			√	9
Wiley	√		√		6
Donna		√	√		7
Joanna		√	√		7
Quianna		√	√		8
JB	√		√		8
Cameron	√		√		8
Derek	√		√		6

Table 2

Pseudonym and Demographic Information for Parent/Caregiver Participants

Name	M	F	Middle	High
Terry		√		√
Krystal		√		√
Tessa		√		√
Lilah		√		√
Angela		√		√
Tanya		√	√	
Jamal	√		√	
Verna		√	√	
Soraya		√	√	
Shani		√	√	
KiKi		√	√	
Bell		√	√	
Diana		√	√	
Toni		√		√
Nell		√		√
Myrna		√		√
Yvonne		√		√
Shalanda		√	√	
Eva		√		√

At times, I recruited multiple family members from one family. For example, the Jackson-McAllister family (pseudonym) had their middle-school-aged daughters Joanna and Donna, their mother Tanya, their father Jamal, and their grandmother Verna participate in multiple focus groups. The data also include 9 parent participants whose students did not attend focus groups for different reasons. I recruited parent participants via text and e-mail, and I requested that parent participants reach out to their students to participate in the focus groups.

I collaborated with a co-facilitator, a graduate student with significant experience conducting

focus groups with students from Urban District #1, and an alumnus from that district. I

facilitated focus group conversations, and the co-facilitator recorded observations and debriefed

each focus group with me to compare notes. We conducted focus groups virtually via Zoom. I

recorded all focus group conversations and transcribed these conversations through Rev.com

transcription services. Table 3 shows the student and parent or caregiver name from the ten

complete families who participated in the focus groups.

Table 3

Student – Family Relationships

Student Name	Parent and Caregiver Name(s)
Derek	Krystal
Quianna	Shani
JB	Bell
Edwin	Ayana
Joanna	Tonya, Jamal, Beatriz
Donna	Tonya, Jamal, Beatriz
Heather	Terry
Cameron	Kiki
Uriah	Lilah
Wiley	Soraya

Focus Group Protocol

A semi-structured protocol guided the 75-minute focus groups. I facilitated by providing

space for story-telling to unearth the stories of Black students and their families during the

spread of COVID-19. Each group received more general questions about their pandemic and distance learning experience during 2020-2021 school year, including the benefits and challenges of engaging in distance learning and more specific questions targeted for their groups. For the parents and caregivers participating, I asked questions specifically about their thoughts and attitudes about distance learning, what they observed, and their perceptions of the quality of schooling and support their child or children received. I requested that students provide their observations about distance learning, their perceptions of the quality of education and support they've received, what they would change or keep about distance learning, and if they received support from their families during the process.

Data Collection

I conducted nine focus groups of 30 students, parents and caregivers in four Urban District #1 school sites, located in South Los Angeles. I used stratified random sampling to sample participants from eligible schools. Focus groups allowed me to observe interactions among groups, and groups should feel comfortable interacting and engaging with each other (Lavrakas, 2008). Given the relatively new approach of whole-school distance learning, I moderated focus groups of Black middle school and high school students and their parents or caregivers via Zoom. However, I conducted 75-minute student and parent focus groups separately. Interviewing students and parents in separate groups may help students speak about their challenges without their parents and guardians in the room. Parents felt more open to discussing their students' academic and social-emotional journey without them present in the room. I administered two level-alike focus groups for middle school students and one level-alike focus group for high school students who may interact with their level groups differently than in

a mixed level-group environment. I administered two high school parent focus groups and four middle school parents focus groups.

A semi-structured protocol guided the 75-minute focus groups. Each group received more general questions about their distance learning experience during the 2020-2021 year, including the benefits and challenges of engaging in distance learning and more specific questions targeted for their groups.

Data Analysis

I moderated and recorded my focus groups through Zoom to ensure that families and students feel safe as we continue to experience the spread of the COVID-19. I used video recordings, and transcripts of those recordings, the moderator's and note-takers notes from the discussion, and notes from the debriefing session held after the focus group to analyze data (Mack et al., 2005). Notes were initially handwritten in field notebooks, on the focus group guide, or in special forms. After data collection, I will made sure all handwritten notes were expanded into more complete narratives, then entered into a computer. I facilitated conversations with a co-facilitator with prior experience working on student and parents focus groups. We each took notes and served as process observers during the conversation. Each focus group recording was transcribed for the coding process. To support the analysis, I used Quirkos, a CAQDAS software package for the qualitative analysis of text data, commonly used in social science. I also utilized several principles used to analyze data for focus groups including systemic analysis, focused analysis, appropriate level of interpretation and adequate time to guide my focus groups (Gizir, 2007).

Positionality

I served as the Chief External Officer for Urban Schools Collective, a non-profit organization that supports 19 Urban District #1 Schools in South LA and Boyle Heights. In that

role, I supported the family engagement, development, policy and advocacy, community engagement, and partnerships and communications departments within the organization. Because of my current position, I had access to the network of schools. While I supported the family engagement team, in my current role, I did not interact with parents in our school sites daily, and I did not anticipate that parents participating will know about my position with the Collective. I also explained to participants that I am an employee of the district, but I am primarily a UCLA graduate student conducting research for this study. I worked with my co-facilitator, another current UCLA graduate student with experience conducting focus groups with Urban District #1, and they provided feedback about any concerns that may arise. This helped mitigate potential biases I have connected to my role analyzing data.

Ethical Considerations

This research posed some ethical issues because of the general issues of privacy and potential harm resulting from breach of confidentiality. I asked parents and students to discuss success at their school sites as well as challenges. Identifying challenges can sometimes be seen as negatives, and parents and students may have concerns about retaliation (Adler et al., 2019). To mitigate these issues, I ensured confidentiality by having interview participants sign an informed consent form that stated no identifying information would be shared outside of the research team. The anonymous nature of the focus groups ensured confidentially. I used pseudonyms for school sites when necessary. All data was stored on technological devices that are personal and password protected. After the conclusion of my research, I provided the Urban Schools Collective my research and findings, and this report maintained the use of pseudonyms (Young, 2020)

I engaged in several strategies to enhance the credibility and reliability of this study. Given my previous work in family and community engagement, I was mindful of any of my own biases that might affect my interpretations. My co-facilitator and I compared our field notes and interpretations to limit my biases through observations. Additionally, I conducted peer checks with the co-facilitator when I developed the findings. As mentioned in the data analysis section, I will follow an interview protocol, reviewed by my experts, to ensure proper flow and sequencing.

The biggest potential ethical threats came with the research with students. I administered focus groups with secondary students as a way to avoid causing harm to a younger audience. I relied upon qualitative researchers' protocols to design the interview protocol and worked with an experienced facilitator to coach and observe me during the process.

Study Limitations

This study intends not to claim that the results are representative of Black students and their families nationwide. Also, given that research is emerging on the impact of distance learning, this study will add to the literature around the effectiveness of whole-school distance learning and its equity implications. Further research will be needed to make broad claims.

Conclusion

This study used qualitative methods to explore how Black students and their families in South Los Angeles viewed distance learning during the 2020 – 2021 school year. I identified 30 Black students and parents whose schools met the 10% Black student enrollment threshold. A family was defined as at least one Black student and their parent or caregiver participating in a focus group. I wanted students, parents, and caregivers to be forthcoming about their thoughts and reflections. I organized 75-minute focus groups so that parents/caregivers and students were

in separate groups to provide students a space to answer questions without concerns about their parents' reactions and allow parents and caregivers to do the same. As Shaw, Davey, and Brady (2011) note, focus groups can create a safe peer environment for students and avoid some of the power imbalances between researchers and participants, for example, those between an adult and a child in a one-on-one interview. I believe this study will ultimately provide schools and districts evidence to inform how they thoughtfully engage Black families and Black communities in this moment and beyond.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

As discussed in Chapter One, existing research has shown that Black students and families suffer from systemic and institutional barriers that exacerbate opportunity gaps for Black students (Delpit, 2012; Howard, 2015; Jeynes, 2005; Kunjufu, 2012). Also, schools have often engaged Black parents and students less often than their White counterparts (Harry & Klingner, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002). This study acknowledges these gaps and explores the impact of distance learning and the COVID-19 pandemic on Black families, their schools, and, subsequently, Black family engagement in South Los Angeles schools. Currently, the field lacks research about how the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of whole-school distance learning affected student and family engagement, particularly for Black students and families. Researchers and practitioners need to address these questions: What worked well? What hurdles, if any, developed for Black students and their families? How did educators and school leaders communicate with these families? How did race factor, if at all, in their experiences of pandemic and distance learning?

In this chapter, I present the findings of my study. Specifically, I addressed two research questions.

1. How did Black students and their families experience distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did schools engage Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This chapter will briefly overview the study's methodology and then offer five findings, These findings include:

1) Black students and parents experienced a range of challenges throughout the pandemic: technological, social-emotional, mental, and academic difficulties;

2) Roles and responsibilities for both Black students and parents had to shift;

3) School support, greater flexibility, and new tools were three positives;

4) Communication and engagement between schools, students and families had some bright spots, but on the whole the communication process remained challenging;

5) Black families took lead in initiating conversations on race and racism due to the pandemic and the country's racial reckoning.

Methodology of the Study

As I described in Chapter Three, over four months I conducted nine semi-structured focus groups with 30 participants that identified as either Black students, parents, or caregivers from four traditional public schools located in South Los Angeles. I engaged ten Black families (at least one student and one parent or caregiver in one family unit) in the participant group. The data also include nine parent participants whose students did not attend focus groups for different reasons.

With the use of two conceptual framework, critical race theory and Mapp's dual capacity framework for family-school partnerships (2013), five findings emerged. Table 5 provide a snapshot of these findings:

Table 5

Connection of Themes and Subthemes to Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Themes and Subthemes	Conceptual Framework(s)			
	Critical Race Theory	School -Family Partnerships Theory	RQ1	RQ2

#1: Black students and parents experienced a range of challenges throughout the pandemic: technological, social-emotional, mental, academic difficulties.	√	√	√	
Digital Divide	√	√	√	
Social-Emotional and Mental Health Barriers	√		√	
Academic Challenges	√	√	√	
#2 Roles and responsibilities for both parents and students shift	√	√	√	
#3: It was not all bad—school support, greater flexibility and new tools were three positives	√	√	√	
Educator and School Supports	√		√	√
Greater Flexibility			√	√
Innovations	√	√	√	√
#4: Communication and engagement between schools, students and families had some bright spots but remained challenging	√	√	√	√
Bright Spots	√	√	√	√
Challenges	√	√	√	√
#5: Black families facilitated conversations on race and racism due to the pandemic and the country's racial reckoning	√	√	√	√

Findings

For me…I would say (the pandemic) handicapped us. I felt handicapped, you know what I mean? And stuck. If I think about my life a year ago, a year and a half ago from now, I just feel like I've lost a whole year and a half of my life. You know what I mean? [That] I've been restricted to my life. Me and my children. That's valuable time that we can't get back. Moving forward, it's just like now I'm trying to climb out of quicksand for me. I'm trying to get back to where I was. You know what I mean? (Ayanna, high school parent)

Finding #1: Black students and parents experienced a range of challenges throughout the pandemic: technological, social-emotional, mental, academic difficulties.

Ayanna's quote exemplifies the toll reported by participants as they hung on to the COVID-19 pandemic's rollercoaster of events. The study's student, parent, and caregiver participants have painted a clear picture that they experienced the pandemic's tectonic shifts not in silos but at the intersection of multiple systems, including education. Each focus group began with the same prompt, asking participants to share their pandemic experiences. Students, parents, and caregivers discussed not only distance learning but how they navigated several challenges and changes to day-to-day life to engage in learning.

Digital Divide

Research has well-documented the digital divide challenges for low-income families and families of color (Eamon, 2004; Okwumabua et al., 2011; USC, 2021). For study participants, the digital divide also emerged as a clear obstacle. Most students and parents reported that accessing and utilizing technology needed to support distance learning proved difficult at best and painstaking at worst. Specifically, all 11 student participants and 19 parent participants stated they had challenges accessing and using multiple types of technology, including laptops, iPads, broadband internet, video-conferencing technology, and web-based learning management systems (e.g., Schoology and Google Classroom), and WIFIhot spots. Five students and 7 parents detailed that although the District and schools provided WIFIhotspots, laptops, and other devices to students implementing learning from home, families often found roadblocks to accessing quality broadband services, technical support assistance, and training to use the new technology effectively.

Broadband Service. Students, parents, and caregivers highlighted access to quality broadband as their top technological challenge. Urban District #1 reported that they provided

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WIFI hot spots for all students. However, while some students and parents expressed appreciation for this offer, many students and parent participants pointed to the multiple challenges access WIFI hotspots and finding affordable or quality internet services. Middle school student JB expressed his challenge with his hot spot: "I did, I did get a hotspot, but after that, after like one month, it went out." Mariah, a high school parent, also expressed how her twin daughters tried to access the internet and had to resort to going to relatives' houses or fast-food restaurants with internet access to participate in distance learning:

Sometimes they would go over to their god mom's or their dads and other places [for internet access]. [The students would go to] McDonald's, right? Yeah, see. And even if they did their work, the teachers would mark them absent. They would say they weren't there.

Some students reported not receiving any hotspots during distance learning despite the District's public announcement that every family received one. Student and parent participants reported their hot spots were insufficient for supporting Zoom video-conferencing for long periods. Bell, a middle school parent, illustrated some obstacles using hot spots: "Yeah. Then there were times when my son, he'd go around the house and turn off devices that were hooked up to the [hotspot] so that way he can be on his Zoom call without it being interrupted. It was that bad."

When families found their hot spots insufficient to support distance learning, many families turned to purchasing quality broadband, even while they reported losing income during this time. However, they found similar challenges in getting quality services in South Los Angeles due to affordability, a limited number of internet companies providing internet service

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in the South LA area, and poor-quality service. Kiki, a middle school mother, also noted the challenge of both hot spot and broadband access:

[The hotspots] barely worked. Then the internet around here, I got Spectrum, it was up and down with them. Still is kind of [up and down]. There are periods where the internet would be down for days. Then the kids were not able to actually join their calls. So the school did try to help out, as I said. That's the only thing I can think of, was with the hotspot. But even that, it wasn't suitable for them to actually use and be in class all day.

Recently available data underscores study participants' experiences. According to a Public Policy Institute of California survey conducted in April 2020, 26% of K–12 students and nearly 40% of low-income students still did not have reliable internet access in Fall 2020. Also, half of the Californian parents were concerned about providing productive home learning environments (PPIC, 2020). For both student and parent participants, getting access to quality and reliable internet exacerbated the day-to-day challenges of distance learning. Also, it left them feeling alone and frustrated trying to implement distance learning in its entirety.

Devices. While the pandemic and distance learning brought long-standing inequities with internet access, Black students and families have obstacles accessing reliable laptops, tablets, printers, and other devices. Five students and 14 parents discussed these challenges. Some students and parents noted the complication of receiving working technology from schools, further exacerbated by the barriers in communication between schools, students, and families in the shift to distance learning. JB, a middle school student, and Uriah, a high school student, discussed the challenge of using all these devices combined, respectively:

The Chromebooks were difficult to use, because we were using the hotspot, and then after that, the hotspot didn't work, so we had to buy WIFI. And then after that, it kept on

logging us out and then in, and then I could barely be on classes that much. So, it was difficult. To do school work, they had gave me an iPad, and at first that was difficult because it's really not that easy to type on a iPad. So then I started using my younger sibling's computer that her school had given her. And then sometimes I would use my phone often.

As some students struggled using this technology, many of the parent and caregiver participants expressed concerns about how to support their student's success. Lilah, a high school parent, provides an example that represented the core of the worries of many focus group participants:

One computer would work, one wouldn't, the [laptops] weren't working. So I believe they'd been more prepared and things could have been more effective, but I believe because it happened in such an emergency that we just got stuck and it just remained that way during the pandemic. And I think the kids suffered because of that.

Challenges with devices led many parents to purchase new technology, even as they reported challenges with income loss. As mentioned in chapter two, their actions run counter to mainstream, long-held beliefs that Black families care less about their student's academic progress or are less engaged in their education. However, parents reported that these challenges cost them in financial and time resources that they could not always afford.

Logging In and Lagging Obstacles. Students, parents, and caregivers not only discussed their hardships with hardware and internet access but using the essential software needed to engage in distance learning like Urban District #1's distance learning platform, Zoom, and other applications. Five students and seven parents highlighted the countless hitches keeping the technology working throughout the pandemic. In particular, student and parent participants

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focused on the challenges of logging into classes and the "lagging" challenges, including starts,

stops, and delays when they logged on to Zoom to engage in class. Edwin, a high school student,

commented:

> Well, I woke up and I just logged in to my computer and I just went to go log in to the
>
> [platform]…I used to be late all the time because I didn't know what to do to get on the
>
> classes and stuff.

Heather, a high school student, reinforced these difficulties. Heather said:

> I have always been a tech person, so it was easy for me. But the hard part, I would say,
>
> would be trying to log in every day on Zoom, and sometimes you have to go to another
>
> page to log on using the admin for [Urban District #1] or sometimes even turn in
>
> assignments, taking pictures of it.

For the study's participants, distance learning's lagging, primarily described as their synchronous

instruction's starts and stops, caused some students to feel less engaged in lesson plans and less

connected to their teachers. I asked Quianna, a middle school student, to describe her

experiences with slow and lagging internet service:

> I would tell [my teachers] that they were, and usually they would repeat themselves or
>
> put it in the chat…So if a teacher's talking and if the WIFI connection or mind maybe
>
> would turn, like go up and down, they would start lagging. And I wouldn't be able to hear
>
> what they

JB, a middle school student, further expands on this lagging phenomenon:

> The major thing that I didn't like about online learning was the lagging…Yes, it's lagging.
>
> So if a teacher's talking and if the WIFI connection or mind maybe would turn, like go up

and down, they would start lagging. And I wouldn't be able to hear what they were

talking about.

Parents and caregivers also brought light to their students' difficulties logging on video-

conferencing applications and the slow service that students witnessed while online. Many

parents referenced the logging and lagging barriers as the reason students were absent and did

not want to continue to participate in distance learning for long periods of times

      Systemic Technology Challenges. While some parents focused on unique obstacles with

technology, many other parents and caregivers understood that their lack of access to technology

was a part of a more significant, more pervasive systemic issue that's pervasive in high-need

schools. Specifically, four parents discerned structural inequities with access to quality devices

and internet services. Mariah, a parent of a high school student, brought light to this observation:

      Moreover, I felt that our kids get left out the most. Our kids get left the most over here.

      We get the poorest everything. Everything from books, anything. We get the poorest

      everything down here. Everything we get is not fair. Our kids get a lack of everything

      down here, around here in Urban District #1. But out here, anywhere around here in

      South Central, Watts, whatever. We get the poorest everything. Computers, internet,

      whatever.

Like many study participants, Mariah made connections that digital stumbling blocks are

connected to more prevalent systemic problems that exist for Black families in South Los

Angeles, explored further in this chapter. Also, as I conducted multiple focus groups, both my

co-facilitator and I witnessed the digital divide's impact up close as participants engaged in focus

groups. During almost half of the focus groups, we had to start and stop focus groups from

helping participants with their technology or explaining how to use the Zoom application before conducting our discussions.

Ultimately, when observing student and family engagement, one must contextualize the difficulties of engaging given technology efforts. Any school that continues with virtual learning must first assess the technological infrastructure at school and multiple homes of students. It should also not assume that students are using one mode of technology (phone, laptop, tablet). It must understand that students are working from their homes, from WIFI-supported restaurants, or even from other relatives' and neighbors' homes.

Social-Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties

In recent years, researchers and practitioners have noted a spike in depression, anxiety, and suicide amongst our youth. It is a phenomenon that is troubling and at the cornerstone of many new reform efforts. In the Black community, mental health and social-emotional issues are often compounded by the psychological stress of systemic racism. Black adults are 20 percent more likely to report severe psychological distress than White adults (White, 2020). The study's participants voiced how the pandemic and distance learning may have brought these issues to the surface at best and further exacerbated these issues at worst. In addition to technological gaps, study participants recognized social isolation's impact on families' social-emotional and mental health. As research notes, caregivers at home often have little guidance on how to help their students with resiliency, mindfulness, and other aspects of social-emotional (SEL) development (EdSurge, 2018). Emerging research has also started to examine the social-emotional and mental health toll students face each day.

Student Mental Health and SEL Challenges. During focus groups, students and social-emotional hardships manifested throughout the pandemic. Students observed the toll the

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pandemic took on their families. In this study, 5 students had several social-emotional and mental health challenges, including depression, stress, anxiety, lack of focus, an absence of peer interaction, and peer relationships. When asked about how the pandemic impacted her family, Heather, a high school student, made connections between the need for her family to procure resources and the stress that caused her family:

I think the pandemic affected my family... when everything went out of stock and we had to do a scavenger hunt to get the essentials that we need for the house. Having to get used to being in each other's space all the time and trying to make sure everybody was okay mentally.

Other students echoed Heather's journey, detailing how both COVID-19 and distance learning increased their stress levels. High school student Dante mentioned, "I would like the school to go back to normal. COVID is stressful." High schooler Uriah also noted her personal challenges:

I'm not really a school person, and it's stressful, trying to worry about staying away from people as best as I can and [attending] school online because of the coronavirus and every new virus that's coming out.

Five students also discussed missing their friends, family members or the sense of loss they felt from social distancing or deaths related to COVID-19. When asked what he disliked about distance learning, Derek, a middle school student, remarked, "I could not see my friends, and I had to stay in the house.". I have to stay home and quarantine all day." Willie, a middle school student, discussed the loss of family members, "The pandemic has been bad since a lot of family members have died." Edwin, a high school student, mentioned the impact of distance learning on his family's ability to socialize and play:

Well, they can't go outside and play much, and they have to stay inside because they move like playing with people and making friends. When my mom is taking us to the playground, they like to play with people, but they can't do it that much because of coronavirus.

Parent Observations of Student Mental Health and SEL Challenges. During focus group conversations, parents felt they lacked the expertise and resources to support their students' mental health and SEL challenges. They described feeling helpless as they witnessed their students self-isolating. Eight parent participants expressed their concerns about students' isolation due to the pandemic and students choosing to be less social as the pandemic carried on. They reported not knowing how to support their students' need for friendships and connections that they often received in person at school. Tanya, a middle school mom, asserted that social isolation and staying home remained the most significant challenge during the pandemic and, subsequently, social distancing:

To me, it was my kids because they were missing out socially. To me, that was the most difficult thing because they wasn't getting no fresh air. They wasn't able to play; they weren't able to socialize with their friends. It was kind of real hard to come up with things to do and stuff in the household to keep them entertained.

Terry, a high student parent, added her student's frustrations about not engaging with friends "And my daughter, she didn't like that she didn't have no friends. She did not like the fact that she was stuck at home with me." Six parents also described their students battling perceived depression because of the separation from their friends, losing loved ones, or the stress of the pandemic. Parents and caregivers also reported feeling ill-equipped to address these challenges given the multiple priorities they found themselves balancing each day. Participant Mariah

soberingly describes her students' mental health journey and details a student suicide that happened at her students' school:

> As the other moms said, they did not like being away from their friends, their best friends or their besties, as they call them. A lot of kids got depressed. They didn't like being home. That's what they didn't like. And I don't mean... I know there are no children here on this meeting, I hope not. But I know one of [the students at school], committed suicide because of the depression that they got from being at home. They didn't like being at home. They were like..16 years old.

Parents made clear that they felt ill-equipped to support their student's mental health and SEL challenges and did not reference services inside and outside of schools to support their student's success. Like other aspects of distance learning and the pandemic, the learning felt steep and the needs overwhelming for them and their families.

Parents' Mental Health Challenges. As parents opened up about their child's mental and SEL health challenges, conversations also emerged about their mental health. Seven parents opened up about the toll the pandemic took on mental health, particularly as they navigated their quickly shifting roles and responsibilities, which I have outlined in more detail later on in this chapter. Many parents identified the need to acknowledge and address their mental health while trying to support their student's mental health during the pandemic. Nell, a parent of a high school student, explained:

> I would say the parents' depression came too because you are trying to figure out how to make sure your kids go to school, still trying to figure out how to run a household. If you have babies, you don't have no childcare because you don't want to leave them at home with your big kids because they still got to go to school. So, you can't leave your babies

on your big kids. Then you have to figure out to find childcare for your younger kids. As a parent, it was kind of depression on the parents also because we had to go through it too.

Distance learning, like the pandemic, exacerbated these challenges. Notably, two parents framed having to support their students as they engaged in distance learning as a "roller coaster" and ride they felt they participated in with no brakes. Shalanda, a high school mom, described in detail:

A tough change. I'm still going through this rollercoaster ride with these [students], especially my [child]. I've been going through this rollercoaster ride and it's hard. Been on distance learning then they go back to school and then they want to do all this craziness and think it's okay and it's not okay. I'm not trying to be hard. I'm just letting you know that you need your education, your education comes first. Your friends come second when it comes down to it. You [supporting] emotionally, physically, mentally, all that. It's hard.

Middle school grandmother Verna also describes her journey navigating the pandemic, distance learning, and her children's social-emotional health that ultimately led to her seeking support for her mental health:

It was hard. Like I said, [my children] keep [saying] that it was hard because I don't have an education myself. Then for me to try to keep them stable and let them know that school, we have to do this and stuff. And then watching my son's grades go from threes and stuff down to ones and stuff in satisfaction. Then my daughter not having her focus and stuff on there and not wanting to get up in the mornings and stuff and comb her hair

and stuff like that. [Parents agree in unison with some crosstalk]. It was a lot for me. I

had to take up counseling because it was stressing me out.

While some narratives advance the notion that talking about mental health is taboo in the

Black community, the study's parents and caregivers challenged these ideals by openly

discussing their personal challenges in the focus groups. As schools examine their systems to

deepen their student and family engagement, whole-family social-emotional and mental health

supports should become a central part of school strategies.

Academic and Learning Challenges

When asked about their academic experience with distance learning, most students and

parents revealed their concerns with learning outcomes. Students and parents identified that they

felt educators and schools did the best given the circumstances and expressed empathy for their

teachers and school site staff. However, 22 study participants, 10 students, and 12 parents

mentioned a learning or academic challenge connected to distance learning.

Declining Grades. Students and parents noted that students' grades declined during

distance learning, and they grew concerned about how this may impact students' long-term

academic success. Six students described changes in their grades. Derek, a middle school

student, explained:

Zoom school made my grades were down to all Bs. Not great. Yeah. Virtual learning, it

was hard for me. My grades went super down, and I didn't like... Virtual learning is way

harder for me than in-person learning. So, that's why I like in-person learning.

Students who considered themselves high-performers felt perplexed as they did not know how to

improve their grades. Traditionally, they would reach out to their teachers before, after, or during

school but felt distance learning hindered their ability to ask the teacher for help. Other students

remarked that the work felt more arduous, and the assignments seemed more challenging than when they participated in school in person. This left some students to engage less in distance learning and feel discouraged about distance learning more generally. Cameron, a middle school student, summed up the experience most students described, "The last past year been hard for me, because I couldn't go to school. I had to do virtual school, and my grades went down." Parents also observed these grading trends. After discussing how she's survived the pandemic, Verna, a grandmother, maintained that her student's grades suddenly dropped during the implementation of distance learning:

> My grandson's grades were threes and fours, and then through the pandemic in the beginning, his grades went down to failing and stuff. It was hard. I mean they still just passed him to graduate him from fifth to sixth grade.

> Parents also expressed a desire to understand why their students' grades were declining and what more they could do to support their students. However, parents also appreciated that teachers and school leaders were doing their best to cope with the shift to distance learning.

Student Engagement. Students also observed that they felt less engaged in their classes because of the format and unfamiliar approach to instruction. Six students reported feeling less engaged or unable to engage in distance learning, and 4 expressly stated distance learning was boring. Some students also reported that distance learning required them to learn in ways they were not accustomed to and had difficulty acclimating to the new learning environment. Uriah described this phenomenon as she described her learning style:

> I did not like the fact that I have to be a visual learner…I would say learning from home for me was life changing because I already do not like... Okay. So when I first heard about the COVID and I found out that we were going to be learning from home, I was

excited because I'm not a really a morning person and going to school person. But then

when in reality really hit me, it was difficult for me because I'm not really a visual

learner, I'm more of a hands-on learner. So me having to be at home and not be able to

raise my hand and ask the teacher a question right then and there, or she would come over

there and help me like usual, it trying to force me to teach myself in a way. And also it

seemed like we were getting more work than we were when we went to school.

Many students expressed that, in person, they appreciated the opportunity to engage with the

teacher and ask questions. Even though video conferencing platforms provide opportunities to

engage in conversations through chat, students felt challenged to learn in this new. Cameron, a

middle school student, described this challenge, "It was hard learning from the teachers when

they tried to explain something on the computer because sometimes, I didn't understand it. I just

couldn't." Like their students, parents also suggested their students had a hard time adjusting to

the distance learning environment which impacted how they learned. Tanya, a middle school

mother, asserted challenge for one of her students in particular. She said:

My two younger kids had a hard time adjusting, because my son, he learns better in class.

In-class learning, if that makes any sense…He needs teacher interaction, basically, for

him to learn. To learn better. That was kind of adjustment with them, with my two

younger kids.

Seven parents also pointed to other factors that hindered their student's success, including

a lack of focus. Parents believed it was too easy for students to engage in other activities like

playing video games or texting while participating in classes virtually. High school parent Toni

mentioned her student's challenge with focus:

And what I would say too, the kids was more distracted because when the system was up, I would come in and Reggie had [fallen asleep] and I had to hit him, "Wake up." To me the kids were more distracted too. I was saying anyway because they kicking back, for real, for real, realistically saying this is not school when it really was. I'm going to say the kids didn't take it seriously anyway, far as them being able to be in their bed because I done came in there a couple times and Reggie was sleeping during the time when the system was working and I had to [get] him like, "Get up." Go to bed at night.

While some parents described distractions as the leading cause of focus challenges, other parents felt the biggest focus challenge stemmed from asking students to sit in front of a computer screen for hours. Even if students could take breaks, parents observed students lose focus as the day progressed. Kiki, a high school parent, described these focus challenges in her household, "No. It was hard for us too, because the kids couldn't focus. So as the day went on they want to do everything else, except for listening to the teacher or do whatever they have to do online."

Assignments and Content. Three students and five parents also mentioned the challenges with the distance learning content and assignments. Students described that the assignments seemed harder and more challenging to complete, and parents at times echoed that their students had a more difficult time navigating the content. High school student Heaven provided a hypothesis for this problem:

I think it was just teachers trying to figure out how to come up with assignments that we could do at home by ourselves and trying to create new work plans. Because when the teachers at school, they have work plans where they teach a certain thing that you can only learn in a classroom or you can't cheat, but you're at home, so they have to create

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work plans where you can't cheat while you're at home with no supervision. I don't know. I don't know how to put it. I think it's just more difficult overall.

Parents also questioned whether assignment and content barriers stemmed from teachers not having a clear sense of how to instruct in a distance learning setting, students having a hard time focusing or a combination of both. Yvonne, a high school mom, expressed gratitude for the school's efforts but questioned whether teachers had the right resources to support her in the implementation of distance learning. She comments:

Like I said that virtual learning did not really work. We know that there's something new that they were trying and that was very much appreciated, but however, it just didn't work. Not for my grandson. It just didn't work because he didn't have the proper tools to go…Well, mine didn't learn anything either because the system didn't work.

Concerns about Learning. Many parents and caregivers reported having a front-row seat to their child's education through distance learning. While a few parents expressed satisfaction with their child's education, many parents questioned if students learned while participating in distance learning. Thirteen parents questioned whether students learned enough or anything at all during virtual learning.

We were unhappy. And the reason why I'm unhappy about the pandemic was the distance learning. Even though they called it distance learning, I felt like the children weren't learning anything. And that was my issue with the pandemic. It was hard for the kids to focus, they made rules about kids not being able to [log off]. I was at work. So I'm calling home from work, trying to make sure everybody's logged on and learning.

Yvonne's comment summarized the academic and learning challenges students and parents expressed during focus groups. Multiple parents felt their students did not benefit from online

63

instruction and expressed worry about the long-term impact of distance learning. As more

research emerged about the learning loss, parent and student participants provided a clear picture

of the complexity of engaging students online and in new ways. Students and families felt they

needed more understanding of this new environment to navigate it effectively.

Finding #2 Roles and responsibilities for parents had to shift significantly

Parents' roles and responsibilities shift dramatically

As described previously, many parents and caregivers discussed how their day-to-day

responsibilities shifted overnight during the implementation of distance learning and the

pandemic. The education, health, and job shifts left parents reeling minute by minute. Student

and parent participants across focus groups discussed how they adapted to financial and familial

difficulties while balancing new school duties, job responsibilities, safety protocols, and being

attentive to the shifting education landscape. Three students and twelve parents described ways

their day-to-day responsibilities shifted with the pandemic and distance learning. These new

roles and tasks impacted students and parents profoundly, including how they chose jobs,

administered their finances, scheduled their time, and made day-to-day decisions. These changes

can affect how schools partner with students and families moving forward.

Financial and Safety Obligations. As discussed earlier in this chapter and chapter two,

distance learning forced parents to spend more on technology and other resources, even while

many saw their income decrease. Some institutions and public agencies provided more support to

these students and families. For example, Urban District #1 provided meal programs for families.

While some parents took advantage of these programs, many parents discussed barriers to

accessing them and reported spending a lot more on resources, even as their income may have

declined. Five parents discussed financial hindrances. Eva, a high school parent, examined this conundrum:

What I want to share is about how the kids staying at home impacted parents financially. Kids being at home all day made the bills higher. Going to get the kids' meals from school, that didn't work for me because I had to be at work. So it was really hard on me financially. And sometimes you might not qualify for this program or that program. And so it really took a toll on me. And then I really felt like our community didn't help. Because we would go to the store and they had the school uniforms and the school supplies out and it's like, well, why are you guys teasing the kids like that? Knowing that everybody's in virtual learning right now. I feel like as a whole, we weren't supported. The kids didn't have PE, they gave us notebooks and pencils, but we didn't get balls or jump ropes for physical activities.

While supporting their students' distance learning, parents also had to navigate keeping themselves and their families healthy, working and taking care of sick family members. Five parents described challenges navigating health protocols, and Toni discussed her roles shifts, working while keeping her children healthy:

You trying to be safe, you trying to keep [your students] safe. You are trying to not take it home to your kids. I have kids that have asthma, so it was just a lot to take on. Because it's like you trying to prove yourself to the client. I'm not trying to be mean, I'm trying to stay safe. I'm trying to keep you safe. I'm trying to keep my house safe. I'm still trying to stay up on my duties. I'm trying to make sure they up online. I'm still trying to work, pay the bills. This is a lot. And the kids don't be really understanding because they really kids,

even though they older, but they don't have that mentality to know what a parent going through because they're not a parent

Parent as "Teacher." Toni and Eva's recollection of their new day-to-day responsibilities and obligations were not uncommon among the study's participants. Consistent among parent participants was the feeling that they had to do more than usual to support their students' learning. Fourteen of the 19 parents identified that they felt like they had to do more to support their child's education. Five parents and caregivers attributed this change to the fact that, as students learned from home, they had a front-row seat to their child's education and, in turn, wanted to do more to help them succeed. Middle school parent Bell mentioned, "It changed my daily life by having my kids go from full-time in school to being at home virtual, me trying to teach my kids, and stuff like that. And having to focus on their schoolwork." Like Bell, other parents felt they were even more essential to their child's education while participating in distance learning. In turn, parents adjusted their already impacted schedules to meet the needs of students. Krystal, a mother of multiple students, explains this occurrence sharing her personal story:

> He's eating, he's throwing football. He's not thinking about school anymore. Then so for me, I had to bring him back to that. "Okay, hey, what time does your class start?" . At work I'm a cashier, so now I'm at work and forget the time, I'm setting alarms. That way my alarms can go off, I can call them and see, "Are you in class? It became very difficult to juggle the responsibility. I'm a mother of five, so I have four of them that were actually in distance learning last year. It was very, very difficult.

Parents also discussed taking on the role as teacher at home, which they didn't feel like they had to do prior to distance learning. Middle school parent Tanya explained, "I became an instant

teacher. I just had to add that to my list…It was just me adjusting to working graveyard, to happen to come home and get them adjusted for school. I just turned into instant teacher."

Eight of the 19 parents and caregivers reported seeking help from extended family members and other caregivers to support their students' needs. The McAllister family serves as one example. Father and middle school parent Jamal also discussed his efforts to support his students. He commented, "For me, man, I just have to stay at home, make sure stuff got in the way it was supposed to get done, and make sure the kids stay on top of their game." He mentioned that his mother, Verna, remained instrumental in supporting his daughter's success. Verna who serves as a caregiver to his two middle-school daughters, Donna and Joanna, discussed her dual role as a professional educator at a juvenile youth camp and an academic supporter for her grandchildren:

> It changed for me, because as a teacher doing virtual learning, you have to really stay on
> top of it. [For my granddaughters] I would ask them questions, at the end of the lesson,
> and they were able to respond. So it was a challenge, but we got through it.

Six students also commented about how other caregivers like siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents aided their learning with mixed results. Middle school student Jay stated, "Well, it was hard because my mom was trying to help me when my mom didn't get it and she tried tell my granny to help me and then it didn't work out." Highschooler Heather shared:

> Mom helped me the best way she could, like reading my essay and tell me if I wrote them
> good. But anything more accomplished than that, she couldn't really help me because she
> had work. So she was tired from work."

Students Roles. Some students also noted how their roles changed. Five students spoke to their responsibilities, including taking care of adults in their homes and helping their younger siblings. Heather, provides one example:

> I would say my responsibilities did change because everybody was forced to do school at home during the pandemic. So I would say my responsibility to being self-accountable and making sure that I woke up every day and made myself sit on the computer without getting up, even though I wanted it so bad, I guess that was a big responsibility for me. And also having to help my younger siblings more than usually with their school learning at home too.

Student, parent, and caregiver participants recognized that their relationship with schools and each other changed dramatically, particularly for parents, in new and profound ways – ways that may boost and deepen student and family engagement efforts in the short and long term.

Finding #3: It wasn't all bad—school support, greater flexibility, and new tools were three positives

When prompted to reflect on the benefits of distance learning, many students and parents provided glimpses of distance learning's benefits. Three themes emerged from these reflections, school supports, flexibilities, and innovations in supporting students. These study participants shed light on how students, parents, caregivers, educators, and school site staff can partner to support more effective collaboration.

School Supports

In the literature review of this study discusses the importance of relationships between families, schools, and communities. These relationships help strengthen family and school connections and improve communication. Despite students' and parents' concerns with distance

learning technology and learning outcomes, some students, parents, and caregivers felt supported

by their educators and school communities. Four students and seven parents highlighted

experiences where teachers, principals, and counselors supported their success during the

implementation of distance learning. High schooler Uriah provided an example:

> We have a teacher at our school. His name is Mr. Parker. Well, yeah, he was my English
>
> teacher in ninth grade. But he's no longer a teacher anymore, but he's still an adult that
>
> you can still go talk to and he can help you and give you advice and things like that.

Uriah understood the importance relationships could play for her academic performance,

especially during a tectonic shift like distance learning. When asked why some teachers and staff

provided supportive environments during distance learning and may not have provided that

space, Uriah asserted this belief:

> Maybe some teachers don't really enjoy using technology like other teachers do or letting
>
> their students know that they've enjoyed in the classroom. Or some teachers don't reach
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> out at all because... But other than that, I think that the other teachers reach out to tell
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> their students that they've enjoyed in their class, to try to inspire them to keep on coming
>
> or let them know that they're liked and welcome there.

Students expressed that many teachers who had reputations as caring could translate that

during distance learning by reaching out to them over the phone or making time for them after

virtual classes. Other students pointed out the adults that helped their success during the

implementation of virtual learning. Four students identified individual teachers that, through

personal relationships, helped them navigate this "new normal." When asked what adults you

talk to on-campus during distance learning, students Heather and Devon responded that they talk

to their students, principals and counselors. Students also pointed to additional supports outside

of the classroom. As one middle school student emphasized "They would usually have me stay after class and ask questions that I have."

Parents also pointed out educators and school site staff who, as one parent described, when above and beyond to support their students and build relationships. They provided examples of the staff that build relationships with them and vice versa, which made them feel secure that their student's education was in good hands. KiKi, a middle school parent, revealed a positive experience with her son's teacher "[My sons teachers] gave us technical support, resources online, and teacher, parent information." Parents also expressed empathy for their educators and their changing roles. This acknowledgement helped deepen their respect and some relationships between parents and Diana, a middle school parent provided. "Well, a lot of the teachers were really nice and really concerned and they would offer extra work for them to catch up, that they missed." Tanya, a middle school parent, also communicated support for her student's teacher: "I don't know, the teachers handled it pretty well. They spoke with the students, they made sure work was done. They communicated with the parents. I wouldn't really have any concerns towards the teachers."

Three parents also voiced that teachers of color specifically supported their students' success. As research points to the added value —benefits to social and emotional development, as well as learning outcomes—for students of color taught by teachers of color (Bristol & Martinez-Fernandez, 2019). Bell, a middle school parent, underscored this research, "Now, with [my student], like I said, I was fortunate that she had a good teacher that was trying to do the best she can. Her teacher was Black and then she had another Black teacher"

Many parents expressed empathy and support for their teachers. Middle School grandmother Verna's comments encapsulate this appreciation of educators:

I was thankful that they tried to do the best they could. I mean it seemed like they were

trying to help, to me, because left up to me it was hard for me. Like she was saying, what

was this problem against this and I haven't been to school in years. Do you know what

I'm saying?

For many students and parents, distance learning and pandemic humanized their educators and

provided space for them to build relationships in ways that may not have been possible without a

major disruption such as the pandemic.

Greater Flexibility

Some students and parents acknowledged that students appreciated more flexibility such

as flexible schedules, open deadlines, and ability to wear comfortable clothes. Eight students and

parents recognized the benefits of these flexibilities students' appreciation of these new benefits.

Students identified having a more flexible schedule as their top distance learning benefit.

Students identified that they enjoyed starting their days later and the ability to take breaks

between classes to nap, rest or day other things. Eight students expressed having a more open

schedule including all six Black male student participants. Middle school student Wiley

explained, "I really enjoyed it since I could sleep between classes." Other students seemed to

plan their days differently given this newfound freedom. Heather, a high student described her

daily schedule:

A day for me while I was doing virtual learning, I would say, I would wake myself up,

try to sit there and try to still wake up and enjoy my class, do my classes. Then I would

get off doing my classes and fall asleep, take a nap, wake up, see what assignments that I

had to do for the day, try to do my assignment, join another class in the afternoon

probably an hour or 30 minutes after school ended to join an extracurricular class and

then after that, go to sleep again.

Given the challenges that the pandemic created, flexible schedule also gave students an

opportunity to pause and organize their days and work, which they hadn't experienced in a

traditional school day setting. Also, the secondary school students expressed appreciation for

staying in one place, rather than traveling from building to building, similar to elementary school

students. Quianna remarked, "For me, [distance learning] was bad, but also it helped in a way,

because the schedule was easy to follow and the classes, we didn't have to move around as much,

because it was just in one place for me."

Many parents felt that their students received too much time to relax between classes,

which they thought may have hindered their students ability to focus. However, some parents

recognized the advantages of a more flexible schedule. Shani, a middle school parent, articulated

this point:

It was less stressful for her, because just the whole having to travel to school and come

home and settle, and get situated, prepare for her homework, prepare to eat, prepare her

fresh enough for the... She didn't have to worry about none of that. Do you know what I

mean? Because she's at home already.

Research reinforces students' and parent observations. According to the Center for Disease

Control and Prevention, not getting enough sleep is common among high school students and is

associated with several health risks, including being overweight, using drugs, and poor academic

performance (CDC, 2015).

Students also voiced enthusiasm for being able to wear pajamas, sweats and other

comfortable clothes while participating in distance learning. Four students and six parents

commented that students appreciated wearing relaxed attire at home or didn't dress for school.

Middle school student Donna commented, "Oh, I didn't like when the teachers asked to turn on our cameras, because I wasn't ready. I don't get ready when I go to online learning. I like my sweats." Parent Lilah noted, "My kids like being able to be in their pajamas all day and not have to get ready for school. That's what they like." Study participants also alluded to the fact that distance learning provided parents a reprieve from buying new school clothes, which given other rising costs associated with new technology and food was welcomed by parents and caregivers. These well received freedoms potentially provide opportunities for schools, in-person and online, to think about student schedules and wardrobe differently to support student success.

New Tools

Social distancing and the use of new technology compelled schools and educators to adopt new tools and activities to engage students and families. While several students and parents discussed significant challenges with communication and engagement, discussed later in this chapter, a small number of study participants stated that they experienced new, innovative activities and tools that teachers, staff, and communities engaged them during distance learning. Two students and six parents described activities related to their school communities and distance learning which included incentives, new activities, and celebration. Parent Lilah highlighted a school-sponsored drive-thru graduation her school hosted for her student and others in place of a live event as a creative way to engage the community. Middle school parent, Toni, also provided an example:

> Well, I know that my son's school, they did a parade around the community. They sent out an email to all the parents, letting them know when and where to meet. And they came by, all the teachers and the staff and everything, they came and they did a parade

for the kids. They had signs and everything, letting them know like, "Oh, we miss you. We can't wait until you guys come back and everything." So that was nice. The kids felt appreciated, and felt like it's not so bad."

Some parents also described incentives schools employed to get students to log in and attend schools. Kiki, a parent, felt encouraged by these types of activities. She stated:

I would think for me they liked the fact that they didn't have to get up early in the morning. I found for my seventh-grader last year, that she liked the incentives that they had for actually showing up on the Zoom call every day…She was at [Middle School #2], and they would have you come down to the school to pick up prizes and things that she had won from actually attending her Zoom classes. That kept her going and that was something that she liked.

Technology also served as an impetus for schools to try new and different tools to engage students and families. Four parents discussed receiving academic updates through various online applications about their child's attendance and academic progress which they didn't experience pre-pandemic. A middle school parent brought light to how technology was used to communicate with families. Tanya, a middle school parents said:

I like the weekly progress [sent through e-mail], like hey, this week they got 50 out of a hundred or they was missing this assignment. They got time to make up this assignment. It'd be due on this day. I did like the weekly activity so I could know for sure how the kids were doing.

Finding #4: Communication and engagement between schools, students and families had some bright spots but remained challenging

As research suggests, strong communication and engagement are the cornerstone of building relational trust between home and school (Epstein, 1986; Epstein et al., 2002; Mapp,

2013). Although student and parent participants highlighted some improvements, a large number of participants found communication and engagement taxing, and at times worse, than pre-pandemic.

Communication Bright Spots

Some students and parents reported more communication from educators and schools during distance learning. Participants credited this to teachers, school site staff and school communities adapting to virtual learning and the need to communicate and engage students and staff in new ways. As to be expected, new technology provided inroads for this type of engagement. High school student Edwin mentioned about communication between him and his teacher "well, usually they'll reach out to me over schoology. So they send messages to me." A middle school student affirmed utilizing technology as well "[The school reached out] through Zoom and calling my parents."

Four of the 11 students and 7 of the 19 parents and caregivers acknowledged that the received more frequency in communication and engagement from their school communities, particularly earlier on during the early stage of distance learning adoption. Diana, a middle school mom, acknowledged this new approach:

> Right now, well since the pandemic's been going on, they're giving you information daily. Hitting you up on your email, hitting you up on your phone, calling, leaving a message. So if they ain't never gave you no information, they been upon giving you the information lately.

Parents participants reported school staff used technology to reach out to them and their students. Distance learning family engagement required parents to also familiarize themselves with new applications and platforms. Diana, a middle school parent, further elaborated on the trend:

Well, for me we had some teachers would email on the iPads and some would email me and some would message me on an app that was set up for the children. All newsletters, all information would be loaded on the app and you just go in and you'll check the app and you can send a message and they'll reply right back.

Parents who experience improved communications between themselves and schools also reported that they changed some of their communication habits with the school because of their efforts. Shani, a middle school mother, discussed how she changed her approach and maintained her relationships to support her daughter's education:

Absolutely. Like I said before, I have it set up where I get automatic updates, text messages, phone calls, for anything, any updates and anything that's coming up…I know the principal personally, directly, and I'm very diligent in making sure I stay on top of everything that she's doing, her subjects, her teachers, they all know me. So there's that means of communication and that not only the teachers know me, but my daughter knows that I know what she's doing. And I stay on top on both sides, with the teachers as well as with my daughter. So it's a constant, both ways.

Six parents also reported schools used live phone calls and text messages more to communicate with students and families. Jamal, a middle school parents, explained:

I'm satisfied, I'm a hundred percent satisfied [with communication]. Like I said, if our kids wasn't in class, or if something wasn't going on that was supposed to be going on, they'd give us a call or a text.

Parents also appreciated more updates about their students' assignments, attendance and other information about their academic progress. Three parents discussed new ways they

received progress or assignment updates. Lilah also provided an example of how schools used technology to engage her and her students:

>Okay. So we had an app and so the teachers would send messages through the app. Let's say one of my children weren't paying attention through class, he would send me a message. It was a little ineffective because sometimes I would get the messages and sometimes I wouldn't. And then the school would call and leave automated messages on the house phone. So that was how they communicated with me about the different times, then I could come up to the school and get supplies and the hours for computer help and things of that nature.

These communication bright spots helped parents build trust their schools with the distance learning changes and students navigate the ins and outs of their new normal.

Communication Challenges

While some students, parents, and caregivers found new communication and engagement tools and resources, other students and parents also experienced a lack of communication and engagement from their school communities. Thirteen student and parent participants acknowledged that communication stayed status quo or got worse during the pandemic. Referenced in the teacher and student supports section, students, parents, and family members, expressed empathy for the transformation that school communities had to implement to continue distance learning and pinpointed teachers and staff that did communicate effectively. However, some students found communication and engagement lacking writ large. Highschooler Heather said:

>I would say that the school, they didn't really communicate with me that well because not all the teachers really put that much, I'd say, what's the word.... consideration in it. The

teachers were like, Well, if you don't do your work, you don't do work. They weren't

going to force it or anything or continue to remind you or remind you at all. It was just

like, it was all on you. But I can say that some teachers, probably two out of six or one

teacher out of your six classes, they did try to communicate and try to motivate you and

try to offer extra help to get your work done. But other than that, not really.

Like Heather, six other students identified communication challenges. Edwin, a high school

student, also commented about barriers in communication between school and parents but

described how he tried to bridge the gap between his schools and his mother, "Well, they didn't

really communicate that good. But sometimes [when my mom gets] off of work, I'll tell her

[about] the stuff they send me, I would show it to her when she get off of work and stuff."

Eight parents and caregivers also found communication and engagement insufficient, particularly

as the pandemic wore on. As a response to a question about their experience with

communication, Eva testifies about the difficulties with waning communication:

Communication could have been a lot better, but they did. After (the first weeks)

[communication] slowly stopped. So it could have been a lot more better on making sure

that the kids ... At a while, they didn't care if they were fine or not, or if they were having

problems. It was just okay, if your child's not signing on, then that's just that. Then we

were going to get in trouble.

While some parents found technology helpful to improve communication, other parents reported

significant obstacles, including miscommunication, due to the use of technology. Krystal told a

story about miscommunication and that she felt was attributed to her teacher's bias against Black

families:

I have a younger child and he's in elementary and he happens to be online, and you know, they type in a chat in the little chatbox. So the teacher's talking and my son put an emoji with a tongue hanging out and he said, "I'm dead", and as soon that he said that I have cops pulling up to my house and they had at me online for like four hours because they said, "Oh my son want to kill himself And I was like, "Why would my son want to kill himself? You are talking too much. You killing him. That's what he's saying". But she assumed because we were an African American family, my child was going to kill himself.

Five parents also shared experiences about only hearing from schools when their students were doing "bad", not turning in assignments or logging in when they hoped to receive new information given the transition to distance learning. Middle school parent Terry remarked:

No, because they call you when they are doing bad. When they are doing good or something is going right, they don't call. But, when they start acting up, like my daughter, she's not a problem child in the classroom. So I don't know what's going on. If I don't go to the school, I don't know anything about what is going on. So she's not a problem child, that's what I feel. So no.

Parents and caregivers challenged some popular beliefs that Black families do not have time or want to be engaged. The study's parent participants enjoyed and needed schools to communicate with them regularly. Also, as noted in this chapter, parents felt even more responsible for their child's education during the implementation of distance learning. They hoped to build a partnership with the school to support their student's success.

Finding #5: Students and parents led conversations on race and racism due to the pandemic, distance learning, and the country's racial reckoning

During the implementation of distance learning, Black students and parents lay captive to the national attention, images, and media coverage of the unarmed deaths of Black men and women like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Arbery, and others at the hands of the police. The national uprisings connected to these deaths led Black families to navigate this "second pandemic" by facilitating conversations with peers and family members about these events, race, racism, and the role of the policy while surviving the pandemic and adapting to distance learning. Having navigated both distance learning and a racial reckoning, students found new agency and began to engage in conversations centered on race and racism. Parents, compelled by media images and their students' questions, felt they had to make space for police conduct, race, racism, and anti-Blackness.

Included is an unexpected finding centered on Black students, parents, and schools' conversations centered at this moment. Black families communicated that the "second pandemic" was a central part of how they experienced this moment, including distance learning. This finding also connects to research that supports understanding the cultural barriers and successes of Black students and their families can deepen family engagement.

Student-Led Conversations on Race and Racism

Students, parents, caregivers, family members, and their families to engage in conversations about race, racism, police violence, and their safety. Notably, 7 out of the 11 students and 14 of 19 parents and caregivers stated that they had conversations with their students about the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the role of the police in their community. As examined in the literature review, communication within families and between families and schools is an essential foundation for

effective student and family engagement. While these conversations happened in reaction to this unique moment, families had different types of conversations with their students.

Student participants not only joined their family discussions but pushed for conversations with their peers and at school as well. Seven of the 11 student participants discussed how they had conversations with friends, family members, and the school community. All 5 Black male participants confirmed that they engaged in these types of conversations. Edwin, for example, discussed how he talks about the issue even when his teacher may not want him to do so:

> Well, I talk about my friends about it, like when I get to class. They'll listen to me real good. I'll be talking about how life is hard for a lot of Black young boys than a White person…. we'll just walk and I just talk about it and we'll go after class. And the teacher, he'll be like, "[Edwin], you talk a lot about racism and stuff. You have to chill out." [I said] "It's a lot of stuff going on". And our teacher said, "It ain't." I said you can't just tell me I can't say it.

Edwin's story of the importance of him to discuss issues of race and racism, even when adults dissuaded them from doing so, was not unusual among the student participants. Heather recalled:

> Just anything that happens recently related to it, like the stuff that's been going on in the past year, like the protest, with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and some more incidents that anything that's trending on social media related to that topic.

Some students expressed that during their conversations with their friends expressed frustration and surprise that racism on this scale continued to exist. Student Quianna remarked:

> At first, it surprised me, just by the fact that it's still around today and it scared me. But when I had conversations with my mom, and my teacher, and my friends, it made me feel like I was... I guess I can say, I was on guard or I was getting prepared on how the society

is now. And it made me feel like I was scared, but also ready and prepared for what was

happening during those times of the shootings and the protesting.

When asked if their school communities, including teachers and school site staff-led or helped

create spaces to have conversations, a few participants unveiled that schools did indeed drive

these discussions. Five study participants, including students, reported that schools created space

for discussions. One student participant stated that their teacher-led presentations, showed

videos, asked questions to students about Black Lives Matter, and led a lesson on racism.

Another student remarked that only their English and History teachers led these discussions,

which uncovers the notion that individual teachers may have taken the initiative to lead these

discussions.

Parent-Led Conversations on Race and Racism

Like their students, as parents and caregivers sheltered at home and navigated distance

learning, Black parents felt compelled to facilitate conversations focused on race, racism, the role

of the police, and their futures with their families. Fourteen of the 19 parents referenced these

types of conversations. One example of this phenomenon is Tessa, a middle school parent of an

eighth-grader. She describes her conversation about how her daughter should consider the role of

the police moving forward:

> My oldest daughter, she's really into that stuff. She really took to the news and watched it
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> and was curious about it. I had to talk to her about racism, a little bit. Make her
>
> understand. I had to explain that not all cops are bad cops because I always tell my kids,
>
> if you're in trouble or if you need help, always try to find you a cop or an officer that you
>
> can relate to or whatever. I don't want them thinking that all cops are bad cops. I had to
>
> explain that to my kids. I don't want them to be in a situation where I'm not around and

they need an officer's help, and they're too scared to go to the officer because of what's

going on in the world. I had to explain that to them.

Inversely, Shalanda, a high school parent, questioned the role of the police in her conversations

with her family. She led conversations about the systemic and institutional challenges that Black

people have historically faced and connected them to the resource challenges they see today. She

said:

I would discuss with my children about Black history and stuff like that with the

historical thing for African Americans and our communities, the police reform, I don't

think will ever change because back then in the early '40s on or slavery time or whatever.

They say Black lives matter, our lives didn't matter then and our lives don't matter now.

So as far as this police reform, it'll never change. We'll never get the equality that we

deserve because they have appealed to all our leaders and stuff like that. We're really,

really behind. The only thing that I do, pushing in our lives is prayer, that's it.

Consistent among parent and student participants was the feeling that the Black Lives

Matter movement and their child's education were inextricably linked. Parents felt that education

was an essential lever for their students to improve their present and future livelihood. Yvonne, a

high school parent, provided an example of making this connection:

It's really hard on our African American children, whether they're male or female to get a

good education. And you try [to help them]. And the police is out most of the time is

wrong because that's how they make so many Black lives…But we still got to teach our

children to do the right thing and have the right attitude when they're stopped by the

police. It's a sad situation that we all have to struggle with, but we have to keep going.

We can't stop. We can't give up. We have to keep our children and keep teaching them

self-love and tell them to get their education.

The focus groups of the students and parents in this study revealed how the pandemic

strengthened student agency, and the importance family played in centering discussions on race

and racism during two pandemics. Students and family members set a stage to continue ongoing

conversations about institutional and systemic racism in both class and communities for years to

come.

Conclusion

This chapter presented findings from focus groups conducted with 30 Black students,

parents, and caregivers. The data show that the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, and the

deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of the police fostered new types of

support, communications, and innovations and intensified deep disparities that Black students

and their families face. This unique and pivotal moment also provided space for students,

parents, caregivers, and schools to at times give voice to the institutional, systemic, and structural

barriers these families traverse each day.

Chapter 5
Discussion, Recommendation, and Conclusion

Overview

Black family engagement in K-12 schools has been studied extensively, focusing on student and parent engagement, communication, lack of social and cultural capital, and the reasons schools tend to lack partnership with Black students, parents, caregivers, and families. Researchers have also examined the impact of virtual learning on student learning and the impact on Black students. However, scant research currently exists on whole-school distance learning and the implications for students and families, particularly Black families. This study sought to contribute to existing knowledge by examining how the implementation to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Black students and Black families. The research investigated how Black students and their families experienced distance learning, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reckoning on race, often referred to as the second pandemic. It also sought to identify ways schools engaged Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic compelled schools to utilize new strategies to engage students and families, I hope to provide these schools, and schools that serve similar populations, insight into how to strengthen partnerships between Black students and their families. Also, since George Floyd's death, the United States has witnessed a profound public reckoning on race including its history of racial injustice. In turn, schools and districts are exploring efforts to address racism and Anti-Blackness in new ways. With this in mind, my research questions were:

1. How did Black students and their families experience distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did schools engage Black students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This qualitative study employed nine in-depth focus groups of Black students, their

parents and caregivers from traditional public schools in South Los Angeles, a high-needs

community located in Southern California. These focus groups allowed participants to share their

personal stories. More specifically, participants conveyed their perceptions and understanding of

what it was like to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of distance learning,

and the US racial reckoning. This approach allowed me to gain insight into their experiences and

learn from their voices.

The findings suggest that the COVID-19 and the move toward distance learning revealed

deep-rooted inequities that Black students and their families face each day, which were made

worse during the pandemic and distance learning. The findings also indicate that bright spots

exist in engaging Black students, parents, caregivers, and the schools that serve them, whether

online or in-person. This aligns with much of the literature on Black family engagement and

provides a window into the unique experiences of these students and families. I review my

findings in this final chapter while tying them back to the literature review in chapter two. I also

discuss study implications, limitations to this study, and recommendations and conclude with

suggestions for future research.

Review of Findings

***Finding #1: Black students and parents experienced various challenges throughout the
pandemic and distance learning: technological, social-emotional, mental, and academic
difficulties.***

The first research question investigated how Black students and their families

experienced distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. To detail, my findings extend the

scant literature reflecting how Black students and families fared in implementing distance

learning and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many studies exist about how schools engage Black

students and families, and the biases schools face when engaging these families (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016; Mestry & Grobler, 2007). Also, some literature asserts Black parents and families are equipped to passionately create partnerships with schools to support their student's learning (Graham-Clay, 2005). This study aligns with existing research, particularly the research that underscore that Black families seek to build authentic partnerships with schools. Also, the study supports findings that Black families experience bias and significant barriers to engaging with educators and schools. However, these findings contribute to the literature by examining how Black families participated in whole-school virtual learning, a phenomenon unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic is a rare occurrence, the health crisis brought to light the significant challenges Black families navigate day-to-day. A situation like the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the challenges.

Digital Divide. The research underscores the difficulties Black students and families face regarding access to quality broadband and technology. Specifically, prior studies have shown that the digital divide disparately impacts low-income, rural, elderly, handicapped, and populations of color who do not have access to computers or high quality broadband unlike their wealthy, middle-class, and young Americans living in urban and suburban communities (Compaine, 2001; Digital Divide Network, 2020). This study aligns with prior research detailing the significant challenges Black families faced. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning may have shone a brighter light on the extent of the digital divide for practitioners and the broader community.

Although Urban District #1 provided hotspots to students, access to quality broadband remained challenging for students, leaving some to purchase internet, travel to other family members' homes, find free WIFI access at fast-food restaurants and other locations to complete

assignments. When students gained broadband access, they grappled with the devices they received, how they were engaged while learning online, and logging onto their District's online platform to connect to their classes. Parents found significant barriers to affordable internet access. Further, this study adds to the literature in noting that while the focus on closing the digital divide has focused mostly on broadening access to broadband and devices, students and parents felt they lacked access to capacity-building opportunities that would aid them in utilizing this technology. Students and parents found some of the technology they received insufficient for distance learning. For example, some student participants noticed that iPads were challenging to write on and to submit assignments.

Mental and Social-Emotional Health. Prior literature suggests that Black students continuously fight against bias and bear emotional scars from systemic and institutional racism. This leads to increased anxiety, poor mental health, and reduced social-emotional outcomes. Also, research indicates that Black adults suffer from these same scars as they move into adulthood (Anderson, 2020; Cockley, et al., 2014; White, 2020). This finding confirmed this prior literature. For instance, students identified they endured stress, lack of motivation, boredom and depression when participating in distance learning. Parents also reported that they observed their students' social-emotional and mental health struggles and identified their own mental health challenges as well. My findings confirm prior research. Participants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning caused and worsened some mental health challenges. Parents reported feeling ill-equipped to support their students, their mental and social-emotional health trials. These parents and caregivers stated they lacked support from schools and other agencies to navigate ongoing distance learning and pandemic barriers.

Academic Challenges. This study contributes to the literature on the academic achievement of Black students by reinforcing the significant barriers Black students face as they participate in learning. Black students discussed challenges that researchers often place under the umbrella term "opportunity gap", including the lack of access to resources, grade-level assignments and instructional supports (Education Trust-West, 2015; Noguera et al., 2019). My study confirms these findings and expands on them by documenting these same challenges as they engaged in whole-school distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Black student participants noted the significant difficulties engaging in learning and interacting with educators. Black students also witnessed seeing their grades decline and keeping up with assignments because of the new virtual learning environment. Black parents and caregivers noted their concerns about the impact of distance learning on the academic outcomes of their students, stating that they feared their students "hadn't learned anything at all". Their observations are supported by an emerging body of research that examines the concept of "learning loss", the decay of knowledge and skills that students experience when they're not in school (Skar et al., 2021). While this study does not explore the learning loss concept, Black students did report lacking the right tools and skillsets to engage in remote learning effectively, and all students in the study preferred in-person learning over distance learning.

Finding #2 Roles and responsibilities for parents and students had to shift significantly

Despite the extensive research on family engagement, little is known about the specific contributions of Black families to student learning. The literature recognizes that schools understand parents' roles and responsibilities at home and meet families where they live to engage them more effectively (Epstein et al., 2019; Henderson & Mapp, 2022). My study underscores the importance of understanding parents' experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic

and the implementation of distance learning provide a unique window into how Black families cope with significant challenges to support their student's academic success. The education, health, and job shifts caused by the pandemic left parents adapting to a dizzying number of financial, safety, education, and other day-to-day responsibilities while balancing learning a new teaching and learning environment, their job duties, safety protocols, and being attentive to the evolving education landscape. Participants' stories challenge the deficit views that Black families cannot support their children's learning (Harry & Klingner, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002). This finding adds to the literature that, even facing tremendous obstacles including loss of income, food insecurity, and a significant health crisis, Black parents and families will prioritize their child's education. Students also experienced role changes, as many students found themselves supporting their siblings' education and supporting the livelihood of their families.

Finding #3: It wasn't all bad—school support, greater flexibility, and new tools were three positives

School Supports. While some research has examined what works for effective Black family engagement in schools (Huguley, et al., 2021), these studies do not focus on practical approaches for distance learning or during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is little literature that explores distance learning's family engagement practices and scant research that explores effective Black family engagement through virtual learning. This study contributes by describing what students and parents appreciated about distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior literature suggests that Black families enjoyed building authentic partnerships to support their students' success. Parents pointed to understanding their race and culture as essential factors in how schools can more deeply engage their families. Students and parents also noted that some educators and schools provided different types of virtual supports, like creating space before and

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after Zoom class, reaching out to answer questions, continuing to build relationships, and creating a supportive, welcoming online environment.

Flexibility. Existing research reveals Black students pointed to engagement, motivation, and independence as factors for supporting their success. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, not getting enough sleep is common among high school students and is associated with several health risks, including using drugs, and poor academic performance (CDC, 2015). My study aligns with prior literature. For instance, Black students and their parents disclosed that they and their students valued a more flexible schedule that allowed them to organize their days differently and provided space for rest. They also discussed being able to wear less formal clothes while they participated online as a bonus as they experienced distance learning. While some parents expressed concerns about these newfound freedoms, some parents recognized the advantages of a more flexible schedule.

Tools. The influx of technology compelled schools to employ new tools and activities to engage students and families. Epstein et al. (2019), outline how communities work together to build school-like opportunities, including creating family-like settings, services, and events to enable families to better support their students. This study contributes to the literature as parents highlighted the tools and services created by schools to support distance learning. Parent participants discussed receiving academic updates through various online applications about their child's attendance and academic progress, which they did not experience pre-pandemic. They referenced those innovative engagements like drive-through graduation celebrations and technology-based tools like progress reports provided by e-mail and text messages. Some parents described incentives schools employed to get students to log in and attend school. Parents also expressed empathy for schools and educators. Students, even if they had criticisms of distance

learning, also empathized with their educators. This finding supports prior literature that when schools meaningfully engage parents and students, they'll recognize and reciprocate these efforts.

Finding #4 Communication and engagement between schools, students and families had some bright spots but remained mostly challenging

Despite the recognized importance of family engagement, a family engagement gap remains—defined as a lack of connection, involvement, or relationship between families and the children's schools or teachers. Numerous studies document the communication challenges between schools and families (Fisher et al., 2011). However, Black families face distinct difficulties with communication between them and schools that their White counterparts do not (Murphy, 2010). The student and parent participants felt they experienced communication challenges between them and their schools, particularly as schools moved to distance learning and familiar structures had to transform overnight. Many participants thought communication was effective at the beginning of the implementation of distance learning but began to trail off as the pandemic wore on. While some students and parents found technology helps improve communication, other participants conveyed that technology at times made communication more challenging. They reported significant obstacles, including misunderstandings due to the use of technology. Technology coupled with already existent cultural barriers exacerbated communication difficulties.

However, the student and parent participants did identify bright spots. Notably, a small number of students and parents stated they received more communication from educators and schools during distance learning as schools used technology to e-mail, text, message, and call students and families. Participants credited this to educators who went above and beyond to

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engage students and parents in different ways. Parents expressed appreciation for communication focused on their child's academic achievement and progress. This aligns with studies that show parents, teachers, and school leaders rate academic achievement as the most important type of information to communicate is centered on academic achievement (Center for American Progress, 2020).

Finding #5 Students and parents led conversations on race and racism due to the pandemic, distance learning, and the country's racial reckoning

Countless studies suggest that due to systemic and institutional racism and classism, Black students continue to lag in academic outcomes, face harsher discipline punishments, and be identified for special education at higher rates than their White counterparts (Delpit, 2012; Howard 2015; Jeynes, 2005; Kunjufu, 2012). Fueled by media images, quarantine, fear, and outrage, students and parents began to make space to discuss race, racism, anti-Blackness, and police violence. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, while students and families sheltered at home, images of the deaths of George Floyd and others at the hands of the police propelled efforts like the Movement for Black Lives to take an even more public stand on anti-Black racism and police violence. The images and protests also led to parent and student-led conversations with family members, peers, classmates, and colleagues about these events. A person's willingness to act is dependent on how they access and use social capital to advance themselves and their community (Mosuba & Baez, 2009). Students reported leveraging their voices to create space for these conversations in classrooms and communities at without the support of the adults that surround them. After the death of George Floyd, Black parents were even more likely to have such conversations with their children and to prepare their children to experience racial bias than they were before Floyd's death (Sullivan et al., 2021). This finding aligns with this research. Parents and caregivers also had conversations with their students about

their students' livelihood and safety. Parent participants also discussed seeing education as a pathway out of the significant barriers Black students face each day. A small number of students and parents also noted some schools that made space for this discussion during their virtual classes.

Study Implications

The findings of this study make essential contributions to the body of knowledge on the impact of the implementation of distance learning on students and families during the COVID - 19 pandemic. In particular, they fill the research gap in understanding the experiences of Black students, parents, and caregivers' implementation of whole-school distance learning and the COVID-19 pandemic. As I discuss in this section, there are notable implications for practitioners and scholars. For example, the findings reveal the need for a critical understanding of how schools support families, particularly families of color, as they navigate educational shifts like distance learning. The findings also extend to other academic and technical changes that schools and school systems experience often. Families simultaneously experienced multiple academic, mental, social-emotional, financial, and technological challenges. Yet, at best, systems that support students and families tend to be siloed and, at worst, unwilling to work together. Current policies and practices need to be re-examined, re-evaluated, and changed.

Recommendations

Whole Family Social Emotional and Mental Health Supports

Recently, schools and school systems have embraced supporting students' mental health, social-emotional, and restorative needs. According to a national survey of 3,300 adolescents, nearly 33% had feelings of depression and anxiety since the closing of school buildings. Also, more than 25% reported a lack of connection to peers, teachers, and school communities

(Cipriano et al., 2020). This study highlights students' social-emotional and mental health challenges. The findings also examine the mental health and SEL challenges parents, and caregivers suffered from during the pandemic. However, SEL and cognitive health support systems within education are exclusively centered on students. This limits progress in two ways. First, by not including parents and caregivers more intentionally in these efforts, these important student supports end once students come home. However, this study shows that parents recognized these feelings in their students and often feel helpless about what to do. Secondly, parents and caregivers expressed similar feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Still, they didn't understand where to get the support they needed to help themselves and their families. Black adult participants discussed these issues openly, a departure from the narrative that discussing mental health challenges is taboo in the Black American community. The more educators and policymakers can consider how to address whole-family SEL and mental health supports, the better the outcomes for students and the adults who care for them.

Reconsideration of Integrated Supports Across Systems

There is a tendency to address the needs of Black students and families single issue by single issue. However, the study and the pandemic brought more to the surface that families often tackle several significant obstacles not at one time but together. Educators and policymakers discuss raindrops in isolation while students and families deal with entire tsunamis. As school buildings closed and distance learning emerged, students and families discussed the need to buy technology, understand distance learning, support their family's food and housing needs, and adapt to a changing job landscape. Many school systems continue to adopt multi-tiered systems of support in light of the COVID – 19 pandemic (Kearny & Childs, 2021). While these types of support are crucial, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems must

approach building intersectional partnerships with city, county, and federal agencies differently. These systems should confront educational gaps, food insecurity, housing insecurity, unemployment, underemployment, digital divide, and other vital issues in tandem. The pandemic has demonstrated the need to embrace collaboration across systems and more readily support families with a fierce sense of urgency.

The Community Schools model serves as an excellent vehicle to support more integrated supports for Black students. Community schools are a strategy that creates and coordinates opportunities with schools to accelerate student success. It serves as a vehicle for hyper-local decision-making that responds to the unique needs of each community. By bringing together the relationships and assets of a neighborhood, Community Schools can efficiently and effectively utilize resources to advance the well-being of children and their families now and for future generations.

Understanding the Cultural and Technical Gaps in Distance Learning

During the adoption of remote learning, several mainstream media articles highlighted how Black students and families embraced remote learning. For example, National Public Radio published an article entitled "For Some Black Students, Remote Learning Has Offered a Chance To Thrive" (2020). Similarly, the New York Times published an op-ed stating that Black and Brown families need distance learning, referencing a poll citing that most families of color requested both remote and in-person learning options when schools reopen (Murphy, 2021). Student and parent participants in this study did not embrace distance learning. The opposite was confirmed by the majority of students and families who preferred in-person for a host of reasons. However, families did bring light to communication and engagement challenges exacerbated by distance learning. For example, 1 parent recollected their experience of the police being called to

their house when a student typed in the chat feature "you're killing me," a cultural reference to the teacher is wasting my time. Parents also noted that they had a front-row seat to their child's education and at times wondered if the teacher was teaching their students are understood their child's specific needs. As districts combat declining enrollment, large urban school districts like Los Angeles offer a remote option. Other urban districts like New York City schools are exploring virtual possibilities. School systems must further explore how to engage students and families in this new platform, particularly for families of color, who often are left behind in traditional settings and run the risk of being even more left behind with a strong move to distance learning.

Also, studies demonstrate an ongoing digital divide for families of color (Eamon, 2004; Okwumabua et al., 2011; USC, 2021). This study revealed that although the schools and districts associated with this study did their best to provide broadband services and adequate technology to students, student and parent participants had to purchase technology and better quality broadband service as the pandemic had a negative impact on their income. More must be done to bridge the digital divide. Actions can include conducting needs assessments using student-level engagement data from distance learning to identify under-connected and disconnected students and establishing a school and community-level systems and teams that collaborate with district family engagement and technology teams in connecting students and families to available (Partnership for LA Schools, 2021).

Recognize and Invest in Student Agency

An unexpected finding emerged from this study. Parents and students recognized that the deaths of George Floyd and other Black individuals were a core part of their experience of the pandemic. These students and families led conversations centered on race, racism, and anti-

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Blackness. As studies note, an individual's willingness to act is dependent on how they access and use their social capital and other forms of capital for their benefit (Mosuba & Baez, 2009). Throughout this study, there was evidence that the pandemic, racial reckoning, and the resulting actions students had to take on, from different responsibilities to having ongoing dialogues with friends about police violence, racism, and anti-Blackness, translated into student agency. The students who attended schools pre-pandemic are markedly different from the students in classrooms today. As this study notes, students led conversations with peers and others about the Black Lives Matter movement. These experiences helped Black students employ student agency to challenge points of view on race and racism, help develop their voice and advocate for themselves. Thus, practitioners and education leaders must recognize, create space and encourage this newfound agency in classrooms and the community. Also, schools must embrace forming a different and deeper partnership with students and student leaders to inform efforts to rebuild and heal after these two pandemics.

Summary

This study advances Black student and family engagement literature by examining how these populations fared during distance learning and the COVID-19 pandemic. This critical moment allows new thinking about strengthening student engagement, developing deeper partnerships with parents and caregivers, supporting more effective implementation for distance learning, and making space for student and family leadership. This study also showed how one district and community are doing to help students during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. These findings are what educators and practitioners should focus on as they explore how to move forward, improve, and rebuild in the wake of the pandemic.

Limitations

Although the findings shed valuable light on the experiences of Black families during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of the pandemic, it is essential to acknowledge the study's limitations. The current study included participants from four schools in only 1 district in an urban area in Los Angeles. The findings may not be generalizable to other settings and populations.

The second notable limitation of this study is that I only interviewed Black families currently enrolled in middle and high school experiencing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I might have received different responses if I included elementary school students and their families or students who recently graduated high school but experienced distance learning during their senior year of high school. Thus, this study does not reflect the experiences of primary school students or those students who graduated from high school. The specific focus on only Black students, parents, and caregivers further limits the study's generalizability. This study intends not to claim that the results represent Black students and their families nationwide. Also, given that research is emerging on the impact of distance learning, this study could add to the literature around the effectiveness of whole-school distance learning and its equity implications. Further research will be needed to make broad claims.

The third notable limitation is my bias as a researcher. Although I was careful not to allow any personal preferences to affect the study, I am aware that a researcher's bias cannot be eliminated. As someone who has worked to improve the conditions of students and families of color, this study is of interest to me. Sharing a part of the identity of the Black men and women in my research, it is possible that my personal experiences and assumptions may have shaped the study design and my interpretations. In turn, my focus group co-facilitator, who does not share

my same racial background, examined the data compiled and analyzed to eliminate any bias that may have been reflected in my conclusions.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic and challenges with technology that some of my participants experienced made data collection challenging, limiting the number of participants, particularly students who took part in the study. Despite the study's limitations, the study does provide a platform for future studies to understand the experiences of Black students and their families navigating virtual learning and substantial changes to their livelihood. This study might be helpful for educational practitioners, educational leaders, policymakers, and Black students and families as they navigate through their challenges as continue to work towards leadership roles in their respective fields.

Future Research

Additional research related to Black families and students who experienced distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic should examine how other populations, including other communities of color and their White counterparts, fared to compare and contrast their experiences. Including this group could provide further insight into the challenges students face as they continue or consider taking part in distance learning or online credit recovery programs. It is also important to note that although research is emerging, there is not much known about how students and families navigated school building closures, the move to whole-school distance learning, and the impact on efforts to reopen schools and transition back to in-person learning. How have schools evolved, if at all? Have schools utilized more technology to engage students and families in an in-person setting? How have schools navigated students' and families' social-emotional and mental health needs as they return to school? More research is needed if high

schools and postsecondary institutions want to find better ways to support the persistence of Black students and their families moving forward.

During this study, I conducted focus groups when schools began to open up school buildings to welcome students back to in-person instruction. During this time, parents' and students' demands for in-person learning were high. However, students' and parents' attitudes may have changed about distance learning as they went back to school. Some reports have advanced the notion that Black students and parents prefer remote learning over in-person learning at higher rates than some of their peers (NPR 2020; Murphy, 2021). While research continues to emerge about the impact of distance learning, more research should be conducted to measure how Black students' and parents' feelings may have changed since school buildings reopened.

In addition, researching how Black students in community colleges, universities, historically Black colleges, and other person of color serving institutions could benefit systems specifically designed to support this population. Research into their practices and pedagogy and how they support their students' families could provide more knowledge about how K–12 schools can prepare and support Black students and their families. More partnerships between K-12, institutions of higher education, government agencies, community-based organizations, parents, caregivers, and students could also result in a more robust and targeted set of strategies to tackle this population's persistent support gaps.

Conclusion

Policy and Practice Recommendations

As California grapples with how to support students as they come back in person and navigate the endemic phase of COVID, there are several opportunity windows for the state to deepen support for Black students and their families in light of the study's findings.

A Black Student-Centered Community Schools Model

In the Governor's 2021-2022 State Budget, Governor Newsom allocated a record $3 billion towards the California Community Schools Partnership Program, which is likely to grow amid the state's $97 billion surplus. According to the California Department of Education, the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) supports schools' efforts to partner with community agencies and local government to align community resources to improve student outcomes. These partnerships provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement (CDE, 2022).

As my study notes, Black student and parents felt that they lacked essential resources to help them navigate distance learning and the pandemic. Also, Black students and their parents reported a range of social-emotional and mental health needs, brought on and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, their response to the death of unarmed Black people, and the continued impact of institutional and systemic racism. As California rolls out $635 million in grants, policymakers and practitioners should recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for all students. States like California should develop a community schools program tailored to Black students and their families. Districts should invest in wrap-around support services with a proven track record for moving the needle for Black students and their families. They should also reflect on how to hire and retain Black staff and faculty, an evidence-based practice to support Black student success. Also, local districts should survey Black students and parents about both programs, strategies, and goals as they implement this new program.

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Closing the K – 12 Digital Divide for Black Students

In March 2021, Congress authorized the $7.2 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF). This funding allows districts to purchase or seek reimbursements for laptops, WIFIhotspots, routers, and other eligible equipment or services. Five hundred California districts applied for the funding. Also, California has provided devices to 1.2 million students and connected almost 1 million students with broadband. The Census reports that 16 million Black people do not have computers or broadband access. Nearly all Black students and family participants expressed challenges with access to quality broadband and technology. Federal, state, and local agencies should do more to target outreach efforts to Black families. For example, some support services like Emergency Benefit Broadband Program didn't have the level of participation anticipated by the Federal Government. Outreach programs must focus on Black students and families who would benefit from this program. Also, while these programs will continue to improve, closing the gaps in technology, more must be done to help build the capacity of students and families to utilize this technology effectively. Given the disparities, government agencies should help invest in programs and organizations centered on helping Black students, parents, and families understand how to use the technology to support their education goals and day-to-day responsibilities. Lastly, while many programs have focused on those disconnected, this study has also revealed that many Black students and families were under-connected, using broadband that didn't support their day-to-day needs. As we collect data on broadband disparities, we must ensure a clear sense of under-connected students and families, including Black students and families.

Improve California's Black Student and Family Data

In 2019, California passed legislation to establish a longitudinal data system to connect education, workforce, and financial aid data to improve outcomes across the state. The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data has signed agreements with 15 education, social service, and workforce entities that allow these agencies to create tools for students, families, and policymakers to follow students and help close equity gaps. As the state tackles implementing this landmark decision, the state should improve data collection for Black students and families. This includes using quantitative and qualitative data to identify schools in need of support and develop meaningful improvement plans. Also, disaggregate data by race, gender, and ethnicity to identify gaps in access to technology and academic programs like A-G courses, AP classes, and GATE programs. Also, the Black community isn't a monolith. Disaggregate this data to identify access to vital mental health and workforce development opportunities. The state should use this data to engage stakeholders in discussion and planning on closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

Closing Thoughts

The findings from this study provide valuable insight into the challenges and benefits that Black students and their families fared during school building closures and the implementation of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspective of Black students and families, it investigated their unique experiences and how schools and school systems can better support this population of students to be successful in school, leadership, and life. Many of the study participants' perceptions corroborate existing studies about the gaps in providing support and resources to Black students and their families. However, this study broadens our understanding as it examined a specific moment when school systems needed to shift to engage in teacher and learning. Surprisingly, in response to student and parent observations, the study also highlighted the "second pandemic", recording the actions Black students and families

participated in during the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement in response to the deaths of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and countless other Black men and women. In doing so, the study confirms Black students and families' near-constant navigation of issues that impact their education, health, safety, and lives. In sum, the findings of this study provide insight into the supports and assets that Black students, their parents, their caregivers, and their schools can draw upon to help them persist in life.

Appendix A

E-mail Recruitment for Schools

Hello Principal_____,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA conducting research on Black family engagement during distance learning and the pandemic. If interested, we will randomly select Black parents to reach out to at your school site and if they are willing, these parents will participate in a focus group addressing the aim of the study. We will also ask each parent participant's consent to conduct a focus group with their student(s). We will engage other (middle/high school) students in a student-only focus group.

Anonymity is an essential aspect of this study, so your school name, parent, and student responses are anonymous and strictly confidential. Information that might connect to an individual or a school will not be shared.

If you are willing, I will share themes from the findings with you after concluding the study. I understand that addressing the pandemic and reopening schools have made this time of year very busy, so I appreciate your consideration. Would you have time to chat about the project and your school's role within the next two weeks? If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

Ryan J. Smith
Educational Leadership Program – UCLA

Hi Ms/Mr. (last name).

My name is Ryan Smith, a doctoral student from UCLA. I am hosting a parent focus group this (date) via Zoom to ask your thoughts about distance learning and the pandemic. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes, and each participant will receive a $30 gift card. Are you interested in participating?

If yes

Thank you. We'll send your information about the focus group. We'd also like to engage your student in a 90-minute student focus group with other (middle/high school) students on distance learning and the pandemic. Each student will receive a $30 gift card. Would you also give consent to engage your student in a focus group as well? If so, please have your student attend the following focus group on (date) with other students.

Focus Group Protocol with Students

I'd like to first thank you for being willing to participate in the focus group. The point of our research is to understand your experiences with virtual learning during the pandemic, and I appreciate you sharing your experience with me.

There are no right or wrong answers or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel. You also can skip answers if you do not feel comfortable discussing it.

If it's okay with you, I will be recording our conversations.

This focus group interview should take no longer than an hour and a half. Any information obtained in connection with this study that can identify you will remain confidential.

I will primarily ask questions about your educational experiences with virtual learning and during the pandemic.

Before we begin the focus group interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions]
If questions arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions. After the focus group interview is over, you will receive a $30 dollar gift card.

Introduction

1. What is your name? What high school/middle school do you attend? What grade level are you in?
2. Where do you live?
3. What do you do for fun? Did that change since the pandemic?
4. How has the pandemic been for you?
5. How has your family been affected by the pandemic?
6. Did your responsibilities change during the pandemic?
7. What was hard about the pandemic?

Academic Experience/Virtual Learning during the Pandemic

1. How was your experience learning from home?
2. Describe a typical day for you when you were doing virtual learning.
3. What types of technology did you use to do schoolwork?
4. How difficult or easy is it to use distance learning technology (computer, tablet, video calls, learning applications, etc.)?
5. Did you have reliable wifi or internet service for schoolwork?
6. How would you describe your home space? Noisy? Quiet? Busy?

7. What did you like about virtual learning? What did you like about school during the pandemic?
8. What did you not like about virtual learning? What did you not like about school during the pandemic?
9. Are you learning as much now as you were before switching to remote learning?

Support at Home with School
10. Did someone at home help you with school? How?
11. How did your family support your learning during the pandemic?
12. Can you tell me about a time when your family helped you out with school?
13.

School Support for Families
1. What resources did your school provide for you and your family?
2. How did the school communicate with you? With your family?
3. Do you feel your school met your needs and your families? How?
4. Are you getting all the help you need with your schoolwork right now?
5. Are there adults at your school you can go to for help if you need it right now?
6. How often did your teachers reach out to you individually?

Racial Reckoning
1. Did you have conversations in class about what was happening related to the Black Lives Matter Movement? Or things related to race or racism?
2. Do you have conversations with your friends related to race and racism? If so, what are they?
3. What are your thoughts on racism?
4. Have you ever experienced racism in the last year? Can you tell me about the experience?
5. Do you feel your race has impacted you? How?

School Reopening and Conclusion
1. What are your thoughts about the new school year?
2. How would you like to be learning right now?
3. What changes to school would you like to see your school make for the new school year?
4. What suggestions do you have for students that might help improve their experience during the pandemic?
5. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

If you all do not have any other thoughts, can I stop the recording?

Conclusion
Thank you all so much for your participation in this focus group. We have learned so much and appreciate all your insights. Before we disconnect, we would like to make sure we have the correct email addresses/numbers to send you all your gift cards.

Focus Group Protocol for Parents and Family Members

Intro

I'd like to first thank you for being willing to participate in the focus group. The point of our research is to understand the experiences of students and their families with virtual learning during the pandemic. I appreciate you sharing your experience with me. Your participation and your thoughts matter, and we hope they'll inform the work of schools and districts.

There are no right or wrong answers or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you think and how you think. You also can skip explanations if you do not feel comfortable discussing it.

If it's okay with you, I will be recording our conversations.

This focus group interview should take longer than an hour and a half. Any information obtained from this study that can identify you will remain confidential and your personal identifying information will not be shared with anyone.

I will be asking questions about your experiences during virtual learning and the pandemic and questions about your family, race, and the racial reckoning. Again, if you are uncomfortable answering any questions, just let me know, and we will move along. When we say student, we mean your child (children) or family member(s) who participated in distance learning.

Before we begin the focus group interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions]
If questions arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions. After the focus group interview is over, you will be compensated $30 as a token of gratitude for your participation in this study and for sharing your expertise and knowledge with me. **Do I have your consent to begin this interview?**

Introduction
Cluster #1 Introduction

1. What is your name and age?
2. What is your student or student(s) name?
3. What grade levels are they in?
4. How did you experience this past year and a half during the pandemic?
5. Did your responsibilities as a parent change during the pandemic?
6. What was hard or difficult about the pandemic for you?
7. Is there anything that changed during the pandemic that you enjoyed?

Academic Experience/Virtual Learning during the Pandemic
1. How was your student's overall experience participating in remote learning?
2. What types of conversations did you have with your students participating in remote learning?
3. What did your child like about remote learning during the pandemic?
4. What did you or do you like about remote learning?
5. What did your child not like about school during the pandemic?
6. What did you or do you like about remote learning?
7. How did your school support your students during remote learning?

School Support for Families
1. During remote learning, how did the school communicate with you? With your child?
2. Are you satisfied with how often and how school staff communicates with you about your child?
3. What were some conversations you had with school staff this past year?
4. Do you feel welcome in your child's school?
   0. If yes, what does the school staff do that shows you that you are welcomed?
   1. If no, what could the school do differently that would make you feel welcomed?
5. Is there anything else you would like us to know about what is important to you as a child's education?

Racial Reckoning

Did you have conversations with your child about what was happening in the world related to the George Floyd incident and other exchanges centered on race and racism?
1. Did the school communicate anything to you about the conversations related to race and racism?
2. What are your thoughts on race and racism in America?
3. Have you ever experienced racism in your child's schooling in the last year?
   0. Can you tell me about the experience?
4. Have you ever felt your child has had academic pressure tied to their racial identity?

School Reopening and Conclusion
1. What are your priorities for your child's education for this upcoming year?
2. What are your thoughts about the new school year?
3. Any worries or questions?
4. How would you like your child to be learning right now?
5. What changes to school would you like to see your school make for the new school year?
6. What suggestions do you have for families that might help improve their experience during the pandemic?
7. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

If you all do not have any other thoughts, can I stop the recording?

Conclusion

Thank you all so much for your participation in this focus group. We have learned so much and appreciate all your insights. Before we disconnect, we would like to make sure we have the correct email addresses/numbers to send you all your gift cards.

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