

On the Rebound: Critical Race Praxis and Grassroots Community Organizing for School Change

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Published online: 26 July 2012
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Abstract This ethnographic research was conducted over a three-year period, and documents the efforts of a committed group of parents and community members who through community-based research sought to address the disproportionate underachievement of African American students within their city’s public school system. Specifically, the parents and community members who make up the group Parents of Children of African Ancestry (POCAA) offer a refreshing theory of action that explicitly addressed issues of racial inequity, and called upon the larger community to respond with the urgency the youth deserved. In effect, POCAA challenges dominant views of African American parents and re-envision their involvement in school reform as a site of radical resistance.

Keywords Grassroots community organizing · Critical race praxis · Equity · School reform

Introduction

In early January 2001 in a small firehouse in West Benton,¹ a university town in Northern California, citizens from a wide range of professional and personal backgrounds came together with offerings for a symbolic pot of stone soup. Their ingredients came in the form of monetary support, research, time, and extra hands. They all came together to stand behind a newly formed parent group, Parents of Children of African Ancestry (POCAA) that had sparked an excitement, curiosity, and energy across the city. “Energy,” as the former Benton NAACP representative

¹ Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used for all personal and institutional names.

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put it, “that comes from discontent...fired by the fact that the Benton public school system has failed [our] kids.” Much of what the group has accomplished since then has followed the initial stone-soup concept that they began on that cold winter morning:

We are not starting out with much. We have a vision of what we want for these struggling children, and we have ideas about how to achieve our vision. But we need all the sectors and individuals of our community who influence and care about our children to bring the resources and ideas they have and put them into the pot so that we can collectively nourish and educate these children (POCAA Intervention Plan).

This article tells the story of majority African American parents and grandparents who came together out of an urgent need to address persistent and damaging inequities that were disproportionately affecting their youth at Benton High School. The formation of POCAA inspired a movement in the city of Benton that challenged two key assumptions. First, the perception that parents, specifically parents of color, who may not follow conventional parental involvement activities do not care about their child’s education. Second, by highlighting structural inequalities within Benton’s high school, POCAA challenged existing, flawed dominant understandings of the education of students of color. Primarily, that the students themselves had a lower aptitude for learning and also, that the existing racial “achievement gap” was deep-rooted and therefore impossible to remedy.

As their story unfolds it also becomes apparent that the work of POCAA in many ways poses a challenge to traditional modes of school reform. Unlike traditional reform that often ignore issues of race and power (Oakes and Rogers 2006; Fine 1993). POCAA’s strategy revolved around building upon the inherent political power of the most marginalized of stakeholders, in this case African American parents and youth. POCAA also challenged traditional models of reform by clearly naming the reality as an urgent crisis for young black youth, and called for quick, precise action and response. In the end, POCAA offers a counter narrative on grassroots organizing for school change that centers on the building of community capacity, of creating power, and the offering of hope grounded in urgency.

In this article, I focus on two key aspects of their process and argue that POCAA’s theory of action can serve as a lesson in grassroots community organizing that leads to effective change. The first is the process by which the group organized themselves and mobilized the community. This is followed by the POCAA initiated intervention program, which served the dual purpose of mobilizing the African American community and addressing academic underachievement of its youth. Before sharing POCAA’s story, I will contextualize their work in both the growing field of grassroots organizing for school change and as Critical Race Theory Praxis (Su 2007).

Conceptual Framework

This article pays particular attention to the employment of organizing as a technique to address educational inequities. The United States has a long and rich history of

social movement building and organizing around issues of economic, racial and social justice. Often included in these movements are collective actions towards educational justice. This was seen for example both during the Civil Rights movement, with the creation of Freedom Schools, and in the Chicano youth movement's direct actions (walk outs) to fight oppressive schooling structures. More recently, communities across the country are engaging each other to find creative ways to challenge school districts plagued with funding disparities and inequitable, and often dehumanizing, schooling structures (Warren and Mapp 2011). POCAA, along with other groups across the country such as Mothers on the Move (MOM) a community organization in the South Bronx, provide living testament to community members impacting school policy through the "intentional building of power" (Lopez 2003, p. 1).

At the heart of this type of grassroots community organizing is the notion of relational power (Warren 2005) activated by the collective engagement of key stakeholders within school communities. Most often, parents and youth who have experienced marginalization due to race, class, language or immigrant status, stand to gain the most from an improved educational system. As opposed to more traditional forms of parental involvement in schools, which often exclude working parents, such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), grassroots organizing efforts are focused attempts to build community power. This is an especially powerful tool in communities that have been historically deemed "powerless" in negotiations with schools. This affirmed community power can then be used to influence change in institutional policy, practices and structures. In doing so, families who are often deemed as uninvolved, become active citizens and as a result are often seen by the larger school community as a resource.

Key outcomes of this type of organizing, specifically in regards to building of collective power, are the development of community leaders, the building of relationships, and the raising of critical consciousness (Warren 2001; Warren and Mapp 2011; Anyon 2005; Stovall 2005). Recent scholarship suggests that community groups working towards educational change are on the rise. For example according to Warren and Mapp (2011), the number of active groups across the country numbers approximately 500.

Although community organizing for school change is grounded in a rich history and offers a hopeful opportunity for resistance and movement building, scholarship in the area is still relatively new. One aspect of this emerging field is the focus on obstacles or challenges to successful organizing initiatives. One such challenge is the deeply held cultural beliefs regarding community involvement and academic achievement. Oakes et al. (2006) describe these beliefs more broadly as "cultural logics." The authors go on to state that there are three main cultural logics that shape the ways in which people make sense of the disparate schooling experiences and outcomes experienced by various groups of students: "the logics of scarcity, the logic of merit and the logic of deficits" (p. 3). The first refers to "scarce" educational resources, which simply put, means there exists a finite amount of resources that can be invested into public schools and therefore not all youth can and will have access to "quality" education. The second refers to the belief in a system of meritocracy, while the third adheres to deficit thinking which views "low

income children, children of color, and their families as limited by cultural, situational, and individual deficits that schools cannot alter” (p. 4). Taken together the three forms of cultural logics frame the dominant narrative regarding educational opportunity and outcome. In the case of this particular study, these three forms of logic framed the ways in which the larger community and schools responded to, and in many cases, resisted the work of POCAA.

At the same time one of the most effective ways to challenge and change the above “cultural logics” is when marginalized groups can articulate their own counter-narratives. Counter narratives allow for the “challenging of privileged discourses” by providing voice for marginalized communities (DeCuir and Dixson 2004, p. 27). Su (2007) frames this work as critical race praxis, which highlights the ways in which community organizing groups, specifically made up of communities of color, translate critical race theory (CRT) into practice. In this way, the very parents and youth who are often silenced through the pervasiveness of dominant cultural logics can actually carve out a space to voice their own construction of what education broadly, and pedagogy more specifically, should look like.

A brief review of CRT scholarship is included to provide rationale for the use of critical race praxis. CRT grew out of a concern, within legal scholarship, of the absence of a race analysis within a society steeped both in racism and in “colorblind” neutrality. CRT recognizes racism as endemic to daily life and argues for the re-centering of the experiential knowledge of those voices most often excluded from the dominant discourse (Yosso 2005). In recent years, scholars in the field of education have used CRT as a way of analyzing racial inequities in schools and the ways in which communities of color, in particular, respond. Yosso (2005) defines CRT in education, as both a “theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) go on to describe CRT as an act of transformational resistance by exposing “deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered and classed experiences as a source of strength” (p. 26).

Even more recently scholars in the field of education have made the explicit link between CRT and educational organizing (Stovall 2005; Su 2007). These scholars draw on the work of earlier CRT scholars, Tate et al. (1993), who cite the active engagement of parent and community involvement as a key force in challenging educational policy that results in the perpetuation of racial inequality in our schools. Works such as Stovall (2005) and Su (2007) consider the crucial role of organizing in contributing towards educational justice and change for historically marginalized communities of color. Specifically Stovall (2005) urges CRT scholars to move from beyond the confines of the academy and engage in scholarship with communities and community based organizations to “challenge hegemony in urban schools” (p. 12). Su (2007) goes on to suggest that we should:

“Examine the everyday practices, patterns of inequality, and results of real-life struggles for racial justice. In the context of education policy, this means community organizing should be an integral component of policy-making, as

this is how people of color might get a chance to voice their vision of what good pedagogy and education looks like (Tate et al. 1993)” (p. 532).

Within this framework, grassroots community organizing is a way of answering CRT’s call for action. Through critical race praxis, groups such as POCAA can “construct visions of alternative pedagogy and education policy in drastically different ways” (Su 2007, p. 546). The following section outlines the methods I used to collect data.

Methods

This multi-year study, grounded in a combined-methods approach, took place over three years in Benton, a city with a population of approximately 100 thousand people. Specifically, this study utilized both critical ethnography (Madison 2005) and participatory action research (Hall 1992; Cammarota and Fine 2008) to examine the ways in which Latino and African American parents and community members organized within their respective communities to address a racial achievement and opportunity gap at the local high school. This article focuses in on one specific aspect of this larger study, the process and outcome of POCAA’s organizing. As I will show, the work of POCAA was aimed at changing specific structures and practices within the high school toward greater equity as well as building civic capacity within their own community.

I utilized a critical ethnographic approach to both capture and reflect POCAA’s political purpose of overcoming unjust schooling experiences. Madison (2005) describes critical ethnography as work that probes “beneath the surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (p. 5). POCAA took a courageous stand against a perceived injustice with the hopes of creating alternative possibilities for their youth. In the hours I spent with POCAA members in school board meetings, in homes, and in classrooms, it was clear that the research had to be represented and analyzed in ways that furthered this political project. Fine (1994) discusses the role of the critical ethnographer as taking “a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives” (p. 17).

POCAA is a group made up of working and middle class, professional parents who have children or grandchildren attending school in the Benton Unified School District. Although most in the core group of parents are African American, there are a few general members of POCAA who are white mothers of inter-racial children. The core group was comprised of one male participant and 11 women. POCAA began as a loosely structured organization, coordinated by a steering committee. Parents, grandparents, and guardians of children of African Descent were invited to join. Originally POCAA held monthly meetings on the first Saturday of each month. During times of greater activity, the group met more frequently, often several times a week. Following is a brief description of the data collected and its analysis.

Data Collected

This analysis draws primarily on interview and observational data collected to investigate the following: parent group members' perspectives on community organizing and school reform; the impact their work had on schools, youth and community; their motivation for joining POCAA and finally as a means of documenting a grassroots school reform effort. I came to my work with POCAA as a graduate student researcher involved in longitudinal research collaboration between Benton high school and the local university's School of Education. POCAA had developed a relationship with the research collaboration in order to access previously conducted data on the high school. Due to the trust established between POCAA and the research collaborative, I was asked to serve as an historian for the group. In this new role I was charged with documenting their ongoing organizing, research and planning process. I later was also involved as a member and researcher of a parallel parent/community group based in Benton's Latino community (Fuentes 2009; Fuentes 2011).

My role as historian with POCAA involved many hours of participant observations of approximately 30 POCAA meetings, interactions with local school officials, and in the intervention program, Rebound, the group implemented at the high school. I was in charge of writing up the minutes for each meeting. I also assisted/observed in Rebound classrooms, attended mandatory parent meetings with POCAA's intervention program parents and weekly school board meetings for the duration of their organizing. During all of the above opportunities for participant observation, I kept detailed ethnographic field notes.

Supplementing the field notes, I conducted structured and semi-structured interviews as well as informal conversations with teachers and parents along with informal conversations with the youth in Rebound. Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. In addition to conducting interviews and taking meticulous field notes, I was also intimately involved in the organizing, research and education processes of each of the three distinct parent and community groups (one of which was POCAA) over the course of three years. During this time I also collected articles written in the local newspaper, which had a dedicated reporter who covered the entire process.

Data Analysis

During the three year period in which this study was conducted, POCAA members were engaged in various levels of community organizing and actions around Benton High specifically, and Benton Unified School District in general. For this paper, the bulk of my analysis focuses around the design and implementation of the Rebound program implemented at Benton High School and the subsequent community organizing that evolved out of this action. It is important to note that the specific moment highlighted in this paper is situated within a larger analysis of a complex reality that led to and followed the action. In this paper, I will explore both the specific organizing moment (leading to and during the Rebound program) and

discuss possible emerging principles that transcend the particular moment and address larger issues of educational inequality.

Specifically, I utilized both open and focused coding of field notes and interview data to identify recurrent patterns and multiple layers of meaning. As larger themes emerged from the data, I created a narrative that reflected as accurately as possible the process POCAA was involved in. POCAA members read this narrative to check for accuracy. I also triangulated certain events and experiences by comparing the interview data of all key POCAA members, and other stakeholders (including teachers, administrators and youth) in an effort to understand particular key events and moments from multiple angles. I utilize what Geertz (1973) calls “thick description” to unpack a piece of the large, complex reality of grassroots organizing for school change. I attempt in every way through my analysis, extensive work with POCAA and parallel organizing groups to provide the most accurate portrayal of the events that took place in Benton.

Findings

Seeds of Change: The Development of POCAA

Our name implies something. There needs to be a shift in terms of who is being viewed as directing something. We need to change the focus from blame to action. We are stepping forward. We want our community to know who we are and how we respond to crisis in our community (POCAA Pamphlet).

Many of the parents involved in POCAA came together out of a shared concern regarding the often-negative schooling experiences of their youth. One POCAA member, Tammy, describes the experiences that prompted her involvement:

Whenever I went to (Benton elementary school) the office was filled with African American boys called in for behavior problems. This really infuriated me, so I began to attend the schools PTA meetings, even though as the only African American mother there I felt very disconnected and stigmatized.

The bumpy terrain of the Benton Unified School District was by no means new territory to many of the parents and grandparents of POCAA. Specifically, a few of POCAA’s core members had been involved in the university/high school research collaboration as well as local organizations committed to community organizing.² Additionally, a majority of core POCAA members came to the group with the resources, skills, and social networks needed to launch a successful organizing effort. These resources and skills represented a wide spectrum of experience and expertise: long-time parent in the school district; community organizer; active member of the church community; lawyer; policy; public health; and engineer.

² Although POCAA as an organization developed in an organic manner as the parents and grandparents responded to a situation that directly affected their children and their community, it is important to note the links the organization had with the local University based research collaborative and the strength the data provided them throughout their organizing efforts.

Karen, another POCAA member, was raised and schooled in Jamaica. She spoke of the difficult transition she had moving from the majority-black island to the United States. Her upbringing was marked by the reality that class more than skin color affected the possibility of social mobility. She shared in an interview and many times with students that in her home country, “Black folk were at all spectrums of the society, in positions of power and in positions of extreme poverty.” When retelling the story of her entrance into POCAA, Karen expressed a common sentiment among the core-members: “I came to POCAA out of a personal motivation. I didn’t want my kids to be in a school where so many kids of color were failing.” Virginia, another POCAA member added to the above sentiment:

I got active as a parent in POCAA because I knew I had children and friends with children [at Benton High] who were having a difficult time. My daughter is in college now but is still affected by her Benton High School experience and by the fact that many of her peers didn’t make it.

Mark the sole male participant in POCAA’s steering committee, played an important role along with Karen in terms of outreach to other organizations and groups. He has played a significant role in the work of POCAA that has continued past their initial intervention, including taking on the directorship of POCAA and establishing a multiracial coalition, United in Action. Finally, another POCAA member was particularly well positioned to understand the internal workings of the high school. As the parent liaison in the Benton High parent resource office, Yolanda had an insider’s perspective on the student and parent experience within the high school.³

The group organized themselves around the idea that if you know what you want, what your time frame is, and what you need to do to make it happen you will be successful in creating the conditions for change to occur. They practiced under the philosophy that they were all leaders of the group. They set aside specific times to share personal stories so that when it came time to meet they could focus on the issue. They had a firm agreement that they would never meet just to meet. Their main goal was to establish a POCAA presence in the city. According to group members it was essential that they attend and be an active part of citywide discussions and agreed to have at least one POCAA member attend all relevant meetings.

Starting with an initial meeting convened by Yolanda in the school’s parent resource office, POCAA began an intensive collaborative process of education, research, and action. In this first meeting the parents addressed the question of whether or not their children’s spirit would be broken or enhanced as a result of attending Benton schools. After sharing stories it became clear that the situation for students of color was one of crisis and in need of urgent action.

³ This “insider’s perspective” was important in many ways. For example, it provided POCAA access to an institutional memory they would otherwise not have. Also, since Yolanda was a trusted member of the larger African American community and the school community, her position within the school allowed POCAA somewhat easier access to teachers, administrators, and community.

A Plan of Action

“Our challenge is to do what has not been done before, rather than repeating what has already been proven to fail” (POCAA Intervention Plan).

In response to a rumor that students of color within the entering class of 2004 were disproportionately failing, POCAA embarked on what would become their first major involvement with the high school during which their name would be established across the city of Benton. The group began by sending a letter to the high school principal and the school board requesting a profile of the ninth graders who were at risk of failing during the Fall semester of 2000. The data they asked for included the number of students failing one or more core courses, student demographics, interventions already in place, as well as any recommendations they may have. In reviewing the data, the parents saw that educational opportunity and overall academic success seemed to have a direct correlation with a student’s race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. In fact at the time of this study, data on overall student achievement at Benton High School⁴ showed that more than 50 % of the African American ninth grade students completed their freshman year with a grade point average below 2.0 while less than 10 % of White ninth grade students completed their freshman year with a GPA below 2.0. Similarly, nearly fifty percent of African American and Latino students who entered Benton High in the ninth grade failed to graduate in four years, and among those who did graduate few complete the course requirements necessary for admission to state university system. These same students also made up the overwhelming majority of students who were suspended or expelled for disciplinary reasons.

POCAA found that in the first semester at Benton High, of 890 ninth graders of the class of 2004, as many as 150 were receiving F’s in two or more core academic courses, and 250 students were receiving an F in at least one. Of these 250 students, all but one was African American and Latino with the overwhelming majority being African American. The group realized that the chances for these ninth graders to graduate, much less go on to college, were slim at best. The first step the group took was to organize their data and come up with a plan of action, followed by a special meeting with the Benton School Board to present their findings and enlist the board in addressing the high rate of failure.

Following this initial school board meeting and within approximately two weeks, POCAA developed an 18-page intervention plan entitled “A Proposal: Plan of Action on Behalf of Underachieving Students in the Benton Unified School District.” Their plan was grounded in the acknowledgement that the factors that contribute to the academic failure of students of color are complex, multi-faceted, and interrelated and that all key stakeholders shared responsibility for creating and addressing the problems. Yet the goal of their intervention was simple and direct:

⁴ At the time of this study, the student demographics were as follows: 37 % White, 32.7 % African American, 10.8 % Latino, 8.3 % Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.6 % American Indian, and 10.6 % other/mixed race.

For intervention to be successful, it needs to be appropriate and intensive enough. Each succeeding intervention that fails increases the sense of hopelessness, frustration and anger. The interventions proposed here are designed to satisfy a very specific goal: Every ninth grade student will be given the support they need to complete the state and high school grade level requirements for ninth graders and be prepared to enter the tenth grade (POCAA Intervention Plan).

POCAA's Plan of Action called for an intervention for 250 ninth graders who would be given the opportunity to get "back on track" to graduate in four years. The students would undergo an intensive two-semester worth of work during the spring and summer in order to make up for classes they had previously failed. All students in the program were required to take a reading class, double period Algebra, Ethnic Studies, combined with a "Steps-to-Success" elective focused on motivation, organization, student culture, and leadership. Class size would be limited to 12 students per teacher. The plan required parental participation, weekly assemblies, and weekly advising.

POCAA's 12-member steering committee conducted an intensive organizing and outreach campaign. Essential to the groups' effort was the creation of a planning process that included parents, students, teachers, administration and other members of the community as "equal partners in the development of a solution." POCAA established guiding principles to ensure that this particular process was informed by and held accountable to their beliefs in equity, collaboration, genuine dialogue, trust and sustainability (see Table 1). To initiate this effort, POCAA held the previously mentioned Stone Soup luncheon at the local firehouse, which turned out to be an extremely successful and positive community-organizing event. Approximately 85 people were in attendance and among those present were members of the Benton City Council, current and past members of the school board, representation from the mayor's office, members of the Benton chapter of the NAACP, members of the Benton Black Firefighters Association, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens. Each person received a copy of POCAA's Intervention Plan, a pledge form where they could indicate how and in what ways they could help get the Plan implemented, a list of resources needed, a request for funds which clearly listed what the funds were needed for, and finally an endorsement letter request. The event culminated in a delicious stone soup meal that represented the collective contributions of everyone. POCAA received overwhelming public support both in terms of community backing and \$40,000 in donations.

Less than a month after presenting their Plan of Action and armed with public support, POCAA went in front of the school board to hear the district's decision on whether to implement the program or not. All but one board member approved the plan and offered district funding to serve 50 of the 250 students and hire three teachers.⁵

⁵ The group was given district approval to search and hire their own teachers. None of the three teachers held California Teaching credentials at the time of hire. One teacher was in the process of getting her credential, while another teacher as one of the core members of POCAA.

Table 1 Guiding principles for POCAA planning process

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1. *Listen and learn:* The timeframe for developing and implementing solutions is extremely short, however, we want the learning process to provide for listening and understanding. We will work to facilitate mutual learning and capacity building amongst community groups, rather than perpetuating dependency and opposition.
 2. *Combine and focus:* We are seeking to create focus by choosing to initiate an intervention program within a “high impact” area strategically selected for demonstrable results.
 3. *Create community participation:* We want to emphasize participatory decision-making that enables collaborative partnerships and encourages local initiative, volunteerism and community-based leadership.
 4. *Build upon local networking:* We will work to link local initiatives to broad existing networks.
 5. *Create cross-community linkages:* We want to link community- and university based professionals into the planning process.
 6. *Work toward sustainability:* We will emphasize the need to integrate economical and socially sustainable approaches to planning and programs.
 7. *Invite scrutiny and evaluation:* We will work with and document different approaches to report and disseminate lessons learned about action-based community development, establishing the basis for continuous professional and community learning.
 8. *Involve the students:* We believe our students are an incredible asset and we will work to unleash the talent, drive and capacity of our students (p. 4).
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A Space of Possibility: “Rebound” and the Challenge to Inequity

On the first day of POCAA’s proposed intervention, 53 students accompanied by their parents entered Benton High’s Community Theater to begin their second chance at a successful ninth grade experience. Due to the limited spaces, priority went to those students who were failing three or more courses, followed by those failing two or more. Additionally, students were given priority if they were referred by the onsite parent resource center. Of the final 53 students all but one were Latino and African American (21 were female and 32 were male).

The program began with a three-day orientation where speakers welcomed the families into the newly constructed community with exaltations like: “We believe in you! We believe in your potential to be the best that you can be!” “You are our motivation.” “I am speaking to you from a place of parent, teacher, grandparent, community, and those that are not able to be here in front of you.” The program, while proposed by POCAA, was designed for students of any ethnicity who were struggling academically. While the majority of these students were African American, POCAA did send out a very clear message that all students would be welcome and supported.

During the first three days of intensive orientation, the students decided to name the program “Rebound.” They decided on this name since the space was providing them a second chance to succeed. According to Yolanda, POCAA member:

Students named the program Rebound because they felt like in the game of basketball. If the ball goes up to the backboard and rebounds, you get a second chance at another shot. And so that’s what they said that this program would do for them, educationally give them a second chance at improving

themselves and becoming successful and being able to graduate from Benton High School.

Teachers, students, and parents were required to sign a contract that outlined their specific responsibilities with regards to communication and participation. POCAA members designed the core structure (including classroom pedagogy and curriculum) of the Rebound program based on the following educational pillars: high academic expectations, rigorous academic content, regular and consistent contact with families/home and finally, teacher, student and parent accountability.⁶ Once the teachers were hired, POCAA held “trainings” on how to incorporate the educational pillars into the classroom. The newly hired teachers also contributed to the overall curriculum design.

POCAA’s educational pillars, or norms, were evident in Rebound’s Algebra class. This specific class was modeled on the ideas put forth in Dr. Robert P. Moses’ Algebra Project (Moses and Cobb 2001). The Project is based on the belief that math literacy, and algebra in particular, provides disenfranchised communities with the keys to economic access. Out of the traditions of the civil rights movement, the Algebra Project suggests that becoming an active citizen not only requires literacy in reading and writing but in math and science as well.

Karen’s algebra class provided students with the tools to understand the language of math, and also with an understanding of themselves as “learners, participants and leaders” (Moses and Cobb 2001). In my observations of this particular classroom, I was able to witness students who had been previously labeled as “difficult,” “troubled,” or “slow learners” laboring alone or in groups on complicated algebra problems. Most of the days I observed her classroom parents were present, either volunteering or observing their child. The walls of the classroom were covered with quotes, rules, and agreements.

Rebound was set up as a small learning community within the larger high school. The structure of the program was largely in response to the large, impersonal, and alienating structure of the high school. POCAA held the idea that if the students who were at the lowest levels in terms of academic achievement were provided with caring and supportive learning environments they may be able to effect change in the persistent and ever-growing achievement gap.⁷ According to one POCAA member, the role of Rebound was to “help students who had not done well academically to begin engaging their many strengths in a caring environment where they are respected and supported, and where they are expected to succeed.”

Rebound students completed the same core courses as all other ninth grade students at Benton High and were held to the same, or in some cases higher, academic standards. The students were allowed one elective course and one foreign

⁶ It is important to note that POCAA worked closely with members of the fore-mentioned University based research collaboration as they designed the intervention program. This means that they had professional educators and researchers help in the design and implementation of the program.

⁷ In fact, the curriculum offered mirrored that of Benton High’s ninth grade, yet the way the curriculum was presented, the pedagogy, class size and the expectation that the students could be successful was vastly different. For example, each teacher focused on “progress” made, assured that all students participated in meaningful ways, and had strong connections with students’ families.

language course. They all attended weekly assemblies on Mondays especially designed to motivate the students for the week. Students also attended a special class that helped with coping, study, and organizational skills. All of the students were paired with an adult mentor and provided additional community supports when needed. The four teachers were also paired with students and families so that each family had a main contact amongst the Rebound staff to address questions and concerns.

In my conversations with Rebound students they all described the program as a supportive and caring space. Knowing everyone in all of their classes, knowing what is expected of them, feeling supported and cared for by adults in the program and using their minds were among the many reasons the students praised the program. According to one Rebound parent the size and sense of community in the program contributed to the students' positive interactions with each other and with the teachers: "Students are happy because teachers care about them. Rebound has a lot of love and that is 50 percent of what is needed. Care, and then the students will open up!" Finally the student representative on the school board in describing the Rebound program said, "This is about nourishing minds and souls."

Ten weeks after the Rebound program began the teachers and students evaluated their progress. Karen and Mark shared the results at a POCAA general meeting at the end of April. What they found was that of the 53 students who began the program 48 students remained. Of the 48, 15 still had one or more F's. In an effort to shift focus from "failing" to one of "progress," Karen drew a graph of the students who were still failing Algebra yet had made significant gains. For example, some students started her Algebra class with an average of 28 and ten weeks into the program had an average of 48. This focus on successes changed the way the students felt about failing and gave them a sense of hope in terms of their continual progression. Karen also showed that at the ten-week point, a small group of students still had attendance problems. However, the majority attended class on a regular basis and 33 of the 48 were passing with some making straight A's. In addition the teachers and POCAA members were building strong relationships with all of the parents, creating welcoming spaces both inside the classrooms and at community meetings. Karen framed these results by saying: "We wanted to prove that the kids had it in there somewhere, we wanted to show that it was not an impossible problem."

Through the Rebound intervention POCAA engaged in an aggressive effort to tackle the racial achievement gap by working with the kids who were suffering the most academically. There were several other by-products of their effort. The following are examples of these by-products based on interviews with teachers, students, and researchers from the university/high school collaboration:

1. They were able to tackle the culture of the students who had given up on being "schooled" and given these students a second chance at receiving an education. Students were motivated, and kids were changing their mindset about what school can be (Interviews with Rebound teachers and students).
2. Teachers' perceptions of students were also challenged. If the students at the lowest ranks in terms of achievement started showing progress, teachers would

have to re-imagine these students as not only deserving of an education, but as educable beings (Interviews with Rebound and Benton High teachers).

The Rebound program proved to be an effective intervention, and for seven months it showed the city that changing the structure and the belief system around who is considered to be a successful student is a possibility.⁸ Nearly all of the students that enrolled in the program were back on track by the time they entered the tenth grade. Rebound in many ways highlighted the systemic (and by all means alterable) conditions in the high school that year after year worked to reproduce academic failure for students of color. As Noguera (2000) points out in a comparative analysis of the United States and Barbados, the racial achievement gap has nothing to do with the children and everything to do with the values and priorities of the society in which we live.

Redefining Involvement: “Rebound” as a Tool for Organizing Community

POCAA’s clearly stated mission was to not only address the crisis of academic underachievement of students of color at Benton High, but also to organize the parents of these students in order to more effectively make demands of the school. Therefore, POCAA included in their Plan of Action specific strategies to assure parental participation on a variety of levels. Parents were encouraged to take ownership of the program and of their students’ educational experience. One example of this was the parent advisory committee established to provide input on the direction of the program. In addition, all parents of Rebound students were expected to participate in the program and encourage others in the community to become involved.

POCAA members described the first parent meeting a “gush fest.” Parents expressed joy that their children were being responded to, cared for, and educated. As a result of the structure POCAA set for parental participation, 85–90 % of parents were showing up to meetings and to the school site where previously they had felt uncomfortable and unwelcome. At Rebound meetings parents shared stories about their interaction with the program and overall described their reception as encouraging and helpful. Often parents would show up unannounced to check in on their children. On one occasion a father, visiting Karen’s class, approached the door and saw that his son was not paying attention and was laughing and fooling around with other students. The father entered the classroom, excused his son, and took him home. The following day the student arrived and apologized for his behavior. Karen later reported that she had no problems with this particular student after that.

The parent meetings were planned around two central objectives: to gauge the types of support parents and families need from the school and to build community. Often parents expressed frustration with the high school and felt unaware of how to navigate what seemed to be a complicated and unfair system. Due to this lack of

⁸ The district only funded this particular intervention for a seven-month period with funds that were not renewable. The board believed at the time that there were several interventions already in place to support struggling students. Towards the end of the seven months, POCAA went in front of the board to extend the intervention but the board denied their request citing a lack of funds.

navigational and social capital, POCAA also utilized the meeting space in order to explicitly teach parents about the structures and practices in place at the school site so that they can be better positioned to hold the school accountable when needed.

In creating Rebound, POCAA presents an active challenge to the logic of deficit that views parents of color as non-involved in the education of their children. With Rebound, POCAA created a space for parents to participate and become empowered as change makers for the benefit of their children. One parent was quoted as saying, “I didn’t know the skills I had until I started participating in the school.” While another parent approached the school board at a meeting to evaluate the program stated, “I’ve never addressed you. This is the first time I address the board but I am very impressed with Rebound.”

In reflecting on the Rebound program, Karen commented on the group’s intentional use of the intervention program as a tool for mobilizing community. She stated, “We never saw Rebound as something that would continue past this intervention. We don’t believe in the program part. New programs are created all over the nation to address the achievement gap and still continually fail. We have no intention of repeating what has already been proven to fail. Rebound was a strategy for mobilizing parents, plain and simple.” POCAA did not see their success or failure hinged on a program or in relation to a failing school; yet, they located their obvious success in the relationships formed between parents. This organized group of parents went on to successfully lead a small school reform at Benton High School with the intention of creating learning environments similar to those in Rebound.

Resistance and Opposition to POCAA and Rebound

The story of POCAA and Rebound within the context of Benton High School raises the question of what happens when parents from communities that have been traditionally marginalized and discouraged from participating in schools step up and make demands? POCAA’s organizing efforts within communities of color and primarily in the African American community, as well as their successful implementation of the Rebound program, provoked an unexpected response from the high school, the board, and many citizens of this liberal town. Benton likes to pride itself on being at the forefront of social change. In fact as a community, Benton has very little tolerance for overt expressions and manifestations of racism. In an interview that appeared in major local newspaper, POCAA member Karen urged Benton “to stop tiptoeing around the issues and acknowledge that the failure rate and dropout rate are directly tied to race. It is really about low expectations of students of color.”

In line with CRT Praxis, POCAA’s worked to bring issues of race and equity to the core of each discussion. As Jay (2009) points out “one of the important features of CRT is its insistence upon acknowledging and examining the subjective manifestation of race” (p. 681). Because of this, it became quite difficult to ignore the blatant inequities that exist and this awareness brought with it a range of opposition and resistance. In varying ways the city of Benton, the school board, and pockets within the high school actively stood in the way of the change POCAA was proposing (and implementing). Beginning with resistance within the high school,

this section outlines the ways in which all three of the above sectors voiced their opposition, symbolically or through overt means.

Logic of Scarcity: Resistance Within Benton High School

As is true in society in general, the other side of racial inequality is racial privilege. Therefore, the same institutional practices that contribute to the large numbers of black and brown students at the bottom rungs of educational performance help to reward and privilege upper middle class and/or white students at Benton High (Noguera and Yonemura-Wing 2006). This system of inequity is built into the policies, procedures, and culture of the school. Many teachers, administrators, and parents whose students were successful, responded to POCAA with fierce opposition. Following Oakes et al. (2006) notion of cultural logic, and the logic of scarcity in particular, when social privileges are challenged, those who have benefited fear that the privileges they enjoy will be greatly reduced if others start to benefit from them as well.

The fear and anxiety over change made Rebound's temporary existence at Benton High a very hostile one. The reality is that small learning communities were not new to the high school. At the time Rebound began two very successful small schools already existed within the larger high school, albeit each with a different student makeup. Rebound was the first small learning community dedicated to the bottom 6th percentile, majority students of color, and as a program was perceived very differently from the other small learning communities, which were welcome enclaves within the large high school. Primarily, Rebound was seen as a program that was subtracting resources rather than as something that would benefit the whole school community. In a letter to the Benton City Council, POCAA suggested that Rebound be seen as a beneficial contribution to the entire school community since class sizes in the ninth grade were lowered (by removing the 50 students) and fewer students were hanging out in the halls. POCAA urged the larger Benton community to understand that the success or failure of one student has an effect on all students. "Even if your teenager is not failing a courses, your students education is directly affected by the struggles, discouragement, and loss of hope already experienced by as many as one-third of their fellow students" (PCAD letter to Benton City Council). The group also urged the school community to understand that the persistent underachievement of Latino and African American students has an effect on students' perceptions and belief systems in regards to race and academic achievement. As one POCAA member pointed out, "Although a white child may be getting an excellent academic education at [Benton High] students can't help but develop ingrained social ideas based on what they see around them."

The reaction POCAA and Rebound received from the school was one of distrust, resentment, and fear. For example, school counselors refused to help Rebound students because of the conflict surrounding the program. Yolanda, of the Parent Resource Center, reported that many teachers and administrators treated them rudely after the implementation of the Rebound program. Similarly even though several teachers supported Rebound and opened their classrooms to the new teachers, there was an overall air of hostility around the program. Many teachers

within the already existing small schools felt that their work with struggling students had been slighted. Other Benton High teachers resisted making accommodations for the new program and often expressed resentment about having to give up classroom space or prep times for a program that was receiving special funds. As one teacher stated, “Rebound was a blow to the ego because what we were doing before obviously wasn’t working.” Finally, many teachers expressed concern of holding high expectations for students who were seen as failures. As one teacher stated at a school board meeting, “Maybe we will frustrate kids by having the expectation that they will pass.”

In an interview with Karen one afternoon in her classroom, she broke down and told me how difficult it was to keep morale up in an atmosphere of such hostility. These subtle and often times not so subtle, indignities and demeaning messages experienced by members of POCAA and teachers and students in the Rebound program are what many CRT scholars refer to as microaggressions (Yosso et al. 2009). Overall POCAA members experienced both institutional and interpersonal microaggressions that for the most part they responded to by building a stronger sense of community and continually naming the reality. As Yosso (2005) points out, “when the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice” (p. 74).

Logic of Deficits: Perceptions of Parent Involvement

The Benton School Board was the most consistent opposition POCAA faced. With so much public spotlight on POCAA and their urgency in dealing with the large numbers of students of color who were struggling at the high school, it was difficult for the board to reject the group. Yet, throughout the planning process and implementation phase of Rebound, the board in subtle and not so subtle, ways tried to undermine POCAA’s presence and power. The board’s opposition was seen most clearly in the structure of the board meetings, discourse of the professional versus non-professional, and finally in the ways the board labeled the parent group as “angry parents.”

During the period of POCAA’s organizing, the group appeared before the board on several occasions. Often at these meetings, the group was positioned as the last item on the agenda. This translated into group members waiting until 11 or 12 at night to present their concern or progress report. At almost every board meeting POCAA was able to organize large numbers of parents and community members to attend. As a result the boardroom was often filled with supporters (as well as a small handful of opponents). Yet, by the time the board discussed their concerns very few people remained. This response to POCAA and its supporters contradicted the discourse around the need for parental participation, especially within communities of color. Many group members described years of experience with the schools, the board, and the district urging parents to participate. Yet, as they stood before the board as an organized body, it seemed as though their concerns were met with a collective deafness: “They whine about black parents not getting involved with their kids, but when we develop a sensible plan, they ignore us.” POCAA responded to this disrespectful treatment by turning their attention away from the board and

directly to the community. At a meeting in which the board announced its plan to drop Rebound, POCAA member, Karen literally turned her back on the board as she spoke to the public that had gathered in support:

This body is not listening, they do not try to understand and do not care. We need another forum seeing that these Wednesday night meetings are not working. You all [board members] have developed a thick skin when it comes to hearing complaints and concerns of people of color. I have a lot to say but this board isn't who I need to direct my words to...(turns to the audience) the people who I want to speak to are here.

Through interactions with POCAA, it became apparent that board members were unable to see the group members as “concerned parents.” Instead they attempted to label and dismiss them as a group of angry and hostile parents who went beyond the acceptable boundaries of parent participation. This stance was opposite the stance taken when affluent and/or white families advocated for their children. This advocacy was considered and valued as parental involvement. When this group of African American parents did the exact same thing, it was considered political and inappropriate. One of the ways that racialized assumptions and racism play out (explicitly) in the school settings is through deficit thinking (Yosso 2005). In this case, the knowledge POCCA members brought to the board was silenced and marginalized and the members were considered to be lacking in necessary knowledge and skills to create meaningful, effective policy. Specifically, the board made clear that the role of parents was not to create policy. “To think that parents can dream up a working plan over Christmas is ridiculous.” Another board member went on to say, “How dare you think you can storm in here and expect us to make educational policy based on your demands!”

Many in the city of Benton accused POCAA of concerning themselves only with the plight of African American students and often labeled the group as separatist and hostile. The local media praised POCAA's ability to reach out to all sectors of the Benton community and simultaneously labeled the group in the public eye as angry activists as opposed to caring parents. Terms such as “angry,” “frustrated,” “activist,” and “pressure group” were used to describe the group in local media and in turn in public conversations around their efforts. The racialized imagery of the angry parent surfaced in rumors that floated throughout the city and was used as a means to delegitimize their efforts. At one board meeting the Benton representative of the NAACP, stood up and asked that the city and the board put a stop to such rumors: “Many people are stirring up the white population. They are saying that here are hordes of black parents waiting to beat them up. We want this to stop!”

Throughout POCAA's grassroots organizing campaign and in the Rebound program, the group engaged with others in the community with a collaborative spirit. Specifically POCAA reached out to members of the wider school community and to a parallel organizing group in the Latino community. The members were consistently clear as to the urgency of the situation for both the African American and Latino communities in Benton. Even though they attempted in different ways to create what Su (2007) refers to as “meaningful bridging spaces” based on a narrative of shared responsibility, their critique of the dominant school paradigm

met with fierce resistance. Yet, even within this context the group was able to successfully build an agenda for social justice by placing issues of equity and race at the center of discussion within the city of Benton. By utilizing cultural resources and assets available with the African American community, POCAA worked to shift the lens away from a deficit view to one of collective identity and group consciousness that lead to concrete change. These changes primarily came about by engaging with community around issues that mattered to them. Members in the church community became more involved in matters at the school and in the city. The city turned to the POCAA leaders for advise, and made a point to include parents and community on district wide committees. This collaborative spirit eventually lead to the formation of all-city and district wide equity task forces that are made up of multiracial coalitions working towards effective school change.

Conclusion and Implications

CRT poses a challenge to traditional educational scholarship by focusing analysis both in and outside of schools themselves. Specifically, in documenting the growing number of grassroots movements across the country that are actively challenging racial inequity in urban schools through a critical race theory lens, CRT scholars bring voice to an often untold story and present new narratives on radical school reform. Utilizing CRT as both theory and practice, or in other words, praxis, allows scholars to move beyond the confines of academia, and work with and alongside community organizations and parents that are actively creating counter narratives on what it means to be a youth or parent of color in an urban school. Stovall (2005) calls for CRT to follow its legacy of expansion (from legal studies to education) to include such praxis as an essential component of educational research. In their discussion of Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) discuss the importance of CRT and LatCrit theory as an “antissubordination and antiessentialist project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community” (p. 312).

POCAA created a strong network of parents that collectively worked to nurture the youth of the community and in the process illustrates the power of critical race praxis towards change. The group had a very clear, consistent objective: placing issues of equity at the center of the dialogue and mobilizing parents of the bottom 6th percent. Their strategy was to consistently pressure the school from perhaps the most legitimate domain—the parents. In the process POCAA was able to effectively build social capital by developing parent leadership and mobilizing collective power. The group was also able to have a direct impact on school policy and student achievement, specifically with the implementation of Rebound, the success of the Rebound students, and their later involvement in a small school reform effort.

Their story has direct implications for practice. In an era of increased criminalization of youth, and dehumanizing schooling experiences, the Rebound program offers a hopeful peek into what is possible when students are expected to succeed and are taught within in an empowered community. In fact the program provides an example of the positive ripples that come about when a new discourse

for the academic achievement of African American youth is created. These ripples impact the teachers, students and larger community. In closing, POCOA provides a powerful counternarrative that works to shift the dominant discourse or logic of deficit, from one of blame to one of commitment. Their process of inclusion and their decisive action models the new relationships needed for effective school change to occur.

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