

# Black Male Principals' Engaging Black Parents in Urban Charter Schools

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the strategies employed by Black male principals to foster and sustain parent engagement in urban charter schools with a predominantly Black student body. Grounded in Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement and Bass's (2020) theory of Black Masculine Care (BMC) reveals that these principals leverage their cultural understanding and community connections to establish trust, facilitate open communication, and create a welcoming school environment. The findings highlight the importance of representation, visibility, and culturally responsive practices in promoting meaningful parent engagement. The study concludes by offering educational leaders and policymakers recommendations to enhance parent engagement in urban charter schools.

**Keywords:** black male principals, parent engagement, urban charter schools, Black Masculine Care, culturally responsive practices

## 1. Introduction

Parent engagement is a critical factor in student achievement and overall school success. However, traditional models of parent involvement often fail to account for the unique cultural and social contexts of Black families in urban charter schools. This study addresses this gap by examining the strategies employed by Black male principals to foster and sustain parent engagement in these schools. By drawing on Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement and Bass's (2020) theory of Black Masculine Care (BMC), the research explores how these principals leverage their cultural understanding and community connections to create a more inclusive and supportive school environment. A growing body of research has supported the assertion that parent engagement positively impacts student achievement (Fan & Williams, 2010; Shumow & Schmidt, 2014; Zhang et al., 2011). In a longitudinal study, Liu and White (2017) concluded that parental engagement enhanced schools' academic performance and served as a deterrent to student dropout rates. Johnson et al. (2016) investigated the openness and willingness of Hispanic mothers to engage in their children's learning processes despite language barriers for clarity. They explained how this involvement increased the English proficiency of their children. Parents desire to engage in their children's education (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Johnson et al., 2016).

## 2. Literature Review

This comprehensive literature review delves into the intricate landscape of Black parent engagement, aiming to understand how Black male principals activate and sustain this engagement in urban charter schools with a predominantly Black student body. The review explores the evolution of the term "parent engagement," its significance in academic and social success, and the unique challenges and opportunities it presents in urban school settings. It also examines the pivotal role of principals, particularly Black male principals, in fostering parent engagement and the importance of understanding parent engagement from the perspective of Black parents. Finally, the review discusses the Black Masculine Care (BMC) framework as a valuable lens for understanding how Black male principals demonstrate care and empathy in their leadership practices.

### 2.1 Parent Engagement: An Evolving Concept

The concept of parent engagement has undergone a significant transformation over time. "Parental involvement" initially describes parents' participation in school activities and events. However, this term often implied a one-sided relationship where schools dictated the terms of involvement and failed to acknowledge the cultural and

social context of Black families. In contrast, “parent engagement” signifies a more profound, reciprocal partnership between parents and educators, emphasizing shared responsibility and decision-making in a child’s education (Epstein, 1995). This shift in terminology reflects a growing recognition of parents as active contributors to their children’s learning, both within and outside the school environment.

### *2.2 The Importance of Parent Engagement*

A wealth of research supports the positive impact of parent engagement on various aspects of a child’s educational journey. Studies have shown that parental engagement can enhance academic achievement, improve students’ attitudes and behavior, increase school attendance, and reduce dropout rates (Day & Dotterer, 2018; Nunez et al., 2015; Zaff et al., 2003). Moreover, parent engagement can strengthen the bond between teachers and parents, increasing parent confidence and trust in the school (Deslandes et al., 2015). Additionally, the connections are fostered by in-person interactions. The ability of students and teachers to build their bond, which directly impacts student achievement, is critical (Wilson & Ankrum, 2021).

### *2.3 The Role of Principals in Parent Engagement*

Principals play a pivotal role in fostering parent engagement. Their leadership style, communication approach, and commitment to building relationships with parents significantly influence parental involvement. Research suggests that principals who actively seek parent input, create opportunities for collaboration, and demonstrate care and empathy are more successful in engaging Black parents (Jeynes, 2018).

Ankrum (2016) discusses the importance of parent involvement in education and the impact of socioeconomic status on parent-teacher communication. The author emphasizes that teachers should view parents as partners in their children’s education, irrespective of their socioeconomic background. This aligns with the current study’s focus on Black parent engagement in urban charter schools, highlighting the need for equitable and inclusive approaches to parent involvement. Ankrum’s (2016) research suggests that socioeconomic factors should not hinder parent-teacher communication and that schools should actively work to engage all parents in their children’s education. This perspective resonates with the current study’s exploration of strategies employed by Black male principals to foster parent engagement, underscoring the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive school environment for all families.

Ankrum (2016) stated, “Teacher leaders are an untapped resource in schools’ Research supports that distributing leadership and empowering teachers to take ownership of the school is a way to increase the academic aptitude of schools.” In this qualitative study, researchers explored Black male principals’ strategies to engage Black parents in urban charter schools. The study revealed that these principals often leverage their cultural understanding and community connections to establish trust and open communication with parents. This finding aligns with Ankrum’s (2016) assertion that empowering teachers, often community members, can enhance the school’s academic aptitude.

### *2.4 Black Parent Engagement*

The literature on Black parent engagement highlights the unique challenges and opportunities of fostering meaningful partnerships between Black parents and schools. Historical and systemic inequities and socioeconomic factors can create barriers to engagement. However, research also emphasizes the resilience and resourcefulness of Black parents, who often leverage their cultural capital and community networks to support their children’s education (Tillman, 2007). The literature underscores the importance of culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and value Black families’ diverse experiences and perspectives. The literature also highlights the need for schools to build trust, establish open communication, and create a welcoming environment that empowers Black parents to participate actively in their children’s education (Drakeford et al., 2017).

### *2.5 Black Male Leadership in Schools*

The research on Black male leadership in schools explores the unique contributions and challenges these leaders face. Black male principals often serve as role models and mentors for Black students, providing them with representation and inspiration (Howard, 2008). They can also leverage their cultural competency and community connections to build trust and foster positive relationships with Black parents (Gause et al., 2015). However, Black male principals may also encounter stereotypes and biases that can hinder their effectiveness and create barriers to their success (Chapman & Donnor, 2015). The literature emphasizes the need for more significant support and mentorship for Black male principals to navigate these challenges and thrive in their leadership roles.

### *2.6 Black Masculine Care Framework*

Bass’s (2020) Black Masculine Care (BMC) framework offers a valuable lens for understanding how Black male

principals demonstrate care and empathy in their leadership practices. The framework challenges traditional notions of masculinity and highlights Black male leadership's nurturing and supportive aspects. BMC emphasizes the importance of cultural humility, racial identity, and community consciousness in fostering a caring and empowering school environment (Bass, 2020). The literature on BMC is still emerging, but it provides a promising framework for understanding the unique contributions of Black male principals and their potential to create positive change in urban schools.

In conclusion, this literature review underscores the multifaceted nature of parent engagement, particularly in the context of Black families in urban charter schools. It highlights the importance of understanding this context's unique challenges and opportunities. It emphasizes the need for culturally responsive approaches that empower Black parents and foster meaningful partnerships between schools and families. The research also underscores the significant role of Black male principals in creating a supportive and inclusive school environment that values and promotes parent engagement. However, there is a need for more research to understand the specific strategies employed by Black male principals to foster parent engagement and the impact of these strategies on student outcomes.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Participants*

The study involved 15 Black male principals from urban charter schools in the northeastern United States. These principals were selected based on their experience and leadership in schools with a predominantly Black student body. The participants' experiences and perspectives provided valuable insights into the strategies and challenges of engaging Black parents in urban charter schools.

#### *3.2 Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to understand Black male principals' lived experiences and perspectives regarding parent engagement in urban charter schools. The phenomenological approach explored the principals' subjective interpretations and meanings associated with their engagement strategies and experiences. The study aimed to capture the essence of these experiences and provide rich, descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

#### *3.3 Data Collection*

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement and Bass's (2020) theory of Black Masculine Care (BMC). The interview questions were designed to elicit the principals' perspectives on various aspects of parent engagement, including communication strategies, challenges, successes, and the role of race and culture. The interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, ensuring convenience and accessibility for the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

#### *3.4 Data Analysis*

The data analysis process involved several steps. First, the transcribed interviews were carefully read and reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity with the data and identify initial patterns and themes. Thematic analysis was then employed to code and categorize the data systematically. The coding process involved identifying recurring patterns, concepts, and ideas within the principals' narratives. The codes were then grouped into broader themes representing the study's key findings. The data analysis process was iterative, constantly comparing and refining the codes and themes. Qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization and management of the data, aiding in identifying connections and relationships between the codes and themes. The findings were presented through rich, descriptive narratives that captured the essence of the principals' experiences and perspectives. The analysis also included direct quotes from the participants to illustrate the key themes and provide authenticity to the findings. The study's conclusions were drawn based on the identified themes and patterns, supported by evidence from the data. The decisions about the existing literature and theoretical frameworks were also discussed, contributing to the broader understanding of Black male principals' strategies for fostering parent engagement in urban charter schools.

#### *3.4 Discussion*

The findings also underscore the importance of addressing trauma and fostering care and love within the school community. These principals leverage their cultural understanding and community connections to establish trust, facilitate open communication, and create a welcoming school environment. They prioritize building relationships

with parents, being visible and accessible, and engaging in “real talk” about the challenges faced by Black families. The findings also underscore the importance of addressing trauma and promoting care and love in the school community. The study’s results align with Bass’s (2020) theory of Black Masculine Care (BMC) by emphasizing the importance of care, cultural humility, and racial identity in the leadership practices of Black male school leaders. The nurturing, relational, and socially conscious approaches exhibited by these leaders reflect the principles of BMC and contribute to positive outcomes in their schools and communities.

### 3.5 Hypothesis

The study did not explicitly state hypotheses, but it aimed to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How do Black male principals activate and sustain Black parent engagement in urban charter schools?
- 2) How does race matter in how Black male principals engage Black parents in urban charter schools?
- 3) How do Black male leaders demonstrate caring practices that nurture parental engagement?

## 4. Results

The study’s findings revealed several key themes related to the research questions:

- 1) **Relationships:** Black male principals emphasized building solid relationships with parents based on trust, understanding, and mutual respect.
- 2) **Visibility:** Principals highlighted the significance of being present and visible in the school environment, particularly during arrival and dismissal times and school events.
- 3) **Real Talk:** Principals engaged in open and honest conversations with parents, addressing sensitive topics such as race, privilege, and societal implications.
- 4) **Trauma:** Principals acknowledged the trauma experienced by Black families due to systemic racism and historical injustices, emphasizing the need for understanding, empathy, and culturally responsive communication.
- 5) **Care and Love:** Principals emphasized creating a caring and supportive school environment where students feel seen, loved, and valued.

### 4.1 Hypothesis One

The study did not explicitly state hypotheses. However, the findings related to Research Question 1 suggest that Black male principals activate and sustain Black parent engagement through relationship building, effective communication, and providing opportunities for parent participation.

### 4.2 Hypothesis Two

The study did not explicitly state hypotheses. However, the findings related to Research Question 2 indicate that race plays a significant role in how Black male principals engage Black parents. The shared racial identity fosters trust and understanding, enabling principals to address the unique challenges faced by Black families.

## 5. Limitations of the Study

Simon and Goes (2013) defined dissertation limitations as factors beyond the researcher’s control. The most significant limitation of this study was the lack of in-person access due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person contact allows for observing nuanced aspects of qualitative research, such as body language and facial expressions (Saggese, 2023). The limited in-person contact hindered the ability to capture these subtle cues.

Data analysis in qualitative research can present challenges for novice researchers. According to Roberts et al. (2019), qualitative research can sometimes omit salient details in analyzing articles, making it difficult for novice researchers to replicate strategies when analyzing data. Some instances call for a more experienced researcher to make connections between materials while extrapolating data. As noted in Chapter 1, this study was limited to urban charter schools and did not include other types of schools, limiting the generalizability of the results. Lastly, this study was limited to Black male principals only. The lack of perspective from other principals (e.g., Black female principals) limited the scope of the study’s results.

As a self-identified Black male school leader, my experiences with the transition process may have influenced the study. Any potential biases were carefully considered, and strategies were developed to enhance objectivity. One approach to address subjectivity was through reflexive journaling. Laidlaw et al. (2022) highlight the value of journal entries:

Journal entries, which record and recall the development of our thinking during a research process and eventually present them to research participants, peers, and other audiences, must undoubtedly be considered among the best

research practices; they are an appropriate praxis of academic rigor (p. 8).

I was reviewing my journal entries, which aided in self-reflexivity. Another strategy for mitigating bias involved analyzing my practices and critically examining my role as a researcher about the research phenomenon (Gregory, 2020).

## 6. Recommendations for Future Research

This research critically examined the experiences of Black male school leaders, focusing on their practices in urban charter schools. However, limitations necessitate extending this research into broader contexts. First, this study sample was geographically limited and centered on charter schools in the Northeast, which may not fully encapsulate the diverse experiences of Black male school leaders across the United States. This limitation may also impact the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational settings. Future researchers should expand the scope to incorporate Black male principals from various academic settings and geographical areas, enhancing comprehension of their experiences and impacts across different contexts.

The dominant literature on school leadership has primarily focused on white male leaders, leading to an underrepresentation of Black male school leaders. This skewed representation has consequently influenced the available theoretical frameworks and relevant literature informing this research. Future researchers should endeavor to diversify theoretical frameworks that focus on the experiences of Black male school leaders. This focus will address this limitation and enrich the literature on Black male school leadership.

Social desirability bias may have influenced participant responses, potentially leading to a positive self-portrayal and compromising the depth and accuracy of their shared experiences. Strategies such as ensuring participant anonymity and employing indirect questioning should be considered to mitigate this bias in future studies. The contextual specificity of this research has further limited the generalizability of the findings. School size, location, demographics, and leadership structures vary across educational settings. Future research should include a diverse sample encompassing various types of schools, locations, and demographics to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation was the potential for researcher bias in data interpretation and analysis. Future researchers should consider employing additional strategies to mitigate these biases, such as integrating a peer review process, practicing reflexivity, and utilizing data triangulation.

The study did not comprehensively explore intersectionality. Instead, it focused primarily on the experiences of Black male school leaders without fully accounting for the intersection of multiple social identities. Future studies should consider the role of intersectionality and examine how numerous social identities—such as those of persons identifying as LGBTQ+, having disabilities, or belonging to other historically marginalized groups—shape the experiences of Black male school leaders.

Exploring the experiences of Black male school leaders has far-reaching implications, potentially benefiting various stakeholders, including charter school leaders, educators, policymakers, parents, students, and academic researchers. Future research should also examine the policy implications of increased representation and support for Black men in school leadership positions. This could involve studying the impact of initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership and identifying effective strategies for recruiting, retaining, and mentoring Black male educators aspiring to leadership roles.

Adopting a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework post facto in a study examining the practices and experiences of Black male principals at urban charter schools can critically analyze the research findings and illuminate the nuanced ways in which race and systemic racism intersect within educational settings. CRT posits that race and racism are central and endemic to social systems and institutions, emphasizing how these constructs affect marginalized communities, particularly people of color.

Had the study incorporated CRT from its inception, it would have approached the data through a lens focused on the systemic influences of race and racism. For example, the emphasis on relationships and communication between Black male principals and Black parents could have been examined through the lens of power dynamics and as a form of resistance against institutional inequalities. This perspective could have revealed how these interactions serve as a bulwark against the marginalization of the Black community within broader educational structures.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the visibility of Black male principals, which could have been dissected as a form of counter-storytelling, actively disrupting prevailing racial stereotypes and hierarchies. CRT would argue for a critical look at how much visibility challenges and deconstructs the monolithic narratives often imposed on Black men in leadership positions.

In addition, CRT would likely have highlighted the racialized aspects of care and love demonstrated by Black male principals. This framework would prompt a more profound discussion of how these expressions of care subvert the dehumanizing stereotypes traditionally associated with Black masculinity and showcase a form of leadership that reconciles authority with empathetic and community-oriented practices.

Lastly, the theme of trauma experienced by Black families, as identified in the study, would be re-evaluated through a CRT lens as a symptom of structural racism. CRT would advocate for a deeper exploration of how systemic oppression not only perpetuates trauma but also shapes educational experiences and outcomes. It would also consider how Black male principals act as agents who navigate this trauma, fostering environments where healing and resilience are possible.

Applying CRT to the study's findings would have provided a more robust critique of the educational landscape. It would have highlighted the intricate ways in which race and racism shape the experiences and strategies of Black male principals in urban charter schools. It would have offered a richer understanding of the complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in pursuing equity and justice in education.

In conclusion, there is a significant need to examine the perspectives of Black male school leaders in urban charter schools who live in different cultural contexts. Due to charter schools' unique organizational context, the lived experiences of Black male charter school leaders differ from those of traditional school leaders. Understanding these exceptional experiences and challenges is crucial for fostering more significant equity and effectiveness in educational leadership across various contexts.

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### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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## Appendix A

Appendix A includes the survey questions used in the study, providing a detailed overview of the data collection instrument. The questions cover various aspects of parent engagement, including communication, involvement, decision-making, and the role of race and culture.

What does parent engagement mean to you in the context of Black parents in urban charter schools?

To what degree are Black Parents engaged at your school? a. Probe: How do you measure this level of engagement? Probe: What strategies do you recommend for parents to activate and sustain Black parent engagement?

What systems, structures, strategies, or approaches have you implemented to develop increased engagement with Black parents? a. Probe: How do you measure the success of implementation?

What does good Black parenting look like to you? a. Probe: How might good Black parenting differ from how parents of other races parent? b. Probe: Tell me a story when you experienced good parenting on behalf of Black parents in your school.

How does the school communicate with parents, and at what cadence? a. Probe: Is the one preferred mode of communication used versus others, i.e., phone, in-person, email, and cell phone? b. Probe: What do Black parents say are their preferred contact methods? c. Probe: What are the differences (if any) between how Black parents like to be communicated with versus parents of other races? d. Probe: Who initiates conversations, and how often?

What opportunities are provided to Black parents to volunteer in the school? a. Probe: How are these volunteer opportunities different from the traditional ones in schools that are often white-centered?

How does the school support parents in leveraging learning outside of school? a. Probe: As principal, what strategies do you recommend to parents to aid their students in leveraging learning outside of school?

What role do parents play in school decision-making? Academics? Behavioral supports for students? Enrichment processes? Funding and budgetary implications for the school? Hiring?

How should parents be engaged in parent leadership opportunities within your schools? Can you share a specific example of how parents have taken on leadership? a. Probe: What strategies do you use to increase parent capacity to lead?

How do you define your own racial identity?

How would you describe your interactions with Black parents? a. Probe: Tell me about the best and worst interactions with a parent. b. Probe: How does race play a role in your interactions?

What are the advantages (if any) of identifying as a Black male principal while engaging Black parents in urban



charter schools? a. Probe: Disadvantages (if any).

How have you leveraged your racial identity as a Black male school leader to encourage Black parents to be more engaged?

What does care leadership look like to you? a. Probe: How might care leadership look for leaders of other races engaging Black parents? b. Probe: Tell me about a time when you exhibited care leadership.

What does it look like to nurture parent engagement? a. Probe: Tell me about when you created a nurturing environment for parents to engage.

How do you show parents you care about them and their students? a. Probe: How might this differ with leaders of other races interacting with Black students? b. Probe: Tell me about a time when you were nurturing a student.

What are the benefits (if any) of showing Black students you care about them?

Do you believe your school values your perspective on engaging Black parents? If so, how? If not, why not? a. Probe: How do you measure if your school values your input?

Where have you felt the most successful partnering with Black parents in your school? a. Probe: Can you share an example of this success? b. Probe: How do you measure the success of partnering with Black parents?

What kinds of conversations would you describe as difficult when engaging Black parents? a. Probe: What strategies do you use to make these conversations less difficult? b. Probe: How has your thinking about working with Black parents evolved over the past three years? c. Probe: What do you wish your younger self would have known?

Is there anything we missed that you would like to share about how you engage Black parents?

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