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Refusing Detroit's Public School Failure: African American Women's Educational Advocacy and Critical Care versus the Politics of Disposability

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Abstract: This article highlights a narrative study of African American women educational advocates in Detroit and the political resistance they enact to combat the inequities of structural educational failure and disempowering neoliberal dynamics. The Detroit advocates have challenged the traditional public educational system as volunteers, family members, community activists, elected officials, and/or professional educators. The author discusses the advocates' perspectives, experiences, and improvement strategies in light of Detroit's complex, market-based educational landscape. Findings pertain to the advocates' efforts to respond to educational and communal loss, family engagement barriers, insufficient school choice options, and concerns about privatization. Their narratives comprise counter-stories that illustrate theoretical notions of critical care and traditions of Black women's political resistance used to combat the politics of disposability that hinder many urban communities. The

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author concludes the article by indicating how the Detroit advocates' work can inform broader efforts to improve urban education.

Keywords: Neoliberal politics; African American education; African American women; advocacy; activism; school choice; caring

Rechazando la idea del fracaso de la escuela pública en Detroit: Mujeres afroamericanas defensa educativa y cuidados críticos contra las políticas de marginalización

Resumen: Este artículo describe un estudio de las narrativas de mujeres afroamericanas que defienden la educación en Detroit y las resistencias políticas que utilizan para combatir las desigualdades estructurales de fracaso escolar y las dinámicas neoliberales de desempoderamiento. *Los defensores de Detroit* han desafiado el sistema de escuelas públicas tradicionales como voluntarios, familiares, activistas comunitarios, funcionarios electos y / o profesionales de la educación. La autora analiza las perspectivas de esos *defensores* y de sus experiencias y estrategias de mejora llevados a cabo en la compleja situación de Detroit en un panorama educativo basado en el mercado. Los resultados de la investigación señalan los esfuerzos de los *defensores* para reparar pérdidas educativas y comunitarias, las barreras a la participación de las familias, opciones escolares insuficientes y su preocupación por la privatización. Las narrativas son contra-historias que ilustran las nociones teóricas de cuidados intensivos y tradiciones de resistencia política que mujeres negras usan para combatir políticas de marginalización que imponen barreras a muchas comunidades urbanas. La autora concluye que el trabajo de los *defensores de Detroit* puede ayudar a otros esfuerzos más amplios para mejorar la educación urbana.

Palabras-clave: políticas Neoliberales; educación afroamericana; mujeres afroamericanas; defensa; activismo; selección escolar; cuidado

Rejeitando a ideia do fracasso da escola pública em Detroit: Mulheres afro americanas defesa educativa e cuidados críticos contra as políticas de marginalização

Resumo: Este artigo aborda um estudo narrativo de mulheres afro-americanas que defendem a educação em Detroit e as resistências políticas que elas implementam para combater desigualdades estruturais do fracasso escolar e as dinâmicas neoliberais de desempoderamento. As defensoras de Detroit têm desafiado o sistema educacional público tradicional como voluntários, membros das famílias, ativistas comunitários, funcionários eleitos e / ou educadores profissionais. O autor discute as perspectivas das defensoras, bem como suas experiências e estratégias de melhoria trazidas à luz na complexa Detroit, em um panorama educativo baseado no mercado. Os achados da pesquisa referem-se aos esforços das defensoras para responder às perdas educacionais e comunitárias, às barreiras para o envolvimento das famílias, às insuficientes opções de escolha escolares e suas preocupações sobre privatização. Suas narrativas constituem contra-histórias que ilustram noções teóricas de cuidados intensivos e tradições de resistência política das mulheres negras usadas para combater políticas de marginalização que impõem obstáculos a muitas comunidades urbanas. O autor conclui o artigo indicando como o trabalho das defensoras de Detroit pode informar esforços mais amplos para melhorar a educação urbana.

Palavras chave: políticas Neoliberais; educação afro americana; mulheres afro americanas; defesa; ativismo; seleção escolar; cuidado

Introduction

In cities like Chicago, New Orleans, and Detroit exclusionary politics contribute to the “gentrification, displacement, and containment” of people of color (Buras, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 87; Pedroni, 2011). Such cities have historically been vital community spaces for ethnic groups of color (Buras, 2007), yet they are now identified as “dying,” “disasters,” and centers of “urban decay” in need of outside rescuing when it comes to their business and educational affairs. A prominent disaster-savior discourse typically coexists with the “politics of disposability” (Giroux, 2006, p. 11; Means, 2008, p. 1). The politics of disposability or “disaster” refers to a stream of politics stemming from neoliberal practices that limit governmental provision of public services and resources and promotes privatization. In turn, these politics perpetuate the disinvestment of urban public institutions and communities, and often pathologizes people of color living in urban spaces (Buras, 2007; Giroux, 2006; Means, 2008, Saltman, 2007). All these political dynamics contribute to the shaping of climates in which public schools along with the children attending them are devalued and placed at risk to fail.

Detroit, Michigan, is a city that has been acutely affected by neoliberal politics while also experiencing devastating economic blows, staggering racial segregation and poverty levels, along with underperforming public schools. The city’s socioeconomic struggles have been captured in national and international news, with headlines deeming Detroit as “education ground zero” by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (Welch, 2009, para. 1). Less noted about Detroit, however, is its resilient and socially conscious citizens who strive to improve communities, schools, and uplift youth. This article will highlight findings from a narrative study of such people, namely African American women educational advocates in Detroit who demonstrate critical care in the face of what they perceive as externally controlling and discarding tactics that undermine the city’s public education system and its students. This and other research points to the historically strong role many African American women have played by engaging in educational advocacy and activism to benefit children in their communities (Cooper, 2007¹; Loder-Jackson, 2011; Williams, 2009).

The African American women educational advocates offer complex and nuanced viewpoints about Detroit, its schools, its youth, and its chances for recovery via public investment and coalition building rather than privatization and public splintering. The advocates’ efforts to resist inequity in Detroit’s public schools will be emphasized, including their goals, experiences, organizing strategies, and refusal to accept educational failure and disposability as an option. Specifically, the advocates’ data reveal their perspectives about educational and communal loss, inequity, family engagement barriers, insufficient school choice options, and privatization. In addition they shed light on their grassroots and institutional strategies to affect educational change both in and outside school systems. Hence, findings pertain to improving schools and students’ educational outcomes for communal versus individual good, and they address sociocultural and political factors that influence Detroit’s schools and advocacy work.

Data from the advocates constitute what is known in critical race methodology as “counter-stories” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-stories draw upon the narratives of socially and politically marginalized people of color whose knowledge and voice have

¹ The author previously published under the name Camille Wilson Cooper prior to 2012.

historically been silenced or overlooked in research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006; Rodriguez, 2010). Counter-stories challenge “master narratives” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28) of history and current phenomena that embed colorblind analyses and deficit-based renderings of people of color to instead reveal and validate the experiential knowledge of oppressed, racialized people². In this study, data contradicts pathologizing views of urban community members of color not caring about education and/or being responsible for urban blight and institutional erosion. Instead the advocates’ narratives illustrate their critical care, solution-oriented tactics and communal investment in the improvement of public education and their city.

The Detroit advocates featured in this article have challenged the traditional public educational system as volunteers, family members, community activists, elected officials, and/or professional educators. Their collective efforts and counter-stories illustrate theoretical notions of critical care and important traditions of Black women’s political resistance (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2009; Loder-Jackson, 2011; Wilson, 2015) that are pedagogically significant to anyone interested in simultaneously protecting and improving public education.

In the forthcoming sections, I discuss historical and sociopolitical contexts related to how Detroit’s educational landscape has become a complex site of political resistance. I review critical scholarship on urban schooling and neoliberal educational reform that lend to the “politics of disposability” concept. Then I discuss literature about Black women’s political resistance to later emphasize how the participants’ counter-stories illustrate the importance of enacting advocacy and critical care to oppose disposability approaches. Critical care is “not just a common, altruistic sentiment but a power-laden activity” geared towards rectifying inequity (Cooper, 2009, p. 383). I conclude the paper by suggesting how advocacy and critical care lend to better, and more democratically, serving Detroit’s children and children in urban schools throughout the U.S. In addition, I suggest how this study stands to enrich future research and theorizing.

The City and Educational Landscape of Detroit

Known the world over as the “Motor City,” Detroit was a once bustling, economically prosperous, and industrially pioneering city home to the world’s automobile industry. Detroit is now commonly perceived as an epicenter of poverty, crime, corruption, and political and educational dysfunction (Feeley, 2011; Kampfer, 2011; Pedroni, 2011). In 2013, the city’s national and international reputation further pummeled when it became the largest U.S. city to ever declare bankruptcy (Davey & Walsh, 2013), and its former mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, received one of the harshest prison sentences of any U.S. state politician found guilty of corruption (Yaccino, 2013). Detroit, as Pedroni (2011) explains, is characterized according to a “dominant racially-coded narrative of Black, chaotic, crime-ridden industrial hulk with a vision of the metropolitan region as a gleaming, dynamic, hip (and discursively white) global hub of emergent mobility technology” (p. 211). It is a city that some of its own residents regard as being “on life support” (Shakur, 2012). While Detroit is often stereotyped and unfairly pathologized, it indeed faces harsh realities.

² Critical race methodologies emerged from critical race theory’s emphases on acknowledging the centrality and permanence of race, valuing racially and culturally relevant epistemologies based on people of color’s lived experiences, and infusing macrolevel analyses of oppressive marginalizing forces. See Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N.K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research. Second Edition*, pp. 257-277.

In the 1940s, Detroit was a racially and culturally diverse city of nearly 2 million at its socioeconomic height. Today, it is one of the most segregated cities in the U.S. Of its approximately 700,000 residents, nearly 83% are African American/Black and approximately 36% live beneath the U.S. poverty level, including over half of its children (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Much of the city's woes are tied to severe, decades-long population loss given the exiting of the majority of its affluent and middle class white population over the past several decades, along with its sizeable loss of middle class, African American residents (Dolan, 2013; Sugrue, 2005). Others further assert that a lack of care about and public investment in Detroit, given its racial and economic make-up further perpetuates its struggles (Pedroni, 2011; Sugrue, 2005).

The drainage of Detroit's public resources has naturally impeded its public education systems. These highly splintered, low-performing systems include Detroit Public Schools (DPS), a traditional public school system that encompasses approximately 100 schools heavily governed by a state-appointed emergency manager since 2009; and, a controversial state-run entity called the Educational Achievement Authority (EAA) that has run 15 of the city's (and Michigan's) lowest performing, public schools since 2011. A plethora of corporate-managed charter schools also operate in the city given that Michigan is one of the only states in the U.S. that does not limit the number of state-granted educational charters that can be approved. Approximately 85 charter schools operate in or surrounding Detroit with students primarily from the city (Higgins, 2014). These charter schools are operated by DPS, universities, non-profit or for-profit charter management companies (CMOs).

Detroit's educational landscape is further affected by metropolitan, tuition-based school choice programs that allow city resident youth to attend public schools in out-of-zone, neighboring suburbs if parents pay their child's per pupil fees. In total, most of the educational options yield very low student achievement scores when compared to national and statewide averages (Dawsey, 2013). In addition, the city's schools are too often plagued with a dire lack of equipment, facilities, and highly qualified and experienced teachers to adequately staff classrooms. Moreover, the State of Michigan's heavy governing hand in both the DPS and EAA school systems has diminished democratic processes and the authority once vested to the DPS elected school board. Over a decade of abysmal test scores, financial and governance corruption charges, and disturbing school crime rates have hurt the city too. All of these conditions have led to Detroit's highly contested and complex assortment of local, state, market-based, and private schools that mainly vie for the attendance of students of color from low-income families.

School closure is a widespread phenomenon in Detroit as well. Over 200 traditional public schools in DPS have been closed since 2000 (Oh, 2014), usually amidst fervent parental and community protest. Furthermore, DPS has a staggering high school dropout rate of approximately 35% (DPS, 2013); and, in 2009, DPS yielded the lowest scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test in the history of the exam (Dawsey, 2013). The majority of DPS schools still do not meet federal guidelines for Adequately Yearly Progress. These realities all exist in a district where 98% of the students are of color—with African Americans being the largest racial/ethnic group and 80% of all students qualifying for free or reduced lunch.³ DPS conditions thus exemplify how students of color experiencing poverty are systematically engulfed in inadequate educational systems, even when market-based options abound.

³ Based on analysis of district Academic Yearly Progress data found at <http://detroitk12.org/schools/ayp/>.

Neoliberal Educational Agendas and the Politics of Disposability

Since the advent of charter schools in the 1990s, market-oriented school reform options have grown in popularity signaling the significant influence that neoliberal educational agendas have had on urban schooling throughout the U.S. Neoliberal reformers typically contend that infusing public education with the principles and mechanisms of capitalism will provide effective educational solutions. As Means (2008) explains, “neoliberals privilege the market mechanism as the most ‘efficient’ and ‘rational’ tool for constructing human agency as well as for determining social and political organization,” (p. 3). Johnson (2012) further explains that, “(t)he “marketizing” educational reforms of standardized testing and tracking, charter schools, vouchers, and privatization are part of a broader context of neoliberal economic reforms” and these reforms “involve deregulation, privatizing public services, and defunding and dismantling social welfare, creating a so-called smaller government,” (p. 234). Such reforms have also led to the decreased influence of teacher unions (Means, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007).

Altogether, under a neoliberal regime of public education, “the burden of responsibility for educational opportunity shifts from the state to individual choice within a marketplace” (Means, 2008, p. 5). The infusion of market-based mechanisms in education increasingly leads reformers to frame and approach public schools more like private goods to be sourced based on supply, demand, competition, and consumer (e.g. family) resources rather than ensuring that high quality education is provided to all students as a civil right (Giroux, 2012; Horsford, 2014; Means, 2008; Scott, 2012). A host of critical educational scholars also point out how neoliberal approaches frequently have a racist and economically debilitating impact on low-income, communities of color. This is so given neoliberal educational agendas that focus on divesting resources from the public sector—the sector of society that most marginalized populations in the U.S. rely on for educational and socioeconomic opportunity (Buras, 2007; Johnson, 2012; Saltman, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Scott, 2012; Stovall, 2006). All of these effects culminate to create what Giroux (2006) calls the “politics of disposability” (p.11). These politics perpetuate systemic educational failure and highly constrain educational progress in cities like Detroit. They result in urban, low-income people of color being framed and perceived as socially and politically disposable and having little to no value in the dominant political system.

Three neoliberal phenomena that lead to the politics of disposability in cities across the U.S. are especially prevalent in Detroit. These include: masking the inequities of school choice reform; diminishing the democratic input of communities of color; and, closing public schools in urban communities of color. All three trends erode the public sector and can further disenfranchise low-income students of color and their families. See Figure 1 in the Appendix.

Masking the Inequities of School Choice

On the surface school choice seems like a harmless and deserved mechanism to which all families should be entitled. It evokes the U.S.’s cultural valuing of freedom and democracy. The ways in which school choice structures and policies function in an unequal American society, however, often exacerbates inequality by reinforcing segregation, unfair resource distribution, and absolving public officials from providing quality education to all

(Cooper, 2007; Scott, 2012). This is so with the highly popular, U.S. charter school movement.

Charter proponents typically promise low-income families of color more innovative, student-centered, and higher quality options than traditional public schools. Scott (2012) explains that many of these proponents, along with neoliberal reformers, have “embraced the language and moral authority of civil rights to champion reforms” (p. 6). They, like the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, proclaim “education is the civil rights issue of our time.”⁴ Many neoliberal critics, marginalized students and families, and grassroots educational advocates and activists agree with that sentiment but fervently object to neoliberal and exclusive, choice-driven reforms that do not benefit the masses (Giroux, 2012; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Scott, 2012).

Urban and/or low-income African American families have shown tremendous interest in accessible school choice options for approximately 20 years, hoping the options would offer their children educational quality and increased routes to academic success that White, more affluent children typically enjoy (Cooper 2007, 2011; Scott, 2012). Still, school choice options have proven hard for many families of color with low incomes living in urban communities like Detroit to access. An array of barriers like exclusive admission criteria, extremely limited enrollment slots, and families’ lacking transportation, adequate information, and social networks have prevented the students in the most challenged, unsatisfactory schools from exiting (Cooper, 2007). Consequently, school choice options delivered via a neoliberal reform system that encompasses marginalizing market-oriented features and corporate, for-profit interests has not been a viable educational remedy for the populations that most school choice proponents target. Many choice proponents, however, mask or de-emphasize these inequitable realities while politically and/or financially benefitting from them (Scott, 2012).

Endangering the Public Sector and Diminishing Democracy

As neoliberal agendas anchored in capitalist philosophies of limited government have flooded the educational arena and created school “markets”, traditional public schools in large cities have lost more resources, support, and in many cases declined in performance (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Means, 2008; Saltman, 2007). A plethora of critical scholars further assert that neoliberal political agendas have not only intentionally pushed privatization efforts within education, but they have done so as part of a much broader political and economic movement to erode public property, space, infrastructure, and government. This in turn displaces people of color, limits or abolishes public services, and gentrifies and reinvents urban centers as private commercial, recreational, and living spaces for those with valued fiscal and social capital, namely middle to upper income residents who are primarily white (Giroux, 2006; 2012; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Means, 2008; Pedroni, 2011; Saltman, 2007). These dynamics comprise the politics of disposability because they contribute to the public spaces, public goods, and the people most in need of public services being deemed as politically and socially expendable (Giroux 2006, 2012; Means, 2008). Commitments to justly resource, protect, govern, and nurture the cities and communities in which most African Americans experiencing poverty live are also abandoned and the low performing, traditional public school systems that serve them are left to languish.

As privatizing dynamics and the abandonment of the public sector increase in cities like Detroit, democratic spaces and processes decrease. This makes educational policymakers

⁴ See <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/statement-us-secretary-education-arne-duncan-passing-civil-rights-leader-fred-sh>.

and reformers less accountable to those they serve. Indeed, neoliberal educational tactics have led to the governance and input of parents and communities being increasingly replaced by that of “professional elites” (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 494, Means, 2008; Pedroni, 2011; Scott, 2012).

Aside from school district leaders, these elites include corporate, foundation, and philanthropic executives, like leaders of educational management organizations (EMOs) who run for-profit charter schools and leaders of non-profit CMOs (Scott, 2012). Scott (2012) importantly notes that such elites vary in their ideological stances, with some having progressive and equity-oriented aims, yet those with neoliberal and pro-privatization agendas are most influential.

Closing Schools and Failing Communities of Color

A variety of scholars point to massive rates of public school closures in cities like Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia as emblematic of public disinvestment and the intentional erosion of communities of color, particularly African American communities (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Means, 2008; Pedroni, 2011; Simon, 2013). School closures therefore can easily intensify the politics of disposability.

Education officials in major urban locales typically attribute their school closure decisions to a need to save money when drastic population loss occurs or because federal No Child Left Behind guidelines allow them to do so if a school consistently yields failing test scores (Johnson, 2012). Critics, however, point out that many dilapidated, low-performing schools are closed and then remodeled and reopened for profit and/or for school choice re-purposing. Such ventures include re-opening renovated schools as district-run charter schools or leasing/selling them to charter school companies or companies planning urban economic (re)development zones (Johnson, 2012; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Pedroni, 2011). This type of school re-purposing approach is a neoliberal reform tactic common in Detroit’s majority Black communities (Pedroni, 2011).

Research has shown that massive urban school closures displaces and disproportionately redistributes students of color in schools outside their communities, leading to greater safety concerns, much longer commutes, stress, and often no improvement in educational services or outcomes (Johnson, 2012). Such closures also lend to communities’ decreased cohesion and social networks (Johnson, 2012; Pedroni, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Simon, 2013).

In Detroit, two-thirds of the DPS traditional public schools have closed over the past 15 years. Family and community members have protested but still lost battles to keep their neighborhood public schools (AlHajal, 2013; Simon, 2013). Consequently, they have been forced to enroll their children in schools in which they are unknown, disconnected, and often face hardships physically accessing.

Overall, the politics of disposability, and the neoliberal reforms that proliferate those politics, disempower people of color and can be very destructive in African American communities. Still, history suggests that African American’s political resistance can be (re)constructive and transformative (Collins, 2000; Richards & Lemelle, 2005). Any consideration of neoliberalism’s impact on African Americans therefore should be informed by African Americans’ perspectives and stories. In this study’s case, special attention is given to the political resistance of African American women and their critical care.

Black Women's Political Resistance and Critical Care

Dominant powerholders' political relegation and exploitation of African Americans has been a constant dynamic of U.S. society since the nation's establishment. Indeed, African American political resistance strategies were born out of such oppression (Richards & Lemelle, 2005). Moreover, with educational attainment being historically revered as a tool for racial liberation and self-determination, African Americans have long advocated for equal educational opportunity at grassroots, institutional, and societal levels (Franklin, 1990; Richards & Lemelle, 2005).

African American women, specifically, have engaged in educational advocacy and activism through campaigning for the needs of children as mothers, educators, and community caregivers. Many have directly protested their families' and communities' oppression and worked as systemic change agents (Cooper, 2007; Wilson & Johnson, 2015; Gordon, 2005; Henry, 2005; Loder-Jackson, 2011; Ward Randolph, 2012).

Advocacy and activism are highly related notions. Advocacy typically refers to one's efforts within personal or political spaces to secure benefits for themselves or their loved ones. Activism involves similar acts, yet is explicitly political and includes intentionally resisting the status quo and working for a group's benefit. Activists often (though not necessarily) affiliate with like-minded political groups or movements. The political resistance of African American women typically encompasses both advocacy and activism. Moreover, it reflects both broad, radical traditions of Black protest and more distinct gendered advocacy practices that have emerged from culturally relevant and feminist epistemologies (Collins, 2000, Gordon, 2005; James, 1999).

Black Feminist Conceptualizations of Resistance

In her seminal book "Black Feminist Thought," Collins (2000) explains that Black women's epistemology is commonly informed by: the uniqueness of being a Black female; shared experiences of oppression with Black women and men; and, Afrocentric principles of communalism that have lived on through African American women's existence in the U.S. (and in Black women across the African Diaspora). She acknowledges that both race and gender are tied to socioeconomic realities and thus further asserts that Black women's ways of knowing emerge from interlocking racial, gender, and class identities and experiences. Indeed, what she terms "Afrocentric feminist epistemology" (AFE) rests on the valuing of experiential knowledge. AFE encompasses Black women not only learning from those they recognize and respect as "experts," but also from an appreciation of the pedagogical value of their "everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge" (Collins, 1989, p.750).

Given the salience of oppression in Black women's lives, their knowledge can lead to them devising strategies of political resistance in ways that "talk back" to and act out against disempowering oppressor (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; James, 1999). Thus, knowledge fuels action and liberatory praxis, which prompts many to challenge oppressive structures to protect themselves and their families and communities. Many Black women then channel a deep sense of agency to carry out "everyday acts of resistance" (Collins, 1989, p. 746). A host of scholars have drawn upon Black feminist thought to describe how public education arenas are vital sites of Black/African American women's resistance where advocacy and activism prevalently occur (Cooper, 2007; Gordon, 2005; Henry, 2005; Loder, 2005, Loder-Jackson, 2011; Williams, 2009). I argue that such resistance is typically driven by Black/African American women's sense of critical care.

Political Resistance as Critical Care

At its heart, African American women's traditions of political resistance embody a deep ethic of *critical care* (Cooper, 2009; Wilson, 2015). Critical care, in line with Black feminist and womanist theories, involves African American women drawing from their concern about the struggle and inequities faced by others to show them empathy and advocate for them when needed. It is linked to risk-taking, political clarity, and a desire for social justice (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004; Wilson, 2015). Critical care within education arenas further involves an emotional investment in marginalized students' well-being and uplift. The general framing of one's ethic of care in education is traditionally linked to Noddings' (1992, 2002) assertions about the importance of educators showing kindness, receptivity, responsiveness, and relating well with children overall. Critical conceptions of care, however, move beyond one-on-one relationships to emphasize the importance of one seeking to rectify injustice in socially and culturally relevant ways given children's and communities' needs and experiences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson, 2015).

Extant research indicates that critical care is integral to community members' and educators' advocacy (Alston, 2005; Horsford, 2010; Loder-Jackson, 2011; Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Williams, 2009; Wilson & Johnson, 2015). Findings from this study of African American women educational advocates in Detroit led me to consider how critical care can counter the politics of disposability, thereby adding an important layer of context to be considered in future research on neoliberal education reform.

Methodology

To examine the advocacy of African American women educational advocates in Detroit, this research utilized a qualitative interview design with the aim of soliciting the advocates' oral narratives. The methodology incorporated broad principles and methods of narrative research aimed at eliciting participants' storytelling (Casey, 1995; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013), along with a specific intent to consider how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender was or was not salient to participants' stories and counter-stories (Bloom, 1998; Collins, 2000; Rodriguez, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006).

Participants included eight African American women who ranged in age from the early 20s to the early 70s and varied in educational background, profession, and formal ties with Detroit Public Schools (DPS). They also varied in their poverty-impacted, working class, or middle class socioeconomic status. Most of the women had children, grandchildren, or other youth in their family who had or were attending DPS at the time of data collection. Three of the women were not biological parents or active guardians. All participants are referred to later by a pseudonym. All have challenged the practices and policies of DPS in order to promote systemic equity. The small sample is not unusual for qualitative research, or particularly narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). The study was designed to yield in-depth data that could lend to important educational theorizing and shed light on educational reform practice, while also laying some groundwork for more expansive studies in the future.

The research questions that guided the study were: 1) What key sociocultural and political factors have most influenced the goals and efforts of African American women educational advocates striving to improve urban school communities, and how?; 2) How have the advocates enacted their advocacy work; and, 3) How can the advocates' experiences

and perspectives offer new insight about the kinds of knowledge, strategies, resources, and support needed to improve urban school communities?

Participants' data yielded narratives that allowed me to consider the relevancy of — and possible interplay between— the politics of disposability and the practice of critical care. I then co-constructed their stories. Co-construction was possible since research narratives are inherently shaped both by participants who orally share their stories and researchers who analyze and represent them (Casey, 1995; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Rodriguez, 2010).

The stories of marginalized group members often (though not always) constitute counter-stories. While narrative methodologists of various research traditions have referred to counter-stories without focusing on race (Huber et al., 2013), my notion of counter-story directly emerges from how it is defined within critical race theory and critical race methodology. It also encompasses an understanding that racial, class-based, and gendered identities and experiences can intersect to shape one's meaning making (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical race scholar David Stovall (2006) suggests that, “through counter story we are able to discover the relationships between nuanced experience, individualized responses and macro-policy” (p. 253). Furthermore, Rodriguez (2010) contends that such stories provide new insights into analyzing the role of schools for those that have been marginalized, silenced, and disempowered” (p. 494).

The study's participants were purposefully sampled through snowball methods (Creswell, 2008). A doctoral research assistant, who is an African American women, native Detroiter, and former welfare rights activist in the city, assisted in the sampling process.⁵ She suggested a few women to start with who I, an African American woman and non-Detroiter, inquired into and then confirmed their DPS involvement roles. Also, I reviewed news coverage of DPS protests and public community events to identify potential participants, including those who support charters schools to increase the likelihood that various viewpoints about Detroit school reform would be addressed. Per snowball sampling methods, the first few participants contacted were asked to recommend other potential participants (Creswell, 2007).

The final sample is richly varied. (See Table 1) The internally diverse group allowed for ideologically, generationally, professionally, and personally nuanced stories.

⁵ I am grateful to Kaleema Annie Sumareh at Wayne State University (WSU) for her research assistance and to Matthew Pierson at WSU for his help with data coding.

Table 1
Profile of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Advocacy Role(s)	Highest Formal Educational Level
Ms. Mariel Edwards	60s	Community organizer for housing rights; former education non-profit staff	Community college
Ms. Glenda Wallace	70s	School volunteer; political campaign volunteer	Community college
Ms. Helen Axelrod	50s	Special education advocate; community volunteer; civic office holder	Graduate education
Ms. Brenda Miller	70s	Retired elementary school principal	Graduate education
Ms. Gladys Sails	40s	Former teacher; political office holder	Graduate education
Ms. Raquel Shah	20s	Current teacher	College education
Ms. Gina Stewart	30s	Owner of education non-profit; community advocate	Graduate education
Ms. Briana Solomon	30s	Parent advocate; education non-profit staff	Graduate education

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection consisted of two rounds of approximately two hour interviews with all but one participant who was interviewed once given her limited availability. The interviews, which the doctoral research assistant also helped conduct, yielded approximately 32 hours of narrative data. We debriefed each interview, pinpointed emerging themes, and crafted follow-up questions after the first round of interviews. Data was fully and professionally transcribed. I read the transcripts multiple times and listened to the audio recordings to reconsider the data within the context of the participants' intonation and emphases.

I also analyzed the narrative data in light of individual and cross-participant findings and themes, and the advocates' "repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, rituals, triangulations, and contradictions" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). A trained graduate student assistant first coded the data into basic descriptive categories (e.g. "special education", "social networks"). I then reviewed and recoded the data into analytical categories that indicated pertinent themes (e.g. "corporate critique") or conceptual links (e.g. "political resistance") (Creswell, 2007). Next, I considered and noted how the advocates'

stories and perspectives aligned with or deviated from theories on the politics of disposability, Black resistance, and critical care.

Findings & Analysis

The African American women educational advocates whose narratives inform this study have all refused to accept educational failure in their communities. They identified with being linked to a common legacy of Black woman advocacy that, as participant Ms. Briana Solomon⁶ said, has involved “strong leadership in the face of adversity and disaster and heartbreak.”

In light of the study's first research question that asked what sociocultural factors most influence the women's advocacy goals and efforts, themes arose that suggest their advocacy is a response to three shared concerns. These concerns related to: educational and communal loss in Detroit given the city's economic struggles and racial politics; systematic barriers to family engagement in traditional public schools; and, their sense that the city's school choice options are inadequate for families experiencing poverty. With regard to the second research question that asked how the women have enacted educational advocacy in their urban school communities, data collectively illustrate the women have used a range of tactics, from grassroots to institutional resistance strategies. These strategies have involved them building trust, credibility, and relationships across stakeholder groups. In doing so, they have shown a dedication to cultivating collective uplift and hope. They have also demonstrated critical care.

At various times all the participants discussed Detroit's decades-long battle with harsh systemic inequities and/or their personal frustration with facing the city's increasingly heavy-handed, state-controlled school systems. As counter-stories, the participants' narrative accounts of their educational advocacy complicated – if not directly challenged – the rhetoric and promises of neoliberal reforms. Hence their data reaped implications for the third research question, which asks what reform insights can be gained from the narratives.

Responding to Educational and Communal Loss

Most of the study's participants were born in Detroit and educated in DPS schools. Three women migrated to Detroit from other states or another country in their early life, yet all were able to reflect on several decades of the city's history. The all referred to Detroit as a city coping with great loss and facing an uphill battle to socioeconomically recover and improve its educational systems. Yet, instead of perceiving the city as dying, most agreed that it is the support for public education that is “dead.” Ms. Stewart, an educational consultant and former Detroit social worker declared, “I mean public schools are like, dying. It's done.”

Glenda Wallace, the eldest of the participants who began volunteering in DPS in the 1960s stated, in the “early years” Detroiters “saw the wealth up in the schools. And then as a parent moves away I guess that's when it started falling apart.” While Ms. Brenda Miller, a retired DPS principal and second eldest participant, reflected on how the decline has coincided with the emergence of competitive school choice politics. She explained:

So I think part of the history of Detroit Public Schools has been a trajectory downward, for probably the last almost 35 years or so. In the '70s we were one of the best school districts across the country, so I would say even in the world, and now we're one of the worst. So I think that what that has meant –

⁶ All participant names in this article are pseudonyms.

you know for many Detroiters—is that there is literally not a lot of confidence in the public school system, there is a lot of fear among parents around what choices are available....So I think there is a lot of disappointment, nonbelief, fear among parents because you don't get do-overs with kids. And I think that the politics of it has taken a front seat, and kids—and doing what's right for kids—is taking a backseat.

Ms. Helen Axelrod, an educational advocate very active in special education reform, took Ms. Wallace's critique a step further. She and several other participants linked Detroit's educational decline and school choice climate to political division and racial politics. Ms. Axelrod asserted that race “matters a lot, especially in Detroit,” adding:

Detroit is reported as a shrinking city. We still are (among) the largest African American populated cities in North America. We still have the largest African American school district. The people being most impacted are the African American children, from general ed to special ed. We have a three tiered system in Detroit: state system (referring to the Educational Achievement Authority), charter system, and public system all operating at the same time. So when it comes to children, it's like your race is a factor, class and economic background is a factor.

She further linked the intersectionality of race and the high poverty rates in the city to schools being susceptible to “elimination politics” that have targeted public education. Ms. Axelrod suggested this is part of divide and conquer tactics that would not be allowed in cities with a different demographic make-up.

Ms. Briana Solomon, a younger parent advocacy group leader and charter school proponent, also asserted there is willful political division in Detroit. She referred to a calculated undermining of the city and its public schools by harmful “power structures.” Solomon asserted, “I'm from Detroit so I believe in the conspiracy,” indicating the trust she has in her own experiential knowledge and observations, which aligns with Black feminist notions of epistemology (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2007).

Stories from all of the advocates projected a view of Detroit's predominantly African American schools, families, and communities being inextricably linked and schools once being families' “center of social life,” as Ms. Miller remarked. Ms. Miller further shared that as Detroit's African American communities' have lost residents, they have also lost many communal resources and public services that once strengthened neighborhoods such as fire stations, supermarkets, and churches. She and others explained that all of this loss has yielded decreased safety nets and social supports for African American families, which has in turn hindered families' ability and availability to promote their students' educational success.

Across the narrative data, the advocates referred to these types of interconnected dynamics and losses as strains on the family-educational-community “village” overall, and the wellbeing of African American children specifically. They framed their advocacy as being partly aimed at compensating for such loss.

Ms. Marielle Edwards is a 60-something community organizer and former staff member of an educational non-profit organization. She reflected on the changes she saw in her own community during the 1980s and 1990s as Detroit's population drastically dwindled along with communal safety nets. She contended that, “There were children being raped, adults being shot at...,” and “children are exposed to so much egregious things;” so, her concerns about such matters prompted her to expand her advocacy efforts that were

originally focused within the housing rights arena to also include educational reform. Ms. Edwards stated:

We can't just speak the word and make things happen. We can't say it takes a whole village and expect things to happen. It takes me hugging a child that is not my child necessarily or me seeing things happening to a child, interacting with a child to make sure they are safe. I try to be engaged and be involved.

The engagement and involvement of the African American women educational advocates spanned from them discussing their demonstration of personal and communal care to describing how they challenge the educational system. They all pinpointed politically disenfranchising contexts of Detroit and expressed their desire to counter these contexts in ways that constitute critical care. A few particularly recounted their efforts to contest school closure.

Contesting school closure

Ms. Edwards, Ms. Axelrod, and Ms. Sails, related school closings to the State of Michigan's communal abandonment, privatization, and mismanagement of Detroit's public schools—themes all prevalent in the educational scholarship critiquing neoliberal reforms and the politics of disposability (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Means, 2008; Giroux, 2006). Ms. Edwards discussed working at DPS schools with a “wonderful” principal and supportive community, yet acknowledged it was one where students were academically struggling. To no avail, she and others spoke out to DPS and state entities to defend the school and urge that it be allowed to stay open. In reflecting on the DPS decision to close the school, she stated:

Then to have the school and community and children completely just dismantled just brought people to a standstill. People did not know what was happening. The system decided to change things around them ...just making decisions about how they felt children's lives should be changed —should they remain in community. I thought about the bussing thing a long time ago. (To) have our children bussed from our community to another, that does not make any sense....we have an opportunity to invest all we could—our might, our dollars, hearts, everything about us—into the Detroit Public Schools so that our children will learn what they would learn anywhere else. I don't believe in taking money from (one) school and creating a new school, and putting money into new school so children could go to there. That is stupid! I think we have all the resources we need to have our own system that would make our children succeed.

Ms. Edwards' comments align with theories that stress that many African American women perceive the support and success of Black communal institutions as key to their self-determination and African American's collective uplift (Collins, 2000, Cooper, 2009; Loder, 2005; Ward Randolph, 2012).

Next, Ms. Axelrod passionately shared her efforts to save a specialized public school for students with disabilities in Detroit. She exclaimed:

I described that school as concentration camp existence.... I say that because there were broken windows in the classroom. They had tape over the doors. There was peeling paint, rat infestation. We had a parent meeting in the auditorium and the rats were openly running right in front of us during the

presentation by the state police on internet safety. The presenter was standing in front of the parents and the presenter was jumping around. I told everybody to pick up your bags off the floor. I reported it to the administration...

DPS eventually closed the school for student with disabilities, citing its high costs and poor facilities as key reasons. DPS chose to invest more money in opening a new site versus repairing the original one despite families' protests and public marches. Axelrod said her frustration rose after the new school opened with numerous safety problems too, such as faulty electrical wiring. She explained, "I got the city council involved. Made calls to the mayor, the environmental agency, the feds, civil rights office, health inspectors, fire marshals, American Disability Act people, whomever. I filed the civil rights complaint."

Finally, Ms. Sails, a former DPS school teacher and current political office holder suggested that the school closure phenomenon in Detroit signifies that "there is no due process for democracy. So they (the state) can simply just shut down the school and pretty much re-name and open again." She spoke to the trend of such schools being reopened as for-profit charter schools, thereby fueling a faulty "business model." She asked:

If you have schools that do this, how can we ensure we are producing a population of students who are guaranteed a quality education if you allow these (for-profit charter) schools to pop up, poorly educate, close down, re-open, do this again and pretty much find a way to funnel money as opposed to being certain they are delivering optimal educational opportunities to our students?

Her comments relate to the critique of Giroux (2006, 2012) and Saltman (2007) who contend that the politics of disposability (or disaster) involves corporate interests squelching democratic and public processes.

The women's overall critique of school closure processes further align with Scott's (2012) characterization of educational elites as the "managers of choice" (p. 8), given that such elites are local and state authority figures vested with the power to close schools when they do not understand or value students' and communities' social histories. These managers frequently do so without adequately analyzing urban communities' conditions within the context of structural inequality and the marginalizing effects of market forces (Johnson, 2012; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Pedroni, 2011; Scott, 2012).

The circumvention of public input and decision making within the educational arenas that have historically been anchored by public schools denies community members their democratic rights and blocks the voice and influence of public school students and families. This signals, at best, their perceived unimportance; and, at worst, their perceived disposability (Giroux, 2012).

Data further support A.W. Johnson's (2012) assertions that while neoliberal reformers, including some public officials, frame school closure as a fiscal necessity or service to communities via the ridding unsuccessful schools, they actually predispose these sites and communities to failure. This is done by them maintaining a faulty and punitive system designed to penalize rather than improve education in low-income communities of color. Johnson explains that the current system "places the responsibility for the school's continued existence squarely on the shoulders of the students, absolving policy makers and private partners from responsibility for the consequences of defining and structuring failure" (p. 243).

Like critical scholarship that points to the non-democratic processes involved in urban school closure, each of the study's participants who have contested closing Detroit's public schools associated the issue with institutional and communal loss (Buras, 2007; Pedroni, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Scott, 2012). They further pointed to the loss of voice and political influence among poor, African Americans. Participants also suggested that there is more investment in structuring and expecting failure than structuring systemic school improvement. Thus, the advocates demonstrated critical care by investing emotional and physical energy to work toward system-wide educational access, equity, and inclusion.

Facing Family Engagement Barriers

School closure was just one of an array of challenges the advocates discussed when describing the barriers community members face when trying to engage and influence DPS. Several advocates also referred to DPS educators and the city's school choice policies lending to a climate that is "hostile," "punitive," and/or "criminalizing" towards families.

Longtime DPS school volunteer and staff retiree Ms. Edwards asserted, "The idea of parent participation I think has been only lip service. The Detroit Public Schools really as far as I know has not really put much effort to parent participation." Likewise, most advocates painted an image of DPS as an overly bureaucratic, inefficient, and non-responsive system, yet they acknowledged the presence of individually good teachers and principals. The advocates mentioned issues such as: parents' previous negative experiences and thus disillusion with DPS; the strain of single parents working and unable to get to inconveniently scheduled school events; grandparents and older guardians being overwhelmed and unassisted; schools not distributing needed information; and, "too much competition" and/or corporate influence. Most of the advocates also discussed deficit-based beliefs about parents and families informing educators' negative treatment of them.

Advocates like Ms. Stewart suggested many teachers have a "blame the victim mentality" and:

It's like we have a social system that set up poverty, that set up inequality around these things. And now you're like 'Well your parents just don't care about you,' and it's like that's not true! I mean it might be true for some random kid, but that is not generally true. . . . I get it, I mean from a teachers' perspective, their biggest challenge is parents. (They feel) I can't help you if your parents aren't helping you. And I get that, on the other hand, you know, it's kinda your job to figure out how to help them even if their parents aren't helping them—or aren't helping them in ways that makes sense to you. And maybe that means you need to engage these parents in a very different way.

Such sentiments were echoed by current DPS teacher Ms. Raquel Shah, who conceded that she has improved her own attitudes about students' parents and families after realizing that many family members have disengaged from DPS out of frustration with only receiving teachers' criticism. Ms. Shah spoke of now being at a point in her practice where she has developed more empathy for students and families. She explained:

[If] you look at it like we have equal responsibilities in this kid, your relationship with that parent will become much better. And I don't have any children but I could empathize with that mother [a mother who had been disengaged and frustrated with Shah's criticism]. . . . Your kid is a reflection of you. So if someone was telling me everything I was doing wrong, I don't wanna talk to that person anymore. And so you can come and say (instead):

'He does this well, he does this well, and maybe if he uses that strength maybe that'll balance out what he doesn't do so well. There are certain areas of growth for him.' Instead of (saying), 'This is why he's so wrong' and 'this is what you need to fix.'

Ms. Shah's asserted that she now approaches her relationships with families knowing that they have to be, "constantly and consistently built and maintained." In this sense, she and other study participants demonstrated critical care at the interpersonal level given their conscientiousness about countering marginalizing and deficit-based dynamics.

Viewing School Choice Options as Insufficient for the "Have Nots"

The advocates' discussions about the state of education in Detroit, their frustrations, recommendations, and advocacy efforts all inevitably led to additional remarks about school choice options and charters schools. Concerns about inequity, choice, competition, and what they perceive as threats of privatization were salient to all eight participants.

Retired principal Ms. Miller stated, "It is good to have choice." She and others, however, questioned: "but is it actually working?" Ms. Miller said the goal of school options should be to empower families to "get the best education that you can find," but:

(H)ere again, you still have to have some have-nots. And those have-nots can't get to where those places (with the best education) are. They are still struggling. It's not benefitting everybody...I don't see where it has made things better. I don't think it (school choice policies) was designed for it (the education system) to be better.

Ms. Stewart agreed, yet further detailed a critique of the educational competition she thinks charters schools have sparked. She referred to "corporations that are coming in and sweeping up these schools," and said:

That's state policy that we took caps off of charter schools, and we are letting people who run businesses open schools and we're calling those public schools, and I think they have 36 new charter schools opening in Detroit this year. New ones! In addition to the ones we have and so, when you have a public school system that's failing, it's the same as the school of choice thing...When you give people options to flee a system, of course they are going to do what they perceive to be best for their children. But then you have a dispersed system and so that means you have a lot of little systems that are trying to just keep students and it's like students from district A are running to district B, and students from district B are running to district C, and nobody is in district A. You have this cycle of nobody actually investing resources and improving these schools that exist. Everybody is just like chasing the next best thing, and that's the school of choice policy, that's a charter school issue, and it doesn't... I have not seen any improved schools. It basically just leaves behind the most marginalized and takes away their resources that some of those that aren't so marginalized have to schools that aren't doing so great.

Ms. Sails, a politician-activist, and former school teacher who worked in both DPS public schools and charters agreed. She also linked charters schools to a larger privatization and non-democratic agenda that "takes away a level of accountability." Sails asserted that many

charter schools in Michigan “are not performing, they have not fared any better, in some instances (they are) worse than Detroit public schools. Many of those schools don't have oversight by people we elect.” Her analysis aligns with Giroux's (2012) characterization of neoliberal educational reforms and market-based school options as threatening democracy and important civic traditions.

Finally, Ms. Solomon –surprisingly given her work to promote charter schools and other choice alternatives –acknowledged Detroit's inequitable school choice realities. She stressed her professional efforts to share as much information with city parents and help them take advantage of workable options, but still explained:

So we've (her and her state and district partners) spent time developing the market side, we haven't really spent enough time developing the human side, and making school choice a real choice for parents who would put their kids in the better place if they can't get transportation. So if they know about it (a choice school), and they know it's the best environment for their kid, but they can't get there it's really not a choice for them....So there's still a certain level of ambiguity in the work that keeps me uncomfortable because there is still a disconnect between all the work that we do to make these students better and the people who need it the most.

Solomon clearly indicated her ideological wrestling about school choice reform's implementation and impact.

Altogether, the advocates' shared meaningful commentary about school choice and the educational landscape of Detroit. Their data, overall, align with many of the cautionary points that scholars critiquing neoliberalism and/or the politics of disposability have made (Means, 2008; Pedroni, 2011; Scott, 2012). The advocates' critique is rooted in their frustration that Detroit's choice options are not accessible and beneficial for the majority of the student population whose families lack adequate information, transportation, and valued capital. The data, however, serve to also push theorizing about neoliberalism and the politics of disposability by revealing the importance of recognizing citizens' agency and resistance strategies. For instance, while data indeed supports assertions that the politics of disposability push downward to oppress and disempower (see Table 1), the advocates' narratives reveal how such politics can be contested by the upward push of critical care and political resistance.

Implementing Grassroots and Institutional Resistance Strategies

Narrative data suggests that the knowledge, perceptions, and experiences of the African American women educational advocates in this study culminated into their deep sense of critical care about children, families, and the City of Detroit. Their advocacy is an extension of that critical care given their involvement in numerous activities related to seeking social justice in public educational arenas and standing up for inclusion, representation, and the nurturing of Detroit's students' well-being and success (Cooper, 2009, Wilson & Johnson, 2015; Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2002; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004).

The internally diverse sample of African American women yielded data related to a range of advocacy roles and strategies the women have exuded, which helps to answer the study's second research question. Some of the women's grassroots activities involved the community organizing of DPS parents, students, and community members, along with public protests and testifying before state legislators and/or the school board and emergency

manager. These strategies were implemented particularly by the women not directly employed by DPS, such as Ms. Axelrod, Edwards, Wallace, and Sails.

Other advocates like Ms. Miller and Shah described their work within DPS to engage and nurture marginalized youth by critically teaching and infusing multicultural and Afrocentric curriculum, and leading in a way that included students' families and a plethora of community-based partners. Ms. Stewart, a former Detroit school social worker, designed her current educational consultant firm to help address "race and class and social identity, social justice issues" in schools. She has occupied a blurred insider-outsider role, as others have at times too, like Ms. Solomon, who professionally partners with DPS.

Navigating blurred boundaries and assuming insider-outsider roles indeed proved salient to most of the advocates, since most have worked inside DPS schools at one point in their work life and advocacy trajectory.⁷ Then and now, the women said they have wanted and needed to build trust, credibility and relationships across educational stakeholders to influence educational change. Moreover, they have employed a range of strategies – from grassroots/outside-in approaches to institutional/inside-out approaches – as part of their political resistance.

Many of the women's advocacy started with their efforts to protect and nurture their own children in DPS and then they branched out to help others. Some, like Ms. Axelrod, described politically tackling the state educational system and power holders in very explicit ways:

I spent the summer of 2010 attending meetings with the (school) board president Anthony Adams (and) other community people who came in to weigh in on the transition. What we were discussing was the old district policy verses the policy Robert Bob (the state emergency financial manager) was putting in. I realized there is no policy for special ed. children. It had been totally eliminated! . . . I had been very upset! Because I knew that because you (state authorities) were removed and can make things disappear and invisible, that does not mean that you are erasing the law. This is the way they (the state) had been steadily forging ahead —violating the human rights, civil rights, constitution rights, (and) all of it on the disabled students in the Detroit district. . . My stance was, 'I don't care what you do. I will keep filing complaints until somebody goes to federal prison. My issue, (and) people hate to see me coming, is I'm trying to send people to federal prison. I *will* be outraged.

This stance of determination and righteous anger was one that several women seemed to relate to, yet acted on in different ways.

System insiders like teacher Ms. Shah spoke of advocating for her students through entering her classroom with conscientiousness about their risks of disenfranchisement and a desire to teach in empowering ways. She stated:

I let my kids own their education. So this is yours and you make it yours, and when you make students own their education they're more proud of it and that's a transformation within itself because a lot of times, especially with early elementary up to middle school education, education is a lot of regurgitation. . . . when you get your students involved with you know, that

⁷ Ways that activists can be border crossers and institutional boundary spanners are discussed in more detail in (Wilson & Johnson, 2015). See reference list.

higher order thinking, it's a road of transformation: You see how brilliant they really are. And so I guess that kinda has to be the change with us as adults as well.

In the same vein of being a positive change agent within DPS, retired DPS Principal Ms. Miller spoke of her commitment to being inclusive and collaborative. She described cultivating supportive partnerships and culturally responsive curriculum to inspire student success. Ms. Miller highlighted her efforts to be instructionally creative within a traditional public school versus a charter school, which meant facilitating organizational change and teacher and parent buy-in. While discussing that change process, she said: "We smoothed it toward that, that's what we did. As a matter of fact, we had the group come together, and that's how we developed things around African centered curriculum, and we developed that curriculum year after year." She referred to "inclusiveness" being the hallmark of her leadership practice and "just, being kind, and respectful, and thankful for their help."

Across the advocates' narratives, the importance of building respectful, empathetic, and trusting relationships with teachers, students, administrators was stressed. The advocates perceived their relationship building efforts as key to helping various stakeholders trust their care and credibility so they could spur school improvement.

When it came to influencing DPS from the outside-in, a few advocates explained that building credibility to influence change has also involved achieving a delicate balance between strongly asserting themselves and their change agendas without being dismissed, ostracized, or alienating others. They referred to using trust building and effective communication strategies "because there is a lot of mistrust in people's daily lives," as Ms. Axelrod noted.

For instance, Ms. Sails described having to be strategic as she lobbies against charter and school closure policies and interfaces with supporters of such reforms, particularly politicians and legislators. She contended:

Typically what the corporate mindset tries to do is minimize the relevance of a grassroots person and their expertise or knowledge base...to discredit the person (as) just ranting and raving for nothing.... Being able to use my level of knowledge base to advocate in a way that does not give them that room to dismiss someone (as) not knowing—that's been one of the biggest pieces of accomplishment....I have to build more credibility and, it's like I'm running a one man campaign against an infrastructure...."

Sails added:

It takes a lot of courage to walk in the same room and setting to people who are getting 100+ thousand a year. You have to demonstrate that I am just as qualified and just as good as you are to be able to have the knowledge base and really deflect the narrative they are putting out.

Sails' comments are in tune with theoretical contentions about African American women being conscious of their marginalized positionality given the intersection of race, class, and gender oppressions and white supremacist stereotypes; and then, drawing upon that consciousness to enact political resistance (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2007; James, 1999).

Finally, Ms. Solomon also reflected on the gains she and her parent advocacy group have made in building relationships, trust, and credibility with Detroit communities. She acknowledged that her advocacy group has faced challenging times, yet added:

I think largely parents trust us because of the investment we've made in the community. Whether we're working with them to solve a school issue or a special need, or if we were giving out food in the community, if we were knocking on their door bringing them jacks and reminding them of their childhood I think we have made so many deposits in Detroit that largely parents see us and appreciate us.

The types of investment and “deposits” she mentioned, which the other advocates have also demonstrated, counter the type of disinvestment and public abandonment associated with many neoliberal educational and economic reforms (Giroux, 2012, Lipman & Haines, 2007; Pedroni, 2011). The advocates' counter-stories further contradict master narratives that portray urban community members of color as not caring about education, causing the blight of their cities, and/or being ill-informed victims. Such data therefore helps to invalidate policymakers' and other elite officials' rationale that patriarchal, top-down government and corporate interventions are needed —interventions apt to erase, ignore, or undermine community members' knowledge, voice, and democratic dissent.

In all, the advocates offered narratives of critique, hope, commitment, and equity-oriented persistence. Their counter-stories reveal insight into the real life impact of public disinvestment and neoliberal educational reform on urban communities. Data further show some of the ways that those deeply affected by such phenomena respond when they deem their educational conditions and options as inadequate or oppressive. The study participants' critical care and resistance constitute a type of justice-seeking aimed at rectifying the intersected dynamics of racism, poverty, systemic failure, and undemocratic policymaking that plagues too many major U.S. cities. Their advocacy and activism have been geared towards communal benefit and collective uplift rather than the individualistic values and goals of market-oriented educational policies and systems. Assessing how their critical care influences reform discourse, agenda setting, implementation, and revision are important next steps of this work.

Conclusion: “Planting Hope” and Restoring Educational Quality

The African American women educational advocates highlighted in this study unequivocally cast Detroit's educational landscape as one that is complex, inequitable, and lacking high quality options for the majority of its predominantly poor, African American population. Each of the eight women expressed feelings of disappointment and frustration, yet they also acknowledged the rewards of their advocacy and indicated that their efforts are inspired by their hope for Detroit's recovery and concern for its children.

As special education advocate Ms. Axelrod explained, “Much of what I do is planting hope. It's about showing people that regardless of what your situation is, that you can be active, you can be an advocate.” In reflecting about her advocacy, she further stated, “My advocacy would be promoting the positive things, and that would fall right into the history with the struggle that is ongoing in Detroit.” She said that struggle once helped Detroit become “the jewel—the hub of activism and intellectual thought,” and, “my reward is thinking I am part of that history. I am working for change, just like generations of women before me. I just have different avenues with how to do it.” Her comments speak to so many stories shared by the women, which interweave a consciousness about the legacy of African American struggle and agency with the needs and potential of Detroit and its

schools to do much better. That legacy and continued struggle is heavily shaped by intersecting racial and economic contexts.

Moreover, similar to what Loder-Jackson (2011) found in her cross-generational study of African American educators' advocacy in Birmingham, Alabama, Detroit's educational advocates—be they educators, parents, or other concerned community members—have pursued varied paths toward similar improvement goals. Each pathway has been important, with the women learning and attempting to teach and assist others along the way.

The advocates in this study have been influenced by their desire to counter educational and communal loss, barriers to families' engagement in schools, inadequate school choice options, and the overall faltering of school quality and democratic processes given the neoliberal politics that shape Detroit's educational landscape. Their efforts have also illustrated a Black feminist thought contention that African American women's "everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge" informs a political consciousness and desire for collective race uplift that can manifest in "everyday acts of resistance" (Collins, 1989, p. 750, 746). This study contributes to the literature on neoliberal educational reform by offering both important empirical data and theoretical analyses that link that resistance to critical educational care.

Messages about critical care and striving to cultivate collective uplift and hope were threaded throughout the advocates' narratives, despite some of their differing opinions on particular school choice matters or their specific resistance approaches. They have all taken risks to seek social justice in the margins and/or mainstreams of education in order to support the well-being of some of Detroit's most marginalized and poverty-impacted children and families.

Moreover, the advocates' narratives constitute counter-stories that challenge ideas that Detroit and its educational systems and communities are lifeless, unimportant, or expendable. Data highlights that critical care serves to defy the politics of disability that propagates racial and urban disempowerment. This begs for more research on how the various forms of community agency and resistance discussed influence the neoliberal educational landscape.

In the meantime, the current data offers insight about what additional knowledge, strategies, resources, and support are needed to improve urban school communities. In line with both Black feminist thought and critical race theory, the narratives indicate the importance of the educational community valuing the experiential knowledge of community members who have distinct understandings created by their raw exposure to educational institutions and politics (Collins, 1989, 2000; Stovall, 2006); and, recognizing that the advocates' vast life and advocacy experiences have yielded unique expertise and valuable organizational, communication, and negotiation skills (Loder-Jackson, 2011). It is further important to appreciate that the advocates have made direct inroads with the communities that most formal educational leaders proclaim to serve.

This study's participants, and so many urban community members like them, are indeed working to be part of the solution of public education inequity and underperformance. They therefore should be welcomed, respected, and worked with as esteemed educational partners. Greater involvement, representation, and influence of educational advocates and activists—including those highly impacted by poverty—is warranted to have shared accountability for equity and educational investment at individual, communal, institutional, and societal levels (Wilson & Johnson, 2015).

The primary resource that equity-oriented advocates need, which could in turn help improve urban schools throughout the U.S., is access to and inclusion in democratic spaces where policymakers and professional educational leaders hear, listen, and respond to their concerns. Major social and political advancements that benefit communities of color have not occurred in the U.S. without advocates and activists of color leading the way in conceptualizing policy remedies. Mechanisms for community members to be part of reform implementation and oversight are needed as well. Ultimately, systemic problems of public disinvestment and inaccessible market-based school reforms have to be met with systemic and democratic solutions.

Appendix

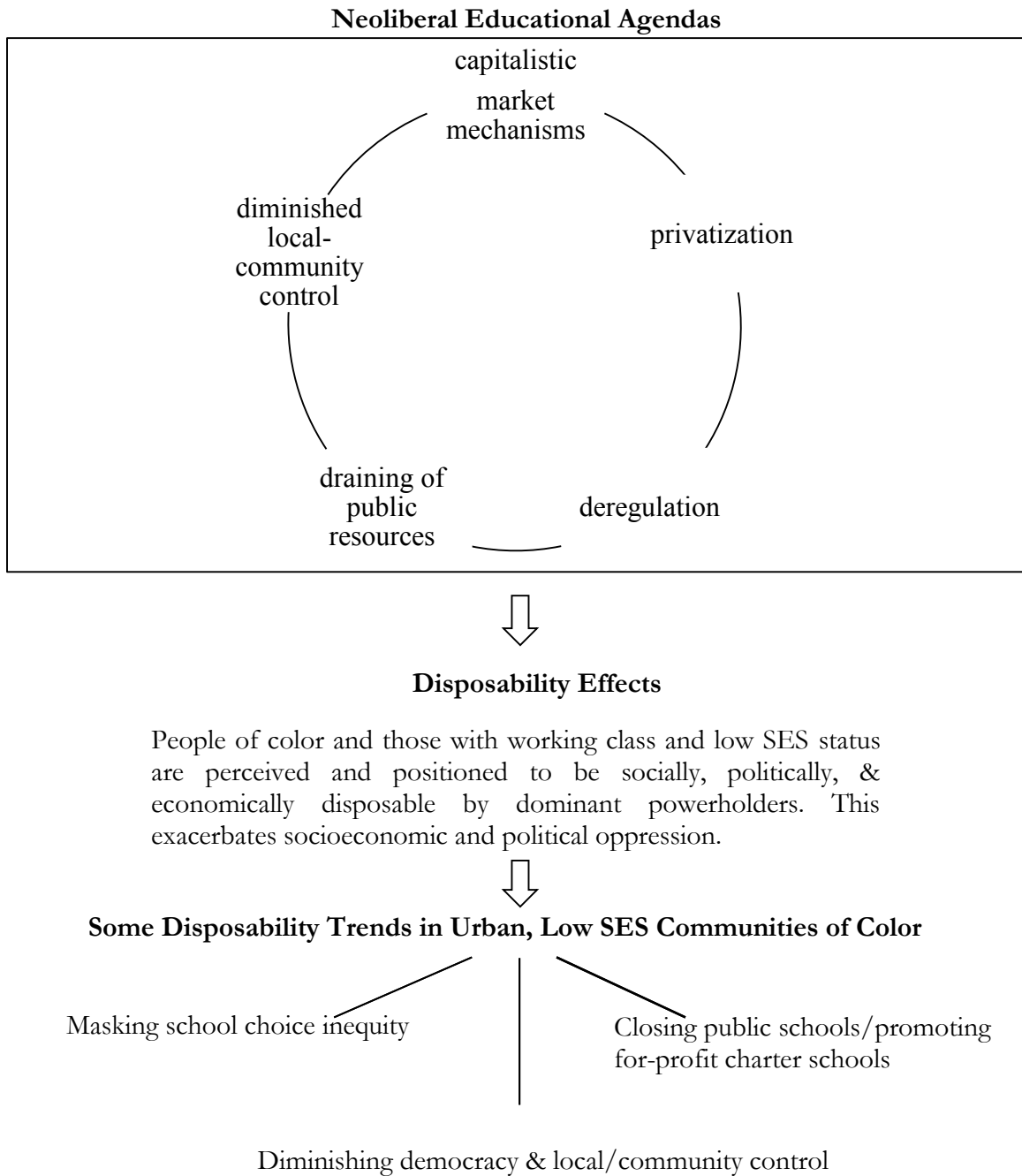


Figure 1. The Politics of Disposability: Three neoliberal phenomena that lead to the politics of disposability in cities across the U.S. are especially prevalent in Detroit. These include: masking the inequities of school choice reform; diminishing the democratic input of communities of color; and, closing public schools in urban communities of color. All three trends erode the public sector and can further disenfranchise low-income students of color and their families.

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