**\*School Challenges, Race and Accountability: Why Do Students of Color Need Educational Cultural Negotiators**

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**Abstract:**

*Purpose:*The research presented in this study focuses Educational Cultural Negotiators (ECNs). The participants in the study were teachers, administrators and graduate students in an afterschool program in the Midwest and a community-based school university partnership in the Western U.S. We posit that the roles of the ECNs function in effect as cultural brokers to improve the academic achievement of African American and Latino/a students at these school sites. *Design/Methodological Approach/:*Relying on qualitative research methods of data collection and critical race theory as the methodological analysis of the findings, this study seeks to identify the role of the ECNs as advocates for students in these settings to promote their academic and personal growth and success. *Findings & Research Implications:* The central research findings and implications of our study were twofold; 1) Given the cultural disconnect between school and students of color, we identified the ECNs and what descriptive role do they played as advocates and leaders to protect the educational well-being and rights of students of color, and 2) in the context of increased accountability and seemingly intractable African American and Latina/o student failure, providing evidence as to why are the ECNs needed in the current education policy context in the U.S. *Value of the paper*: This work sheds critical light as to how these educational leaders provide academic steering, cultural negotiation and navigation, and challenge racial neglect and color-blindness within the academic system.

*Keywords: educational cultural negotiator, cultural broker, culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory*

The expectations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was to centralize the national goal of schools being held accountable for student achievement, particularly for students of color who were falling behind in national standardized achievement outcomes in core subject areas such as reading and mathematics. However, the accountability movement prompted by NCLB has been rooted in impersonal policy efforts to close the academic achievement gap (American Educational Research Journal. 2007; Race, Ethnicity and Education, 2007). Furthermore, by virtue of the lack of the embededness in communities of students of color, the accountability movement spurred on by NCLB seemed doomed to have substantive impact in creating a culture of students as critical engaged learners . This project examines the roles and functions of Educational Cultural Negotiators (ECNs) in two school programs. The first program is at a predominantly White high school in a Midwestern city, and the second is at a predominantly Latina/o elementary school-university partnership in a Western state. The goal of this study is to better understand how the ECNs act similar to cultural brokers, and the objectives are to highlight the cultural disconnect between some students of color and profile the ECNs as intermediary persons working on behalf of African American and Latina/o students. These two programs have a similar practice worthy of systematic study, namely the directors and staff members provide fundamental negotiations with students, and among the following groups: parents and educators, students and parents, and students and educators. To facilitate academic success, the ECNs interpret, translate, and negotiate the socio-political educational structure, home life, and culture of the students’ for all parties. Furthermore, both programs center racial awareness and cultural resources, while mediating students’ academic achievement. Relying on qualitative research methods of data collection and critical race theory as methodological analysis of the findings, this study seeks to identify the advocacy role of ECNs working in the programs and in the lives of these students to promote their academic, social, cultural, and personal growth. *The central research questions of this study are: 1) Given the cultural disconnect between school and students of color, who are the ECNs and what descriptive role do they play as advocates to protect the educational well-being and rights of students of color (and parents)?; and 2) in the context of increased accountability (NCLB) and seemingly intractable African American and Latino/a student failure, why are the ECNs needed in the current education leadership context?* Focusing on the practices of ECNs illustrates how and why these school leaders engage in cultural negotiations between school accountability expectations of teachers and administrators, and students of color who have traditionally not succeeded in conventional school settings.

Education professionals (e.g., administrators, teachers, school specialists) have to realize that challenges may arise for many students; however, for students of color these challenges and their impact on student academic success may be magnified due to predominantly White educators’ lack of cultural understanding of students of color (Milner, 2006a, 2006b; Lynn, 2006; 2002; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Irvine, 1991). A common challenge presented is the miscommunication between people of different racial backgrounds and cultural perspectives. Nationally, while 83.5% of K-12 teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), and the populations of students of color increases in major cities, suburban and rural districts, the likelihood of cultural miscommunication and racial tension is high (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). The recognition of cultural and racial disconnect comes at an important time since the demographics of the nation’s schools are increasingly comprised of students of color, yet the percentages of teachers and principals who are from African American, Latina/o, Asian American/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Tribal Nation groups have barley gained ground. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), African Americans comprised 8.7% of the total population of public school principals in 1993-94, and in 2003-04, this figure only increased to 9.3%. Latina/o principals comprised 3.6% of principals in 1993-94, and their percentage increased to 4.8% in 2003-04. Asian American percentages were 0.8% in 1993-94 and slipped to 0.7% in 2003-04, while American Indian/Tribal Nation principals’ percentage stayed 0.7% in 1993-94 and 2003-04. The absence of equitable racial and ethnic balance amongst educational professionals in K-12 school districts often signals and presents prime opportunity for racial and cultural disconnect. Habitually, school officials often wish to deny that racism exists in schools, suggest isolated incidents cannot be tied to low academic achievement, and dismiss students and parents of color’s negative perceptions of their school experience based on racism (Pollock, 2008). It is still the case in many schools that educational leaders continue to base decisions on standard rules and operational procedures when faced with racial incidents and achievement disparities (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Pollock, 2008). Consequently, when educators, particularly White administrators and teachers, continue to conduct educational activities with a color-blind mentality or with disregard for cultural differences, students of color are more often left behind.

As a result of traditional practices of color-blind ideologies, school educators usually want to avoid all controversy, particularly around race and racism, especially where Whites are the dominant group. School leaders say they appreciate diversity but seldom take social justice risks when racial incidents occur or if a school district is found to have most of their students of color performing below standard achievement levels (Anderson, 2009). In general, while there is a strong push to raise student achievement through the standards and accountability movement, there is still general resistance to remedy everyday racial injustice, which effects the academic achievement of students of color. This is in the form of administrative and teacher resistance that posits: a) harm to children of color cannot be proven, b) harm to children of color should not be discussed, and c) harms to children of color cannot be remedied and/or are too insignificant to ameliorate (Pollock, 2008). We argue that it is imperative that schools and educational leaders recognize the importance of “everyday justice” (Pollock, 2008), where children experience specific forms of denial of opportunity on a daily basis; however, specific persons with influence over the lives of children of color *can and should* provide them with specific forms of opportunity.

Our particular research project explores the role of the ECN as one of these specific persons who acts as a negotiator for students of color achievement and success. Previous educational literature recognizes the need for student advocates such as parents and community members, mentors, cultural brokers, and culturally responsive counselors for students’ academic and social advancement (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994; Mitra, 2009). This study establishes the ECN as utilizing the qualities and tenets of the aforementioned educational partners, combined with culturally relevant pedagogy to help students navigate their way through issues of racial isolation or disparate racial treatment. Like cultural brokers, key components that ECNs provide are critical translations and negotiations between parties to help facilitate the educational development and wellbeing of the student. Fundamentally, ECNs also serve as student advocates challenging school policies and practices that have a deleterious impact on African American and Latina/o students (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004; Delpit, 1995).

The first part of our study gives an overview of the research on student advocacy and racial cultural brokering as discussed in previous literature. We review these works and link them to the concept of ECNs using culturally relevant pedagogy, which builds on advocacy literature within the new context of accountability; thus providing insight on the education of African American and Latina/o students. The second part of our study briefly describes the settings of each location and the efforts of ECNs in each program. The third part of this paper shows how qualitative research methods in combination with critical race theory, helped guide our research and served as a methodological lens to view some ECN actions as teachable moments for more effectively educating students of color. Part four presents our findings and reveals the ECNs personify a *village* mentality, provide academic steering, and navigate and negotiate racial spaces within schools for African American and Latino parents and students. We also offer an example of how critical race theory can be used to interpret the advocacy actions of helping students challenge, negotiate, and navigate through issues of racism and prejudice within the academic system. Finally, part five of our study discusses the implications of the role of ECNs in schools and African American and Latina/o communities.

**Student Advocates**

This study grows out of literature discussing the roles, functions, and limitations of traditional student advocates such as parents/community members, mentors, cultural brokers, and culturally responsive counselors, while providing an overview of what ECNs are and how this concept connects to concept of student of color advocacy.

**Parents and Community Members**

Both parents and community members as advocates help to provide holistic student development; however, they are both traditionally and subliminally discouraged from participating at the on-site school level (Ramirez, 2003). While they are encouraged to pay attention to the educational outcomes, academically and behaviorally, as well as converse with adults who know their child at school (Klem, Levin, Bloom & Connell, 2003), parental involvement is often discouraged through polices and practices (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). Oftentimes, parents of students of color must combat racist practices at predominantly White schools (Hale, 2001). Community members fall in a similar category as parents, generally operating in the form of individuals or community programs, which value youth and invest in student development (McLaughlin, Irby& Langman, 1994). Cooper, Denner, and Lopez (1999) discuss, “community programs can play key roles in helping them [students] feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods, learn alternatives to violence, gain educational experiences, and acquire the bicultural skills needed for success in school” (p. 54). Through these programs, students are able to discuss what is important to them, and their current and future situations. The adults in these programs vary in ethnic background, but they all “value children’s home communities, and many share a common language and sometimes a family history with the children” (p. 54). Through these connections, students see a common and shared experience that can be used as a springboard to forming significant relationships with caring adults. As, “part counselor, part friend, and role model” (McPartland & Needles, 1991, p. 571), the adults can serve as a guide for students by helping them academically and assisting students become bicultural—retaining their home/cultural traditions while learning the traditions of mainstream institutional practices and policies, that are often based off White middle-class values.

**Mentors**

Similar to parents and community members, mentors of minority students operate in a holistic fashion emphasizing personal development, academic and work related goals, while also providing a place of empathy for students’ experience. Hall (2006) summarizes the holistic approach of mentoring as a program to:

reach out and embrace young people with love and understanding, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, or belief system. Youth mentoring is a social responsibility, as well as a labor of love. It is about helping all youth understand who they are, assisting them in building a healthy self-concept, and supporting them in their dreams, visions, and goals (p. 15).

Through this holistic approach, mentors may be able to more effectively help students of color with the added dimension of assisting students “understand who they are,” and in the development of students’ self-confidence and cultural knowledge. Ideal mentoring for minority students values cultural capital embedded in communities of color, such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant (Yosso, 2006). Acknowledging cultural wealth within communities of color, strengthens, the mentor/mentee relationship bolstering student development. This form of mentoring, along with centering racial and cultural capital and other traditional forms of capital, provides social capital, consisting of, but not limited to, knowledge, information, skills, and resources—all valuable commodities for upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1986) and increases the chance for students to gain significant information, from those mentors who act as “information channels” (Packard & Wai-Ling, 2009). This vested interest in the students’ holistic development, which includes culture, increases the chance for cultivating significant relationships with the students.

**Cultural Brokers**

Another group of student advocates, also generally located outside of the schools, but are also invested in the culture of students are cultural brokers. As described by the National Center for Cultural Competency (2004), cultural brokers, who may be from various demographic backgrounds, serve as liaisons, cultural guides, mediators, and catalyst for change. In the role of a liaison, cultural brokers play a critical role in the personal and communal level of the both parties. Cultural brokers are knowledgeable in the practices and beliefs of both groups, as they have learned to effectively navigate their way in both communities. These brokers then help facilitate the relations between each respective party by helping members in each group successfully link the two worlds. As cultural guides, they “understand the strengths and needs of the community… [and] are cognizant of the structures and functions of [each group]” (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004). With knowledge in both settings, brokers help to develop and implement educational material and diversity initiatives for both communities. Cultural brokers also serve as mediators easing the tension between the two groups. Many racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities have a historical distrust towards institutions that engaged in purposeful discriminatory practices, and this past racism still has a deleterious impact on the current material conditions of persons of color (Powell, 2008). As cultural mediators, these brokers have an established trust and significant relationship with both communities, and through brokers, the rift between communities can be mended. Finally, brokers act as a catalyst for change by creating “an inclusive and collaborative environment” for both communities, by modeling, mentoring, and navigating effectively in both spaces (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004).

Inside of the field of education, the cultural broker concept can also be applied (Bassey, 1996; Gay, 1993; Gentemann and Whitehead, 1983; Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Weiss, 1997). Cultural discontinuity, also referred to as cultural mismatch or cultural incompatibility, is a big chasm between, but not limited to, students of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse backgrounds and their mainly middle-class White educators. Cultural discontinuity hypothesis suggests that the varying communication styles of marginalized students’ and those of the culture of school cause misunderstandings, conflicts, and ultimately failure for some of those students (Erikson, 1987; Ledlow, 1992; Deyhle, 1995; Gay, 2000). These cultural discontinuities in classrooms occur intentionally and unintentionally in the areas of “cultural values, patterns of communication and cognitive processing, task performance or work habits, self-presentation styles, and approaches to problem solving” (Gay, 1993, p. 289). The mismatch is stressful to both students and teachers alike. Teachers spend a considerable amount of time trying to manage the classroom and maintain the hegemonic status quo, while students spend an inordinate amount of time trying to combat, negotiate, and simply live with the mismatch. Boykin’s (1986) calls this experience a “triple quandary,” where students constantly negotiate three cultures: their individual culture, mainstream school culture, and being a member of a marginalized group. To decrease this tension and increase a more continuous educational process, cultural brokers may serve as link for both the student and the educators.

Cultural brokers in educational settings also act as “translators” of the academic subculture for the student (Gentemann &Whitehead, 1983). In Gentemann and Whitehead’s (1983) study, they explain how brokers in one university setting utilize several methods and strategies to supply students with negotiation tactics for successfully matriculating the schooling process as well as provide them with access to the hidden rules of the educational system. Furthermore, the brokers also work with the university to increase their awareness of what the students needed from the university. By brokering both ways, these individuals play critical roles in helping the advancement of both the students and the university.

**Culturally Responsive Counselor**

Traditionally, counselors, a major advocate of students located inside of the school borders, define their roles/functions/services by the services they provide—counseling, consultation, and coordination (Erford, House, & Martin, 2003); however, critics have often charged counselors as underserving marginalized groups such as poor, minority, English language learners, and students with special needs (Lee, 2001; American School Counselor Association, 2003). One effort to effectively counsel all students is through culturally responsive counseling (CRC). Access, equity, and educational justice are the guiding forces for this form of counseling, which emphasizes the importance of promoting cultural diversity in school counseling (Smith-Adrock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, & Indelicato, 2006). CRC is based on two important premises: “(1) All young people can learn and want to learn; and (2) cultural differences are real and cannot be ignored” (Lee, 2001, p. 259). Important aspects of CRC are understanding the cultural realities of students and their influence on academic, social, personal, and career development. Through CRC, counselors act as facilitators of student development by promoting positive self-identities, interpersonal relations among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, academic achievement, attitude and skills for school success, and career exploration and choice process. Culturally responsive counselors also act as a student advocates, by recognizing the systematic barriers to quality education for students, and intervening at an administrative and staff level facilitating educator awareness of “cultural blind-spots” that may impede adequate the academic, social, cultural, and personal development of students of color. CRC seeks to provide ways of bridging the home and family life of students of color and the school by looking for ways to promote and incorporate family and community resources into the educational process (Carter & El Hindi, 1999; Smith-Adrock, et al, 2006). CRC requires counselors to move beyond the knowledge component and into the advocacy approach.

**Educational Cultural Negotiators**

The Educational Cultural Negotiator (ECN), generally located within the school borders and are not limited to the classroom, uses a collaboration of educational advocacy approaches for students while using culturally relevant pedagogy. Whereas the other advocates are somewhat limited, by location or otherwise (see Table 1), the ECN employs all of the qualities and practices of all of the other advocates. The ECN has the intimate care of a mentor and the insider knowledge and savvy of a cultural broker and a culturally responsive counselor. Three specific traits are to be highlighted for their significance in the role of ECNs: (a) negotiating between spaces of race/marginalization, (b) navigating between spaces of race/marginalization, and (c) translation between parties. ECNs negotiate spaces of race/marginalization, similar to cultural brokers and culturally responsive counselors, by addressing racial inequity in areas such as, but not limited to, curriculum and policies that disservice African American and Latino students. Additionally, ECNs help students navigate through issues of race/marginalization in areas such as, but not limited to, isolation, “othering,” and racial microaggressions. Lastly, like cultural brokers, ECNs provide critical translation between and amongst groups such as students and teachers, students and parents, and parents and teachers. This translation is a fundamental part of the role of ECNs assisting one party to effectively communicate

**Table 1 Student Advocacy Characteristics**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Advocacy Traits** | **Parent/Community Member** | **Mentor** | **Cultural Broker** | **Counselor** | **Educational Cultural Negotiator** |
| **Center culture as capital** | X | X |  | X | X |
| **Affirm cultural identity** | X | X |  | X | X |
| **Negotiate spaces of race/**  **marginalization** |  |  | X | X | X |
| **Navigate spaces of race/**  **marginalization** |  |  |  |  | X |
| **Translate between groups** |  |  | X |  | X |
| **Negotiate between parties** |  |  | X | X | X |
| **Act as a catalyst for change** |  |  | X | X | X |
| **Seek academic equity for all students, especially students of color** |  |  | X | X | X |
| **Mentor** | X | X |  |  | X |
| **Role model** | X | X |  |  | X |
| **Provide academic steering** | X | X |  | X | X |
| **Provide emotional/social support** | X | X |  | X | X |

and/or understand the other party. Through negotiation, navigation, and translation, ECNs provide the additional advocacy for African American and Latino students, which work in concert with culturally relevant pedagogy.

As advocates and practitioners of culturally relevant pedagogy, ECNs may be able to more effectively reach, teach, guide, and mentor students due to their holistic educational approach. ECNs use culturally relevant pedagogy to empower students “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.17-18). Instead of stripping students of their cultural being/heritage/traditions, ECNs, use race, gender, language and culture as a vehicle to bridge the divide of home and education. Additionally, ECNs maintain due diligence to issues around social inequities. Similar to the practice of critical race pedagogues, as mentioned by Lynn (1999), ECNs pay close attention to: “the endemic nature of racism in the United States; the importance of cultural identity; the necessary interaction of race, class, and gender; and the practice of a liberatory pedagogy” (Lynn, 1999). Additionally, through this approach, ECNs are better able to address student achievement and help students “accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Acting as a catalyst for change for equitable schooling, the ECNs serve a unique role in African American and Latino education.

ECNs uphold the core values of success for all students, particularly African American, Latino, and other marginalized groups, but not at the expense of racist practices or benign neglect of students. The difference between the ECNs and advocates and/or teachers who use culturally relevant pedagogy is that while ECNs use culturally relevant pedagogy in ways that promote student learning, they also use advocacy, negotiation, and other means to work with educators and school officials to change policies and practices. They also help students negotiate around teachers and administrators when need be; it is the role of advocacy and the process of negotiation that makes them different from advocates and educators who use culturally relevant pedagogy. Plus the role of an ECN is not limited to teachers nor the classroom and classroom, but doctoral students, community members, or other persons connected inside school boarders working.

**Methods**

**Participants**

**Midwestern program.**

The Midwestern school program takes place in a predominantly White, public high school in a racial and class stratified metropolitan area. The program was an effort to close the academic achievement gap between African American and White students in one high school in a Midwestern city. African American and Latino/students were identified by teachers and/or administration as students in the “academic middle” and/or have potential for post high school achievement. Students possessing “potential,” as defined by the ECNs, are those who demonstrate a desire to receive extra help, and say through speech, action, or otherwise, “I will make an effort to help myself.” The program lasted from 2004-2009, and operated year round serving as a supplemental activity helping African American and Latina/o students strengthen their academics, social, cultural, and emotional sense of being. Students met approximately twice a month for regular meetings and were expected to attend tutoring sessions at least 2 hours a week.

Essential program activities included: *academic workshops* for tutoring sessions. Students were required to attend two sessions per week offered for study hours and assistance and with homework, projects, and college related material. *Student life workshops* were held twice a month during the school day and consisted of speakers visiting to “tell their stories,” giving tips for success, and explaining the process and providing tips to get and surpass the speakers level of “success.” The workshops also included, but not limited to, student centered discussions on culturally relevant issues, such as “how to deal with racism at school.” *Cultural fieldtrips and College Visits* were held once a semester and included trips to local events celebrating Latina/o and African American heritage and local and out of state colleges and universities.

**Midwestern participants.**

The Midwestern participants consisted of two co-directors, one African American female English teacher and one African American male principal. The female was in her twenty-first year as a high school English teacher in the district, and the male taught middle school and high school English for seven years each, and principled for two years at the high school. All of his experience was also in the same district. As co-directors, both coordinated life-workshops, tutoring sessions, and set-up field trips and college visits. Additionally, both spoke with parents and facilitated conversations around college preparation. Overall, the ECNs expressed their role as helping students get to the next level academically, socially, culturally, and personally.

**Midwestern pilot study.**

A qualitative evaluation (Warren-Grice, 2010), which interviewed 19 of the student program participants, suggested that strong relationships with the program directors, staff, and peers; structured and supervised study sessions; and anticipated fieldtrips helped to facilitate academic achievement, college admission eligibility, and attitudes toward school. The pilot study consisted of an analysis of student report cards, interviews, and a paper-pencil survey. The study was completed during the 2008-2009 academic school year and suggested indicators for African American student achievement and the role of the directors.The 19 students were chosen based off of their participation in raising money and attending the 2009 Presidential Inaugural Address. According to the evaluation, student participant grade point averages increased from spring 2008 to spring 2009. The average GPA for the 2007-2008 school year was 2.7 and for the 2008-2009 school year it was 2.8. There were also student grade increases in core subjects: English, math, and social studies; the most improved being in English with the number of students enrolled in an English class (n=16). English is to be highlighted for increasing from zero (0%) to eight (44.4%) A’s, and seven (38.9%) with B’s, and one (5.6%) with a C. Although grades increased from the spring 2008 semester in 3 subjects, grades did not continually increase at the rate of the fall 2008. It is to be noted that grades were at the highest prior to the fieldtrip to Washington, D.C. It appeared that based on paper-pencil surveys, students identified as more committed to tutoring hours and their grades, when a big field trip was on the horizon. Lastly, according to the students, the most significant factor in student achievement and development were the strong relationships built with the directors in connection with the tutoring sessions. Academic, social, cultural, and emotional development and/or improvement, and the willingness to give back to the community were also strongly related to the established relationships with the directors.

**Western program.**

The second location for this study took place in an elementary school that is majority Latino/a in a large urban center in the Western U.S. The school was home for a university-school based partnership with the local public school district. The partnership focused on preparing students to master both Spanish and English language literacy and writing through a dual immersion program. This elementary school was located in a part of the city that was approximately 80% Latino/a, some of whom are undocumented in terms of their legal status in the U.S. The school was perceived to be in a dangerous area rife with crime, gangs, drugs and other forms of urban blight, despite the fact that many families in the area sought the “American Dream” through hard work and a belief in education for their children’s future. The intent of the partnership was two-fold: 1) to value the cultural experiences and lives of students by placing them in a dual immersion language program so they could value both languages and cultures; and 2) provide the students, parents, and the larger Latina/o community with early and continuous exposure to post-secondary education options so students could see college as a real option to further their education. The exposure came in various forms, such as: (a) university undergraduates of color who came on a weekly basis to tutor the students and serve as role models of success, and (b) active engagement with parents geared toward increasing parental partnerships with the school. The entire student body, the surrounding school community and the ECNs worked with the teachers and administrators to envision who these children would be as adult participants in society, and how the experience through this school-university partnership would help them actualize that dream.

**Western participants.**

The Western program participants consisted of two doctoral students. One of them was a Latina doctoral student at a local university in the area. She worked with the program for four years, beginning as a summer camp teacher and was a program coordinator at the time of study. She operated as coordinator for two years, helping with all the programmatic aspects of the partnership, focusing on the undergraduate tutors, and serving as the academic planner. She also worked on site to communicate with families about: (a) school-university events for Latina/o students, (b) financial aid opportunities for future college plans, (c) parental involvement in student learning, and (d) resources to help undocumented families with the citizenship process.

The second participant was also a Latina doctoral student at the same university and worked in the program for one year as a staff member, starting off as a program intern. She was on site to communicate with parents, and coordinates campus visits to the university. Like the other ECN in the program, she also worked in the summer as a teacher/tutor/mentor with the students and took them to campus to attend afternoon classes in math, science, reading, and Latina/o history and culture. Both of these ECNs expressed their overall purpose was to show the students and families a way to be successful in school, while simultaneously taking ownership and pride of their culture and heritage. They saw the purpose of being ECNs as helping students recognize, early, how and why it was important to negotiate borders for success in both the larger White academic world and their own communities as Latinas/os.

**Conceptual Framework, Research Methods and Data Collection**

For this study, we used an interpretive methodological framework: qualitative methods with an emphasis on critical race methodology[[1]](#footnote-1) (Solórzano & Yosso 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). Critical race methodology provided an important interpretive lens into the subjective everyday experiences of students and persons of color in schools. This methodology examined specific moments, incidents, practices and situations that contribute to an overarching pattern of denial of equity in education. Centering and documenting race and racial contexts (with intersections of class, race, and gender), our research examined those overarching patterns of inequity in education through the counter-narratives of ECNs who operated from race-centered and culturally-based norms, to help students of color reach success (DeCur & Dixson, 2004). Critical race methodology was significant to our study because we wanted to examine the educational leadership of ECNs who center race and culture in student advocacy.

We collected data principally from interviews with the Midwestern ECNs during fall 2008 through fall 2009, and interviews from the Western program during fall 2010 and spring 2011. These data were supplemented with observations, organizational artifacts, existing data on student grades, and information about the academic achievement gap in both districts. Researchers made five site visits to each program and met three times with individual ECNs for semi-structured interviews. The site visits included:

1. attended key functions and events sponsored by the programs where the ECNs provided cultural afterschool opportunities for students;
2. attended focus group meetings where the ECNs engaged with students about how to “negotiate” school;
3. Observed or shadowed the ECNs to see how they acted as cultural negotiators with teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

While many of the issues were the same across sites, there were also site-specific considerations to examine differences across sites as well as provide flexibility in the data collection process such as:

1. What was the role of the ECN program director and staff, and what does that look like on a daily basis?[[2]](#footnote-2)
2. How did the director and staff communicate with the students, parents, and teachers?
3. In what ways and to what extent was the ECN effective in helping African American and Latina/o students negotiate the academic environment?
4. In what ways and to what extent was the ECN effective in helping African American and Latina/o students negotiate the cultural environment?

Observations addressed the following inquiry:

1. How did the ECNs negotiate the academic and cultural environment for students, teachers, and parents?

Lastly, we used open-ending coding to thematically organize the data narratives into categories that captured the essence and depicted the roles of the ECNs as cultural negotiators. We identified three major themes: ECNs conveyed a *village* mentality, influenced academic achievement and helped navigate and negotiate racial spaces within the school setting. In the next section, we present each theme and the reflections of ECNs to illustrate the roles they provide for program participants.

**Results**

**Findings and analysis**

In this section, three major themes emerged from the data regarding the roles of ECNs and why students of color need them. We discussed the *village* mentality of the ECNs and how it reflected the importance of significant relationships and helped to establish a *village* within the school for students. Next, we illustrated how the ECNs influenced student academic achievement, as seen through ECNs acting as guides, role models, or mentors, in the educational process, and helped to navigate and negotiate racial spaces within the schools.

**Village mentality.**

ECNs discussed at length the concept of the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” which echoes the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships with students. In alignment with other culturally relevant pedagogues, ECNs often described their roles as members of an extended family (Ladson-Billings, 1990; 1994),where older adults take on a more parental role. Acting as a family member, educator, advocate of trust, role model, and mentor, ECNs held students accountable for their work, while providing a safe place where students felt comfortable to share information about their lived experiences. The relationships created in these programs imitated a family structure where students went to ECNs for basic necessities such as food throughout the day, to guidance for handling social problems. The programs provided a village within the school, and presented ECNs as a resource to listen, advise, encourage, support, discipline, push, and exist for students. The male ECN director from the Midwestern program described,

…with us, we [the other ECNs of the program] were all really close, then we got close to the kids, and the outlook was that they had people that they could trust to the highest degree here. [We were] people they could come tell stories to, talk about their problems, [and] help just like a family would. I was like a dad. [I would ask questions like] “What are you doing here?” “What about your life?” [Those] conversations help them with forward thinking, [and] encouraging them [to] move on. I was always talking to at least one of them….about something.

The female director of the Midwestern program described those conversations and meetings as,

It felt like parenting…the bond. It was more than just meeting. It was kids

stopping by my planning period, my lunch, saying, this is the issue I’m having with this teacher in class. [Or], they would bring problems with each other, within the group, so you try to play referee, but referee the way parents play referee. Not an impersonal way…not only in an I’m-trying-to-get-you-to-stop way, but, I wanted you to see what’s wrong in what you are doing. Instead of hearing a lesson, you want them to learn from the lesson.

In the Western program the first ECN discussed,

As far as the Latino community goes, we are able to communicate with Latino youth and parents more efficiently because we speak Spanish and understand the culture. We do not use words or terms that are not familiar to youth and families. We use words that we would use with our own parents.

In both sites, ECNs offered paternalistic/maternal roles to support students academically and socially, acting as an extended family. As described by the male ECN from the Midwestern program, the ECNs from each program “got close first,” suggesting a meeting of the village “elders,” or family members, to figure out how best to bridge the gaps between the students home, culture, and school expectations. For example, the use of home languages, like Spanish, or a nonstandard English that parents and students felt more comfortable, was a key component to help build relationships. Speaking in a more relaxed and familial way helped to bridge the home-academic divide and facilitated both students and parents to connect more fully with the educational system. In the Western site, the theme of family was of special importance since it was an elementary school and the ECNs, here, adhered to the goals of the partnership program regarding extensive parental involvement, parental contact with the ECNs and teachers, and in some cases served as a negotiator between families and teachers to reach common goals around particular student achievement concerns. ECNs in both sites practiced a type of translation and negotiation to help students and parents understand, utilize, and apply the information teachers and schools provided. Forming significant relationships helped set up students and parents for academic success.

Setting up students for success, like running a village or parenting, was not only a job between the regular school day or during the program, but it was an ongoing process. We found a similar pattern across sites where both sets of ECNs met, often, in and out of school to discuss how best to help students holistically in their respective educational sites. ECNs willingly met for hours and would often get “lost” in time as they planned activities and strategized ways to better the positions of their students academically, socially, culturally, and emotionally. The process was aided by the fact the ECNs generally liked each other, respected each others work, and they were all “in it” for the students. They did not want to only talk about the problem and hope with good intentions, but they wanted to systematically have a process in place to help the students, and the program provided the means, supportive environment, and energy of other ECNs to facilitate the process.

We also saw a pattern of the ECNs “getting close to the kids.” The ECNs talked to the students with respect and attention, as opposed to speaking to them in a deficit manner. ECNs were generally interested in the students and how they were developing holistically; consequently, students felt comfortable to stop by during the lunch of ECNs seeking academic help, advice, a sounding board, someone to listen, a referee, or someone to speak their home language. Interest in students overall wellbeing opened the door to discuss betterment in all facets of life in the present and future. The “intermediary spaces” (Noam & Tillinger, 2004), created within the programs, allowed for a *village* or family-type structure where students felt safe to discuss everyday experiences that they were dealing with in and out of school.

Additionally, the village concept is not limited to the students, but to their parents as well. Parents were a central part of the family, and as described by the female Midwest ECN, “not to sound cliché, but it does take the whole village.” She continues, “parents are happy to see somebody pushing for their kid, so now they [the parents] would go out and they would look up some stuff and [make suggestions on activities for the program].” As parents saw the personal and vested interest ECNs took with their kids, it encouraged some parents to become active and confident partners in their child’s educational journey within the program. The second Western ECN illustrated, “Parents come ask about resources in the community or sometimes they tell us about community resources and events and ask us to help spread the word. Parents ask us to translate for them or help them pay bills. We give them resource information about schooling and educational opportunities especially if they are undocumented.” The village at school and personal commitment the ECNs made to their students and families provided a place of safety, support, and resources, where students and parents felt comfortable to seek and receive help. The ECN role as “family” at school further developed the student-ECN relationship, nurtured the foundation of trust, and supported the bridge students move to the next level of success. This trust was particularly important at the Western site given that the school was situated in a majority low income Latino neighborhood with a history of political tension between them and the dominant White majority city. The issues related to: anti-immigration public sentiment, lack of affordable housing, lack of sustained investment in community development, tensions with police, poor health care, lack of employment opportunities, and biased attitudes of some school personnel toward Latino/a children and parents. These tensions in the city, community, and school created the need for space and personnel parents and students could trust.

The significant relationship also allowed for students and parents to have a *voice* within the school. In general, the ECNs knew and recognized what their students needed because they listened to their students, were intimately familiar with the operating system of the school, comprehended the impact race has in schools, and sought equitable schooling for all students. Students felt comfortable to share their experiences, thus ECNs were able to speak to administrators on behalf of students and parents. The first Western ECN described it as, “we do not always get the support we need from central office school administrators, so we have to learn how to convince them that what we do is important and that there are other ways of doing things that will benefit the students and not continue to deprive them of good schooling experience.” Sharing the experiences of students and parents with administrators helped to demonstrate the need for these programs and ECNs to help students deal with everyday issues that the schools were not adequately addressing. Additionally, ECNs afforded students an on-site and visible advocate. The male Midwestern ECN states, “Those teachers [other teachers in the building] realized that they [students in the program] had somebody here that was watching out for those kids. They were careful with how they interacted with those students because they realized they had people here in the building.” The ECNs acted just as parents would, by holistically protecting the educational rights of their students from, but not limited to, a social, cultural, and emotional standpoint. These ECNs were the village “elders,” “family,” and voices of advocacy pushing for change on behalf of the African American and Latina/o students and parents.

**ECN influence of academic achievement.**

When discussing their influence on academic achievement, in general they operated as a guide, role model, or mentor pushing students for success, while providing them with support (Foster 1991, 1994). The first Western ECN summarized, “We are able to prep them and guide them through the K-16 system by sharing our experiences, and giving advice/suggestions/support to parents so that they are able to advocate for their child.” ECNs assisted in various ways needed to set up students for success. In the Midwestern program, the female ECN discussed the need for tutoring sessions.

I knew these kids needed it. They needed someone other than parents to believe in them and I think our kids, not just [this program]…some of them don’t have quiet places to do their homework. [Tutoring hours] might be the only two hours that they might be able to get some peace and quiet, work accomplished, and asks questions. We were teaching them: here’s what it takes; give yourself an hour and here’s what to do.

As a guide, role model, and mentor ECNs helped show and provide students and parents strategies and opportunities to reach success.

ECNs *pushed for excellence* by challenging students to strive to reach higher levels of academic goals while also providing the structures to support those endeavors. The male ECN in the Midwestern site discussed two different types of students in the program and how the ECNs motivated and enhanced both. “[W]e had some students that were gonna achieve, but they didn’t have that social part…somebody that could support them and say ‘you can achieve to a higher level.’” For students that were,

on track as far as grades…it wasn’t so much of a hard push, but we took them to

a higher level of thinking in the things they thought they could achieve. Like student A, she was always about her grades, but she didn’t know about college, what she could do, [or] what school she could go to. [Whereas student B], her grades improved drastically, and I think it was because we kept pushing…and now she’s at a great school. That last year, student B got scholarship this and scholarship that and was in[volved] in everything, and that allowed her to do things she wouldn’t have been able to do had she not been here [in the program].

As seen in the aforementioned example given by the male ECN in the Midwestern program, ECNs worked with students at their academic level, but also helped them attain their personal best through their own academic growth as students. For ECNs, there is no standard benchmark for success, but with each student it was an individual process of constant improvement and striving for personal records in mentality and in action.

Another example of pushing for excellence was when ECNs encouraged and helped students navigate spaces where they were not challenged academically. At the Midwestern site, two African American senior students felt as if their math teacher was failing to adequately prepare them for college math. The students complained to the ECNs, and the ECNs discussed the importance of following the “chain of commands.” The female ECN told the students, “The thing is not to act out in class, but to go to him and say, ‘this is what we want,’ and if you don’t get what you want, then you go the next person about him.” The students followed the chain of commands, by talking to the teacher and principal. When students saw no results regarding the teacher, the students enlisted their parents to get involved, and with persistence, talking to the right people, and providing documentation, the teacher was eventually fired. ECNs pushed the students to look out for their own best interest, to be educated, and to be prepared for the next stage in their academic trajectory. Additionally, the ECNs taught the students how to fight against injustice and create change. It was here that critical race theory was relevant to our research findings in that the ECNs helped the students articulate a counter narrative. The counter narrative illustrates student of color academic achievement rooted in their own racial cultural capital and their desire and actions for a more rigorous educational experience. Through culturally relevant pedagogy, ECNs continue the process of challenging racial subordination in education. The ECNs helped the students recognize their rights as students of color to be educated to their full capacity. When students were not being adequately educated, the ECNs helped the students work the administrative channels to have the teacher removed in order for future students to receive a challenging math curriculum for college preparation. As ECNs pushed for excellence, this finding connects to other CRT works by Lynn (2006; 1999) who documented the connection between African American students and teachers to improve the practices of African American social justice educators and improve academic knowledge, or Carter (2008) who documented the drive to success by African American students and their own will to succeed.

ECNs also pushed for excellence by stressing the importance of getting involved in extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. As a result of, but not limited to, constantly hearing the need to get involved and take on leadership roles, students in the Midwestern program began entering both extracurricular and academic areas where students of color were traditionally underrepresented or completely absent, such as leadership programs, student council, and honors courses. ECNs pushed extremely hard for program participants to take higher-level courses to prepare them for college and increase their critical thinking skills. ECNs, using culturally relevant pedagogy, pushed to increase racial educational equity and opportunities for African American and Latina/o students.

Another example of the influence ECNs had on academic achievement was on a college trip for the Midwestern program. The campus tour guide for the overnight trip was an alumna of the program. One of the female ECNs commented,

She talked to the kids and was like, ‘you need to go to college, do this, because Mr. [ECN] is for us, and you all gone get here and some of the same things that they said would happen, happened.’ So it was kinda like she was talking about how it affected her by preparing her for what was to come.

Though not a direct hand in academics, the alumna discussed the “care” of the ECNs and their diligence to show and guide students in process of preparing for the “next step.” The African American and Latino/a high school students saw college students who looked “just like them,” who came from places “just like them,” and acted and talked “just like them,” and it showed the students the potential of what they could be and do in the future.

College trips were also a part of the experience built into the Western program, as the ECNs worked with a university-school partnership intended to empower the Latina/o community around educational opportunities. The ECNs took the elementary school children on field trips to the university; the purpose being that, if students at a young age went to a college campus, the concept of college and post-secondary opportunities would be a catalyst for them and their parents to imagine and see themselves in college. Through the program, the ECNs led students around the campus to meet with professors and administrators; see campus facilities in the social sciences, hard sciences and medical fields; and obtain information about colleges. The ECNs also taught summer academic classes for the children at the college of education that gave the students early exposure to the environment of college classes. In this way, the ECNs at the Western site used the college visits as an intentional way to put in the minds of the student and their families at an early age, that college is a possibility for their future. The college visits were intended to instill an early sense of ownership and belonging on a college campus, so these students could start to feel, even at an early age, that they had a place on a predominantly White campus environment.

**Navigate and negotiate racial tensions.**

At both sites, ECNs used culturally relevant pedagogy, similar to Lynn’s (1999) suggestion of critical race pedagogy, “which uses a broad interpretation of emancipatory pedagogical strategies and techniques that have proved to be successful with racially subordinated students” (Lynn, 2006, p. 615). With students, ECNs first tried to affirm students’ identity and culture. Building students confidence in who they were individually and culturally, helped provide students with a foundation for navigating the sometimes racially hostile landscape of school. In the Midwestern program, ECNs would find activities that spoke to the Latina/o and/or African American culture, through, but not limited to, local events, speakers, movies, and conversations. In the Western program, ECNs had students conduct oral histories, and “encouraged [them] to focus on their cultural and familial background to get a better sense of who they are.” Not only does this teach them about their history, “but by doing this type of activity, students [were] taught that there are different ways of learning and histories that are not always taught in schools.” Through helping students gain more knowledge about who they are as individuals, communities, and a culture, students were able to build confidence in themselves. At both sites, ECNs emphasized racial cultural capital as a strength and source of knowledge (Yosso, 2006). The ECNs believed that in addition to the accountability of standardized assessment of the school curriculum, it was imperative that the African American and Latina/o students also learn about their respective histories, struggles and achievements, and value their racial cultural capital. From a CRT perspective, the ECNs knew that it was their responsibility to create moments that would be just as important as the standardized assessment tests, especially since there were either limited opportunities to learn about their own racial group histories, or students felt a pervasive sentiment of racial intolerance in the larger communities in both the Midwestern and Western sites. Yosso’s (2006) concept of cultural capital emerged in this study as fundamental tenant in the ECNs knowledge building process with the students. Through this process of personal development and navigating racial tension, the relationship between students and ECNs was further developed.

Another way ECNs navigated and negotiated racial tensions was to challenge traditional White middle class ideologies that inform teaching practices and policies. This portion is a key element for differentiating ECNs from other advocates and educators that use culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, the Midwestern ECNs conducted staff development workshops on cultural differences and cultural relevancy. ECNs challenged staff members to look at their teaching methods, consider how their practices may be culturally biased, and to consider teaching practices more culturally relevant for all students. The male ECN at the Midwestern program states, “there are staff members that still discuss how powerful a workshop was and how it really helped him to realize what students of color experience and have to experience.” Additionally, Midwestern ECNs challenged staff members to make the curriculum to be more culturally relevant. The female ECN described how the English department was going to make teaching *The narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* optional for teachers during the unit covering persuasive techniques. She describes,

I was like, “yea, everyone does need to teach *Frederick Douglass*. It has nothing but persuasive techniques.” One [White teacher] said, “I can’t find any persuasion.” I was floored. She said, “I was just letting them find the emotional ones.” I was thinking, ‘if your just letting them find the emotional ones, then they don’t get the meaning behind the piece,’ because they think it’s purely for sympathy and it’s sooo not that. [She goes on to say] We all have a different take on it I guess, and our [ECNs] take comes from a different place, and maybe they feel that they can’t. I don’t know. And another [White female] teacher even said, “I just don’t know if I can’t teach Douglass.

In this example, the ECN advocated teaching *The narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* and suggested that many White teachers do not want to teach it, because it deals with slavery, race, and racism. She continued by discussing the necessary burden of having to teach twice, to students and to staff about culture, race, and racial implications. In this particular situation, she continued illustrating the tragic and nerve-wracking irony in how everyone was “ok” with teaching Patrick Henry’s, “Give me liberty or give me death,” but were not ok with Frederick Douglass’ autobiography, both essentially talking about freedom. She later discussed how she would lend her book, which she marked with personal notes and commentary in the margins, to the White female teacher, so the teacher could see her highlighted examples of persuasive techniques of ethical and logical appeals. Using advocacy techniques of negotiation, ECNs worked on behalf of students, and parents of color, behind the scenes to link effective teaching practices and content related to critical racial content (Lynn, 1999). Challenging traditional White middle-class teaching practices, policies, and beliefs helped to ameliorate educational inequities.

Additionally, while combating racism and prejudice on a staff and administrative level, ECNs also taught students how to navigate those same “hostile spaces” in and out of schools. In the Midwestern program, the female ECN described an incident were a Latina student enrolled in a Spanish course, and on the first day of class, the White male teacher assumed that she spoke Spanish. The Spanish teacher told her, “Don’t worry about it. If you get bored, you can go to the library.” The student was furious and hurt. The ECN calmed her down, validated her experience and feelings, and asked her what she wanted to do, as opposed to telling her what to do. Together they devised an appropriate response where the student would talk to the teacher letting him know that she did not know Spanish, and the assumption made her feel uncomfortable. Together, they rehearsed the conversation before meeting with the teacher, and to further connect with the student, the ECN shared personal experiences of racism as a student and as an adult. CRT can be used to interpret these two significant findings in that the ECNs helped the students directly confront the color-blind omissions within the curriculum and pedagogy of the teachers, and address the racial battle fatigue (Smith, W. Allen, W., & Danley, L., 2007) that students may face from direct and more subtle forms of White racism and racial assumptions that lead to tension and mistrust (Smith, Yosso, Solorzano & Tejda, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). ECNs helped students navigate those same hostile spaces while also helping students deal with the emotional aspect of constantly dealing with racial microaggressions. The mental and emotional aid works in tandem with the instructional aid to assist in the holistic wellbeing and development for students of color.

At the Western site, the ECNs helped navigate the racial space at school, by providing legitimacy to the use of Spanish and English at the school. They also saw the importance of providing an additional informal level of advocacy for students with teachers where problems related to low expectations were prominent and effected student learning and behavior. Additionally, the ECNs working with the undergraduate Latino students from the local university who served as tutors further helped to navigate the racial spaces at the school, by providing an auditory and visible presence of cultural support and advocacy. The language, advocacy, and work with the undergraduate tutors affirmed the Latino culture and heritage and served as a conduit for student learning and a connection between school and community. Through these methods of advocacy and partnership at the Western program, ECNs helped to navigate and negotiate the racial spaces for both students and parents.

**Discussion**

The ECNs had a unique position within the school sites in this study. The *village* mentality, and use of culturally relevant pedagogy to influence academic achievement, and navigate and negotiate racial spaces, offered the ECNs a unique opportunity to create a truly beneficial learning environment for students of color. In the aforementioned examples regarding why students of color need an Educational Cultural Negotiator (ECN), our findings suggest that the ECNs played critical roles in the lives of African American and Latino students. As a result of ECNs understanding and knowledge of the system, ECNs were able to advocate for students and parents, when faced with educators using stereotypes and/or deficit ideologies dealing with African American and Latino students. ECNs served in a unique capacity meeting the needs of an underserved population by providing a village within an often isolating and exclusive school system. This familial support received from ECNs sets the foundation for holistic student development. In these familial environments students felt safe, connected, supported, encouraged, and were held to high expectations, and pushed to do well. This extended family utilized the *village* mentality to help students’ problem solve personal, academic, and social issues, while also extending the *village* notion to help parents better their life positions by translating, finding jobs, and/or paying bills. This holistic and *village* mentality helped to create bonds that extended beyond traditional academic walls and created intimate levels of trust on both sides. Parents and students trusted ECNs to help their child(ren) achieve at optimal levels academically, socially, culturally, and personally, and ECNs trusted that parents and students would do their part in assisting students reach higher levels.

ECNs were able to push for academic excellence because they saw, accessed, and nurtured the strengths of the individual students and did not accept less than students’ best efforts. The overall tone set by the relationship demanded excellence in a positive way, and ECNs provided a support system to help students reach success. ECNs also valued and utilized the cultural capital found in communities of color. The ECNs incorporated the cultural aspect to help students further develop a positive cultural identity and challenge racist educational practices of perpetuating the status quo. The example given by the Midwestern ECN who fought for a more inclusive curriculum, illustrated the job of the ECN is not limited to one on one interaction with students and parents, but it is also to challenge systemic issues to ensure a positive, culturally relevant, and inclusive site for all students. In essence, ECNs worked on behalf of the African American and Latino students and parents in schools that are often racist and hostile, and they worked on behalf of the school system by recognizing and pushing for academic excellence. By brokering both ways, ECNs serve as a key link in developing and maintaining a better and more equitable educational environment for students of color.

Critical race theory (CRT) served as a useful analytical methodological framework to interpret the findings from our study illustrating how ECNs helped students address daily racial microaggressions faced directly from educators or indirectly from educator practices, pedagogues, curriculum, or policies. CRT was a valuable interpretive lens to view the acts of the ECNs in their use of racial cultural capital and to situate this knowledge as just as valuable as the standardized test assessment knowledge (Yosso, 2006). In this way, the ECNs used teachable moments to engage students with critical thinking and knowledge about their place in the racialized context of schools (Ford, 2009-HER article).

**Implications**

This study considers how advocacy approaches, racial navigation and negotiations, and culturally relevant pedagogy work together to help students of color on a staff and administrative level, individual student level, and family and community level. CRT in education helps to address these issues by analyzing: (1) the *village* mentality, and (2) how the culturally relevant pedagogy of ECNs influenced academics and the racial spaces within schools. The ECNs were positive additions to students, parents, and educators.

Although ECNs were a positive addition and great resource for students, parents, and educators, as described by the ECNs, “it was a full-time job” because there were so many students and so few ECNs. One of the issues that people in these positions have is sustainability. ECNs worked full-time jobs or were full time graduate students in addition to directing or working as staff members of the program. The stress from professional employment, the ECN position—constantly being on-call for students, and regularly combatting issues of racism on behalf of students, parents, as well as themselves—and their personal life, make running programs difficult and taxing. For instance, the ECNs at the Western site often worked many more than the 20 hours per week during their assigned time and during the summer class sessions they taught on campus. However, given the importance of these relationships and the increased academic performance based on the pilot study (Warren-Grice, 2010), practitioners and researchers should consider further research on sustaining ECNs as program directors. In addition, CRT would be of value to study the future roles of ECNs as they address the ever increasing demands of standardized assessment and accountability, discipline issues with students of color, and clashes between the racial and cultural capital of some students versus knowledge valued by many public schools (McCarthy, et. Al. 2008; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

**Conclusion**

This study supports the use of ECNs to increase the academic, social, cultural, and personal betterment of African American and Latina/o students. Traditional educators such as teachers and principals provide a foundation of standardized assessment knowledge for these students; however, relying solely on teachers and principals, who operate with color-blind ideologies and practices, to raise the academic achievement of students of color is destined to fail. In order to be most effective, it takes a village of educators to help all students holistically, find success academically, socially, culturally, and personally. ECNs can work to facilitate a “village” mentality, and help schools get on board with structural change. Institutional and structural changes must occur alongside professional development and other efforts to raise the academic levels of students of color. Additionally, future research must delve into how to create better schools replicating the process of the work of ECNs. These student advocates are often overlooked, however, serve as a missing link when exploring the role of intermediary persons in organizations that can inform and advise educational professionals regarding academic, social, cultural, and personal development of African American and Latino students. During the era of NCLB accountability, they hold the school accountable for ensuring all students succeed, and if racial barriers arise in the student’s way, ECNs use their advocacy-negotiation processes to challenge school policies and practices.

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1. CRT methodology has the potential to enhance understanding about race, create knowledge, and foster institutional change. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Midwestern site had both a program director who was, at one time, a teacher and currently an administrator, as part of our study. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)