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Starting the Bandwagon: A Historiography of African American Mothers' Leadership during Voluntary School Desegregation, 1954-1971

Camille M. Wilson

Camille M. Wilson: University of Michigan, email: camillewilson01@gmail.com, phone: 734-764-9470

In this article, the author presents a historiography that considers the leadership that African American women, particularly mothers, played in U.S. school desegregation. Discussion moves beyond offering a political analysis of school integration politics that is male centered, bounded by a legalistic frame, or steeped within general discussions of the political clashes between integrationists and segregationists to recast significant historical events through a more nuanced womanist lens. Literature is reviewed and archival data from 1954 to 1971 are marshaled to shed light on why and how African American mothers contributed to the school desegregation movement, particularly in Greensboro, NC. The author suggests what lessons can be gleaned from the mothers' legacy to extend conceptualizations of transformative educational leadership.

Keywords: desegregation, African American women, educational leadership, mothers

Introduction

U.S. educational leadership has traditionally been viewed as the domain of school administrators; yet, parents, community activists, and other engaged citizens have helped bring about educational transformation. Indeed, mothers' acts of political resistance in education have greatly contributed to systemic reform. In this paper, I present a historiography of African American mothers' involvement in voluntary school desegregation. I consider the transformative educational leadership of these mothers and explore how they worked to improve schools while negotiating various social, political, and educational contexts.

In line with the objectives of historiography, my examination "exposes the frames and parameters" of previous historical renderings and it sheds light on how the telling of history has been "mediated by philosophy, ideology, and politics" (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006, p. 311). Specifically, I draw upon archival data to more fully account for the role that African American mothers played in U.S. school desegregation — actions most often linked to prominent male lawyers, male ministers, and male activists (Payne, 1995; Robnett, 1997). Essentially, these mothers according to their peers of the day did not join the civil rights "band-wagon" (Murray, 1971, p. 4), rather they helped to start it. I move beyond offering a political analysis of school integration politics that is bounded by a

legalistic frame, centered in the leadership of males, or steeped within general discussions of the political clashes between black integrationists and white segregationists. I, instead, recast significant historical events through a more nuanced womanist lens.

In the sections below, I overviewed literature regarding the quest for educational equity and the racial desegregation of U.S. public schools. Such research has paid little attention to the roles of women. I discuss how African American women and mothers contributed to the civil rights movements in the U.S. and draw upon black womanist theories to suggest that such efforts constitute leadership. Next, I review the insight gleaned from key historical narratives that indicate why and how African American mothers contributed to the fight for school desegregation, focusing on mothers' leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. I conclude the paper by pinpointing some of the implications of the mothers' leadership legacy.

School Desegregation and the Quest for Equitable Education

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling Brown v. Board of Education, which mandated the desegregation of public schools, was viewed by many as a political victory that would secure equal access and quality schooling for African American children (Anderson & Byrne, 2004; Bell, 2004). Over 50 years later, the promise that Brown held remains a dream deferred.

Many of the mandatory desegregation rulings and policies that school districts once adhered to have been repealed, and many schools have re-segregated (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, 2005; Thro & Russo, 2009). School districts are now free to choose voluntary desegregation plans; and, due to the Parents Involved in Community Schools ruling of 2007, even those plans have been legally banned when they involve race-based strategies (Brown, F., 2009; Donnor, 2011; Thro & Russo, 2009).

Educators and policymakers continue to debate the merits of school desegregation. Supporters of school desegregation maintain that racial integration socially benefits society-at-large and provide African American children access to better schools, valuable social networks and more educational opportunities (Frankenburg, Lee & Orfield, 2003; Wells, Duran & White, 2008). Cautionary scholars have explained how mandatory desegregation resulted in the decrease of African American teachers; the bussing of African American students to hostile and unsafe schools; and/or the weakening of community bonds in African American neighborhoods that once benefited youth (Bell 2004; Edwards, 1993; Siddle Walker, 1996). With the decline of mandatory desegregation policies and the perpetuation of the achievement disparities between white and African American students, the search for effective and equitable educational options persists. The voices of African American families, however, have never adequately informed legal or policy debates.

Prominent school desegregation researchers have emphasized a host of influential Supreme Court cases that challenged the segregated assignment of African American and other non-white students to K-12 schools and universities that provided inferior resources and facilities (Ogletree, 2004; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Patterson, 2001). These cases were typically brought about by African American students and families in partnership with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Ogletree, 2004; Patterson, 2001). Historical accounts of segregation are also replete with information about activist lawyers and judges, and both the opposition of racist whites and the support of white equity-oriented allies (Ogletree, 2004; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Patterson, 2001). Some of desegregation research contains a historical tracing of Brown that reminds one that the seminal case was the culmination of decades-long battles fought by many who were involved in community activism and in lesser known law suits filed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bell, 2004; Ogletree, 2004; Patterson, 2001). Indeed, such bodies of research include important historical accounts that do not reduce school desegregation efforts to the Brown case nor separate the quest from school desegregation from the larger civil rights agenda of the era. Rather, work by scholars like Bell (2004), Patterson (2001) and Hochschild (1984) links school desegregation pursuits to the broader aim of incrementally dismantling the Jim Crow system of racial oppression in the U.S.

Still, analyses of the school desegregation movement are not explicitly gendered and lack specific attention to the experiences and contributions of women. For instance, it is widely known in education and legal circles that the Brown v. Board of Education case was named after key plaintiff Oliver Brown, a Topeka, Kansas minister whose young daughter Linda was forced to attend an all-black school that was farther from her home than the nearby, better resourced, all-white school (Chappel, 2004; Patterson, 2001). What is much less known is that all of the other 12 plaintiffs of this landmark case were women, specifically mothers (The Brown Foundation, n.d.). In fact, African American women and mothers are rarely named or described in the school desegregation research, with few exceptions (see Celceski, 1995). A closer look at a variety of texts and historical documents indicates that mothers played significant roles in various locales. Indeed these mothers displayed leadership.

Black Womanist Leadership

Critical revisionist scholars highlight how many African American women and mothers have fought for community improvement, racial uplift, and institutional transformation in ways that have advanced African Americans' overall quest for civil rights (Collins, 2000; Robnett, 1997; Henry, 2005). Historians like Gasman (2007), Perkins (1993), and Gordon (1995) have particularly studied the ways African American women contributed to educational theories and institutions. Work like theirs has begun filling in wide analytical gaps in scholarly fields that have overlooked centuries of African American women's leadership.

McDonald (1997) has further explained that traditions of "maternal activism" (p. 775) among many African American mothers from the 18th century and beyond are well documented. Nevertheless, such activism and modeling of both familial and communal care have yet to consistently be framed or understood as leadership. Often mothers' efforts have been cast as innate women's work or simply celebrated as assistance that constituted the "backbone" of male leadership (O'Reilly, 2005; Robnett, 1997, p. 171). Leadership traditions of African American mothers, however, are sophisticated, intentional, and rooted in distinct epistemology and cultural mores.

Historically, African American mothers' leadership has embodied ethics of social justice and care that are usually family and community-centered (Cooper, 2009i; McDonald, 1997; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004). These ethics have reflected both mothers' childrearing responsibilities – natural, mandated, or chosen (Collins, 1994; Davis, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005) – and their empathy for and social investment in the elevation of other African Americans as a whole (Collins, 2000; McDonald, 1997). Furthermore, they have typically reflected what Beauboeuf-LaFontant (2002) called "embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk" (p. 71), which is part of black womanist caring norms. These guiding ethics are informed by knowledge and experience that come from facing racial, gender, and class oppression while lacking the male

privilege that benefit men or the racial privilege that benefits white women (Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 2010; Jones, 2010; Robnett, 1997).

Within the field of education, African American mothers' non-traditional leadership and maternal activism have also been evident in home and community spaces. For instance, mid-20th century educator-activist William Pickens stated, "Many an educated Negro owes his enlightenment to the toil and sweat of his mother" (as cited in Jones, 2010, p. 91). African American mothers have, in fact, toiled for other people's children too by engaging in a range of education organizing, non-profit initiatives, and protest politics. Such protest politics aimed at increasing educational equity at the community, regional, and national level. Mothers served as professional educators as well, consciously nurtured children other than their own as teachers or school administrators (Loder-Jackson, 2005). Still, scholars like King and Ferguson (2010) have explained that the devaluing of African American women in society as a whole, coupled with their performance of extraordinary acts as part of their everyday struggle, lends to the minimizing of their leadership.

Links to School Desegregation and Mothers' Motivations and Strategies

What emerges from a historical look at African American mothers' leadership is a framework for seeking justice that is culturally relevant, gendered, and rooted in black womanist ethics of activism and care. These roots are evident in the small body of school desegregation literature that highlights women and mothers' roles, such as Curry's (2005) profile of Mae Bertha Carter, the African American mother of a family of sharecroppers whose eight (out of thirteen) children were the first to integrate schools in Sunflower County, Mississippi in 1965. Carter, who was also a voting rights activist and community educator, explained:

Why I decided that I wanted them to go was I was tired of my kids coming home with pages torn out of worn-out books that came from the white school. I was tired of them riding on these old raggedy buses after the white children didn't want to ride on them anymore. . . . I thought if they go to this all-white school they will get a better education there. (Curry 1995, p. 34-35)

She added, "those white men were spending my tax money and making all the decisions about schools where they wouldn't even send their own children," (Curry, 1995, p. 236).

In her comments, Carter indicated the political realities of the day with which African American families had to contend. These realities included distant, poorly resourced schools that were financially and politically controlled by all white school boards though they were usually staffed by all black educators and served all black students and their tax-paying parents (Bell 2004; Siddle Walker, 1996). Thus, African American parents faced not only the segregation of their children based on racist ideologies of fear and white superiority, but they were

subjected to taxation without political representation or educational choice — factors that supported legal arguments that separate but equal school policies failed to offer African Americans equal protection under the law (Yudoff, Kirp & Levin, 1992).

At the same time, mothers of the day voiced grave concern about the psychological effects of their children being systematically deemed inferior. For instance, Zelma Henderson, a Brown plaintiff, asserted: "I wanted my children to know all races like I did" (Associated Press, 2008, para. 9). She added "It means a lot to a person's outlook on life. No inferiority complex at all, that's what I wanted for my children as far as race was concerned," (para. 9). Furthermore, Melba Pattilo Beals (1994), a member of the Little Rock Nine group who integrated Little Rock, Arkansas schools in 1957 recounted in her memoir the actions her mother Lois Pattillo took to not only enroll her into school but encourage her to remain in school despite the daily harassment and threats she endured. Her mother strove to ensure her physical protection by speaking out in front of the all-white male school board. While there she stated, "What I want to know is whether or not you have any specific plans for protecting our children…As parents we have a right to know how you will protect our children," (as cited in Beals 1994, p. 188). Once enrolled, Beal's mother offered moral support, emphasizing the meaning and importance of her daughter's perseverance. She suggested: "You hit back every day you get through. You kick them every week you get through. And if you make it through the year, you've hit them with the biggest blow of all," (p. 210). The "blow" that Beals' mother encouraged was personal, demonstrating that racist epithets, bullying, and physical assaults would not shatter Beals' resolve. It was also political since she indicated that Beal's persistence could help advance a larger movement and erode a racist system. Indeed, those who integrated public schools acknowledged the pain of their experiences in their memoirs given the threats, bullying, and humiliation they endured. Still, these former students also offered respectful and reverential analyses of their mothers, versus expressing anger or resentment about being volunteered to initiate school desegregation (Bates, 1987; Beals, 1994; Bradley, 1995).

To gain a more contextualized and in-depth understanding of African American mothers' involvement in voluntary desegregation, I took a closer look at their efforts in one specific locale: Greensboro, North Carolina.

Methodology

My research aimed to help address the absence of attention to the leadership exuded by women, particularly mothers, during the primary school desegregation era in the U.S. This era spans from the *Brown* ruling in 1954 to the final implementation phase of mandatory desegregation in school districts in 1971. I designed my study to explore: Why and how did African American mothers in Greensboro, NC challenge school systems and volunteer their children to racially integrate them from 1954-1971? I also considered what lessons could be learned

from these mothers' efforts. I chose to focus on mothers involved in voluntary desegregation because of their conscious choice to place their children and families on the frontlines of hostile and sometimes violent battles for civil rights when it could have been easier for them to wait for the debates over desegregation implementation to be resolved in the courts.

To address my guiding research questions, I conducted a historiography, which Villaverde, Kincheloe, and Helyar (2006) defined as "the careful study of historical writing and the ways in which historians interpret the past through various theoretical lenses and methodologies," (p. 311). These scholars further described historiography as a process by which a historiographer assumes that the rendering of history – like a crafting of human narratives in general – it is a constructivist process that involves, "controversies, disputes and tensions in history" and requires "inter-textual understanding" (Villaverde, Kincheloe, & Helyar, p. 313). As such, I entered the research process believing that history is theorized and subjective and that historical accounts are based on the presentation of knowledge that is partial, discursive, and informed by the multiple perspectives of others (Raddeker, 2007; Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006). Moreover, my attention to the experiences and contributions of African American mothers reflected my understanding that dominant or mainstream histories too often dismiss women's meaning-making and experiential knowledge (Collins, 2000; Raddeker, 2007; Robnett, 1997). These histories also tend to underestimate racialized epistemologies, meaning the extent to which knowledge production is shaped by racially relevant understandings of the world and by systems that maintain racial hierarchies in which African Americans have been traditionally disenfranchised (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Indeed, historiography is an inquiry method that is pedagogical in nature given that it usually offers information and analyses that challenge long-standing dominant narratives and disrupts "regimes of truth" (Gordon, 1995, p. 81), thereby constructing new knowledge (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006). My inquiry approach reflects both postmodern and feminist research methodologies that assume that the "discourse of history" (Raddeker, 2007, p. 21) is dialogic, partially socially constructed, representative of cultural narratives, and reflective of power relations of the era being considered (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006).

I engaged in inter-textual analyses of documents that involved "critically interrogating the texts and products that comprise culture to resist patriarchal understandings of social reality that push women and other minorities to the peripheries of their culture and interpretive processes" (Leavy 2007, p. 224). I did this by doing a content analysis of primary sources created from 1954-1971 in Greensboro, NC, including letters to the editors and newspaper articles containing quoted information from civil officials, parents, and other community members. These sources were published in white-owned and black-owned Southern newspapers, local Human Resource Department reports, city records from museum archives, and legal

documents. Additionally, I analyzed interview transcripts from the Greensboro Voices oral history archives housed at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Walter Clinton Jackson Library and oral history archives at the Greensboro Public Library.[ii] I also analyzed secondary sources authored after 1971, particularly dissertation studies, books about desegregation, and the memoirs of those who helped integrate southern public schools as children.

I read all data several times for different purposes such as to map out a timeline of historical events, identify key people and organizations, and identify the substance of mothers' views, experiences, and organizing efforts. In line with feminist content analysis methods, I looked for consistencies, contradictions, and gaps in the texts (Leavy, 2007), along with ways in which the texts challenged or extended ideas previously presented in other desegregation research. I stayed mindful of various historical contexts, events, and power relations that influenced the politics of the 1950s through 1970s.

Discussion

Greensboro, North Carolina, is a city most known in U.S. history for being the site of the 1960 Woolworth's sit-ins that catapulted the use of sit-ins as an effective political protest strategy throughout the nation. Greensboro City Schools did not begin mandatory desegregation until 1971, one of the last urban districts in the U.S. to do so (Hawkins & McDowell, n.d.). Prior to that, 128 African American students, based on their parents' approved applications for school transfers, voluntarily integrated the city school system (Peck, 1974). Voluntary integration from 1954 to 1971 increased the momentum of a highly contested civil rights movement, and it was the precursor to significant political organizing activities and legal victories along the way.

The Greensboro City Schools (GCS) board of education voted six-to-one to honor the *Brown* case one day after the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling, affirming the city's reputation for being a relatively progressive Southern city (Chafey, 1980; Chavis, 1979; Peck, 1974; Player, 1979). The board's intention to comply with *Brown*, however, met immediate opposition at state and local levels, which put all desegregation attempts at a standstill until 1957. In 1957 Governor Luther Hodges signed North Carolina's Pearsall Plan into law. The plan was a constitutional amendment that allowed parents to use one of three freedom of choice strategies to avoid sending their children to desegregated schools (NC Museum of History, n.d.; Bradley, 1995). According to historical and legal documents, communities could vote to close a local school, parents could receive a grant to send their children to private schools, or school administrators could waive the compulsory attendance policy for parents not wanting to integrate (Bradley 1995; Hawkins & McDowell, n.d.). The Pearsall Plan was designed to benefit anti-integration white families, like most freedom of choice policies of that era (Donnor, 2011).

African American families were a key group who strove to counteract the Pearsall Plan and other North Carolina desegregation delay tactics. In fact, nine families joined in the summer of 1957 to request that their children be transferred to all white schools and six of those requests were granted (Johnson, 1957). In her autoethnographic dissertation, Josephine Boyd Bradley described how in 1958 she was the first African American student to graduate from a racially integrated, North Carolina school. Bradley integrated what is now Grimsley High School almost a year earlier, escorted by her mother Cora Lee Boyd (Bradley, 1995). Her graduation came 90 years after North Carolina's State Constitution's decreed that "the children of the white race and the children of the colored race shall be taught in separate public schools" (as cited in Gavins, 2004, p. 68) Local newspaper articles also indicated that her graduation also occurred during a time when many whites felt integration should be "condemned, vilified, damned, and cursed," (Benjamin, 1957, p. B-1).

Bradley (1995), in her dissertation, reflected about the importance of her mother and grandmother preparing her to integrate Greensboro's school system. She stated:

> Under the tutelage of my mother and grandmother, I learned to strive for the best, the impossible. We were taught not to let our blackness stop us from learning or pursuing our dreams. We were encouraged by these women to seek the impossible dream. (p. 280)

She further speculated that she was the "chosen child" (p. 278) by her mother to achieve what her mother and other family members couldn't do during their youth.

City archival documents revealed that additional school transfers allowing both African American and white families to voluntarily integrate schools were made in 1959 and more allowances were slowly granted thereafter (GSO Commission, 1971). During the 1965-66 school year GCS also desegregated its central office and for the first time assigned several African American administrators to predominantly white schools. Still, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) officials determined that GCS was out compliance with *Brown* implementation in 1969 (Greensboro Human Relations Commission (GSO Commission, 1971). Greensboro had marginally integrated a small sector of its schools, but five all-white schools and twelve all-black schools remained during the 1968-69 school year, and the school system resisted bussing or rezoning measures that would have facilitated integration (GSO Commission, 1971).

In February of 1970, eleven African American parents, eight of whom were mothers, filed a U.S. district law suit to demand full desegregation compliance and repeal of the State's exclusive freedom of choice laws (GSO Commission, 1971). Newspaper coverage of the day explained that the mothers and lead plaintiff Dr. George Simkins, Jr., a Greensboro dentist, submitted their own detailed desegregation plan to the courts and were represented by NAACP lawyers (Knox, 1971). This

was a bold and uncommon move in desegregation cases of the day. Eventually the district court stayed the Greensboro case, thereby putting it on hold until the Supreme Court ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (1971). Soon after the *Sw*ann ruling, the Greensboro plaintiff's desegregation plan was approved (Paul, 1971).

Altogether, from 1957 and to 1971 African American mothers were particularly active on various social, cultural, and political fronts to lobby for integration and desegregation compliance, efforts that were catapulted by *Brown*. My review of Greensboro oral history and newspaper data show that African American mothers harnessed their social capital and the influence they had accrued in their churches, community groups, sororities, Black Parent Teacher Associations, and professional groups to mobilize support for school integration. Several of these groups had interracial and/or interfaith membership and some were founded by black mothers. Also, like the pro-integration mothers in other locales, these mothers performed decision-making leadership within their families. Historical data indicated that African American mothers sought to achieve three core objectives, including the overall implementation of *Brown*, the monitored safety of integrating children, and the provision of moral support to integrating children. The mothers' activism came with enormous risks. For instance, African American mother Angeline Smith (1989) recounted in her oral history narrative:

> As we began to put into action our plans, we encountered threats, epithets being hurled at our children, bricks being thrown through our windows, unethical handbills being passed around, and lurid letters being sent to us.

Bradley's (1995) research further documented that mothers (and fathers) faced threats being fired and blacklisted for hiring by white employers. Still, data suggest that African American mothers were steadfast and kept their focus on the integrating children and they engaged in numerous acts of care that helped sustain these students' courage and will. Yolanda Leacraft (1988), for instance, discussed her and other mother's efforts to meet and strategize about how to encourage and offer some relief to the children who were voluntarily integrating Greensboro's schools. She, in her oral history narrative, explained that the children faced severe opposition in their daily interactions with white peers, parents, and educators. Leacraft stated:

> And I remember going and another black parent attended. And we began to talk about this situation and what could we do outside of the school setting to make things better for our children and help these kids really—I mean what the whole thing was all about: freedom of choice. And then ultimately integration of the school system was coming down the pike. So what could we do for these children who were really pioneers to help them make it easier for the ones who are coming.

Oral history data revealed that Leacraft and the other mothers chose to organize picnics and dances for the integrating students, cook meals for pro-integration protestors who stood in picketing lines for long hours, and organize regular parent meetings and community dialogues. These informal activities that have often been overlooked or dismissed as women's domestic work (or duties) made an important political difference. As historian Christina Greene (2004) suggested, they exemplify black women's success in "nurturing the freedom movement," (p. 259). Such nurturing and sustaining effects were acknowledged by Greensboro community leaders such as Dr. Willa B. Player (1979), the former president of Greensboro's historically black Bennett College who recalled that the "women of the community were very valiant in their efforts to support desegregation by doing a great deal of volunteer work in transportation and things of the sort" (p. 10), referring to women (most of whom were mothers) who, in part, organized carpools to transport integrating black children to predominately white schools. City documents also reported that African American mothers served as "bus mothers" (GSO Commission, 1971, p. 59), meaning mothers who rode along with integrating school children on the busses to and from school to offer safety and a sense of comfort.

Of course the mothers' actions and those of the other family and community members with whom they collaborated, inspired vocal opposition from many white parents. Newspaper coverage explained that some white parents petitioned to block the first small wave of Greensboro integration in 1957 believing that, as a result, white children would "suffer irreparable injury and damage" (Shields, 1957, p. A10).

It is important to also acknowledge that some African American families opposed mandatory desegregation too, yet for distinct reasons. These families feared the retaliation that the integrating black students would face. They were also concerned about the impending demise of historically black schools in which many African Americans took pride, and/or they found the city's school desegregation plans to be impractical. For instance, Mrs. Onetha Smith, co-founder of Greensboro's *The Black Citizens for Neighborhood Schools* group, addressed the Greensboro City Board of Education and voiced opposition. According to newspaper data, she shared:

> We believe that to give up our schools and have our children spread out all over the city is wrong. We do not believe a majority of the students at [various all-Black schools] and the other schools in the black community should be predominantly white. If most of the students at the schools are white, our children would not be treated fairly. At the junior and senior high schools our children would no longer get the leadership training they need. The student councils would mostly be white, the cheerleaders would be white. Black students would become a minority in their own schools. This we believe is bad. (as quoted in Benjamin, 1971, p. A12)

Comments like those from Mrs. Smith likely reflected that while Greensboro's segregated African American schools lacked the resources enjoyed at white schools and were often inconveniently located, they were regarded as offering a high quality education and being staffed with excellent, caring African American educators (Hawkins & McDowell, n.d.). Indeed, civil rights-related archival data showed that some of Greensboro's all black schools were ranked among the top black schools in NC (Hawkins & McDowell, n.d.).

Newspaper coverage revealed there was also a group of African American parents who initially allowed their children to integrate Greensboro's schools but later chose to not support integration after they saw their children endure "personal damage," comments offered at a public community meeting held at a black church (Members of Black Community, 1971, p. 6.) Nevertheless many African American families persisted in their quest for school desegregation, and African American mothers stayed vigilant and vocal. For example, in 1971 one of the (unnamed) mother plaintiffs of the Greensboro district suit was reported as answering back to African American naysayers at a community meeting. The mother asserted: "It was an old battle to see change. Why should we change our position now, when we are so close to achieving integration," (Members of Black Community, 1971, p.2).

While newspaper letters and editorials of the day conveyed both African American families' integration hopes and fears, calls for unity were strong (Murray, 1971; Stevenson, 1971). As Connie Murray, an African American mother, wrote:

> I feel that the eleven parents involved in the desegregation suit should have the support of the black community for their efforts, if nothing else. For it is out of these efforts that at least some change will be brought about. It is easy to get on the band-wagon after it is rolling, but it takes courage to get it started. (p. 4)

In line with Murray's comments, historical data overall point to the bravery of rarely named mothers who helped implement school desegregation and advance social change.

Final Analysis: Mothers' Work as Transformative Leadership

My research on voluntary school desegregation points to how the civic contributions and struggles of women and mothers in the school desegregation movement have gone unexamined and underappreciated. This identified gap aligns with the goals of historiography to revisit historical writing and phenomena to reconsider how philosophy, ideology and politics have influenced the rendering of historical narratives (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006). Through applying a womanist framework to better understand the fight over school desegregation, it became clear that the contributions of African American women had been largely ignored, yet they are very significant. Such contributions entail African American mothers performing transformative leadership that is gendered,

culturally relevant, and has intellectual, pedagogical, and activist dimensions.

Transformative leadership constitutes a form of "liberatory political praxis" (Cooper & Gause, 2007, p. 203) that is activist-oriented, morally-driven, and aims to bring about social justice (Cooper, 2009; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). For many African American mothers who have navigated public schools to advocate for their children, such leadership has specifically involved engaging in self-reflection, systematically analyzing schools and communities, and confronting inequities. This leadership has been part of what is also known as *motherwork* —a maternal childrearing approach that encompasses political resistance (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2007, 2009). Indeed beyond uplifting their own family, many pro-desegregation mothers worked toward the social transformation of schooling 1954-1971 (Brown, 2005; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Data indicate that the mothers' leadership was motivated by their desire for their children to have increased freedom and educational opportunities. Their leadership commitments were further sustained by their belief that their efforts were helping to spark political progress on a societal level.

A closer examination of historical data regarding the role mothers played in desegregation politics revealed that their leadership activities encompassed: being among the first parents in the United States to request that their children be transferred to integrated schools; establishing parent organizations that offered logistical, emotional, and physical support to other integrating black families; appearing in front of hostile school boards to advocate for their children; and, joining children to safely escort them through hateful mobs during the first weeks of integrated schooling. Furthermore, the mothers' leadership was guided by their lived experiences, social justice principles and their beliefs that education is political and emancipating. Many of the mothers' actions and motivations are described in memoirs of those who integrated schools in various locales (Bates, 1987; Beals, 1994; Bradley, 1995), yet they are evident first-hand in the Greensboro data. As a whole, the mothers' maternal activism and transformative leadership amounted to freedom fighting work.

Today, it may seem routine for mothers to exert school choice given the array of options like traditional public, magnet, charter, and private schools that are ostensibly available to families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds if they possess adequate information and resources (Cooper, 2007). Scholarship on historiography, however, warns against analyzing historical acts with a "presentist" bias (Raddeker, 2007, p.55). Such bias imposes contemporary norms and assumptions that did not apply to past eras or events, while recognizing that our knowledge of the present inevitably influences our interpretation. In the context of the 1950s U.S. South, it is essential to understand that African American mothers requesting and exerting school choice and publicly advocating for their family's educational rights – rights newly recognized at the federal level while still highly contested and

ignored in the communities they lived – were radical acts. From Mississippi to Arkansas to North Carolina, seeking school choice and desegregation defied racist patriarchal systems led by all-white school boards and politicians in locales where African Americans had faced lynching, home bombings, and other forms of physical and emotional violence for implementing much milder civil acts (Bradley, 1995; Chafe, 1980; Curry, 2005; Patterson, 2001). These mothers were everyday African American women who were factory workers, stay-at-home mothers, domestic workers, agricultural laborers, and teachers. Their educational choices, which included decisions to speak their truth to power while modeling and teaching political resistance to their children, embodied the ethics of care, justice, and risk that characterize womanist leadership (King & Ferguson, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005; Robnett, 1997). Moreover, their leadership during voluntary desegregation reflected well-established traditions of maternal activism and leadership that pre-dated the 1950s but extended them into a new era and established new legal ground (McDonald, 1995; Payne, 1995; Robnett, 1997).

In Greensboro, mothers preparing their children to seek the "impossible dream" of school integration and political equality that Josephine Boyd Bradley (1995, p. 280) mentioned partly entailed believing and teaching their children that they were equal to and deserving of the same rights and privileges that white children enjoyed. Thus, the "tutelage" (p. 280) that they and other pro-desegregation mothers offered points to the pedagogical aspect of African American mothers' political resistance and womanist leadership.

In line with Henry's (2005) discussion of black feminist/womanist pedagogy, the mothers put forth a "pedagogy of liberation" and social justice-oriented "consciousness and commitments" (p. 91). Doing so helped advance their families, communities, and society at large. The mothers further emphasized their sense of personal accountability for protecting their children, seeking increased educational and life opportunities for them, and nurturing their feelings of pride and dignity.

Findings about the plight and leadership of African American mothers during the school desegregation era stand to help educators, policymakers, and researchers renew and extend discourse about school integration, the role of race, gender, and various unsung leaders. Mothers' efforts also offer an important example of what it means to democratically engage and challenge the public education system. Moreover, data illustrate how educational reform can be enhanced by a bottom-up grassroots movement rather than shaped only by highly ranked education officials and legislators. African American mothers advocated for their children while nurturing a collaborative, political movement. They did not act alone, rather they coalesced with men and women of various racial, religious and class backgrounds to politically strategize, mobilize, and support each other. Indeed, families and communities, including African American fathers and high profile men,

united to secure educational and civil rights. Women's and mothers' leadership, however, have become inappropriately subsumed in patriarchal retellings of the civil rights era. In this study, I have spoken to the importance of incorporating critical gendered analyses in scholarship overall and to the significance of revisioning long-standing analyses that have become dominant yet incomplete historical narratives so we can benefit from new insight and fuller perspectives.

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